

“Out of the Frying Pan” – Book IV: Into the Fire (part two)

Session #90 ¹

The Keepers of the Gate jogged at high speed through the ash-covered trees and brush, and over and around the large rocks of the ridge, making their way towards the great chasm that had appeared between it and the amphitheater turned fortress.

Again they heard the horns and clamor from the western entrance to Greenreed Valley.

“I don’t understand why we aren’t going directly into the valley,” Bastian said in his quiet voice as he paused alongside Martin the Green. The watch-mage had stopped a moment to catch his breath, the ash burning his lungs and making his normally bright green robes into something much drabber.

“Ratchis believes, and I agree, that we need to find a way across the chasm and directly to the tower the light pointed to,” Martin explained. “We need to hope we can get in right away and maybe outrun or get by our foes. Going through the valley will take too long, and we don’t know what it is that is making all that noise down there.”

“I have an idea what it is,” Bastian said, and with that he continued to run. Ratchis was way out ahead scouting, and asked Bastian to lead the rest of the party and make sure they stayed together.

It was a nearly two-hour march to the edge of the woods on the north side of this part of the ridge. The Keepers of the Gate passed many burned out areas that were nothing but swaths of black ash and scorched stumps, but they were still surprised when the wood ended so abruptly, as if a whole section had been burned away methodically. A few hundred yards across the clearing yawned the new chasm, and across from that the island of rock the fortress sat upon and its rear wall and towers.

“I’m going to scout ahead,” Ratchis said. “The rest of you stay here.”

“I am coming with...” Roland said, his blue-black fur rippling in the steady breeze that blew in from the southwest. The half-orc said nothing and took off, sulking among the blackened remains of trees and blasted rocks. The Bastite trailed after.

They crept up to the edge and the wind echoed in the empty yards of the fortress. They could see the inner buildings much more clearly now. There were long barracks, stables, covered wells, and storage huts, all made of dull grey stone. The four tall rear towers, two on each side of the great black smoke-spewing slightly tapered stack, glistened in places where it was traced with a yellow stone of some kind, and the featured square spirals of marble steps that led to the top. The steps were guarded by a low fortified wall cut with crenels, and enclosed turrets at different levels at each corner. The statue atop the stone pedestal on the tower they sought was a man of stone nearly twenty feet tall. Stylistically, what made it interesting, was the unparalleled craftsmanship and seamlessness of the carving of the stone that seemed almost to draw breath it looked so real, with the juxtaposition of crude raw stone pocked with randomly occurring quartz formations that made up portions of the back and the limbs. It seemed to have been made that way on purpose.

Ratchis and Roland crept to their left to see past the fortress to the valley entrance. There seemed to be a multitude of dark figures marching into the valley and coming down towards the fortress.

“Did you see that?” Ratchis pointed, and Roland saw it too. The far ridge wall seemed to ripple for a moment, as if the stone were flowing, but then it was clear what they were seeing. Four or five great brown hairy beasts, with long muscular noses and great white tusks.

Ratchis’ eye was drawn back to the fortress by movement among the towers. He snorted and headed back to the

¹ **DM’s Note:** This session took place on February 26th, 2005 – which means, even though we were technically beginning the final adventure of the campaign, we would not be done until nearly a year later (i.e. January 2006).

others. Roland quickly followed.

Meanwhile, the others were going over options for crossing the chasm. Martin did not have enough *levitation* spells prepared to affect everyone, and even then, he wondered aloud: how would they get across without horizontal impetus?

“I could use the miracles my gods grant me to make a stone bridge out to the towers,” Kazrack offered. “But it depends on how far it is.”

“The fortress still looks empty, but I saw swirls of air among the towers,” Ratchis said when he returned.

“Like leaves?” Kazrack asked.

“Kind of, but more like the black funnels that come out of the sky in a storm,” Ratchis explained. “Violent and quick and gone as soon as I noticed it. I think they were elementals.”

“I didn’t see it,” Roland added.

The Friar of Nephthys went on to describe the multitude of orcs marching into the valley and the great beasts they brought with them.

“That sounds like mammoths,” Martin said with awe in his voice. “But I thought they were extinct except perhaps for a few pockets in the Northern Reaches.”

“Who said that?” Ratchis asked. “Where did you learn that?”

“The Academy of Wizardry,” the watch-mage replied.

“It seems they were in error,” Roland said.

“I need to take a look at the chasm and see if I can make a bridge that will reach it,” Kazrack said.

“I doubt it,” Ratchis replied. “It is about one hundred and twenty-five yards, maybe one-fifty across.”

“Hmm,” Kazrack scratched under his beard and then combed it with his fingers. “What if I shaped some kind of stone platform and you levitated that?”

“As long as it didn’t weigh too much so I could also lift the weight of the party atop it with the spell,” Martin replied and then snapped his fingers. “And then I can turn into my Tanweil-form and fly across pushing the weightless platform!”

“Okay, we have a plan. Let’s go,” Roland said. “We don’t know how long it will take Mozek to get here, but we don’t want to be caught going over the chasm when he does.”

Ratchis nodded, and once again he led the way. The Keepers of the Gate made it to the edge of the cliff and examined the gulf. Water splashed among sharp stones over one hundred feet below. Kazrack began to think of the best way to make his platform.

“If we only had a boat,” Dorn said.

“I have a boat,” Bastian said in his quiet way.

“You do?” Martin turned to him.

“No, no... a boat is a bad idea,” Kazrack said.

“Kazrack, the boat won’t be on the water,” Roland said, snarkily.

The dwarf shook his head.

“Where is this boat?” Martin asked Bastian.

“Right here,” Bastian pulled a patch from his *Robe of the Wayfarer* and tossed it to the ground. Suddenly there was a ‘pop’ and in its place was a long wooden rowboat and two oars.

“You weren’t supposed to use that!” Martin brought both hands to his face in shock.²

Bastian shrugged his shoulders.

“I do not trust boats,” Kazrack said. “Especially a magical boat that was a patch on a robe a moment ago.”

“It isn’t magical,” Bastian said. “It is a normal boat now. Go ahead... *Detect*.”

“No need,” Martin said. “Bastian is right, Kazrack, and since we have it, a boat will be much more stable and easier to keep everyone in and push.”

“N’kron tells me a great bird is coming,” Bastian said.

“Who?” asked Kazrack.

“My hawk,” Bastian replied. “He said, a bird, but not a bird. I think it is Mozek’s hellbeast.”

“How far?” Ratchis asked.

“Hard to tell. N’kron expresses things certain things in a bird kind of way that can be hard to interpret,” Bastian said. “I think about fifteen minutes, maybe ten.”

“We should wait here for Mozek to come,” Roland said. “If we go to the fortress now, we might have to fight him and the place’s guardians at once.”

Bastian nodded.

Ratchis shook his head. “Mozek may have seen where we need to go and if so, he will avoid us and simply try to get into the Maze.”

“We need to bring the fight to him,” Kazrack agreed.

“Why waste our resources fighting him?” Roland said. “We should wait here. If he comes, we’ll be ready for him, and if he goes straight into the fortress, we can let whatever defenses Hurgun has weaken, or even kill him for us. And maybe he can eliminate some of those defenses making it easier for us to get through.”

“And I have not gotten a chance to summon my patron and ask him what he might tell me of the defense of Hurgun’s Maze,” Bastian said, as the wind began to pick up. “He is a denizen of the earth plane, he may have helpful knowledge. But that takes time.”

“I prefer you not practice your witchcraft on our behalf,” Kazrack said.

“We cannot afford to waste time or hope that the defenses will kill him for us,” Ratchis said. “This is our

² Martin the Green theorized that none of the patches on the *Robe of the Wayfarer* could be used without risking some kind of time paradox. (See Sessions #84 and #86)

responsibility.”

“We cannot leave this to luck,” Kazrack said. “Martin, what do you think?”

“We are wasting time and should have left by now,” the watch-mage replied.

”Ya, friggin’ pansy and the Beard are afraid of a little demon-gnome,” Gunthar smirked. “Let’s go rips his nose off and shove it up his bleeding ass!”

“We’ll vote,” said Ratchis.

”I vote to wait,” said Bastian.

“I refuse to vote. It’s pointless,” Roland pouted.

Dorn, Gunthar, Martin, Kazrack and Ratchis voted to go.

“And we should go *now* so we are not caught in mid-air,” Martin said, and with a flick of his wrist holding a leather thong tied in a loop at one end and an arcane word the boat began to hover. Another word and another gesture and his features melted and swelled as he changed into a nearly seven-foot-tall green scaled humanoid with black wings and blue-gray eyes. Ratchis followed this up with a *Bull’s Strength* on the transformed watch-mage and granted one to Kazrack as well. Kazrack cast *Magic Circle Against Evil* on Martin, and then everyone got in the boat. Ratchis was at the front, with Gunthar right behind him. Dorn and Roland rode in the middle and Kazrack was in the stern, sitting in the bottom and holding on tightly.

“I reserve the right to say I told you so if this turns out badly,” Roland said.

Martin pushed the weightless boat out over the chasm and then began to hastily flap his new form’s wings, willing the boat to rise ever so slightly as to create a gentle slope up to the tower they needed to get to. The view from up here was amazing, and soon they all could see scores and scores of tiny black figures gathering around the outer gates of the fortress. They could see the tall statues on the other towers. The far western one had some abstract strands of stone the entwined with one another, and from within every few moments puff of cloud would emanate from it and then quickly dissipate. Atop the next tower was great stone lantern and within it leapt a dancing flame of orange and blue. The easternmost tower’s statue was part of an elaborate fountain that shot up three swirling snakes of water.

The Bastite turned to look where they had come from and pointed down. “Look!”

The rest of the party looked back to see three robed forms lying partially crushed against a protrusion on the cliff face. No one had bothered to look down close enough to spot the fallen monks when the Keepers of the Gate had been at the edge.

“Why do I feel like that was a missed opportunity?” Roland sighed. The going was slow as Martin struggled to keep the momentum to fly while pushing the weight of the party forward.

Ratchis called to Nephthys and cast *magic weapon* on his great sword.

“Look there!” Ratchis said pointing up into the sky ahead of the boat and to the right. They could all see a dark winged form coming down out of the distant sky and getting bigger every second. It would be on them in less than a minute’s time.³

Ratchis sheathed his great sword and called to Nephthys to let him read auras of magic. “The door and statue are magical,” he said, drawing his bow and getting back to keeping an eye on the approaching wyvern.

³ **DM’s Note:** Thirty-six seconds to be exact. I told the players they had about six rounds until the wyvern got to them.

“This Mozek, will my *holy smite* spell be a good choice against him?” Roland asked Kazrack.

“Yes,” the dwarf nodded.

“Just don’t catch Gunthar in the blast or he might get hurt,” Ratchis said, overhearing.

As the purple and copper-colored wyrm descended, acrid steam roiling off it waves, the Keepers of the Gate could see Mozek on its back. The half-fiend gnome’s white and yellow hair was whipping wildly back from his green-scaled face. He wore a chain shirt and had a short sword on his hip. Behind him on the monster was another gnome with a green complexion, but with golden hair and big swollen orange lips. She had bat-like wings that snapped out reflexively to keep her steady as the thing came down.

The wyvern’s spiked tail whipped wildly in the wind, and then the party noted that it held something in each of its claws. In one was a third gnome dressed in plate and gripping a battle-axe in both hands. This gnome’s hair was green and black, and his face was hideously burned on one side. In the other claw was a strange creature like a pyramid of flesh with an arm and a leg stretching out from three of its sides and a large eye to go with each.

“Modron,” Martin hissed as he continued to push, the forked tongue of his altered form flicking between his fangs. The tower was now less than thirty feet away.⁴

“Oh, great queen Bast! Thou who art as graceful as thou art powerful! I call upon your holy power to smite these fiends and their servants!” Roland roared. There was a burst of holy energy that obscured the wyvern and its passengers for half a moment. The wyvern screeched a painful scream, and its dive became a tumble.

Ratchis and Gunthar prepared themselves to leap from the boat to the tower as it came within reach, keeping an eye on the plummeting wyvern that looked like it might slam into the side of the tiered steps of the earth tower. However, Mozek Steamwind pulled on the reins of his mount with all his might and the wyvern pulled its blind head up and lowered its wings slowing its descent in hopes of actually landing atop the tower and not slamming into the side.⁵

The demon-gnome giggled with perverse excitement and flicked his hand towards the boat. Four small objects came slamming into Ratchis’ chest and he felt them burn as his muscles cramped up painfully. He looked down and saw four writhing fingers on the boat bottom and he stepped on them, still grimacing through the pain.⁶

The prow of the boat bumped against the tower side and Ratchis and Gunthar came leaping off firing arrows at Mozek and the wyvern, which were still falling too fast. The winged female gnome took off from the thing’s back, darting to her left. And a hunk of the battlement exploded, huge chunks plummeting down into the chasm below as the wyvern landed awkwardly on the stairs thirty feet below the top level on the right side of the tower and then slammed into the wall.

It roared in its blind agony buffeting its wings against the stairs and wall as it struggled to get back to the air. The wyvern was huge. Its body nearly twenty-five feet long and its tail nearly thirty.⁷

By this time Kazrack was off the boat and casting *protection from evil* upon himself, while Dorn hustled off ducking behind the statue’s pedestal, around the corner from the door beneath it. He readied his crossbow. Roland raced across the top of the tower to stand by Dorn but was startled by a whirlwind of dirt and leaves that came racing across the lower fortress wall and up onto the tower. It howled in an inhuman voice. For a second, the Bastite swore the air itself took the form of winged humanoid with a great sword, and then the whirlwind buffeted against Dorn, and the warrior was forced to lean against the pedestal wall to keep from falling over.

⁴ Martin learned about a little about the Modrons, creatures who serve the god Ptah in maintaining the mechanisms of the cosmos, while studying in the library in Topaline.

⁵ The wyvern was blinded by the *holy smite* spell as it failed its save.

⁶ **DM’s Note:** This spell is *Labm’s Finger Darts* from the Book of Vile Darkness.

⁷ **DM’s Note:** Purplespite was a fiendish wyvern advanced to huge size.

Bastian loaded his crossbow and was slowly creeping to the tower edge to look down at the wyvern.

Martin nimbly flipped the weightless boat around and dragged it behind him as he moved towards Dorn and the air guardian. “*Sanctus terrae abjurus auram!*” the watch-mage chanted and with a ‘whoosh’ the air creature was driven back to its home plane.

“Stay spread out in case that thing has a breath weapon,” Ratchis barked, moving to the far side of the tower to perhaps get a look down from the opposite side of Bastian.

Gunthar, however, made straight for the edge and fired an arrow into the flank of the writhing wyvern. He could see the plate-mailed gnome on one knee catching his breath two levels down, and the pyramidal modron lying on one of its faces, askew upon the steps, unmoving. It was near the door into the tower itself. The Neergaardian leapt back as the flying golden haired female gnome began to fire arrows down at him with incredible speed. The others watched him dodge as the wyvern took off again swooping down towards the fortress courtyard, but then snapping back up and flipping around deftly to come racing back. They could see Mozek was still on its back.

“Hee! Hee! Time to play with Tinka!” said the gold haired half-fiend as she flitted back and forth, bow in hand.

Kazrack moved to the other side of the tower to look down and see the steps below near the lower wall. There was no one there to see.

The wyvern turned quickly and soon was heading back around to swoop by. Roland hurried around the pedestal with Dorn to join Ratchis as Mozek drew a scroll from a case on his side and spoke the foul arcane words. A splurting and farting wall of green and black ooze popped out of thin air bisecting top of the tower and blocking the door in the pedestal. The wall was ten feet tall and over fifty feet long, slime and pus dripping off it. It wheezed and popped as pseudo-pods of slime and ooze whipped across its surface.

Curious, Bastian fired a crossbow bolt into the wall and the missile disintegrated.

“Beware the wall,” Martin hissed in warning, still in his reptilian form. “It melts metal and flesh!”⁸ He was on the same side of the wall as Kazrack, Bastian and Gunthar.

The dwarf harrumphed and called to his gods. Shaping a bit of clay in his hands, he caused the stone floor of the tower roof melt and stretch up creating a narrow passage beneath the ooze about four feet high.

Ratchis called to Nephthys to *restore* him, and he felt some of the tightness leave his muscles.

Dorn fired arrows at the wyvern as it flipped over around to return, Mozek gripping tightly and screaming with joy at the rush of it. Gunthar fired arrows at the female gnome and missed.

“Oh Great Queen Bast! Please blast these fiends back to oblivion with your holy searing light!” Roland called to his goddess. He opened his mouth and out came a beam of white holy light that exploded against the chest of the wyvern as it came in once again to swoop across the roof of the tower.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Mozek screamed as he frantically yanked up on the reigns of his fiendish mount, but it flopped down lifeless sending another rain of dust and rock as it smashed against the stairs and wall below.⁹ The tower shook and rumbled, and the Keepers of the Gate allowed themselves enough momentary joy to cheer. When the sound had settled, they heard the heavy steps of the plate mailed gnome coming up the steps around the tower. Dorn moved to the edge and took a shot down at the gnome as it hurried around the corner out of view. He missed.

⁸ **DM's Note:** This spell is *Wall of Ooze* from the *Book of Vile Darkness*.

⁹ **DM's Note:** The card for the *Incense of Meditation* I gave Roland's player had the description of the item as it was in 2E, meaning instead of empowering all his spells, it made them do maximum damage instead. So, while the maximum possible damage was not as high as with the 3E version, the damage would be much higher on average. So, having failed the save for the *Holy Smite* and the *Searing Light* the wyvern took maximum damage from both.

Kazrack moved over to the edge of the roof on his side of the tower, throwing axe in hand, waiting for Mozek to come into view.

Bastian chanted in dwarven and soon a tiny ball of flame was in his right hand. He threw it at the squirming and fetid wall of ooze (at the spot where it obscured the door beneath the statue), and a very little bit of it burned away, but mostly it was still there. A second tongue of flame did about the same amount of damage.

“*Invisus Majorius*” Martin chanted and slapped Gunthar on the shoulder. “You’re *invisible*.”

Unfortunately, the flying archer gnome took a shot at Martin the Green now that she could no longer see Gunthar, but the invisible Neergaardian was in the way and felt the bite of an arrow in his shoulder. The watch-mage lifted the weightless boat to act as an awkward shield.

“Nephtys! I call on you to break the ties that bind this foul magic together,” Ratchis called to his goddess to cast *dispel magic* upon the wall of ooze, but nothing happened.

Gunthar called out profanity in crude gnomish to the flying half-fiend and fired two arrows at her.¹⁰ She tried to block them with her bracers of bone, but instead they clipped her arm and thigh.

“Here!” the gnome giggled in the common tongue and grabbed at her crotch and made a mock seductive face. “Taste the smell of my cootch!” She flicked a finger and a cold, cloying miasma of greasy darkness enveloped burst about Martin, Gunthar, Kazrack and Bastian. They all felt an ache in their lungs and in their soul, though Bastian was able to resist the worst of it. Martin and Kazrack stomachs turned and cramped, and their eyes watered as they could not get the taste foul burned rotten fish and ash, the smell of evil, out of their mouths and nose.¹¹

Roland slipped beneath the wall to the other side of the tower by way of Kazrack’s tunnel, while the dwarf finally seeing Mozek come around the corner just one level down, threw his axe down at the gnome. Mozek side-stepped with a grin as if he were doing a jig and spoke some whispered arcane words. Suddenly, Kazrack saw the form of his mother rise before him. She was an animated and bloated corpse with strands of kelp tangled in her beard and part of her face was gnawed away.

“Mother! Nooooo!” Kazrack cried in dwarven as she reached out and grabbed him about the neck with preternatural strength and began to crush his throat with her fingers. “Mother! No!” Kazrack cried again and he was finally able to tear himself free as he felt his life-force threaten to slip away from the overwhelming fear he experienced. He was panting, but the vision was gone.

Martin meanwhile had made it to the edge as well and chanted his faithful spell, “*Lentus*,” trying to affect both Mozek and the mailed gnome that was coming around the corner up the steps. The spell failed. Ratchis and Dorn followed Roland beneath the *wall of ooze*. The half-orc rolled as four arrows came down at him as Tinka swooped by. Gunthar got a bead on her and returned fire, missing with one arrow, and the other bounced off to no effect.

Ratchis limped to his feet as three arrows had caught him in the legs. Roland called to Bast with a roar and then rubbed against the ranger’s legs curing the half-orc of some of his moderate wounds.

“Damn you, Mozek!” Kazrack cried, pulling his halberd as leapt down the ten feet to the gnome. “Damn you and the Hells you come from!” Unfortunately, he landed awkwardly and lost his footing, landing on his rear end with little dignity. He hopped right back up to his feet but was flanked by Mozek and the battle-axe wielding gnome.

“Mister Delver, it is my pleasure to introduce you to my brother, Ajax,” Mozek said, again side-stepping and this

¹⁰ **DM’s Note:** This became a kind of contest between me and the player of Martin’s character who was running Gunthar throughout most of the combat, trying to outdo each other with the foul profane and raunchy stuff we could have Gunthar and the flying female gnome (Tinka) say to each other.

¹¹ **DM’s Note:** Martin and Kazrack were *sickened* by the *Unholy Blight*, suffering a -2 penalty on all attack rolls, weapon damage rolls, saving throws, skill checks, and ability checks.

time tipping his head in a mock bow. “Ajax, make Mister Delver feel welcome.”

The squarely built gnome burst at the seams of his armor as he huffed and puffed and screeched, his green eyes turning fiery red. He brought his axe down on Kazrack and the dwarf’s breast plate screeched in protest as the shining heavy blade cleaved a large deep score into it. Kazrack stepped back and the axe quickly raised up slamming him in the chin and cracking a tooth. The tip of the curved blade punctured the skin of his neck. The dwarf brought his halberd into a defensive position to block the berserk gnome’s frenzied blows. For a second, he felt a sense of confusion wash over him as he noticed blood dropping from his face on to his armor, but he shook it off.¹²

However, Mozek stepped up behind Kazrack and touched him with an outstretched finger. The rune-thrower spun around as he felt some of his life-force drained in time to see some of Mozek’s bruises fade. They had been healed by the gnome’s *vampiric touch*.

“Mmm, dwarf blood,” the gnome smiles and licked the end of his finger. “Rich in minerals.”

Bastian continued to try to batter the wall where it covered the door with the flame he produced, while Martin tried his *slow* spell again to no avail. Gunthar and Tinka continued to exchange arrows, and Ratchis chugged the contents of one of his clay flasks, feeling his orcish blood charged with the energy of their one-eyed god.

“Kazrack! Let us strike with righteous fury!” the half-orc cried as he leapt over the side to join the melee, great sword in hand.

Roland moved to the edge as well, to see Ratchis behind Mozek and moving in. The Bastite leapt down deftly, and purring rubbed against Kazrack’s side, healed the dwarf with a *Cure Critical Wounds* spell that had been empowered, like all his spells, by the *Incense of Meditation*. The dwarf twisted around the panther and brought the blade of his halberd down on the distracted Mozek, but with blinding speed the half-fiend gnome had short sword in hand and knocked away one blow. He then danced aside to avoid the other, whistling a happy work-song.

Mozek tried to dance around Ratchis, but the half-orc could hardly be more prepared. He slashed a nasty blow against the gnome’s side and chest as Mozek went by, and the fiend grimaced, but ducked around the corner of the steps to the final set that led to roof. Ratchis did not hesitate and went around the corner as well, catching the gnome with a bruising blow on his back.

“Watch yourselves up there!” Ratchis called to whoever was still up on the roof, as he stepped up on to it to follow the gnome and stay on the same side of the dripping wall of ooze.

Ajax brought his axe down into Roland’s rear flank and the Bastite drew away as the pain exploded in his leg, and he could feel the sticky blood in his black fur. He felt relief as he saw Martin the Green drop a furry ball down onto the steps from above. The fist-sized ball burst into a boar that immediately charged Ajax. The watch-mage also let the boat hover there, letting it go.

Kazrack was looking back and forth, not sure if he should aid Ratchis or stay and deal with Ajax when he heard the flap of wings above and behind him. He turned around in time to see Tinka loose an arrow that while missing him, exploded into a ball of flame when it struck the wall behind him. He ducked and rolled, but he felt a burning in his lungs aggravated by the stench of his singed beard.

Gunthar and Dorn both leapt down to the lower level steps a slight distance from the melee. The former put away his bow and drew both his swords and began walking towards Ajax. The latter lost his footing when he landed and ended up face down on the steps. He got up slowly rubbing a bruise on his temple.

Roland began to scramble up the sheer wall, driving his claws into the mortar to get back to the roof and away from the melee. But he need not have done so, because with three devastating blows Kazrack drove Ajax to the ground.

¹² **DM’s Note:** Ajax’s axe called for a Will save whenever it hits, or the victim suffers from *lesser confusion* for one round.

The blade of *Beáth-agh* steamed as it sliced easily into the fiend's flesh.¹³ Mozek's brother was nothing more than a steaming pile of armor, blood, and stinking flesh on the steps, so Kazrack took off around the corner to join the chase for Mozek.

"Bastian! To your left, Mozek is trying to get away from Ratchis!" Roland said as he pulled himself over the edge. Bastian, who had finally given up his one-man battle against the *wall of ooze*, turned to look where the Bastite indicated as he was heading to the edge to look down at the melee with Ajax.

Mozek Steamwind giggled and side-stepped, taking a moment to look at each of the people on the roof in the eye and winking, save for Kazrack who arrived on the roof behind Ratchis. He looked at Ratchis last.

"Shouldn't you be sucking the shit from the black teat of your slave-goddess, the whore of Set?" Mozek asked with evil glee, and power of his *blasphemy* washed over them. Ratchis was *dazed* as he felt his limbs grow heavy with the smallest doubt about his goddess' ability to triumph over evil. Roland was frozen in place, unable to will any of his muscles to act as his mind reeled, still unaware of the strength that had also been sapped of him. Bastian was similarly *paralyzed*, *dazed*, and drained of strength. Kazrack was also *dazed* by the sheer audacity of the fiend, his strength ebbed nearly as low as it had after the battle with the shadows in Topaline.¹⁴

Martin, luckily, was just out of range having taken to the air to avoid Tinka's arrows. He grimaced as he felt them bite through the reptilian hide his form gave him, and he charged at the gnome woman as she had swooped down to just a few feet off the ground. The transformed watch-mage tried to grab hold of her and pin her wings down, but she laughed and pushed him away easily, drawing blood with her black claws.

"Fresh!" she admonished him with a playful slap. Sighing, Martin took a moment to mentally command the boar to charge around the corner and go onto the roof after Mozek.

Gunthar came around the corner, having avoided Mozek's spell and flicked his short sword against Kazrack's helmet in an attempt to break him out of his *daze*. He was still *invisible*.

"Nephthys, forgive me," Dorn whispered as he drove his sword through Ajax's neck, delivering a *coup de grace*. The half-fiend gnome's corpse began to shrivel and fold in on itself giving off the odor of sulfur and burned copper.

Mozek giggled and danced away from the boar and slapping his hands and speaking an arcane word caused crackling black energy to burst out from his body in all directions enveloping those still *dazed* or *paralyzed*.

As if the additional pain has snapped him out of it, Ratchis regained his wits and swung his sword over his head, charging at Mozek, but the little fiend side-stepped and stuck out his tongue, dinging his short sword playfully against Ratchis' blade. Still *invisible*, Gunthar moved towards melee with the gnome with more caution.

Down in the valley near the front gates of the fortress came the sound of trumpets again, and then the chilling roar of a multitude, and the bellowing of mammoths.

The sound may have distracted Tinka because Martin was able to reach out and pluck her bow from her grip and fly down near Dorn out of her immediate reach.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you die, mage," she said, the giggle leaving her voice. It was now more a menacing squeal. She spoke an arcane word and swooped down to touch Martin, but he moved out of the way and Dorn moved in threateningly, sending her attack offline. He cried out in fear and anger and swung wildly at her, missing.

Roland came to his senses and realized that his *Ring of Alacrity* allowed him to ignore the paralyzing effects of the *blasphemy*. He hurried under the wall of ooze by means of Kazrack's tunnel and to the edge of the tower to get a

¹³ **DM's Note:** *Beáth-agh* is a fiend-bane weapon, doing an additional 2d6 hit points of damage to them.

¹⁴ **DM's Note:** Ya gotta love the *Blasphemy* spell! Ratchis lost five points of strength. Roland lost 7 points. Poor always *paralyzed* Bastian lost 6 points, and Kazrack lost an even 10! Luckily for those who were not paralyzed the reduction in strength only lasts 2d4 rounds – but then again this was only the 9th round of combat so two to eight rounds can be an eternity.

better look at the gates.

There was a flash and Mozek disappeared, reappearing above the obscured door atop the statue's pedestal. Ratchis threw himself around the wall of ooze and tried to climb the smooth stone of the pedestal on its left side but made no progress.

Seeing Mozek above the door as he took to the air to avoid Tinka once again, Martin chanted and two arrows of pure flame went flying at the gnome. Mozek easily dodged both of them. Martin moved to the roof behind Kazrack.

"I'm not done with you yet, little nose!" Tinka swore taking to the air as well and hovering a few feet above the roof. Dorn took off around the corner and up the stairs to join the others.

Roland took a moment to call to Bast and deal with the wounds dealt to him by Ajax, while Kazrack calling to Natan-ahb, caused the stone of the tower roof to warp and flow in one spot, stretching out into crude set of steps that circumvented the *wall of ooze* and reached up to where Mozek stood at the top of the pedestal.

"*Shadam! Fwam-Fwom!* Mozek cried and black lightning forked from his hands cleaving through Kazrack and reaching Martin as well. Luckily, both were able to roll with the worst of the blast.

"Tell me how to get in Hurgun's Maze from here and I will let you live..." Mozek hissed and giggled, and then added slyly. "...A little longer."

Ratchis flung himself around the wall again and hurried up Kazrack's impromptu staircase. The boar followed at Martin's command, and Gunthar followed it. Martin decided to go and get the weightless boat once again. Tinka landed behind Dorn and reached out to touch him to cast some awful spell, but he dodged out of the way and counter attacked. She blocked the blow on one of her bone bracers. However, she did not expect Roland to emerge from under the *wall of ooze* and pounce on her. She was able to tear away, but green steaming blood streamed down her right arm.

Roaring as he realized the steps he created were too clogged for him to reach Mozek easily, Kazrack charged at Tinka putting all his strength into the swing, which she deftly ducked.

Mozek disappeared, but only Bastian, still *paralyzed* and unable to speak noticed that the gnome reappeared down in the arch created by Kazrack to bypass the wall of ooze. Mozek blasted the southern area of the tower with a *dispel magic* spell and several of the party's spells disappeared. Fortunately for Gunthar, he remained *invisible* and was able to leap back off the pedestal and move into position to flank Tinka. Suddenly the female gnome was lying in an expanding pool of her own blood.

"Yuck! Looks like that time of the month!" Gunthar quipped crudely, and Mozek Steamwind laughed heartily, seeming to enjoy the nasty joke at his dying sister's expense.

"I'm sorry, Nephthys," Dorn said again, and shoved his sword into the gnome woman's neck to finish her off.

End of Session #90

Session #91

“You have lost all of your companions,” Roland said, stepping upon Tinka’s shrinking corpse and turning his panther head to get a glimpse of where Mozek Steamwind might be. “Your odds are looking very bad. Why not just get out of our way like you should?”

“Hee hee hee hoo hoo!” Mozek giggled and he loped like an ape out from under the wall of ooze with evil mischief burning in his green eyes. His long arms brushed the ground to give him support and his green and black scaled back was hunched over as he moved towards Bastian’s paralyzed form.

Martin flittered over to Bastian with the weightless boat still in hand and propped it up in front of the paralyzed warrior to block the gnome’s access, but then Mozek disappeared.

“Where’d the fucker go?” Gunthar cursed, jogging over, and swinging his swords around, when suddenly Martin’s spell wore off and the foul-mouthed warrior was visible again. He turned to Roland and demanded some healing.

The boar moved in confused circles atop the pedestal as Ratchis moved to the edge of Kazrack’s impromptu steps. Everyone froze waiting for Mozek to make a move, or to hear him moving about. They hardly breathed.

“He may have teleported away,” Martin the Green offered.

Suddenly, Ratchis cried out in agony as he felt a great shock and looked down to see a stab wound appear near his groin.

“Mozek is invisible!” the half-orc cried out and he leapt down the stairs leaving a trail of blood and weaving to avoid the unseen little fiend, but unfortunately, Mozek was ready and he thrust out thrice more catching the friar in the outer thigh and the buttocks.

“Roland, please heal me so I may return to the fight,” Ratchis staggered over to the Bastite as Kazrack moved in hopes to block pursuit by Mozek. The dwarf swung twice defensively guessing where the half-fiend gnome might be, but to no avail.

Martin let go of the boat and readied his crossbow, while Roland healed Ratchis and Gunthar complained that he had asked first. The Bastite’s spell nearly completely closed the nasty wounds Ratchis had been dealt, and then the half-orc turned and called to Nephthys to deliver healing to Gunthar as well.

Dorn cried out as he felt Mozek’s blade cut him in the lower back. He ran across the top of the tower away from Tinka’s body where he had been standing, and Kazrack cursed knowing that that meant Mozek had gotten past him. The dwarf grabbed his pack off the ground and pulled out a small bellows and a sack of flour he had been carrying for a long time.¹⁵ He stuck the bellows into the sack trying to suck up a good amount of the stuff, creating a white cloud that settled on and around him.

Martin dropped his crossbow and took up the boat again, moving to the vicinity where Mozek last was and swinging it around in a wide angle in hopes of clipping him.

“Hoo Hoo Hee Hee,” Mozek mocked and giggled, his voice was coming from down on one of the lower tiers around the corner from where Ajax had fallen. “It doesn’t matter if you know where I am. You cannot defeat me! You are out of your league! Give up now if you value your soul!”

“Thanks, Puss,” Gunthar said, when Roland had followed up Ratchis’ healing spell with another. He patted the panther roughly on the head. “Now get out my way and let a real man handle this!” The Neergaardian hustled across the tower and leapt down to the steps leading down from the tower roof, swinging wildly, but making no contact.

¹⁵ These had been bought in the general store of Ogre’s Bluff soon after the part first met Richard the Red.

Ratchis moved to follow, but thinking better of it, he paused to call to his goddess for healing once again. Kazrack however, did not hesitate and soon he had leapt down as well, abandoning his flour and bellows idea. “Where is he?” he asked Gunthar, swinging defensively in a wide arc in hopes of keeping the demon at bay, the white powder on his face and beard speckled the drying blood there.

They heard some chanting from the next lower tier and they braced themselves, but nothing happened.

“He is down by the wyvern’s corpse!” Martin cried, pointing in that direction in case the others had not heard it. The watch-mage remembered the boar he had pulled from his bag of tricks and commanded it to come down and go after Mozek. However, it had to go the long way all the way around the tiers.

Roland made a spectacular leap, pushing his panther-form muscles and agility to their limits as he flew over the first set of steps and down to the lowest tier. He landed deftly and swung his head around trying to pinpoint Mozek’s location by scent.

“Taste my boots!” Gunthar said, grabbing the edge of the tier and leaping down the nearly forty-five feet to the lower tier. He stumbled and slammed back against the wall, grunting through the pain, and struggled to get back to his feet. Less than a moment later, Kazrack was picking himself off the steps as well and looking around frantically out of instinct, as if that would make Mozek visible to his eyes.

“Heh heh heh, you are making this even easier for me,” Kazrack heard Mozek’s voice nearly in his ear as he got up, and then felt three sharp thrusts of a sword. All went black for the dwarf.

Above, Ratchis finally leapt down to the first tier, but he slipped, slamming his lower back against the stone edge of the steps. He could feel the bruises already developing as he scrambled to his feet to make to leap again.

Roland caught Mozek’s scent and pounced at him, but he miscalculated and missed completely. He cringed to avoid Gunthar’s wild swings, one of which bounced off the tier wall and bounced back. Gunthar swore as his own sword clipped his face and slammed into his shoulder. Soon, blood was pouring off his chin and down his chest and arm.¹⁶

Ratchis came crashing down, catching his foot on the edge of the tier, and slamming face first onto the steps. He lay there stunned for a moment. But Martin had maneuvered the *levitated* boat over where he thought Mozek was and he dismissed his spell.

“Ow!” Mozek cried out as the boat crashed upon him splintering in places. “Very clever.” The rowboat jerked up of its own accord as the *invisible* fiend got out from under it. Noticing this, Gunthar, who stood nearby, spun around.

“What are you, Jeremy’s evil twin?” Mozek giggled and there was a storm of blood coming off Gunthar in streams where an invisible blade cut him several times. He stumbled back toward Roland, but the Bastite was calling to the cat goddess to close Kazrack’s *serious wounds*, extolling in the effects of the *incense of meditation*.¹⁷ The dwarf coughed and sputtered as he awakened, but Gunthar’s blood cascaded down the steps at a steady pace. He would not be getting back up on his own.¹⁸

Martin glided down next to Gunthar to check his wounds.

Ratchis scrambled to his feet shaking his head, while Kazrack reached into a pouch and pulled out a vial of the water he had collected from among Chochokpi’s roots. He gulped it down and felt a bit of his strength and vigor *restored*, making his deep *exhaustion* into mere *fatigue*.¹⁹ Roland followed up with another curing spell upon Gunthar, and the Neegaardian grabbed his swords and got to his feet as they all heard Mozek’s voice moving back up the stairs and around the tiers. “Oooh! I wonder who I can kill up here?”

¹⁶ **DM’s Note:** Gunthar fumbled and rolled the result “Reflex save (DC 15) or hit self, critical hit” – the critical hit did “double die damage” (which means the damage die is rolled twice and any bonuses are added *once* to that total. He took 22 points of damage.

¹⁷ **DM’s Note:** Much as with damage spells, cure spells too were automatically doing their maximum.

¹⁸ **DM’s Note:** Gunthar took 55 points of damage total from those attacks, and thus was very close to death.

¹⁹ See session #85

Dorn was the only one above, standing guard over the still paralyzed Bastian. The brown-haired warrior loaded his crossbow and listened, ready to take a shot if he noticed the gnome. Martin the Green, still in Tanweil-form, took off and made his way over, landing beside Bastian, as the others came the long way around after Mozek. Kazrack left behind another vial of Chochikpi's water for Gunthar to use.

The watch-mage had a handful of powdered corn extract ready for use to reveal Mozek's location if he heard him nearby.²⁰

"Rivkanal, I call on you to bind my wounds so that when we find this fiend, I might better smite him," Kazrack prayed in dwarven as he trailed behind Ratchis, who trailed behind Roland. Lastly came Gunthar who cast the empty vial off the tower.

Martin passed the *Wurfel Craft* cube to Dorn, indicating which side should be depressed if Mozek were to appear nearby.

"Use it to keep Bastian safe," the watch-mage instructed.

Roland made it back up onto the tower roof, followed by the boar, which snorted loudly in its attempt to zero in on the foul-smelling gnome. Martin the Green noticed it turned and charged at some empty space near the top of the steps of the tower where it and Roland had just run past.

The Bastite called out in his human voice though he was in cat-form. "Oh, great queen Bast! Lend me your aid in our hour of need to smite this fiend that is surely your enemy as he is ours!"

There was a crackle of divine energy, but no discernible affect to indicate that Mozek had been caught in the spell. However, as Gunthar came around the corner to the top of the tower he jerked awkwardly as more wounds appeared on him from out of nowhere.

"Amazing that your mangy goddess takes time from licking herself to help you," Mozek was heard to say. "But then again for all the good her help did, she might as well keep at it."

Gunthar stumbled towards Roland, begging for healing again. Ratchis appeared on the roof. He had waited for Kazrack to catch up, suddenly afraid that the gnome was using a ruse to separate them.

Suddenly Mozek appeared as his spell's duration had run out. His teeth were long jagged and black, crusted with yellow. His green eyes burned, and he held a silvery short sword with an unusually thin blade. Strangest of all, he was covered by a dim aura of cold darkness that shimmered and darkened in the sunlight, and then he spoke a word and suddenly there were six of him, leaping and shifting around. Sometimes three or four would all be doing the same thing in sync, while two others did somersaults, sometimes all six had different expressions. One of the *mirror images* stuck its black forked tongue out at Ratchis.

Dorn activated the cube and its glowing blue transparent field enclosed him and Bastian.

Ratchis swung his masterwork greatsword in a great arc and it flew through one of the images of Mozek and into another. They both popped out of existence, but the remaining five all leapt forward speaking an arcane word and touching the half-orc. He felt magic wash over him, but he was able to resist whatever it was. He tried swinging some more, but the many images leapt away laughing and waving their swords. Kazrack, however, thrust his halberd among the images and felt the blade strike something solid. Five Mozeks cried out as green blood burst from them. The dim aura shimmering against the demon's skin crawled along the haft of the polearm and Kazrack felt a deep cold in his soul as it touched him. However, he was able to shake it off.

²⁰ **DM's Note:** *Powdered corn extract* is the material component for *Rope Trick*, but since Martin did not know that spell, I am not sure why he had the component.

Mozek and his doppelgangers scattered as Martin had the boar charge into their midst. Gunthar hurried after one or two of them taking wild swings, but he could not reach any, and Roland called to Bast for her *Divine Favor*. The *mirror images* gathered together and five Mozeks, all facing to the north, pulled out a scroll and scrunched up their faces as if reading with difficulty. Suddenly, all of Mozek's wounds were gone. Five fiendish faces turned to the Keepers of the Gate and smiled once more.

"Your tricks will not work!" Kazrack swore.

"They seem to be working pretty well so far to me," Mozek Steamwind winked with five eyes in sync.

Roaring with anger, Ratchis, Kazrack and Gunthar came swinging into their midst, but once again they all scattered and danced back together behind them giggling. Martin touched Ratchis and the half-orc benefited from *improved invisibility*. Roland pounced at where he thought the real Mozek stood, but landed on nothing at all, while the boar turned in circles snorting and confused.

At Martin's command, Dorn moved the cubic field over to block the door on the pedestal, as the *wall of ooze* had melted away into nothing moments before, leaving Kazrack's impromptu stone structures looking abandoned. He brought Bastian with him, of course.

There was a burst of greasy cloying darkness from one of Mozek's images (ostensibly the real one) and Ratchis and Kazrack shuttered in pain as the *unholy blight* struck them. Gunthar was able to leap away and avoid its effects.

Clutching his chest, Kazrack retreated and called to Rivkanal to close his wounds the best she could, for he only had his weakest curing spells left. Roland slinked over and supplemented it with one of his *empowered* healing spells.

"Call to your weak gods all you want, help you they will not!" Mozek taunted, but his look of satisfaction became one of alarm as Ratchis smashed through two more of the remaining images, leaving three Mozeks dancing about. His *unholy aura* disappeared as well. "Hmmm, now where could the piggy be?"

Courageously, Martin the Green glided over to the melee, taking Kazrack's place temporarily. He swung his staff at the remaining images but missed. Gunthar swung wildly again, but tripped over the unseen Ratchis and nearly fell, stumbling to his right to keep his feet.

Mozek's delight at the clumsiness was short lived as Ratchis cleaved through the last two *mirror images*, causing the half-fiend gnome to duck to avoid the blade. He began to cast another spell, but now that Ratchis was *invisible* and so close he lost his concentration in an effort to keep from getting hit. He grimaced as he felt the bite of Kazrack's halberd against his fine chain shirt. The dwarf was back in the melee, and all the Keepers of the Gate were pressing the attack. Roland pounced into their midst, but missed in the confusion of so many bodies and swinging weapons.

With a word, the *unholy aura* returned, and as Kazrack found his target again the darkness crept up the haft of his weapon and he felt his strength ebb.²¹ Luckily, Roland had withdrawn from the melee and immediately cast *lesser restoration* to return at least some of that strength to the dwarf's limbs, and also alleviate the last of the fatigue he felt from having been at death's door only moments before.

Martin the Green also withdrew, taking to the air to consider the fight and figure out the best way to defeat Mozek. Gunthar over-swung his long sword and taking a wide step, tripped over the invisible Ratchis again. Losing his balance, he slipped off his feet and slammed his head against the tower roof. He tried to get right back up, but stunned, he fell back to his hands and knees.²²

Kazrack grunted as he felt the bite of Mozek's thin blade again and again. The thing moved with such speed it was a silver and gold blur that hovered about the green gnome like a second aura. Again and again, the little blade knocked

²¹ **DM's Note:** Kazrack lost 6 points of strength.

²² **DM's Note:** Gunthar fumbled getting the following result: Trip. Make Reflex check vs. DC 20 or fall and be stunned for 1d3 rounds.

back Ratchis' heavy sword and locked up the halberd blade, sending it offline. All the while, Mozek giggled.

Ratchis withdrew unseen to cast another healing spell on Kazrack. "Nephthys, though I call to you in a low voice as to not alert my enemy, I implore you to aid my dwarven friend so we may defeat this evil." Taking up his sword again, he leapt into melee taking Mozek by surprise. The demon gnome barely got his own sword up in time to slow Ratchis' blow, and even then, it cut deep into his shoulder. Ratchis grunted in dissatisfaction, seeing that his blows did not seem to affect the fiend nearly as much as Kazrack's did.

Roland leapt back into the fray, but Mozek danced within the reach of Kazrack's polearm and the dwarf tried to muffle his cries as he felt the bite of the fast blade thrice more. The dwarf was barely able to withdraw and get into an effective defensive posture, but it was too late. He felt a cold rush and looked down confused at his own blood pooling under him, and then, once again, he was on the ground dying.

"Uh oh!" Mozek mocked. "You are losing folks awful quick. There's still time to give up and get away. Just tell me how to get in."

Before any of the Keepers of the Gate could respond, they heard a great clash and clamor at the gates, and what could only be the death throes of one of the great mammoths the orcs brought with them. Martin the Green stole a glance down into the distant courtyard and saw the gates had burst open, but some great shadow had come out of the ground and was knocking orcs from the walls and smashing them into the earth.

Shaking his head and cursing, Gunthar was back in the melee, but Mozek was too quick. He sang a nonsense song, mimicking the tone of every ring of blade on blade. "Hey piddle-diddle! The orc and a fiddle! And a ding-dang-doong-dang-frong! Thruh-ring!"

Martin swooped down as best he could with his clumsy flying, trying to distract Mozek to allow Ratchis to get a clean blow in.²³ But it did not seem to be helping. "Urk!" Ratchis coughed as he felt Mozek's blade slice his outer thigh a moment after the *greater invisibility* spell wore off. Roland came leaping back into the melee once again, but Mozek rolled out of the way. However, this gave Ratchis a chance to drop his own sword and take up Kazrack's halberd. Mozek turned around just in time to have the pole-axe chop into his chest. The blade bounced off the silvery chain shirt, but it had landed heavily and the little gnome was knocked back a bit, startled. He grimaced through the pain, hopped back and grabbed a clay vial from his satchel, barely avoiding Gunthar and Ratchis trying to take advantage of the opportunity. He gurgled down whatever was inside and soon many of his wounds were closed again.

Martin took the opportunity to pull Kazrack away a little bit and begin to massage the dwarf's throat as he poured a *potion of cure moderate wounds* into his mouth. He was happy to see that the dwarf had stabilized on his own, and in half a moment, despite sputtering and coughing and once again feeling the exhaustion of pushing his body despite the great strain on it, Kazrack was unslinging his shield from his back. He called to Natan-ahb for his *divine favor* and then hefting his flail marched back into the battle.

"Looks like the stubbornness of the dwarves is no exaggeration," Mozek quipped despite feeling the weight of the halberd on his shoulder again. Ratchis shuddered as the *unholy aura* shot up the weapon and sapped him of a tiny bit of strength.²⁴ The gnome followed this up with a deep stab into Ratchis' foot,²⁵ and when the half-orc looked down he had to flinch back as the sword flicked up at him, catching his forearm, spraying blood.

Roland continued his support position, healing Gunthar some more, even though the Neergaardian seemed unable to score any telling blow.

"Oooh! It looks like it's time to move over here!" Mozek said, side-stepping to meet Kazrack as he returned. Two thrusts of the quick blade and once again Kazrack lay dying on the floor.

²³ **DM's Note:** Martin's player was using the *aid other* action, which is actually something players used quite a lot of in this campaign.

²⁴ **DM's Note:** Ratchis lost 1 point of strength.

²⁵ **DM's Note:** Ratchis suffered a critical hit: *Foot Wound, Speed Reduced to 1/2. Save vs. Knockdown.*

"You're bleeding! You're bleeding! You're bleeding! More healing you'll be needing!" Mozek mocked, skipping back and forth to avoid Ratchis' desperate attacks. "Now let's see you get back up *this* time!"

"Come on, Ratchis! Take him out!" Martin the Green said with frustration overcoming his fear.

"Eenie-meanie-my-nee-moe! Which of you has got to go?" Mozek gestured with his blade at each of the four of them. He then shrugged his shoulders and thrust at Martin, who came back into the fight to watch over Kazrack. The watch-mage collapsed, his green reptilian form oozing out red human blood.

The boar rushed back into the fight, but once again Mozek deftly avoided its charge. However, this left him open to another blow from Ratchis. Roland prayed to Bast and once again Kazrack sputtered awake. The Bastite turned around to see Ratchis wince as he felt Mozek's blade once again. The half-orc swayed like he might fall but roared in defiance. Roland echoed the roar with his own panther's voice and faked a charge at Mozek, causing the gnome to step to his right slightly and into Ratchis' downward chopping blow.²⁶ The *fiendbane* poleaxe caught the gnome on the neck and shoulder once more and drove him down to his knees. Blood exploded from the fiend, and he looked up pathetically as he fell backward. "This wasn't supposed to turn out this way..."

Ratchis lifted the halberd and brought it down again cleaving open Mozek Steamwind's chest. The demon-gnome's corpse sizzled and hissed, giving off the stench of sulfur and burning copper. It began to fold in on itself and shrivel.

"That's for Chance..." Ratchis murmured, sinking exhaustedly to the ground.²⁷

Gunthar grabbed Mozek's short sword as Ratchis grabbed what he thought might be valuable from the former gnome. There were two rings. One was set with a large smooth sapphire and seven small diamonds (six above, one below), its band of white gold. The other was a silver ring is set with a golden emblem of a lion's head. There was also a bone scroll tube and Ratchis tore the chain shirt off the smoldering corpse when Kazrack walked over and gasped, "Mithril..." And then followed it up with "Bah! It is elven in style."

Roland used a *cure light wounds* spell to stabilize Martin, but the watch-mage did not wake up. The Bastite was about to cast a second one when suddenly there was the repeating sound like air being forced through a bladder. From down on the lower wall, or perhaps the rear buildings of the inner fortress, rose three of the strangest creatures any of them had ever seen.

They were drooping starfish with five swollen leaf-like limbs of pinkish-white flesh upon each of which was a large black eye and round mouths with thin black lips. They had five black spindly legs that ended in hooves, which reached down from beneath the strange limbs, and they rose up awkwardly forcing some kind of gas out beneath them to gain loft. The creatures were about five and a half feet tall.

"What in Hells are those ugly things?" Gunthar swore.

"Withdraw. Withdraw. You are not welcome here. You must flee," the things said with three of their facing mouths. They had flat voices that betrayed no inflection or emotion with the slightest hint of the mechanical in it. The rate of air they expelled slowed, and they began to sink to the tower roof.

"We do not wish any harm upon you," Kazrack called to them. "Please do us no harm in return." He repeated his greeting in dwarven.

"Hey! How do I turn this thing off?" Dorn asked, still inside the cube with the still paralyzed Bastian.

"Martin, you can get up," Roland breathed into the watch-mage's ear. "We have a problem. Ptah's servants seem to be here."

²⁶ **DM's Note:** Once again, the *aid other* action.

²⁷ Mozek killed Chance and ate his brain way back in Session #17

“We mean no harm!” Martin coughed in gnomish, turning to take in the strange creatures. Two of the three creatures landed beside the still glowing cubic field, while the third landed in the corner overlooking the first tier of steps. The bulbous sacks at the center of their five limbs and between their five legs popped out at the top of their bodies at the center. They could see bone-like protrusion with a puckered sphincter on the end. It lowered and turned with the mechanical dexterity of an arbalest on turret. Martin turned to his companions. “I really don’t know much about these things except their names and some of their basic qualities. I hope they don’t attack us.”

The two creatures by the cube of force began to spin, slamming their limbs against the left side of the cube, and Dorn willed it to move away. The bizarre guardians moved to block the now uncovered door.

The watch-mage told Dorn to press the depiction of the pond on *the Wurfel Kraft* when he was ready to turn it off.

“We need to get into Hurgun’s Maze,” Kazrack said to the creatures in dwarven again. “Can you show us the way?”

“No invitation. No entrance,” the three creatures said in unison in their flat voices. The Keepers of the Gate were all taken aback as the eastern wall of the statue’s pedestal became a fifteen-foot-long set of stone steps that led to the top. The great statue atop the stone pedestal swung out over the tower and two more of the things Martin called ‘pentadrones’ came flying out from beneath. They emitted the nasty sound of rapidly flapping flesh as they expelled gas beneath them to grant them lift. The statue swung back into place, but the stairs remained. “No invitation. No entrance. Leave now.”

“Invitation?” Roland said. “I assure you I am not one to crash parties. Who is in a position to issue invitations? Mine was probably lost in the mail.”

The cube scooted along slowly as two of the pentadrones knocked against it futilely. Gunthar stepped toward the door with his sword drawn. “Don’t we have to go in there?”

“Gunthar, we don’t want to fight them,” Martin said. “Stay back.” He called the boar back into his *bag of tricks*. He laid the pouch on the ground and the bristly swine walked up to it and then rolled up back into a tiny ball of fur and rolled back in, disappearing.

“Get out. Get out. You must get out,” they said, each taking a turn with a word but all saying the last one together. They turned their bodies after each third syllable, flaring their strange limbs out a bit when they did. They did not blink.

Ratchis grabbed the quiver of arrows that Tinka had dropped when she died as three of the five pentadrones now moved in to corral them and drive the party towards the steps, separating them from the cubic field.

“Perhaps we should make our way down the stairs and into the tower,” Kazrack suggested. “We may be able to bide some time and devise a plan while not being out in the open and seen. If we are attacked, we can use the cube to make our way down.”

The Keepers of the Gate marched down the steps. Ratchis took the lead, still hobbling from his wounded foot. Kazrack and Gunthar took the rear keeping an eye on the three pursuing modrons, with Martin the Green right near them to advise if necessary.

The other two pentadrones drove Dorn towards the edge of the tower overlooking the stairs.

Ratchis stopped when he came to the shriveled remains of Ajax’s body. He took up the battle-axe with its blade of red-tainted steel and its black metal haft...

“You can just kill them all with me. It would be easy... You can carve a kingdom of blood...”

Ratchis dropped the axe and shook his head. He stepped past it and called to the others to not touch it.

Dorn looked down and saw his companions below him. Pressing the side of the stone cube he held that depicted the pond, the field disappeared with a hum and a pop.

“I need to drop Bastian down to you,” he called to Ratchis. The half-orc offered to climb up to help.

“Naw, these things might think you are trying to get in without an invitation and attack or something,” Dorn said. “Just catch him, and then I’ll climb down.”

”Hey! What’s this battle-axe?” Gunthar said as he came to it. He scooped it up. “Ain’t ya gonna take this Snuffles? It seems your style...” Gunthar’s face paled, and he brought a second hand to the haft of the axe.

“Gods damn it, Gunthar! Drop that axe it’s evil!” Kazrack swore, grabbing at it. Gunthar pulled it away.

“It is whispering to me,” Gunthar said with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Drop it now!” Kazrack commanded as the pentadrones came awkwardly down the stairs after them.

Gunthar shook his head vigorously but did not drop the axe. “It can’t tell me what to do,” he said.

“Just drop it!” Kazrack lashed out with his halberd and suddenly the axe was askew upon the steps again. Gunthar rubbed his hands and cursed. He reached down for it again, but Kazrack placed his halberd blade over it.

”If Kazrack says it is evil, it is evil,” Martin said.

“I was just going to throw it over the side,” Gunthar said.

Kazrack snorted his dubiousness and then shoved the axe into the chasm far below through one of the arrow slits in the low wall with his pole-arm.

By this time, Ratchis had caught Bastian still stiff form in his thick arms, and Dorn climbed down. The two pentadrones up top came to the edge and angled their strange black eyes to look down at them.

Round and round they marched with the pentadrones at their heels, still repeating, “No invitation. No entrance. You must flee. You must flee.” They had to squeeze past the steaming wyvern carcass, while the modrons took to the air again with loud blasts of gas.

Ratchis stopped at the unmoving pyramidal body of the modron Mozek had brought with him.²⁸ He was sure it was the same creature the party had met back in Garvan so many months before. The half-orc tried someway to check for a pulse, but there was none (though he was not sure if it ever had one). Its three eyes were glazed over. He noticed a black manacle and chain locked tightly around one of its three legs and he shook his head angrily. He went over and waited by the door.

Roland stopped at the dead modron and gave a silent prayer to Bast, sorry that his powerful spells had inadvertently led to this innocent being’s death. He then turned to the pentadrones and said, “This one had our invitation, but the evil gnomes killed him.”

“Tridrone must be re-assimilated,” the lead pentadrone said, and the other two echoed it. The two still atop the tower, flopped an eye and mouth-bearing limb over the side and they said it as well. “Tridrone must be re-assimilated.”

“We opened the Key Room, does that win us an invitation,” Roland tried, suddenly changing his tact. The pentadrones pressed in and one kicked the tridrone body back away from the party.

²⁸ See Session #90

Impatient, Gunthar pushed open the heavy steel door that led into the tower at this level.

“There may be a ward on that door!” Martin warned. “Or just inside of it.” He reached into his *bag of tricks* and threw a ball of fur towards the doorway and it grew into a black bear that roared and charged into the room beyond. Ratchis followed the bear into a great chamber that spanned nearly the entire width and breadth of the tower. It was an armory with countless spears, arrows, bolts, crossbows, long swords, maces, and the like on racks along the walls and creating aisles in the room. There were also wooden shields on one partial wall of the room that cordoned off an area behind another metal door. This area seemed to be directly beneath the stone pedestal and statue above.

A narrow stone stairway led down from the door to the tower roof down into the armory, and the bear bounded down them followed by the Keepers of the Gate.

“You must flee! You must flee!” the pentadrones continued to say, seeking to enter the tower as well, but Kazrack pulled the door shut and dropped the bar on the inside.

“I need something to wedge this closed, so they do not come in!” Kazrack said, holding the door closed.

“Nooo!” Roland moaned and buried his snout beneath a paw.

“What is it?” asked Martin.

“I just wish we could get back to those monks we saw crushed on the cliffside,”²⁹ Roland explained with a sigh. “I just realized, I bet they had found an invitation, but not the way in. They may have one.”

End of Session #91

AQUERRA

²⁹ Again, see Session #90

Session #92 ³⁰

“This door will not hold for long,” Kazrack said, pressing his back against it and feeling it shaking from the repeated roll of blows from the strange modrons outside.

“Hello?” Roland called through the door. “You are being addressed by Roland Eremicia of Bast and the Keepers of the Gate, Ratchis, Kazrack, Martin the Green of the Academy of Wizardry, Dorn and Gunthar... oh, and uh... Bastian, too...” He turned and looked around. “Is that everybody?” he whispered. He turned his panther-head back to the door. “Perhaps you can tell your master those names and that we have come to...” He turned to the others once again, “What have we come for again?”

Ratchis sighed.

“I do not think those creatures will listen to reason,” Martin said. “Or rather, their reason is so limited by the role they are created for they cannot conceive of things beyond that boundary.”

Tha-tha-tha-tha-thoom! Tha-tha-tha-tha-thoom! The door shook again and again. They grabbed some spears from the racks on the walls and Ratchis and Kazrack wedged them to hold the door the best they could. They also smashed up some of the weapon racks and Kazrack hammered the boards over the door with iron spikes.

Roland transformed back into his normal human guise, stretching out the aches of wounds closed in the process. He wandered over to a deep narrow window that looked down on the lower fortress and courtyard below. There were some kind of siege towers leaning against the outer wall by the gate, and he could see the pulped corpse of a mammoth near the center of the courtyard. There were small groups of orcs fanning out on the wall and they seemed to have had taken the gatehouse. Suddenly, he saw three of the pentadrones slowing making their way down to the orcs as swarms of arrows flew up at them in great arcs from the wall and beyond. He called out what he saw to the others.

Tha-tha-tha-tha-thoom! Tha-tha-tha-tha-thoom!

“That means there are only two out there,” Kazrack said. “Perhaps we should go take care of them now before the others return and figure out how to get past the door up there.”

“Are we sure that the door is the way we want to go?” asked Roland.

“Yes, I was thinking that” Martin said. “The beam of light struck the statue, and those creatures came from beneath the statue. I think *that* is the way we have to go.”

“I want to scout around this tower some more before we decide which way to go,” Ratchis said. He had just finished casting two *cure light wounds* in quick succession on Kazrack, and now came down the stairs to join the others. Kazrack remained by the door to watch it.

Roland looked back out the window and noted several hundred more orcs converging on the fortress.

“Oh boy! There are a lot of them big piggies down there,” the Bastite said.

“I want a chance to try to talk to those modron- things,” Bastian said. Everyone was startled. The bearded warrior had been paralyzed so long ³¹ that they had propped him up in a corner at the bottom of the stairs.

“Bastian! Are you alright?” Roland asked.

³⁰ **DM's Note:** This session was played on April 3rd, 2005.

³¹ **DM's Note:** Poor Bastian was paralyzed early in the combat in session #90, for all of Session #91 and did not recover until the beginning of this session.

“I am now,” He stretched and yawned as if he had been sleeping. He called mentally to his familiar, and the hawk alighted in the window Roland had been looking out of moments before.

“Bastian, do you know about these things?” Roland asked.

“No, afraid not,” Bastian replied. “But...”

“Did you see everything?” Ratchis interrupted with his question.

“Huh?”

“While you were paralyzed, could you see what happened?” Ratchis asked.

“Some of it,” Bastian frowned. “When I was pointed in the right direction.”

Ratchis nodded and Gunthar chuckled.

“As I was saying,” Bastian cleared his throat, but his voice was no louder afterwards. “I want to tell them of the patron creature I can summon. They might know his name and we could work something out.”

“Oh, plan to name-drop, huh?” Roland winked.

“Uh...”

“If you think it will work, I give you free reign to try to tell them whatever you please,” Ratchis said to Bastian.

“Oh, how righteous of you to give him freedom, *Nephtys*-follower,” Gunthar smirked.

Ratchis growled in response.

Martin the Green decided to change some of his prepared spells,³² while Ratchis scouted around downstairs, and everyone did their best to catch their wind and prepare for whatever might happen next.³³

Ratchis checked the stone door for magic and found none, so he opened it slowly. Beyond was a narrow circular stairway around a broad cylindrical center. It coiled in both directions, up to the right and down to the left, out of sight. The half-orc crept up a bit first and found exactly what he thought. This led to the door at the base of the pedestal at the top of the tower. Martin and Roland had been right, the party needed to go down the passage beneath the statue above. The cylindrical section these stairs coiled around must have been a second narrow spiral staircase that went down into some other part of the tower, or perhaps even into the lower fortress itself.

He crept down past the door in the other direction. These narrow stairs led down to another room similar to the one he had left his companions in, so he went down another level, where the stairs ended in a broad L-shaped hall. There were other stone doors leading off this hall.

Each door connected to long barrack rooms, but the bunks were stripped bare, and there wasn't so much as dust upon the open and empty footlockers at the foot of each one. Some other doors led to smaller rooms that held desks and wardrobes, all empty.

Ratchis realized that all of these rooms, corridors and staircase seemed to all be made of the same stone. There were no bricks and no seams and no chisel marks from carving. It was as if the place had been molded into its shape.

³² **DM's Note:** In Aquerra, wizards may change spells they have already prepared but have not cast yet, but this takes fifteen minutes per spell level in order to do. They still have the normal total of spell cast per day.

³³ Remember, Martin and Kazrack were still *exhausted* from having dropped to negative hit points, and Gunthar was *fatigued*.

There was another open stair at the end of the perpendicular hall, and Ratchis had barely crept halfway down it when realized he had reached the bottom floor. The ground floor had a marble fountain and small benches and plots with small trees and flowering plants. There were double doors out to the upper courtyard, and beside it the wall was made of what could only be described as transparent stone.³⁴

Ratchis could hear the cries and curses of the orcs out at the gate across the lower courtyard.

There was a sudden flash from out in the upper courtyard and Ratchis was forced to cover his eyes. It was followed by a horrible scream of agony that was cut frighteningly short. The flash made Ratchis note a stone statue standing atop a niche that looked like it was reached by two shallow steps. It was over nine feet tall and was carved to look like a broad bald man in a skull cap, bare-chested and with a sash about his waist.

Ratchis stopped short at the bottom of the steps. He thought he saw the statue move and did not think about it twice. He rushed back up the stairs as quickly as he could as his foot wound still ached. Hustling around the narrow stairs, he burst into the room.

“I think I woke a stone statue!” he warned his companions. “I hear breaking stone down there, I think it is slowly climbing up here.”

“Oh no,” Martin the Green said.

“Will it fit in that narrow stairway?” Bastian asked.

“If it is a stone golem it will break through eventually if it really wants to get up here,” Martin said. “This is a creature like the dog we encountered in the dwarven temple beneath the Pit of Bones.”³⁵

“A dwarven creature?” Kazrack asked coming down the stairs.

“No,” Martin replied. “We need to get out of here.”

Ratchis nodded.

“Okay,” Kazrack agreed. “But we need to move as a unit and push our way past those creatures and to the statue.”

“It is good to stay together so I can activate the cube around us if needed,” Martin said. They came up with a plan using the cube and some longswords they collected from this armory. Martin the Green began to show Ratchis how to use the cube when the stone door into the tower at the stop of the stair burst open, sending shards of spears, boards, and iron spikes in all directions.

Ratchis moved to the bottom of the stairs and Gunthar joined him on his left.

“No invitation. No entrance. You must leave. Entrance is barred,” a pentadron said as it came down the step blasting gas and flaring its leaf-shaped limbs to steady itself.

Gunthar thrust his sword at it, but it turned the blow away pinning it for a second between two of its limbs. Kazrack stepped over as another pentadron floated off the steps to land beside him. The dwarf ducked to avoid one of its limbs slapping out at him. Roland and Bastian moved in close, as did Dorn and Martin and Ratchis activated the cube so that it held out living matter.

The Keepers of the Gate began the slow awkward climb within the cube as it scooted along, feeling the strange sensation of their boot soles going through the cube and stopping when it touched their feet within.

³⁴ **DM's Note:** This was a permanent *Glassee* spell.

³⁵ See Session #62

“Please let us pass,” Bastian said to the modrons, hefting a long spear he had taken from one of the racks. “There is one who expects our arrival.”

“No invitation. No entrance,” the pentadrones said. There was now one in front of the cube and one behind it, twirling with great speed to slam all five of their limbs into the cube’s field over and over again.

“His name is Torzig,”³⁶ Bastian said. “Do you have a way of talking to him before you make your judgment?”

The pentadrones both paused.

Ratchis readied to attack with his spear as the cube’s progress was very slow, but Bastian laid a hand on the half-orc’s arm.

“It looks like they might respond,” Bastian said.

“How can you even tell?” Roland asked, twisting his lips in disapproval.

“We are running out of time,” Ratchis said. “We need to get inside the Maze.”

“Servant of Torzig, you will not fool our master this time,” the two pentadrones said in their cold flat voices, taking turns at words and turning their bodies to speak with one, two or three mouths at once.

The others looked at Bastian who shrugged his shoulders.

“What can I do to redeem myself?” Bastian was asking when the other door into the armory began to crack from the blows of something on the other side.

“The golem!” Martin cried.

The Keepers of the Gate arranged themselves in the cube. Kazrack was in front with Gunthar, while Ratchis stepped in behind the dwarf ready to attack over his head with a long spear if necessary.

“This is your last chance,” the pentadrones said, as the party got the cube to the top of the stairs and at the lip of the door back outside. Martin looked back and saw a huge stony hand trying to tear open the lower doorway into the armory to widen it.

Tha-tha-tha-tha-thoom! Tha-tha-tha-tha-thoom! The pentadrones slammed against the cube. Gunthar thrust with the spear he had picked up, but these creatures were very resilient. The sharpened points of the weapon slid off of them to little or no effect, and even Ratchis’ great troll-belt augmented strength did little to make the wounds more deadly.

“These things are tougher than the scarred clit of a Zoosburg whore!” Gunthar swore. Kazrack thrust his halberd and scored a deep hit, catching the edge of the modron’s mouth and yanking it hard to the right. The creature’s blood was pus-like yellow grease.

The Keepers of the Gate stumbled over themselves repositioning to turn the cube round and get up the stairs. The pentadron in front of them withdrew. They did this again and again, and soon they were just one level below the top of the tower.

“Invaders,” it said. “This is your last chance to retreat.”

With a ‘pop’ the boney gas-expelling tube appeared at the top of its body. The party moved forward, and it expelled

³⁶ Torzig is the dao (an earth jinn) that Bastian summons to learn spells and gain information from.

a noxious cloud of the gas that passed through the cube with no trouble.³⁷ Everyone fell into a fit of coughing and when the gas dissipated Gunthar and Dorn were paralyzed.

Bastian grabbed Dorn by the collar and began to drag him along. Martin did his best to bring Gunthar along as the cube slid forward again. Again, Ratchis and Kazrack attacked, and this time the dwarf's halberd pierced the gas-filled sack atop the thing's head. There was a loud 'pop' and a hiss, and the thing drooped down and dribbled its yellow blood from all its orifices.

Ratchis pressed the pond-etched side of the cube, deactivating it.

"Make a run for it!" the half-orc said, and everyone began hustling up the stairs, Roland pausing just long enough to assume panther-form again. However, soon his muscled feline legs pulled him past everyone else. N'kron took off from Bastian's shoulder.

Martin the Green was slowed by the weight of Gunthar's inert form, and Kazrack, not a fast runner anyway, took Dorn off Bastian's hands. Free of his burden, Bastian was able to nearly catch up with Roland. Ratchis seeing that no one was helping Martin with Gunthar, hobbled back, cursing under his breath and threw the Neergardian over his shoulder.³⁸

Roland with his great speed was the first to reach not only the top of the tower, but he hustled up the stairs that had appeared when the second wave of pentadrones had arrived³⁹ and was beside the statue.

The pentadrone following on the stairs caught up to Ratchis and slammed the half-orc as he spun around to try to defend himself. He fought to keep his breath as he felt his ribs contract, and lowered Gunthar's paralyzed form to the ground and drew his sword.

"Secondary defenses!" the pentadrone said, its cold voice actually increasing in pitch and volume, as Ratchis cut into one of its black legs, tipping it over despite its five-legged stability.⁴⁰ "Secondary and tertiary defenses!"

"Hurry! Find the way down! There may be more coming!" Ratchis called to his companions.

As if in response, another pentadrone landed on the tower trying to cut off Kazrack as he made it to the corner of the stairs. Bastian and Martin had hurried past the dwarf and were already at the top of the tower. "Invaders. Invaders," it said.

Kazrack dropped Dorn and cut the creature deeply, making one of its limbs a ragged sopping thing that whipped its pus-like blood in all directions.

"I can't see how it would open," Roland said to Bastian, leaping off of the statue pedestal. The bearded warrior hurried up and looked himself, and immediately noticed a round metal seam beneath the statue. He called down what he saw to Martin the Green but was forced to draw his hammer and ready his shield as still yet another pentadrone landed on the steps behind him. Bastian spun around, catching a whipping limb against his shield.

"Invaders. Invaders," it said.

"We are not trying to invade," Bastian said to it. "We are just trying to make our scheduled appointment. We do not want further hostilities."

Tha-tha-tha-tha-thoom! Bastian stumbled back as he felt the five heavy blows against his head, chest, and legs. He tried in vain to move his shield into position to block the blows, but the pentadrone limbs flew up and down as it

³⁷ The cube was set to only keep out/in *living* matter.

³⁸ **DM's Note:** Ratchis took a critical hit to the foot in the previous session as was still moving at half speed.

³⁹ See Last Session (#91)

⁴⁰ **DM's Note:** Creatures gains a +2 *stability bonus* to their save vs. knockdown per extra leg beyond two.

spun. He stumbled, nearly falling, and for a moment the world seemed to spin as well. He was gravely wounded and tried a weak counterattack that the modron easily avoided. Martin the Green waited at the base of the stairs, unsure of what to do. He noticed a whirlwind forming in the air above the statue. Finally, sighing, he began to load his crossbow.

Kazrack cut the limb from the pentadrone he fought, and it collapsed, gurgling. The dwarf hurried back to support Ratchis, whose blows despite his great strength were not doing nearly as much damage as the magical halberd. Gunthar and Dorn began to stir.

“Ugh, that smelled worse than a she-troll’s gash!” Gunthar swore. He drew his swords and made for the top of the tower. Dorn stood where he was, waiting for Kazrack and Ratchis, and then moved cautiously towards the melee when he saw Ratchis stumble back from two blows on the chin and collapse, unconscious.

“Ratchis is down!” Dorn called to those above.

“Here, take this!” Bastian said. He withdrew from the pentadrone and hung the strap at the end of his hammer on a hook on the back of his shield. Gunthar had leapt into the melee by then and was able to draw the thing off. Reaching into the *robe of the wayfarer*, Bastian tore off one of its patches and placed it on the ground. It lay there for a minute and then ‘pop’ transformed into a white crystal vial. He rolled it towards the top of the steps with his foot. Dorn ran up the steps and grabbed the vial, and then hustled back to where Kazrack struggled with the other pentadrone. The dwarf drove his halberd into the center of its strange body, and it made a strange noise and then fell over. Kazrack hurried up to the top of the tower, leaving the bleeding Ratchis to Dorn.

Martin the Green followed Dorn down the steps, leaving the pentadrone to Bastian, Gunthar and Roland, and he grabbed up *the Wurfel Kraft* from Ratchis. He came back up on the tower in time to see the last pentadrone was dead as well, but Gunthar was stumbling down on his face, as the whirlwind came down among them.

“I think I can hold it off with the cube!” Martin announced.

“You will have to come to me,” Kazrack said, moving to the left and right to avoid the elemental’s buffeting blows. “If I withdraw now, I will go down.”

Kazrack thrust and swung, feeling his magical halberd cut at the binding magic that held the elemental in this plane, but he overextended himself and left an opening. He felt the slam of the elemental’s airy fist and he spun around, dropping unconscious upon the steps.⁴¹

Bastian dropped to one knee and looked up to the air elemental “Please stop this! We don’t want to fight anymore!”

“Are you a fool?” Roland asked, growling as he finally leapt into melee. “That is not going to work! It thinks we are invaders. Get up and fight!” His bite and claws had little effect and he leapt on the other side of the whirlwind, trying to get its attention away from Kazrack. Martin moved up and pressed the side of the cube that pictured grapes. The blue cubic field hummed into being around him and Kazrack.

“We do not wish to continue this,” Bastian continued to address the air elemental, this time in dwarven. “We only seek to meet one who resides on the plane of earth.” Gunthar was back on his feet and leapt back into the melee only to be slammed and knocked down again. Roland yelped as he was slammed as well and nearly knocked off the steps.

“It is not working,” Roland insisted, getting a little hysterical, “We are in aggressive negotiations. Help us fight or we’re all going to die!”

Down on the stairs, Ratchis was getting to his feet with Dorn’s help. “If you survive, please pray to Nephthys to

⁴¹ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack fumbled, rolling the following result: *Distracted*: Intended opponent gains immediate attack of opportunity at +4.

forgive my soul for this selfishness.” The half-orc took out a potion and slurped down its contents; more of his wounds closed.

“Heh. If any of us survive this,” Dorn replied. He took off up the stairs and came up behind Bastian, loading his crossbow.

Gunthar leapt back to his feet and the air elemental sent its fist-like winds down on him, but he scurried into the cube and the blast of wind slammed against it to no effect. Roland yelled again, as he was not as lucky. It noted Ratchis limping through its reach to get to the others, but it reacted too slowly, and again it slammed into the blue field before it could get its prey. Kazrack’s blood dripped off the steps, unobstructed by the blue field about him.

Bastian leapt into the field as well, followed by Roland. The bearded warrior turned to Roland. “When I was at its mercy it did not attack because I did not threaten it. If we do not attack, it may show us all mercy.”

“It is too late for that,” Roland replied. “It might work as a strategy for saving yourself at the cost of the rest of us. Good work!”

The air elemental moaned like a wind through a haunted canyon and turned towards Dorn, battering the henchman and knocking him down. Ratchis and Gunthar leapt from the cube and chopped at the thing. Gunthar felt a stiff resistance as he stabbed with the short sword he took from Mozek, and the elemental dissipated.

“Haw! Haw! It was nothing more than an overblown fart,” Gunthar laughed, and it echoed in a sudden silence that was broken by the sound of something smashing in the armory below. But this was quickly drowned out by the swell of orcish roars of joy from the fortress courtyard.

“Ratchis! Kazrack is dying!” Martin called. The half-orc went back and whispered to Nephthys, stabilizing the dwarf’s condition with an orison.

Bastian climbed up the steps and began to examine the seam beneath the statue once again, while continuing to bicker with Roland.

“Shut up!” Ratchis roared, letting his anger bubble over. He climbed the steps and looked at the seam himself. “Out of the way,” he said, as he climbed upon the pedestal and began to push on the statue in the direction they had seen it swing out. It did not budge. Ratchis motioned Bastian to help, but it was too much for the two of them. Gunthar joined and then Dorn and then Martin, and finally on the last push they felt it budge and heard the protest of the gears that held it locked in place. They looked at Roland, who sighing, transformed back into human form, and helped them push.

It still took three more tries, each of them looking at Kazrack’s unconscious form with longing between each try, but finally it gave way and began to click open of its own accord, revealing a steep metal circular stairway beneath.

With an arcane word, Martin the Green was able to *detect magic* and he saw that the third step down held a protective sigil.

“It will explode into flame if stepped on,” Martin said, after he had examined it for a time while the others nervously kept an eye out for more invaders. He looked beyond and saw another glyph two steps down. “And there is one that turns you into stone.”

“We have no way to dispel them,” Ratchis said. “We are going to have to climb down and skip steps.”

“That seems dangerous,” Martin said. “Especially if Kazrack has to be carried down... Remember Derek.”⁴²

Ratchis snarled.

⁴² Derek was killed in Session #60. He fell from Ratchis’ grip when the steps the half-orc was climbing down collapsed stairs.

“Are there anymore?” Bastian asked.

“Yes,” Martin said, carefully hopping down between the two warded steps. There was another glyph two steps beyond the second. “This one makes you choke on your... <gulp>... on your own bile.”

Martin the Green shuddered, and then reaching into his *bag of tricks* pulled out one of the fuzzy balls that grew into a black bear.

“What are you doing?” Ratchis asked.

“Sending it down to set them off,” Martin replied, and everyone took a step back.

Ratchis opened his mouth like he was going to protest, but then just bowed his head. “Nephthys, forgive us what we must do.”

“Can you make it skip steps?” asked Bastian.

“Yes... well, I can try anyway,” Martin replied. “I am just worried that if it gets turned to stone, I may never be able to use the bag again.”

The bear roared as Martin directed it, and it hopped down the stairs. Fortunately, the Keepers of the Gate drew back even more, for a moment later there was a fiery explosion and the sickening smell of burning hair and flesh accompanied by the death moan of the animal. The thing slid down the steps and then got stuck on a corner for a second before the corpse disappeared.

“Oh no,” Martin said as he went back over to the steps to look down. “The sigil is still there! I think they just become temporarily defunct when set off, not sure how long until it activates again. I guess I should draw more animals from the bag to set off the others.”

“Just a moment,” Bastian said. He began to chant in his dialect of dwarven. “*Bring forth vermin from the bowels of the earth to lead our passage!*”

A steaming red and black rat appeared at his feet and scurried down the steps. There was a pop and a bang as it turned into stone and bounced the rest of the way down the metal steps.

Roland’s lip curled in disgust. “I would rather you didn’t summon infernal creatures in my presence. I find it distasteful.”

“Would you rather see a good bear go up in flame or an evil rat?” Bastian asked in his quiet way. “Which would you rather see suffer and die?”

“Enough arguing,” Ratchis barked. “It is bad enough we have to do this. Let’s just get it over with.”

Martin reached into the bag and this time a tawny gray wolf appeared. Bastian summoned another fiendish rat.

“There wouldn’t happen to be any cats in that bag, would there?” Roland asked Martin, ignoring Ratchis.

“Sometimes,” Martin replied weakly.

“What kind?” the Bastite asked.

“Bob cat,” Martin said.

“You’re lucky you didn’t use that one,” Roland said. “I won’t tolerate the abuse of a cat.”

Martin nodded.

There was another resounding cheer from below and the Keepers of the Gate looked down to see scores of orcs charging towards the upper courtyard unchecked.

“The orcs are coming,” Ratchis said, taking Kazrack up into his arms.

“Looks like orcs are here!” Gunthar said and he ran down the steps and towards the edge of the tower roof that looked over the lowest tier of steps. It seems the crashing in the armory below, was orcs fighting and running past the stone golem Ratchis had awakened. Two of the orcs had gotten through.

Bastian sent his rat down the steps and in a half moment it convulsed in agony, choking on its own bile, and then disappeared. Martin sent the wolf down next, but there were no more glyphs on the top steps. Ratchis began to follow the wolf but stopped and turned to his right. “Gunthar! Get back here!” Ratchis ordered.

But the Neerguardian had an orcish short bow out and an arrow ready. The orcs made it around the corner.

“*Targsh’gish, humans are up here! We must go back and tell the others,*” one orc said to the other in their tongue, as they suddenly changed direction.

Gunthar fired his arrow at nearly point-blank range down on one of the orcs, killing it instantly. The other turned the corner widely and came into view for Roland and Martin who fired crossbow bolts down in that direction. The orc hustled closer to the wall to get out of view again. Bastian hurried down steps getting a bow ready as well.

“Leave it, let’s go!” Ratchis said.

“It saw the where the entrance is,” Gunthar said. “We should kill the last one before it gets back to its kind.”

Roland nodded, and his form melted into that of a black panther once again. He leapt off the steps and made a quick sliding turn to cut off the orc before it made it back to the door. However, Gunthar fired again and that orc dropped as well. They all made it back to the steps and Bastian called to his familiar. The hawk landed upon his shoulder once again. The Keepers of the Gate began to make their way down. The wolf led the way, and Ratchis followed, but allowed it a good lead. He carried Kazrack. Dorn followed him, and then came Martin, Bastian, Roland and finally Gunthar. The statue slid back in place behind them.

Down the metal steps they made their way, their bootsteps echoing up and down the dark shaft as they went. Martin cast *radiant spark* and the small orb of light followed him down. They could not tell exactly how far they had gone, but they certainly were deeper than the tower itself when the steps opened into a large round room that was nearly seventy feet across. A hallway that was about fifteen feet wide led off into the dark in the northwestern quadrant of the circle, and there was another, even tighter circular stairway (this one of stone) in the center of the floor (and thus within the metal one the party descended).

The Keepers of the Gate fanned out in the room, taking a moment to catch their breath. Martin the Green sent his *radiant spark* along the wall of the round room to reveal an intricate mosaic that ran around its entire length. The continuity of the mosaic was only broken by three ribbon-like bands covered in lettering which swept up and down the length of wall, creating panels that divided the chronology of the events shown in the mosaic. It started on the right side of the hallway and went all the way around to its left. Martin followed it around seeing it depicted a tall armored warrior with a winged helm and a shining solar disc and ankh upon his shield. He wielded a flaming sword as he entered into what could only be the Hells. There was a river of blood and countless fiends bounding towards the hero in vile clusters.

In the next panel the holy warrior was depicted destroying fiends by hacking them into pieces with his sword and blasting them with holy fire. The third panel showed a scene with the warrior on his knees before the spirit of a beautiful woman wearing a shining locket, but it also depicted puppet strings that were connected to wooden handles

held by a naked winged demoness upon a mountain manipulating the woman. The fourth panel showed the paladin wearing the shining locket and cutting the head from the demoness as he stood upon the gore-covered bodies of many more fiends. The final panel showed the man struggling to climb jagged steps up and out of Hell, but a small imp has torn the locket from his neck. He had the look on his face as if had given up and would lie down to die and be damned if there were another panel to show it.

The ribbon-like bands of text were written in elvish, dwarvish and common. Martin the Green read it aloud:

Welcome to Hurgun's Maze.

Invited guests are guaranteed to be returned to the world they please. But rogues, thieves and rivals beware, surrender, flee, we might send you anywhere.

Let those who fear to see the truth, take this other safer route. And let those here for ill-gain take this last chance to do the same. . .

The last bit of the ribbon displayed by the tiny tiles of the mosaic folded to a point as if to show the way out the hall.

"This might be your last chance to avoid doom, Dorn," Martin turned to the cohort. "Assuming it is not another trap, that is..."

Dorn shook his head.

"So down that center stairway is Hurgun's Maze?" Roland asked.

Martin shrugged.

"We should rest here before we enter," Roland suggested. "We are all near dead, Kazrack more than any other and we have all but depleted all of our granted miracles and spells."

For once there was no argument. They could only hope than no one else had figured out how to get under the statue, or even that that that was the place to go, and that they would not be taken by surprise in the night by Richard the Red's group trying to sneak past, or scores of orcs coming down the stairs.

"At least we'll hear anyone coming long before they get down here," Roland said.

"Unless they come from that hallway," Bastian pointed.

"That is the way out," Ratchis said. "I don't think it is a way in."

"I guess Hurgun of the Stone depended on his reputation to turn away those that got this far," Martin said.

"I would think that anyone that got this far would not be so easily deterred," Roland said.

"Probably, but at least then you couldn't say that Hurgun didn't try to warn you when some horrible thing happens to you in his place," Bastian said, and Roland sneered at him and turned away.

Ratchis did his best to make Kazrack comfortable, and Dorn helped him to strip the dwarf of his armor. Martin gathered up the magical items taken from the half-fiend gnomes, as he planned to *identify* them. It was still early in the day, so they could get some rest, make preparations, and then sleep, in order to prepare spells again the next day and then enter the Maze.

Roland and Bastian barely spoke a word to each other while everyone else, but Martin, slept and rested. Martin cast his spell and examined what items he could very closely.

A little more than eight hours later Kazrack stirred, and Martin went over to attend him, calling for Ratchis to wake up.⁴³

“I am already awake,” the half-orc said, sitting up immediately.

“What happened?” Kazrack muttered, and Martin and Ratchis did their best to catch him up.

Martin the Green seemed almost happy as he described the items he had *identified*, and the party quickly divvied them. Gunthar took Mozek’s short sword, called *Hornet*.⁴⁴ Roland was given the silver ring with the lion emblem, and Bastian was given Mozek’s elven mithral shirt, which grew to fit him. There was a potion of *lesser restoration*, which was given to Dorn to carry, and lastly, Martin took the *Ring of Marked Excellence*. The watch-mage slipped it on.

“Greetings and salutations, I am the ring of marked excellence,” Martin heard within his head when he slipped on the ring. “I am here to serve you, or well, really anyone that wears me, but even though anyone can use me only an arcane caster can re-fill the spells I have been made to hold and I can sense you are quite a powerful one.

“I like being the only one who can talk in your head,” Thomas complained, and Martin scratched his familiar lovingly.

The ring told Martin which spells it could hold, but added, “Currently I am without the bull’s strength, bear’s endurance, or cat’s grace spells.”

Many hours later, deep in what they thought was night, when everyone but Roland was asleep, Bastian called to N’kron and fed the hawk some dried meat. The bird had been hopping around the round room restlessly, gliding short distances and then hopping again as if annoyed.

“I’ve found these adventurers,” Bastian told his feathered friend mentally. “As it seems I was supposed to, but now I don’t know what comes next, and when I was needed, I was prohibited from directly assisting them. I mean, the instant I thought about going on the offensive, my whole body seized up!”⁴⁵

“A statue!” the hawk said, perking up a bit. “I thought about going on you.”

“Well, I am glad you resisted your natural urges,” Bastian smiled, and threw another piece of the dried meat to his familiar. He stood and walked over to where Roland was pacing along the wall. The Bastite was in human form and was obviously fretting about something. Bastian could see him chewing on his cuticles in the dim lantern light as he squinted at the mosaic.

“You wanted to talk to me?” Bastian asked. “I mean, we seemed to leave our disagreement unresolved earlier.”

“I did...I do,” He put one hand on Bastian’s broad shoulder and gently drew the bearded warrior further aside, away from where the others slept. He also lowered his voice to a near whisper. “I’m glad you came over. I really wanted to apologize for speaking so harshly to you during that last fight with the servants of Ptah and the air elemental. I appreciate that you’re a man that looks for other solutions besides your weapon...but that’s not all I wanted to say...”

Roland looked away and took a few further steps down the wall, placing a hand on the mosaic where the face of the spirit of the woman beseeched the kneeling paladin. Bastian walked over close again.

“Okay. I have something to tell you that I’m just plain nervous about,” Roland continued. He turned and looked right

⁴³ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack naturally regained enough hit points from his rest to go above 0 hit points. Thus, he was not *exhausted* when he awoke. As Ratchis and Gunthar had rested eight hours they were no longer *exhausted* or *fatigued* either.

⁴⁴ **DM’s Note:** *Hornet* is a *shortsword of speed*.

⁴⁵ See Session #90 and #91

at Bastian, and his lip quivered the slightest bit. "I don't like being ashamed and I detest being nervous, so I'll just say it."

"What is it?"

"I think I'm going to die tomorrow. I threw too much of my goddess' power around yesterday and got extremely lucky that the demon-gnome and his minions overlooked me. And while priests of my order are unusually lucky about evading death, but I just can't shake this feeling... All that luck has a way of catching up with you in time," Roland sighed. "And that's okay. I can die knowing that I've served my Queen faithfully and lovingly, but... but, I am still scared of dying and I am ashamed of being scared."

Bastian opened his mouth to reply, letting the words roll around in his head and his mouth before speaking them in that near whisper of a voice he had, but Roland continued yet again, his voice getting just the slightest bit louder, "That probably leads you to ask, why am I telling you this? Why would I think you'd care? But I *do* think you'd care. I feel it. I also feel..." The Bastite looked down again. "I feel like I am falling in love with you."

Bastian's mouth opened again, but this time it was a gape of surprise. There was a long moment of silence, but he never broke eye contact with Roland. The bearded warrior put a calloused hand on the narrow shoulder of the svelte priest of Bast.

"Roland. I am flattered that you think that much of me. It takes a strong bond for those feelings to develop, one that I was not fully aware that we had," Bastian began in his quiet way, a small smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "You spoke of being fearful, yet you show tremendous courage to share those feelings with another. As for your apology, it is much appreciated, but hardly necessary. You only did what you felt was the right thing to do, as you are doing now, and that is all that can be asked for. But I have to ask, your mind is preoccupied with death on the morrow, have you received some sign or vision that suggests this?"

"No, Bastian, none of the gods gave me a sign. I don't need signs," the young priest said with a small amount of heat, his soft voice gaining a strident tempo. His eyes narrowed as he nearly hissed out his next statement, "And I didn't say that I was falling in love with you to flatter you, so wipe that smirk off your face."

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean to..." Bastian began to say.

"Shut up," Roland cut him off. "Just listen. I think it obvious that I largely go through my life by instinct. I have two major drives that govern my instincts...survival..." It was Roland's turn to smirk slightly. "And pleasure."

Roland continued, "My survival instinct is telling me that I'm going to have to be a little more cautious than usual in order to live through what's ahead of us. That's fine. Can do. But I'm really not so sure if others will let that happen. Kazrack alone has made me leap into danger a few times in order to keep him from dying. It's gotten me hurt, but up until now, I've done it. If I keep doing it...if I do the same tomorrow, I don't think I'll live through it. But I can't abandon them when they need me. I won't...even if it means I might die. So, there you have it. No divine interventions...just plain, old-fashioned instinct. Bast teaches us to trust our instinct."

Roland sighed again, but even if Bastian had the propensity to fill up every silence, he knew that it was not the time to speak, and he let the Bastite continue when he was ready.

"And as for pleasure...well, when I think about dying I get angry and frightened and lonely," Bastian thought he saw Roland's eyes begin to tear up in the lantern light. "And when that happens, when I need someone to comfort me, I can't stop thinking of you, Bastian. I can't stop thinking about what it'd be like to be close to you. Please, help me feel better, Bastian...if only tonight," Roland pleaded, touching Bastian's face gently.

Bastian drew the Bastite close and held him tight for a few minutes and then they sat very close together with their back to the wall. Bastian tore a patch from his *robe of the wayfarer* and in a moment, he had a bottle of very fine golden wine to share.

They spent the rest of the night talking of old loves and dreams for the future. Roland rested his head on Bastian's lap and Bastian stroked his hair tenderly. In the morning, when it was time to wake the others, they hugged tightly again and shared a quick kiss before doing so.⁴⁶

Isilem, the 2nd of Ese – 565 H.E.

The healing prayers to Nephthys, Rivkanal and Bast were a chorus of raised voices in the morning. It was decided, however, that Kazrack and Ratchis would use most of the healing granted to them right away to get the group into fighting shape, while Roland would keep most of his in reserve for later.

“Before we go, I just wanted to say that I'm pleased to walk into certain death with you,” Roland announced to the group. “You are loyal, brave, and true and that doesn't happen often. Now, feel free to praise me back...”

There was a long awkward silence, finally broken by Gunthar's guffaws and his rude gestures.

“Well,” Ratchis said, glaring at Gunthar, more to not have to look at Roland in the eye than from any real anger. “We would never have made it without you.”

“Why thank you!” Roland responded.

“We are only doing the duty that befell us,” Kazrack grumbled. “We are due no praise, and the quest is not yet complete, so let us get to it.”

“I love you, too, Kazrack,” Roland winked.

The dwarf grumbled some more.

With a final check of their gear and a quick discussion of the spells they had prepared, the Keepers of the Gate began to make their way down the central stone spiral staircase. Ratchis led the way, followed by Kazrack, Roland (still in human form), Bastian, Martin the Green, Dorn, and finally Gunthar took up the rear. “I'm the rearguard from Neergaard!” he laughed.

The stairway was tight and deep and after a time Ratchis began to feel a bit disoriented, as if he were going no further and the steps were just turning in endless tight circles to oblivion. Finally, the end of the stairway came; Kazrack could only guess that they had descended another two hundred feet deep in the earth. Ratchis could see a red glow coming from the opening below and there was distinct rise in temperature. Sweat immediately began to bead on the ridge of his brow. They could all smell the nearly over-powering scent of burning sulfur. They stopped to cast some spells to protect them from heat and fire.

They came down into a square room that was seventy feet to a side. The spiral stairway they had just come down was enclosed in a black stone cylinder in the very center of the room, and all about it were eight trapezoidal columns in sets of two that reached from the brown stone floor to a similar ceiling twenty-five feet above. Ever-burning torches within sweating golden sconces hung on the columns. Each corner of the room was roiling with a different energy.

The stairs opened to a corner that gave off the heat. It was a roiling glowing pit of fire and magma, and at its center was a moving statue, a twirling bird of lava floating on the hot gases being emanated from the pit. The bird shifted multiple hues of reds, oranges, and yellows, and then exploded, spattering back into the magma. The Keepers of the Gate were startled, and then suddenly the statue began to reform itself. The roiling magma seemed to be kept in

⁴⁶ **DM's Note:** While the foundation for this scene between Bastian and Roland was set during the session, with a general agreement of what it was pertaining to and a little bit of an exchange, the majority of it was left to be handled between session via email. I took large portions of the dialogue from those emails, though I edited it for length, while still wanting to give the two newcomers some spotlight time in the story hour.

check by the pillars in that corner, which were of a blood red stone.

In the corner to the right of this was a dark impenetrable cloud of brown, gray, black and even blue smoke. The puffs turned and spun around each other expanding and dissipating. A variety of smells wafted through the two gray columns that held this corner in check. There was hickory burning, incense, perfume, fish frying and then rotten eggs.

To the left of the fire was a pit of foul ooze with spouts of black and gray and green varieties of different consistencies. The spurts of ooze would freeze into geometric shapes and then melt back into the goo with a hissing belch. Here there were brown columns

Finally, in the corner diagonally opposite from the magma, were columns made of ice that sweat and wheezed. Beyond was a frozen fountain that seemed to have overflowed, and at its center the statue of a translucent woman, her hair, and hands and elbows and back covered in sharp jagged icicles.

At the center of each wall was an arched doorway beyond which was a portal devoid of light. It reminded them of the passage they took to Topaline.⁴⁷

“It looks like a junction of the para-elemental planes,” Martin said, wiping his brow of sweat. Bastian had to calm his bird, which flapped its wings angry at the heat and glare.

“It says something here,” Ratchis said. He was looking at the stone cylinder that held the steps they had just descended. There were letters in common, dwarvish and elvish carved into the stone and traced in gold paint. Martin the Green read it aloud.

It said: *Born of neighbors ever-struggling and volatile, act as a good neighbor or no fence can mend their anger.*

“Hmm, it seems like a riddling version of the traditional wardings against outsiders,” Martin mused aloud.

“So we should be safe here as long as we act as good neighbors?” Bastian asked.

“Well, it won’t hurt to try,” Martin replied. “Do not attack unless you are attacked. Clearly and unequivocally attacked.”

“That would be worth taking the first blow to avoid conflict,” Ratchis agreed. He turned to Gunthar. “You get that?”

“Oh, we’re gonna get it alright,” Gunthar replied. “But that’s alright, ‘cause I can take it and I can dish it out.”

“From what I remember from the notes in the probably false vision I had when I first touched the Book of Black Circles, the rooms here in this place move around, so any way is as good as any other I guess.”⁴⁸

“Wait! I fear this riddle is about this very room and these elemental nodes in these corners,” Kazrack said. “It may be that they are a form of ward, or that guardians emerge from them if we do not ‘act as a good neighbor’. What else do good neighbors do?”

“They certainly don’t wander around someone else’s house uninvited,” Roland snapped. “But it looks like that is what we came here to do, so we might as well get it over with.”

Kazrack nodded. “Remain alert,” the dwarf said.

Ratchis began to lead the way to the portal between the ooze and the ice corners. The stone cylinder at the center of the room and began to turn of its own accord and rose into the ceiling, taking with it the entrance.

⁴⁷ See Session #83

⁴⁸ See Session #63

“I guess no one is going to be following us in here,” Kazrack said.

“There is a kind of relief to that,” Roland replied.

“It may be set for a certain amount of time, or there may be some other way to extend it,” Martin said. “So, we should not assume no one else can come down here.”

As the half-orc passed between the columns, Kazrack and Martin right behind him, Gunthar called out.

“Look!”

The ooze in the corner on the right was taking a large dripping humanoid form.

End of Session #92

AQUERRA

Session #93

Kazrack cried out with alarm as the ooze formed into a fist-like pseudopod and slammed into his chest. There was an acrid hiss as the delicate etching on his masterwork plate melted away. The dwarf jerked back, certain the ooze would have burned through his labor of love in only a few moments of contact.

Roland hastily prayed to Bast to grant him *protection from energy* gearing it towards acid and drawing his crossbow, he withdrew.

Ratchis called out, "Martin, make the call soon!"

"Feel free! Attack!" Martin the Green said, confused that the sole responsibility had fallen on him.⁴⁹ "It attacked us first." With an additional arcane word, he cast *mage armor* upon himself.

Dorn moved behind Ratchis and loaded his crossbow, turning his head from side to side to keep an eye on the corner of the room oozing its magma phoenix.

Two arrows from Gunthar hissed and disintegrated as they plunged into the vaguely humanoid ooze para-elemental. Its limbs dripped with each step forward, leaving behind slimy green and brown bits of itself that snaked back into the corner pit it had emerged from, creating a trail.

Bastian called for flame in his dialect of dwarven and hurled it at the thing, but it snuffed out as it struck it.

Kazrack ducked another of the thing's pseudopods as it drove them back towards the center of the room, below the raised column that held the stairs. Roland stepped in front of Bastian with words of prayer on his lips, but the prayer became a cry of agony as the heavy limb of the thing slammed him. The Bastite lost his spell and stumbled backward, dropping his crossbow. Bastian stepped to the side to draw its attention and tried to cast again, but again the thing whipped a limb out and the bearded warrior-warlock found his spell was ruined as well.

Kazrack, Ratchis and Gunthar moved in. Their metal weapons hissed as they sometimes cut pieces both great and small from the ooze elemental, leaving trails of acrid smoke to trace the arc of their swing. However, most of the blows made shallow cuts that were reabsorbed into its slimy mass. Martin crept forward and with a mental nudge cast *bull's strength* from his *ring of marked excellence* upon Gunthar.

"Thank you for using me, kind sir," the ring said in the watch-mage's mind. "But really you should fill me up with more spells. I am nearly depleted."

Bastian flung more flame at the thing and this time it seemed to shrink the slightest bit from it.

"Everyone back up and let it come to us," Ratchis said, and Gunthar and Kazrack immediately complied. The half-orc stepped back as well and had to duck the swing of the thing. Another pseudopod stretched out far, scoring Kazrack's armor once again.

"Krauchaar! Bless my bones and make me strong so that I might fell my foes easier," Kazrack called to the dwarven warrior god.

As Roland was overcome by the powerful scents of the room when he transformed into his panther shape, Bastian leapt at the para-elemental, ducking one of its blows and doing a shoulder roll to get back to his feet on the other side of it, warhammer in hand.

"Bastian! Not that way!" Ratchis said to him. "This way! We need to all stick together and decide one way to go."

Bastian shrugged and dove through the monster's threatened area again, easily avoiding its blow, but Ratchis must

⁴⁹ See Last Session, when the Keepers of the Gate decided they would let things clearly attack them before they attacked.

have been momentarily distracted because he suddenly felt the weight of a burning punching blow strike him on the side of the head. He stumbled back, and Roland immediately cast a healing spell that resealed the blistered and bruised skin. Kazrack stepped between and cut another hunk from the para-elemental.

“Stick with the plan,” Kazrack said. “Fall back, everybody back.” But by then, having reached the center of the room, where the stairs had once been, the Keepers of the Gate were unsure of which way to go.

Gunthar’s left hand stabbed with great speed using Mozek’s sword, *Hornet*. There was a rain of slime whenever he closed with it, keeping it at bay with the longer blade as he repeatedly plunged in the other. Suddenly the top part of the vague humanoid swelled up and it thrust itself into Gunthar shoving him back with great strength. Gunthar cried out as he tried to push back, pressing into the acidic ooze, but he slid right between the two gray columns where multi-colored fragrant smoke puffed and twirled.

“This thing is nastier than the abortion bucket at a whorehouse,” Gunthar said, as he swung his melting longsword. He had managed to keep his feet, but his non-magical blade was whipping bits of slag with every swing.

Kazrack, who was closest to the smoke-filled corner side spun around in time to feel the immaterial black claws of a smoke elemental slip through his armor and slice his flesh beneath.

“Finish this thing!” Ratchis roared, but the ooze elemental sucked itself back into a ball to avoid his vicious blows. Kazrack leapt away from the smoke elemental and brought his magical halberd down on the ooze in a wide downward chop. The thing exploded sending acid in all directions. Ratchis and Kazrack absorbed most of it, patches of skin and hair burning away. Ratchis looked down to watch the individual globules rolls slowly back into the corner the creature had emerge from and saw that his *Boots of Uller* were now less than rags on his feet, and he winced as he felt the burning cold of the stone floor on his bare soles.⁵⁰

“The acid pool retreats,” Roland warned the others. “It may reform. We need to pick a way and go!” He hurried back towards the original portal they headed towards, and Dorn and Bastian followed him.

Martin the Green drew *the Wurfel Kraft* from its pouch and activated the side depicting grapes.

The smoke para-elemental floated silently after them. It was a column of black, blue, and orange, twirling and expanding within itself. It had two ghostly black claws that hung beneath it as if dragged by an invisible string. It enveloped Bastian as the man spun around. The smells passed over him like waves, taking his mind away to some memory or another each time. Baked beans, frying fish, the musk of a boar’s den, the spoiled stench of a pig sty, the disgust of burning hair. Suddenly, Bastian realized he could not breath. The smoke elemental was as much within his lungs as around him, and he jerked in pain as the claws raked over his chest.

Roland roared and leapt at the Bastian, knocking him back out of the thing. The Bastite felt the thing’s sharp claws catch his back as he leapt away, and Bastian bent over and let out a hacking cough. Black smoke emerged from his mouth, and he stumbled into the cube’s blue field, leaning on Martin for a moment as he caught his breath. The elemental monster twirled and snaked across to Ratchis who was now making for the black lightless doorway as well, and in half a moment it now enveloped him.

“What the fuck are you looking at, Pointy? Gunthar was heard to say, and everyone turned to see him address a pyramidal modron that looked exactly like the one they had left on the tower above.⁵¹ It had come through the black portal between the smoke and the ice corners and was walking with determination into the center of the room.

“Everyone gather about me! The smoke cannot enter the cube,” Martin said, following the modron as it changed direction without turning its body, now moving towards the same door the party was headed towards. Each of its three upright sides had a large yellow eye, and a bill like horn for a mouth. It had three arms and three legs, one of

⁵⁰ These magical boots were a gift from the elves of Aze Nuquerna. See Session #23.

⁵¹ The creature the party had met in Garvan in Session #16, and discovered it was missing in Session #51. They assume it was the same one that was killed when the wyvern carrying it slammed into the tower above (see Session #89)

each on each of those sides. It disappeared through the portal.

Holding his breath, Ratchis managed to leap into the cube's blue field before breathing in any of the smoke elemental. In a moment, everyone was crammed within it, as the para-elemental hovered above them. Martin moved the cube right up against the portal and the wall there.

"We should all go through together," Kazrack said of the portal.

"I can slowly move the cube forward allowing us to pass through in a line grasping hands and bringing *the Wurful Kraft's* field with us," Martin suggested. "But, if this is like the door to the pocket dimension that held the city of Topaline, then we will be blind when come through the other side."

"I don't think Hurgun would have made doors in his house that make you blind every time you go through them," Roland said.

"He may have had way to make himself immune to that side-effect," Martin posited.

"We have no choice," Kazrack said. "The best we can hope for is that we stay together."

The Keepers of the Gate locked arms and Kazrack stepped out of the cube and through the portal. He felt a shock of cold as all went black, but Ratchis cried out as he felt something stab at his very being. Stunned, he fell through the portal behind the dwarf, but Dorn who was next cried out as well and let go of the half-orc. The Herman-lander reeled as he tried to shake off the pain, so he could not resist when Gunthar shoved him through the portal after the first two. Roland, who had been grabbing onto the rear of Dorn's coat with his teeth, yowled and let go, falling to one side stunned.

Gunthar shrugged and leapt through, and Bastian helped Roland to his feet and sent him through as well. The bearded warrior leapt through with Martin right behind.

Kazrack and Ratchis found themselves in a short dark tunnel of some sort with an arched ceiling. It was barely more than fifteen feet long and just about the same width, and ended in a portcullis of broad metal bands, from beyond which came a dull yellow light.

"I hope this delay does not mean we have been separated," Ratchis was saying to Kazrack as he rubbed at the pain in his temples. Dorn stumbled through and fell to the ground. Gunthar came right behind him.

"Where are we now?" the Neergaardian's voice reverberated down the short tunnel. There was murmur of clicks from beyond the portcullis.

"Did you hear that?" Kazrack was asking as Roland came through with Bastian right on his heels.

"What is this place?" Roland asked when he regained his senses. He walked over to the portcullis and began to sniff at the openings in it.

Martin the Green stepped through.

"My! It is a lot more crowded in here than I thought it would be," he said, and with that the portcullis began to slowly rise.

"Intruders. Come forward for judgment," came the clockwork voice of what could only be some kind of modron. Its voice was eight tones that complimented each other in cold harmonies, two, three, four even five at a time, the chords changing with each word. There was another murmured cacophony of clicking that washed around them in the cramped tunnel.

“Maybe we should go back and try another way,” Ratchis said.

“These creatures obviously dwell here,” Kazrack reasoned. “We should not flee from them but step forward and explain our cause.”

“The voice said something about ‘judgment’,” Ratchis replied. “What if they judge against us?”

“I see no reason why they would, we have done nothing wrong,” Ratchis opened his mouth to interrupt, but Kazrack just continued on in a harsh whisper. “But if such a thing were to happen, we’ll be sure to stand by Martin and he can activate the cube and we can push our way out of there.”

Since no one could think of a better plan, and the modrons seemed more likely to be parleyed with than the para-elemental guardians, they stepped past the risen gate. Ratchis and Kazrack led the way, with Martin close behind them. The trio was followed by Dorn and Roland, and Bastian and Gunthar took up the rear.

The Keepers of the Gate stepped out into a tiered gallery. This chamber seemed much the same square shape and size as the first room of the Maze, but the floor level was only thirty feet long and twenty-five feet wide and surrounded by twelve-foot-tall walls. The entire place seemed carved from one immense cube of living rock. The ceiling was arched and plated in dull gold that emanated the yellow light of the chamber.

Directly across from them was another portcullis, this one closed and above it was an elaborate stone balcony set with a tall-backed stone throne-like chair. The balcony was carved from the great angular stone that made up the rear wall. There was a closed portcullis to the left and right beneath the tiers as well. There were no seats behind or above it. The tiers were connected by short narrow stone steps, and each one was not much wider than five feet.

The tiered seats were filled with nearly two score modrons of various kinds. There were nearly a dozen of the pyramidal ones, but nearly a score had one eye and round spheres for bodies, with two spindly legs, tiny wings and no arms. There were a handful of six-sided cube-bodied modrons, with two legs that ended in black hooves and two arms, but with two eyes on each of its facing sides.⁵²

The balcony was flanked by a pair of pentadrones that spun, lifting their flat limbs slightly as they buzzed. And within the balcony propped awkwardly atop the throne was the strangest of these creatures yet. Its head was a great sphere with ten round eyes set evenly about it, and beneath each was a long tentacle that ended in a narrow-clawed finger. The top of the sphere was a wide mouth, and the whole head rested on a pair of trunk-like elephantine legs.

“Intruders. You shall be judged,” they heard the freakish thing before them say. Its mouth did not move, but there was no doubt it came from the lead modron. A tentacle touched something on a panel before the throne and the portcullis behind them slammed shut. “I am the Decaton. I command the collective for the Master.”

“Whatta load of freaks!” Gunthar swore. Roland hushed him.

“Martin, step forward,” Kazrack whispered, stepping aside to let the watch-mage past. “You are our best talker.”

“The first question of this inquiry shall be question number one, and question number one is: Do you have an invitation?” the decaton asked.

“Oh great and unerring servant of Ptah,” Martin began looking up with arms outstretched in exaggerated supplication. “We come seeking to save our world from the random fluctuations that threaten to tear it apart because of the very existence of this Maze. We did not mean to arrive without an invitation, but it an emergency.”

“No invitation, no admittance,” the decaton said, and all the other modrons echoed the rule. “Admission without invitation is a violation.” The thing’s multi-toned voice hit a sharp dissonant chord when it said its last word.

⁵² Quadrones

“Violation. Violation,” the modrons all repeated in agreement in their cold voices.

“We did not seek to violate this place or its rules,” Kazrack spoke up. “But we have come to save your master, Hurgun of the Stone.”

“Perhaps you are unaware that he is trapped in the center of his own Maze and he must be rescued if the Maze is to be moved away from Aquerra and he is to regain control of it,” Martin added. “Our goals here are selfless, but others who may soon access will not be so.”

“There is no center of the Maze,” the decaton replied, its voices striking dissonance again when it spoke the word ‘center’. “You are operating with incomplete data. Incomplete data leads to violations. Violation equals re-assimilation or banishment. Decaton calls to the gallery for affirmation of judgment.”

“Wait! Wait!” Martin cried out. “We have done nothing. We are here to stop the planar bleed. Surely Hurgun left you with instructions of what to do if he did not return.”

“We await your judgment, Decaton,” the other modrons all said.

“Is there not a second in command? An assistant to Hurgun?” Martin asked.

“Gilbart,” the Decaton replied with a warm group of tones that hummed nicely at the base of the back. “Gilbart is absent.”

The Keepers of the Gate all looked at each other, but none recognized the name.

“Outsider influence has led to corruption and re-programming of crucial modron units,” the Decaton said. “We operate at less than full capacity. The modron maintenance re-assimilation station is no longer operational. However, judgment must still be made.”

“But you said yourself that we are operating with insufficient data,” Martin reasoned. “And now, so are you. *You* will be in violation!”

“Judgment has been reached,” the Decaton said. “These before the Collective have been found in violation of the rules of admission and thus must face banishment.” The last word words squelched in the party’s ears, and they winced. “All in favor?”

The modrons clicked, “Aye” in perfect unison.

“Those against?” The only sound was Martin the Green growing desperate.

“You have been found to be in violation,” the decaton said to the Keepers of the Gate. “You are to be banished. You must GO TO HELL! ”

The decaton pointed to the portcullis on their left with three of his tentacles while another depressed something on the console before him, and it started to rise.

“You have no authority to do this,” Martin protested. “We have done nothing to deserve this fate!”

“Please step to the left,” the Decaton said in a perfunctory manner.

The Keepers of the Gate looked at each other dumbfounded as all the modrons around them clicked and whirred and repeated the words “banishment” and “hell” to each other in perfect agreement.

“What can we do to not go to Hell?” Kazrack asked. “How may we make up for being in violation?”

The decaton turned its great spherical head so that one of its eyes was looking right at Kazrack, while another looked right at Martin.

“Can you repair the modron station? We cannot re-assimilate. We cannot repair the damage,” the decaton said.

“Yes! Please allow us a chance to repair it!” Martin took up the slim hope. “You are obviously not functioning at full capacity and need to be serviced at this modron station. We can help you and then you can help us help Hurgun.”

“Outsider influence,” the Decaton said. “Our numbers dwindle remaining unassimilated because of the strange monkey demon. It was in violation. The Master was seeing to it.”

“Mitha-agogol!”⁵³ Martin cried. “How long ago?”

“It has not been seen since...” the thing’s huge head jerked back and forth spasmodically, and it clicked and whirred unintelligibly. “Please step to the left.”

“You cannot pass judgment if you are in need of repairs,” Roland said. “Your judgment might be flawed and then, as Martin said, you would be in violation and would have to banish yourself to Hell.”

“Direct us to this modron station and we will do our best to fix it for you,” Kazrack said.

“Modron station is past Hell,” the Decaton said. “Please step to the left.” It pointed with six of its tentacles this time.

“We formally request permission to visit the modron station before going to Hell in order that it might be fixed,” Martin said.

“Request approved on conditional basis,” the Decaton replied.

“And uh, we’d like a guide,” Martin added. “Perhaps a tridrone to show us the way to the Modron Station?”

“Tridrone-9,” the Decaton announced, and a pyramidal modron presented itself at the left-hand exit that was now open. “Designation Nine will guide this outsider contamination to the room of Hell and beyond to the modron station. This is Rule Priority Two, second only to your primary designation.”

“Yes, Decaton,” the tridrone replied in its honking voice.

“We thank you for your kind aid and hope we can return the favor by repairing the modron station, defeating the monkey-demon and rescuing your master from whatever fate has befallen him,” Martin said. He turned to the tridrone guide. “Lead away, good Tridrone. Guide us to this modron station at once!”

The pyramid of ruddy flesh upon spindly legs made a slight adjustment and then retreated back down the tunnel to the left. Ratchis and Kazrack followed it, followed closely by Martin and then the rest.

As the last of them passed under the portcullis, it slammed shut and they could hear the decaton say, “Sentence rendered: To Hell!” The modrons in the gallery clicked their agreement.

The Keepers of the Gate found themselves in a tunnel much like the one they first appeared in, except this one had narrow stone stairs leading up to the gallery tiers on either side. They were blocked by gates of their own.

”Tridrone-9, please lead us to the modron station,” Martin asked the modron again.

⁵³ Mith-agogol is a powerful “monkey-demon” that the Keepers of the Gate first learned about from Zedarias’ Books.

“This. Way.” It clicked and scurried through the portal of darkness at the end of the tunnel.

“Do you think Hell is really, you know... *Hell*?” Roland asked Martin. “I mean, like the plane realm ruled by Set?”⁵⁴

Martin could only shrug as each member of the party passed through the portal in turn.

“Is this the modron station?” Martin the Green asked as he stepped out of the portal. This time there were no unpleasant side-effects. It seemed that something about trying to go through too slowly or touching another living thing was what caused the stunning effect.

“No, this is clearly Hell,” Roland said, hearing the watch-mage’s question as he came into the room as well. He was still in panther-form and he scrunched up his muzzle as the sulfurous smell of the air of the room filled his sensitive feline nostrils. “At least, it smells like it.”

They were in a darkened room. A fifteen-foot-wide path led to another of the black portals seventy-five feet across the chamber. The ceiling here was much lower than it had been in the audience chamber, only about twenty feet. The center of the path widened to create a kind of central room enclosed by partitioned walls that made the narrow halls that branched around the outside of the chamber to the left and right. The center area was illuminated by a dull red light that stung the eyes ever so slightly and ruined Ratchis’ and Kazrack’s darkvision.

The tridrone had procured a feather duster from some corner and was brushing off some objects resting on shelves built into the inside other angular partitioned walls that created the center area.

Martin the Green walked over to it, looking around with paranoia as he activated the *rune of light* medallion about his neck with a word. There was a heavy sense of doom in the air here that the light of the medallion could not dispel, even when Dorn activated the one he wore as well.

”Tridrone-9, please show us to the modron station,” Martin said to it.

“Dirty. Must. Clean,” it chirped.

“Oh Bast, don’t tell me this thing is not functioning,” Roland complained of the pyramidal creature, creeping forward silently on his padded paws.

“Must show us to the modron station,” Martin repeated, inadvertently adopting its cadence. “So said the Decaton.”

“Secondary designation. Primary designation. Clean,” the tridrone said, cryptically.

Martin turned to Roland, shrugging. “I think it is working as well as these things ever work.”

Ratchis and Kazrack came walking over when suddenly everyone froze. There was a momentary scream of agony that came from the far side of the room to the left. It was a hoarse scream that cut short.

“There may be someone kept prisoner in here,” Roland said.

“Or being punished,” Martin said. “We may have discovered the reason why this room is called ‘Hell’.”

The Keepers of the Gate hurried past the central area, making a note of the objects found in there. On the left shelf was a silver flask with a black cap, and on the right one was a worn leather satchel. On the black stone pedestal in the center of the area, which the tridrone had been dusting, was a large black sapphire about half the size of a man’s fist. It rested on a black velvet cushion and the black metal plate it rested on was carved with some kind of runes. But they left it behind, making their way around the left partition wall to the small room in that corner.

⁵⁴ Actually, Set is only the ruler of three of the layers of the Nine Hells, conquering them when he fled the Prime after *The Time Before*.

Ratchis was the first to look in but the area beyond was dark to him despite his darkvision. When Dorn walked over the light of his medallion was swallowed by the darkness of the room and suddenly Ratchis could see in the gray tones he was used to. Finally, when Martin arrived with his light the room was illuminated.⁵⁵ The barren room beyond had two twenty-foot-long perpendicular rear walls, but the wall the entrance was in was at an angle, halving the room's effective size.

There was a man dressed in a plain white tunic made gray with dust and dirt. He was writhing around on the floor of the room. He brought his hands to his head and rolled over and then shook with spasms and then seized up. He grabbed at his hair and then covered his ears, and then curled up into a ball. All along the man looked as if he were screaming in agony, but no sound emerged from him.

Martin turned to say something to Ratchis, but no sound came from his mouth either.

The man seemed to take no notice of them. He continued to shake and writhe and sob silently. Sometimes he would try to get up only to collapse again.

The party gathered outside of the room to talk.

"He probably stumbled out of the range of the silence momentarily and that was why we heard him," Martin speculated.

Kazrack frowned and walking into the room grabbed the man by the shoulders and dragged him out. From the moment they emerged from the area of the magical *silence* the man's screams became almost too much to bear. Over and over he screamed, sometimes saying something that almost sounded like a name, but mostly it was unintelligible.

Kazrack tried a *cure minor wounds*, but nothing seemed to calm the man. Roland called for Bast to give him the power to see magical *dweomers* and the cried out in alarm. The magic emanating from the man was overwhelming! He went in and checked the room while the spell was still active and noticed a strong aura coming from something on the far-left wall. It was a framed document scrawled in what could only be blood, but the language was unknown to Roland.

Martin the Green went in and examined it and then came back out.

"I cannot read it without aid of a spell, but it is certainly the infernal tongue of Hell," Martin said to the others. "My guess is that it is a contract of some sort."

"So this man is suffering because he signed himself over to Hell?" Roland asked, rhetorically.

They dragged him back into the *silenced* room so they would not have to hear him while they decided what to do about him. The tridrone walked over and then into the room, reaching up to dust the framed contract.

"As much as it pains me to do this, we have to leave this man here," Ratchis said. "We do not know the reason why he is here or in this condition, and we do not have the means to save him now anyway. We need to focus on finding the modron station."

"Well, it seems our guide must clean this room first," Roland said, annoyed. "So, we might as well take a look around."

They walked back the central area of the chamber to find Gunthar already there. He had the satchel in hand and was

⁵⁵ The four corners were cloaked in permanent magical *darkness*. The first *light* counter acted the magical darkness leaving the area cloaked in normal darkness which Ratchis could see through, but it took a second source of magical light for the place to actually be illuminated.

undoing the button that kept it closed.

“Gunthar! Stop!” Martin hurried and placed a hand on the Neergardian’s arm. Gunthar pulled away angrily. He reached into the satchel and his face took on a puzzled look for a moment and then he drew a longsword of masterwork quality from within it. The sword was at least three times longer than the apparent depth of the bag.

“Is it magical?” Gunthar asked Roland.

“No,” Roland replied. “And at best it is useless to us, but it is probably cursed.”

“You’re lying,” Gunthar spat.

“Gunthar, we shouldn’t touch anything,” Martin said. “We don’t know what unforeseen consequences taking things might have.”

“Bah! What’s the point of coming to a place from the Age of Adventurers if you can’t take anything?” Gunthar complained. He shoved the sword back into the satchel and placed it back on the shelf without buttoning it shut.

Kazrack was looking at the black sapphire on the pedestal with a frown. The runes about it were a name in dwarven. It said, “*Dwitek Chem Agh-Lorgh*.” The name was familiar to him, but he was unsure why it would be on the metal plate beneath the gemstone.⁵⁶

“Roland, is this gem magical?” he asked.

“Yes,” the Bastite replied.

Tridrone-9 emerged from the *silenced* room and began to walk into the room in the far right corner which was also obscured by magical darkness.

“We should keep it in sight,” Martin said. “We do not want it leaving the room without us knowing which way it went.”

The Keepers of the Gate went into that room. It was similar to the *silenced* room in shape and was barren except for a great chair carved of the same black stone as the walls of the chamber. The rear of the chair leaned back, so the pale naked man laying upon it was nearly lying down.

Martin turned to Ratchis, “I leave any decisions regarding freeing any of these people to you, as you are a priest of Nephthys. I defer to your wisdom on these matters.”

The Friar nodded. The tridrone was now dusting the naked man and the Keepers of the Gate approached to take a better look. He was very pale, nearly albino, but with black stringy hair and no eyebrows. He had broad shoulders and was well-muscled. The man’s eyes were closed.

“He’s not breathing,” Martin said, pointing to the man’s chest.

“Could this be the ‘Gilbart’ the lead modron mentioned?” Ratchis asked.

“Doubtful,” Martin pulled his hand away from his own face, as he had been unconsciously picking at the gray scabs of his disfigurement.⁵⁷ “Uh... He’s too muscular to be a wizard’s apprentice.”

“My! Martin, but that’s *magist!*” Roland said.

⁵⁶ *Dwitek Chem Agh-Lourgh* is the name of the last "official" king of a united dwarven nation.

⁵⁷ Remember Martin the Green’s face has been slowly shriveling away, exposing raw yellowed flesh beneath and black veins just under the skin. He also lost most of the teeth on the right side of his mouth and his fingernails have become black.

The watch-mage shrugged his shoulders. "I went to a whole school full of mages," he replied. "Let's just say the athletic program was an elective."

"Elective?" Roland asked.

"An optional class," Martin explained.

"Oh, why would anyone opt to take a class?" Roland purred. "I always found school so boring and experience a much better teacher."

"Can we concentrate on the task at hand?" Ratchis asked with venom in his growling voice.

Martin kneeled beside the tridrone. "If I help you clean can we move on and you can show us to the modron station?"

The tridrone did not respond. It continued to dust. Martin spoke an arcane word and with a *prestidigitation* he cleaned off the naked man.

The tridrone turned three times as if confused and then left the room. The others moved aside to let it by, and then as a group the whole party followed the modron. Tridrone-9 walked around the central area and disappeared into the darkness of another corner room.

Bastian and Dorn stopped at the entrance to the room, the light of the latter's medallion swallowed by the magical *darkness* within. Kazrack walked over, being able to see into the room with his darkvision. Ratchis was right behind him and could see something reflective for a moment.

There was a long silence. "So what's in there?" Dorn asked Ratchis. There was no answer.

"Ratchis?" Dorn asked again. "Kazrack?" There was still no answer. "Martin! Something happened to Ratchis and Kazrack! They're gone!"

With an arcane word in a dwarven dialect, Bastian cast light upon his shield, and now this second spell illuminated the small room beyond. Martin and Roland were on their way over when there was a strange flash, and the light was gone.

"Bastian? Dorn?" Martin the Green said, coming forward.

"I don't smell them," Roland said. "I don't smell any of them, except..."

There was a shuffle and a snort from within the darkened room. "They are all gone, and something is in that room that isn't any of them," Roland said. He and Martin retreated into the red light of the central room, where Gunthar was looking at the flask.

There was a thump of a heavy bare footstep and another snort and the sound like a large fist slamming against a chest. A great ape leapt out of the darkness into the red light. It was over seven feet tall and had blue-black fur on its head and shoulders that slowly became gray towards the legs. It snarled and swung over on its great knuckles.

Martin gasped. The top of the thing's skull was gone from just above the eyes and there a great swollen green and blue pulsating brain emerged. Its moist eyes shone blue-green.

"I told you not to touch anything," Gunthar admonished, drawing his partially melted longsword.

"We are free," the gorilla said in a husky voice. His teeth were bright white and his fangs very long. His nostrils flared and he stuck out his chest as he got even closer. Martin took a step back. "Human! Where is Hurgun?"

“Wuh... We do not know,” Martin replied. “We seek him ourselves. I am Martin the Green of the Academy of Wizardry, and we seem to have lost our companions. Would you know where they might be?”

The gorilla snorted. “We care not for your human academies,” he replied. “Ming, King of the Dakkons, only cares to find Hurgun so we might get our revenge on him. Beware him, if you truly seek him, humans, for he is a crafty foe that has no respect for his betters.”

“Uh, you said you were free?” Martin ventured. “Where were you captured?”

“Within the *mirror of life-trapping*, left to stare at our glorious self for a seeming instant, which now in my memory weighs as an eternity,” Ming said. “It must be full now and your companions looking into it must have freed us. How ironic that the stupid luck of humans would free the King of the Dakkons! When we rule Aquerra again, we shall remember to keep some of your kind as slaves in honor of your own stupidity.”⁵⁸

“Rule it *again*?” Martin asked.

“Bah! We must find Hurgun!” The gorilla straightened up and craned his head looking for the ways out, acting as if the three adventurers were beneath his notice.

“Wait! How can we get our friends out of the mirror?” Martin asked.

“Heh. Why should we help such lowly humans?” Ming thumped his chest once and snarled.

“We helped you, even if by accident,” Martin replied. “Plus, it would anger Hurgun. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“Yes... Yes, it would please us,” Ming said. “But Ming does not help humans for nothing. Give me those rings you wear. We see their dweomers. They would please us.”

“Uh, I need these rings,” Martin said. “Well, I guess I can part with one...” He took off the *Ring of Marked Excellence* eager to stop hearing the ring’s begging in his mind that began the moment he mentioned the possibility. It did not want to be handed over to a huge gorilla with an exposed pulsating brain. “I shall give you this ring and you shall tell us how to free our friends.”

The ring was dropped in the gorilla’s great palm. “Smash the mirror,” the gorilla snarled, enclosing the ring within his fist. “Smash the mirror and they shall all be free.” Ming snorted and puffed up his chest again and, slamming it twice, took off for the portal out the other side of the room.

“I don’t know if we should believe him,” Roland said after the gorilla was gone. “Smashing it seems like it might be the way to have them be lost forever. Perhaps there are instructions for the use of the mirror somewhere in the Maze and we can go find them and return.”

Martin shook his head. “We have no way of knowing if such a thing exists, where it might be, and if we could ever make our way back to this room if we leave without them. I think we have no choice but to trust the ape and smash the mirror.”

“What about...” Roland stopped himself. “No, that would not be right...”

“What?” asked Martin.

“I thought we might use the tortured man or the breathless man to try to activate the mirror,” Roland explained. “If what Ming said is right and the mirror *is* full, then when someone gets sucked in someone else will come out.”

⁵⁸ Ming the Dakkon King is actually from an alternate Prime version of Aquerra that is ruled by the psionic philosopher gorillas known as Dakkons.

“Except...”

“Except we don’t know what order they will come out in, and if it is first in first out then we will not have enough bodies lying around to get to Ratchis and Dorn and the others,” Roland said. “Not to mention the nebulous morality of using those men for that purpose anyway. Or... we could use the tridrone.”

“No, that would not be right either, if they are even affected by such a thing,” Martin replied. “No, we must smash it.”

“What if take the mirror off of the wall and use it as a shield against the next foe we face? We get them to look into it and have someone else come out and so on until we get Snuffles, Stumpy, Beardy and the other guy out of there,” Gunthar spoke up with a suggestion.

“No, we should smash it because I think that is what Ratchis would say to do if he were here,” Martin reasoned. “I’ll do it.”

“No,” Gunthar put up a hand and stopped the watch-mage as he stepped towards the mirror room. “You are the brains of the group and if there is a bad consequence to breaking it, we should not put your dough-ass on the line. Roland should do it.”

“I’m not going to do it,” Roland replied. “I’m just a pussycat, remember? Maybe you’re one too?”

”No, I am not,” Gunthar said. “But it seems I was right about you.” He hefted his slagged longsword and walked into the darkness. “Here goes nothing!” His voice echoed out of the small room, following by the sounds of breaking glass.

End of Session #93

AQUERRA

Session #94

Kazrack remembered hurrying over when Dorn's cries made him realize that something had happened to Ratchis, but when he saw his reflection, he was struck by how he appeared. The dwarf could not remember the last time he had seen himself in full in a mirror. Most likely, it had not been since before he left Verdun for Derome-Delem.⁵⁹ He saw the dents in his helm and the three braids in his red beard knotted about stone beads at their end. The beard covered the pouch of rune stones about his neck. He saw the sparkle of his blue eyes and winced as he noted the scouring of his breastplate that once held a detailed etched representation of the First Mountain. He lifted his arm to better admire the workmanship of the grieve he had been given as a gift from Richard the Red when crafting the armor.⁶⁰ The black metal of the grieve was in stark contrast with the buffed steel of the rest of the armor.

It was a long drawn-out moment of self-examination.

Ratchis noticed how his longest natty red-brown lock was draped over his shoulder, resting on the rough wool of his shirt. He saw the dragon-hilt of his great sword sticking out from behind his head, and the black metal and leather bracers with their silvery moons, ships, and skulls on his forearms. He cracked his jutting jaw, looking out from under his thick yellow-brown brow at his old boots, which he was forced to fish out from his overstuffed pack when his magical boots were destroyed by the ooze elemental.⁶¹ The swinging of the loose end of the scored chain belt about his waist caught his eye.

Bastian scratched at his long grizzled dark brown beard and then patted out the dust from his chain shirt and leather greaves. He pulled off his helmet with its narrow visor and looked into his own twinkling green eyes.

And then the world shattered.

The small corner room was suddenly awash with light again as the mirror's glass shattered. Gunthar leapt back, sword still in hand and Roland and Martin the Green stepped forward to get a look. There was a crash of bodies as many forms suddenly appeared and leapt to their feet. Among them were Ratchis, Kazrack, Bastian and Dorn, but there was also a black-bearded dwarf in a black woolen shirt and trousers. The dwarf had a short stature even by his kind's standards, and large calloused hands. He got up to his hands and knees and threw himself to his feet and regarded Ratchis carefully who now stood blocking the exits with Kazrack, Bastian, Dorn and Martin. They had appeared where they had last been standing and were now closely bunched up.

"Oh, what a beautiful looking glass..." a tall thin man with pale skin murmured. He wore a suit of very fine chainmail, and had two knives sheathed on either hip, along with a fancy sabre. He had long black greasy ringlets that were plastered to his forehead and a long, waxed mustache.

The other pale man was in a black robe with a silver belt and pin upon his chest. He was gaunt and a few strands of black hair on his bald head that belied the youth in his eyes. He clambered to his feet and looked about with great surprise. His jaw dropped as he looked at the shattered pieces of the mirror on the floor of the room.

There was a woman in a frilled dress of soft white cotton with many layers of petticoats. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a bun on the back part of the top of her hair, and her face was made up with powder, red lipstick, and soft blue eye shadow that matched the flower pattern of her dress and the color of her laced up tall shoes.⁶² She appeared to be in her early forties but had kept the better part of her beauty. The woman squealed in alarm and took off for a corner of the small room.

⁵⁹ See Session #2

⁶⁰ Richard the Red gave Kazrack (and the rest of the party) gifts for the Festival of Isis in Session #38, and Kazrack crafted his armor while the party was in Nikar in Session #68 thru 73. The grieve grants a straight up 50% chance to resist critical hits that strike the arm.

⁶¹ Ratchis' *Boots of Uller* were destroyed in the last session.

⁶² Make-up is not commonly worn by the women of central Aquerra. Aside from powder used to even out the complexion, it is almost completely out of favor in Thracia and Neergaard. In the Kingdom of Herman Land, women who are not of a high station who wear make-up will generally be assumed to be a sex worker. In El Reino Unido de Familias Superiores, make-up is widely used.

And lastly there was a modron. Its body was a cube three feet to a side, with two sets of human sized eyes on each of the four outer faces. Set beneath the eyes was a mouth and a spindly arm that were swollen at the joints. The thing wore a wide leather belt set around its body at an angle. Two short swords hung from the belt, as did two heavy crossbows.

"Servant of the oppressor!" the thing said in a cold voice that cracked with adolescent self-consciousness. "I will not go with you!"

"Oh my! Oh my! Oh my!" The woman said, covering her mouth with a kerchief. "Where is Hurgun?"

"Yes! Where is Hurgun? Stand aside!" the dwarf barked at Ratchis. "Is my imprisonment over, blood of Ashronk?" He pulled a silvery battle-axe from his back.

Ratchis took a sidestep into the crowded room and drew his great sword. Kazrack stepped between them.

"I do not think any of us are at cross-purposes," Kazrack said. "We need to find out what is happening."

"Who are you people? Where is Hurgun?" the black-robed man said with a hint of authority. "You are *not* the guests of Hurgun."

"I am Martin the Green, Watch-mage of the Academy of Wizardry," Martin said, putting a hand to his face reflexively to cover the left side of it and cover his disfigurement. "Hurgun lies imprisoned within his own Maze and his power threatens Derome-Delem itself. Who are you?"

"I am Gilbert, pupil of Hurgun of the Stone and steward of his Maze," the black-robed bald man said. "And you do not belong here. You must leave."

Roland took a moment to creep forward to sniff at Bastian and make sure it was really him, but the bearded warrior ignored the panther and went over to the lady, trying to calm her.

"If you be a dwarf of stout heart and loyal to Natan-ahb, you will stand aside and join me in undoing the folly of our peers," the dwarf said to Kazrack. "Hurgun is not to be trusted."

"Yes, Hurgun of the Stone is a terrible man," the woman said. "He threatened me and imprisoned me..."

"Believe none of that woman's words," Gilbert said, a bit more authority creeping into his voice.

"Nay, I dare say she is right," the mustachioed man with the sabre said. "I am Sergio Fontane. I came here as a visitor and a diplomat, under an understanding of hospitality and I was wrongly imprisoned as well. I would not trust his servant to do naught but try to obfuscate the true nature of his master."

There was an explosion of chatter as everyone tried to talk at once. The modron turned three times and two of its hands hung closely to its swords. Kazrack yelled and put his hands up.

"Let's take this slowly before anyone does anything regrettable," Kazrack said. "We should discuss what is going on here, and in order to do that we should know who everyone is..."

"But that is beside the point," Gilbert said, frustrated. "This place is Hurgun's and I am charged with keeping its mundane operations so he may concentrate on his own studies and explorations. Part of that duty is defending this place and making sure that no thieves or vandals enter."

"We are not thieves or vandals," Kazrack replied.

"How am I to know that?" Gilbert replied. "If I am to hear your side of the story you should obey the wishes of its master, as a step towards proving that you have no mal intent."

"I'm sorry, but we cannot do that," Kazrack said. "So instead, we will introduce ourselves and we will discuss the goings on both in and out of the Maze right there."

"But..." Gilbert began.

"That seems reasonable," Sergio Fontane responded. The woman nodded meekly. "I am Lady Elvira Vaporina Viento of Azules on the western coast of Derome-Delem," she said. "And I came here in order to try to convince Hurgun of the Stone to take one of my sons as an apprentice. If I had known what he was like, I would never have come."

"There is nothing here to fear, my lady," Bastian said, bowing deeply and kissing her hand. She smiled weakly.

After Lady Elvira announced herself, the dwarf said his name was Aitan Absolom, High Engineer of Gurit Malak in the east.

"I was designation Oh-One," the modron said. "I am now Owun."

"We are the Keepers of the Gate," Kazrack said to those who had been trapped in the mirror. "I am Kazrack Delver, rune-thrower of Llurgh-Splendar-Tar by way of Verdun. These are my companions, Ratchis of Nephthys, Martin the Green, Roland of Bast, Dorn of Herman Land, and Bastian of... Bastian, where are you from again?"

"We don't know bugger all where he's from," Gunthar swore. "I want to know where all these here freaks are from."

"That is all very well and good, but you need to come with me," Gilbert said. "I will bring you to the guest rooms to wait while I check on the state of the Maze and contact Hurgun."

"Owun refuses to be re-assimilated," the modron said. "I will not wait for Hurgun. Hurgun is the oppressor."

"Oh-one," Gilbert turned to the modron. "You have incomplete data. Hurgun meant you no harm when he trapped you in the mirror. Not like these others." The pupil turned and looked at Lady Elvira. "She especially is not to be trusted. She is not what she seems. But still, you *must* accompany me to the guest rooms and remain there until I can straighten this out."

"I don't think that will be possible," Martin said. "As I said before Hurgun is gone or trapped or something. We have yet to determine exactly the nature of the problem, except that it has something to do with a time elemental, or so we were told by Chochokpi, the Tree that Grows Backwards."

"You have been through the portals in the light room?" Gilbert asked.

"Huh? No..." Martin began.

"Listen not to this man," Aitan Absolom said, looking to Kazrack. "His master holds the spirit of one who would be king of our people trapped in this very room, so that it may never return to the First Mountain."

"What?!?" Kazrack's voice raised up into a confused roar.

"Master Absalom is characterizing that in a negative light," Gilbert protested.

"It seems Master Hurgun had a lot of secrets," Sergio said. "No wonder he is so withdrawn."

"Please, accompany me to the guest rooms," Gilbert repeated, looking from Kazrack to Martin

"No! We will go nowhere until I learn more of what Master Absalom is referring to," Kazrack responded.

The Keepers of the Gate moved to the center of the dark chamber accompanied by the occupants of the mirror. Lady Elvira Vaporina Viento took Bastian's arm and walked with him, hanging back a bit in the lower hall as the others gathered about the black sapphire upon the pedestal.

"Hurgun is the one who is not what he seems," Lady Elvira whispered to Bastian. "And his servant Gilbert is no different."

"Gunthar, keep your eyes peeled," Martin leaned in and whispered to the Neerguardian as he came around the pedestal. Sergio hung back as well, near the dark entrance to the one room the party had not yet explored. Roland transformed back to his normal human shape and stood over there as well, chatting friendly with the man about Bast. Owun fluttered his wings and floated over them landing in the darkness of the hallway.

Kazrack took his flail from his belt and held it above the gem, a determined grimace on his face.

"What are you doing?!" Gilbert exclaimed. "Stop!"

"Tell me why I should?" Kazrack turned, shaking his golden flail angrily as he addressed the black-robed man.

"It is a gem under the safe-keeping of Hurgun," Gilbert stammered. He turned to Aitan who was standing beside Kazrack. "Master Absalom, you know it was your feelings on this matter that led to you being imprisoned in the first place. Don't..."

"Does it hold a dwarf spirit?" Kazrack asked, interrupting.

Gilbert sighed. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Do not the rules of hospitality dictate that you wait for a host whose home you are in to answer your questions, and that you trust his judgments until you know otherwise?" Gilbert asked.

"Answer me yes or no, Gilbert," Kazrack replied, shaking his flail again. "Or I will act..."

Gilbert sighed again. "Smashing the gem will do nothing but free the soul within it."

"And that is good in and of itself," Kazrack said. Sergio and Roland jokingly bet about whether Kazrack would smash it or not.

"See how evasive he is," Lady Elvira whispered to Bastian.

"Nephthys frowns on slavery of all kinds," Ratchis said to Gilbert, his yellow eyes narrowing.

"Hurgun holds all my kind in bondage," came Owun's modron voice cracking with awkward emotion from the dark hall.

"There was an arrangement made with High Priests of the dwarven faith," Gilbert began to explain. He looked around nervously and noted, Lady Elvira still whispering to Bastian. "I would be wary of that *woman*. Come with me to the guest rooms, but leave her behind, perhaps I can explain more of what is going on then..."

"Explain now," Kazrack said.

"The rune-throwers came to Hurgun and asked him to keep the gem safe until such a time that they would return for it," Gilbert said, twisting his lips in annoyance.

“And the dwarf himself was party to this agreement?” Kazrack asked.

“He was dead at the time,” Gilbert said. “But the rune-throwers agreed to it.”

“It was a poor choice,” Aitan Absalom said. “This is the spirit of the direct descendant of the last true dwarven king. He is our true king!”

“I will take the gem and keep it safe myself until such a time that I can speak to Hurgun about it directly,” Kazrack decided.

“It will not be any safer in your custody,” Gilbert said. “It will only be in danger of being stolen, lost or broken and if it broken those who might still seek to use that spirit for ill-gain will know it has happened.”

“Like who?”

“Like the Lich-Lord of Dralmohir,” Gilbert replied.⁶³

“It matters not,” Kazrack responded. “I cannot in good conscience leave the gem here until I know firsthand all there is to know about its being here.”

“Normally, I would not disagree,” Ratchis told his friend. “But perhaps it is best we leave it here until we know more...”

Kazrack shook his head.

“Again, I must insist that you retire to the guest rooms and wait until I have determined the trouble with the Maze if any,” Gilbert said. “And then if I do need your help, I promise I will come to you for it.” He stepped back and called up the dark hall. “Oh-one, that means you as well.”

“I will not be told what to do,” Owun said.

“You will not be told what to do?” Roland echoed. “How refreshingly rebellious! I think I like this one.”

“Rebellion is the fire in my soul,” Owun said.

“Oh, yes, I *do* like this one,” Roland smiled.

“They are very strange creatures, I must say,” said Sergio.

“I will not go with Gilbert,” Owun said. “I am leaving.”

“Oh-one, I promise you will not be re-imprisoned,” Gilbert implored.

“I refuse,” Owun said.

“Owun, you must be careful,” Roland said. “The rooms of the Maze are moving, we cannot know where the portals lead.”

“I know where they lead,” Owun said, his voice growing fainter as he headed to the portal between the unexplored room and the *silenced* room.

Roland gave chase into the darkness. “Wait! Stay with us! We may need your help and we will make sure you win

⁶³ Dralmohir is the undead land to the east of the Little Kingdoms. It was once the site of one of the most powerful dwarven nations in Derome-Delem.

your freedom!” But it was too late, the modron disappeared into the darkness.

“This one wears time on his face like a mask,” Sergio Fontane said quietly to Roland as the Bastite returned. The lithe man gestured to Martin the Green, as Gilbert was trying to explain the reasons he might not trust the party, including the obvious deadrot of Martin’s face.

“And there are many apparent reasons for us to not trust you,” Ratchis replied. “Why were you trapped in the mirror? Why does did the modron say that his kind were enslaved? Why do the others claim to have been falsely imprisoned? Why is a man being tortured eternally in that other room with an infernal contract on the wall?”

“We could go on and on...” Martin said. “But instead, let us reach a compromise. Perhaps my companions can go to the guest rooms as you asked, but I can accompany you to see what is wrong with the Maze and see if we can find Hurgun?”

Gilbart rubbed his balding head as he considered it.

“Wait, I don’t think you should wander the Maze alone,” Ratchis said to Martin. He turned back to Gilbert. “Allow Martin to bring one bodyguard with him in case there is a physical danger to deal with. This might be to your advantage as well.”

“I’m not sure...” Gilbert began. He fished a pendant out from the folds of his robes and examined it. It seemed to be inset with many tiny gems of different colors.

“Regardless of this compromise, I will still take and hold this gem,” Kazrack said. “Nothing will stop me from doing so.”

“You are acting from ignorance,” Gilbert responded. “Again, I remind you of the responsibility of guests.”

“Ratchis!” Roland suddenly hissed. The Bastite had noticed how Lady Elvira was still holding Bastian by the arm, whispering into his ear and touching a hand to his chest every now and again with her flirtatious words. “There is something wrong with Bastian, I think.”

Ratchis called to Nephthys, casting *detect charm* as Gilbert protested. “There is no casting of spells in Hurgun’s Maze without his leave!”

Ratchis noted the aura of enchantment magic hanging over Bastian and he drew his dragon-hilted greatsword once again and pointed it at the woman. “Kazrack! Stand fast!” The half-orc barked and then stepped towards Lady Elvira Vaporina Viento. “Stand away from that man!”

“Oh! You won’t let him harm me, will you?” Lady Elvira cried nervously, grabbing Bastian’s right arm with both of hers. The *suggestion* echoed one she had made in passing only a few moments earlier.⁶⁴

Bastian pulled his arm free and pushed her behind him. “Ratchis, there is no need for violence.” He put an open hand up as a gesture of peace.

“She is under an enchantment? A charm?” Martin asked.

“No, Bastian is,” Ratchis growled in reply.

“I told you not to trust her,” Gilbert complained.

⁶⁴ **DM’s Note:** Lady Elvira cast *suggestion* on Bastian, but I rolled his saving throw secretly. Knowing that Bastian’s attitude towards her was already favorable, I thought it made more sense to not affect how the player having him act by telling him his character was *charmed*.

Roland put himself between Ratchis and Bastian. “Bastian, she is using you. She’s put a spell on you and trying to turn you against us.”

“Nephthys! Free this man from the mental chains of arcane slavery,” Ratchis grabbed his belt of scored chains and call out to his goddess to dispel the charm upon Bastian, but the spell was not so easily undone.

Lady Elvira took a few steps back down the small angled hallway that led to one of the portals out of the chamber and the room with the man in stasis. “Don’t let them harm me, please,” She said. “I am just a woman on my own trying to keep myself protected!”

“Yes, there is no need for violence,” Bastian said again. He stepped around Roland and gestured to Ratchis. “Let us all just settle down and continue to discuss the matter at hand.”

“Let us give this woman a chance to explain her actions,” Kazrack said, and cast *protection from evil* on Bastian to defend him from outside control. The bearded warrior blinked and looked back at Lady Elvira with a puzzled expression.

“Uh, yes, Kazrack is right, we should talk this out,” Bastian began.

“Gilbart is leaving!” Martin the Green announced as the wizard took the momentary confusion to take off through the portal that the party had emerged from. “We cannot wait! He might get away beyond our reach and he may be the key to discovering what is wrong with the Maze!”

“Lady Elvira, I will tell you this once, release Bastian now or it is war between us,” Roland said, stepping forward. He readied a *holy smite* spell.

Ratchis charged towards Bastian.

Meanwhile, Aiten Absalom stepped behind Kazrack and reached for the black sapphire. “We should take it now when there will be no argument,” he said to Kazrack. “I am with you whatever you decide, but I recommend we take it and flee now before Hurgun or his servant can stop us.”

Bastian struggled to break free of Ratchis’ grasp as the half-orc held him in a bear-hug and carried him towards the portal Gilbart had fled through. N’kron swooped out of the darkness, dive-bombing Ratchis with nasty pecks in defense of his master.

Seeing that Bastian was out of harm’s way, Roland let loose with his *holy smite* and Lady Elvira Vaporina Viento crumpled and stumbled back, putting a hand out to steady herself.

“Mister Dwarf, I think you had better take your gem and leave now,” she said, her voice slightly deeper and steadier than it had been. She raised her head as her body began to grow. A second set of arms burst from around her torso as she began to reach nine feet in height, and a pair of black glistening wings appeared on her back. Her dress ripped and melted away as her body grew muscular and the ends of her fingers became black talons. Her bare chest featured two sets of swollen veiny breasts with blood-red nipples crusted with black milk. Horns popped out from beneath her hair turned golden, and her lips were blood-red as well and swollen, covering sharp teeth.

Lady Elvira Vaporina Viento was none other than the greater succubus, Ora-Amira-El. Her laughter began to echo in the dark room.

“We are *so* out of our league...” Martin gulped.

“Sweet Nephthys! What is that?” Dorn swore, drawing the *Left Blade of Arofel*.

“Ratchis, what is the matter with you?” Bastian said, struggling to free himself as the hulkish half-orc carried him towards the portal.

“Snuffles, we got a serious bitch to deal with here,” Gunthar called, hustling through the central area of the chamber to face the laughing demoness.

Aitan Absalom grabbed the sapphire from the pedestal, not waiting for Kazrack’s assent and moved up the hallway opposite that Ora Amira El stood in. In a moment, he was obscured by darkness. Somewhere in that darkness Sergio also hid.

Ratchis turned and dropped Bastian, noticing the demoness for the first time. “We must destroy this abomination!” He cast *protection from evil* on Gunthar. Roland hurried out of the range of the demon and cast a healing spell on Ratchis as he was still suffering wounds from the battle with the para-elementals.⁶⁵

Ora Amira El’s laughter continued as she leapt back avoiding a chop of Gunthar’s sword. She leaned forward, her four bloated breasts jiggling beneath her, and stuck out a long black tongue set with a red-jeweled stud. She exhaled and a jet of flame washed over Ratchis, Martin, Gunthar and Dorn.

Dorn screamed in agony and turned away from the fire, stumbling off as he swatted his smoldering clothing. Kazrack came out from the central area, his enchanted halberd set before him, but the demoness’ great size gave her reach. She reached down with her black claws and grabbed hold of Kazrack’s right arm. The black metal grieve crunched as she twisted. The dwarf felt his bones and tendons protest and blood seeped out from the seams as he jerked free.⁶⁶ He bellowed from the agony and his attack was thrown offline.

Ora Amira El continued to laugh, leaping back to avoid more blows from Gunthar who moved in.

“*Exarchus expulsione ad labyrinthia!* Martin chanted, hoping to *dismiss* the outsider, but as the arcane energy faded, the watch-mage knew that such spells would not work in Hurgun’s Maze. He sighed.

Ratchis ducked past her and swung his great sword, but she reached down and flicked the blade back with a pair of fingers and a wink.

“Keep up the pressure! She is off-balance!” Kazrack rallied his companions.

“Fools! You should flee while you still can! I expected one of my children to free me, but you will do just as well,” Ora Amira El mocked. She spun and grabbed up Ratchis, squeezing the big half-man against her naked body with all four of her muscular arms. His sword was trapped below him. “Ooh! My! But you are a strong one, aren’t you?” She breathed her foul breath like burned rotten fish into his face, smiling all the while. She squeezed and Ratchis struggled to keep from exhaling.

“Your children? I hope you’re not talking about Mozek, baby, because we already killed that little snot,” Roland said, as he crept forward and cast *aid* on Kazrack.

“Come on! We shouldn’t be fighting. Just leave her... Oh no!” Bastian finally came into the light to see the fight. “Where did the Lady go?”

“Come and help us fight! Now!” Kazrack commanded, shoving his halberd at the demoness’ feet to trip her. She was able to deftly leap, still holding tightly to the squirming Ratchis. And Kazrack almost lost his grip on the weapon when he tried it again and was forced to pull back.

⁶⁵ See last session.

⁶⁶ **DM’s Note:** This blow proves how useful having a story hour is. I actually rolled a critical hit with her attack of opportunity and the result was *Apply Crit Multiplier +1 to Total Damage – Fort Save (DC 10 + 1/2 damage) or Arm Removed at Shoulder (+5 to save if shield), 3d4 bleeder crit*. Kazrack failed his roll and it seemed he was about to bleed out and die rather quickly. However, his player remembered the effect of the grieve, but having lost his bag with all his gaming stuff in a few weeks before, he did not have the info on it, and we could not remember if it was on right arm or the left arm. I dug out the ole story hour, did a quick search and found out it was the right arm, to cheers around the table. He then had to roll 50% chance to avoid the crit, which he succeeded at.

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted, but the spell failed.

“Kill... Her...” Ratchis managed to croak as he failed to break free. She stepped back, turning to use Ratchis as a shield as she did. Because of this, Roland was able to reach out and touch the Friar of Nephthys, casting *cure serious wounds* on him, to keep him alive a little longer.

“Once I have broken your physical will, nothing Nephthys can do will save your mental will, my sweet,” Ora Amira El whispered to Ratchis in a lover’s voice as she held him close.

“Martin! What should I do?” Dorn asked, staying out of the melee.

“Don’t get yourself killed,” Martin replied, as he saw Kazrack try to leap into the grapple to pull the demon’s arms away from his friend. She turned quickly and slammed the dwarf with the half-orc, driving him back. Gunthar stepped between her and the portal she was making for still holding Ratchis, however his blade could not cut her thick hide. The distraction allowed Ratchis to wiggle free and fall to the ground. He rolled away but felt one of her claws rip into his back as he did, and even more blood was running down his side.

Bastian hurried into the central portion of the chamber and grabbed up the satchel that Gunthar had been looking into before everyone had been freed from the mirror. He reached in for the sword hilt he though would be inside and then cried out in fear as the brim of the satchel transformed into a salivating maw that tried to bite his hand off. Bastian was barely able to jerk his hand free and drop the satchel. He took a moment to look at it. It was a normal satchel again. He shrugged his shoulders and hurried back out to the battle, hammer in hand.

Ora Amira El spun, still laughing, dancing a ruinous dance as blades and blows bounced off her to no effect. Suddenly the stomping of her feet in time was echoed by the crackle and flash of black energy that leapt out in all directions, and for a moment everyone’s body jerked in rhythmic spasms from the agony.

Roland called to Bast and a blast of *searing light* lit up the room for moment, but Ora Amira El leapt aside easily, her laughter was becoming maddening to the Bastite.

The Keepers of the Gate gathered back near the portal that led to the modron audience chamber, or at least that was where they had come from.

“You guys take care of this mother, I am out of here!” Gunthar said, making as if to leap through.

“Yes, everyone back through the portal! Quick!” Martin said, beginning to push Roland through.

“This isn’t over!” Roland said, looking over his shoulder as he went through. The demoness had calmly walked over to the pedestal where the black sapphire had been. Martin the Green leapt through after Roland.

“Where is Aiten?” Kazrack asked, looking around.

“He went through that portal past there!” Bastian said, pointing to the left hallway as he stepped through the portal as well.

“Sweetling in the back? Yes, you there!” Ora Amira El was walking over, her shape changing to something closer to a normal woman. For a moment, her extra arms and breasts were gone and so was the age of Lady Elvira Vaporina Viento. She was a beautiful voluptuous naked young woman. She kissed the tips of her fingers and waved at Dorn. “Please do your best to keep your friends from getting in my way too much. Will you?” She stepped into the darkness.

Dorn took two halting steps towards where the demon had been and Gunthar leapt through the portal. Half a moment later, Sergio came hustling out of the darkened corridor he was hiding in and leapt to the portal as well.

“Dorn! We have to get out of here,” Ratchis said to his friend, pulling at him. But Dorn stumbled forward again.

"We should just do whatever she wants that way no one gets hurt," Dorn said. Ratchis put a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Kazrack, go! I have Dorn," Ratchis said, but in that moment Aiten's Absalom's voice came from the darkened hall. "Kazrack! Help me!"

Kazrack was about to step through the portal, but he turned and walked away from it instead. Dorn broke free of Ratchis' grip.

"Kazrack, that voice..." Ratchis began.

"Dorn, please come help me find Master Absalom," Kazrack said, trying to grab Dorn as well. He clutched the warrior about the waist and dragged him back towards the portal. Dorn struggled against him.

"Don't worry, my love, I won't let them hurt you," Dorn called. He broke free of Kazrack's grip and leapt towards the dark hallway just as Ora Amira El stepped out of it. She stroked his hair with a great hand, now back in her four-armed form.

"Momma, loves you, Dorn," she said. Ratchis leapt towards them to grab Dorn away, but she deftly reached over the Herman-lander and snatched Ratchis by the wrist. Ora Amira El pulled him off his feet as if he were a child and suddenly had him smothered against her chest by her two right arms. Dorn climbed up into her left arms and she began to kiss him passionately, licking his mouth and jabbing her putrid tongue into it. Dorn's head swooned.

"Oh, sweet momma's baby, you are so delicious," she said. Ratchis managed to break her grip as Kazrack grabbed Dorn's ankle and tried to pull him free, but Dorn kicked the dwarf's hands away. Ratchis stepped in as well, but Ora Amira El turned away and with another wet kiss set Dorn to sit on the ground; patting him on the head.⁶⁷

"His soul will be nice for an appetizer, but I am not leaving here without a real prize," she said, looking from Kazrack to Ratchis. Kazrack ducked and ran beneath her reach grabbing Dorn and dragging him back towards the opposite portal from the ones the others had gone through. The demoness reached out with a claw and caught Dorn in the chest, ripping a great wound. Dorn passed out as blood began to seep quickly from the wound.

"Oh dear! I didn't mean to do that!" Ora Amira El feigned shame covering her mouth with one hand and cocking her head. Ratchis took the moment to dash past her, sliding over towards Dorn and casting *cure minor wounds* to stabilize him.

"Ulp!" Ratchis felt the greater succubus grab his ankle and drag him back, pulling him into another bear hug. He felt his ribs crunch and he could not help but gasp. He felt her grip tighten even more and everything went blurry for a half moment as she spun around and fell. For a moment he thought he was free and then felt something sharp slip into his side. He looked up to see Kazrack's face growing pale and then all went black.

Kazrack pulled his polearm back, cursing his over-eagerness to strike her while she was down.⁶⁸

Ora Amira El stood, dropping the dying half-orc to the floor. "Flee, Kazrack! I let you go free as long as you leave your friends behind."

Kazrack chopped down at Ora Amira El and she put out her forearm to block the blow and smoking green blood flowed out from the wound and she cried out.

"Taste my weapon, fiend!" Kazrack said.

⁶⁷ **DM's Note:** Ora Amira El's kiss drains 1d2 wisdom.

⁶⁸ **DM's Note:** Kazrack rolled a fumble: Reflex save (DC 20) or hit friend, normal damage.

“Ooh! Don’t you have more important things to do?” she asked the dwarf. “Aren’t you willing to sacrifice your friends to do be able to go do whatever it is you are here to do? I am sure your other companions have already bumbled into some other jeopardy. Don’t you think it is time you go gather them up?”

Kazrack shook his head, resisting the seeming reasonableness of her words. He chopped at her again, but she leapt back shaking her head disapprovingly.

“You know, I do love the feel of a dwarf beard against my cunny,” she said to him. “We could make some time and I can squeeze you out a litter of sons to carve a dwarven empire with.”

Kazrack roared and thrust at her, but she leapt back again.

“Okay, how about we play a different game?” She winked and flapped her wings taking to the air. Kazrack swung futilely, but she was able to land behind him, between Dorn and Ratchis. The pool of blood around Ratchis did not seem to be getting any bigger.⁶⁹ “How about you choose between your friends? The one who survives will grow to resent you. It is my favorite kind of choice: Between suffering and mental anguish.”

Kazrack gritted his teeth and took a step forward, grabbing Ratchis’ collar. He pulled the half-orc away from the demoness.

“Oh! You choose that one? Fine, then I choose this one,” She scooped up Dorn and tucked him under her lower right arm. She took a step back towards the portal behind her. “What fun I will have twisting him into... oh, whatever strikes my whim, I guess!” She winked.

Kazrack grasped his halberd with both hands and whispering a prayer, he charged. He ducked her clawed hand and thrust his halberd into Dorn’s neck. The dwarf felt tears streaming down into his beard, but better Dorn die by his hand than whatever his fate might have been if she left with him alive.

“I absolutely love it when friends are forced to kill their friends,” Ora Amira El said with relish. “The emotion tastes so wonderful. Oh, the stories of delicious tragedy I could tell you if we only had the time...” She shifted Dorn’s corpse from one side of her body to the other unceremoniously. “Very well, he might still be of some use even dead. See ya later, buh-bye!” And with that she stepped through the opposite portal.⁷⁰

Weeping, Kazrack cast a cure spell on Ratchis and gathering whatever loose equipment and weapons that others had dropped in the combat, he dragged the half-orc through the portal.

“And when they pass through here, detain them,” they heard Gilbert’s voice instructing the great audience of modrons from up on the raised box and podium.

“They are taking too long,” Martin whispered to the others. “Something is wrong.”

“Our only choice is to mediate with Gilbert,” Roland said. “There is nothing to be gained by going back. If she has killed them then they are already dead.”

”That is rather cold,” Bastian said. “And what about Lady Elvira? Did she get away? Did she run out one of the other portals? She might still be in danger...”

“Fool! Lady Elvira is a demon. She is Mozek’s mother. She is Ora Amira El!” Roland spat.

“She is...?”

⁶⁹ Ratchis stabilized on his own.

⁷⁰ **DM’s Note:** This combat lasted 17 rounds beginning with the round in which Ratchis cast his *dispel charm* spell (see last session). The length in rounds of combats interests me because my group averages combat length much longer than most people think “remains fun” and yet it is those kinds of exciting long combats that I find the most fun.

“Damn, I never seen someone so easily whipped,” Gunthar said, with a wink.

“They are still taking too long,” Martin said.

“Let us ask Gilbert for help,” Roland suggested. “He knows this place better than any of us, and now with Kazrack not here barking questions at him we can get more accomplished by acting like proper guests.”

Martin the Green shrugged his shoulders, but Gunthar and Sergio refused to go forward. Roland led the way into the center of the audience chamber with Martin and Bastian close behind.

“Decaton, we need to organize the pentadrones in order to seek out these invaders and bring them somewhere safe,” Gilbert was saying as Roland, Martin and Bastian stepped out.

“That will not be necessary, Gilbert,” Roland said. “Here we are...”

Gilbert hurriedly pressed something on the console of gemstones before the great stone seat he stood in front of. The gate behind the three adventurers slammed shut.

“It is regrettable that we could not come to an agreement earlier,” Roland continued, bowing his head slightly. “Our companion Kazrack is rather relentless once he has focused on a problem and cannot see things from the point of view of others.”

“Where *are* your other companions?” Gilbert allowed some anger to show now that he felt he had the upper hand. The ten-eyed decaton with its trunk-like legs stood silently beside him, and the gallery still had about a score of modrons among its seats, including two pentadrones nearby.

“Well, I wanted to ask that you re-open that gate so that they won’t be trapped with the demoness when they come through this way,” Roland said.

“And Gunthar and that other fellow are in there as well,” added Bastian, pointing past the gate.

Gunthar’s swear words echoed out of the tunnel.

Soon the gate was opening, and they could hear the smaller lower gates open as well allowing four tridrones to enter the tunnel from either side. They held two spears each and herded Sergio and Gunthar in with the others. The gate remained open.

“You had an opportunity to be esteemed guests, but now I fear I must treat you as intruders until such a time that Master Hurgun can decide what to do with you,” Gilbert said.

“We needed an invitation in order to be esteemed guests, and we *want* to be esteemed guests,” Bastian replied. “But invitations were not available. Hurgun’s Maze, by all accounts, has been gone for about one hundred and fifty years. Invitations were not accessible.”

Gilbert frowned.

“But please, sir,” Martin the Green interjected. “Haven’t you noticed there is something wrong with the modrons? And where is Hurgun? Have you spoken to him?”

“There a great deal going on here and we need to take it slow,” Roland said. “But we really need your help to keep that demon from killing our friends, if they are not dead already.”

“Who are you again?” Gilbert asked Roland.

“I am Roland Eremecia of Bast,” the Bastite replied.

“You will be brought to the guest quarters and there you will stay until I can ascertain the extent of what happened,” Gilbart said.

“It is still happening...” Kazrack’s voice made everyone turn and look. The dwarf was covered in blood and dragging Ratchis awkwardly by under his arms. Roland hurried over and called to Bast to heal the Friar. “It is still happening. The demon is free in your Maze and because of her Dorn is dead, and I do not know where Aiten is, but he carries the gemstone with the king’s soul.”

“Dorn is dead?” Martin cried. The watch-mage’s head sunk as Ratchis sputtered awake.

“The demoness was the reason I was trapped in the mirror,” Gilbart said. “I led her in there knowing at the very least I would be trapped and safe until Hurgun found me, or perhaps she might get trapped as well.”

“But Hurgun never came, and he still hasn’t come and so we have to make do with one of our friends being killed as your form of hospitality,” Martin spat.

“I am sorry for your friend, but I was trying to get you out of there without starting a melee as you will clearly remember, in order to have the modrons around to protect and in hopes of finding Hurgun this time,” Gilbart voice became a hurried mumble, and then he cleared his throat and his voice took on a bass authority again. “Regardless, now we will accompany you to the guest rooms, but first I must ask that you drop your weapons and components pouches.”

Ratchis stood and shook his head but dropped his sword to the ground and the others followed suit. The spheroid monodrones walked over and picked up the weapons and equipment and the two pentadrones floated down to flank the group. In a few moments the Keepers of the Gate and Sergio Fontane were being led out of the great carved audience chamber and through the portal opposite the one they had come from to flee the Hell Chamber. Gilbart accompanied them along with the two pentadrones, four tridrones and five monodrones.

They came into another large chamber of the same outer dimensions of the two previous chambers they had seen, but this one was an elaborate dining room. There were several round tables surround by chairs, and two long rectangular tables, one a third longer than the other. There was a cloth screen on a track that could be pulled to divide the great chamber into smaller, more intimate eating situations. In the top right-hand corner was a raised area with one smaller round table with three chairs. The walls were lined with long low cabinets that held silverware and dishware of many different styles and cultures. The lacquer of the wood paneled walls shone in the light of the crystal and silver chandeliers that hung low over the long tables. Gold lanterns and tapestries decorated the raised area.

But some of the glass on the cabinets was broken, and there were tridrones in here, dragging away the corpses of blubbery humanoids with sagging gray and black skin and foul smell to them.

“It seems this was all caused by a little dretch infestation,” Gilbart said. “Nothing to worry about. And I am sure Hurgun will have the demoness in hand very soon.”

Ratchis looked to Martin the Green who shrugged and shook his head.

They were led through the portal to the right of the one they came through and were greeted by cold air.

It was another square chamber with the same length and depth of the previous ones, but the ceiling was higher, looking slightly taller than forty feet. The walls, floor and ceiling seemed to be made of cloud-like material. Their footsteps into the room made no sound, and the air was moist, feeling the moisture soak into the hems of their pants, robes and cloaks. There were nine cubes of cloud in the room. Most were small, around ten feet to a side and floated in place twenty to thirty feet off the ground, but there were two larger ones about twenty by fifteen, both of which hovered about fifteen up.

There was no discernible light source, and yet it was lit up with a soft blue light.

“These are the guest quarters,” Gilbert announced, as a tridrone took a spot at each of the four portals in the room; one on each wall.

Gilbert explained that the cubes of cloud were actually rooms that the Keepers of the Gate would find very comfortable.

“The rooms obey the mental commands of those who are staying in them,” he continued. “And gravity in this room is subjective. You can will yourself to fall up, and you can will yourself to step into any of the rooms here as long as they are unoccupied. If they are occupied then whoever is inside of them must allow you in.”

“So there is no need to worry about our privacy?” Roland asked.

Gilbert frowned and shook his head. “Furthermore, the rooms can be positioned about the room and smaller rooms can be joined to make bigger ones by acting cooperatively.”

“This is pretty amazing,” Martin finally said.

“Master Hurgun’s mastery of the elements is unequalled,” Gilbar replied.

“Except the element of time,” Kazrack said. Gilbert frowned again.

The tridrones placed the party’s weapons and other things in one corner of the larger room. Gilbert explained that the modrons would guard over their stuff until the situation had been cleared up.

“What’s that?” Roland asked pointing to the edge of one of the cloud rooms. There was a tiny draconic form with a long tail with a swollen stinger on the end crawling along the outside of it. It buzzed its wings.

“Why it is a dragonette!” Martin said, when he smiled the rotting bruise on his face cracked and oozed puss. “One of order of *pseudo draconis*...”

“Oh my! I nearly forgot in all of the activity! We have another guest!” Gilbert exclaimed. “Lady Aureliana!” And with that the form of a petite woman came floating down from one of the large rooms. She was barely half a foot above four feet in height, with wispy sea blue hair and a white gossamer gown that seemed to hide everything and nothing at once. She had large insect-like wings that gleamed with many colors. The cold air of the room was filled with a flowery perfume as she approached.

“Gilbart! You are finally back! I fear you *did* forget me,” she said in a mellifluous voice like a songbird. “It has literally been years!”

“Years? What...?” Gilbert looked puzzled.

“Yes, about one hundred and fifty years,” Bastian said. “I said it before, and you ignored me.”

“Nonsense!” Gilbert frowned.

“One hundred and fifty years! No, my good sir, but I am afraid that cannot be,” Lady Aureliana said. “It has been years, but more like three or perhaps four...”

“You have been waiting here for years?” Roland asked, skeptically.

“Yes... well... and who are you, sir?”

Introductions went around, but Gilbert excused himself saying that meals would be brought presently and that he

would have Hurgun come and explain everything that had happened.

“I don’t think he can accept what has happened,” Roland said after the Maze’s steward left.

“What is *still* happening,” Kazrack said. He had not spoken since first re-joining the others. “We should not have let him go. He will be killed by the demoness. She is loose in the Maze.”

“You have seen the demoness?” Lady Aureliana asked, she caught a glimpse of Martin’s face and turned away, shuddering. “I fled from her the last time I tried exploring the Maze for myself. I spent the last three years certain that she would find this room again and I would have to flee and face the other dangers of the Maze.”

“What have you eaten in all that time?” Roland asked, still skeptical.

“My kind do not eat,” she replied. “At least not in a manner you’d consider eating. I am a sylph, and I am here as a diplomat, representative of the Djinn King Diya al-Dhin of the elemental plane of Air. His anger must be great that I have been gone so long, but even he could not bust open this Maze by force... if he has tried.”

“Can you tell us what rooms connect to this one?” Martin asked Lady Aureliana.

She gulped and looked down, and her pseudo-dragon companion landed on her tiny shoulder and hissed at the watch-mage. “The rooms move. That is the nature of the Maze.”

“What triggers it?”

“I don’t know,” she was still looking down and shaking her head and took a half-step back. “It seems like they just change every ten minutes or so, though people passing through the portals may affect it.”

After a long argument the Keepers of the Gate decided to get some rest while they could. While this happened, Sergio Fontane took the opportunity to talk to Lady Aureliana privately, and as the others chose rooms, finding them to be warm and cozy, and not damp at all. They had some fun moving them around, while Kazrack brought Ratchis over to one corner of the chamber.

“I need to tell you something,” the dwarf said, looking down. He then raised his head and looked at the half-orc with determination. “It was *I* that killed Dorn...”

Ratchis was silent.

“She had him and was going to leave with him and only the gods know what horrible fate might have befallen him, if not his immortal soul,” the dwarf continued, tears streaming down his face and beard. “I *had* to do it, and what’s more, if it had been you, I would have done the same thing.”

“He understood the danger,” Ratchis said, placing a hand on Kazrack’s shoulder. “And what you did you did for the sake of his soul and his sanity. Our blows were ineffectual against her, or at least nearly so...”

But Ratchis’ shoulders sagged, and he could not look Kazrack in the eye. He walked over to where the party’s weapons and equipment was and a tridrone moved to block his path. The half-orc got into a futile debate with the creature.

Meanwhile Roland was visiting with Martin in one of the cloud rooms.

“I need to ask you something,” the Bastite said. “Do you blame me for Dorn’s death?”

Martin shook his head. “Why should I? Your reasoning about not going back was sound and I did not argue against it,” Martin replied. “Who am I to judge you? You can only do that yourself. Well, you and your goddess, I guess.”

“You are right,” Roland said. “I have to go meditate, but first I need to take care of something.”

The Bastite went to another of the cloud rooms and demanded that Bastian let him in. “We need to talk,” he said. “Actually, I need to talk, and you need to listen.”

“I can do that,” Bastian said softly.

Roland sat down his friend and then softly prayed to Bast, *restoring* Bastian’s lost wisdom.⁷¹

Martin opened his cloud room to Kazrack, willing it to sink down to floor level in order to make the dwarf feel more comfortable. The dwarf retold the tale of Dorn’s death to the watch-mage as well.

“I am amazed with all we have gone through is how these things still hurt so deeply, and yet... I can turn it off,” Martin mused.

Kazrack nodded.

“The time to do what I must be done with the Book of Black Circles draws near,” Martin said, changing topic. “I feel the weight of Osiris’ *geas* upon me, so we must be close to where I must bring the book into the Negative Material Plane. I just still don’t know what spell to cast from the book.”

The dwarf had no response.

“You are a good companion, Kazrack, and I am glad to have met you no matter what happens,” Martin said. “I just want it over soon, one way or another...”

The two companions shook hands. Soon Roland arrived again, sharing his healing spells, and then Gunthar called for Kazrack.

“Hey! Ya got that sword?” the Neergaardian asked.

“What sword?”

“The one Dorn had, the magical longsword you claimed you got from a magic talking tree,” Gunthar crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

“Yes, I grabbed it before I left the ‘Hell’ room,” Kazrack said.

“Okay, good. I’ll let the pointy thing guarding our stuff know that it belongs to me now,” Gunthar replied, and walked off to do so.

Soon, the Keepers of the Gate were all trying to catch some sleep, letting the tensions of their dangerous profession ease out of their muscles the best they could in their own rooms. The ambient light of the chamber seemed to sense their need and dimmed itself. Martin the Green with the aid of *Lacan’s Demise* stayed awake poring over his journal notes from his vision beneath the Pit of Bones, but soon he slammed the book shut frustrated, realizing those details had been fabricated by the Book of Black Circles, and the notes about the Maze were wildly inaccurate.

Hours had passed when Roland jerked awake.

“Modron Alert! Modron Alert!” Cold voices called out in unison. He willed the floor of his cloud room to allow him to peek through, and in the dim light of the larger chamber he saw the tridrones set at each of the portals were leaving their posts, passing through portal to the right of the one the party had entered through. Roland willed himself down to the ground level and noticed that a tridrone that remained guarding the party’s weapon and gear.

⁷¹ It turned out Bastian and Lady Elvira Vaporina Viento had stolen a few kisses while the rest has been talking.

“Who’s there?” Martin voice called from one of the rooms.

“Martin! Did you hear that?” Roland asked.

“Yes, and I think more modrons came through the room before I poked my head out to see,” the watch-mage floated down gently to where Roland was. As if to confirm Martin’s speculation three modrons came hurrying back out the portal the others had exited through. They were tridrones, but their pus-like yellow blood rolled down their sides. One of them had two broken arms, and the third dragged a broken leg and one of its eyes had been pierced.

“Modron Alert! Re-group! Modron Alert!” They disappeared through the portal the party had first come through. A moment later an equally wounded pentadrone emerged.

“My dear creature,” Roland said to it approaching. “Whatever is happening?”

“Outsider infestation,” the thing said, flapping its petal-like lips once. “Modron Alert!” It walked out of the room the same way the others went.

“We should wake the others,” Martin said, and Roland agreed.

Gathered in a large cloud room made from the smaller ones being willed together, the Keepers of the Gate discussed their options. They were joined by Sergio Fontane and Lady Aureliana, though the latter only when convinced by Martin. She refused to look at his face the whole time.

Roland went into the lone room Ratchis had for himself and found the half-orc had pierced his brow and ear and was sitting with his legs folded under him and stripped to his waist. He was whipping a narrow leather strap across his back repeatedly. And he looked as if he might have punched himself in the face several times.

“What are you doing? I thought you were sleeping; resting to recover from your wounds,” Roland exclaimed.

“What is it?” was all Ratchis said without looking up.

“The modrons are fighting the demoness in the Maze and appear to be losing,” Roland said. “Also, Gilbert has not returned and it has been hours. We are gathering in a larger room to discuss what we do next.”

“What we do next is wait here,” Ratchis replied. “We have done enough harm blundering around. We wait for Gilbert... or for Ora Amira El... Or until we have fully recovered from our wounds and replenished our spells...”

“If we wait until we think we are ready we may never be,” Roland sneered. “Well, you know where we are if you change your mind.”

Lady Aureliana told them what she had seen of the Maze.

“There is a room of light and a room of absolute darkness,” she explained. “Each of them has a handful of portals to places you would expect such rooms to have portals to. I think the Light Room has portals to the Heavens and definitely to the Beastlands.⁷² It was through the portal from the Beastlands that I arrived. It is located near the great tree Chochikpi.”

This caused some clamor among the Keepers of the Gate.

⁷² In Aquerra cosmology, the Heavens are the domain of the gods, the place where the gods of Ra’s Pantheon live, but also where the Holy City of the Kalevala of the gods of the Northern Reaches and the First Mountain of the dwarves. The Beastlands is the realm of the beast gods and of the paragons of the normal animals of Aquerra.

“The Beastlands are the home of my goddess!” Roland exclaimed excitedly.

“We should go to the Light Room,” said Martin the Green. “We need to see Chochokpi and give him back his gifts, and perhaps he will have advice for us.”

“I can’t go,” said Roland.

“Why not?” asked Kazrack.

“I did not meet him before, he said as much,” Roland said. “If I go and he meets me doesn’t that mess up time somehow?”

“We can’t worry about such things,” Bastian said in his quiet way. “Either time is already messed up or it will all work itself out, either way we cannot ham-string ourselves by weighing every little choice in that way.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Chochokpi knew who you were,” Roland snapped back.

After taking a few moments to explain to Sergio and Aureliana about Chochokpi as best and as quickly as they could, it was decided that Martin would cast his *analyze portal* spell, and examine the ways out of the room to choose the best possible way to go.

Sergio volunteered to go with them, but Lady Aureliana could not be convinced.

Ratchis grunted as he punched himself in the face twice more, but finally he sighed and wrapped the narrow strap of leather around his forearm. Getting dressed he willed himself through the floor and joined the others.

“What did you decide?” he asked.

“Martin is casting a spell to tell us which is the best way to go and then we plan to make our way to the Light Room, where we hope a portal to the Beastlands will lead us to Chochokpi,” Roland explained.

“I think you are all misguided, but I do not want you to go on without me,” Ratchis replied.

“This lead to “chambers” of some kind. I guess that those were once Hurgun’s quarters,” Martin said, pointing to the portal the party had come through to enter this room. He then pointed to the left. “That way is the Earth Room.” He pointed to the right. “That is the Entrance Room. So, I guess that is the room with the para-elementals. And that...” Martin pointed to the final portal. “...is the Light Room.”

“Now we all we need to do is get our weapons away from that tridrone,” Roland said.

End of Session #94

Session #95

The Keepers of the Gate enacted their plan. Kazrack moved as if to pass through the black portal into the Light Room, and as expected the tridrone stood, threateningly moving towards him.

“None may leave without Gilbert’s leave,” It said, in its flat voice. “No leave to leave.”

The dwarf turned suddenly and bullrushed the modron, driving back into the wall as the others hurried over and grabbed up their weapons. The thing stabbed at him with a spear drawing blood.

“You may not reclaim your weapons,” the tridrone said. “You do not have leave to take or leave to leave.”

“Just run past it,” Kazrack called to the others. “It cannot hurt us... much...”

Roland of Bast hurried through the portal and was followed by Martin the Green. Bastian stepped aside and let Sergio got through first, before following himself. Ratchis and Gunthar went through, and Kazrack went through last.

The dwarf heard Martin cry out in pain as another kind of modron they had not seen before stabbed at him with a spear. The modron had a long rectangular body. It had two arms forward on the body and two backward bending legs, all of which ended in clasping hoof-like claws. It had wings springing from its side as well, but only one large eye above a black swollen mouth. Its body was the pinkish-orange flesh of the rest of its kind.⁷³

This chamber seemed to be the same width and length as the others, but much like the Hell room its ceiling was only about twenty feet above them, not the great height of the earthen Audience Chamber or the Air Room that held the guest quarters. The room was brightly lit, and its walls were plated with polished brass depicting intertwining suns, stars, moons, trees, and other objects of the heavens and of nature. Immediately in front of the portal was the back of a flat lacquered heavy wooden screen about fifteen feet long. The Keepers of the Gate spread out around it and Gunthar drove the *Left Blade of Arofel* through the attacking modron and it farted out yellow pus-like blood and collapsed.

“We shouldn’t kill those unless we have to,” Bastian frowned, but his voice never rose.

“Gods forgive us this sacrilege!” Martin moaned.

“Oh, shaddap!” Gunthar bellowed. “You have a Set-lovin’ death-face and you say *I’m* causing sacrilege?”

“Bastian is right,” Kazrack said. “Do not kill them. If we must fight them, we will do as we did before. Grapple or bulrush them back through a portal. If we must use weapons, attack to subdue.”

Gunthar rolled his eyes.

Roland walked over and applied minor healing on the duodrone before it bled out.

The Keepers of the Gate spread out around the screen and saw more of the chamber. A wooden screen in three sections cordoned off each corner of the chamber. The rear of each one held a statue that faced into the center of the room.

On the far end of the right side of the room was a statue of a bare-breasted cat-headed woman. It was mostly made of gold but had beautiful amber and tiger-eye adornment. The statue was atop a two-foot-tall pedestal and was nearly seven feet tall itself. This was Bast.

On the closer corner of the right side of the room was a statue carved of basalt adorned with onyx. It was the jackal-

⁷³ Duodrone.

headed god, Anubis, his arms open as if in supplication. One hand held an ankh and the other a crook-like scepter.

On the far side of the left of the room was the solid gold statue nearly eight feet tall of a hawk-headed man bearing a crown. Ra's arms were folded, and he held a golden crook in one hand and a flail in the other. An ankh was carved upon his crown.

Lastly, the statue on the left side and closer to them was carved of basalt. It was of a tall stooped man without an animal head, but with a great misshapen bald head. He was tall and thin and stooped and did not look regal at all, but this statue was adorned with gold, silver, platinum, and diamonds. This was Ptah.

There was a similar screen as the one they walked around on the other side of the room, obscuring what they assumed was another black portal beyond. A painting hung on it and they turned to see a painting hung on this side of the first screen as well. Two more portals led out of the room to the left and right, not covered by screens.

In the very center of the room was the most amazing sight of all. There were four tall mithral pylons that formed the four corners of a cage made of bars of light that emerged from the marble tiled floor and stopped at the stone top of the enclosure the pylons held up. The whole thing was about fifteen feet to a side, and inside of it was a marble pedestal. Atop the pedestal lay a book with a thick gold cover.

"Wow... Agh!" Martin the Green cried out in astonishment as his eyes burned from the magic present in room the moment his *detect magic* spell came into effect.

Another duodrone stepped into the room from the portal on the left, and Kazrack hurried over and shoved it back through. It came back and he pushed it again.

"I could use some help," Kazrack groaned.

"Whatever. Is that solid gold?" Gunthar reached out to touch the statue of Ra.

"Touch nothing!" Ratchis cried out, moving over to slam a shoulder into the modron, driving it back out of the room. It did not return.

"This is a sacred place," Martin said, walking over to the Neergardian. "We should not touch anything unless we have to, and even then, only in reverent fashion."

Roland nodded.

The watch-mage saw something flash across the top of the wall in one corner over where the screen behind the statue of Bast was. When he looked again, there was nothing there. He frowned and something in the rotting patch on his face popped and was forced to dab at the rotten smelling pus that came seeping out.

"You're disgusting," Gunthar muttered.

"I am sorry I left you to make such a horrible decision," Ratchis said to Kazrack solemnly as he reached down to help the dwarf to his feet.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," Kazrack replied, quietly. "You fell and were near death yourself. We have all fallen. I am only sorry that that decision needed to be made at all."

"So," the dwarf turned to the others. "There are portals to the Heavens here? Or we are closer to them or something?"

Martin the Green came around the screen that was behind the statue of Ra. On the center panel within the screen was a bright gold mirror in the shape of the sun. The watch-mage cried out again. The light of it had nearly blinded him.

“Yes, I assume behind each of these screens is an object or altar keyed to a particular plane,” Martin said. “I guess this one goes to the Heavens.”

“So the one marked by my goddess’ visage must lead to the Beastlands!” Roland said, happily.

“Yes, that must be this one,” Martin the Green replied as he went around the screen by the statue of Bast still rubbing his burning eyes. The Keepers of the Gate cried out as one as great writhing dun-colored tentacles with spots of pink and green came out of the upper wall to grab the watch-mage. Whatever the thing was, its body was beyond the wall, which seemed to just blink out existence where the tentacles emerged from it. “Help! The wall is eating me!”

“Finally! Something to kill!” Gunthar ran over, sword drawn, but in a moment one of the tentacles grabbed him about the leg and pulled him up as well. Roland roared as he transformed into his black panther shape. Bastian slammed his warhammer at a tentacle, but its rubbery consistency did not seem to give, but the thing yanked Gunthar higher up out of reach. As Ratchis and Kazrack hustled to come around the other side of the screen to help Martin, the watch-mage tried to cast *alter self* to slip out of the thing’s grip. But the tentacle squeezed and the Martin cried out, losing his concentration on the spell. However, in the next moment, the mantle of green and black flame that sometimes enveloped the watch-mage burst into being around him, a spasm went up the two tentacles that had grabbed him, and they let go. Martin the Green dropped the floor with a thud.

“Oh my!” Sergio pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and covered his mouth when he saw the vile tentacles writhing through the wall and the malevolent green and black flame licking around Martin. “I don’t know about this...” The self-professed diplomat withdrew.

Kazrack twisted past the fop and hacked at the tentacles with his halberd, Ratchis right beside him with his greatsword, as Martin crawled away from the melee.

“What kind of foul necromancy is it you are using, sir mage?” Sergio asked Martin as the watch-mage stood and turned to take in the tactical situation. “I cannot say that I condone such things.”

Sergio withdrew from Martin and made his way around the paneled screen behind the statue of Anubis towards the melee again.

“Bast! Though who art as graceful as thou art powerful! Your humble servant asks that you smite this aberration from beyond the planes!” Roland called in his human voice, though he was still in panther form. However, the holy energy seemed to dispense too quickly and he thought perhaps the thing had resisted his spell.

Gunthar managed to push off one of the two tentacles that held him, but the two that had been holding Martin whipped onto him and he grunted with pain as the thing pulled him back towards the wall.

“*Lentus!*” Martin cast, but the thing resisted that spell as well.⁷⁴

A song on his lips, Sergio leapt forward and touched Gunthar on his dangling foot. He withdrew again.⁷⁵

Gunthar grunted again and finally was able to break free from the four tentacles that held him leaping to the floor with a curse and spitting blood. Kazrack was whipped across the face by one of the tentacles but slapped it away with the blade of his poleaxe before it could grasp him.

“Pull back!” Ratchis called, withdrawing. “It may not be able to reach us in the center of the room.”

The Keepers of the Gate obeyed their companion and the tentacled thing pulled itself back through the wall. There was a flash across that corner of the wall, as if the side of the room were disappearing, revealing a speckled blue

⁷⁴ **DM’s Note:** This creature, a dharculus from the 3.0 Manual of the Planes has SR 20.

⁷⁵ Sergio cast *Freedom of Movement*.

darkness beyond that exuded a disorienting sensation. And then the wall was back.

“It seems the veils between the planes are deteriorating even here in Hurgun’s domain,” Martin said. He sat down, clutching at his ribs and grimacing as he coughed blood. The mantle of green and black flame around him disappeared leaving a sulfurous smell behind, and Roland walked over to heal him.

“That seems like a handy spell,” Bastian commented to the watch-mage.

“It is the work of the Book of Black Circles,” Martin replied.

“Well you used it at just the right time or else those tentacle things might have pulled you through to wherever in the Hells it comes from,” Bastian said.

“I did not use it,” Martin said. “It wants to be used. It wants to help and be convenient to use, but the cost for this convenience is my soul, or perhaps my very identity.”

“Oh, then you shouldn’t use it then,” Bastian replied quietly.

“What is that place?” Gunthar asked, point to one of the paintings on this side of the screen that by the portal the party came through. It was a shining silver city upon a cloud that sat on a mountain. The sky around it was starless and dark blue.

“I believe that is the heavens of the gods of the Northern Reaches,” Martin answered.

“What are we even doing here?” Ratchis complained, but before anyone could answer two more duodrones came through one of the black portals without a screen before it.

“Return to your quarters. You do not have leave to wander,” the two duodrones said, alternating syllables. They moved forward, spears in hand, but suddenly the tentactled monster came through the wall and snatched up the rear modron, crushing it easily and then ripping off limbs and wings with the other psuedopods.

“Can we kill these things yet?” Gunthar asked, looking around for his sword. He saw it on the floor under where the tentacles dragged the poor modron through the wall.

“No! We are not killing them, jack-ass!” Ratchis roared his reply. “Just push them away.”

“Well, the monster is killing them, so who’ll know the difference?” Gunthar asked. He saw the half-orc glare at him again and tense up. “Fine. You take care of it, Snuffles. I am here to rescue my brother and find some neat loot, not to push freaks around.”

Ratchis growled and drove his shoulder into the duodrone’s side, shoving it towards the black portal the party came through. Kazrack came up alongside his companion and slapped the flat of his halberd into the modron, but it seemed to do no good, even when he jabbed it repeatedly with the butt end of the haft.⁷⁶ The dudodrone stabbed at Ratchis with its spear, drawing blood, but finally the two priests were able to shove it through the portal. It tried to come back through, and they shoved it again.

“Please ruh-ruh-ruh-ruh,” the modron’s voice seemed stuck somehow as it tried to come through once more, but once more it was pushed back.

Meanwhile, Bastian walked over to Sergio who was slowly bringing his hand between the bars of light in the center of the chamber. “Is it safe to pass through?”

Sergio jumped a little and drew back his hand quickly letting out a low breath and hanging his head back.

⁷⁶ **DM’s Note:** Modrons are immune to subdual damage.

“I was planning on trying to not touch it and have to find out,” Sergio replied, a snide tone creeping into his voice.

“We should go back,” Ratchis announced, getting up from being crouched and ready to deal with the duodrone if it returned. He left Kazrack to stand there as he walked over to the others. “There is nothing to accomplish here and we are not ready to deal with the demoness or whatever else has to be dealt with. We should return to the Air Room and rest, just as the modrons insist.”

Kazrack nodded his agreement.

“We should not second guess our plans,” Roland said. “We should travel on through the gate to the Beastlands. Chochokpi said we would while we were here, and here we are...”

“I saw Chochokpi, or at least some kind of tree depicted in wood carving I saw before that thing grabbed hold of me,” Martin said, point to the screen by the statue of Bast. “I think if we did go through that gate the Tree would not be far.”

“And what are we going to do once we are there?” asked Kazrack.

“We could gain the aid of other servants of my goddess, *powerful* servants,” Roland replied. “Anyway, you need to go see Chochokpi.”

“We can’t go anywhere,” Ratchis said. “We have no assurances that the Beastlands will not be as dangerous, if not more so, than this place. I know little of Bast’s realm, but what I do know is that those who walk on two legs are not always welcome.”

“But as you can see, I have four legs,” Roland said. He was still in panther-form, so he rolled over onto his back playfully and stretched, waving his four paws in the air.

“You know we can see your tally-wacker when you do that, right?” Gunthar snickered.

“I will not go to the Beastlands unless we do not see Chochokpi,” Kazrack said, hefting his magical halberd, Beathagh. “We are not prepared to give up our gifts of yet. We will need this fine weapon to destroy the demoness.”

Roland rolled back up to his feet and let out a yelp of frustration. “I think you hold on too tightly to these gifts. They may have already served their purpose, or perhaps we are meant to sacrifice them and achieve our victory by our own means. Did not Chochokpi say that we had not yet accomplished our mission when we gave him the items to give back to us.”⁷⁷

“If this place is dangerous to walk on two legs, and the rest of us are unwilling to part with our gifts as of yet, why don’t you go and find this aid on your own?” Kazrack suggested.

Everyone contemplated the suggestion silently for a moment.

“Roland,” Martin began. “I trust your instincts in this. If you think that going to the Beastlands will aid our cause, then perhaps you should go...alone...”

Roland pawed over to the statue of Bast and sat before it. “Great Queen Bast. I sit before your visage in thy favored form and beg your aid.” The Bastite laid down before the statue and bared his neck. “I come in proper obeisance and ask that you do not turn me away when I enter your realm and seek your aid directly...”

The Bastite continued to pray in quiet contemplation. Ratchis laid down on the ground and rested his head on his

⁷⁷ See Session #85

pack and tried to catch some winks while they waited. Kazrack kept his eyes open, watching the portals for more modrons, occasionally eyeing the corner of the room where the shimmer of non-existence would wash over it now and again.

“Hey! There something missing over here!” Gunthar’s voice came from behind the screen adorned with the statue of Anubis. “I think this is a clue. Stuff like this is always a clue of some kind in the stories...”

Martin walked around the screen and was awed by what he saw there. There was a black iron gate with nasty spines along the top behind which was a depth of utter blackness. It was cold behind this screen. Gunthar pointed to a peg on another panel of the screen and the outline of dust below it.

“Hmmm, it looks to have been a horn some sort,” Martin said. “And guessing from the amount of dust around it I’d say it was taken relatively recently. Then again, with the fluctuations in time that are occurring...”

“Fluctuations in time?” asked Bastian coming around the screen as well.

“Yes, well I was thinking about how from what Gilbert and the Lady Aureliana said, that time has flowed in two ways here in the Maze since whatever happened happened.”

“What do you mean time has flowed two ways?” Sergio asked, walking over as he slicked down his mustache with a wet finger.

“I mean, that if we assume that the ‘closing’ of Hurgun’s Maze of the legend coincides with his being trapped by the time elemental, which was soon after you were trapped in the Mirror,” Martin turned to the bard. “It means that you have been trapped in here for about one hundred and fifty years, but Lady Aureliana said it felt like perhaps four to her.”

“Could that not just be a feature of the outlook of her kind if they are long-lived?” Bastian asked. “I mean, yes it has been over a hundred years, but her description of what it felt like doesn’t mean that time is acting screwy. It could be that Hurgun was allowing guests from other realms into his Maze after closing the Maze from Aquerra.”

“One hundred and fifty years?” Sergio’s eyes were wide open as was his mouth.

“I am afraid so,” Martin replied. “Everyone you know is likely dead.”

Sergio Fontane stood up straight, his body becoming rigid for a moment, and then he slowly relaxed. “Well, I guess I won’t have to worry about that little incident in Zootsburg anymore!” He laughed and walked away.

Bastian and Martin looked at each other and shrugged.

“So this is the gate to the realm of Anubis?” Gunthar asked, point to the iron gate.

“Yes.”

“So, this is the way I need to go to rescue Jeremy,” Gunthar said.

“I don’t recommend it,” Martin said. “Anubis does not take kindly to living visitors in the realm of the dead.”

“But here we are, and you all said you’d help me get Jeremy back if I helped you with this thing, and here I am helping,” Gunthar reasoned.

“We cannot afford to make a side trek into the realm of Anubis,” Martin said. “At least not until we have fixed the situation with the Maze.”

“Oh, but the pussycat can go traipsing off to La-La land, right?” Gunthar spat. “I see how it is. I guess I’ll have to go

alone.”

“But... but we still need your help,” Martin stammered. “If you go through there you might never come back. You *probably* won’t ever come back...”

“Don’t worry your ugly rotten little head,” Gunthar smirked. “I am a man of virtue. I’ll keep my word and help your sorry asses, but when this thing is done, Hurgun or no Hurgun, I’m going through that gate, and any of you bleedin’ filth that has a conscience will come with me.”

The Neergaardian walked off.

“Wow, he really loved his brother, huh?” Bastian said.

“He never even knew him,” Martin replied.

”I am going,” Roland announced soon after.

“As I said before, I trust your instincts in this,” Martin the Green told the Bastite. “If you feel you should go, then go...”

“You should do what you feel is right, of course,” Bastian said in his quiet way.

“We should wake Ratchis and tell him of this,” Kazrack said. “You would do well to get his sound advice before going.”

“Let him sleep,” Roland replied. “He would only argue with me, and I find it best to simply do what I think is best without asking. It is my typical method.”

“Very well,” Kazrack replied, shaking his head. “Just remember that the last time you went off on your own, I had to take you out of captivity.”⁷⁸

“Oh, I would have gotten out of there eventually anyway,” Roland laughed and then covering his mouth coughed and continued. “Not that I did not appreciate your timely aid. It is just that even though that plan did not work out as I initially intended, my short stay with those dwarves taught me something about the political situation regarding Gothanius regardless of not having arrived ahead of you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about anymore,” Kazrack said, still shaking his head.

“I love it when you play dumb to get me to shut up,” Roland laughed again. “You’re cute in a dwarfly sort of way.”

“Okay, then go...” Kazrack grunted, obviously uncomfortable. He waved his hand towards the statue of Bast in a dismissive gesture.

Martin cast *mage armor* and *greater invisibility* on the Bastite to protect him on his way, and in hopes that invisibly he could slip past the tentacled monster that came through the wall by the portal to the Beastlands.

Roland of Bast pawed silently and invisibly around the screen behind the statue of Bast, taking a moment to look up cautiously to where the wall still occasionally shimmered back and forth. Behind the screen was a wooden frame of excellent craftsmanship nearly six feet across and over nine feet high. It was artfully carved to look like two trees bound together by vines and flowers, and the bottom portion was decorated with wooden reliefs of a rat, a weasel, a jackal, a wolf, and a mountain lion, all looking up with open mouths. Within the frame itself was the shimmering and glimmering image of verdant hill upon which was a tree so great that the top of it was not visible in the screen. There was a clump of brush in the foreground, and the slightest winding hint of a river on the right.

⁷⁸ See Session #76

With a quick prayer to Bast, Roland leapt into the image expecting to sail through, but instead he slammed against the frame, bouncing back and crumpling. He looked back to see the frame still rocking back and forth a bit.

“I can’t get through it!” Roland whined to others. “Passage seems barred.”

“Some portals require a price or offering, or some other requisite exists in regard to who or what it might allow through,” Martin called back. “Describe it to me in detail.”

Roland did so.

“It must be the mouths,” Martin the Green speculated. “The Beastlands are the land of life and of the hunt. It seems to me that blood would likely do the trick.”

“Blood? How much do you think?” Roland asked.

“As much as would be a sacrifice, or at least I would guess...”

Roland shrugged in his lithe feline body and bit down hard on one of his paws. He held the paw over the open mouth of the wooden mountain lion, letting most of the blood drip in there, but putting a few drops in the other mouths just in case.⁷⁹

Another quick prayer and he leapt through the shimmering image and a moment later he was gasping as he surfaced in small murky pond in a copse of trees. Roland paddled over to the edge of the pond and dragged himself out of the water, shaking his body to send water and fur in all directions.

The day was growing long here in the Beastlands. Roland crawled out of the brush to see the great grassy hill upon which was rooted Chochokpi. The tree was many times larger than the talking tree the Keepers of the Gate had met in Topaline,⁸⁰ but there was no doubt that this was the same. The area beneath the tree was already nearly as dark as night.

The air was clean here, tasting better than fresh water, and the sun, though a distant yellow ghost on the horizon, was warm. Roland felt invigorated and overcome with the pleasure of being. He rolled and lolled in the grass, occasionally giving off happy growls and yelps that he could not help. Suddenly, a breeze brought a scent to his feline nostrils. Prey.

Roland leapt to his four feet and took off towards the river. When he reached a patch of woods along the shore, he crept in the shadow of the edge of it and moved downwind of the group of antelope he had caught scent of. He peeked his head above the brush as he came around and saw a small herd of less than a score of the noble beasts, their antlers tall tight whorls that were nothing like the mountain goats and rams Roland was used to back in Aquerra.⁸¹ They had muscular humps over their front shoulders from which their brown and white heads emerged, and they were nearly seven feet at shoulder. The antelope were gathering on the far side of the river and would likely get away before Roland could reach them, except for three loitering on the closer shore, seemingly oblivious to the safety of being with the herd and its males.

The black panther Bastite shot out from under the brush and made right for the smallest of the three. It was young fawn, but it was still the size of a decent buck back in Aquerra. It turned awkwardly when it finally sensed the predator’s approach. It had barely splashed a few feet into the river when Roland pounced upon it, snapping his jaws about its neck and whipping violently. Two or three kicks and the antelope drooped lifelessly in the Bastite’s mouth. The rest of the herd withdrew, the last stragglers still hurrying to catch up to them.

⁷⁹ **DM’s Note:** Those would pass through the gate to the Beastlands had to feed the open mouths an amount of blood equal to 10% of their maximum hit points.

⁸⁰ See Session #85

⁸¹ These antelope were a form of *Giant Eland* known to the islands in the far south of Aquerra.

Roland dropped the prey momentarily and roared triumphantly. Taking it back up again, he hurried back into woods and leapt into a tree and began to devour it. He stopped only when he smelled what were undoubtedly wolves coming from the north. Taking the time to finish his kill, Roland leapt back down and crept to the edge of the wood, seeing a group of nearly twenty great gray wolves crossing the river as well. The Bastite decided it was time to go see Chochokpi.

The Bastite crept towards the tree slowly, noting how in some places the great tree's branches touched the ground hundreds of yards from the trunk. As he came under the cover of the tree he could smell many animals living among the branches above. It was dark under there, but bits of sunlight dappled the many roots, leaves, and vines on the uneven ground.

Suddenly, a branch swung down and sideswiped the panther, knocking him off his feet to skid painfully on his side a few feet.

"Hrum Hroom! Outsider! Speak up now and be hasty about it or be smashed!" came Chochokpi's voice. It was like a great wave rushing through a great hollow log, and being drawn back into the sea, rivulets of echo, like birdsong, twitted here and there in it as well, but that made it no less filled with menace.

"I am Roland of Bast," Roland said, and he felt a momentary queasiness, that passed so quickly he had forgotten about it before he continued.

"Hrm... Well, hrm... Yes, well... that certainly is a hasty answer," the tree replied. Roland was still too far away to see the speaking tree's knotted face.

"Oh great, Chochokpi!" Roland bowed his head and covered his snout with his forepaw for a moment, and then sat up again. "As I said, I am Roland of Bast, member of the Keepers of the Gate, and I travel here from the mortal realms on a mission of great importance, and I am sure one of your great wisdom and knowledge can aid me in taking the correct course to get the aid I seek."

"Hm... You seek aid to get aid? All this frontways thinking never makes any... hrm... Yes, sense to me..." The tree said. "It has been a long time since I have seen a human here, a long frontways time, at least... And yes, I know you are human... Yes... Hrm... You can't fool a tree... You said my name, so you must know I am the Tree That Grows Backwards... So everything new to you is old to me... But still, it has been a long frontways time since an outsider has come to speak to me."

"I am not an outsider," Roland protested. "This is the realm that resonates in my soul. This is where I will come when I die..."

"If you deserve it," the Tree retorted.

"I already do," Roland replied, with cheek.

"That is for Osiris to decide, not you," Chochokpi's voice grew deep and menacing once again. A crow cawed among his branches. "You are arrogant, but such is the way of mammals."

"And cats always know the truth, but as much as I would like to sit here and banter with a great and imminent tree such as yourself, I fear I must be hasty and explain to you of my mission," Roland said. "You do know of Hurgun of the Stone?"

"Hrm... Yes, that human is known to me," Chochokpi replied. "Learned he is, for a human..."

"And if you know of his Maze, then you know of its great power, but right now it seems that it is unattended and its power is seeping between the planes and disrupting things I think it has to do with a time elemental he tried to bind, but it bound him instead," Roland tried to explain. "There are servants of Ptah, my companion Martin the Green calls them 'modrons'... They seem to be malfunctioning someway and I think they are part of what is making the

Maze not behave properly... But I am not sure... We also think that the flow of time itself might be being disrupted. The fact that this is the second time I am meeting you, but the first time you are meeting me, might have something to do with that as well... It is all very complex and confusing..." Roland panted.

"Hrrm, Hrrm, Really? Hrrm, well..."

"Have you felt any disruptions here?" Roland asked.

There was a long moment, and a breeze shook Chochokpi's branches. Somewhere frogs began to croak, and the sun had completely set. Darkness swept across the Beastlands like a blue-black shroud that rippled in the wind. Some time passed... Roland tried addressing Chochokpi again, but there was no response. After an hour, he heard the howls of wolves on the air, and the Bastite risked creeping closer to Chochokpi's trunk, in hope it might provide him with some safety.

Roland guessed it was over three hours before he heard Chochokpi's voice again.

"Hrm... Hroom?"

"Chochokpi? You were silent for a long time. I was worried," Roland said.

"I had to feel across the planes to where all my roots do lie and seek out the truth of your frontways words," Chochokpi replied. "And you are correct... Hrm... Something is wrong..."

"Yes, something is *very* wrong," Roland's voice took on a tone somewhere between annoyance and pleading. "And I didn't get to finish telling you what else is wrong before you... uh, felt your roots or whatever it is you did... There is a fiend, a greater succubus named Ora Amira El loose in the Maze and seeking to use its power for her own evil ends. My companions and I, the Keepers of the Gate, tried to stop her, but were forced to flee her might. She killed one of our number, as well."

"Hrrm, well... yes,... I mean, no, no... That won't do, not at all," Chochokpi said. "Hurgun would not like that... No... Control of the Maze must be gained before it breaks apart and permanently damages the veils between the planes."

"Yes, but we don't know how to do that," Roland replied.

"Not so hasty!" Chochokpi shook all his limbs and small animals and insects all scampered among the limbs with fright. Roland took a step back and bowed his head again.

"Hrrmmmm... Yes... yes... I know what must be done," Chochokpi murmured. "Yes... in order to gain control you need to repair the malfunctioning modrons... Yes, that is it... Yes, that is what happens... What *could* happen frontways, I mean... At least I think so... Maybe not, however... Hrrmm... It is what should be done... Yes... You need to repair the means by which they are repaired and given their basic... uh, orders... Yes, the station..."

"The Modron Station? Yes, we heard of it and it has been damaged, but how do we repair it, and what do we do once we have?" Roland asked.

"Hrrm, still hasty... But the means of repairing it are a dubious means... Necromantic means that one such as yourself might not have access to..."

"The Book of Black Circles..." Roland murmured.

"Hrrmm?"

"I think one of my companions has the means, though the cost will be dear," Roland replied.

“Once the modrons are repaired and control is re-established, the Maze must be plunged deep into the Plane of Time,” Chochokpi said. “Yes, this is what it would... does... will... it would be like that to your frontwards minds... the Plane of Time...”

“And what then?”

“Hope the Time Elemental will be drawn off and return to wherever, whenever, whatever... it came from,” Chochokpi said. “Or find a way to defeat it... But one cannot defeat time, not even Chochokpi can do that, and I am the Tree That Grows Backwards... Hmmm, hroom! Yes, I am...”

Roland was quiet for a long time contemplating what he had learned.

“The wolves are coming,” Chochokpi said.

“Yes, I smelled them before,” Roland replied. He cocked his head and asked, “Tell me, do you know where I might find the servants of my mistress, Bast? I need to ask their aid in this matter.”

“Hrmmm, Hroom... Servants, hmmm...?” the Tree gurgled, and then was silent for a time before replying. “This is not a good part of the Beastlands for those who serve your mistress. To see her servants, you must travel to the distant realm of the Tiger-Prince, past the Realm of the Charging Beasts and through the Valley of the Suffering Hunters... And hrmmm, yes... there are also the Wolves of Law...”

“How long would such a journey take?” Roland asked.

Again, there was a long silence punctuated by gurgles and murmurs and the hoot of an owl up in the great tree’s branches. “Three days as you would count them...”

“Three days here, or three days in Aquerra?”

“There is... Hrm, Yes... Hroom.... There is no difference... At least I do not think so... So, yes... Difficult to count forward ways sometimes... Yes... Short bursts! So hasty... I do not like it...”

“And what of these wolves?” Roland asked. “I am not at my full strength... Should I fear if I were to meet a pack of them?”

“Hrmmmm... Yes... the Wolves of Law... They prowl and patrol and enforce the will of their alpha... Yes... That is what they do... Drink of the pools of water amidst my roots... Be refreshed and restored... You may rest here and recoup your strength before you continue your journey... Yes, that you must... Yes... Hrm....”

Roland hurried over to the pools and felt his wounds close as he drank deeply of them. He found a warm spot up among the branches to loll lazily until he was relaxed enough to nod off.

Osilem, the 3rd of Ese – 565 H.E.

“SPOKE TO CHOCHOKPI. AM GOING TO TIGER-PRINCE FOR HELP. MUST FIGHT WOLVES FIRST. WILL RETURN WHEN ABLE. HOPEFULLY WITH HELP. CAN YOU GET HERE?”

Bastian relayed the *sending* he received from Roland the next morning. The others had waited many hours in terror, catching sleep when possible and were finally able to re-prepare spells.

“You tell him that he is to return immediately!” Kazrack roared.

“It is too late. You only have a moment to reply,” Bastian said. “And I already replied...”

“What did you say?” the dwarf asked.

“I said, uh... That’d I’d tell you all what he was doing and that we would try to reach him through the gate, and uh... good luck on his travels to the Tiger-Prince, and uh... if he could give us directions...”

“You said that?” Kazrack asked with disbelief. Bastian nodded, and the dwarf dropped his head into his own palm with a smack.

Ratchis placed an awkward hand on his friend’s shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “We just have to go and get him and listen to what he has to say,” the half-orc said, unusually calm. “We have little choice now. Well... we could go on without him, but part of friendship is sometimes following along with something you know is stupid idea...”⁸² He smiled showing his yellowed sharp crooked lined in black gums.

“But how could he just make this decision on his own to stay wherever he is?” Kazrack was dumbfounded. “It is just the most selfish... If he went to get aid and realized it would take this long, he should have just come back.”

“Getting aid is secondary to him,” Ratchis replied. “He wants to bask in the grace of his goddess, and can you blame him? We just need to go and get him back or go along with him if that is what we figure out we need to do.”

“If you view Roland as that selfish that he is making his decisions because of his own...” Bastian began, but Gunthar leapt into his face, bumping his chest against the soft-spoken bearded warrior.

“He’s a bloody Bastite!” Gunthar said. “Never trust a Bastite I said that when he joined the group. But nobody listens to bloody Gunthar! You can trust a Bastite with a party, but not with your back.”

“But we cannot afford to give up our gifts to Chochokpi yet,” Kazrack protested, still addressing Ratchis, but stepping between Bastian and the Neergardian.

“From what Roland told me while we were in City of the Ancients, you have to convince Chochokpi to take the gifts to give back to you,” Bastian said. “So, even if you do end up meeting him, just don’t do the convincing. Do it another time.”

“But we can’t know that that was how it happened,” Martin the Green replied. “We are risking a paradox that could lead to anomalies we could not imagine.”

“They haven’t happened yet, have they?” Bastian asked. “It seems fairly clear to me. Maybe since it hasn’t happened, it never happens and we’re safe to do as we please.”

“That makes no sense,” Martin said.

“It doesn’t make any less sense than when you go on about it,” Kazrack grinned.

“I think you just misunderstand Roland,” Bastian said, turning to Ratchis. “He is not violent like you are, and will not bully others into agreeing with him, but just chooses to go his own way.”

Ratchis was silent for a long moment and then stepped away.

“Aw! I think you just hurt Snuffles’s feelings,” Gunthar guffawed. “You think he’s a murderous half-orc! Haw! Haw!”

Ratchis turned back around. “Are we ready to go?”

“Excuse me, sir,” Sergio came forward, trying hard to smooth out his fine clothes that were becoming increasingly

⁸² Nephthys is goddess of freedom, but she is also goddess of friendship and bravery.

bedraggled despite this. “But I am not sure that I want to go into the Beastlands. To me it seems a rather foolish and dangerous thing to do for no good reason. I mean, no offense to you... You may have a good reason to go, but I, my good orc, do not.”

“Then stay behind,” Ratchis said.

Sergio looked around nervously and pulled at his collar with obvious discomfort. “I am not sure I want to do that either...”

“You could make your way back to the Air Room and stay with Lady Aureliana,” Bastian suggested.

“But however should I find my way back?”

“Martin will cast his spell determining which portal leads where, in order to help you,” Ratchis said, looking at the watch-mage.

“I am not sure I want to use it yet if we are not planning to leave the room,” Martin protested. “We may need it more urgently later.”

“If you don’t to help him find some safety, we may be leaving him to be killed,” Ratchis replied.

“Any room is as safe or dangerous as another as far as well know, what with Ora-Amira-El running around,” Martin reasoned.

“As your conscience dictates...” Ratchis said.

Martin the Green sighed profoundly. He cast his spell and looked around at the black portals looking out, and then took the opportunity to check the other gates behind the other screens.

The watch-mage pointed to the portal they had come through, “Control Room,” he said, and then pointing withershins from there he said, “Entrance, Library, Hell.”

The portal behind the statue of Ra went to the Heavens, the one behind the statue of Ptah was a shimmering hovering vertical plane of white light. It went to the Positive Material Plane. And of course, the one behind the Anubis statue went to the realm of the Jackal God. He was surprised that the painting of the Holy City of the Kalevala was also a gate, as was the other which was a depiction of some white and blue icy realm.⁸³

“Well, I do not like any of those choices one bit,” Sergio said, flattening his mustache with the tip of his pinky. “I think I would rather go to the Beastlands than go to any of those places alone.”

“The library could be an interesting to spend time,” Martin reasoned.

“A powerful wizard’s library? Probably the most heavily defended room in the place, don’t you think?” the bard asked.

Martin nodded.

Sergio Fontane and the remaining members of the Keepers of the Gate crammed into the cubic blue field of *the Wurfel Kraft* and slowly made their way around the screen to the gate into Beastlands. The tentacles of the otherworldly aberration coming through the wall slammed against the field futilely, but with such strength the whole thing shuddered. Martin maneuvered the cube so that it blocked the access of the tentacles to the gate itself. But he then had to quickly deactivate it to let people out two at a time to go through the gate but put it back up to keep the

⁸³ The pantheon of the Northern Reaches is an amalgam of Finnish, Norse and Celtic gods and folklore. The icy location remains a mystery.

tentacles from grabbing anyone.

Kazrack grumbled about having to give blood to the waiting mouths of the wooden frame, but he went first certain that there should be a doughty warrior to protect others from any danger as they passed through. A moment later he was sinking to the bottom of the pond in his full plate mail, watching the others appear from a square plane of blue light above him and break out at the surface, oblivious to the futile waving of his arms.

Meanwhile, Roland of Bast, still in his panther-form crept along a strip of woods back near the river. While Chochokpi had warned him that he would have to face the Wolves of Law eventually, the Bastite wanted to choose the battle ground, and he wanted to summon some allies and prepare them.

“Hrm... Remember, if you slay the alpha wolf the others will likely... Hoom, hrm... Hm... disperse. Yes, yes... mmmmm,” Chochokpi had said to Roland by way of advice.

Chanting and praying in a small clearing within a branch of the woods that ran along the river, four lions appeared to help their mistress’ priest. With the howl of wolves before him, and the scent of a second group creeping through the woods from where the river was obscured, Roland cast another spell, and he and the four lions (three of them lionesses) grew to a great size.⁸⁴ Finally he called to Bast to fill him with *Divine Power* increasing his strength, resilience and fighting skill.

Roland sent the great golden lions out of the brush in a staggered charge. He stepped clear to see about a half-dozen wolves heading towards them. The first lioness roared angrily as the dire wolves surrounded her, but this quickly became growls of pained confusion, as the dire wolves snapped at her from all sides and pulled her off her feet despite her size. They worried her side and haunches, drawing great gouts of blood. In a moment she was already critically wounded, but the other summoned lions leapt in. The two other lionesses dragged wolves out of the circle, crunching down on their backs with their own powerful jaws, and trying to pin down the canines with a huge paw.

The male leapt into the thick of the fray scattering the remaining wolves and allowing the first lion to get to her feet again.

Roland charged out into the clearing, but then pulled off to the left. It was a ruse to draw out the rest of the wolves, as the Bastite had smelled them coming around when the wind changed. From the brush came a huge wolf followed by three more of the dire wolves.

“Bast! In your own realm where your mere thought is made real, I beg to help thy humble servant and smite these foes that seeks to halt me from seeking your aid!” Roland cast the spell, but the as the *holy smite* came down among the wolves, the alpha wolf disappeared. The other wolves howled as the divine energy washed over them, but they did not seem to be that effected.⁸⁵

Suddenly, the alpha wolf appeared behind Roland and grabbed the Bastite’s rear paw, trying to drag him to the ground with a twist of his great head. Roland was able to pull free and keep his footing, while he twisted away and around, to keep his eyes on all the approaching wolves. However, the alpha wolf disappeared again. Roland looked around wildly trying to get a bead on him but could not. He did see the male lion shake his mane free of blood right after crushing the throat of one of the wolves. The two lionesses were finishing off another, but the first lioness was already gone. The other wolves were withdrawing and reforming a semi-circular cluster to attack from.

And then the wolves were almost on him, so Roland turned again as if to flee, but charged and pounced at the lead wolf instead. They tumbled together, clawing and biting. The other two wolves moved in biting at Roland. Suddenly, they howled strangely, and their bites seemed stronger, as if biting down into the essence of his faith, and the wounds burned.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Roland cast *Cat Growth*, a specific and lower level version of *Animal Growth*.

⁸⁵ These wolves were not evil.

⁸⁶ These *axiomatic* dire wolves used their *smite chaos* ability.

Roland pulled himself free, leaving the first wolf dead beneath him, but had to turn around quickly to fend off the two wolves still hounding him. He could see the two lionesses killing another wolf, but the alpha wolf appeared behind the male and pounced upon him, driving the noble beast to the ground.

Roland withdrew some more and called to Bast to close his wounds, and then had to leap right back into melee with the two wolves on him. He managed to kill another, but the alpha male appeared beside him and tore into him before disappearing again.

“Bast curse you!” Roland cried in agony and frustration. He leapt upon the other wolf to kill it, as he saw the alpha wolf finish off the male lion. One of the remaining lionesses was moaning in pain as two wolves worried her from each side over and over, but the other two wolves were bleeding out on the ground.

The dire wolf near Roland withdrew and tried to blindside the remaining lioness, but she spun around and snapped her jaws beneath its throat and twisted him around, slapping a heavy paw on its chest. Roland charged in and pounced on one of the wolves worrying the dying lioness. He tore its back open and it collapsed beneath him, just as the lioness’ body disappeared. The other wolf withdrew.

The alpha wolf appeared to finish the other lioness, but Roland spun around and called to Bast with a roar, shooting a ray of *searing light* that hissed as it burned across the huge alpha wolf’s chest. It whined and disappeared.

“Yes! Go! Run! Do you see how cowardly he is?” Roland asked of the remaining wolves, but his voice was roars and growls in his fury.

“I’m telling you there are demon octopus here,” Kazrack sputtered as the others dragged him away from the pond.

“It was a fiendish octopus that Bastian summoned to pull you up to the surface so you wouldn’t drown,” Martin the Green explained. “But you just batted it away...”

“I would rather drown than take aid from a fiend,” Kazrack sat up and coughed. He turned to glare at Bastian, but bearded warrior turned away and crept to the edge of the trees to have a look around. He sent N’kron off to have a look.

“Well, you nearly did drown,” Martin said, as Ratchis helped the dwarf to his feet. The half-orc squeezed water out of the red-brown nappy locks atop his head.

“Big lions are fighting wolves,” N’kron said to Bastian through their telepathic connection.

Bastian conveyed this to the others, and they hurried down to the clearing in sight of the river. They were awed by how verdant his place was. They ran down towards the twinkling blue-green river, seeing the towering branches of Chochokpi off to their left. They saw the blast of *searing light* burn through the morning mist as they approached in time to see Roland finish the last of the dire wolves. The lioness was long gone.

“Careful! The alpha male is still around, and he *blinks!*” Roland warned when he saw the others.

“Everyone around Roland, in a tight ring facing out,” Ratchis said, and the Keepers of the Gate closed ranks around their Bastite companion, weapons drawn. Sergio had drawn his rapier as well, but he entered the circle looking around quite nervously.

Roland took a long whiff and everyone waited expectantly for a long moment, but nothing happened.

“The coward fled,” Roland said, laying down in the grass to lick at his wounds. “I am so glad you came. It would have been lonely traveling to see the Tiger-Prince alone.”

Kazrack opened his mouth to protest.

“Before the arguing starts, I want to look around,” Martin said, and with a word he transformed into his Tanweil-form with a use of *alter self* and he took off awkwardly with his stubby wings. He had not ascended very far when he noted a huge eagle swooping down in his direction.

End of Session #95

AQUERRA

Session #96 ⁸⁷

Martin tucked in his reptilian wings and dropped down to the ground immediately, landing beside Ratchis.

“A giant eagle is swooping down in our direction!” he warned.

“We cannot afford to be drawn into a fight here without knowing who is who and what is what,” Ratchis replied. “Roland, can you do something?”

With a roar, the Bastite summoned a great cloud of *obscuring mist* that billowed out from beneath his body and filled the area.

“Who farted?” Gunthar guffawed.

“We are vulnerable out here,” Roland said. “That was just a quick defensive maneuver. We need to decide how best to handle this.”

“I find this mist to be not necessarily a very prudent means of defense,” Sergio’s voice came wafting out the odorless mist. “It probably cannot see us, but we definitely cannot see it.”

“Okay, Roland, we are here because of you,” Kazrack’s voice was filled with grudging restraint. “What are we supposed to be doing?”

“Yes, what is going on?” Martin the Green asked.

“Well, I spoke with Chochokpi and learned that in order to handle the problem of the Maze we need to repair the Modron Station with powerful necromancy,” Roland explained. “And once that is accomplished, the modrons must be made to send the Maze deeper into the Plane of Time, where we might battle or drive off the time elemental...”

“You could have returned immediately and told us that as soon as you learned it!” Kazrack yelled, his restraint quickly forgotten.

“Let’s keep our voices down,” Ratchis admonished. “We do not want to draw more attention than we already have.”

“The Tiger Prince might be a powerful ally,” Roland said. “Chochokpi told me where I might find him. What I planned to do was for the sake of being more likely to accomplish the awesome task before us.”

“Do we *need* the aid of this Tiger Prince?” Martin asked.

“If he is as powerful as I suspect, he might be able to more easily defeat the demoness, Ora-Amira-El,” Roland replied.

There was a long silence, broken only by the whooshing of the wind that swirled the mist the Keepers of the Gate.

“But...” Roland continued. “It will take about three days to get there, so we are talking at least six days...”

“Kazrack, when you fell ill because you were not attending to Osiris’ task quickly enough, how long did it last?”⁸⁸ Martin asked. “I feel the weight of my task upon me, and I fear I will soon be feeling its debilitating effects.”

“Several days,” the dwarf replied.

Martin the Green sighed. “I guess I will hold on as long as I can...”

⁸⁷ This session was played on July 23rd, 2005.

⁸⁸ See Session #29

“If we are going to talk about this longer, we should make a break for the cover of the woods near the pond,” Ratchis said. “When the mist dissipates we will be out in the open.”

It was agreed, and a moment later the Keepers of the Gate, accompanied by Sergio, took off for the woods, leaving the *obscuring mist* behind.

“N’kron warned me that the giant eagle is still around, but way up in the sky,” Bastian told the others as they ran.

They gathered by the pond and continued their discussion.

“So can we count on this Tiger Prince to aid us?” Ratchis asked the Bastite.

“Well...” Roland took a long time before continuing. He sat down and his panther tail flicked back and forth nervously. He looked at everyone. “I really am not sure that this prince will help, but I have hope that I can convince him to do so. I hope that your assessment of my judgment has led you to trust my instinct...”

“Heh. Based on your past displays of judgment, we should return to Hurgun’s Maze immediately,” Kazrack replied.

“Kazrack! That was petty,” Roland complained.

“The truth is never petty,” Kazrack said. “I will say it again. We should return to Hurgun’s Maze immediately.”

“And there you go again,” Roland replied. He sat up, still in panther-form, and the black velvet fur on his back bristled.

“Is there a point to your blathering?” Kazrack replied. “Can you give us a real and sufficient reason to believe we should go wandering some bestial landscape to find some tiger-king...?”

“Tiger-Prince,” Roland snapped. “There is no monarch here but Bast.”

Kazrack shrugged his indifference.

“I must say that I believe that wandering a plane is folly,” Sergio Fontane interjected, rubbing the back of his neck. “And the demoness is a pale shadow of what we might meet here. If you decide to go find this Tiger-Prince, I will be returning to the Maze alone.”

“And it still stands that we cannot give the demoness six days, if not more, to get her hands on the power of the Maze,” Kazrack said.

“We will die if we face that demon again,” Bastian joined the discussion quietly. “Perhaps it is worth the risk to take these six days out of our way.”

“It will likely be more than six days,” Kazrack said, getting heated.

“We know where you stand, Kazrack...” Roland began.

“And we know where you stand,” Kazrack interrupted. “You would have taken it upon yourself to abandon us in the Maze and undertake this folly on your own if we had not come here to convince you to come back. I still think we might have been better served to just leave you here if that is what you really want.”

“That is enough!” Roland roared.

“No, it is not enough!” the dwarf replied. “You are a selfish and foolish man that thinks of naught but himself, and...”

“Kazrack! Be silent!”

“No! I will not be ordered about by the likes of you!” the dwarf spat.

There was the cry of bird unseen way above them that echoed the growing volume of their argument.

“Birds! Friggin’ wolves! I thought this was cat-land?” Gunthar swore. The Neergaardian was sitting on a stump and had the *Left Blade of Arofel* across his lap.

Bastian walked over to Martin who was sitting by the edge of the pond with his back to the others.

“How are you feeling?” the bearded warrior asked the watch-mage.

“Like strangling my companions,” Martin replied dryly, but he slapped his hands on the ground and standing, turned to Roland. “Can you at least give a guess of how likely the Tiger-Prince is to help us? And how dangerous the journey to see him will be?” The watch-mage instinctively held his right hand to his face to cover his disfigurement.

“As for the likelihood of aid, with no hubris I can say that the likelihood is based on my ability to convince him and display my faith and dedication to Bast, and thus, I have no doubt,” Roland replied. “As for the journey... Well, of that I am less certain. Chochikpi said we would have to pass through a place called the ‘Valley of Suffering Hunters’... Oh, and another place he referred to ‘the Realm of the Charging Beasts’.”

“Kazrack,” Martin turned to the dwarven priest. “I suggest you cast the stones.”

“I will certainly try, but I fear that so far from my gods in the realm of other gods the patterns in the runes may not come as clearly,” Kazrack said.

“Part of me feels that I should not be so prideful to I assume that only *we* can solve the problem of the Maze. Perhaps such puzzles require us to admit our shortcomings and seek out this help,” Ratchis said. “But at the same time, the risks involved in going after this possible aid has me doubting...”

“It seems perfectly clear to me,” Kazrack said. “Pure reason alone is enough to show we should return and not seek out this tiger-man.”

Roland snarled.

“Kazrack... Please go throw the stones,” Martin pleaded.

The dwarf nodded and walked off to consult his gods in private. Ratchis walked over to stand guard over his friend while still keeping his distance. Sergio and Gunthar were sharing swigs from a flask.

“Martin? Are you really willing to risk being killed by Osiris’ *geas* to go find this aid?” Bastian asked.

“I am not as important as what needs to be done,” Martin the Green replied.

“But aren’t you afraid that as you are weakened by the *geas* you will be more likely to succumb to the influence of the Corruptor’s book?”

“Uh...”

There was a long heavy silence.

Martin shrugged. “I’m going to die either way.”

After a time, Kazrack and Ratchis returned.

“I think the gods are telling us that this aside will be unnecessary and risky journey,” Kazrack began.

Roland opened his mouth to speak.

“But let me recite the words of my gods as exactly as I can, so you all might judge for yourselves,” Kazrack continued. “*The capricious nature of beasts will delay and frustrate even the most patient dwarf, and ironically, may even kill a man despite his beastly nature.*”

“Well, then... Who wants to go into the pond first?” Roland said, stalking off towards the water.

“Well, that settles that...” Ratchis said, and followed.

The Friar of Nephthys was sent first with a rope tied around his waist. He felt the slightest resistance as he passed through the portal of blue light, but relaxed and passed through. He re-appeared in the Light Room, but the rope was cut off. Kazrack who was following behind holding on to the rope passed right through the portal, unwilling or unable to relax enough to pass through.⁸⁹ Worried that something might have happened to him Roland leapt in and saw Kazrack lying in the muck below, frantically stirring up the bottom of the pond trying to swim to the surface and clearly failing in his full plate armor.

Roland swam quickly to the top and told Martin what was happening.

“Gunthar, you have to go help Kazrack!” Martin said to the Neergaardian.

“Uh-uh, Ratchis told me to stay in the back,” Gunthar winked, but he sat down in the grass and began to take off his boots.

“Were you planning on leaving your boots here?” Martin asked, clearly disgusted with Gunthar’s delay.

Gunthar stopped and looked up at the watch-mage. “No, but I’m not going through the damned portal now, am I? I’m going trolling for a dwarf... Not that I haven’t done that before, if you know what I mean...” He winked.

“I mean, don’t you think you should hurry?”

“He’s got time,” Gunthar went back to his boots. “He’s got strong dwarven lungs. I’m sure if you asked him, he’d tell you that himself.”

Sergio chuckled, and Roland would have certainly found it funny as well, but he dove back down into the pond and this time through the portal to leap out of the wooden frame behind the screen in the Light Room. However, at that same moment, Ratchis, concerned that no one had come through behind him, cut himself again and paid the price of blood to go back through the frame.

The half-orc broke the surface of the pond. Gunthar was pulling off his chain shirt and was about to leap in.

“Kazrack is drowning at the bottom of the pond!” Martin said. Ratchis leapt back in and Gunthar followed him.

It took some time before everyone was coughing and sputtering back in the Light Room. Martin activated the *Wurfel Kraft* as soon as everyone was through, and it was not a moment too soon, as the pink and green tentacles came through the wall to slam against the side of it.

A few moments later, when the blue cubic field of light dissipated near the center of the Light Room, the Keepers of the Gate fell to arguing again. Gunthar walked away from the others and began to examine the beams of light that

⁸⁹ **DM’s Note:** In order to pass through they had to fail a DC 6 Will save, or willingly fail the save.

acted as bars to protect the golden book upon the pedestal within. Sergio joined him and the two began to discuss how they might be circumvented.

“Purely theoretically,” Sergio said, wagging his eyebrows.

Gunthar sneered.

The debate on what to do next sputtered when Martin announced it was pointless to argue until after he used the *analyze portal* spell he had prepared, and they could see where the portals led.

“I also plan to take more time looking at each portal that I might actually get a view of what lies beyond,” he explained.

Martin cast his spell and soon was walking around to look at each portal. “Hell,” he said pointing to the portal near where the worm-like tentacles had emerged from the wall. Across from it was the way into the Air Room where the guest quarters and cloud rooms were. The portal back the way they came now led to somewhere Martin called the ‘Control Room’ and the portal opposite it led back to the Entrance room with its para-elemental guardians.⁹⁰

Martin covered his eyes with his left hand and concentrated at the portal leading to the Control Room. Beyond was a room that he guessed was the same size as all the other chambers they had passed through, and much like the Light Room, it was brightly illuminated, but with blue-white light. There were broad metal steps leading up to a catwalk made of metal grates, which created a cross that hung over a misty chasm. The actual floor of the room was obscured in blue and white roiling mist. The center of the room was obscured by a similar mist within which was a blue twirling light sparking with a myriad of tiny lights along its incorporeal tubular surface. A dark-skinned figure hovered above a throne like chair in the room’s center platform.

“What do you see?” asked Roland. Martin waved the Bastite away and hurried over to the portal that he had determined led to the Air Room, and again he extended his visual senses through it. The room appeared empty, the cloud rooms floating lazily across the ceiling.

As the watch-mage described what he had seen to the others, Ratchis, Kazrack and Roland doled out the healing favors of their gods to the group.

“Could the ‘control room’ be the Modron Station?” Ratchis asked.

“I saw no machinery,” Martin replied. “I don’t think so.”

“The Modron Station must be like the works for the Maze, this is the *Control* Room; that figure must be Hurgun,” Roland said, shaking his head. He had transformed back into his normal human shape.

“And the swirling blue light must be the time elemental,” Bastian said.

“So does what you saw suggest a course of action?” Kazrack asked.

“Don’t touch the blue light?” Martin shrugged his shoulders.

“We’re supposed to fix the Modron Station,” Ratchis said. “Maybe we should not go into the Control Room yet.”

“We don’t know the way to the Modron Station,” Martin said. “And this might give us a chance to determine what we are dealing with.”

The others agreed and a moment later they were passing through the portal into the Control Room, one at a time.

⁹⁰ See Sessions #92 & 93.

Bastian saw Gunthar hang back and toss a copper coin through the bars of light that warded the golden book in the center of the Light Room. There was flash of light as the coin struck one of the bars and then the thing was gone...

The Control Room had a palpable cold, as if mountain water snaked invisibly in narrow rivulets in the air. The Keepers of the Gate gathered on the metal steps up to the catwalk before them and could look down through the grating at the swirling mist fifteen feet below. There was no way to tell how deep the room went.

At the center of the crossed fifteen-foot-wide catwalks was a square metal platform another five feet up. It held a silvery metal obelisk about six inches to a side at the base and each just less than four feet tall. In the center was a metal throne-like chair on revolving disk, but no one sat on it. Instead hovering five feet above it was a man with his arms akimbo and his head slightly tilted back. He was stripped bare from the waist up and had broad shoulders and well-muscled arms. He had rich brown skin and his head and face were hairless, not even eyebrows. His eyes were closed. He was close to six and half feet tall.

"It is Hurgun of the Stone," Martin whispered to the others.

Around Hurgun the swirl of blue tubular light spun, expanding and contracting at seemingly random pulses, sometimes reaching out as far as fifteen feet from the center platform.

Suddenly they noticed a murmur as if of voices on a wind swelling and ebbing beneath them in the mist. The time elemental sparkled and pulsed and then some of the voices became clearer.

"*No Kazrack, go to the lifeboats,*" they heard a woman's deep voice over the rain and wind of a storm, and the muffled cries of a frantic ship's crew. "I'll be right behind you!"

Kazrack's mouth opened in awe and consternation. He peered over the edge of the platform and tugged on his beard worriedly. He then turned to Martin. "What does it mean?"

"I..." Martin began, but suddenly the sound of young laughter wafted up from the mists below. "*Martin wet his bed! Ha! Ha!*"

"*Are you sure we should hole up in here, Roland?*" came a different, only slightly different voice.

"*Yesh... Mmmm... Delicious!*" came another voice, this one was sibilant.

"Whatever is in here is responding to our presence," Martin finally said, as another woman's voice was shrieking, "*Gwar! Gwar! I am so sorry! Love you; do you understand love? I love YOU!*"

"If there is nothing we can do here until we have repaired the Modron Station, let us leave," Ratchis said.

"*Gunthar! You worthless little shit!*" came a shrill slurring voice followed by a sound like an echoing smack. "*Get the hell out of here before I sell you to the Jackal-Ghouls!*"⁹¹

"Martin, can you check the portals out of here at least?" Roland asked. "What if one leads to the Modron Station?"

The watch-mage nodded and cast his spell. The portal across from the one they came through led to the somewhere called the Storage Room. The portal on the left led to the Dining Room. The one on the right led to the Dark Room, and the one they had come through was now leading to the Air Room. The Keepers of the Gate went back through the portal into the guest quarters.

Martin hurried ahead to get a look at the portals out of this chamber before his spells' duration expired. From left to

⁹¹ 'Jackal-Ghoul' is a common nickname for Monks of Anubis.

right they led to the Light Room, the Earth Room (which was the Audience Chamber) and the 'Chambers'.

"Do you think the modrons will attack us if we run across any as we explore the Maze?" Roland asked.

"Probably," Ratchis replied.

"Modrons are the least of our worries," Martin the Green said, uncharacteristically.

"Lady Aureliana? Are you still here?" Ratchis called out.

Lady Aureliana came floating down out of one of the rooms. Her sea-blue hair looked ruffled as if she had just woken up from a deep sleep, and her white gossamer gown hung off her bare shoulders. Her insect-wings buzzed as she landed.

"Oh? Are you back?" she asked in her high-pitch, but mellifluous voice. "I fear terrible things have been happening in the Maze..."

"What have you seen or heard?" Ratchis asked.

"Modrons moving through the room in a state of alert, many of them were wounded," she replied, looking right at Ratchis. He noted how she no longer seemed to tense up nervously and look away when she addressed him. "Where did you come from?" she asked.

"The Control Room," Kazrack replied, and then turned to his friends. "I still think we should go back in there and experiment a bit and see more about the nature of the time elemental. We do not know where the Modron Station is, but we know where this room is... At least until the rooms begin to move again. We have no time."

"Oh yes, I agree," said Lady Aureliana. "If you have discovered something so important, to abandon it in hopes of finding something else might be foolish. Remember, I was lost in this Maze for a time and only made my way back here quite by accident. I will come with you to this Control Room and give what aid I can."

Ratchis frowned. "Why have you changed your mind?" He asked the sylph.

"Changed my mind?"

"Before you did not want to leave here," the half-orc replied.

"Before you were not sure where you were going, but now there is a more definite goal," Lady Aureliana reasoned, as she brushed a lock of her wispy hair behind her pointed ears.

"It is futile to tamper with it until the Modron Station is repaired," Martin insisted. "Has Gilbert returned?"

"I have not seen Gilbert."

"She is lying," Ratchis whispered to Martin in orcish, moving to one side with the watch-mage.⁹²

"But what can we do?" Martin whispered back, his inflection might have been humorous to Ratchis under different circumstances.

"You know, I am not sure of Aquerra, but where I come from whispering like that is not polite," Lady Aureliana admonished them with a smile.

⁹² Ratchis taught Martin some basic orcish while the watch-mage taught Ratchis some basic reading on the trips to and from Nikar and while they were in that town.

“They have no manners,” Roland responded. “But if you’ll excuse me, I left some of my things in one of the rooms and need to collect them. The Bastite willed himself to enter one of the floating rooms.

Ratchis flashed Kazrack a look of warning and the dwarf frowned.

“Tell me, Lady Aureliana,” the dwarf said. “How did you like the gift I gave you before?”⁹³

The sylph paused and furrowed her brow. “Gift? What gift was that?”

“You do not remember?” Kazrack asked.

“Kazrack...” Ratchis began, but the dwarf raised a hand.

“I find it interesting that you suddenly want to go exploring the Maze when before you did not want to,” Kazrack said to the sylph.

“Yes, your orcish companion said as much,” she replied. “If you do not wish to accompany me, I am willing to go alone.”

“You see, that is even odder,” Kazrack said. He stepped before the portal. “I am afraid I will not be able to allow you to go the Control Room, either with us or without us.”

“Kazrack...” Ratchis began again.

“You folk of the earth are so strange,” Lady Aureliana said. “But I *suggest* that you and your companions are better off letting us each try to do what we can in the Maze without interfering in each other’s goals.”

Kazrack shook his head.

Roland came back out of the cloud room looking pale. He held something in his arms and turned his back to the others to show it to Martin the Green. It was the twisted and broken corpse of Lady Aureliana’s pseudo-dragon companion.

Ratchis noticed it out of the corner of his eye.

“Martin! Can we possible let her through?” Ratchis asked in orcish again. “We cannot allow her into the Control Room. We must stop her here or die trying!”

The half-orc reeled as he heard Ora-Amira-El’s laughing voice in his head. “I can hear your every thought, worm!”

Lady Aureliana began to laugh as her form changed. She grew to a great height and another set of muscular arms stretched out of her expanding torso, revealing two-sets of veiny breasts. “Fine. You want to choose to face me here and now? At least I will get the pleasure of watching you kill another of your friends, Kazrack.”

Ora-Amira-El opened her mouth and letting her long-pointed stud-pierced tongue roll out as she shook her head back and forth, and spat forth a stream of red and black fire. Gunthar leapt out of the way, avoiding the flame, but Kazrack cried out and had to smack the at flames out as they roasted him in his armor and threatened to singe his beard.

Ratchis leapt at the demon, great sword in hand, but she laughingly smacked him away and the blade could not even touch her.

⁹³ **DM’s Note:** Suspecting that Lady Aureliana was not who she appeared to be, Kazrack was trying to bluff her into revealing it; rather ineptly.

“*Invisus Maiore!*” Martin the Green cast his spell and *invisibility* covered Kazrack as the dwarf called to his gods to surround him a *circle of protection against evil*. Roland’s voice joined the clamor of prayers as he *blessed* the group, and a song was on Sergio’s lips, and suddenly Ratchis, Kazrack, Bastian and Gunthar were moving with greater speed.⁹⁴

Bastian swung his warhammer at the demoness as he dove in at her, but then pulled away as she turned her gaze to him.

“My love? How could you?” She laughed, licking the corner of her black mouth. She stopped and placed her lower right hand on her hip and leaned back a bit in a casual display. “Well, you can start running now. I always find that part so much fun.”

“*Invisus Maiore!*” Martin chanted again, and this time Ratchis disappeared.

Kazrack stepped back near the portal that led to the Control Room (or at least, had led from the Control Room when they stepped through from there), calling to the others to stand by him and block the way.

“She seems to have taken a liking to you, Bastian,” Sergio said, tugging on the warrior’s arm. “I hope that you will use that to defend me to the best of your ability.”

“Uh, sure,” Bastian replied, puzzled.

As the others backed into the invisible dwarf’s general area, the demoness continued to hang back as well, sucking on a finger playfully.

“Oh, Roland, I think something that must certainly be retrieved right away if you hope to fulfill your quest lies through that portal over there,” she pointed to the portal that Martin had declared as going to ‘Chambers’.⁹⁵

“Not bloody likely, harpy,” Roland replied.

Suspicious of Sergio’s words to Bastian, Ratchis cast *detect charm* and could see the aura of an enchantment on the human warrior. The curly haired bard stepped behind his would-be protector, bumping into the invisible half-orc, and a moment later, when everyone was crammed into the same general area Martin drew out *the Wurfel Craft* and pressed down on the side of the cube that depicted a garden gate. Suddenly, they were protected by the blue cubic field of light.

“It’s going to be a waiting game is it?” Ora-Amira-El traced the circumference of one of her pustulant black nipples with one her claws, drawing the slightest bit of blood as she pouted her lips. “I have all the time in the world. How about you?” She blew them a kiss with another of her four hands.

Sergio Fontane yelped as he felt the still *invisible* Ratchis yoke him from behind. The skinny bard was pressed under the half-orc’s arm pit and no amount of wiggling was getting him out.

“Get your filthy paws off of me!” Sergio complained. “There is no time for this! Can’t you see the demoness is right here?”

“Release Bastian,” was Ratchis’ reply.

“Ratchis! Put him down. Come now. This is not the time,” Bastian reasoned.

“Yes, listen to him,” Sergio managed to choke out. “Bastian! Restrain your companion!”

⁹⁴ *Haste*

⁹⁵ *Suggestion*

“Release him now,” Ratchis squeezed again.

“Sergio, we do not have time to deal with her *and* you,” Roland said. “Release Bastian and we can see our way clear of giving you the benefit of the doubt regarding your actions.”

“The spell is gone!” Sergio croaked. Roland confirmed this with a spell and Ratchis let the bard go. “Savages!” the fop added.

Meanwhile, Kazrack and Martin had been sharing whispers as Ora-Amira-El climbed up atop the *cube of force*. She straddled one corner and Kazrack shuddered as he looked up into her festering demonic substitute for womanhood, and then looked away.

“You know, my son Mozek deserved to die if he could not defeat such a sorry lot as you,” the demoness said. “He always thought he could play with the big boys, but he was so wrong. But oh, did those gnome-boys know how to pleasure their mamma...”

Even Gunthar shuddered at that one.

“Everyone be ready to act when I speak,” Kazrack cryptically announced. He turned to the watch-mage. “Martin be ready to do what we discussed.”

“Oh no!” the demoness feigned worry and leapt back off the cube to spin around and face them. She had two hands on her hips and two at her cheeks in mock anxiety. “Is something going to happen? Are you going to pull off some brilliant plan to defeat me?”

“Now!” Kazrack said, and Martin the Green pressed the side of the stone cube that depicted the sundial. He then walked towards the black portal and the blue cubic force field moved into the stone wall around it, allowing them access, but still blocking the portal from the outside.

Roland hurried through first, followed by Sergio and Kazrack. The dwarf cursed that it should have been him who went through first. Gunthar and Bastian went next and finally Ratchis passed through with Martin right behind him.

The Keepers of the Gate were back in the Control Room. The cold air whipped about them. The blue cube of light pushed against those who had already come through as they were outside of it; only Ratchis and Martin were within. Martin deactivated the cube, and everyone turned to watch the portal they had just come through, certain Ora-Amira-El would be coming through any moment; but she did not.

After a few moments they began to relax, though Ratchis would not take his eyes from the portal.

“Look!” Roland called, and his voice carried across the gulf of blue mist below them, seeming to reverberate against grated metal catwalk.

In the center of the chamber, Hurgun of the Stone still hovered, unmoving, surrounded by the spiral of blue white energy. However, there was now a second figure orbiting the paralyzed geomancer. It was a great ape frozen mid-leap with its huge hands balled together over the exposed multi-hued brain of its head as if to strike down on Hurgun of the Stone. But now he just went round and round very slowly, like a fly caught in the paper that was the time elemental. It was Ming the Dakkon King.⁹⁶ Every few moments the gorilla’s very essence seemed to wink in and out as the whole spiral pulsed.

“I guess he didn’t make it through, huh?” Bastian said.

“Do you think the demoness could succeed where he failed?” Roland asked.

⁹⁶ See Session #93

“Let’s hope not,” Ratchis said, from where he and Kazrack stood ready to push back anyone who came through the portal. He was certain the demoness would come through any moment. “But if she can’t, can we expect to?”

“We have a different goal,” Martin replied. “Fixing the Modron Station. Maybe then we won’t have to deal with whatever that is... Though, I am curious... Bastian, could you summon some kind of fiendish creature, something whose welfare we don’t have to concern ourselves with and sent it in there? We see the ape frozen there, but I would like to see how it happens...”

Bastian agreed. Ratchis grunted disapproval but did not move to stop them.

The warlock warrior began to chant and trace his circle in the air, but in the end the spell failed.

“Yeah, I thought that might happen,” Martin commented. “When the *dismissal* didn’t work, I thought summoning might not either; now we know.”⁹⁷

The Keepers of the Gate waited there for a time. The durations of their spells began to expire and as voices and other sounds began floating up to them from the mist below once again, they once again fell to arguing about what to do next.

End of Session #96

AQUERRA

⁹⁷ See Session #94.

Session #97

“Change out some spells and prepare more of *analyze portals*,” Ratchis said to Martin the Green.

“It will take most of an hour,” Martin replied.

“I don’t think we can leave until we know where we are going,” Ratchis said. “We have waited here a long time, I am sure the portal has changed since we have been in here; especially if you consider the time we spent in the Air Room.”

Kazrack nodded his agreement, staring down at the mists below them. The mists below the grated platform they stood on swirled in tight circles that waved up and down vertiginously.

“Are we going to just stand around here all day?” Gunthar complained, as Martin sat on the cold grate to begin changing his spells.

“Martin, do you know which spell you have to cast in the Modron Station?” Ratchis asked.

“No... Not yet,” Martin replied, annoyed. He waved the half-orc off and buried his nose in his spell book.

Sometime later, the watch-mage cast his spell and announced that the portal they had come through now led to the Light Room, where the gates to the Beastlands, the Heavens and Anubis’ Realm were.

“You know we had to go this way no matter what,” Martin complained. “I doubt we could have made it across to the other portals leading out of here without risking disturbing the time elemental, and I don’t want to know what’d happen if someone fell down into those mists.”

“At least now we know where we are going,” Ratchis replied, and he led the way into the Light Room. The others followed. Martin the Green immediately hurried to the center of the room, was able to use the last moments of the *Analyze Portal* spell to look at the other portals. “Entrance. Dining Room. Earth Room. Modron Station!” the watch-mage pointed to the way behind one of the screens where a painting hung. He concentrated his vision to look through the portal, but found his view was blocked by a thick red velvet curtain that cordoned off a small ten foot by ten-foot area just beyond the portal.

The Keepers of Gate took some time to cast many defensive spells on each other, and Ratchis, Kazrack and Martin spread out some *Bull’s Strength* and *Bear’s Endurance*. They then passed through the gate, Roland leading the way in panther-form, cramming into the tiny curtained off section beyond.

There was a cacophony of mechanical sounds coming from beyond the curtain. There was hissing and clanking and loud explosive sounds like farts followed by arrhythmic clicking. There was a smell on the air like a mix of methane and grease, and the ceiling visible above the curtained area was made of shiny ceramic tiles.

“It sounds like there are a great number of modrons out there,” Martin whispered to the others.

“Perhaps you can use your spell of *invisibility* on someone to go have a look,” Kazrack suggested. “I am not sure what the best course of action is if we run into more hostile modrons.”

“It will only last one minute. I’d rather save it.” Martin replied, and then he turned to Roland. “How about you use your house cat form to slip under the curtain and have a quick look around?”

The Bastite did just that, his long and lithe blue-black panther-form melting down into a tiny black cat that batted at the curtain with a paw and then made his way through. He had only been gone a few moments when he came hurrying back.

“I saw no modrons,” Roland voice issued from the tiny feline. “There is some kind of wall of flesh. It is hard to

explain. It is like a great box with many different moving pieces, some of which are on bony legs. It is that thing that is making the sounds and smells. It is...uh, disgusting and disturbing..."

"Well, disgusting and disturbing doesn't bother me," Martin the Green replied, pulling the curtain aside to see for himself. "It is the fighting and the killing I don't like."

Behind the curtain the chamber was filled with a great machine that was difficult to comprehend. It seemed to be made of flesh of all colors and of a consistency similar to that of modrons, but it was a collection of tubes and sinews and pumping muscles and fissures that dilated when gas was forcibly expelled through them. There were bellows-like flaps of orange skin that rose and fell atop the thing, and in places it was propped up upon black bone-like legs that allowed for a crawl space beneath it. The whole machine wound about the room making it into a sort of maze with narrow walkways between it and the outer wall, and in some places with other sections of the machine.

"I... I... uh... I don't understand this thing," Ratchis said stepping out into the chamber, looking around in awe. "It seems like some kind living machine, right?"

"Yes," Martin replied. "It must be used to make or repair the modrons, but it is injured or is malfunctioning... Look!" The watch-mage pointed to a great gash in the side of the thing's fleshy side that bubbled with viscous oil-like red liquid, like greasy blood.

"What spell will you use to repair it?" Kazrack asked.

"I believe it is called '*Sculpt Flesh*'" Martin said. "It is what we call a gray necromantic spell.⁹⁸ It is only potentially corrupting depending on how it is used."

"So using it in this way will not be a corruptive influence?" Kazrack asked.

"Normally, I think not, but since I must use the Book of Black Circles to cast the spell, and the book has its own influence, as we have all seen before."

There was a sudden sound from the other side of the machine like something or someone painfully retching.

"Is this foul machine making that sound?" Sergio asked, covering his mouth with a kerchief. "I told you Hurgun was not to be trusted. I mean, look at this thing! Have you ever seen anything so foul?"

It was decided that Martin the Green, Roland (who was back in panther-form) and Ratchis would go assess the damage to the machine while the others waited near the portal they had come through. The three of them walked around the machine to the right seeing a portion of it that appeared like stretchable skin covered in fine peach fuzz covering narrow ribs that breathed in and out. They noticed one or two small tears in the skin there that Martin noted for when he would cast the spell.

As they came around another set of curtains that certainly covered another portal out of the chamber, they saw a conical portion of the machine like a shiny snail shell. There was another retching sound from behind them to left and a figure came crawling out from under that area of the machine. It looked like a man, but its skin was a blubbery gray and black, with drooping melted features, and though it was naked it had no genitalia. Its stubby fingers ended in black claws, and black bile dribbled over its triple chins. They looked like the dead things they had seen when first passing through the dining room. Gilbert had called them 'dretches'.⁹⁹

"Demon!" Ratchis warned, spinning around and raising his sword.

"Demons!" Martin corrected, seeing another of the things come out from around the conical end of the machine and another climbing around atop the skin covered ribs.

⁹⁸ In Aquerra necromantic magic is categorized as either 'white', 'gray' or 'black.'

⁹⁹ See Session #94

“Demons?” Where?!” Gunthar called out, tearing the curtain aside and stepping into the chamber with his swords drawn, looking around.

Kazrack hurried out past the Neergaardian and dove under a portion of the machine, crawling out to the other side to reach his companions. He stood just in time to see a fourth dretch leap from the shadows of the machine, as Ratchis tore one in half with one mighty blow of his great sword. It made a sound like an echoing belch and fell over to ooze black grease as its rubbery skin began to quickly dissolve.

One of the blubbery demons came around to get at Martin and Roland from the other side, so the watch-mage cast his *greater invisibility* on the Bastite. The demon responded by belching out a green noxious cloud at the two of them. However, both Martin and Roland were able to avoid the worse of it. Gunthar pulled himself up on to the machine to face the one up there, while another came out from under the machine to claw at Kazrack.

Roland, still *invisible*, leapt at the dretch near him and Martin, as the watch-mage took up a defensive posture as best he could. The demon was forced back to avoid being grappled but suffered deep and long scratches of the folds of its naked body.

Ratchis cut another down but was surprised as another appeared above him atop the machine to belch down another *stinking cloud*. The half-orc’s mighty lungs allowed him to resist the noxious vapors and hold his breath for a time.

Gunthar cut one down easily and then leapt atop the breathing ribbed area of the machine, stabbing the one that appeared above Ratchis. However, one of the thin ribs cracked beneath his boot.

Bastian had moved to join the fray, but the narrow ways around the machine thwarted him, while Sergio remained by the curtain singing an encouraging song but refraining from getting any closer to the fiends.

There was an ear-piercing screech as Kazrack drove his *fiendbane* halberd into one of the dretches and it fell to not rise again, quickly beginning to dissolve as the others had. Gunthar pushed the demon above down between Roland and Ratchis and they quickly finished it between the two of them.

The fight was over, and they all took a moment to catch their breaths as the strange machine continued to sputter and fart and cough and clatter.

The Keepers of the Gate walked the rest of the way around the machine, and Sergio hurried to join them, going on about how the dretches proved that Hurgun was up to no good and should not be trusted.

Around the conical shell-like corner of the machine they saw a red end of flesh striated with black that twisted into a huge puckered sphincter that hung over a space in the floor on the left. It was dripping yellow viscous fluid from a tear near the hole. Just beyond it was metal platform attached to the machine that was about six feet high. Steps curved up to it, and some kind of metal chute grafted onto the top of the machine was reached from up there.

“I think this is the beginning...” Martin pointed to the chute, and then to the sphincter. “And the end of the machine.”

There was a tridrone motionless and flat on its triangular bottom atop the platform. Another modron, this one a spherical monodrone, walked back and forth at the base of the stairs, clicking randomly.

The Keepers of the Gate spread out a bit to keep watch while Martin made a mental tally of the places that machine was broken and cut.

“Wish me luck,” the watch-mage said, as he walked up onto the platform and sat with his legs folded before him. He drew the great book from his pack, running his hand over the black oil skin bag. He took a deep breath and whispered a prayer. “Isis, guard my soul against the power I must now wield...”

Ratchis moved to the bottom of the steps and the monodrone clicked confusedly and took up its pacing nearby.

Hoping Kazrack's *protection from evil* might help lend him some aid as well, Martin drew out the black book from its slick second skin, feeling the deep grooves of the blackened skin that served as its cover. He cast the oilskin bag aside and lay the book on his lap, tracing the raised black concentric metal circles pressed into it.

"Show me the spell that will fix this modron machine," Martin the Green said aloud, taking his hand off the book. The cover opened of its own accord and the thick yellowed pages began to flip rapidly, stopping at a pair of pages filled with arcane sigils and formulas like none the watch-mage had ever seen. He looked it over for a moment, tracing with the tip of his finger without touching the actual page. The runes were traced in blood, and though it seemed long dried in most places, in some places the blood seemed to ooze fresh.

"*Alter Reality...*" Martin whispered, his lower lip shivering. For a moment he thought about how much more than this machine might be fixed, but he closed his eyes and spoke aloud again. "No. Show me the spell of sculpting flesh..."

The pages began to flip forward again, and then flipped back to a page with several detailed diagrams of rearranging facial features and closing wounds. It was the right spell, and Martin instinctively knew that these spells were permanent scrolls. He would be able to cast many times himself without their ever disappearing from the pages as long as he paid the price of the tome.

"*Mutatio Liquefactam Carnifactus!*" Martin chanted and stood, letting the book drop to the platform. He clutched his chest for a moment as there was the crackle of dark energies about him, and he felt his constitution weaken.¹⁰⁰

"Martin! Are you alright?" Ratchis put his foot upon the steps to start to climb, but the watch-mage stood straight up and held out his hand. Martin walked down the steps and Ratchis stepped out of his way. He reached out with hands and the flesh of the machine became like clay to his touch. He smoothed over a great gash in one spot and then walked over to do a smaller one where a tube-like connection of bony material wove in and out of the sides and top of it.

There were four places where he affected repairs. As he worked the flesh to carefully close the rents in the machine, he considered whether he'd have enough time to use the spell to fix his face. There was an insistent feeling that there was *plenty* of time, almost like a second voice in his head trying to reassure him. Suspicious, Martin finished the repairs anyway, and finally he turned to the others with his hand hanging over his own face.

"I think I may have time to..." He brought his finger closer to his face and then stopped. Less than a moment later, the spell's energy was gone.

"I was going to use the remaining power to fix my face," Martin said to the other sadly. The great festering crease ran from beneath his left eye, down past his mouth. He could feel bits of it liquefying and dripping as he talked. The side of his nose felt dry and cracked to the touch, like it might flake off in one great piece. "But then it seemed too easy... I mean, I shouldn't use the book's power for my own benefit, however small... It could... It could lead to a bad path. I didn't like that the Book was encouraging me to do it."

Kazrack walked over and reaching up patted his companion on the shoulder nodding wordlessly.

The great living machine shuddered for a moment and then all the strange sounds died down to be replaced by a hum that ran from one end of the machine to the other. Finally, it was quiet.

"Well, I think that should do it," Martin said, his shoulders sagging.

"Do what?" Kazrack asked. "I still am not sure what you accomplished."

¹⁰⁰ **DM's Note:** Martin suffered a permanent point of Constitution drain. However, he also realized in that moment that he need only pay that price once, later he might cast spells with greater costs paid by others, whether either by coercion, trickery, or threat.

The watch-mage pointed to the monodrone that was walking back and forth aimlessly, and then to the tridrone atop the platform. “We need to put those in the machine.” He then pointed to the chute by the platform. “And hope for the best.”

While Martin put the book away again, Ratchis hefted the tridrone over his head and dropped it into the chute. He noted it was missing one of its legs and two of its arms. There was a sound like a clunking shuffle. He then herded the spherical monodrone into the chute as well.

The machine began to hum and then there was a rhythmic churning that reverberated back and forth in the front part of it.

“And now we can move on and destroy the Book,” Martin said, turning to the others.

“Perhaps we should return to the Control Room,” Kazrack suggested.

“The Earth Room,” Ratchis disagreed. “The Audience Chamber. We need to gather the broken modrons and feed them to this thing.”

Bastian nodded.

End of Session #97

AQUERRA

Session #98 ¹⁰¹

“It is all about the modrons,” Bastian said. “They maintained this place, so if they were broken and the machine was broken and Hurgun was not around to fix the machine and thus fix them, then that explains why the Maze began to malfunction.”

“Makes sense...” Martin nodded. “So, we should wait and see what happens with the modrons we put in the machine before moving on.” ¹⁰²

Looking bored, Sergio drew a small file from his vest pocket and began to push back his cuticles with the tip of it.

The living machine was still throbbing and there was a collection of whooshes followed by a sound like a crank being turned at a high speed. It let out a blast of blue steam from one corner where some kind of kelp-like fins wavered back and forth in a tall box.

It was nearly twenty minutes later that the red and black sphinctered end of the machine began to gurgle and spurt as it stretched out to many times its normal size. Finally, a tridrone was squeezed out. It plopped down to the ceramic tiled floor and clicked twice and turned, seeming to take in the Keepers of the Gate.

“Modron Station repaired,” it announced in its cold flat voice, and it turned to make its way through a nearby curtain and through a portal to one of the other great chambers of Hurgun’s Maze.

“Martin, perhaps you should converse with it?” Kazrack suggested.

“Or...” Roland purred. “We can just follow it.”

“I agree with Roland,” the dwarf said.

“What a refreshing change!” Roland replied, and he took off through the curtain. The rest of the Keepers of the Gate hurried to follow. They appeared back in the Dining Room, which Gilbert had led them through the first time they went to the guest quarters. ¹⁰³

There were several round tables surround by chairs, and two long rectangular tables, one a third longer than the other. There was a cloth screen on a track that could be pulled to divide the great chamber into smaller, more intimate eating situations. In the top right-hand corner was a raised area with one smaller round table with three chairs. The walls were lined with long low cabinets that held silverware and dishware of many different styles and cultures. The lacquer of the wood paneled walls shone in the light of the crystal and silver chandeliers that hung low over the long tables. Gold lanterns and tapestries decorated the raised area.

However, the tables were cracked, and many chairs were smashed and cast aside. Two injured tridrones were fighting three of the blubbery dretches. There was a monodrone lying motionless on its side, and another trailing its pus-like ichor behind it, as it dragged its legless body with its arms. Occasionally, it would lose its grip and roll over helplessly, and have to steady itself before continuing.

Kazrack ran right into their midst, impaling one of the quivering gray and black fiends on his magical halberd and flinging it across the room, sending cracked plates and loose silverware to skitter the marble floor. It did not get back up.

Meanwhile, the other two turned away from their modron foes and charged at Ratchis, who hurried to meet them sword in hand. He knocked one back with a mighty blow, sending it flying into a group of wooden chairs. Bastian hurried in to flank the other, while Gunthar moved to cut down the one Ratchis had sent flying. A swift flick of his

¹⁰¹ This session was played on Saturday, September 10th, 2005.

¹⁰² See Session #97

¹⁰³ See Session #94

swords and the remaining dretch's head was flying across the room to land atop a table with a disgusting pop.

The tridrone they had been following disappeared through the portal on the right.

They decided to gather up the dead and wounded modrons and bring them back to the Modron Station and feed them to the machine.

"The Modron Station is repaired," Ratchis told one, and it did not need persuasion to make its way in that direction. Back in the Modron Station, after the two tridrones climbed in themselves, Ratchis and Kazrack fed the machine the dead modrons one at a time (and the torn limbs they had also collected) waiting a full minute between each. The machine began to hum and throb once more.

"If we hurry, we may still be able to find that first fixed tridrone," Martin said, and do the Keepers of the Gate, hurried back through the portal into the Dining Room, and then stepped through the portal they had seen the repaired modron step through.

"Outsider! Fiend! Intruder! Outsider! Fiend! Intruder!" They heard the cold voice of many modrons saying the words over and over sometimes in unison, but occasionally in a disturbing dissonance as some ended abruptly. They were back in the Audience Chamber, also known as the Earth Room, beneath the carved stone tiered seats that made up the majority of the room. Shuffling and honking echoed around the chamber, and above it all was the voice of Ora-Amira-El shrieking with anger. "Tell me! Tell me!" she was saying. This was followed by the sounds tearing flesh and crunching bone.

They had come through on the left side of the balcony, the gate out to the central area of the chamber was open, as were the gates that lead led up into the seats.

"Lords and Lady, protect me from the evil of this demoness, and all else that might fall short of your judgment, and protect my companions, so long as they remain close to me," Kazrack intoned quietly, casting his spell. He moved to the edge of the open gate, and Roland was close on his heels, still in panther-form. They could see the four-armed quadruple breasted demoness squeezing the ten-eyed decaton in her arms atop the balcony.

"I don't think we're ready for this," Roland growled, but followed with a spell calling to Bast to grant him a *shield of faith*. The tiers were strewn with modrons, lying motionless and oozing their yellow pus blood, but others were gathered fearfully in corners, or moving in pointless circles, spinning uselessly, or dashing about chaotically, some whirring arhythmically.

Ratchis moved up to join Roland and Kazrack, casting *divine favor* on himself. "Kazrack, do you see any reason to fight now, or should we flee?" He stepped to the opposite side of the gate, craning his neck to look up at the fight. Bastian joined him. Martin moved up as well, casting *mage armor* on himself. Gunthar actually stepped out into the chamber, drawing both swords and putting his back to the wall.

The decaton spun and managed to break free of Ora-Amira-El's grip and floated across to the lowest tier across from where the party stood. A pentadron came blasting up to the balcony, spinning its five limbs, while expelling gas from beneath it to keep itself aloft. The demoness laughed and tore into the thing, sending it collapsing back down to the audience chamber floor. She looked down and noticed the Keepers of the Gate.

"Why if it isn't my favorite killer and his band of pathetic friends," she greeted, waving cheerfully with her lower right hand. "Do you have a preference as to which of them you'd like to kill this time?" Martin felt a presence try to push its way into his mind, but he fought it off, unsure what it was.¹⁰⁴

"Bastian, Gunthar, stay close to me so your weak minds won't be vulnerable to her evil control," Kazrack said.

Ora-Amira-El moved to leap off the balcony and down to the ground level, but slammed into some invisible barrier

¹⁰⁴ **DM's Note:** Martin had to make a will save (DC 16).

and fell back without grace.

Gunthar laughed and Kazrack joined him.

“Heal the decaton if you can,” Martin announced to the party’s priests. “The *wall of force* must be its doing. It may be the only one who can stand up to her...” And with that he cast his *alter self* spell and his features melted and stretched and, in a moment, he was back in his winged half-draconic lizardfolk form.

Roland leapt up deftly to the decaton, it turned to look at the Bastite, and its eyes were red and bulging in its globe-like head “She’s contained! Let’s just get out of here while we can!” Roland suggested as he nuzzled against the chief modron to heal it some with a *cure moderate wounds* spell.

“Scaredy cat!” Gunthar laughed at Roland.

The decaton made a buzzing sound that swelled into a pained bleat but seemed unable to speak.

“Modron Station is repaired,” a tridrone announced from the corner of the tiered seats. It was likely the same one they had been following, but who could tell them apart?

Ratchis and Kazrack ran towards the tunnel beneath the opposite tiers, but while the half-orc hurried to turn up the narrow steps up to the tiers on that side, the dwarf stopped to guard the passage and see if he could get a glimpse of the demoness.

Martin the Green hurried to follow the decaton as well. He flapped the stubby wings of his new form and landed next to it. The decaton turned its great spherical head and acknowledged the watch-mage with first one eye and then another, and then still another. Martin felt something push at his mind once again, and this time he let down his defenses.

“You are Martin the Green. You are the Keepers of the Gate. You should be in the guest quarters. You... You... Whirrr... Danger is loose in the Maze,” Martin heard the polytonal voice of the decaton in his mind, as the strange creature made a strange clicking humming sound.

“Great Decaton of Ptah! We have repaired the Modron Station and wish to aid you in expelling this fiend before it can take control of the Maze,” Martin replied. “Master Gilbert is missing once again. Tell us what we might do to aid you.”

“Repairs to the Modron Station. Self-diagnostic reveals motor and... Whirr-click-whirr. . . troubles,” the decaton said. “Gather my charges so that they may be returned to the Modron Station and re-assimilated. We serve Hurgun of the Stone. Not Ptah.”

Gunthar and Bastian followed after Ratchis, while Kazrack waited below not sure which was the best way to go.

Above on the balcony, another pentadrone had made its way to Ora-Amira-El, but its blows could not break through her fiendish defenses.

Martin floated back down to the ground level and called out to his companions. “It wants us to help it collect the modrons!” He cast *bull’s strength* upon himself and began to drag a corpse away. “It seems to be damaged as well.”

Ratchis appeared among the tiers and Kazrack called up to him. “Throw some down and we can start moving them out!” Kazrack ran over to a spot below Ratchis, while Bastian and Roland hurried over to support him.

Martin felt another force come into his mind, and this one he could not resist if he wanted. Ora-Amira-El’s voice came echoing into his mind. “Do you think your pitiable alliance with that freak will help you? I will track each of you down and I will kill you all and each of these stupid creatures!”

The decaton kicked one of the dead modrons up on the tiers down to the lower level beside Kazrack and the dwarf was startled.

“Everyone beside Martin and Roland start collecting these things,” Ratchis said, lowering a monodrone to Kazrack. “Martin and Roland, watch our backs!”

Soon Bastian and Gunthar were up there as well, kicking dead and dying modrons off the tiers to bounce down around Kazrack. Sometimes the creatures would get caught on the edge of one of the tiers, forcing the adventurers to run down to dislodge it, throwing it the rest of the way.

Sergio had climbed up to the tiers on the side the party had entered from and began to push modrons down as well, cautiously looking over at the balcony where the demoness slammed the invisible wall with all four of her fists.

She laughed from the behind the invisible wall and ceased her effort to free herself. Martin flew across to the other side of the chamber to push a duodrone down to the bottom level.

Roland (who leapt back down) and Kazrack began dragging piles of the modrons in the direction they had entered from.

“Gunthar! You should come down here and help me,” Kazrack called. “She may attempt to control your mind and thus should be near me so my gods can protect you... for they are... merciful, even to such as you.”

Gunthar spat. “Why don’t you wear a leash so I can hold you by it, Stumpy? Then you’d never be too far away!” He laughed and chucked a monodrone over the side and then leapt after it.

“The *wall of force* will only hold for one minute more,” the decaton told Martin. “Bring those collected to the Modron Station. We shall attempt to bind her once again.”

Martin relayed this to the others, and everyone hurried down to the bottom level to make piles of modrons to push out of the chamber. Ratchis laid his great hyenadon skin down and rolled several onto it, including a quadrone he had found shredded in one corner.

“He said the cubes are the most important ones to grab,” Martin continued to relay. “And then the pyramids and then the flat ones. The round ones are least important. We need the greatest number of integers re-assimilated.”

“What does that mean?” Roland asked.

“They are based on a rigid hierarchy of operations,” Martin began. “The more complex their shape the more total energy of the collective they represent...”

“Enough! It’s gibberish! I’m sorry I asked,” Roland responded. He had changed back into human form to more easily manipulate the many modrons.

Martin took flight again to get a glimpse of Ora-Amira-El up on the balcony. “Drat! I don’t know if she is invisible or went back down into the hall below the balcony, but she is not to be seen.”

“Be wary!” Kazrack said, continuing to drag modrons towards the portal back to the Dining Room. The others followed him. Bastian and Roland were dragging the skin holding five modrons, while Ratchis had a monodrone under one arm and dragged a tridrone behind him.

Soon, the Keepers of the Gate (along with Sergio, of course) had made it back through the Dining Room and were back in Modron Station. The decaton remained behind. Two other damaged tridrones were here, moving to throw themselves down the machine chute, and soon Ratchis was chucking in the ones they had dragged into the chamber. The machine was humming and throbbing and squelching and farting, as it broke down and reworked the modrons to squeeze out more.

Three came out in quick succession and announced they would be exploring the Maze in “retrieval mode” to bring more modrons to be repaired. Two walked out through the portal nearest the platform, while the other walked all the way around left by the opposite one.

There were still many modrons to be fed to the machine when Ora-Amira-El stepped through the portal the two tridrones had just stepped out of.

“Hello, Martin!” Ora-Amira-El smiled, showing her pointed teeth behind her full red lips. She tore the curtain aside and stepped towards the watch-mage. “Come here, sweetie, and give us a kiss.” She opened her arms, and Martin the Green felt magic wash over him, but he was able to shake it off and stepped away a thin shriek of fear issuing from his lips.

“I do not like the sound of that voice. Let me drown it out!” Sergio said, from under the platform. He lifted his voice in an encouraging song to boost the band’s morale.

Bastian, rectangular duodrone in hand, hurried up the steps to the platform to toss it into the machine, while Ratchis ran past him at full speed. The half-orc ducked his head and tried to push the demoness back through the portal, but she knocked him aside with a claw as he approached, drawing blood. And as he struggled to move back and get in a defensive position, she stepped up and clawed him twice more. Ratchis was barely able to leap back to avoid all four of her blows and get grabbed up into her arms as he had been once before.¹⁰⁵ Kazrack rushed forward to stand by his friend, bringing his halberd to bear.

Roland called to Bast to *bless* his companions, as Sergio’s song rang out and filled their hearts with courage, and Bastian tossed the duodrone into the machine and began to look around for more modrons to grab before the demoness could stop them.

“Martin! The cube!” Ratchis said, but the watch-mage was way ahead of him, having *the Wurfel Kraft* in his hands.

“Recovered nicely...” Ora-Amira-El began. “But let’s see how you recover from this!” She snarled as the *cube of force* surrounded the three Keepers of the Gate before her claws could reach them.

“Strike her through the cube!” Martin suggested,¹⁰⁶ as Gunthar came around the corner of the machine, swords drawn, from where he had been poking about thinking there might be treasure around to be had.

“Martin, ya dumb bastard!” Gunthar swore. “We aren’t all in there!”

The demoness easily blocked the mighty blows of Ratchis’ dragon-hilted great sword, and flapping her wings, took to the air, landing atop the Modron Station machine. It groaned in protest of her weight atop it, and for a second some of its vents squelched sharply.

Kazrack side-stepped and cast *shield of faith* on himself.

“*Light shine a bit of your essence to blind this fiend to the beauty of our world,*” Bastian chanted, casting his *flare* spell in his strange dwarven dialect. But the spell dissipated like a winter breath. Martin deactivated the cube and quickly cast his spell of *greater invisibility* on Ratchis. As Gunthar shifted from foot to foot, watching the demoness unsure of which way to go, Roland joined Bastian on the platform, and Sergio continued his song, Ratchis grabbed hold of the sphinctered end of the living machine and began to climb atop it.

The Friar of Nephthys looked up in time to see the demoness take flight again, landing beside Kazrack. The sound of her blows against the breast of the dwarf’s platemail echoed over the sound of the still churning machine. The

¹⁰⁵ See Session #94

¹⁰⁶ Martin had activated the sundial side of the cube which kept out all living things, but allowed minerals and dead matter through, allowing weapons to be wielded through it.

dwarf grunted and swung his weapon with such abandon that he left himself open to the succubus. Luckily, however, the demoness was so eager to deal a killing blow, she also overextended herself and had to draw back her hands to keep her balance.¹⁰⁷

Martin stepped over to the dwarf and cast another *improved invisibility* and Kazrack disappeared.

“Hey, Betty the lower depths!” Gunthar taunted her even as he withdrew close to the corner of the machine. “Come sit on *this* cock!” He shook his long sword in front of him suggestively. Sweat plastered his golden locks to the side of his stubble strewn face.

Ora-Amira-El took a step in the direction of the Neergardian but cocked her head and turned around as she heard someone approach. She swung out with a claw, and though invisible, Ratchis felt the sharp pain across his chest. He moved to one side, but right into her next blow and his grunt was echoed by her laugh. Kazrack thrust his halberd at her, but she side-stepped and barely managed to block it. She spun with great speed and reached out in both directions. Ratchis cried out again, but Kazrack ducked and got within her reach, and she could not stop two hard thrusts to her chest and stomach.

Steaming blood splattered down one the dwarf from the two deep wounds.

Martin the Green dove past the melee and hid behind the torn curtain near the portal. Gunthar ran over and stood in front of the watch-mage, watching the demoness struggle against her two invisible foes. Another set of magic words from Martin, and there were three invisible foes, as Gunthar was also enchanted by the dweomer.

“It’s about time you did something to help me out,” Gunthar complained. “I’m the best fighter in the group and always have to carry everyone else’s weight in a fight.”

“Shut up, Gunthar and get in there,” Martin tried to push him, but could no longer see where the Neergardian was.

Sergio continued to sing and Roland and Bastian hung back, unsure of what to do.

The demoness screamed in pain and frustration as she felt repeated heavy blows from Ratchis and Kazrack, her wounds sizzling where the dwarf’s *fiendbane* halberd struck her. Gunthar got into the fight in time to stab deep into her calf as she took to the air again, unable to fend off the unseen attacks. Ratchis and Kazrack also drew more fiendish blood as she fled.¹⁰⁸

“After her!” Kazrack yelled, hurrying up the stairs to the platform for an easier climb onto the machine, for this was where Ora-Amira-El had fled to. Gunthar, did not hesitate and began to climb up onto the Modron Station machine. But Ratchis walked over carefully, quietly casting *cure serious wounds* upon himself.

“I think we will have to finish this another time,” the demoness said, and she took to the air again, diving through the far portal.

Kazrack leapt back down and took off in that direction. Gunthar followed, but Ratchis ran across the top of the machine. Sergio hearing them go by, stopping his song to cast *haste*.

“Now go finish her!” the bard said, gesturing to the portal.

Satisfied that the others had the demoness well in hand, Bastian scooped up another duodrone and fed it to the machine.

Roland changed to panther form and took off for the portal with Martin close behind him. The Bastitie, stopped at

¹⁰⁷ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack’s player rolled a critical fumble, allowing his opponent an immediate attack of opportunity. However, I rolled a fumble for the demoness as well, which called for Reflex save or fall (which she succeeded in making).

¹⁰⁸ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack, Ratchis and Gunthar all got attacks of opportunity on the fleeing demoness, and all hit, including a critical hit from Ratchis.

the portal and moved aside. Ratchis leapt deftly off the machine over Martin's head and through the portal. The watch-mage stepped through right behind him.

This chamber was not much of a chamber at all. Instead, it was a stained wood paneled hallway ten feet wide that ran perpendicular to the portal. There were no apparent doors into the center section. And the hall was lit by dim ambient light, like many of the chambers in Hurgun's Maze.

Martin the Green barely avoided the claws of the demoness as he came through the other side. She was looming to his left, so he stepped to the right. She snarled as she raised an arm to block the invisible blow of Ratchis, and then took off down the hall to the left, as Gunthar and Sergio appeared through the portal.

Gunthar and Ratchis took off after her, their spell-induced speed keeping them on her heels. Martin the Green was not that far behind either, though Sergio took his time. As they sped around the corner, they noticed that the wood panels gave way to a short angled inner hallway wall that was decorated with a tall stone archway that did not seem to lead anywhere. Within it was a plain wall of dressed stone marked with the rune of Hurgun of the Stone.¹⁰⁹

There was a trail of slick gore on the hardwood floor left behind by the fleeing fiend.

Ora-Amira-El spun around as she reached another portal, leaping back and forth to avoid more blows from Ratchis and Gunthar. The Neerguardian invisibly stepped between the demoness and the adjacent portal.

"You know you cannot defeat me!" she said to Gunthar, her voice becoming a sweet and enticing thing. "Just delay your friends so they won't get hurt..."

Gunthar spat and drove his sword forward. Noticing it at the last moment, she turned away right into the point of Ratchis' greatsword, and in a flash of green steaming blood a great wound appeared in her back where the invisible sword came out the other end. The succubus fell to her knees. "This isn't how it was supposed to happen," she croaked, and Gunthar brought his sword across with all his might, nearly cleaving the head from her body as she had already begun to transform and shrink down to the battered and bloodied body of a naked girl of about thirteen years of age.

Kazrack came rushing around the corner, accompanied by Roland. Sergio peeked around as well.

"It may be a trick! Do not be fooled!" Ratchis warned and brought his sword down to cut the corpse's head off.

Roland padded over and cast *detect magic*, but the only thing that radiated on the body were the three studs still piercing the girl's tongue.¹¹⁰ Gunthar cut them free with a dagger, and Kazrack collected them into an empty glass vial.

The Keepers of the Gate took a moment to collect their breath.

"We actually did it," Martin sighed, disbelief in his voice.

"Of course, we did," Gunthar retorted as he and Ratchis and Kazrack became visible again.

"Teamwork and planning," Kazrack said. "It was good use of your spells of *invisibility*, as much as I hate to admit that arcane magics are what won us the day."

Ratchis wrapped the corpse and head in a blanket and tying it up, toss it over his shoulder. "We need to find a place to burn this, just to be safe."

"I wonder if that really killed her," Martin speculated.

¹⁰⁹ This "unnamed" room turned out to be the Library.

¹¹⁰ The tongue studs detected as conjuration magic.

“Whatever do you mean?” Kazrack asked.

“Some powerful fiends can only be killed permanently on their home plane. She might have long ago possessed this girl’s body...” Martin explained. “It might be that one day she will find her way back to Aquerra, though if my study of such things is correct, she must wait ninety-nine years before she can leave it again.”

“I’ll be dead by then,” Ratchis said. “It will be someone else’s problem.”

“If my Lords and Lady will that I should live to my middle age, I will yet be among the living,” Kazrack said. “And if I must slay her again, I shall.”

“You didn’t slay her, Snuffles did...” Gunthar smiled.

“We all did it together,” Ratchis replied.

“Uh, where’s Bastian?” Roland asked.

A quick casting of *analyze portal* showed Martin that the rooms had moved since they came into this strange square-shaped hall. The portal adjacent to where they slew Ora-Amira-El led to the Earth Room, the portal they had come through no longer led to the Modron Station, but to the Dining Room. The other two portals led to Hell and the Dark Room.

“Bastian could be lost in the Maze!” Roland exclaimed.

“Relax... He’s probably still feeding modrons to the machine,” Ratchis said. “Which we need him to do... Let’s hurry and go into the Dining Room before Martin’s spell expires. It is the most innocuous of rooms, and from there we might be able to reach the Modron Station.”

“Now that I have cast the spell from the Book of Black Circles, I need to go to the Dark Room...” Martin said dejectedly.¹¹¹

“I know,” Ratchis replied. “But not yet...”

The Keepers of the Gate went through the portal into the Dining Room, and as they hoped, one of the portals from there led back to the Modron Station, so they hurried that way, where they found Bastian doing exactly what Ratchis had guessed.

They finished feeding the non-functioning modrons to the machine, and soon some more were squeezed out and began to spread out through the Maze.

“Perhaps there will be a cascading effect,” Roland speculated. “As they go out and tell others to come here for repairs, more and more will be fixed and the Maze will begin to function properly again... Whatever that means...”

“It means the decaton will be able to move the Maze through the planes and deep into the Plane of Time for us,” Martin the Green explained. “Well, for *you*... I am going to the Dark Room.”

“Not yet...” Ratchis said again.

“Then when?” Martin whined. “The longer I wait the more opportunities the Book of Black Circles has to corrupt me and take me over, and then what? Not only will I be damned, but it might keep you from freeing Hurgun, and would be putting this place and its secrets in the hands of the most nefarious wizard of the Age.”

¹¹¹ The party speculated that the portal to the Negative Material Plane, where the book can be destroyed can be found in the Dark Room.

“He makes a very good point,” Bastian said. Ratchis glowered at him.

The party began to debate once more. Ratchis and Kazrack did not want Martin to go to the negative material plane until they could figure out some form of protection for him. Martin insisted it was pointless to fight against his fate.

In that time, the Modron Station machine shuddered and squeezed out the largest modron yet, one of the winged cube-shaped quadrones.

Roland padded over to it as it looked around. “Please report fiend intruder has been neutralized,” the Bastite said to it.

The cube turned and then lowered his body to the floor and turned back again, and strangely said, “Yes, decaton...”

“It must be communicating with the decaton by some remote means,” Martin the Green said, with awe in his voice as he walked over, leaving the argument. A duodrone that had come of the machine a few moments earlier, walked over and said “Report Fire Chamber. Follow.”

“I guess we should follow it,” Martin said to the others.

“Perhaps the decaton has some idea of how to protect Martin while in the Negative Material Plane,” Roland suggested. Martin shrugged.

The Keepers of the Gate followed the duodrone out the portal on the far side of the Modron Station. Martin was in the front with Ratchis and Kazrack right behind him. The chamber beyond was made of white polished marble, with a high vaulted ceiling supported by faux-columns that protruded in rows along the walls. In the center of the chamber was a square pool of calm blue-green water of indeterminable depth. Huge leaves and lily pads floated about on its surface.

The duodrone led them around the pool to the right and went through the portal there. Martin was about to pass through as well, as Roland roared in alarm from the rear of the marching order. A huge pseudopod seemingly made of the water of the pool itself slammed at him, like a rogue wave. The panther leapt to the side to avoid the blow.

“It’s a water elemental! Let’s get out of here!” Martin called, stepped out of the way of the portal to gesture the others through.

Roland did not hesitate and darted past everyone through the portal. “I’ll take the rear!” Ratchis roared, drawing his sword, and stepping towards the pool. “Everyone through the portal!”

The water elemental slammed its pseudopod towards Ratchis, but the limb sliced over the half-orc’s raised sword, and he only got wet. Sergio whistled a quick little tune, and in a half-moment he was diving out of the room expeditiously, right on the Bastite’s tail. Kazrack followed.

Bastian moved to follow but grunted as the thing slammed him in the face. For a moment his lungs burned as he aspirated water, but he managed to stagger through the portal, pushed by Gunthar who followed. Ratchis stepped out of the chamber as well, leaving the elemental guardian behind.

They were now in another expansive chamber, this one outfitted as a kitchen. Bastian crawled to a wall and sat there, spitting up water and taking deep ragged breaths. Roland walked over and cast two curative spells to help the bearded warrior’s recovery.

There were several modrons in the kitchen. The duodrone they had been following, joined a group of monodrones who were collecting strewn implements, ordering two to begin clearing out a small room set into the larger chamber, that seemed to act as a form of larder.

“This kitchen must be the Fire Room,” Martin said. “And the room we just passed through was obviously the Water Room...”

The Keepers of the Gate began to explore the kitchen a bit. There was the inset room that acted as dry storage, a large brick oven with cut logs stacked beside it. There were two large chopping blocks and an empty chicken coop. Countless pots, pans and utensils of various kinds hung from a pole suspended over a long metal tub. On the other side of the room was a sloped cleft in the floor over which hung a nasty looking hook on a chain. It looked like this was used to clean and butcher great sides of meat.

There were two heavy iron cauldrons on the other side of the dry storage room, and a monodrone was setting a fire beneath one as another chopped vegetables into it.

Ratchis put down the wrapped corpse he was carrying and walked over to the thick metal door of the closed off area in the top right-hand corner. A blast of cold air came at him from within when he pulled them open. Beyond was a cold storage room, with hanging sides of beef, a few pigs and several pheasants and other game birds. There were also stacked barrels of various perishable goods. In the back of the cold storage locker was a crystalline figure made of ice that seemed frozen to the wall and ceiling. It turned its head and struggled for a moment against its bonds with a silent roar. The half-orc closed the doors back up.

He explained to the others what he saw.

“Does it not anger you to see any creature in bondage?” Roland asked.

Ratchis shrugged. “I never learned anything about the freewill of elementals. Anyway, I am not about to free that thing when it will likely be angry and reasoning with it is unlikely. When this is all over, it is one of the many things I am sure Hurgun will have to explain to us.” He looked pointedly at Kazrack. “Sometimes it is best to wait for more information before acting.”

“Speaking of more information...” Martin cast his last prepared *analyze portal* spell and looked around clockwise at the portal leaving the Fire Room, saying their names aloud, “Dark Room, Entrance Room, Laboratory and Water Room.”

The watch-mage concentrated a moment to look through the portal to the laboratory, and beyond he saw a many floating platforms connected by narrows steps and catwalks. The platforms were covered with tables and counters which had a great number of papers and tools strewn on them.

“Why did the modrons bring us here?” Kazrack asked.

Ratchis shrugged, “Who knows? But why not rest here while we can?”

It was agreed.

End of Session #98

Session #99 ¹¹²

Ratchis was creating a form of camp over near the empty chicken coop, as Kazrack laid down his prayer stone, annoyed that he could not determine the direction to the First Mountain. Bastian and Roland poked around the dry storage for something immediately edible, but Gunthar found some cooking wine and was drinking that despite the bleating protests of a monodrone. Sergio was whistling a tune as he filed at his nails sitting on a small barrel. Martin the Green walked over to Ratchis.

“So, we’ll rest here and tomorrow we go to the Dark Room?” he asked the Friar of Nephthys.

“No,” Ratchis replied, not looking up as he rolled out his hyenadon skin. “We’re going to the Audience Chamber.”

“And *then* to the Dark Room?”

Ratchis sighed. “Okay...”

“Not a guest area,” a tridrone said, in rising dissonant tones, as it approached Martin. “Cannot stay here.”

“Can you lead us to...”

“Air Room. Guest quarters... Follow,” the modron turned and walked towards one of the portals. The Keepers of the Gate quickly gathered their things to follow.

Ratchis noticed a duodrone directing two monodrones in lifting the still wrapped corpse of Ora-Amira-El. He ran over to shoo them away.

“Immolation of fiend corpse ordered,” the duodrone said.

“You’re going to burn it?” the half-orc asked.

“Affirmative.”

“Very well,” Ratchis replied. “I saw a pig in the frozen room. Do you think I could take it?”

“No authority to grant permission,” the duodrone replied, and continued what it was doing.

Ratchis shrugged and retrieving the frozen pig, he left with his companions. They were led back through the Dining Room and back to the Air Room with its cloud-like rooms. As the party prepared to get some sleep, modrons brought them large bowls of pork stew and large slabs of stale bread that Ratchis ate with relish.

“What did you do with that pig?” Roland asked as the Keepers of the Gate gathered in one large room to talk and eat.

“I put it in one of the smaller rooms and realizing I could control the temperature of the room by willing it, I made it as warm as I could and left the pig in there to thaw,” Ratchis replied.

“Chopping up the pig will make it thaw faster,” Kazrack said.

“I need to be able to cut it open carefully,” Ratchis explained. “I want the bladder. I was thinking we might fill it with air and figure out a way for Martin to use it to breathe while in the Negative Material Plane.”¹¹³

Martin’s head drooped, and he shook it slowly back and forth. “There is no point, Ratchis... I have acclimated

¹¹² This session was played on Sunday, October 2nd, 2005.

¹¹³ The Negative Material Plane is airless.

myself to the reality of my fate...”

“Well, I have not,” Ratchis replied. “And while we can still try, we should try...”

“I agree,” Kazrack said. “It makes no sense to me for this human god to put a task upon you that you can only accomplish by dying and hold death over your head to get you to do it...”

“The ways of the gods are ever mysterious to us mortals,” Roland said.

“Can we stop talking about this?” Martin said. “In fact, I am going to get some sleep. Tomorrow, I die... And nothing is going to change that.”

The watch-mage rose and left.

“Poor Martin...” Bastian said quietly.

“Yeah,” said Gunthar, slurping down the last of his stew. “He’s going to die a virgin.”

Ratchis punched the Neergaardian in the arm.

After the modrons had cleared away the bowls, everyone bedded down. The half-orc took the first watch and woke Gunthar to take the second.

“Everything’s fine,” Gunthar grumbled, rolling over. “We already saved the world. Get some shut eye...”

Ratchis nudged him again.

“Alright...” But the Neergaardian did not get up. Ratchis kicked him this time.

“Snuffles! It’s alright. I close my eyes in order to hear better,” Gunthar said, and he was kicked again. He sat up and rubbed his eyes and looked up at the half-orc. “You know, I bet there was a time you used to get kicked...”

“There are too many random factors for us to sleep here unprotected,” Ratchis said as he walked off to claim his spot.

After he had heard Ratchis’ snoring for a few minutes, Gunthar shook Bastian awake.

“Your turn to take watch,” he said to the bearded warrior. “Snuffles and I have been up half the night watching and he finally just zonked out. Watch out for monsters, or whatever...”

Gunthar went back to sleep.

Tholem, the 4th of Ese – 565 H.E.¹¹⁴

In what they assumed was morning, the Keepers of the Gate awoke to a cube-shaped quadrone trilled a loud rolling click that drew them all out into the main area of the Air Room.

“I am designated Four of Six,” the quadrone said. The thing had the most human-like face of all the modrons, but it was disturbingly over-sized, and its mouth enunciated words in an exaggerated fashion. I am to bring you to the Dining Room to have a meal, and then to the Audience Chamber to speak with the Decaton.”

“Thank you, Four,” Roland said.

¹¹⁴ After all that has happened, this is still just the third day in Hurgun’s Maze.

“I am designated Four of Six,” the quadrone repeated.

“Four of Six, we still need to prepare our spells,” Martin the Green said walking over. “Would it be okay if we did that first before coming with you?”

“I am to wait at your leisure,” the modron replied. It walked on its six legs to stand by one of the portals.

Martin moved to one corner and began to draw his spellbooks from his bags. Kazrack walked over to him.

“Martin, I was thinking we should discuss what spells we might prepare in hopes of finding some that might be cast before your journey to the realm of Void,” Kazrack said. “Something that will help you survive...”

“It is pointless,” Martin replied, looking up. “I am going to prepare some spells the best I can, but there is nothing anyone can do to help me avoid my fate.”

“But what if we use the Cube?” Kazrack said, referring to *the Wurfel Kraft*.

“It won’t help,” Martin replied. He raised his hands in frustration and then drew his knees up to his disfigured face, clutching a spellbook close to his chest.

“But Martin, I don’t see why you are so resigned...” Kazrack began, but Roland drew the dwarf away.

“Leave him alone, Kazrack,” the Bastite said. “He has a heavy heart because he knows he is going to die. The only way you can help is by being quiet and supportive.”

Kazrack sputtered in disbelief for a few moments as the priest of Bast stared him down, but he left the mage alone.

Martin the Green sighed and slid his legs back down, but as he reached to open the spellbook on his lap, he flinched and gasped and then pushed it away as if it were a spider crawling on him.

It was the Book of Black Circles.¹¹⁵

Sighing again, he picked up the book and slid it back into its sleeve and into a backpack and proceeded to prepare his spells.

Later, after a meal of bland porridge and more stale bread in the dining room, but with lots of wine to wash it down with, Four of Six made to lead them to talk to the decaton.

“I am going to go back to the Air Room and work on that bladder some more,” Ratchis said. Martin rolled his eyes but said nothing. After checking with the modrons, he went back through the proper portal, while the others were led to the Earth Room.

The Audience Chamber did not have as many modrons in the tiered seats as it did the very first time the Keepers of the Gate visited it. However, there were about a dozen or so of mixed types, including two pentadrones flanking the decaton up on the balcony.

“Martin the Green and the Keepers of the Gate,” Martin heard the decaton polytonal voice in his head. “Pardon my malfunction. Voice operations need repair. Only telepathic contact possible. Re-assimilation through Modron

¹¹⁵ **DM’s Note:** I made a secret Will save for him, but then allowed a Spot check to notice the Book before he opened it. Basically, he had retrieved it unconsciously, in a moment where the book was taking control.

Station must wait. Must ask Keepers of the Gate questions. Questions have primacy over instructions regarding Plane of Time. Martin the Green must relay to companions.”

Martin explained to the others about the decaton being unable to speak but expressed his confusion as to what the rest of it meant.

“Why will we not be getting instructions?” Martin asked.

“Your other companion is not with you,” the decaton responded telepathically.

“He is working on creating a device he hopes will help me survive the quest that I came here for,” Martin responded. “But still... Why no instruction?”

“Time is short. Time has passed. And now there are other intruders in Hurgun’s Maze. In the guise of orcs. Not orcs,” the decaton said. “They must not be allowed to reach the Control Room. The modrons must attend to their stations for travel to Plane of Time. You must do this thing. Do you know this other party?”

“We can guess who they are,” Martin replied, and then paraphrased what the decaton said to the others.

The modrons in the tiered seats began to file out.

“Can we have one of your servants retrieve our companion?” Martin asked. The decaton agreed, and a few minutes later Ratchis arrived, his pig bladder breathing contraption not in any kind of working condition. Martin conveyed what the decaton had told him.

“Ask him when the trip into the plane of time is to begin,” Kazrack said to Martin.

“It has already happened. It is about to happen. It may never happen,” the decaton replied.

Martin the Green shrugged his shoulders. “The answer has no meaning,” he told the others.

“Intruders are fighting the para-elemental guardians. Intruders are now entering Dining Room. No longer orcs. Please intercept,” the decaton was pressing the colored gems on the console before him with two of his ten tentacles about his spherical head. “Note, travel between chambers may be hazardous while in the plane of Time. Consequence algorithms too long to process.”

“Uh... About the guardians,” Martin replied, mentally. “Is there a way we might get past them?”

“Guardians are shut down for the journey. Other rogue elements may still be a danger. Please intercept. Behind you through portal to Entrance Room. Left to Dining Room. Intercept.” The decaton pointed with three of his tentacles. “Do not allow them into Control Room. Free Hurgun.”

Martin nodded and told the others.

“Let’s get this over with,” Kazrack said.

The Keepers of the Gate filed through the portal they had first passed through when entering the Audience Chamber and found themselves back in the Entrance Room. The central column holding the spiral stair out of the Maze was in the process of rising, and the elements in the four corners roiled and burred and bubbled and spat, much as they did before, but none of the figures came to life. They noticed the foul ooze—freezing into new geometric shapes every few moments—was as large as it had been before it became the creature they had slain. It had somehow grown back.¹¹⁶

They passed between the ooze and the ice and then turned left to walk through the portal between the ooze and the

¹¹⁶ See Sessions #92 & 93.

magma. Kazrack went through first, followed closely by Martin.

The Dining Room's many crystal chandeliers glowed like mini-suns as the Keepers of the Gate entered. The tables had been straightened and covered with cloths. While some of the surrounding cases holding the plates and cutlery sets were still broken, all the shattered glass had been cleared away.

There were a group of humans gathered around the longest table. Some were sitting, and others paced nearby, one was sitting up on the table itself, feet on a chair. The man sitting on the table wore black leather pants with bright yellow stripes, and a shirt to match. He was slight man in a with a wide-brimmed feathered hat, with long slicked-back bluish-gray hair, sharp powdered features, bright white teeth, and the slightest point to his thin ears. It was Razzle Greyish.

There was a tall man in a breast plate with a nasty-looking mace at his side. He wore a tunic with a golden ankh emblazoned on an open tome. A similar sigil was a golden holy symbol about his neck. It was hard to recognize his features beneath his helmet with its long ankh-shaped noseguard, but it was clearly Cordell of Thoth.

One of the pacing ones turned and noticed Kazrack and then Martin as they came them through. He was a young man with olive skin, square jaw, and lean stature of a Herman-Lander. He was a few inches shorter than six feet tall and had close cropped black curls on his head. The few mousy whiskers on his chin showed his youth. He wore travel-stained black studded leather armor and his hand went quickly on the hilt of his sword. It was Logan Naismith. Martin frowned as he noticed their former companion was bare foot, and the bottoms of his pants appeared to have burned away some.

At the head of the table was a tall woman. She was lithe and pale, with her long light brown hair in a single thick braid that fell down her back. She had a freckled face that was just barely on the pretty side of plain. She wore robes of various shades of lavender and had a staff on the table before her. It was Alexandra the Lavender.¹¹⁷

Standing beside her was a familiar figure in billowing robes of varying shades of crimson. He had bright green eyes and long curly auburn hair. His beard had tiny glints of brighter red in it. He wore a short sword at his side. It was Richard the Red.

The rogue watch-mage turned to see the Keepers of the Gate entering the room.

"Richard! We were sent to find you!" Kazrack announced, hefting his halberd.

"Ah! There you are!" Richard the Red smiled and began to walk in their direction, looking to his companions. "Didn't I say that if we waited here long enough *they* would come find *us*? It made no sense to wander about." He looked pointedly at Razzle.

The swordsman leapt to his feet and danced on the table, bowing to Martin the Green as he doffed his hat.

"Welcome to Hurgun's Maze," Martin announced, as the last of his companions slipped into the room, fanning out a bit. Roland immediately changed into his panther-form. "I'm afraid you've come at a metaphysically awkward time."

"Martin the Green! It is good to that you have found us. There is much of import we must discuss before it is too late," Alexandra said, standing.

"Alexandra! I must say I am very surprised to see you here," Martin replied.

"I realized I needed to come myself when I discovered more information about the Book of Black Circles," Alexandra explained. "I was able to contact Richard the Red and tell him some of it, but I could not risk letting you know too soon, in case..."

¹¹⁷ She appeared way back in Session #7, but Martin talks about her all the time, and she appeared in Logan's dream in Session #76.

“In case what?” Martin asked. Gunthar gave Logan a wink, tracing out the edge of the pommel of his short sword, *Hornet*. He pointed at the young warrior’s bare feet and let out a breathy laugh.

Ratchis stepped towards the raised area in one corner of the Dining Room, where Logan had moved to, scowling at Gunthar, while Kazrack walked into the room in the opposite direction. Roland pawed his way forward along the left side of the long table. Cordell of Thoth looked down at the panther warily as the Bastite approached. Razzle leapt off the table in an impressive somersault when Richard admonished him to get down.

“I think Alexandra is having difficulty getting to the specifics of the matter because of how difficult it will be to accept,” Richard explained. “I would not have accepted it so readily, but if Alexandra the Lavender thinks something difficult to accept must be done, well then... Most likely it *must* be done. You see, she has figured out that you must *not* destroy the Book of Black Circles.”

There was a long silence as Martin the Green stared at Richard the Red, and then re-positioned the glare to rest on Alexandra the Lavender for a moment as well. Ratchis whispered to Nephthys to grant him the ability to *detect charm*, expecting to see the familiar aura about the watch-mage of Bountiful, but there was none.

“Well, I guess there is something to be said for your blunt approach, Richard,” Alexandra smirked. She turned back to Martin, coming around the table. Roland continued to creep towards the watch-mage, sniffing. “But, Martin, what he has said is essentially the case. Have you ever wondered why the Brotherhood of the Lost allowed you to have the book?”

“They did not allow me,” Martin replied. “We took it from the gear of some monks we defeated in the Pit of Bones.”

“Fine. Well, why did they not send forces after you to retrieve their book?” Alexandra asked.

“It is possible they did, and they never found us,” Martin said. “But more likely, since Rahkefet is patron of those who have gone astray, they hoped I would be corrupted by the Book of Black Circles and fulfill some precept of their god...”

“Yes, that is likely, but only a happy bonus for their twisted order,” Alexandra replied. “However, I have discovered there is more to it than that. The destruction of the Book of Black Circles in the negative material plane unlocks a great celestial chain that keeps Rahkefet from extending his power into this plane. It completes the events needed for him to become a god as his kin are gods.”

“Why would Osiris want Rahkefet to be free?” Kazrack sputtered, interrupting. “The more I hear of this human god, the more I think you all are duped to call this god ‘good’.”

“What I call good and what you call good can be different and both still be right,” Ratchis said, sighing. “This may be wisdom beyond what any of us can grasp.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” Martin asked. “Disobey Osiris and die? And who knows what will happen if I die while in possession of the Book?”

“Destroying the book will most likely kill you as well,” Richard said.

“I have resigned myself to that,” Martin replied.

“Be that as it may, do you really want to be responsible for the freeing of an evil god?” Richard asked.

“His power has been kept at bay since the time of Agon the God-King, it must remain that way,” Alexandra the Lavender said.¹¹⁸ “Marchosias the Corruptor, however, terrible he may be, is a mortal threat. If we must choose

¹¹⁸ In the Third Age, an avatar of Rahkefet, ruled the Spice & Thread Islands (what is Thracia today) using two artifacts, the Orb of

between evil...”

“Are you suggesting I allow the Book of Black Circles to corrupt me?” Martin was agog.

“Not purposefully,” Richard said. “But it *is* inevitable.”

“Richard, this reminds me of an episode with drow witches about a year ago,” Ratchis said.

“In Richard’s defense,” Kazrack coughed, obviously pained to say it. “The argument makes sense. We cannot not allow the power of an evil god to enter the world and lead people astray.”

“If it be Osiris’ will...” Ratchis began.

“I am Roland of Bast,” Roland said, still in panther-form, as he sat before Alexandra. “We have met before briefly. I am a friend of your former companion, Norena of Bast.¹¹⁹ You wouldn’t happen to know where she is?”

“She has not been seen since she left to reconnoiter the orcs force,” Richard replied for the watch-mage, but Alexandra nodded. “There has been no response to our *sendings*.”

“Where’s Dorn?” Logan was asking Ratchis.

“Dorn has passed,” Ratchis replied.

“Kazrack killed him,” Gunthar said, smiling.

“Shut up, Gunthar,” Ratchis said.

“And we liked him ten times more than we like a little pissant like you, so you better watch yourself,” the Neergaardian continued, jerking a thumb in Ratchis’ direction. “I mean, Snuffles here doesn’t take kindly to betrayal.”

“Shut up, Gunthar,” Ratchis said again, but he looked to Logan. “Why *did* you leave?”

“After talking with Richard and thinking on the matter, I realized the course of action that needed to be taken and that I needed to work with a group who actually takes action instead of pissing and moaning about it for hours before doing so,” Logan replied, but his tone did not match his words. They seemed sadder. He looked up and sneered at Gunthar once more.

Bastian walked over to Richard the Red and they shook hands friendlily. “It is always good to see you, Richard,” Bastian said. “It is a shame we end up on the opposite sides of this issue.”

“It need not be that way,” Richard replied quietly with a smile. Bastian smiled back and shook his head.

“How did you get in here, anyway?” Bastian asked the crimson-robed mage.

“We found the entrance on the Earth Tower after spending a couple days in the guise of orcs, wandering the fortress above,” Richard explained.

Roland called Martin over to where he was sitting in front of Alexandra. He had only met the watch-mage of Bountiful once or twice, but still there was something not right about here that he could not lay a paw on. He hoped Martin might have a better clue.

Might and the Crown of Might. He was called Agon the God-King.

¹¹⁹ Norena of Bast and Alexandra the Lavender were once members of the same adventuring company and are old friends.

Martin walked over explaining to Richard and his companions how the Hurgun's Maze was entering the plane of Time "I am not even sure what the consequences will be anywhere in the Maze once we are in the Plane of Time," he said. "But we need to go to the Control Room, if we are to expel or destroy the elemental."

"Very well, we will come with you," Richard said. "I would love to see the Control Room of the legendary Hurgun's Maze."

"That cannot be allowed," Kazrack announced. "The decaton who rules the creatures that serve Hurgun has said as much, and we have given our word that we would not allow it."

Richard sighed. Martin walked back over near Ratchis at the half-orc's signal. The friar of Nephthys was trying to draw the attention of all of his companions to get them to withdraw towards the portal they had come through.

"You should stay here for your own protection," Ratchis said. "If we fail in our task, it may be up to you, however misguided you are, to try to fix the situation."

"Surely some compromise can be reached?" Alexandra said. "What if Martin were to stay here and continue to talk with us while the rest of you deal with this threat?"

"No," Ratchis replied.

"Would you be willing to swear to return here to discuss the Book of Black Circles before going on to destroy it?" Richard suggested. "In order to give us a chance to convince you of the proper course of action?"

"Well, that seems reasonable..." Martin began.

"No," Ratchis said again. "If you want to convince him, do it now and quickly. We can make no promise to return here, especially if it turns out we have a limited window of opportunity to find the Dark Room and send Martin through the gate there."

"What is the source of this information regarding Rahkefet and the Book of Black Circles?" Martin asked Alexandra.

"The Book of Agon," the watch-mage replied. "A rare tome kept up to date by the Librarians of Thoth in Moon City. Of which I am fortunate enough to have a few pages copied directly from it. And then there was the information of a fallen monk of Anubis who revered Rahkefet, that repented his actions... I can show you the pages and go over the confession in detail, if you like..."

"I am not sure we have the time," Martin replied. "The decaton mentioned traveling between rooms will be dangerous once we are in the plane of time, we should make our way to the Control Room. I give my word I shall return..."

Ratchis grunted his disapproval.

"I think perhaps we should come with you anyway," Richard said.

"But you just said..."

"But I did not know about the danger of passing through the portals," Richard explained. "We cannot risk losing track of you now that we have found you. It is not that I do not trust your word, Martin, but you may end up being *unable* to return."

Kazrack began to froth with anger. "Why should we have to return if you are going to come with us? What you say makes no sense! You are only trying to use words to confuse us, as usual! You will stay here if I have knock you unconscious to make sure that you do!" His hands tightened about his halberd.

“You can try,” Richard the Red replied with a smile.

Bastian walked over to Martin and leaned in to whisper, “Get the others to go with you out the portal. I will do my best to delay them.” He ripped a patch from his *Wayfarer’s Robe* and in a moment was holding bottle of wine. He walked towards Razzle offering some.

“Let’s just do the job,” Logan said, turning to Richard and pulling his sword. “I told you talking wouldn’t accomplish anything.”

“Let’s just go,” Martin said to Ratchis, turning to him.

“I am not sure we can leave without making sure Richard and his companions will stay,” Ratchis said, turning to the others, but then quickly turning back to Martin. The half-orc scooped up the gawky watch-mage and began to carry him towards the portal behind them.

“*Manus mentallus forsus!*” Richard cast his spell, and a huge disembodied hand appeared between Ratchis, Martin and the portal. “I’m sorry, but we can’t let you leave with that book.”

Roland leapt onto and over the table, pouncing at Richard the Red, but the watch-mage stepped aside deftly, avoiding the Bastite. Suddenly, Logan was tumbling towards Gunthar, sword in hand. The Neergaardian cried out, for even though *Hornet* was out and flashing in that moment, Logan caught him under the arm, sending a jet of blood down Gunthar’s chain shirt.¹²⁰

Ratchis dropped Martin and clutched at the belt of chain links about his waist. “Nephthys, I call this *prayer* to you, that if this comes to bloodshed, let us smite our enemies more quickly!”

“Thoth, I call your prayers to this room to cancel those of a Queen of Chaos!” Cordell cast a *prayer* as well, balancing the influence of the gods.

Gunthar’s *short sword of speed* flashed twice, scraping against Logan’s slower parries to draw blood. “I’m gonna stick this in you further than I stick my longsword in your momma!” Gunthar laughed. “I’ll teach you how to take a joke.”

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted, trying to withdraw from the great hand that kept pushing him away from the portal. Cordell’s movements were arrested.

“There is no reason for this to be happening!” Alexandra the Lavender put her hands in the air to call for calm.

Razzle ran past Roland, sticking the panther in the hindquarters as he went past. And then the half-elf swordsman flipped up onto the table, turning in mid-flight to face Kazrack, who was charging at him. But it was too late, and the rapier was too light a weapon to knock the halberd very far out alignment. Blood was drawn as Razzle was knocked back onto his rear.

“I think I’ll just stand in the corner and see if I can figure out who I think is right,” Sergio said quietly and side-stepped into a corner to do just that.

“The plan was to fall back,” Kazrack complained to his companions, swinging at the leaping Razzle. “But as soon as one way was blocked you all scattered!”

“You ran forward as well,” Bastian said, holding up his shield and readying his warhammer, but not joining the melee.

¹²⁰ **DM’s Note:** Logan rolled a critical hit and did sneak attack damage against Gunthar; doing 22 hit points of damage.

“Yes, well, I’m *supposed* to do that,” Kazrack replied.

“We should all fall back,” Bastian said. “Fighting here is not furthering our goals. Alexandra is right!”

“*Lentus!*” The Keepers of the Gate recognized the spell Richard the Red cast even as it was too late to do anything about it. Roland felt his movements slow for less than moment, but the effect was warded off by his *ring of alacrity*. Kazrack, on the other hand, was not so lucky.

Roland leapt at Richard once again, and once again the wizard was too fast for him. The watch-mage spun around and looked to Ratchis who was calling to him.

“Richard! When are done taking the fight out of your companions, then we are going to have long talk!” And with that the Friar of Nephthys charged into the fight between Logan and Gunthar, cutting the young Herman-Lander deeply across the chest with his two-handed sword.

As Logan looked up in surprise, Gunthar’s sword found their openings and their former companion’s body jerked twice more.

Logan stumbled back and looked at Ratchis. “I would have left the fight between me and Gunthar,” he croaked. “I wouldn’t have tried to stop you...” As he crumpled forward Gunthar brought his long sword down cleaving the top of Logan’s head open.

“No!!!” Ratchis cried, shoving Gunthar away, but it was too late.

“No one tries to kill me and lives,” Gunthar spat, and grabbed at a deep cut in his shoulder. Ratchis noticed how much blood the Neergaardian had lost. Speaking of blood, Roland was noticing that the wound Razzle had dealt him was still oozing life steadily despite not being that big a cut.

He saw the half-elf leaping off the table at Kazrack, finding an opening between plates with his thin blade. The rapier whipped about at furious speed. Roland considered leaping into that fight, when he heard a familiar voice over the melee.

“Oh Divine Mother of Cats! Though who art as merciful as though art agile, hold that half-breed in place so that peace may prevail!”

Ratchis felt a spell wash over him, but his *aura of freedom* helped to protect him from the magic influence.¹²¹

“Norena?” Roland padded over to Alexandra the Lavender, as Cordell called on Thoth to *dispel* the *slow* spell on him.

Martin the Green continue to try to push past the huge disembodied hand to get to the portal, but it hovered with great speed to always interpose itself and push him back, not matter how he turned. “*Lentus!*” he cast again, and this time no one was affected. Bastian ran over to push the hand away from Martin to give the latter a chance to escape, but it was too strong.

Alexandra the Lavender’s form melted away to reveal Norena of Bast, with her tall svelte frame and sharply defined features. Her narrow green eyes outlined in black pencil sparkled and contrasted with her long curly red locks. She wore a simple low-cut maroon dress, and amber cat’s eye encased in gold on a fine chain just long enough to make the medallion draw more attention to the cut of the dress.

“Lies! Subterfuge! I knew we could not trust them all along!” Kazrack spat, swinging his halberd so hard that Razzle winced as the basket hilt of his rapier barely knocked it away.

¹²¹ **DM’s Note:** The version of the Friar of Nephthys class being used at the time awarded a +2 bonus to the priest against all mind-influencing spells. This ability has been changed since this session.

“It wasn’t lies, silly!” Razzle replied, beginning to dance back just fast enough to keep the *slowed* Kazrack struggling to get blows in. “It was just using a face you could trust. What she said is still true. You can still trust us.”

“I never trusted you,” Kazrack replied. “But you can trust me when I say this: I will heal you when you are bleeding out on the ground from my halberd blows. I will not let you die.” And with that he scored a deep blow, but Razzle was able to roll with it tumbling back too fast for the dwarf to catch up. The swashbuckler drew out a glass vial and downed its contents. He threw the vial at Kazrack, laughing as his wounds closed, still dancing back and forth. His rapier buzzed.

Kazrack noticed the wounds from the rapier were still bleeding.

Richard spoke a word and sprinkled a bit of diamond dust over his head.

Ratchis looked up at Gunthar from where he was confirming what he already knew, Logan was dead. “Go and help the others, and if you attack anyone else that is helpless, I will kill you myself.”

“It was a miracle he lasted as long as he did,” Gunthar replied, choking down a flask of the *Blood of Ashronk*.¹²² “Someone was bound to kill that kid...” And with that he ran to aid Kazrack.

The Neergaardian reached him just as the dwarf was done calling on his gods to grant him *bull’s strength*, and they turned when they heard Richard say, “I’m sorry, but I’m forced to do this...” and followed it up with an arcane chant. A tumbling sphere of white cold came barreling at the two of them and then exploded in a million crystal shards. Gunthar was sent flying back on to his ass and was having a hard time getting back up, while Kazrack was able to crouch down and brace himself. His lungs burned from the cold, and bits of ice hung in his beard and he retreated to cast a spell of healing upon himself.

Cordell was getting back up from a hard blow dealt to him by Ratchis, crunching his armor in on one side, and slammed his heavy mace into the half-orc’s chin driving him back for a moment.

“Norena, I think we need to take a moment and have a philosophical discussion,” Roland said to his fellow priest. “But first I need to help my companions.”

“Oh yes, I agree,” Norena said smiling. “It seems like a very good compromise. And I think I will shift in a form I find a little more comfortable for these kinds of situations.” And with that her form began to melt and stretch and fur exploded from her skin. In half a moment, she was a long and lithe cat. Her form was dull reddish-yellow with black speckles and had a deep chest and narrow waist.¹²³

Roland leapt off towards Gunthar and cast a *cure critical wounds* spell on him. Norena leapt away and did the same for Razzle.

The dancing swordsman laughed and leapt back towards the still *slowed* dwarf, and Kazrack felt the sting of the rapier some more.

Cordell and Ratchis disengaged, both breathing heavy, and looking for an opening. They were close to evenly match in terms of skill, but the Librarian of Thoth had suffered a couple of heavy blows more than the half-orc. Martin the Green ran forward and managed to cast his *greater invisibility* spell on Ratchis before the great hand began to push him away again.

Bastian leapt over and yanked the watch-mage out of the way.

End of Session #99

¹²² Ratchis gave Gunthar a couple of the clay vials at the Neergaardian’s insistence.

¹²³ A reddish cheetah

Session #100 ¹²⁴

The great disembodied hand moved over with great speed and shoved Martin the Green back towards the glass cases in one corner. The watch-mage lost his footing and slammed his head on a shelf on the way down.¹²⁵ He began to scamper desperately in the direction of the large table in order to get under it.

“Cordell!” Richard warned the heavily armored Librarian of Thoth, pointing right at the invisible Ratchis. “The half-breed is still right in front of you! Beware!”

Ratchis hurried past the Thothian and leapt up onto the long table to try to creep towards Razzle, but the table creaked beneath his heavy feet.

Gunthar finally got to his feet after feeling the brunt of Richard’s icy spell with the help of a *lesser restoration* spell from Roland to get him over some of the exhaustion of coming back from death’s door. The Neerguardian, did not wait to catch his breath. He leapt at Razzle with swords flashing, but still was not fast enough, as the half-elf danced away from every blow.

Now under the table, Martin signaled for Bastian to get out of the chamber while he could, mouthing the word, “Hurgun.” The bearded warrior did just that, stepping through the black portal.

“D’nar! Let us switch foes!” Kazrack said, running from Razzle as fast as his *slowed* body could carry him. The dwarf hurried across the room and tried to use a chair as a step up onto the table to cut across towards Cordell. However, the chair tipped forward from under him as he stepped and he came flying down, slamming his face into the table before landing prone on the floor with the wind knocked out of him.

Ratchis made to leap off the table towards Richard when he felt an invisible force grab hold of him. Richard pointed out towards the portal to the right of the one Bastian had stepped out of and the half-orc was flung off through it. He fell down onto the metal grate-covered catwalk of the Control Room but landed on his feet. Ratchis noted the blue-white spiral of the time elemental was spinning faster and pulsing more frequently. He leapt back through the portal.

Roland turned back to look at Norena, still in cheetah-form, as Razzle darted away from Gunthar’s fierce downward chops punctuated by the buzz of his whizzing shortsword. There was the sudden thump of Ratchis, still invisible, charging into the room leaping over the table to bring his greatsword down at Richard the Red. But the moment seemed stretched to Roland, almost as if reality itself bulged for in those seconds and the Bastite’s awareness was rubbed slowly across its rounded surface. He reeled.

Gunthar and Razzle seemed to slow down in time, their blurring swords becoming almost comical in the exaggeration. Something was not right.

Richard the Red stumbled backward as his robe sleeve torn caught on Ratchis’ blade. Only the fact that Cordell suddenly appeared beside Ratchis from wherever he had been on the other side of the chamber, saved Richard. The half-orc’s sword shook under the weight of the Librarian of Thoth’s barely parried blow, when he realized his invisibility would not help him this time.¹²⁶

“How did you...?” Richard began, but stopped his query and his eyes widened as if he had caught sight of some horror only he could see. Meanwhile, the emerald watch-mage spun and swooned, choking up bile under the table. He felt his guts twisting in two directions. The crimson mage directed his great disembodied hand towards Ratchis and it shoved the half-orc back through the drawn screen used to divide up the chamber, tearing it. He fell to the

¹²⁴ This session was played on November 12th, 2005.

¹²⁵ **DM’s Note:** Bullrushing has a knockdown score as a weapon or many spell attacks have, depending on the attacker’s size.

¹²⁶ **DM’s Note:** Cordell figured out where Ratchis was standing due to Richard’s indication and succeeded on hitting despite a 50% miss chance.

ground.

Beneath the table, Kazrack stood and tried to tip it over, but the huge oak thing would not budge.

Ratchis rolled to his feet and hurried back towards Richard, coming around the table this time. However, once again the hand intercepted him and knocked him back onto his rear. Richard fled behind the still slow-moving Razzle, as Cordell stepped over and slammed Gunthar with his mace. The Neergardian fell backward heavily. It was not until he was struggling to get back to his feet, shaking his head, disoriented, that he was moving at a normal speed again.

Kazrack hurried out from under the table and onto his feet. He suddenly had a strange sensation as if the world around him were slowing way down, and his momentum took him towards Cordell of Thoth. He drove the point of his halberd deep into the priest's side, leaving a bloody rent in the man's armor. Cordell staggered back, critically wounded,¹²⁷ as everything turned back to normal for the dwarf.¹²⁸

Coming out of his stupor, Roland slinked over to Gunthar and healed him once again. Across the room, Ratchis got to his feet and called to his goddess to close his wounds as well but had barely done so when the hand shoved him back prone another twenty feet away.

Cordell spun around and Kazrack ducked to avoid the wide swing of the heavy mace. There was a crunching sound as the dwarf's armor absorbed another blow, and then he spun away and around his larger foe. Suddenly, there was a blow that came seemingly from nowhere, as if the priest's arm moved with blurring speed. Kazrack side-stepped to avoid another similar blow.

Martin by this time had gotten over his nausea and reached out from under the table to cast *greater invisibility* on Kazrack, and the dwarf tried to return the Thothian's blows, but missed.

"Gunthar, Get up!" Roland admonished the Neergardian. Disoriented, Gunthar stumbled towards Razzle, but Norena leapt between them, hissing. She clawed at Gunthar.

"Norena! You should try to talk your companions out of these ruinous acts!" Roland said to her with a snarl, showing his gleaming white fangs.

"*Nubes de Foetor!* Richard the Red crushed a hard-boiled rotten egg in his hand and cast the crumbled bits in Ratchis' direction. A noxious green cloud burst into being around the Friar of Nephthys, and bloomed out to catch Martin as well, still under the table. He choked up more bile. Ratchis scrambled to his feet and out of the cloud, holding his breath.

Cordell stepped in close to Kazrack and brought his heavy mace down, but the dwarf hooked his halberd on the leather loop on the weapon's end and flung it off to land on the table. The priest had been in mid-swing, and losing his balance was plummeting to the floor when he disappeared in a flash of blue and white light. Letting a deep breath escape, and still feeling the sting of Razzle's wounds, Kazrack looked over at the swordsman. Razzle was still moving so slow he was hardly moving at all, and every now and again the air around him sparkled blue-white. Kazrack called to Rivkenal to heal some of his wounds.

Smearing vomit in a long trail, Martin pulled himself down to the other end of the long table to escape the cloud. He looked up to see Sergio searching Logan's corpse over by the portal.

The great hand tried to push Ratchis back into the cloud, but this time the Friar of Nephthys was ready and putting his shoulder into it, held his ground. He rolled away from the hand as he heard Richard say, "I am sorry, Ratchis..."

¹²⁷ **DM's Note:** Hit points are divided into fourths with each fourth corresponding with a health condition we use to describe hit point loss without use of actual numbers. *Critically wounded* corresponds with less than one-fourth hit points left.

¹²⁸ **DM's Note:** Each round everyone was making Will saves to resist the fluctuations of time. Those who failed were unable to act for one or more rounds (depending on how poorly they failed). Those who made the save had a chance to take advantage of 'pockets of time' by making an Intelligence-based Reflex save, allowing for additional partial actions, and with a good enough roll, a full action.

followed by, “*Sagitta Igneus!* Three fiery bolts came flying from the watch-mage’s hand. The half-orc dove out of the way of the first, but unfortunately it sent him flying right into the other two.

“Aaaaugh!!!!” The still *invisible* Ratchis hollered as he swatted the flames out. He continued his roar as he charged across the room, driving Richard back again. The watch-mage cried out and blood ran down his arm as he fell. For half-a-moment, Ratchis felt the world around him slow and sparkle with a blue and white sheen. He was confused, and when he suddenly realized he might get to strike Richard as the watch-mage was struggling to get back up the moment had passed.¹²⁹ Gunthar, however, did not hesitate. Having been *restored* by Roland, he left the still frozen Razzle and leapt over, stabbing out with his short sword. Richard rolled but felt the bite of the blade. Richard cried out as the Neerguardian’s longsword caught him on the forearm.

“No offense, guy,” Gunthar quipped as he readied to strike again, but he was forced to turn away as Norena leapt at him from behind. He noticed Razzle up in his face and reeled as the rapier’s basket hilt struck him on the bridge of the nose. Gunthar felt the thin blade’s sting twice more. Richard hurried behind the swordsman.

“How is it that everyone was moving so fast?” Razzle asked.

“No, you were moving slow!” Roland replied.

“Ha ha! A Greyish Brother never moves slow!”

Kazrack stepped in to draw the enemy Bastite off, the point of his halberd scratching a deep wound in her flank.

“Where are the... Augh!” Cordell of Thoth suddenly reappeared near to where he was when the battle began, which unfortunately for him, was where the *stinking cloud* now hovered.

“Norena, I have refrained from using tooth and claw out of respect for my fellow priest, but your failure to keep to our agreement requires chastisement,” Roland said, as the black panther priest leapt on the smaller tawny cheetah. He worried her for a moment, but she escaped his grip and spun around roaring.

Hoping that Norena could not see him as readily as Richard the Red did, Ratchis chopped down on Norena scoring a deep wound. Again, he saw the moment unfold and he thought he might have a chance to act in the space between moments, but he his reason was too slow recognizing it to get his body to act. However, Gunthar stabbed her deep with his shortsword and the cheetah fell over, unconscious. Roland sniffed her and noted she was not bleeding out. In fact, her wounds had already started to close on their own, albeit so slowly that it would be some time before she would wake up from such severe wounds. Left to her fate, she would not die.¹³⁰

Cordell came around the table once again, wiping bile from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. He brought his shield to bare and swung at Gunthar, who leaped out of the way toward Martin the Green, who was now just getting over another bout of nausea caused by the time fluctuations. He was still on his knees beneath a corner of the table. The watch-mage spoke an arcane word and touched his companion, and suddenly Gunthar was invisible.

“Ha ha! You think my skills are such that your being invisible would hinder me!” Razzle laughed, as he danced over whipping his sword back and forth. “I laugh at you both!” He whipped his sword catching Ratchis in the upper arm.

“Richard! I have waited so long to bring justice to you at the end of my halberd!” Kazrack cried, charging at the crimson-robed mage. Richard stumbled backward, barely avoiding being skewered, but his robes were torn and bloodied.

Once again the great hand shoved Ratchis away from the fight, but the hulking half-orc spun away from it and brought his sword down on Cordell’s shoulder from behind. Crunching the armor there painfully. The Librarian of

¹²⁹ **DM’s Note:** Ratchis failed his Int-based Reflex save for an opportunity to take extra actions on his turn.

¹³⁰ She was under the effect of a *Regenerate Critical Wounds* spell.

Thoth, spun away from his invisible opponent, forgetting about Gunthar, who cut deep across the back of the priest's thighs. Cordell of Thoth fell the ground, unconscious.

"I'm buzzing like a hummingbird! Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!" Razzle sang and suddenly moved with great speed, winding amid combatants unscathed to spin around on the other side of the table. Deprived of his guardians, Richard was driven further back by Kazrack's attempted savage blows. The dwarf tried to hook the watch-mage's ankle with his blade, but the mage was too quick to leap.

"Come on! You have them on the proverbial ropes!" Sergio encouraged back in his not-so-neutral corner.

"*Laxo veneficus!*" Richard the Red chanted carefully, dancing back and forth to avoid Kazrack's pole-axe, and suddenly Gunthar and Ratchis were both visible, and Roland felt his *divine favor* wash away. The *stinking cloud* disappeared.

The Bastite pounced at Richard, but the watch-mage stepped aside deftly to put the panther between him and Kazrack, but Gunthar stepped into the gap on the left, driving Richard back further to the corner across from Sergio's.

"Richard, your companions are falling," Roland hissed, as in the corner Sergio took up an encouraging tune. "You may wish to consider surrender. I, for one, would argue for clemency for you..."

Once again, Ratchis was invisible at Martin's word, but as the half-orc approached, Richard cast the same spell on Razzle. The swordsman had come rushing back in to draw off the Keepers of the Gate. Suddenly, Richard disappeared and re-appeared on the far side of the room. He looked as confused as the others.

Ratchis surged forward swinging wide in the general area he had last seen Razzle but felt contact with nothing. Once again, he sensed that time was slowing around him, and this time he was ready. To everyone else he seemed to disappear for a moment and re-appear right next to Richard the Red. But to the Friar of Nephthys, it was as if he were charging through a blue-white-tinted frozen world. Unfortunately, the watch-mage became aware at the last moment and ducked the blow.

"Come on, Martin! Make me invisible again!" Gunthar complained, as Sergio ran over and leapt atop the table to dance as he continued his song. He directed certain lyrics at certain party members to praise their deeds, and they felt their limbs lighten.

"I can't. I am all out," Martin replied. Gunthar opened mouth to make some remark, but suddenly his movements once again slowed way down. His voice escaped him like a dull rumble in his lungs. Cordell's unconscious form disappeared in a flash of blue-white light.

Kazrack's *slowed* stubby legs took some time to carry him back around the table to thrust his halberd at Richard once again. Meanwhile, Roland lagged behind sniffing the air for Razzle's scent.

"*Cuspis ut mihi gresu vobis gelu!* Richard the Red chanted loudly as he crushed a small crystal cone in his hand. A blast of violent cold came out of his fingers point blank on Ratchis and Kazrack. Shivering and covered in bits of ice, his bones aching from the cold, Ratchis side-stepped and brought his sword down on the watch-mage. The two combatants became a blur, with blue-white color trails of their deadly dance. Richard stumbled back with worry on his dirty face. However, before Ratchis could bring down a killing blow, he cried out feeling the bite of Razzle's invisible sword.

"Ha! You cannot defeat a Greyish Brother!" Razzle voice floated out of thin air. The half-orc was forced to retreat from the melee to ask his goddess for healing.

Richard took the moment's respite to turn to Kazrack, leaping deftly once again to avoid the tripping attack of the dwarf. He cast another spell, but it was not clear what it was. Kazrack brought another wide chop around, but a nip at his hand with an invisible rapier, caused him to draw back and close his guard, wary of the swashbuckler.

Roland noticed that Gunthar's rapier wounds were still bleeding steadily despite the blonde warrior's status, so once again he cast a spell of curing.

Bastian came stumbling back into the room. He had been frozen in the limbo of time in the paneled walls of the Library Chamber, what seemed only a few moments from his perspective, but he was still curious what was taking so long.

"Martin! Where are you? I thought you were coming!" He called.

"Martin is under the table," Roland informed Bastian. "And beware, both Ratchis and Razzle are invisible somewhere in this room."

Richard the Red took advantage of the momentary distraction and fled back across the room once again. "You might want to know," he announced, taking a swig of a something and throwing the glass vial down. "There is someone else invisible in this room as well." Ratchis gave chase, drinking down another flask of the *Blood of Ashronk*.

Kazrack cried out as he felt many stinging blows at weak points in his full plate mail armor. Now even more blood was pouring out beneath the heavy and binding metal and leather. "Lady, I am about to fall from my wounds. Please close whatever you can that I might still prevail before I fall..." He had withdrawn to cast. Roland pawed over and cast *shield of faith* on the dwarf.

Richard smirked as a crossbow quarrel skittered across the floor fired from under the table. Bastian walked over to the table and squatted down, keeping one hand on the surface to steady himself. "Come on, Martin! We need to get the Book out of here!"

"The enemy of your former companion is here," Richard said, pointing to the raised area in the far corner, where a smaller dining table stood for more intimate gatherings. "One of the monks is there!"

"Nephthys, this may be my final battle. I call on you to heal me one last time..." Ratchis prayed softly, hoping Razzle would not hear him.

"Where did that portal lead to?" Martin asked Bastian, crawling in that direction.

"It looked like the place you described when talking about killing the demoness," Bastian replied. "I think you called it the Library. We should go... Agh!"

"You are not going anywhere!" Razzle laughed. Bastian felt the rapier cut through his boot and deep into his foot. He hobbled back and raised his shield.¹³¹

There as a flash of blue-white light and Richard, Razzle, Martin, Bastian and Gunthar seemed *dazed*. Cordell re-appeared. Roland took the moment of distraction to cast *cure moderate wounds* on Kazrack.

"Quick! While he is distracted!" Ratchis cried, and he and Kazrack were moving to finish the battle when the entire chamber jerked, sending the half-orc off his feet. A humming sound began to build. The sound surrounded them, coming from all directions. Even their skin began to hum.

"This is not good," Martin the Green said, as the chamber shook again.

There was a blast of blue and white light once again, but then everything was black.

¹³¹ Bastian suffered the following critical hit effect: Foot Wound, Speed Reduced to ½. Save vs. Knockdown.

The first thing Martin the Green noticed was a chilling silence. It seemed tangible, like the crispness of a late autumn morning. He held his breath and could not even hear the blood pumping in his ears, though he felt it. Martin opened his eyes.

The Dining Room chamber was dimmer than it had been, but everything was covered in a fuzzy blue glow. The watch-mage sat up and noticed all his companions and recent foes were unconscious, though some had their eyes open. Roland was back in human form. Martin carefully crept over to Richard the Red and waved his hand in front of the mage's face. There was no reaction. And there was no sound still. He could not even hear his own steps. He stepped over to the nearby Kazrack, slapping and shaking the dwarf to no avail. He even yanked on Kazrack's beard, but nothing...

Movement up by the raised area in one corner of the chamber caught Martin's attention. It was a monk he had never seen before. The olive-skinned man wore simple grey woolen trousers with a similarly colored shift above it, cinched with a black velvet rope belt. He wore leather sandals, and his head was clean shaven except for a thin patch of long black hair at the very base of his skull that reached halfway down his back. The monk was covered in scars. Deep whorls have been carved into his scalp, and his face bore the crisscross marks of a cat o' nine tails purposefully whipped back and forth across it. The bit of his muscular chest that Martin could see beneath the man's shift was covered in scars as well. He gingerly held a spear with a nasty three-edged head and had a straw rucksack over his shoulders. The monk was walking down toward Martin calmly.

The watch-mage tried to speak, but no sound came. He quickly stepped to his left and snatched up Richard the Red's satchel of material components. The monk continued to walk forward but leaned his spear on the table and raised his hands slowly in a gesture of peace.

Martin the Green never took his eyes off the monk as he stepped over and kicked Razzle's rapier away from the half-elf's unconscious form. The monk pointed to the far portal, pointed to Martin and pointed again.

Martin fished in his pouch and pulled out a piece of chalk and rolled it across the large stone table to the monk. The monk nodded again and taking the chalk, wrote on the table in careful block letters, "*I AM ADDER.*"

Martin gulped silently as Adder went on writing. "*COME. LET US FIND THE PORTAL TO THE PLANE WHERE THE LOST GOD IS TRAPPED.*"

Martin brandished a second piece of chalk. "I will go with you, if you allow me a few moments to finish up some business here and leave my friends a message." He wrote in a halting script as the chalk wore down.

The monk nodded.

Martin the Green proceeded to awkwardly roll both Richard the Red and Razzle Greyish up in rugs and tie them up. He checked on Cordell and Norena. They were still gravely wounded, but stable.

"THESE ARE OF NO CONSEQUENCE," Adder chalked onto the table, after a time. Martin was not doing a good job of casually stalling, as he was hoping his companions would wake up. He held a finger up to the monk and gestured to Ratchis and walked over to the half-orc. He kneeled beside his unconscious companion and reaching down into the pouch that held *the Wurfel Kraft* he activated it to keep out all living matter.

Adder walked over, hands clasped behind his back and examined the cube. Martin searched Ratchis until he found one of the clay flasks held the *Blood of Ashronk* and tried to pour the contents down the half-orc's throat. Ratchis choked for a moment, but finally Martin was able to massage it down. Martin sighed when after a moment Ratchis did not awaken.

He looked up at Adder and the monk pointed once again to the portal.

Martin's shoulders sagged as he depressed the side of the stone cube depicting a still pond and the blue field disappeared. He left the cube with Ratchis. He walked over to the table and took his time to write one last message.

Adder walked over, looked at it and shrugged. They were nonsense words. He picked up another piece of chalk and wrote, “*THIS IS POINTLESS. COME AND FACE YOUR DESTINY.*”

“What destiny is that?” Martin wrote.

“*OSIRIS’ WILL*, was all he wrote in reply.

“And your will, too?” Martin wrote.

“*THEY ARE PARALLEL FOR THE TIME.*” Adder threw the chalk onto the stone table and it shattered, but his face never lost its vacant look. He pointed to the portal once again.

“Thomas?” Martin the Green sent his awareness towards his familiar, who was hidden beneath his backpack, beneath the table.

“Yes? that bad monk man gone, yet? I still smell him,” the squirrel chittered.

“I need to go with him, Thomas, and I need you stay here,” Martin replied. “You cannot come where I am going.”

“No!” Thomas refused. He came running out from under the pack and up to the watch-mage’s shoulder.

“You have to stay,” Martin said again. “Stay with Ratchis. He will take good care of you. I fear I won’t be coming back from where I am going now...”

“Not ever?”

Martin just shook his head. He scratched Martin under the chin and then patted his little head and placed him on Ratchis’ chest. He looked at Adder and nodded. The monk gestured towards the portal and Martin walked through it. Adder followed closely behind.

They passed through the Entrance Chamber with its para-elemental corners. Martin noticed that sound had returned as they passed through the portal.

“Do you know which way to go?” Adder asked. His voice was dry sand falling over rocks. “I am just guessing. So, if you have a better idea of which way to go to reach the gate...”

“I have none,” Martin replied. The next chamber was the Kitchen, and Adder led straight ahead through it into a chamber Martin had never seen before.

It was another elegantly appointed room with polished marble floors, and walls covered in wood panels below and light lavender stucco above. As they walked down a narrow hall, turning into a wider sitting room, Martin noted a twelve-foot tall statue of a shirtless man with a broad chest, bald head and skull cap. He noticed another identical statue on the other side of the sitting room. They were clearly of Hurgun of the Stone.

“Well, Hurgun certainly doesn’t seem to have any lack of vanity...” Martin commented. Adder did not respond. He just set a quick pace through the next portal, and in a moment they back in the Dining Room. It was no longer silent.

Adder stopped.

“What is it?” Martin asked. But the monk just pointed to the left and led that way. Martin looked over his companions sadly and followed. They hurried on through that portal and were in the wood paneled halls of the Library Chamber, where they had finally slain Ora-Amira-El. They went through the opposite portal this time and came out underneath the tiers of the Earth Room Audience Chamber. Martin was startled at how quiet it was.

As they walked out through the central area Martin noticed the tiers were filled with many motionless modrons.

Adder took no notice, once again leading the way to the opposite portal. The portcullis leading to the portal slammed shut behind them of its own accord, startling Martin. Adder took no notice, he just stepped through the portal, pushing Martin ahead of him. They appeared in the dim light of the Hell Chamber. Adder's pace only flagged when he noticed Martin the Green had tarried by the pedestal in the center of the room. The watch-mage noticed the sapphire that supposedly held the spirit of a dwarven king was back upon it.¹³²

"Your destiny..." Adder whispered.

"Yes, yes! My destiny, I know..." Martin muttered continuing to follow the monk. He rubbed the crusty wound on the side of his face.

Adder stepped through the portal and Martin followed. Beyond was a chamber shrouded in pitch darkness. Martin waited a moment.

"The gate is over there," came Adder's voice out of the darkness, but Martin did not reply. The watch-mage ducked back through the portal as quietly as he could and began to run for the opposite portal, stopping only to scoop up the sapphire. He was through the Hell Chamber and halfway through around the Library Chamber halls when he was startled by the sound of something beside him. He looked to see Adder standing there, and then jerked as he felt sharp kick to his lower leg that dropped him to the floor.

Martin looked up at the monk standing above him, his horrific scared face betraying no anger. Martin scrambled to his feet and continued to run. He ran around the corner and felt a blow from behind as he stumbled to the floor again. This was followed up by another kick. Martin threw himself through the portal and was on his feet again, taking off across the Dining Room, he put the sapphire in a fold of Kazrack's clothes.

Adder walked through the portal as Martin was shoving Richard's component pouch under Ratchis' unconscious form. He stepped away from the half-orc rapidly.

"You're back!" Thomas chittered in the mage's mind.

"Not for long..." Martin replied.

"Enough games," Adder said. "I thought as an alumnus of the Academy you would have some dignity about how you face your fate, but if you must be coerced, so be it."

The monk walked over to Ratchis of Nephthys, and took a deep breath, holding his hand up before him. Martin noticed Adder's hand shaking with intensity and with a finer and finer arc until, when it appeared perfectly still, the monk drove his open palm down in the half-orc's neck, leaving a purple line of bruise.

"Now, I need only will it and your friend will die," Adder said, calmly. "Shall he die? Or shall you come? If you do not believe me, I can kill him now and apply the quivering palm of Anubis upon another companion, to prove that I will do it."

"No!" Martin raised his hands. "I will come." The watch-mage followed the monk from the Dining Room once again.

It was impossible to tell how much later Kazrack Delver awoke.

He sat up and noticed something fall from his chest to his lap. He fished for it blindly as he looked around at his unconscious friends, and the strange sight of Richard the Red and Razzle rolled and tied up in rugs. His calloused

¹³² This was last seen in Session #94, when the dwarf, Aitan Absalom took off with it.

fingers felt the smoothness of the gem and he was startled. He raised it to his eye.

“Natan-ahb’s Beard!” he exclaimed.

“What happened?” Bastian groaned, getting up onto his arm. He looked around groggily. “Oh! Everything is sparkling...”

“One of these bastards cast a spell that went out of control and zapped us all,” Gunthar swore as he leapt to his feet and walked over to the bound duelist, giving him a swift kick.

“He is already bound. There is no need to harm him anymore. Anyway, I think we might be in Plane of Time, whatever that means,” Kazrack said, standing and looking around with some wonder at the shining all around them. He noticed Martin’s gray squirrel leap from Ratchis’ chest onto the tabletop. “Look, it is Martin’s animal! Hmm, where is Martin?”

N’kron, Bastian’s hawk familiar, flew over from a corner of the room where he has been standing on one of the cabinets. When the bird landed on the table, the squirrel took off for Ratchis once again.

“Heh, three gulps!” N’kron said to his master. Bastian chided his familiar.

“Maybe one of these bastards knows,” Gunthar pointed down at Razzle and kicked him again, harder than the first time.

“Maybe this writing is a clue,” Bastian said, point to the tabletop.

“I cannot read human letters,” Kazrack said. Bastian shrugged and shook his head.

“Step aside, dummies!” Gunthar walked over and began to sound out what had been written as best he could. “There are two different sets of handwriting, and some of this is friggin’ nonsense!” Gunthar sounded out the syllables of the last message Martin had written.

“The pronunciation is all wrong, but it is almost like dwarven,” Kazrack frowned.

“Martin was obviously using the chalk messages to communicate with someone else who was here, Adder...” Bastian said.

“Adder?!!” Kazrack exclaimed, as Ratchis stirred.

“If he was being observed, he might have written in phonetic dwarven in hopes of leaving a secret message,” Bastian continued. “Gunthar read it again, but slower...”

“It’s nonsense!” Gunthar repeated.

“Gunthar, please do it...” Kazrack said

The Neergaardian smirked but began to read it again.

“Snake here?” Kazrack scratched his beard.

“An adder is a kind of snake,” Ratchis said.

“Everyone is knocked?” Kazrack continued the awkward translation. “Must go to Dark Room! Help!”

“We have to go after him,” Ratchis said. By this time, Roland had awakened as well. “But I am worried about what trouble these two might get into if we leave them here.” The half-orc pointed to Razzle and Richard.

“Simple,” Gunthar said, and he drew a single finger across his neck.

“Richard certainly deserves it,” Kazrack replied

Ratchis walked over to the crimson-robed watch-mage and drew his long-curved hunting knife, but finally sighed and slipped the weapon back in its sheath. “No,” he said. “Martin had commitments to return him to justice and it is for him to decide.”

“Then ya have ta trust to a knot then,” Gunthar laughed. The half-orc nodded and went over and checked the bonds. Richard was still unconscious and well-tied, but he discovered Razzle had been playing at still being knocked out and had wriggled nearly enough to be free. The Friar of Nephthys rolled him over roughly and tightened the bonds again, using some of his rope to make sure the half-elf was fastened well.

“You have won due to unforeseen events,” Razzle grunted. “There is no need to be cruel. We are beaten. Cherish the victory, for in a fair duel, none can defeat a Greyish Brother.”

“Martin might already be dead,” Roland said, ignoring the swordsman.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ratchis replied, pausing to give Thomas a scratch, as the squirrel was on his shoulder. “We cannot abandon a friend. We need to know what happened to him and let him choose freely to do what he has to do, not be coerced by some fallen monk.”

Kazrack nodded. Sergio stirred from atop the table where he lay. They took a moment to quickly explain what was happening.

Roland, noticing Norena was not far from consciousness, hog tied her with more than a little bit of lingering spite. He then gagged her and Cordell. As the Thothian was more wounded, the Bastite was gentler with him when tying him up.

Roland shifted back into his dark panther-form and started to smell around the room as Ratchis looked around for the sign of a track.

“This way!” Roland said, gesturing with his head towards one of the portals. A few moments later Ratchis found the slightest imprint of a sandal in the soot in the halls of the Entrance Room and led the group through a portal to the Kitchen. They stopped again as Roland sniffed and Bastian and Ratchis looked for any sign of passage.

“He was here,” Roland said. “I think they were traveling in a straight line from room to room.”

The rest of the Keepers of the Gate, along with Sergio, followed Roland through the portal into the Library. A green thread led them back into the Dining Room.

“You must have made a mistake in your tracking,” Kazrack said.

“Or they left the Dining Room and came back, and then left again,” Roland speculated. “Could we be experiencing some kind of prolonged disruption of time that is confusing us? I mean... that *was* what we were experiencing before, right?”

“It was strange, whatever it was,” Kazrack said. “Strange and unnatural. I did not like it.”

“For once I agree with you,” Roland said.

“There is hope for you yet,” Kazrack replied. Roland snarled, but good-naturedly.

They decided to go back to the Library Chamber and try one of the other two portals. Soon they were in the

Audience Chamber with the many ‘sleeping’ modrons. Guessing that perhaps Martin and the monk did not know where they were going either and were being methodical in their search, Ratchis led the group towards the opposite portal, but the portcullis to the tunnel beneath the tiers that led to it was closed.

Thomas leapt off of Ratchis’ shoulder and between the bars. Ratchis tried to lift it and found it was locked.

“Do we need to apply more strength?” Kazrack asked.

Ratchis shook his head and took *the First Key* from his belt of chain links and touched it to the gate. There was a click. He lifted it and the party passed through, finding Thomas waiting for them on the other side. They went through the portal and found themselves in the Hell Chamber.

Ratchis, Roland and Bastian began to look around carefully, but little was coming of it.

“Perhaps it was Martin who left me the gem,” Kazrack said, looking at the empty pedestal at the center of the room. “He came here, took the gem, left it with me and then left again.”

“Why would he do that?” Ratchis asked.

Kazrack shrugged.

“Which way do we go?” Roland asked.

“That way,” Kazrack pointed, leaving it to luck. The others shrugged and they made their way through that portal and into a room cloaked in darkness.

End of Session #100

AQUERRA

Session #101

“Be careful, there is a great maw in that corner that acts as a gate,” Adder said.

“I’m surprised the big mouth in the floor isn’t the way we have to go,” Martin the Green replied. He could hear the smacking and licking of the giant mouth in cloying darkness.

“That way leads the Abyss,” Adder said. “It is the sliver of dark that you want. Hold out your hand. I will guide you.”

“You can see?”

“I can.”

Martin the Green attempted to cast *darkvision*, but it did not seem to work.

“That will not work,” Adder said.

“How is it you can see?” Martin asked.

“I have a clearer vision of the world. Darkness cannot abate my senses,” Adder answered. “Take up the Book of Black Circles and you may be able to see.”

Martin hesitated, and raised his arm out instead, feeling the monk take his elbow and walk him towards one corner of the unseen Dark Room chamber.

“It is before you, you need only...” Adder began.

“Why are you doing this? Why do you want it to happen?” Martin the Green asked.

“You already know the answer. You are trying to stall again,” Adder replied. His sibilant voice tickling the watch-mage’s ear from close beside him in the dark.

“No, I am serious,” Martin insisted. “Why do you want to do this?”

“You know of the weakness of men. You know how flawed and far from the divine they truly are,” Adder said, calmly. “Even those with good intentions can cause the greatest of evil. Everything they touch goes awry and sours. The stench of corruption hangs on every act of humanity. But no longer, when our lord returns, he shall be a beacon to all who wander from what they once cherished, so they might see the falseness of it all. But the meaning of it lies in rejecting those laws and rules from a place where you once held them to be true. Does that answer your question?”

“That is pathetic,” Martin spat. “You are doing this because you are a failure at following Anubis and you are justifying it by turning to Rahkefet. It is your own weakness that is at fault here.”

“You may try and bait me into anger, but it will not serve you,” Adder replied. “You have just iterated the essence of our order. We have no shame at being flawed men. It is the flaw that makes us men. We embrace it.”

“If I were to follow your view, I would turn away from this task you want me to undertake.”

“But you will not,” Adder said. “There are ironies in this universe, and one just might be that to become lost, you must stay true to your path. One extreme reinforces the other.”

Martin the Green did not reply. He took a deep breath and unsealed the form-fitting bag about the Book of Black Circles. It was all he carried with him, having left all his gear and magical items back with his companions, except

for the book and *Lacan's Demise*, which he still wore. He shuddered as his fingers brushed the leathery hide of the book's cover, but suddenly the darkness around him abated. The room was still dim, but now he could see there was something in each corner of this room: A slaving mouth nearly fifteen feet across was set into the floor near where they had entered the chamber, a mirror of red-black glass in a black iron frame that steamed, and a strange metal wheel set with colored glass before a blank white wall. The wheel had a crank and handle attached.

Before him the portal to the negative material plane was a shivering sliver of black light hovering before a paneled partition. Martin stepped forward and looked at it from one side, and saw it did not touch the partition, and nor did it have any depth. He sighed again, and then got down on his knees and lowered his head.

"Osiris, show me what to do," he prayed aloud. "What must I do to avert the disaster that may come of this?"

"Before you lies what Osiris would have you do," Adder said. "Any means you find to get around what you fear doing will just be admitting that the order I founded looks at things is the right way..."

"Need I do anything special to step through?" Martin looked up at the scarred monk's face. It was as impassive as ever.

"All you need do is will yourself through and take a step," Adder replied. "But let me warn you, if you touch it without sufficiently willing yourself you will only suffer some of the consequences of having passed through, without passing through..."

"What is the nature of this portal?" Martin asked. "How does it hang here?"

"Martin..." Adder paused.

"Adder?"

"You are stalling again. Need I remind you of the half-breed's fate if you should not go through?"¹³³

Martin the Green sighed profoundly once more, and then standing straight, took another deep breath and stepped through with his eyes open.

There was confusion among the other Keepers of the Gate as they entered the Dark Room. Both Bastian and Ratchis tried to cast *light* spells, but neither worked.

"Huh? What is going on? Someone get some light in here," Gunthar said.

"Light does not work in here for some reason," Ratchis replied.

"I guess they call it 'the Dark Room' for a reason," Roland quipped. "However, I can tell you the smell in this place is nearly overwhelming. Blech!"

"Ugh! What terrible things are in this room!" Sergio cried as he came in. "Watch where you walk! There is a slaving maw in the floor larger than the mouth of a well, and it seems... well, *alive!*"

"You can see?" Ratchis asked.

"Yes... Can't you? I mean, it is dim, but..."

"There is nothing here but darkness," Kazrack said.

¹³³ See Session #100, when Adder used the ole Quivering Palm on Ratchis.

“How is it you can see?” Roland asked. “What else is there in here?”

“I don’t know why I can see and you cannot, perhaps I am simply blessed, but the chamber seems much like the others in size, and there are objects in each corner of the room, which the mouth is one of. There is also a scarred monk looking at us from a place across the room. He stands by a partition with some plane of black light before it...” Sergio described the scene.

“Step forward, monk!” Kazrack bellowed into the darkness, slamming the butt of his halberd into the stone floor. “We would speak with you about the location of our friend, Martin the Green.”

For a long moment, there was only the sound of their breathing, and the disturbing smack of the abyssal maw in the floor in the darkness, but then Adder spoke. “Then you may as well go back from whence you came, for he has already gone on to complete his destined task. You will not see him again...”

“And why is that?” Kazrack asked.

“He has passed on bodily out of this world to the realm from whence evil originates,” Adder replied. “He is dead. Gone forever.”

“We should go after him!” Kazrack said, addressing his companions. “He should not have to enter into the realm of death alone.”

“Actually, that is *exactly* what he had to do,” Roland said.

“Monk! Which way did he go?” Kazrack called across the Dark Room.

Again, a long silence, and finally the voice came. “He had to allow himself to be swallowed by the mouth in the floor.”

“Kazrack, you are not going into that mouth,” Ratchis told the dwarf.

”We have to free Hurgun...” Roland began.

“Well, if we must abandon Martin to his own demise, then should we not at least destroy the mouth, so this god he going to awaken won’t come back through it?” Kazrack asked.

“Adder,” Roland called to the monk, ignoring Kazrack. “If Martin has gone to his death, why is it you still wait here?”

“I am on my way out,” Adder replied.

“Since you don’t seem to be leaving just yet, do you mind telling us what exactly happened while the rest of us were unconscious?” Roland asked.

There was no reply. Sergio confirmed that the monk was still standing very still by the iron mirror.

“Didn’t Martin say something about a mirror?” Kazrack mused aloud. “Perhaps it was really the mirror Martin went through and the monk guards it so it will not be broken and keep his god from entering the world...”

Ratchis leaned over to the dwarf and whispered, “Or else he waits here because he fears we might attack him and in the dark he has the advantage.” The half-orc knelt beside Roland and repeated his thoughts and went on to add. “If Martin is gone, we must trust him to do what he was meant to do.”

He leaned back over to Kazrack and continued with his whispering. “All we can do is try to find a way to brighten

the room to fight that mouth thing, or simply leave and see if we can free Hurgun. There is nothing left to be done for Martin.”

“I am...” Kazrack began at normal tone.

“Whisper,” Ratchis admonished.

“I said, I am...” Kazrack voice grew a bit louder with anger.

“Whisper,” Ratchis said more gently.

“I am... Stop shushing me! I do not care that this foul monk hears what I have to say,” the dwarf barked. “I do not want to leave whatever portal used open for a god to come through. If we cannot fight the mouth, but we may be able to destroy the other portals and deal with the mouth later.”

“We have no reason to think a god will pass through any of these portals,” Ratchis said to Kazrack. “If it is truly a god, what does some portal here matter? Destroying the portal may make no difference to the god but might have bad consequences for us. We should not do it.”

“Hey the monk stepped closer,” Sergio reported. “He is near the middle of the room now!”

“Adder, please move off,” Roland warned. “Did he move off?” he asked Sergio.

“No,” the bard replied. Roland growled.

“We cannot start a conflict in here,” Ratchis whispered to the Bastite.

“I know, but... it is just rude!” Roland replied.

“But it is rude to whisper in front of people, too,” Bastian quipped.

“What kind of consequences?” Kazrack forged on with his point.

“The portals may hold something out...” Ratchis speculated.

“You know who’d know the answer?” Gunthar asked.

“Martin?” Roland replied.

”Ya damn right, Martin!” Gunthar laughed.

“You know, it is possible that Martin may return and Master Adder here is deceiving us, and wishes our watch-mage some ill,” Roland said. “If Martin does return, I do not want Adder here when it happens.”

“Monk!” Kazrack called across the room again. “Why have you not left? Did you not say you were leaving?” He turned to Roland. “Can you not sniff him out?”

“The stench is too foul in here,” Roland complained again.

“There are six of us and one of him,” Kazrack said. “Even in the dark we should be able to defeat him.”

“Um, he can hear what you are saying, Kazrack,” Bastian said.

“He’s got rocks for brains,” Gunthar laughed again.

“Monks are fleet-footed, and did not Beorth say Adder was the head of the order of the monks of Rahkefet? I am not so sure,” Ratchis said. “But if Martin returns, we may be forced to act anyway...”

“How long should we wait?” Kazrack asked.

“A day? That should be long enough to see if he returns,” Ratchis replied.

“But shouldn’t we be trying to free Hurgun?” Bastian asked.

“It’s okay, since we are in the Plane of Time, we essentially have all the time in the world,” Roland reasoned.

“Or no time at all,” Bastian replied.

“There is that view of it, too...”

“We should go about our business,” Bastian said, his voice was still his usual steady breathy sound with many pauses. “I know I did not know Martin as long as the rest of you and am not as familiar with his quest, but from what he told me, no one expected him to survive it, so why are you expecting it now?”

“He is our friend, and sometimes it is hard to accept the death of a friend, especially when he is not lying there dead to be seen with your own eyes,” Ratchis replied, sadly. He felt Thomas convulse on his shoulder and the squirrel let out a squeak.

“He’s friggin’ dead!” Gunthar yelled. “He said he would be, and he’s been a friggin’ nancy-boy about it the whole time I knew him, but he’s gone and he’s done it, which is more than I ever thought he’d accomplish.”

The room rumbled faintly, in a way reminiscent of just before they had all been knocked out during their combat with Richard the Red and his companions.

“Adder, if I may ask,” Roland called to the monk. “Why did you turn apostate?”

There was a long silence, broken only by another rumble and a fleeting sense of vertigo.

“Oh, I don’t like that,” Sergio grumbled.

“I found the rules of Anubis to be hollow,” Adder finally replied. “I discovered all the rules and customs of all the gods are equally valid or invalid, and thus have no real weight at all, except that which we choose to give them.”

“That is true of the human gods,” Kazrack said.

“I said, all gods, and I mean, all of them, regardless of the people that revere them,” Adder continued.

“Even Rahkefet?” Roland asked.

“Even Rahkefet,” Adder replied. “But my master knows that failure and corruption are the true eternal gifts of mortals. The laws of the gods only have meaning in this world in terms of how far short we mortals fall of them, and we always fall short.”

“But what does Rahkefet want?” Kazrack asked.

”For men to be as men are.”

“And that is...?” Roland asked.

“Men are untrustworthy,” Adder said.

“Yes,” Kazrack nodded in the dark.

“They abandon customs and laws when they become old and inconvenient,” Adder continued.

“Yes,” Kazrack said, again.

“On a whim, sometimes...” Adder said.

“Yes!” Kazrack said. “On that we are in full agreement.”

“The same is true of dwarves,” Adder added.

“Bah!” Kazrack scoffed. “Dwarves may change, but if so, only as rocks with water. And if a man remains steadfast, what does Rahkefet think?”

“No man remains steadfast in his heart,” Adder replied.

“I am loyal to my goddess no matter what!” Roland protested.

“Sucking on the teats of the cat goddess may bring you some power,” Adder said. “But you are still but a mewling kitten.”

”Mmmmm, I love sucking on some teats!” Gunthar laughed.

“I think you are a liar,” Roland said, anger growing in his voice. “I think something happened to embitter you against Anubis, and you drape it in philosophical nonsense...”

“Perhaps there was something,” Adder replied. “But if so, it was only the trigger that allowed me to see clearly. I have forgotten most of my former life, perhaps you might ask my one-time companions, the Oath... They might tell you a version of the tale that fits the illusions you refuse to dispel.”¹³⁴

“What must I do to understand?” Kazrack asked.

“Give up everything you have,” Adder replied.

“I have nothing to give up.”

“Your weapons, your companions, the bag of stones about your neck,” Adder said.

“I cannot.”

“Then you will never understand.”

“Kazrack, is there a point to all of this?” Ratchis asked his companion.

“I am just killing time,” Kazrack said. “Waiting for Martin’s return. Unless you have changed your mind about destroying the gates.”

“No...” Ratchis said.

“Martin may still come through one,” Roland said.

¹³⁴ **DM’s Note:** The Oath were PCs in a 2E D&D campaign that ran from fall of 1996 to early 2000. Adder was a PC abandoned by a player who decided playing a monk was too onerous for their tastes. He was a member of the Oath around the same time as Escher (see Session #6)

“Martin will never return,” Adder voice came out of the darkness.

“You sound like the voice of doubt in my mind,” Roland replied. “But I have faith in my heart, and never listen to doubts.”

“Doubt and faith are two sides to the same coin,” Adder said. “No matter how many times it flips, the outcome will always lead you astray.”

“I have faith he is coming back,” Roland said.

“Even Martin said he is not coming back,” Bastian said. “I think we are accomplishing nothing by staying here. The Maze is already in the deep realm of the Plane of Time, which means it is far from Aquerra, and no longer poses a threat to Greenreed Valley and beyond. We should be looking for a way out.”

“We still need to free Hurgun,” Roland said. “If we hope to get out of here, he will be the one to see that it happens. We need to go to the Control Room and free him, even if we don’t know how.”

“Maybe we *should* go,” Ratchis said, and suddenly the entire chamber rumbled and then jerked. Everyone was forced to fight to keep their balance. Bastian fell and slid fifteen feet across the room with a yelp.

“We go,” Roland said. Ratchis nodded, and Kazrack sighed his assent. The whole Maze rumbled again.

The Keepers of the Gate hurried back out of the portal after a few bumbling moments in the dark. Ratchis led the way. The first portal led to the Light Room, so they ran through that into the Hell Room. Here the screaming man in the dark corner of the chamber had slid out of his place, and his agonizing bellows clawed at their ears.¹³⁵ On a hunch, Ratchis led the group to the right, and they were back into the Water Room, with its rows of faux columns, marble walls and pool of blue-green water.¹³⁶

As they hurried around the pool, a great vaguely humanoid-shaped wave rose up in and smashed out at Roland and Kazrack, sending them flying back bruised against the wall. Roland, still in panther-form, made a beeline for the portal on the left, sliding and tumbling to avoid another watery tentacle that waved out at him. The Bastite leapt through the portal. Gunthar was right behind him.

Ratchis dragged Kazrack behind him as the dwarf struggled to get back up, and Bastian hung back trying to draw the thing off to let the others escape. Sergio pushed past Ratchis and Kazrack and hurried through the portal after the others, as Bastian grunted with the pain of a blow from the water elemental.

Kazrack managed to get out of the chamber on his own feet, and Ratchis turned back to look at Bastian, who was making his way to the portal as well. The half-orc grabbed him and pushed the bearded warrior through the portal, going through as well, close behind.

They found themselves back in the Kitchen Chamber, and quickly Roland and Ratchis used some of their healing on the failing dwarf. They decided to move on, but Ratchis warned, “If there is some kind of enemy or guardian through this portal, everyone immediately come back in here.” The others agreed.

On through another of the black doorways they found themselves back in Dining Room, where once again, Razzle had nearly succeeded in freeing himself, and Richard’s bond were loose as well. The crimson-robed mage looked up as they entered and smiled.

“Fine, you have won,” he said. “You may free us now.”

Instead, Ratchis tightened their bonds again and gagged them both. Richard the Red glared at them with

¹³⁵ See Session #93

¹³⁶ See Session #98

disappointment.

The Keepers of the Gate did not wait long despite being low on spells and at various states of injury. Ratchis led the way through the portal that had once led to the Control Room, but now it led to Hurgun's Chambers. They entered the hallways with the great stone statues of Hurgun, with his skull cap and broad bare chest.

As Ratchis crept up the hall to look around the corner, there was the sound of stone scraping stone, and he looked up to see the statue of Hurgun come to life, a stone golem, stepping with unexpected speed in his direction.

"Get out of here!" he cried to his companions, and Roland who was just coming through the portal near the rear of the group wasted no time in leaping back through. Ratchis cried out again, as he felt two heavy blows on his shoulder and the side of his head and he fell to the ground bleeding.

Seeing this, Bastian ran right at the statue, ducking under its blow to draw it away from the dying half-orc. "Come here, ya big statue!" he taunted.

With a word to Rivkanal, Kazrack was able to stabilize Ratchis, but the half-orc was still unconscious. Gunthar hurried over, aided by Sergio's quickly cast *haste* spell, to stand over their fallen companion ready to attack if the statue turned towards him again.

The golem stopped, its head reared back, and it let out a cloud of green gas that roiled over Gunthar and Kazrack. As quickly as the Neergaardian felt the speed in his limbs from Sergio's spell, did he feel it cancelled, but Kazrack was able to shake off the effect. Having done his part, Sergio ducked back through the portal after Roland.

Gunthar was unable to react in time to avoid two devastating blows to his chest and neck, and he coughed blood and stumbled. Bastian came back past the golem to draw it off again, but this time, he caught the back of its fist to his face, and he spat blood as he continued to duck past.

Kazrack was dragging Ratchis back into the Dining Room when the golem slammed Bastian twice more and the Gothianian fell down to bleed out. Gunthar leapt through the portal as well.

"Where is Bastian?" Roland asked, when the rest were through.

"He must have fallen!" Kazrack replied, alarmed. The dwarf had bruises all over his body from the day's battles that had not been dealt with. "The statue was closing on him when I came through, but I was certain he would be able to get away. Someone cure me so I can go get him." He turned to Roland, who shrugged.

"I have nothing left," the Bastite said. "I am afraid Bastian may be dead already, unless... if he is unconscious then perhaps the golem will not recognize him as a threat and returns to its position."

"I thought the guardians were supposed to be turned off?" Kazrack complained.

"It must be a temporary thing and they come back on," Roland shrugged.

The dwarf sighed, and calling to his gods, cast *bear's endurance* and *shield of faith* on himself. "Come on, Gunthar. I will need your aid in retrieving Bastian. The rest of you wait here."

Back in the Chambers, the golem had returned to its position, and began to move again, as Kazrack stabilized the Gothianian with a *cure minor wounds* orison. They quickly dragged their unconscious companion from the room, but leaving last, Kazrack took a final blow to the back of the head that made him see stars.

"When the miracle I asked my gods for wears off I will collapse," the rune-thrower told his companions. "Someone must be ready to stabilize me, and then we must rest."

"We have no time to rest," Roland complained.

“Two of us are near death, and I, too shall be there soon enough,” Kazrack said. “We have no choice.”

“Well, there is a little bit of choice,” and with some melodic words, Sergio was able to cure some of Kazrack’s lighter wounds.

“We will still need to rest,” Kazrack said. The others acquiesced.

“You need our help. Release us,” Richard said. He had managed to work his gag off. “As I said before, you have won. I do not see Martin with you, so I assume he has gone on to his task. Our attempt at stopping him is over...”

“No, you will not be released,” Kazrack replied. “But... Do you have any means of healing? You may aid us that way. Have you any potions?”

“Perhaps,” Richard replied, cagily.

“We can just kill you and search your body,” Gunthar said.

“Kazrack would not allow that,” Richard replied.

“Do not tempt me, mage,” Kazrack said, walking over. “Now tell me, if you are sincere in wanting to aid, do you or do you not have means of healing we can use?”

“You will have to free me, if you want them,” Richard said.

“Give them to us and we will let you live, that is assuming at least one of us survives to fulfill the promise,” Kazrack said. The Dining Room shuddered again.

“If Martin is dead, you have no more reason to keep my bound,” Richard re-iterated.

”I have plenty of reasons,” Kazrack said.

“Like?”

“Mostly, because I don’t like you,” the dwarf spat, and then re-gagged the rogue watch-mage.

“I may be able to help,” Razzle offered. “But I want my rapier back and be allowed to leave. Whatever your past with Richard, I was only here aiding him in a cause I thought was just; that is over now. A Greyish Brother always keeps his word.”

Kazrack looked to Roland, who shrugged. “I think he’s telling the truth,” the Bastite said.

Kazrack loosened the half-elf swordsman’s bonds and rolled him out of the rug. Razzle rubbed his wrists and ankles, and then reached into his satchel, drawing out several metal vials. He pointed them out, saying “*Eagle’s splendor*, *bull’s strength*, and two of *cure moderate wounds*.”

Gunthar dropped Razzle’s rapier in the half-elf’s lap and sneered at him, while Kazrack fed one of the healing potions to Ratchis.

The friar of Nephthys sputtered awake and was informed about what was going on. He cast *cure light wounds* on Kazrack, while Gunthar drank the other healing potion.

“We should have used that on Bastian,” Kazrack complained.

“Too late!” Gunthar smirked.

“Can you not even try to be part of a team?” the dwarf asked.

“I am perfectly fine on a team, you all just don’t give me the respect I deserve,” Gunthar replied, still smiling.

“Actually, Bastian is too injured for that potion to have brought him around,” Roland explained. “So, we might as well use it on Gunthar to keep him conscious. If we are planning on resting here, I am going to light my last block of *incense of meditation* and get ready for when I prepare my spells.”¹³⁷ He proceeded to do so.

Ratchis and Kazrack fell to discussing what to do with Richard the Red, but first they dragged the watch-mage across the room. Razzle was checking on the still unconscious Norena and Cordell.

“He is going to continue to try to free himself,” Ratchis said, keeping his voice down. “And if he succeeds, we have no assurances that he won’t act against us. If we can get him to promise to aid us, and free him, it might be a better choice.”

“Or, we can break his fingers,” Kazrack replied.

“I’ll do it!” Gunthar said, walking over.

“No...” Ratchis growled. “But since we are resting, we can wait to decide what to do with him.”

“That’s another thing,” Kazrack said. “I know Roland thinks he has decided for all of us, but I do not like the idea of resting now. The monk is still free in the Maze, and those rumblings seem to be getting worse...”

“I don’t like it either,” Ratchis replied. “But we all exhausted and sore from the many battles we have fought while in here. We will need rejuvenated spells and Bastian among the living if we hope to succeed. And while there may come a time when we have no choice but to interrupt our rest and move on, let us rest while we can.”

Kazrack grumbled his assent.

Martin the Green gasped and wheezed as he came out into a cold stone room that looked like some kind of mausoleum.¹³⁸ He turned back and saw that he had somehow walked out of the chest of a great bust of Rahkefet. The ram-headed god had his arms open, holding a crook in one hand and an ornamental flail in the other. The watch-mage walked down the steps off the raised dais and looked around. There were pillars lined with striations of gold with stylized pictograms of people preparing the dead; some stealing the items interred with them. The pillars held up the vaulted ceiling, and the far end of the room, was an arced glass wall with metal doors, that looked out on the horizonless black beyond.

The walls of the mausoleum were lined with open caskets, leaning upright in two rows. The corpses within were hanging out, suspended from the ceiling by hooks on the end of long chains that were inserted under their chins. The center of their bodies was cut open, and their lungs hung out distended, but a healthy pink, though there was crusted line of black at the top of the exposed trachea.

Martin shuddered and began to walk past the corpses. As he did, they began to stir and moan, but they could barely lift their arms and could not move their heads to look at the watch-mage. He hurried past to the glass wall and looked out. He could now make out dark forms in the inky eternal night beyond. There were large stones floating out there, and the mausoleum itself seemed to have been built on just such a floating rock. He guessed that the

¹³⁷ This magical incense was a gift from Chochokpi, the Tree that Grows Backwards in Session #85.

¹³⁸ **DM’s Note:** During the actual session I alternated back and forth between the rest of the group and Martin, moving from scene to scene at the most conveniently dramatic moment. For the re-telling in the story hour, I consolidated the individual scenes to make them easier to follow for readers.

mausoleum was protecting him from the vacuous environment beyond, but that once he left it, he would benefit from no such protection.

Martin the Green walked back towards the zombies and examined the hanging lungs. He reached up for the trachea of one and it snapped off in his hand at the black line. He looked at the broken end and brushed away the cracking rotted flesh. He walked back to the metal doors and held the end of the trachea up to his face. He felt it squirm as it fit tightly over his mouth, and then he nearly vomited when he felt some long tendril reach out from within and squirm down his throat and snap onto something in his own lungs. Martin stumbled back for a moment in shock, but then he realized the lungs were now hanging from his mouth of their own accord, and they expanded and retracted with each of his breaths. He stepped over and opened the doors.

Winds tugged at Martin's emerald robes as the air in the mausoleum rushed out into the cold beyond. The watch-mage shivered as he stepped out into the courtyard, noting quivering black vines growing along cracks in the stone underfoot. He moaned as he felt some of his life energy immediately drained, and a coldness so harsh it hurt.¹³⁹ He walked out to where the floating stone island he was on ended and could see another bigger island of stone floating way out at the edge of his vision. Everything was shades of gray and black, like a dimmer version of *darkvision*, and the more distant something was, the more like a silhouette it seemed.

He looked down and saw another smaller and more barren island of stone about forty feet below. Willing himself to not be afraid, he leapt out and floated down, landing harder than he expected as the stone was floating up to meet him. He looked around and saw another stone passing above from left to right. As his island crossed its path, he leapt again, barely making the edge.¹⁴⁰

Martin the Green noticed cloud-like nebulas of utter darkness that floated by in bunches and swirls, and as he leapt from island to island, he had to duck and wait to avoid them. When the edge of one brushed his leg in mid-leap, he felt more life energy drain from him.

He continued to leap several times until he finally found himself floating way above the largest of these floating stone islands. The center of it was cloaked in a darkness he could not penetrate, and all around he saw ruined building creating a corridor that led up to the dark area. Martin leapt down one last time.

On the island, he could now see that there was a free-standing narrow stone stairway that led up into the column of darkness. He still had the Book of Black Circles, still tucked under his left arm. The buildings on each side appeared as ruined temples, each with a desecrated holy symbol above the door. There was the ankh and solar disk of Ra, the silver spear of Anhur, the cat's eye with emblazoned ankh of Bast, the rising star of Isis, and then he saw on his left, the tree growing from an ankh that represented Osiris. This symbol was not scratched out or smeared with gore, as the others had been.

Martin walked in that direction, seeing that the doors that led within were smashed off the hinges, and beyond was a walled in courtyard about another mausoleum. The courtyard was a shriveled garden. He approached the mausoleum and as he pushed at the cracked door, there was a sharp pain in his right arm. He winced and for a moment saw stars. Martin looked down at his arm, to see the flesh of it rot away at incredible speed, leaving behind near bare bone tied together with thin stretching sinew. His tears were frozen on his cheeks as he raised the skeletal arm and flexed his boney fingers.

"Osiris," Martin prayed silently, unable to speak with the strange lungs still hanging from his face. "I am bereft of wisdom and of hope. I will obey your command, but I fear I do nothing but bring evil into the world. If there is something I can do to ameliorate this evil, please give me a sign."

Within the mausoleum things were in an equal state of disrepair. Upon a stone bier was a sarcophagus, and as Martin entered, the form of a mummified corpse rose and lifted a leg over the side, to sit on the edge of the bier.

¹³⁹ **DM's Note:** Throughout this trip, Martin would have to make several saves to keep from gaining negative levels, as his life-energy was drained. He would also be making saves against the cold.

¹⁴⁰ **DM's Note:** Martin was making Will save-based jump checks that allowed for much further distances to be crossed and greater heights to be traversed, emulating the fact that in the negative material plane, it is the ability to visualize that moves you.

“Martin the Green,” it hissed, its eyes glowing red within the shadow of its stained wrappings.

“Martin the Green,” it said again. “Turn back. Only evil comes from this place. You are only choosing between them...”

“This may be true,” Martin thought, having faith the gods could hear him. “But you are not the voice of Osiris.” He turned around and left the mausoleum and the courtyard, going back out to path leading to the narrow stone stairway.

As he climbed the first step, he felt another shudder of cold through his body, as he continued to feel his energy and will drain from him. Slowly he climbed towards a ring of darkness that surrounded whatever the steps led to, and each step felt more difficult than the last. He stopped right at the edge of the darkness, and before he knew it, he found himself halfway back down the stairs. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath that made the lungs hanging from his face wheeze and crack, and then began to climb again, with even more difficulty than before. This time he did not hesitate but made to step right into the darkness. Instead, the mantle of green and black fire that sometimes appeared when he cast spells ever since he got possession of the Book of Black Circles ignited around him, and again he found himself back down the steps, this time at the very bottom. He shuddered as he felt even more life energy drain from him as he began to climb a third time.

This time he penetrated the darkness. It was even colder than the rest of this foul plane, and he shook violently as he stumbled out the other side a few steps later.

Martin looked up and seeing where the steps led to, felt something unlike anything he had ever felt before. It was a profound awe. It was a sense of smallness and insignificance that subsumed his whole existence. He looked down at the steps before him, as he collapsed onto his hands and knees, dropping the Book of Black Circles onto the stairs.

Martin had seen the colossal chained form of Rahkefet. With ebony skin and muscular arms folded across his broad bare chest, the god stood nearly motionless upon a great stone pedestal. The chains were black, but currents of white energy sizzled along the links here and there. Martin crawled forward, dragging the book with him, and looked up again. Rahkefet’s immense ram’s head looked down at him, and Martin was pinned to the steps in utter fear. He put the Book of Black Circles two steps before him, and then managed to get to his feet, not looking up until the steps ended in mid-air.

The narrow stone stairs stopped right before the great black metal lock that held the great knot in the chains closed. It hung before the ram-headed god’s folded arms like a misshapen medallion nearly six feet high. There was a depression in the lock the size of the Book of Black Circles.

“Blessed Osiris,” Martin prayed silently again. “Richard the Red claimed that I was being tested, but you did not test Ratchis, who follows your beloved sister, or Jana, who was on a far darker path than mine... before now... I am not special. I am not unique. Therefore, I must conclude that this is not a test, but simply a task you need done. Who am I to deny you?”

Martin the Green raised the Book of Black Circles before him, but he felt his skeletal right arm fighting him, and every muscle in his body screamed as cramps rolled up and down his limbs and side. Concentrating all his will and resolve, Martin thrust himself forward and slipped the book into the depression in the lock.¹⁴¹

There was a silent explosion as the chains burst asunder and the ram-headed god opened his arms. The narrow stone stair broke apart, but Martin the Green felt the vertigo of flight for less than a moment, as he was consumed in the explosion of divine energy, ceasing to be.

It was sometime later that Adder arrived. Ratchis had been catching some quick sleep, while Razzle and Gunthar

¹⁴¹ **DM’s Note:** Martin’s player used a hero point to make sure he got a natural ‘20’ on the final will save to destroy the book.

told each other bawdy jokes. Roland was still meditating in panther-form before the burning incense, and Richard had been dragged back into the middle of the room, where he could be watched. “He’s as ugly as you are,” Gunthar said to Ratchis of the monk as he woke the Friar. They noticed Adder’s lattice of facial scars. The monk leaned his cruel-looking spear on his shoulder, and bowed, though his eyes never left them. “You are all here,” he said. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” Kazrack asked.

“Martin has succeeded,” the monk replied. “It is time to go.”

“We need to rest,” Kazrack said.

“Fine. I will I try to do it on my own,” Adder said. “Good-bye.”

“You cannot let him go,” Richard suddenly cried, his gag loose once again. “He is going to try to gain control of the Maze. There is no telling what he might do!”

But the leader of the Brotherhood of the Lost, stepped quickly through a portal to the right of where he had entered.

Ratchis walked over to Richard, hunting knife in hand. “If I free you, do I have your parole? We want your help, but I want you to understand that you are still our prisoner, and we plan to bring or send you to the Academy for justice, as Martin would have wanted...”

Richard the Red agreed, and the half-orc cut him free.

“Roland! We must go,” Kazrack smacked the panther awkwardly on the top of the head, but the Bastite did not respond.

“We will leave him here with the injured,” Ratchis said, throwing Richard his satchel of spell components along with a threatening glare. “Let us go!”

The Keepers of the Gate hurried through the portal Adder had left through. Ratchis and Gunthar led the way, followed by Richard and Razzle. Kazrack and Sergio took up the rear. Suddenly, they were back in the Dark Room.

“He is not in here,” Sergio said.

“This is a foul and powerful spell Hurgun has cast in this room,” Richard commented.¹⁴² “I would cast *analyze portal*, but I need to see the portal to know where it will go.”

“We need to guess,” Ratchis said. He had Sergio guide them to the portal directly across the way. It led to the Hell Room.

After a quick search of the floor, Ratchis said, “Let’s go back and try another way. I have a hunch.”

Back in the Dark Room, Sergio led them to the left, and they fumbled through the portal and appeared in the Control Room, where Adder stood at the edge of the blue-white spiral about Hurgun, rocking back and forth as if trying to sync up with its turns and pulses.

End of Session #101

¹⁴² The spell was a *permanent Ineffable Darkness*.

Session #102 ¹⁴³

The great ape, with its exposed brain, was still orbiting the brown-skinned frozen form of Hurgun of the Stone, caught in the swirling blue-white spiral that surrounded the geomancer. Adder rocked back and forth, and barely made note of the Keepers of the Gate's entrance. But he leapt deftly from one of the wide catwalks to one on the left, twisting his body to avoid the sudden pulse of the time elemental.

"What do we do?" Kazrack asked, as Gunthar stepped forward to the top of the stairs, swords drawn. Ratchis followed, but the Neergardian continued, getting as close as he dared to the orbiting ape. He made ready to take a swipe at it as it came around again.

"I don't know if that is a good idea," Ratchis warned the blonde warrior, taking a moment to look down at the swirling mist below the metal grate they stood on.

"We have to do something," Gunthar complained, letting the ape go by one time.

"For once, Gunthar is right," Kazrack said, and suddenly charged up the steps and leapt across the gulf to the catwalk the monk had leapt to. The heavily armored dwarf teetered on the edge half a moment. Adder walked over calmly, crouching into a fighting position, his scarred face impassive. Kazrack was barely able to throw himself flat to the grate and roll away loudly, as he felt the monk's foot slam him in the chest plate.

Ratchis drained another of his clay vials of the *Blood of Ashronk* and began to string his bow.¹⁴⁴ Arcane words and gestures came from Richard the Red, as he pointed at the monk, but nothing seemed to happen. Kazrack continued to retreat as he got to his feet.

Suddenly, two tendrils of blue-white light flashed out at both Adder and Kazrack. The monk ducked with incredible speed and avoided it, but Kazrack's cry was cut short as he stumbled back stunned. Adder took advantage and followed a roundhouse kick with a shove that sent the dwarf over the side of the grate and down into the crackling misty abyss below. The mist roiled more violently, and a flash of light momentarily blinded everyone.

"Kazrack!" Ratchis cried, letting an arrow go that was sure to reach its mark. Adder turned around and brushed it out of the air almost casually.

Gunthar cut deeply into Ming the Dakkon-King as the paralyzed gorilla flew past and Razzle leapt into the air and came tumbling down onto the catwalk opposite the one Adder was on. However, another tendril flashed out and the half-elf could not avoid it. He stumbled back, dropping his rapier.

Sergio's musically encouraging words echoed across the chamber.

Razzle Greyish barely had time to recover when the time elemental struck out again; this time in both directions at once. The monk leapt high to avoid the one that came after him and leapt upon the dais, beside the chair Hurgun hovered over. Razzle, however, was surrounded by an aura of blue-white light and he began a much faster orbit about Hurgun, further out than Ming was.

Gunthar sheathed his blades, stepping back to avoid Razzle's path, and drew out an orcish shortbow and sent an arrow at Adder. It fell short, but as Adder made to step onto the chair, the time elemental whipped him with a tendril, sending him falling backwards. Gunthar, having misjudged how far back he now needed to be to avoid the tendrils, could not resist when one whipped around him from Razzle's passing paralyzed form. The Neergardian was now paralyzed as well, moving even faster than Razzle did, though just beyond him.

Ratchis let two more arrows go the moment he saw Adder fall back, and this time the monk could not avoid them.

¹⁴³ This session was played on December 3rd, 2005.

¹⁴⁴ This is actually the strength bow he commissioned back in Summit long ago and then later gave to Logan. Obviously, he took it back from Logan's corpse.

However, Ratchis had to step back down the steps to avoid Gunthar and Razzle. He and Sergio and Richard huddled there for a moment.

“Any ideas?” Ratchis asked, as Sergio continued to sing.

“Only one, and it probably won’t work,” Richard the Red said, grabbing the lining of his cloak. “I may be able to reach it by using this, but more likely I will fade away into oblivion.” He paused and looked at Ratchis in the eye. “I hope you can think well of me for this, if for nothing else.” The crimson-robed watch-mage tugged on his cloak twice and he disappeared.

“How will we know if it worked?” Ratchis called aloud. The bard just shook his head and continued singing. The whole chamber shuddered, and Ratchis brought his bow up again as Adder seemed trying to make a second attempt. However, two blue-white tendrils shot out at once and the monk could not avoid them. He too was grabbed in an aura of blue-white light and began to spin about the spiral about Hurgun.

“This is bad,” Ratchis whispered, as he heard Sergio stop singing.

“I am getting out of here,” the bard said, leaping through the portal. The whole chamber shook again and jerked to the left, hanging about fifteen degrees askew. Ratchis fell to his knees and held onto the grating for dear life. His bow clattered down the grate disappearing into the rising mist. The half-orc pulled himself through the portal and found Sergio waiting for him on the other side.

They were in the Hell Room, and the whole chamber shuddered again.

“Look!” Sergio pointed at the portal. The normal lightless black was slowly becoming a rising blue-white swirl.

Sergio and Ratchis ran through the portal across from the one that came out of and ended up back in the Dining Room.

“What are we going to do?” Sergio asked, looking panicky. Sweat was beading up on his forehead.

“I don’t know...” Ratchis replied. He looked to where Roland of Bast was still praying silently between the unconscious forms of Bastian and Norena. Cordell of Thoth was laying still, a few feet away. Two of the portals in this chamber began to transform into blue-white light as well, and the whole place shuddered again.

“I am not staying here,” Sergio said, and fled through one of the other portals.

Ratchis knelt before Roland.

“Roland,” he said calmly. “I need your help. I don’t know what to do. Maybe we should be fleeing...”

The room shuddered and jerked again as the two portals were now rectangles of swirling blue and white. The floor tilted and the unconscious forms began to slide into one corner.

Finally, Roland looked up from his prayer, as he was forced to stop himself and hold the bodies to keep them from being re-injured when colliding with furniture.

“I think it is too late to do anything,” Roland said sadly, as he gestured towards the blue and white light pooling into the room like some form of luminescent liquid air.

“I thought you said we had all the time in the world...” Ratchis said, as the room suddenly slipped into complete freefall and the blue and white energy rushed in quickly, like water into a sinking boat. Submerged, there was only the barren white flash before non-existence.

Osilem, 24th of Keent - 564 H.E.

“Ach, ya ned tah use the sahm stun ta be far. The dwarf said it,” Kazrack heard a distantly familiar voice come down to him from the top of a grassy hill. He looked around as a light breeze broke the stifling heat of a late summer in Verdun. There were tall green oaks, and small flowering bushes lining rows of tomb stones, and in the distance, he saw the occasional tomb. The sun’s glare was peeking out from behind the huge mausoleum to his left. There was a good-sized stone in his hands. He felt healthy and unwounded.

“Aye! Kahz-rock! Whut is takin’ ya suh long? Ya seen the witch, ‘ave ya?” the voice came down to him again, and the dwarf looked up the hill and began to climb it. The voice was coming from black-haired man in studded leather armor, wearing a color kilt of orange and red, and had a bastard sword strapped to his back. He hopped back and forth; restless.

“Muh-muh...Malcolm?” Kazrack said he came to the top of the hill. From here he could see the walls of Verdun nearby, but more amazingly he could now see that Malcom Mac-Duligh was not up here alone.¹⁴⁵ There was tall man with a shaved head in a suit of scale mail, the butt of his quarterstaff resting on the ground, and a silver jackal’s head about his neck. There was a young woman with dark brown hair, olive skin, large eyes, and a plain brown dress. It was Jana and Beorth.

“How did you change into that so quickly?” came the voice that really lifted Kazrack’s heart. “Where did you even get plate mail? I mean, you didn’t carry it with you, and you certainly didn’t find it at the bottom of the hill! And you were wearing a chain shirt before...” It was Jeremy Northrop. His face was still fresh and unbearded, and his golden locks had just started to grow about his ears freeing itself of the simple bowl-cuts favored in his native Neergaard. He wore a chain shirt and had a longsword and short sword on his belt.

Kazrack looked down at the front of his armor, noticing that the detailed etching he had made on the breastplate of a rune-covered mountain was mostly buffed away by the many blows it had absorbed.

Jana’s eyes narrowed as she looked the dwarf up and down suspiciously.

“Ach! Ah thought dwarves had nuh magic about ‘em,” Malcolm protested.¹⁴⁶

“I... I...” Kazrack could not close his mouth. He looked back and forth from one of his former companions to another. Somewhere a summer songbird tweeted. “Don’t you understand? I... I have seen you all die, or leave to not be found again...” His vision rested on Beorth.

“I do not know what you are talking about,” Beorth said, calmly. “Do you speak prophecy?”¹⁴⁷

“No... This must be... How can this be the past? And I stand here in the armor I made myself a year from this day...” Kazrack was dumbfounded.

“Ah thank the dwarf’s been innas coops,” Malcolm said. Kazrack smiled at the accent and then suddenly blurted, “Chance!”

“What?” Jeremy asked.¹⁴⁸ He shot a cocked eyebrow at his Wallbrookian friend and grinned; tapping his own temple.

“Chance is still alive here, too!” Kazrack cried out. “I have a chance to save him, too. To make everything turn out

¹⁴⁵ Verdun is the capital of the Kingdom of Herman Land, where the tale of the heroes that would come to be known as the Keepers of the Gate first began.

¹⁴⁶ **DM’s Note:** Malcolm Mac-Duligh was, of course, played by Ratchis’ player since that was his character. I handed out the sheets with the stats on them face down and gave him a note with instructions that it should be read aloud in ‘Malcolm’s voice’ when I gave him the signal, and then everyone could turn the sheets over.

¹⁴⁷ **DM’s Note:** Beorth was being run by Martin the Green’s player.

¹⁴⁸ **DM’s Note:** Jeremy Northrop was run by Bastian’s player.

better than it did!”

“Ya men the fella back at the pub? The other Wallbrookian that ‘ass signed oop?” Malcolm asked.

Kazrack nodded vigorously, but the smile melted. He barely had time to plant his feet as a brown-clothed form came leaping over the side of the hill scattering the others. The monk’s kick slammed against Kazrack’s chest plate with a resounding ring.

Adder spun back and away, crouched in a fighting stance.

“Why do you attack me?” Kazrack asked, withdrawing to draw his golden flail and his shield. He remembered his halberd dropped from his hand when he was stunned by the blue-white tendril of the time elemental.

“Defeat you now alone, or defeat you later in time when you stand with your friends? What would you do?” Adder replied.

“But he does stand with his friends, false monk!” Beorth said, bringing his hands down from in front of his face. His *sight beyond sight* had detected the foul cloying aura of evil about Adder.

“*Boayl sollys!*” Malcolm chanted, pulling his bastard sword off his back and a burst of light exploded in front of Adder’s scarred face. The monk ignored it and spun, deftly avoiding, and knocking blows aside with a dance-like grace, his arms locking momentarily in fanciful positions before flowing again. Suddenly, the dance turned violent. As he ducked Kazrack’s flail, Adder swept Beorth’s legs out from under him, sending the heavily armored warrior the ground. The monk hopped back up and performed a flurry of heavy stomping kicks as he ran over the helpless paladin. There was a sickening crack as the monk’s sandal sent Beorth’s chin into the grass.

Adder leapt into the air and spun back around, to fend off Kazrack who was on his heels.

“Fiend! I will slay you!” Kazrack roared.

“Holy...!” Jeremy cried, and immediately began to hustle away. He only paused when he noticed his friend was not following him. Jana, on the other hand was already way ahead of the Neergaardian, running for her life back towards Verdun.¹⁴⁹

Kazrack withdrew as Adder tumbled around him, taking a moment to call to his gods for *bear’s’ endurance*.

“Malcolm! Run away! Run away!” Jeremy cried, charging back with his long sword swinging. Adder turned to easily avoid the blow. Malcolm jerked as he brought his sword down through the air missing. Adder grabbed the skald’s arms and drove his knee into the bard’s gut and crotch several times, before dropping him to the ground unconscious.

Kazrack made to take advantage of the distraction, but Adder ducked back down again, and swept Kazrack’s feet, sending the dwarf to the ground. The monk knelt beside the dwarf and punched him full on in the neck but sprung back up as Jeremy tried to creep up behind him. A kick went flying back sending the Neergaardian to the ground next to his companion.

“Give up, Kazrack,” Adder said, stepping back casually towards Malcolm. “Can’t you see this is all pointless? That any duty you are forced to uphold is but a weight dragging you down. There is only pain in this life. Pain and death. And I know you do not relish it...”

Adder stepped on Malcolm’s neck, snapping it as Kazrack struggled to get back to his feet.

“You blame your weakness on your humanity,” Kazrack said. “But you are truly inhuman, monk.”

¹⁴⁹ **DM’s Note:** Jana of Westron was run by Roland of Bast’s player.

“One day that too shall be true, but until I reach that state, I am free of duty and promises,” Adder said, dancing over to land on Jeremy and twist his feet to kill the young warrior. “If I am evil, I am evil because it is the default state of men. If I want you to despair, it is only because I want you to see truly the state of the mortal being.”

Kazrack roared wordlessly, pressing in with shield and flail. The monk did not show that he felt pain, but Kazrack knew he scored a good blow, as the flail chain jerked hard, and he pulled away again. A flurry of punches battered at the top of the shield, and several came down striking Kazrack hard in the bridge of the nose. The dwarf saw stars and withdrew again but was shocked to suddenly see Adder flying down out of the air, left leg held straight before him. The sandaled foot caught him in on his breastplate and he went stumbling back, as Adder flipped back and landed on his feet again.

The monk cracked his arms and got back into his fighting stance, staring at Kazrack without blinking. The rune-thrower called to Krauchaar to grant him *bull's strength*. He could feel every breath burn in his chest, and his knee felt twisted from when he fell; his whole body ached. He sighed, but then caught sight of the crumpled forms of his friends, dead once again, and he raised his shield, spun his flail over his head and charged.

Again he felt the flail strike the monk hard, but the silent master seemed to hug onto the shield, as if using it for cover as well, dancing left and right to avoid the dwarf-head-shaped head of the weapon.¹⁵⁰ However, the monk's blows were having a hard time getting around the shield as well, and the two combatants broke apart once again.

Kazrack called for Rivkanal to close the worst of his wounds, but was dismayed to find that those left behind were not so much better. He looked up to see that Adder was kneeling silently with his palms pressed together. The some of the monk's wounds closed of their own accord.

Kazrack roared and charged again, and this time Adder charged as well, leaping into his flying kick, but Kazrack side-stepped and slammed his flail into the monk's back as he went past. Adder crumpled into a ball on the ground, and Kazrack got in another lick before the monk tumbled away and back to his feet. Tenacious, Kazrack did not let up, raining blows down on the retreating monk. Adder regained his form and balance and managed a few more punishing blows to Kazrack's head and face. The dwarf's ears rung in his helmet. Realizing he had lost his advantage he withdrew again, and once again called to his gods for aid. This time, in the form of a *shield of faith*.

Adder tossed away a glass vial that shattered against a stone, having just swallowed its contents.¹⁵¹

Again the two fighters met. This time, Kazrack stopped short of his charge and Adder ended up overextended in his kick.¹⁵² The flail spun round crushing into the monk's ribs. Adder spat blood and spun quickly to block the follow-up blow but failed. The weight of the blow knocked the monk to the ground, but he hopped back up to his feet with no trouble and battered at Kazrack's shield.

Grunting, Kazrack slammed the monk again, but was alarmed when he felt the monk grab his arm and twist it painfully. Kazrack pulled back too fast, and his shield fell just enough to allow Adder a solid hit to the dwarf's face.

The world became softly pulsating colors awash with pain. After another shock of sudden pain, and then all was black for the rune-thrower.

Balem, 24th of Ese - 561 H.E.

Roland of Bast felt a heavy weight on his head, as if he had been drinking too much the night before. He opened his eyes as he raised his head off of cold stone floor. He was in human-form, but he did not need the sensitive nose of a panther to notice the stench of death that clung to the air here. He heard heavy breathing, and a vaguely familiar

¹⁵⁰ This is Ororon-Thiduil, found in the Pit of Bones.

¹⁵¹ **DM's Note:** This was a potion of owl's wisdom to improve his armor class.

¹⁵² **DM's Note:** Adder missed and fumbled, getting this result: *Over-extended/Distracted. Intended opponent gains immediate attack of opportunity at +4.*

voice whispered, “I don’t think we’re going to live through this.”

“Shut up, Teaser! And have a drink! Here you have a sip of the horn, too!” a dwarven voice growled, too loudly for the surroundings. “Hey! Roland is waking up! I thought you said he was near death, Reynald...”

Teaser? Reynald? Could it be? Roland called to his goddess to grant him the benison of light, and suddenly the dark little room was awash in it, throwing the shadows of Roland’s one-time companions to dance in the corner.

They were underground, that was certain. He sat up and saw a door in the center of the plain wall in front of him, and another smaller metal door in the right corner behind him.

Teaser turned around suddenly. He had been creeping over to the wooden door when the *light* spell went off. He was only slightly taller than Roland, with golden curly locks and a freckled nose. He wore studded leather armor and had a long sword at his side, but there was a shortbow and an arrow in his hands. He had a darkening shiner about his right eye, and his hands were stained in the rusty brown of dried blood.

“Ro! You’re alive,” he said, with genuine surprise.

“Um... Yes! Of course, I am,” the Bastite said, standing and dusting himself off. “You know us Bastites... Nine lives and all that.” He looked around and now he knew exactly where he was and *when* he was, and he gulped audibly.

“Does that explain how your clothes have changed?” Reynald asked. He was tall and lanky, and he too had long hair, though it seemed to have gone pre-maturely gray, as his face was still fresh and boy-like despite the stubble on it. He wore a chain shirt and hefted a warhammer in his hands. About his neck was the silver symbol of an eye engraved with an ankh. “And since when do you have a chain shirt? And that ring...?” Reynald was seriously wounded. Something had torn at his neck and shoulder viciously and the wound was oozing again.

“Observant as ever, oh Wayfarer of Ptah,” Roland replied. “I will do my best to explain, but we need to get out of here. You don’t know how important it is that we all get out of here, right now... Shall we try this other door?”

“Well, since we won’t have to carry your knocked out form around this gods-forsaken place, we just might have a chance,” the dwarf said. His name was TARTH STARN, and Roland knew the hill dwarf well. Dressed in his scored suit of chain mail, he was moderately wounded as well, and his cracking knuckles squeezed about the haft of his great axe. He had a bushy brown beard and a helmet-shaped like a bear’s head.

“Remind me again whose idea it was to break that seal and explore this place?” asked the fat man in shabby burgundy robes. The man’s triple-chins glistened with sweat and drool, and the blood stains on his robes were mixed in with a variety of grease stains already there. He held a light crossbow in his hands.

“That would have been me, Corasant,” said Reynald. “But I do not recall you complaining about the prospect of treasure when the topic came up...”

The argument was interrupted as the swollen wooden door bursting open.

“They found us!” Teaser squealed, leaping back and raising his bow.¹⁵³

Through the door came necrotic loping forms with pale skin and stringy hair, wearing the ragged remains of their clothing. They were dead, but Roland saw intelligence in their eyes, awareness of their own pitiable desire to eat living flesh.

Two came rushing right at Reynald the Traveled, while two more leapt right at the dwarf.¹⁵⁴ TARTH deftly stepped

¹⁵³ **DM’s Note:** Tim “Teaser” Reynolds was played by Kazrack’s player.

¹⁵⁴ **DM’s Note:** Reynald the Traveled was played by Martin the Green’s player.

aside and immediately took advantage of the opening he was given.¹⁵⁵ His axe cut the head from the first and then the heavy blade landed in the chest of the other, driving it to the ground – finally, really dead. However, he felt his muscles grow rigid and looked down to see the slightest scratch had gotten through his breeches. The dwarf was paralyzed.

The hiss of an *acid arrow* from the fat wizard as he withdrew behind Teaser (who was still backing toward the metal door in the corner) was overwhelmed by the rush of holy energy as Roland called to Bast for a *holy smite*.¹⁵⁶ The ghouls screeched in agony. Five more that had just come loping into the room shriveled into black lumps of near-liquid flesh, while the two attacking Reynald ran back out of the room, pushing past another half-dozen of their brethren crowding into the room with hunger in their eyes.

Roland sighed. For he knew that this was the Kingdom of the Ghouls. Early in his adventuring days, he and his friends had broken a seal in an old keep and had climbed down in search of treasure. He remembered it too well and knew there was no end to the ghouls beyond that door.¹⁵⁷

Reynald slammed a ghoul with his warhammer as it hurried recklessly through the door. Another ran right past to claw at Roland, ignoring an arrow from Teaser.

“Oh Great Queen Bast! I call on you to lend me your *spiritual weapon* that I may fight alongside an aspect of my faith in you!” Roland cast as he stepped aside, and a glowing translucent dagger appeared and stabbed at the ghoul attacking Reynald in the neck. The thing fell over exanimate.

But cries of alarm overcame any joy, for one of the ones that had come rushing in was standing over the collapsing Tarth Starn. The paralyzed dwarf’s eyes could not even roll back as the ghoul stopped to slurp down the flesh and sinew it had ripped from his neck.

“Tarth!” Roland and Teaser cried at the same time. The latter began to frantically work at the lock in the door with a crowbar.

Corasant did not seem to notice, deep in some incantation.

The ghouls forced Reynald and Roland back, and as their black nails clawed at them they could feel the cold creep of the paralysis shake off every time, and every time they sighed in relief.

Reynald crushed another ghoul skull, as Teaser pried the metal door open with a gasp.

There was pop in the air as a glowing beetle of great size appeared between Corasant and a charging ghoul. It worried the ghoul with its pincers. The fat wizard flicked a pork rind across the room while saying, “*ne multus!*” More ghouls were pouring into the room, but now they fell over themselves as they entered. Corasant stepped through the metal door to find a round room beyond. A spiral stone staircase climbed up into the darkness, but it was cracked and broken, revealing a deep shaft beneath it.

Teaser crept into the new room and climbed above the door into a narrow shadowy crack.

Reynald backed into the round room, as Roland called to Bast once more with a roar, smiting the dozen ghouls now in the room. In a moment, only two were standing, but still more were pouring in. Teaser squinted as he saw someone climbing up out of the shaft beneath the steps. It was a man in brown robe and wooden sandals. He had a shaved head and as he came over the lip, they could see his face etched with scars.

“Whoa! That’s not Teaser!” Reynald exclaimed, backing away from the monk.

¹⁵⁵ **DM’s Note:** Tarth Starn was played by Bastian’s player.

¹⁵⁶ **DM’s Note:** Corasant the Conjurer was played by Ratchis’ player.

¹⁵⁷ Roland was knocked unconscious fighting these ghouls the first time, only to awaken days later in an inn in a small town miles away. He never went back because he knew that was what the ghouls wanted, more victims to chew on. He never knew how he had gotten to where he was and had to live with the fact the rest of his companions had been eaten or made into ghouls themselves.

“Um, hello sir?” Corasant wiped his chin with the back of his hand and then wiped that on his robes and stepped forward, crossbow trembling in his hands. “Are you a monk of Anubis come to help us escape these terrible undead?”

“Where are the Keepers of the Gate?” Adder asked in his flat voice.

“Who?” the wizard asked.

Back in the first room, a ghoul fell from a wound from the *spiritual dagger* as Roland tore another ghoul apart. A third ghoul had stopped to feast on Tarth.

“No more are coming,” Roland called to his friends. “Come and help me fasten the door closed, so we can find a way out of here.”

Reynald the Traveled came charging back into the room leaping over the last ghoul as Roland tore its throat out and slammed the door shut. Roland looked up just in time to see Adder come stepping into room, leap up, land on one foot and spin with a devastating kick to the side of the Bastite’s panther head. Roland stumbled back as his ears rung and the world shook. He felt some teeth crack, and he wobbled back and forth to keep from falling.

“Foul monk!” Corasant cried, firing his crossbow from the doorway, but Adder spun and blocked it.

“Ptah! Heal this fellow traveler so that he might live to move on!” Reynald chanted, reaching out to heal his Bastite companion. But as soon as the wounds closed, Adder closed in on the still *stunned* priest and let loose with a flurry of bone-crunching blows.

“*Exuro eate respergo*,” chanted Corasant, but the splash of acid he flung at the monk fell short. Adder ducked the wayfarer’s warhammer and ignored that priest, preferring another foot plant right in the panther’s nose. The *cat-shaped* priest went flying backwards. Roland noticed how pretty the blue-white stars spinning about his head were, as all went black...¹⁵⁸

Osilem, 17th of Keent - 564 H.E.

Ratchis of Nephthys found himself under the dark shadows of some pine trees. The coolness of night made the hairs on his arms and neck bristle, but he knew instinctively, that it was the coolness of a late summer night in Derome-Delem, not the cutting cold of the Gothanian fall that he and the others had left outside of Hurgun’s Maze.

The moon was rising, and he could hear the crackle of a fire and the voice of men ahead of him. The half-orc crept forward as quietly as he could, shaking his head at how eerily familiar this all was.

“I’m telling you, the King of Gothanius is calling for fodder from abroad,” one of the men was saying.

“I heard tell it was slaves,” said another. “Whole caravans of wanna-be adventurers and draft-dodging cowardly Herman-landers who will be pressed into irons when they get there.”

“That tricky bastard, always decrying us because of slaves, and now...”

“He saw what Menovia accomplished in Rhondria,” said the second man again. “He probably realized he needed slaves to keep up.”

¹⁵⁸ **DM’s Note:** I always warn players, either come up with a background or I will come up with elements of it for you. This is especially pertinent for characters that come into an established game with several levels under their belt. That is, what was the rest of their adventuring career like before now? So, since Roland’s player had never gotten me anything, and since I wanted each character to have a “time scene” for themselves, I made up a previous adventuring party, and knowing that at some point every hero in Aquerra experiences some kind of failure, I figured he had experienced a big one that carried with it some guilt.

“Next they’ll be worshipping Set,” said another.

“Eventually *everyone* will worship Set,” said the second man again. It was clear he was the leader.

Ratchis crept up to a small clearing. There was a fire just off center, and a group of armored men gathered around it. They wore black leather and had travel-stained cloaks, and Ratchis noticed several pairs of manacles on a nearby pack, and then he remembered. These were the slavers from which he had first heard about the caravans to Gothanius. It had been here that he heard the rumor regarding the king of Gothanius.¹⁵⁹

Ratchis of Nephthys smiled his frightful smile of crooked jagged teeth and slowly drew his great sword.

Silently he jogged over the grass, and with a barbaric yawp brought this great sword down atop the captain’s head, cleaving it twain. There was uproar in the camp, but even as the men about the fire spread out, another lay dying, his innards sprawled out behind him.

The largest of the Menovian slavers turned as he scooped up his great cudgel. He was a huge fresh-faced man-child that snorted happily when he saw Ratchis charge at him. He brought the club down and it cracked over Ratchis’ shoulder and smashed it against the side of the half-orc’s face. But Ratchis thrust his sword before him and jerked it to one side, and then the big man lay dying as well.

The friar of Nephthys, spun around to get a look at the positions of the others, but one of the men had run and never looked back, and another took off when the big man went down.¹⁶⁰ Ratchis’ shrugged his shoulders and made to begin tracking them, when his eyes were drawn to a large form leaping from tree to tree around the clearing. It was a large ape with blue-black fur on its head and shoulders that slowly became gray towards the legs. but the top of its head was sliced off, revealing a pulsating blue-green brain.¹⁶¹ It swung around, and seeing Ratchis, brachiated in that direction.

“Nephthys, I call on you to close my wounds, as this might be the only respite from battle I am to get,” Ratchis prayed. And then he lifted his sword, ready to meet the ape’s leap, but it did not come. At the edge of the clearing, it leapt to a tall tree branch and, slamming a fist against its chest once, simply looked at Ratchis. The half-orc felt a searing pain behind his eyes and for a second he feared he might black out, but instead he focused through it with a grunt, swinging his sword back and forth and grunting at the ape.

Again, the pain came and again, Ratchis squinted and roared and there was no lasting effect.¹⁶² Ming the Dakkon King hooted and beat his chest again. He leapt down in fearsome rage, but Ratchis did not hesitate. As soon, as the gorilla landed, Ratchis charged in, bringing his great sword down. There was a flash of blood and a cry of pain, and suddenly all was dark for the half-orc, as he was crushed against the dakkon’s chest; great arms wrapping around him.

With a deep breath and a roar, Ratchis burst out of the ape’s grasp, happy for the strength granted by his belt. There was another flash of blood, and then Ratchis felt the ape’s hand smack across his face in an attempt to grab him again. The half-orc leapt back, bringing his sword between them.

¹⁵⁹ Ratchis told Beorth and Kazrack about this encounter way back in Session #10.

¹⁶⁰ **DM’s Note:** Once again, I handed out these characters for the other players to use as to not have others left out. However, the battle with the slavers went so quick, I no longer remember who played which of them. Keep in mind, that while this encounter was never originally played out, it was something discussed as part of Ratchis’ background to lead him in the direction of the other PCs, thus it had to be an encounter that a 2nd level priest/ranger could reasonably expected to handle on his own, considering that it was originally described as him taking them out one by one as they went to relieve themselves, and then later went looking for each other.

¹⁶¹ Ming the Dakkon King was released from the *mirror of life-trapping* in session #93 and was discovered a prisoner of the time elemental in session #96.

¹⁶² **DM’s Note:** As I had not settled on a system of psionics for use in Aquerra campaigns at this point, I “faked” Ming’s psionic powers, by just giving him some basic mindflayer-like abilities. The problem was, they were Charisma-based and his Charisma was a measly 7. So, what was supposed to be a fierce opponent, was not all he could be. But that’s alright, the Fearless Manticore Killers had plenty of very difficult fights, so if this once did not turn out as tough as I expected it to be—it all evens out.

Ming the Dakkon King leapt back and flicked his gaze at Ratchis, and once again the tough-minded Friar fought off the effects of the mind blast. There was a rustle in the brush, and suddenly Kazrack came charging out from under the trees. The ape leapt up into a tree once again.

“What is that thing?” Kazrack asked. “Where are we? Be careful, Adder might be lurking about.”

“Adder? What are you doing here?” Ratchis asked, keeping an eye on the foe. The gorilla was making his way around the clearing from tree to tree.

“I don’t know. Last I remember, I was back in Verdun... Back at the time when we were in the cemetery outside of the city, just before we came to Derome-Delem... You weren’t there yet, but...but... Jeremy was there, and Beorth and Jana... Adder attacked, and I fear he defeated me, but here I am again... And I guess that gives me hope that the deaths Adder caused back there are not permanent...”

“Things are already different, there is nothing we can do,” Ratchis replied. “This ape-thing was not here before. And I killed all the slavers last time, this time two got away.”

“What is happening?” Kazrack asked.

“I am not sure, but the time elemental must have scattered us across time and space,” Ratchis’ brow furrowed. “Except... Well, I seem to have all the abilities and memories I gained since this time...”

“It is with good reason that time is the domain of the gods,” Kazrack said. “Our mortal minds were not meant to handle such dilemmas.”

Ratchis nodded. Kazrack called to Rivkanal and cast a healing spell on his companion, but suddenly there was the buzz of cutting air and an arrow nicked a gap between plates in the dwarf’s armor.

“Look out!” Ratchis pushed the dwarf away.

“Is the ape shooting arrows?” Kazrack asked.

“The slavers are back!” Ratchis cried, turning in the direction the arrow came from, as that was nearly the same as the Menovians had fled. But it wasn’t slavers; a figure popped out of the brush and fired another arrow. This one bounced harmlessly off of Kazrack’s chest plate. It was Adder.

“Where did he get a bow? He didn’t have a bow before! I still don’t have my halberd!” Kazrack complained.

“He must have gotten it from one of the fleeing slavers,” Ratchis reasoned, and he charged towards the brush.¹⁶³

Adder popped up again, tearing a bead from the necklace he wore hidden beneath his robes. He hurled it, and where it smashed against a stump there was an explosion of fire. Ratchis dove to the ground, rolling to avoid the worst of it, but Kazrack was badly singed. He called to his gods for their *divine favor*, as Ratchis scurried to the cover of brush that was not burning; standing up behind a tree.

The monk rushed out of the brush and landed a devastating kick in Kazrack’s face, forcing the dwarf to stumble back, nearly off his sturdy feet. But he recovered quickly, and soon Ratchis was moving in to flank the monk. Adder showed no emotion as he barely blocked a blow from Ratchis only to have the head of Kazrack’s magical flail slam him in the kidneys. The monk took off for a nearby tree and ran right up the side, his sandals adhering to the trunk as if he were a spider.

Kazrack moved to follow, but Ratchis held him back. “Wait! Why are we fighting him? There might be a reason we are here. Let’s withdraw, and if he comes after us then we know what is going on has something to do with us. If he

¹⁶³ **DM’s Note:** That is exactly where he got it.

doesn't, we can track him and figure it out."

"Hmmp!" Kazrack disagreed, but for once did not argue with his companion.

The two Keepers of the Gate withdrew from the clearing and made their way towards another smaller one.

"Ratchis?" came a voice from the brush as they approached, and Roland, in panther-form, came stalking out.

"Where am I? How did I get here? *When* are we?"

"The best I can guess, we are about two to three weeks before I met Kazrack and the others for the first time. About five or six days northwest of Tallow's Post," Ratchis replied.

"Have you been anywhere... uh... *anywhen* else?" Roland asked. "I was with my former party, many years ago, and... and Adder was there!"

"He is here as well," Ratchis replied.

"Where?" Roland growled. He cast *greater magic fang* and turned in a circle throwing his nose in the air to catch the scent of the monk. "I am going to make him pay! I could have saved them this time if it weren't for him!"

"What are you talking about?" Kazrack asked.

"Back the way you came from?" Roland asked, but he did not wait, hurrying in that direction.

"I guess he made our choice for us," Kazrack snarled and chased after him. Ratchis followed as well with a sigh.

The Bastite came bounding through the brush, and after one great leap he spotted Adder creeping out of the clearing in their direction.

"Great Queen Bast! Smite this cruel foe that he may be stopped from committing wanton evil!" Roland called, and there was a blast of divine energy. Adder stumbled and then ducked into a roll, changing direction to head back to the clearing.

As the monk leapt into a tree, Roland called to his goddess again for another *holy smite*, but this one fizzled as it came down, not getting through Adder's spell resistance. Kazrack hustled right up to the base of the tree, and regretted it, as Adder feigned as if he were going to leap into the higher branches but came down instead with a heavy kick to the dwarf's shoulder.

Grunting, Kazrack spun and slapped Adder with his flail, knocking the monk down. He followed up with another crunching blow as the monk rolled to his feet. There was a blast of *searing light* from Roland, but Adder leapt up out of the way, completely avoiding it. The monk made to tumble past Ratchis who had moved in to block escape, but he was not quick enough and heavy chop from the half-orc's great sword had the monk bleeding out on the grass.

Kazrack walked over. Roland stalked over still fuming.

"I guess we should stabilize him," Kazrack said.

"Let him die," Roland said.

Ratchis' head sagged. "I don't know. Maybe he needs to actually die so we can stop hopping around in time."

"Yes, that's good..." Roland said, pacing in a circle. "Let's go with that theory. I like it. I'll even speed him along so he won't suffer..."

"No, he is helpless and might still offer us some information that will aid us," said Kazrack. The dwarf grasped his

bag of runestones as he knelt beside the dying monk. With a word to his gods, he touched Adder on the chest, and the monk's wounds stopped the worst of their bleeding.

"Well, let's at least see what magic he has on him," Roland said, beginning to cast, but there was no time. A spiral of blue-white erupted from where Kazrack had touched Adder, and a sudden sensation of falling was washed away by a blue-white flash.

Balem, the 5th of Syet – 561 H.E.

This clearing was familiar to Bastian, yet the light through the trees seemed wrong for the time of autumn it had been when he entered Hurgun's Maze. He wondered if he had ever been in this place in the woods at this particular time of year. Yes, there was at least one time. The leaves crunched under his boots and he startled himself and stood straight up and looked around.

"N'kron?" he called mentally for his familiar, but there was no reply. He could not sense his familiar anywhere around for a mile or more.

"What is going on?" Bastian asked aloud, and suddenly a dark figure stepped out of the autumnal foliage and answered, "I was about to ask you the same thing."

It was a tall man, with thick black hair tight back on his head in nappy locks not unlike Ratchis's. He wore a chain shirt over his black clothes and was covered in a black and green travel-stained cloak, made misshapen by a long bastard sword at his side. He held a long bow in his calloused hands. The man's face betrayed something feral and dangerous. The cut of his chin was too sharp, and his eyes were narrow and dark. His skin had a yellow pallor that no pureblood human could ever have. And yet, it was not that he was ugly. There was a handsomeness to his savage look.

It was Scartesh.¹⁶⁴

"How did you change your clothes and armor?" the half-orc asked, his eyes narrowing.

"What do you...? Scartesh! How did I get here? Do you know what is happening?" Bastian asked, sputtering.

"I am asking *you* what is happening," Scartesh's voice had a scratchy accent that came through more as he spoke. His face grew a bit flush. "I was watching you and you suddenly changed. You even look... thinner... Even your smell has changed a bit... What kind of trick is this?"

"Am I dreaming?" Bastian asked, aloud stepping forward. Scartesh took a step back and his hand went instinctively to the pommel of his sword. "Am I dead? The last thing I remember was the stone golem attacking... How did I get here?" Bastian looked up at Scartesh bewildered. He scratched under his beard, perturbed.

Scartesh's wrinkled brow furrowed some more, and he made a guttural sound in the back of his throat.

Bastian put his hands up. "Look. I am just as surprised at this turn of events as you are," he said. "You are just going to have to trust me. Okay, Scartesh? You trusted me before. You are going to have to trust me now..."

The half-orc left his hand on the hilt of his sword, but visibly settled, after looking to his left and to his right.

"Now," Bastian continued. "If you would be so kind as to tell me what time this is that we have met..."

"What?" Scartesh growled.

¹⁶⁴ Scartesh was first mentioned in the story hour in Session #89. However, he makes an appearance in the Story of Ratchis.

“Um, I am just trying to figure out what is happening with me,” Bastian said. “I think I have been thrown back in time... Somehow, and yet not bodily or else I would be here with me, and I am the only me here right now...”

“You make no sense,” Scartesh replied.

Bastian paused and cleared his throat, placing his hand on the back of his neck and rubbing it hard. He blinked rapidly, took a deep breath, and started again in his normal even quiet tone. “You are right. This makes no sense. Perhaps it is best if we stick to the matter at hand and take advantage of this opportunity my being here affords us.”

There was a long pause.

“You see... I now know that our plan does not work,” Bastian said.

“What plan?” Scartesh asked.

“For me to talk the Gothanian militia out of the attack on the Fir Harge in return for you bringing them away from here peaceably.”

“We discussed the likelihood and unlikelihood of it,” Scartesh said. His face seemed to grow more civilized the calmer he got, as if his erudition changed with his expression. “But there was no plan... I thought that was what we were meeting to discuss the possibility of... So you are now convinced that it won’t work?”

“I was not convinced before, but I am now, because now I *know* it doesn’t work,” Bastian replied.

“Then it seems I have no choice then,” Scartesh replied. “We will have to fight.”

“There has to be another solution,” Bastian said. “I also know that the war will not help anyone and will make everything worse for everyone in the long run.”

“On that we are agreed,” Scartesh replied. “Unless... Well, if it is one thing I have learned, it is that almost anything can be used as a means of survival. You just have to look at it the right way. But still, if your people insist on fighting, we have no choice but to defend ourselves.”

“No, there has to be another solution,” Bastian said again.

“So, you came here to tell me the plan won’t work, and expect me to stand by and let my people get killed?” Scartesh’s eyes narrowed again. “I am starting to think you humans are craftier than I gave you credit for. Is this part of some elaborate ruse?” He drew his sword and looked around nervously again. Once again, he made a guttural noise in the back of his throat, and then repeated it more loudly.

“I already told you, war will not work!” Bastian grew flustered.

“Suggest an alternative,” Scartesh replied.

Bastian rubbed his neck again and stepped back, his head drooping a bit. He hemmed and hawed and then looked up again. “I really don’t know yet,” he finally said. “I need time to think about it.”

“And while you think I am supposed to wait just long enough for your allies to launch an assault on the Fir-Hrage?”

“What allies? No... You have this all wrong,” Bastian replied. “I am here alone.”

“Hello!” A voice came from the woods. “What in the name of Horus’ Hairy Balls is going on around here? This makes no sense.” Gunthar came blundering into the clearing, sword in hand.

“Beardy! Just a few minutes ago I was back in the Honeycombe fighting shit-bears with my old crew,” Gunthar said.

“And suddenly, some crazy ape with a glowing brain showed up and started killing people!”¹⁶⁵

“I knew it! It *is* a trick!” Scartesh snarled and raising his sword he let out a short roar. Suddenly, a large figure stood up in the brush and charged into the clearing. The figure was over eight feet high and was heavily armored and bore a heavy shield. Its helmet’s nose-guard seemed to cut into its yellow-orange face. It was an ogre, and it wielded a large morningstar with black iron spines.

Gunthar was slammed back by the force of the blow, barely able to raise his longsword to keep the spines on the morningstar from skewering his neck. He landed on his ass, but quickly rolled back to his feet drawing *Hornet* in his off hand.

“I didn’t want to fight!” Bastian grunted as his warhammer made contact with the ogre’s knee, crunching the metal of the thing’s greave. Bastian winced as he felt a sharp burning on his left arm, and turned in that direction, swinging his hammer in a wide arc to keep his opponents at bay. Scartesh had moved in close with little effort. A deep cut on Bastian’s upper arm burned as blood oozed from it.

“This can stop,” Bastian said. “There is still time to figure something out... Fighting is not the answer!”

“Dumashg, finish the other one,” Scartesh said to his hench-ogre. “I will deal with our friend.”

The ogre drove into Gunthar again, ignoring the deep wounds the Neergaardian scored on it. Bastian moved to aid his companion, but Scartesh’s bastard sword slipped in the space between the bearded warrior’s legs and tried to trip him. Bastian stumbled, but kept his balance, skipping awkwardly over the blade. He slammed the ogre in the hip, but as it spun around to smash him in return, Bastian had withdrawn again.

The ogre roared as Gunthar stabbed it repeatedly in the outer thigh with his magical *short sword of speed*. It brought the morningstar down, but the blond warrior stepped into the blow, feeling the heavy weight of the weapon’s handle and the fists around it, but not the spines.

Bastian spun around Scartesh and sprung in towards the ogre once again, and once again he scored a hit and withdrew.

With a wise grunt, Scartesh hustled over and slashed at Gunthar viciously, who was too busy avoiding being pummeled by the ogre to notice until it was almost too late. He felt heavy bruises begin to swell up under his chain shirt, as he gave a little ground.

“I could use a little help over here, Beardy!” Gunthar complained. “If ya done dancing, there’s fighting to do.”

Dumashg began to huff and puff, his chest expanding as spittle flew from the corner of his raw red lips and jagged teeth. The fight moved under the trees, as Gunthar tried to use the foliage to gain cover from the rampaging ogre, but his wounds were severe and a solid blow sent him to the ground, torrents of blood soaking into the dry grass.

Bastian slammed the ogre’s knee again, but when he moved to withdraw, Scartesh blocked his way. There was a ringing blow, as Bastian’s basinet went flying off. His ear rung, and he could feel a shiner developing. There was a long gash where his helm has been dragged across his face.¹⁶⁶

Bastian looked up and a blow from the ogre sent him flying back, skidding through the growing pool of Gunthar’s blood. He got up to one knee, shook his head, and looking up noticed a black robed figure in sandals standing silently at the edge of the clearing, watching the melee.

“Are you ready to surrender now, or does your friend have to die first? Because I don’t care either way,” Scartesh said holding his sword out at Bastian.

¹⁶⁵ The second time the party ever met Gunthar was in the Honeycombe fighting quaggoths, back in Sessions #23 and #24.

¹⁶⁶ **DM’s Note:** Scartesh scored a critical hit: *Helm Cleaved Off, Apply Crit Multiplier to Total Damage, Save vs. Knockdown.*

“There is something else going on...,” Bastian stammered. “Something bigger! There is a monk here and...”

“Natan-Ahb, grant me the endurance of the sleeping bear so that I might last through these many battles!” Kazrack’s chant came out of the trees, and suddenly the dwarf was charging at the ogre. He had his flail over his head, and his shield up in front of him. The dwarf sidestepped a ponderous downward blow and turned away, slamming his flail against the monster’s side.

“Surrender!” Scartesh said, again, bringing the tip of his sword closer to Bastian who stood, and took a step back. His warhammer was at his side. Scartesh risked a look away and yelled to Dumashg to kill Kazrack quickly. As if in immediate obeisance, the ogre’s spike cudgel slammed into Kazrack’s shield. The dwarf’s armor crunched and squealed in protest. When Scartesh looked back, Bastian had withdrawn even more and had his shield raised.

“I guess both of your friends are going to have to die then,” Scartesh tsked. “It’s a shame, too. I mean, I don’t care about a grubber, but I am half-man, too...”¹⁶⁷ He gestured at Gunthar’s crumpled bleeding form.

Kazrack looked up and was startled. Suddenly Adder was flanking him, sending a quivering blow just past the dwarf’s head. Kazrack stepped out of the way and Adder had to leap back to avoid the morningstar of the frothing ogre. The monk did not leap fast enough, and one of the spines clipped his shaved head, drawing blood. Adder hurried past Kazrack, and the ogre turned to follow, as Kazrack was moving in that direction as well to check on Gunthar.

Bastian had had a similar idea and was backing around a large tree to get back to Gunthar with Scartesh slowly following him but ended up crossing the ogre’s path.

There was a crunch, and the bearded warrior was bleeding out as well.

Seeing the ogre was momentarily distracted, Adder ran at Kazrack, driving the dwarf back with a flurry of blows. “Why do you persist?!?” Kazrack growled.

“They are coming out of everywhere!” Wonder crept into Scartesh’s voice, as he pointed towards Ratchis, who was hurrying through the brush towards the fight.

The friar of Nephthys stopped a few feet from the other half-orc and they looked each other up and down and snorted.

“You! You are Darksh?”¹⁶⁸ Scartesh asked after a moment.

Ratchis nodded.

“You are friends with him?” he pointed at Bastian.

Ratchis nodded again. “*You* I’ll talk to,” Scartesh smiled. “Go help the grubber. I won’t stop you...”

Ratchis turned in time to see Adder stumble awkwardly as a kick he landed on Kazrack’s shield skidded off at strange angle. The monk’s ankle twisted, and he had to hop and hobble to keep from falling.¹⁶⁹ In that half a moment, Kazrack’s magic flail slammed the monk twice in the ribs. Bones crunched, and Adder clutched his side, looking near unconsciousness.

Kazrack bellowed as his next blow was knocked astray by a devastating hit that punctured holes in on the right side

¹⁶⁷ In Aquerra, ‘Grubber’ is a derogatory term for dwarf.

¹⁶⁸ ‘Darksh’ is the name of Ratchis’ tribe.

¹⁶⁹ **DM’s Note:** Adder rolled the dreaded ‘double fumble’ by rolling a ‘99’ on the fumble result chart: “Roll Twice. Any saves at +5 to the DC. Ignore rolls of 99 or 00.” Amazingly, I rolled ‘00’ for one of those rolls, but the second was “*Twist Ankle. Speed halved for 10 rounds.*”

of his breast plate. Dumashg the ogre was not to be forgotten, the rune-thrower slid through the grass on his side, feeling his wounds burn.¹⁷⁰

Ratchis was calling to Nephthys for a healing spell for his dwarven companion, when the ogre noticed the new foe and slammed him on the hip, disrupting his spell. But the distraction was enough for Kazrack to withdraw and cast his own spell to close some of his wounds, but by no means all. He looked up to see Adder closing again, and felt those heavy calloused fists pummel the side of his head.

There was a hiss and snarl in a tree above them and they both looked up to see Roland in panther-form preparing to pounce from a low bough.

End of Session #102

AQUERRA

¹⁷⁰ **DM's Note:** Yep, another crit. This one was: *Apply Crit Multiplier to Total Damage (and armor DP damage)*

Session #103 ¹⁷¹

The earth shook each time Dumashg the ogre's heavy morningstar missed Kazrack and bit into the dry grass. Each time, Kazrack sidestepped just in time, predicting the wide gait of how all giant things fight, remembering the lessons taught to him by his father and uncle. The dwarf felt Adder's blows on his back and had to turn again to keep his enemies abreast of him.

Ratchis came charging in at Adder, but the monk dove and tumbled away, coming back up wary of the half-orc.

Roland leapt out of the tree with a roar meant to distract, but instead of joining the melee, he hopped over to where Bastian and Gunthar lay. Seeing that the Neergaardian was hurt worse, he called to Bast of a *cure critical wounds*, and in a moment, Gunthar was sputtering awake, trying to shake off the lethargy of death's door. He was still critically wounded.

The monk hustled away from the melee, running right up the side of a tree just as he had when Ratchis and Kazrack had seen him last.

"Watch out for one of those fire beads!" Ratchis warned, charging for the tree himself. "Everyone spread out!"

Kazrack ran right for the tree as well, the ogre on his tail. Gunthar held back looking back and forth from the fight with the monk and the ogre and Scartesh just standing and watching from a few feet away; bastard sword resting on his shoulder. Roland looked up at the melee from healing Bastian in time to see Adder toss a bead that smashed against Kazrack's helmet. It exploded.

Flames licked up the tree and Adder leapt higher into its branches. Ratchis had rolled clear of the worst of it, but Kazrack hollered as patches of his face and beard were seared. Dumashg's armor was scorched, but he continued to attack relentlessly, oblivious to pain.

Ratchis fumbled in his bag for a flask of oil, hoping to take the tree down with the monk in it, but Adder leapt out of the tree and hurried towards another. Ratchis dropped the flask in the grass and charged after him, but Adder leapt up again too soon. Kazrack withdrew from the ogre, keeping on the defense in order to pick the flask of oil up.

So exhaustion might give way to simple fatigue, Roland cast *lesser restoration* on both Bastian and Gunthar. He followed it up with another healing spell on the Neergaardian, while Bastian moved to get a view of the fight.

Kazrack's shield absorbed blow after blow from the ogre's morningstar. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Adder leap down out of the tree striking Ratchis full on in the face. The half-orc stumbled back half a step and hacked wildly with his sword to get some space. The monk easily avoided the swings, but Kazrack came around from the other side to flank him. The ogre still followed the dwarf, each blow meant to kill outright.

Bastian called to the flame in his strange arcane dwarven, and a small ball of it appeared in his hand. He flung it at Adder, but the monk easily leapt high to avoid it, twisting and bringing a kick to the side of Ratchis' head as he came back down. Ratchis fell stunned, and the monk kicked him viciously twice more in the head and neck. He might have finished the now unconscious half-orc if the pain of Kazrack's flail to his kidney did not force him to turn and defend himself. The monk avoided another of the small balls of flame Bastian produced, and Gunthar began launching arrows from a safe distant at the tireless ogre.

"Scartesh! Call off the ogre! We can still talk this out!" Bastian called. "Can't you see something strange is going on? I wasn't trying to trick you! The monk is our real enemy..."

Scartesh sneered. "Once he gets all worked up like this you just have to let him work it out of his system. There's no stopping him."

¹⁷¹ **DM's Notes:** This session was played on December 18, 2005.

Kazrack drew the fight away from his fallen companion, allowing Roland to hustle over to aid. The dwarf moved around Adder, putting the monk between him and the ogre. Dumashg, seeming to prefer a straight line whenever possible, slammed the monk in the head full on. There was an explosion of blood and then monk was bleeding out, his blood intermingling with Ratchis' own growing pool. However, a moment later, Roland's healing spells had the friar coughing and spitting out blood as he sat up.

Again and again, Kazrack withdrew, absorbing the ogre's blows on his shield, and trying his best to pierce its armor in return. Finally, the ogre stopped and teetered atop his tree-trunk legs. It let out a long low breath and then fell over.

"All that huffing and puffing works better when you can kill things quick," Scartesh quipped.

"Tell me why I shouldn't cut you a new one?" Gunthar challenged.

"Because you are all seriously hurt and you can't take me on your best day," Scartesh replied matter-of-factly.

"Wanna find out for sure?" Gunthar raised his swords.

"Gunthar! No!" Ratchis barked.

The Neergaardian stopped. "Pig-fuckers always stick together..."

"We letting Adder bleed out?" Bastian asked quietly.

Ratchis and Kazrack nodded silently, but Roland purred his assent.

"Now can someone tell me what is happening?" Scartesh asked.

"I do not know why we should explain ourselves to you," Kazrack replied.

"Bastian never told me he had among his companions one of our heritage," Scartesh said, approaching Ratchis familiarly.

"You know each other?" Ratchis looked back and forth from the other half-orc to Bastian. Bastian nodded. Kazrack glared at Bastian. Roland pawed over and rubbed against Bastian's legs lovingly, still in panther-form.

"It seems like there is a lot of explaining to do," Kazrack said.

"And I shall try my best to explain but..." A tall broad figure was stepping out of the overgrowth. It was a brown-skinned man with a bare chest, a bald head, and a gray skull cap. He had muscular arms and wore baggy dark blue pants. It was Hurgun of the Stone, and a trail of blue-white sparkling light was spiraling out from around him.

Tholem, the 4th of Ese – 565 H.E.

Perception rippled. Sight, sound, smell, and sensation warped and twisted into a sharp blue-white wave that washed over them. Suddenly they were standing about the dais and central throne of the Control Room, and Hurgun was standing before it still talking to them. "In this moment in time the time elemental is gone, and I am free thanks to your intervention, however, though this is the conclusion, it is not the end. The anomaly is a deep one, and you have one more place you have been, but you have not been there yet."

"I don't understand..." Kazrack began.

"Where are the others?" Roland asked. "Sergio? Razzle?"

“Your group is bound by destiny, just as others are bound to their own,” Hurgun replied. “They have their own places to be.”

“I don’t understand...” Kazrack said again.

“It will all be made as clear as possible very soon,” Hurgun replied. He had an incredibly deep and commanding voice. “Just remember, whatever else happens you have already succeeded in freeing me and saving my Maze—just be cautious. The flow of time is always repairing itself, attempting to undo paradox, rewriting memory to fit actuality and vice versa. However, though you are in the present now, there is one more stop in the future, and the future is always in flux. Die there... Be defeated there... and though the world may not be changed, *you* can be... And what you see and find there is a good indication of the events of the future, so remain alert and observant... Defeat what you find there... These moments of conflict and crisis resonate through time the more important their outcome is to the direction of history...”

“Where...uh... *when* are we going to?” Roland asked.

“Can you not feel it coming?” Hurgun asked. “It is happening now...” The last word stretched out and warped into a long low hum that reverberated with the Control Room. There was a blast of blue-white light, and once again the Keepers of the Gate were gone.

Teflem, the 13th of Oche – 565 H.E.

“Where in the Hells are we?” Gunthar asked. They were spread out in knee-deep murky water, in the entrance to some kind of cave choked with dripping vines and reeds. There was a sliver of light from way behind them through the undergrowth, peeking through, but barely enough for the humans to see by. Warm air was wafting up out of the cave.

“There is a terrible smell here...” Roland whispered. “Some big animal... Monster...”

“Huh? What? How did I get here?” A voice that shocked them came from the reed-choked darkness. Ratchis looked in that direction, his darkvision flipping everything into shades of gray, black and white. It was a tall figure in the robes of an Academy mage, with shaggy red hair that was long in the back. Thomas the Squirrel came to life on the half-orc ranger’s shoulder, chittering happily as it leapt to the figure.

It was Martin the Green.

“Martin!” Kazrack cried happily, and the dwarf’s voice echoed in the cave.

”Hush!” Ratchis admonished but trudged over to the watch-mage and clapped a big ham-hand on his shoulder. “We thought you were dead...”

“I think I was...” Martin replied in a shaken voice. “What is this place? How did I get here? I... I... uh, have a vague set of memories regarding a journey to this place, but they are foggy... Just like my memories of...” The watch-mage shuddered. “...Of that place where I had to destroy the book...” It was then that those who could see noted that Martin the Green seemed whole. His face was not disfigured, his teeth were all there, and his skin was not sallow and blackened in places.

“How is this possible?” Kazrack asked.

“How has any of this been possible?” Roland asked. “But since we are in the future, and Martin is here, we have reason to hope that he will be brought back to life.”

“N’kron?” Bastian reached out to his familiar mentally, and this time there was a response. “Where are you?”

“Flying high above... Confused...” the hawk replied.

“What do you see?”

“A cold marsh surrounding a high round place - you are underneath,” N’kron said. Bastian relayed this to the others.

The Keepers of the Gate realized that they had a full complement of spells, even spells they did not recall preparing, and their many wounds and their fatigue was gone.¹⁷² There was a flurry of castings: *bull’s strength*, *bear’s endurance*, *magic circle of protection from evil*, and *mage armor*.

“We might be watched,” Martin suggested, and cast *detect scrying*. But he shook his head no. “Should I take the time to cast *arcane eye* and explore the cave beyond?”¹⁷³

“Let us move into the cave a bit,” Kazrack suggested. “Our mobility is limited here in this vine-choked entrance. I would rather we be able to spread out and defend ourselves.”

It was agreed.

The cave beyond was much wider and deeper than they could see across, even with darkvision, and the murky water lapped against their knees, except for Kazrack, as the water reached his thighs, splashing up to his waist whenever he took a step. Gunthar snapped on his *darkvision goggles*.

In the middle of the chamber a plateau of stone rose fifteen feet out of the water. To their right, a jagged pillar of stone, nearly flat on top reached six feet. In the far-right corner, a tangle of roots fifteen feet across hung from the ceiling to kiss the murky water.

Martin the Green began his casting.

Bastian cried out in alarm as the long-jagged maw of a crocodile snapped shut right beside him. He had leapt back at the last possible moment to keep from being grabbed. The narrow wake of a second beast was making its way towards him as well. Roland pounced atop the first one, worrying at its thick hide with his panther’s teeth, as Bastian slammed it on the head with his warhammer, and withdrew. However, the second animal cut off his retreat, as he felt the hard slap of its tail against the back of his legs and he nearly fell.

Kazrack stepped forward with one mighty blow, he crushed the thing’s skull. Gunthar charged in and skewered the one Roland was working at, killing it as well. Noting a third of the animals, Roland leapt over and attacked, getting bitten for his trouble, as Bastian hustled in, struck, and moved away again, in his usual cautious style.

Ratchis remained near the still casting Martin, to guard the mage from interruption and noticed small figures hopping up onto the central platform of stone out of the darkness.

“Look!” he pointed. Kazrack looked up from killing the final crocodile. There were five gnomes lining up along the edge of the plateau. They wore rags.

“Those better not be more friggin’ demon gnomes,” Gunthar swore.

“More demon gnomes?” Roland asked, as he could not see.

“They look like normal gnomes to me,” Kazrack said. “Hello?” He called to them.

“Run away!” One of the gnomes peeped in a whispered yell. “She’s coming!”

¹⁷² **DM’s Note:** (*slight spoiler if you are reading the notes as you come across them*) At the end of the previous session, I told the players that they’re homework was to prepare a spell list as if they were about to face a dragon. At the beginning of this scene, I told them they were fully healed, and they now had that prepared list to cast from.

¹⁷³ *Arcane Eye* has a casting time of 10 minutes.

Roland walked over towards Ratchis and Martin, “What does he mean ‘she’s coming’?”

And as if in answer, a large draconic form flew out of the darkness to land behind the line of gnomes. Her body, bristling with wiry muscle was just over ten feet long, though her tail and neck nearly tripled that. She snapped her leathery wings as she landed, showing their nearly thirty-five-foot span, and as her mouth opened, she revealed row after row of vicious teeth, as her long forked tongue licked them clean.

“Oh, no...” Ratchis said.

Glamorgana roared.

The roar was like nothing they had ever heard, as if the sound had already shaken its way out of the marrow of their bones before being echoed by the wyrm’s maw.

“Lords and Lady, please let my faith be a shield to protect me from that which was ever an enemy of our people,” Kazrack prayed as he moved towards the dragon.

“This isn’t how the bloody plan is supposed to work ” Gunthar explained, moving off to the right to take a wide approach to the stone island the dragon had landed on. She moved her great head back and forth to take them all in.

Ratchis ducked down in the murky water, so only his head from the nose up broke its surface, while Martin abandoned his casting of *arcane eye* and cast *alter self* instead, changing into his oft-used Tanweil form. He followed Ratchis’ example.

“Bast, bless us with your light,” Roland chanted, and suddenly he was glowing, illuminating the corner of the cave that held him and Ratchis and Martin.

“Intruders dare enter our domain again?” Glamorgana’s voice was sibilant. It snaked its way around the ears and made the head swim. “The little ones serve us, but you. . . You all we shall devour!”

“We should spread out,” Bastian said.

“No gather to me,” Ratchis said, sticking his head up and moving close to Martin. Roland splashed over there as well, waiting to cast his *prayer* spell when all his allies were in range. Bastian obeyed but stopped when he saw the dragon reel back and then throw her head forward with a gasp. A noxious cloud of green vapor roiled over Kazrack and then unfolded over Martin, Ratchis and Roland. Gunthar had not listened to Ratchis’ call.

They cried out in alarm and Roland was able to leap clear of any real harm, but once again Ratchis called them back, hacking and tearing as the vapor clung to him. Martin saw *the Wurfel Kraft* in Ratchis’ hand and said, “Grapes!”¹⁷⁴ The lips of his current form giving him a sibilant tone as well. The Friar of Nephthys activated the cube as Martin stepped into its area, Roland followed suit with Bastian on his heels, but Gunthar approached carefully, coming around the long way, out of what he hoped was out of range of the dragon’s breath weapon. And Kazrack’s dwarven legs could not carry him back in time, for with another blast of fetid air from the wyrm came another cloud of gas, and the dwarf was nearly overcome, even though he was able to wrap a hand about his face and nose and duck most of the way down into the water.

Kazrack reached the others and called to his gods to protect Martin from evil. Gunthar changed direction and moved into the darkness towards the central island. Bastian moved to climb the rock beside them, and aid Kazrack make his way up as well.

“Oh Great Queen Bast! Thou who art as powerful as thou art graceful I ask you to grant us the benefit of a *prayer* that we might overcome this ancient serpent,” Roland chanted.

¹⁷⁴ Pressing the side of the stone cube that depicts a bunch of grapes creates a force field that keeps out gases, wind, etc...

Martin and Roland were driven back by a splash, as suddenly the dragon was about ten feet away. The huge maw came in and Ratchis felt the long teeth grind against his back and sides, as the protection of the *Bracers of Axo-Morë* let him slide out without being torn in half.

“*Sagitta Igneus*” Martin cast, and two bolts of flame went flying at the dragon’s head, but she moved with great speed for a thing of her size, and easily avoided them. “Ratchis, Gate!”

Still reeling from the ferocity of the attack, Ratchis pressed the side of the cube Martin the Green suggested, and the nearly invisible field, turned a bright light blue. The dragon bit and clawed at the cube with anger, but even her preternatural strength could not break through its magic. Frustrated, she was suddenly in the air again, landing with a splash near the solitary Gunthar.

“Oh shite ” Gunthar turned to run, but the dragon’s head slammed into his head and shoulders, sending him stumbling through the muck.

“She’s playing with us,” Roland growled softly.

Soon all but Gunthar were atop the six-foot high platform of stone, within the protection of the cube.

“We may not be able to defeat her,” Ratchis said.

“Gunthar is going to die,” Martin exclaimed. Roland cast *cure critical wounds* on Kazrack, and Martin followed up with *bull’s strength* on Roland. Ratchis cast *divine favor*.

“We need to rescue those gnomes,” Kazrack said.

“They have been here for a long time, and as much as it pains me to see them in captivity, we do them no good getting ourselves killed,” Ratchis said. “We should retreat and return another time.”

“Can we do that?” Bastian asked. “Hurgun made it sound like this was important somehow. . .”

“We have all the time in the world,” Roland replied. He might have smiled if he were not wearing a panther’s face.

“But we have to try to get Gunthar,” Ratchis said.

“Do we?” Kazrack asked, and Ratchis frowned.

Coordinating their efforts, the Keepers of the Gate rolled the cube into the murky water with a great splash and made sluggish progress in the direction of the steppingstones leading up to the island where the gnomes still stood, shaking in silent fear.

Luckily for Gunthar, the dragon took off for the other side of the cavern when it heard the splash. The Neergaardian had suffered two deep claw punctures, and his shoulder had been worried by dragon teeth. He had withdrawn over and over again, stabbing at its face and breast whenever it got close, and then withdrawing again. None of Gunthar’s blows could cut through the wyrm’s scales, and finally he dove into the deep water and swam into a deep depression all about the large island. He struggled with the weight of his armor and gear, still clutching his short sword, and soon found himself atop a pile of copper and silver coins that filled that submerged area. He tried again and again to swim to the surface, feeling his lungs burn hotter and hotter.¹⁷⁵

The Keepers of the Gate were startled by the sudden clatter of the dragon landing atop the cubic force field of the *Wurfel Craft*. “Sundial,” Martin said to Ratchis, and the half-orc quickly pressed that face of the cube. As Roland

¹⁷⁵ **DM’s Note:** Gunthar failed a swim check two rounds in a row.

cast *aid* on the still wounded Kazrack. “Attack!” the watch-mage cried.¹⁷⁶

Bastian leapt and slammed the dragon the best he could with his hammer, but his blow was as ineffectual as Kazrack’s first halberd thrust, but the second wedged the head of the weapon into the muscle of a foreleg. Again, they felt the dragon’s roar reverberate through their bodies. Glamorgana leapt back off the cube deftly and breathed her noxious breath again.

Ratchis and Bastian winced and fought to wipe their faces of the gas that ignored the force field altogether. Kazrack, Martin and Roland felt the burn as well, but were able to duck into the water before they had breathed in too much.

Roland cast *protection from energy* on himself, realizing the gaseous breath was caustic, not poisonous. Kazrack called to his gods to heal the worst of Ratchis’ wounds.

“Gunthar is dead,” the half-orc murmured.

“What?” asked Kazrack.

“The dragon came back and Gunthar is nowhere to be seen or heard,” Ratchis said. “He must be dead. We should retreat.”

Kazrack grunted his displeasure, but the group changed direction, willing the *cube of force* to head towards the vine-choked entrance to the cavern.

“Is this how it shall be?” the dragon hissed, and they closed their eyes to concentrate on pushing the cube along. “The intrepid heroes? The stalwart adventurers that enter the dragon’s lair, stick their little heads under their tortoise shell and roll their way home? Hmmm?”

“Do not listen to her,” Martin the Green warned. “Dragons are said to have the power of *suggestion*.”

“My goddess protects us,” Ratchis said.

The dragon landed between the Keepers of the Gate and the entrance, turning her body quickly, the reflection of Roland’s *light* spell shimmering off the rolling green and black scales.

“We can play this waiting game for a thousand years,” she laughed, and the laughter of a dragon was dreadful to hear, as if the sound rolled around and curdled in your stomach. The dragon took off again and landed atop the six-foot-high piece of stone the Keepers of the Gate had been on just a few moments before. They moved along at a snail’s pace.

“You know. . .” Martin began quietly, re-adjusting the stubby wings of his altered form nervously. “She might be familiar with *the Wurfel Kraft*, and is waiting us out, knowing it cannot last long enough to get us very far. . .”

“We need to decide what we are doing,” Kazrack barked. “Are we fleeing or taking a stand?”

“*Oh valde venes autheo acha narro,*” Glamorgana chanted, and the vines and roots in the entrance began to roil.

Ratchis sighed. After a heated whispered moment, they turned the cube and began to head back towards the dragon.

In the center of the cavern they heard Gunthar’s voice. He had managed to climb to the top of the depression and pull himself above the water, and while the dragon was preoccupied, he had made his way up to the center raised stone island.

“Hey Wormy I got your little gnome friends here I’m gonna have to kill them before I get to you,” He swung his

¹⁷⁶ Pressing the side of the stone cube that depicts a sundial keeps put all living matter, allowing weapons to go through.

sword over his head dramatically.

With a snap of her wings, Glamorgana took off once more, landing behind Gunthar and spinning around to bite him. The gnomes scurried out of the way, one of them shrieking in absolute fright. Gunthar grunted as teeth snapped on his arm and shoulder with great speed. He jerked himself free with a gush of blood, and collapsed onto the damp stone, dying. Glamorgana took to the air once more and landed right in front of the cube. The rest of the Keepers of the Gate had made some progress, but the cube slowed them down quite a bit, and they stopped to cast some healing spells, including one on Thomas who has been burned by the dragon's caustic breath.

"Would it not make more sense to disengage *the Wurfel Kraft* now and attack?" Glamorgana asked, pointing her remarks towards Ratchis. The half-orc snarled feeling the enchantment of her *suggestion* wash over him harmlessly.

"We're going to have to get closer," Martin whispered to the others. They moved towards the dragon, trying to make towards the steppingstones, but she continued to shift over, just out of reach, but ready with her deadly bite.

"*Sagitta Magicus!*" the dragon chanted, and three arrows of light slammed into the cube and dissipated. She roared in frustration. The Keepers of the Gate moved again, and again Glamorgana shifted over to block their progress. They stopped to allow Martin the Green to cast *greater invisibility* on Ratchis. Roland cast *divine favor*. And then they moved right into the dragon, as Martin having taken over control of the cube changed it to only keep out living matter. There was a flurry of weapons, trying to reach through the field at Glamorgana, as she gnawed and clawed at it to no avail. She snarled and leapt back when Kazrack's halberd found a weak spot in her scales and drew steaming green blood that splattered on the cube and then dripped through a half a moment later.

Martin chanted an arcane word, and a sickly green ray flew from his finger and struck the dragon. She suddenly drooped and fell back even further, her wings dragging through the murky water, as she found her great strength greatly diminished.¹⁷⁷

"Let me out of the cube! I will fell this dragon myself!" Kazrack barked, frustrated with his inability to follow up on his attacks.

"*Sagitta Magicus!*" the dragon chanted again, and this time the *magic missiles* struck Kazrack in the chest. The party moved forward, with Bastian taking hold of the *the Wurfel Kraft* at Martin's behest. The dragon retreated once more and sent three more arrows of light into Kazrack. Bastian pressed the side of the stone cube depicting a bunch of grapes and the cube's brightness and azure tone dimmed. Ratchis and Kazrack charged with a choral roar.

Martin began an elaborate somatic dance, tracing a circle in the water as he chanted loudly.

Kazrack grimaced as the dragon slammed her head into his charging form, but he was able to turn and cut her deeply on the neck. Glamorgana moved with unnatural alacrity, lifting a claw to smack away Ratchis and avoiding his great sword, even as she used the momentum to rear up and avoid Roland's pounce at her head.

There was a blast of white light as a great white glowing bison, six feet at the shoulder appeared and charged at the dragon, leaving a wake in the muck. Roaring with pain and anger, Glamorgana took off once again and landed atop the island. A short bark was all it took for the gnomes to fall in line in front of her again. Gunthar continued to bleed out beneath her.

She sucked in and then let out another blossoming plume of her caustic breath. Kazrack and Ratchis cried out in pain from the burns once again, while Martin ducked as quickly as he could into the water. He felt Thomas spasm beneath his hood and then felt the sharp inner agony of his familiar's death. His arcane power was diminished, and he collapsed in the water letting out a sob.¹⁷⁸ He had been casting another summoning spell, but it was disrupted.

The dragon began creeping across the steppingstones as quickly as she could, making for a natural stone corridor

¹⁷⁷ **DM's Note:** Martin's *ray of enfeeblement* drained 8 points of the dragon's strength.

¹⁷⁸ **DM's Note:** Martin failed his saving throw, losing 2000 XP, which dropped him to 9th level.

they could now see winding into the darkness of the rear left portion of the cavern. She was leaving a trail of green blood behind her, dragging her tail as if crippled. The lip up to where she went was about four feet above Ratchis' head.

“Oh Great Queen Bast, thou who art as powerful as thou art graceful, smite this wyrm with a column of your holy flame! Roland prayed, and a pillar of flame appeared from the darkness above engulfing the dragon. When the smoke and steam cleared the dragon emerged untouched. The spell could not get through its draconic resistance to magic.

Bastian fired a crossbow bolt that went wide of the escaping dragon, as Ratchis and Kazrack cast healing spells upon themselves. Ratchis followed this up with a spell on Kazrack, as the dwarf was still looking seriously wounded.

Glamorgana hurried into deeper into the passageway, and while they could see her tail still emerging from the darkness, the rest of her was obscured. They heard the breaking of glass.

“She has a whole cabinet of potions back there!” One of the gnomes cried. “She can chew through glass as if it were bread!”

“Potions? She's healing herself!” Martin croaked as he took to the air, his stubby wings flapping furiously. He came down on the raised shelf, as Ratchis, still *invisible*, pulled himself up beside him. Roland leapt up onto the shelf easily and snapped his jaws at Kazrack's cloak to help the struggling dwarf up. Kazrack kicked futilely. Bastian made it up as Martin began his emphatic casting of a summoning spell once again, and the bearded warrior turned to help Roland pull up Kazrack, but still they struggled, the dwarf's eagerness undermining his potential success.

Glamorgana whirled around with a roar and charged at Martin the Green. The watch-mage ducked in time with his casting, never losing his rhythm, and another celestial bison appeared, even as the dragon pulled away from the chop of Ratchis' dragon-hilted masterwork greatsword. The bison charged right by, missing the wyrm completely. It bellowed as the dragon clawed it deeply.

Ratchis thought he could use the distraction to move within the dragon's defense, but miscalculated, feeling the claws and bite rip into him. Being *invisible* seemed to prove no help against this foe. “*Sagitta Igneus*,” Martin chanted. He pulled his hand away nervously as he released the spell remembering that an invisible Ratchis was engaged with his target. The *flame arrow* went wide. The second fiery bolt dissipated as it struck the dragon. She brought her claws down on Ratchis once again, but the Friar of Nephthys would not withdraw even as he felt sore muscles tear and his blood seep from him. He drove his sword deep into the left side of the dragon's breast. She reared up again, and the sword was drawn out leaving a ragged wound. Ratchis flicked the blade up with wrists, catching her under the snout, sending a cascade of steaming green blood all over them.

Her screaming roar was like nothing they had ever heard.

Kazrack finally made it up, dragging himself over the lip onto his stomach and scrambling to get to his feet. Roland turned away from the dwarf and to lay another curing spell on Ratchis, as the dragon withdrew once again, but he could not find the half-orc.

They heard the tell-tale deep inhale before the stinging breath of the dragon was all over them again. Kazrack swayed and fell, but on the edge of death, Ratchis charged. He leapt over the monster's head as he brought his sword down with a powerful hack on one of her haunches. Once again, she reared up, but Ratchis was ready, putting his sword up to catch her with the tip of it where her head met the body. There was a tearing sound of sinew and muscle and a rain of green blood as she came down, her own weight helping the blade cut her tough flesh.

The half-orc took three hurried steps back as the huge form of the dragon collapsed with a final breath.

The Keepers of the Gate let out a cheer, even as Roland brought Kazrack back to consciousness with a spell, but the cheer quickly died. The dead form of the dragon began to change and melt. In a moment it was a pile of vaguely dragon-shaped ice and snow, and then it was a puddle with tiny dissipating crystals shining in the light of Roland's

spell.¹⁷⁹

“Oh, no...” Martin the Green gasped, recognizing what he saw. “That was not the real dragon. . . We are so dead. . .”

Suddenly, they were falling through an infinite plane of blue and white, their senses warping and their minds reeling until they were eager for the coming unconsciousness.

Balem, the 5th of Ese - 565 H.E.

“What was it then?” Roland was still asking as the dark of unconsciousness gave way to a fading blue-white corona that spun around them and then disappeared.

The Keepers of the Gate found themselves back in the Control Room, facing the dark broad figure of Hurgun of the Stone, where he sat in his raised stone chair. Martin the Green was no longer with them. Ratchis looked to find Thomas’ little corpse in the hood of his cloak, but the familiar was gone.

“You have returned,” Hurgun said in his quiet bass. “You were only gone for but for a few moments, it seemed.”

“Where’s Martin?” Ratchis asked.

“Is he not dead?” Hurgun asked in reply.

“But he was alive in the future!” Kazrack protested.

“And so, it could be that he will be alive again one day...” Hurgun said.

They all felt a fatigue weighing on their bodies, but were amazed to realize they bore no wounds, and the spells they had prepared that morning were all returned.

“How do we know you are who you say you are?” Kazrack asked, suddenly suspicious. Roland of Bast rolled his eyes and sighed, but Hurgun was unphased. In fact, the bald geomancer seemed to show little emotion at all.

“You will have to take me at my word,” he replied. “So, let us take care of business so that you may rest. Let me lead you to the guest rooms. I am informed you have seen them before and are familiar with their operations.”

“What happened to Gilbert?” Roland asked, suddenly remembering the geomancer’s assistant.¹⁸⁰

“He has passed,” Hurgun replied. “It seems the demoness, Ora-Amira-El slew him, but I have you all to thank for destroying her. I should have dealt with her as soon as I learned her true identity, but alas, I did not expect to be trapped by a time elemental for over one hundred years.

Hurgun gave the slightest flick of his right wrist as he gripped the jeweled armrests of his throne. He then gestured down the catwalk immediately behind them. They noticed the portal between rooms were white now. The mist below the catwalks was white as well, and smooth, like some kind of liquid snow. It did not roil or bubble. No voices came from below. Through the portal they found themselves in the cloudy confines of the Air Room; also known as the guest quarters.

Sergio appeared from one of the cloud rooms. “Oh my! You are safe! What a relief! I don’t know what you plan to do with us Hurgun, but these fine heroes will not allow your evil schemes to come to fruition!”

¹⁷⁹ **DM’s Note:** This battle took 43 rounds.

¹⁸⁰ The PCs last saw Gilbert when he asked them to stay in guest quarters/Air Room back in Session #94.

Hurgun of the Stone ignored the bard. “A word to the wise,” he said to the Keepers of the Gate, pointing to Sergio without looking at him. “Do not trust this one. But while he was imprisoned longer than I had intended, I think having a chance at a whole new life, where no one knows who he is or his reputation, is both punishment and reward enough.”

“Do not talk of me as if I am not here!” Sergio Fontane protested. “I insist on being let go.”

“There is an army of orcs outside,” Hurgun replied. “You can leave now if you like, but I think you might prefer to leave in a few days’ time, after they have left, and we have had time to *talk*.”

“And how will you get the orcs to leave?” Kazrack asked.

“All in due time,” Hurgun said. “First, I fear we have gotten side-tracked from the business I spoke of. I shall need for you all to give me the gifts you received from Chochokpi. They have already been gone from him for too long, and if the anomalies from this event are to be kept to a minimum it needs be done as soon as possible.”

“At least one of the items was destroyed,” Roland said, speaking of Logan’s boots.¹⁸¹

Hurgun sighed.

“I shall return mine personally,” Kazrack insisted.

“Yes! He cannot be trusted!” Sergio interjected. “He wants them for himself.”

“The Maze has moved away from those planes. The portal will not work now. I will have to bring them there directly,” Hurgun explained.

“He’s lying. He wants them for himself,” Sergio said again.

“If he really wanted them, I am sure he could take them,” Bastian reasoned, and he took off the *Robe of the Wayfarer* and handed it off to Hurgun. Ratchis took off *Frojack’s Belt* and gave it to Hurgun. The half-orc looked to Kazrack and said, “You should trust. . .” He then handed over *the Wurfel Kraft* as well.

Kazrack harumphed his disapproval. “I will throw the stones.”

Hurgun nodded and then turned to Gunthar Northrop. “I need that sword as well.” The geomancer gestured to the *Left Blade of Arofel*.

“No friggin’ way!” Gunthar spat and shook his head. “If Stumpy ain’t giving up his halberd, I ain’t givin’ up the sword.”

“Are you proud of yourself, Kazrack? Gunthar is taking you as a model for his behavior,” Roland chided.

“Leave him to his stones,” Ratchis said.

As Kazrack Delver threw his rune-stones, the others went through their gear and took inventory of what they in their packs. In that time, Norena of Bast, Cordell of Thoth, and Razzle Greyish were led into the guest rooms. Each had their own tales of having jumped around through time, but they were all tight-lipped about the details, and the Keepers of the Gate found that their own memories of what had happened were growing fuzzy.

Hurgun of the Stone returned an hour later, and Kazrack acquiesced, having attained a positive reading, but he did so nearly as grudgingly as Gunthar did.

¹⁸¹ Logan’s *Yossei’s Quickling Killing Boots* were destroyed by the Ooze Para-elemental.

“Now rest while I return these items to Chochokpi,” Hurgun said. “And when I return, we will break bread and partake in a feast my servants are preparing, and I shall endeavor to clear up any remaining questions.”

“Questions like, since it was us that supposedly gave Chochokpi the magical items to give back to us in the past, where did they come from to begin with, won’t your returning them change that past?” Roland asked, truly puzzled.

“The past has already been changed much more than that,” Hurgun replied. “But then again, it has not. Again, I will endeavor to explain the best I can over dinner...That is, the best that these kinds of things can be explained in mortal terms.”

“Are you saying you are an immortal?” Kazrack asked, his brow furrowing again.

“No, I am saying my mortal tongue will have difficulty wrapping around the paradoxes of time,” Hurgun said.

“All the more reason that time is the province of the gods and not of men or dwarves or elves,” Kazrack said.

Hurgun merely nodded and left with the items. The Keepers of the Gate and their fellow guests could no longer resist their fatigue and fell into deep naps of indeterminate length. They felt well rested when a monodrone came to wake them all for dinner.

“This is where we get our reward, right?” Gunthar asked as the Keepers of the Gate were led into the Dining Room by the monodrone.

The chamber had been cleaned up and the sliding screen repaired. The cabinets were all still broken, but most of the sets of cutlery and plates were taken away; except of course of those laid out on a table in an incredible spread. There were four stuffed turkeys, two glazed hams, spiced potatoes, a horn of autumnal fruit, and bowls of a myriad of jams about three huge baskets of bread. There were sweetmeats and wheels of cheese and skewers of charred beef. There were pitchers of milk, horns of mead, flagons of wine and small casks of beer. As he approached, Ratchis looked for asparagus, his favorite, but was disappointed.¹⁸²

“I guess thanks are in order,” Hurgun said. He was standing at the head of the table, and for once actually smiled broadly showing pearly teeth. He gestured to the table and chairs. “Please sit. The *unseen servants* will serve whatever you ask for.”

“I will serve myself,” Ratchis said.

“As will I,” Kazrack said.

“As you wish,” Hurgun replied.

Roland of Bast sighed. “Why must you both always be so bristly and antagonistic? You make for terrible guests.” He turned to Hurgun of the Stone and bowed low. “Forgive my rough-edged friends, Master Hurgun. We are deeply appreciative of your hospitality.”

“Uh never said I wasn’t appreshatuv!” Gunthar said, his mouth already stuffed with food.

“I meant no disrespect,” Ratchis said, glowering at Roland.

“Aye, nor did I,” Kazrack said.

¹⁸² Ratchis first discovered his love of asparagus at the feast in honor of the dragon-hunters at Castle Gothanius (Session #12).

They all sat and began to eat silently. They were ravenous, and the food was beyond description.

“You have questions?” Hurgun began after a time.

“Yes,” Kazrack stood, wiping his beard with a cloth napkin. “What happened to our companion, Martin?”

“He was destroyed as a result of completing his task,” Hurgun replied. “None return alive from where he went.”

“And how do you know this, if you were trapped in a time elemental?” Roland asked. “I do not mean to sound suspicious, but. . .”

“I have my sources in the planes that have interests in watching the affairs of mortals such as we,” the geomancer said. “And there is deduction, and the stones of this maze themselves can each tell me what has transpired in their presence.”

“And is it true that Martin’s actions released an evil god’s power into our world?” Kazrack asked.

Hurgun nodded.

Kazrack’s face grew flush as he gritted his teeth in anger, and his whole body began to shake. “And how do we redress this?” He asked as calmly as he could.

“You cannot,” Hurgun replied. “It is part of the mending of creation and the correcting the imbalance of the cosmos.”

“I shall never understand the value of this ‘balance’ people speak of,” Kazrack replied, angrily.

“And what caused this imbalance?” Roland asked.

Hurgun took a long moment before replying. “The monks of Anubis failed to commit the proper sacrifice that is called ‘*Night of the Father*’ at the turning of the two-thousand and sixty-fourth year of this age, so according to ancient divine law, the Furies should have been released to ravage the world of the mortal races, but Anubis forgave his followers and held back the Furies, shifting his former allegiance in ways that resonate through all of creation, creating an opening.¹⁸³ It was by this opening that Rahkefet now emerges. Martin the Green was the means by which Osiris got it done and destroying the artifact of a mortal who would pretend to godhood.”

“And Adder?” Roland asked.

“Dead,” Hurgun replied.

“Well, that is gratifying,” Roland smiled.

“But we defeated him more than once when we were jumping through time,” Ratchis said.

“He is gone beyond recovery,” Hurgun said. “By keeping him occupied he never had a chance to manipulate the time elemental and do something really destructive...”

“Like what?” asked Bastian.

“Like allow Rahkefet to bring an avatar to rule in Aquerra, as he did in the time of Agon the God-King of the Spice and Thread Islands,” Hurgun replied. “Though more than likely he was not up to the task. He has not reached the

¹⁸³ **DM’s Note:** This cosmic mumbo-jumbo are consequences taken from the unfinished Company of the Rod campaign - my friend Sean’s Aquerra campaign from ‘99-‘01 (which I played in briefly as a fighter named “Henry ‘Beetle’ Hough”), which were a result of some shifts in Aquerra cosmology he and I had talked over to help fill out the evil side of Ra’s Pantheon.

level of enlightenment needed to understand the planes the way a hierophant can. He still thinks of himself as *other*.”

“Does anybody else understand what the frig he’s saying?” Gunthar said, after impatiently grabbing a flagon of wine from a slow pouring *unseen servant*. “It’s like I understand the words, but all together it is like... It is like Martin, but ten times worse...”

“Gunthar...” Roland began to warn.

“No, he is right,” Hurgun interrupted. “Words are too small for these matters. Simply put, you kept him from interrupting me while I untwined the Maze from the Plane of Time and allowed us to escape.”

“So Rahkefet turns from a forgotten and lost god to a god for the lost,” Roland said. “Interesting...”

“And his power in Aquerra will grow as word of him grows,” Hurgun said.

“So we must preach against him!” Kazrack slammed his fist on the table.

“Better not to speak of him at all then,” Bastian said, speaking for the first time. He ate slowly, but with gusto, enjoying the many flavors that reminded him of the divine meals created by Abderus.¹⁸⁴

“So, we have no worries about the pasts we visited?” Roland asked, changing subjects. “I mean, the world we return to will be as we remember it, despite what we saw happen back then that was different, and despite the loss of one of the items granted by Chochokpi?”

Again, Hurgun of the Stone took some time before responding.

“Yes and no,” he finally said. “It *will* affect things, though we can never be sure how. We think of time as linear; this moment follows one and is followed by another – but it is more like ripples in a pond, or the circular ridges in the ground when the earth explodes. Everything, from the forgotten bronze coin to the greatest knight of Neergaard is immersed in the liquid of time and no one of us can know how something or someone’s circles intercept that of others. It is impossible to predict. Things *change* more often that you would imagine, but to the world and in the records of sages it as if those things had always been as they are. Some say the cosmos is in constant need of maintenance, that we only play the roles set to us by the gods to accomplish these changes and repairs, but the gods themselves are only pawns of some greater power; a power without form and whose reasons, if any, are unfathomable to us. Though I have erred on the side of arrogance and sought to know, and many have suffered because of it.”

“So...?” Roland began but stopped.

“It is the nature of Time to repair itself,” Hurgun continued. “Even when flung out to the realms beyond reason, it seeks to cling to the at least the illusion of order. Only those involved near the center of these events can remember these things, and even then, the mind tends to try to make it fit and make it work, until the true memory becomes a hazy thing, a dream, if it is remembered at all. And then again, who is to say what the *true* memory is, for was not the world different before then? So, these small items may make small changes, or they make big ones. There may be some that will be immediately obvious, and ones that may not come to light until you are old men, and ones you may never encounter at all. And chances are you will not notice anyway. I would council you to forget.”¹⁸⁵

“Why?” Kazrack asked, growing blustery with anger once again.

¹⁸⁴ Bastian was staying with Abderus the Shedu in the demi-plane of Topaline when the Keepers of the Gate found him, back in Session #86

¹⁸⁵ **DM’s Note:** This is how I explain the changes to the setting that come both from changes to the rules, and desire for certain flavor. That is, it was as if it had always been that way. I knew I would be changing a good number of things based on the effective playtest of houses rules and classes in this campaign, so it would serve as a means to changing that as well.

“If you wish to keep your wits, surrender to your new memories,” Hurgun said. “The mortal mind cannot hold such disparate elements for too long without fracturing...”

Once again, Kazrack’s anger was deflated, as his shoulders slumped. “To be angry at the movements of the cosmos is as to being angry at a mountain. What does it solve? What does it change?” The dwarf’s voice was filled with resignation. “However, Master Hurgun, you were right to call yourself arrogant. What have you accomplished by dipping into the well of the gods? You will do well to mark my words next time such an inclination strikes you.”

“Kazrack, you are being rude to our host again,” Roland said.

“No, the dwarf’s words are harsh, but not untrue,” Hurgun said with a sigh. I would be playing myself false if I were to deny my failure and hubris. When we are done here and I have made my preparations, I shall dissolve the Maze and build a home in a new place on this, the plane of my birth. Perhaps it is time for me to deal with mortal affairs once again, as befits a mortal.”

“So what about our reward?” Gunthar asked, again. He pulled his ale and wine sodden shirt from his chest with annoyance with one hand as he took another swig from a flagon with the other.

“We were willing to sacrifice our lives to save our world, anything beyond that is a blessing,” Ratchis said.

“Speak for yourself, Snuffles,” Gunthar choked down some wine.

“I shall give you a boon, and give you each a token that you might call on me for aid at some future time,” Hurgun replied. From beneath the table, he produced a blue velvet bag that drew open into a drop cloth. Within were six iron coins each marked with Hurgun’s rune. He handed one out to each of the five Keepers of the Gate and explained their use.¹⁸⁶

“Do we each get a boon, too?” Gunthar asked.

“Just one boon you must agree to and share,” Hurgun replied.

“What do you mean by ‘boon’ exactly?” Roland asked.

“What do you *wish* it to mean?” Hurgun answered a question with a question.

“Whu. . . Wish? Wish! Then we’re getting Jeremy back!” Gunthar exclaimed. He stood up and gestured with his cup, sending wine flying in all directions.

“You can’t make that decision on your own,” Roland protested, standing as well.

“I didn’t make it on my own, Puss-a-Wuss!” Gunthar yelled. “Snuffles and Stumpy agreed to it when they begged me to help them on this quest!”

“We never begged!” It was Kazrack’s turn to protest.

“Oh! Now you try to go back on your word, huh?” Gunthar leaned way over to yell right in Kazrack’s face. The dwarf pushed him away and stood back.

“Martin gave his life and perhaps his soul to keep a great evil from entering the world,” Roland said.

¹⁸⁶ The coin is imbued with a *Refuge* spell. When rubbed on both sides and the command words "*Nughur Fo Enos*" are spoken, the holder is instantaneously transported to Hurgun's sanctuary, regardless of where or on what plane the bearer happen to be. This power may only be used once. Afterwards, the coin is nothing more than a blank iron disk of no real value.

“He also helped bring another form of evil into the world to be more widely worshiped,” Bastian pointed out.

“That doesn’t matter,” Roland replied. “He sacrificed himself willingly. We should bring him back.”

“I will miss Martin dearly as well, but is it responsible of us to use such a boon for the life of one man?” Kazrack asked. “Can we not use it for some greater purpose that will help the world and perhaps redress some of the evil that will be caused by the dark god’s return?”

“It is often said, ‘beware what you wish for,’ the larger the thing you request the more possible unforeseen consequences there might be,” Hurgun warned. “You could fill every belly today but condemn more to starve tomorrow.”

“I will never understand why anyone bothers with arcane magic, when wisdom would have you never use it,” Kazrack said. “At least with divine magic you can substitute the wisdom your gods for your own in its use...”

“None of that bleedin’ matters,” Gunthar continued. “We had a deal, and I plan to see that you stick with it. Why don’t we vote so I can see who I have to beat or kill to make sure I get to see my brother alive again.”¹⁸⁷

“We do not need to vote,” Roland replied.

”Why? You planning on agreeing with me?”

“No,” Roland replied.

“Then we vote,” Gunthar said. He looked around the table at his companions.

“Are you sure that he would even want to come back?” Ratchis asked. “He already returned from the dead once, and the responsibility for what his friends had to endure to bring him back weighed heavily on him, especially the death of Jana. Perhaps he is in a better place now. . .”

“You are just trying to weasel out of it!” Gunthar spat. “Who is for bringing back Jeremy? Vote!”

Gunthar raised his hand, and Ratchis sighed and followed. Kazrack grunted and did the same. Roland and Bastian did not raise their hands.

”I do not know who this Jeremy person is, except the little I heard, but I did know Martin, and I think he is the one who should be returned,” Bastian said softly.

“Kazrack, you agree with Gunthar?” Roland asked.

“We gave our word,” Kazrack said. “As much as I would like to see Martin back, and as much as I agree with what D’nar said, I cannot go back on it.”

“Excuse me?” Norena spoke up. She and Razzle and Cordell were unusually quiet during the whole meal. “And what of Richard the Red, Master Hurgun? Do you know what happened to him?”

Hurgun nodded. “He was lost in the planes, his essence scattered, perhaps never to coalesce again. It cannot be known. Though if the Keepers of the Gate would like, the boon could be used to return him...”

Roland burst out laughing, and then turned to Hurgun very seriously. “No.”

“If he does return on his own, he is to be brought back to the Academy of Wizardry for trial,” Kazrack said. “It is

¹⁸⁷ **DM’s Note:** Keep in mind that Martin’s player was running Gunthar this whole time. So, Martin’s player was arguing for his own character not being raised (even though he personally *did* want it).

what Martin would have wanted.”

Hurgun nodded.

“So, Jeremy it is!” Gunthar said, returning to talk of the ‘boon’.

“Your group does not seem to have come to a consensus,” Hurgun replied. “Take the night to talk it over and sleep on it. You can give me your decision in the morning. But there is one last thing...”

The geomancer’s gaze fell on Kazrack.

“There is a stone you have in your possession that holds the spirit of the heir of the last true dwarven king,” he said. “I need for you to return it.” He held out his hand.

Kazrack shook his head and stepped away from the table. “No.”

“It was put in my custody by high priests of your order,” Hurgun explained. “A neutral party to look over it and keep it safe until such time that it might be needed again.”

“Then I shall return it to the high priests myself, and if they want to return it to you, let them,” Kazrack said. “I cannot in good conscience see this having entered my hands without good reason. It may have even been pre-ordained.”¹⁸⁸

“Kazrack, it is the greatest degree of hubris for you to think that your will, as well intentioned as it might be, should override a promise Hurgun gave to your people,” Ratchis said.

“Yes,” Roland agreed. “Do you want to tempt our host to violence if you seek to make him break his own word?”

“I will not fight for it,” Hurgun said in his deep tone. “If Master Delver wants to take it, then he can take it ... I am willing to see him as representative of his people in this matter at this moment; though again I must warn what changes might come from bringing this back to your people may not be all you have hoped for...”

“My people have changed,” Kazrack replied. “We need a king. We need direction that unifies us as one people so that we might take our place in the world again, and so that Derome-Delem might be unified as one nation under one dwarven king.”¹⁸⁹

“Yes, regarding the matter of the future of Derome-Delem, there is someone arriving who would like to speak to you all,” Hurgun of the Stone stood. He gestured for Cordell, Norena and Razzle to join him. “Finish your food and drink, as I bring your other *friends* back to the guest rooms and see to some other things, in the meantime Scartesh has something he’d like to say to each of you.”

End of Session #103

¹⁸⁸ When Kazrack got his runes thrown by Daerngar way back in Session #7, it hinted at something like this.

¹⁸⁹ There has not been a unified dwarven kingdom in Aquerra since the end of the 2nd Age, over 2000 years ago.

Session #104 ¹⁹⁰

“Scartesh?” Kazrack stepped back towards the table, fist clenched.

“The orcs that took the outer level of the fortress were acting as agents of Glamorgana the Green,” Hurgun said. “We had long ago brokered a deal regarding her aid after I performed a favor for her.”

Kazrack’s mouth opened, but he could not make words. He just jerked his head as if suffering palsy.

“That clears some things up,” Ratchis said. “My people, the Darksh, worshiped the dragon, and we saw her flying over their camps as we returned from Nikar.¹⁹¹ If Scartesh serves her, then they would have accepted them as their leader when they had rejected him before.”

Hurgun of the Stone led Norena of Bast, Razzle Greyish and Cordell of Thoth through one portal as Scartesh, his ogre bodyguard, Dumashg, and a stooped black orc wearing a grass skirt and a necklace of bones stepped in through another. None of them were armed.

Ratchis stood and stepped slightly before his friend, moving from watching Scartesh, to the ogre, to the black orc, and then back again. Kazrack murmured a prayer for wisdom and patience.

“Bastian,” Scartesh said in his amicable growl. “It is good to see you again.”

Bastian stood and walked over the half-orc and shook his hand, but gave a wary eye to Dumashg and to the black orc.

“It has been a little while,” the bearded warrior responded softly and smiled.

Scartesh reached down onto the table and grabbed up a strip of beef and began to chew, taking in each of the Keepers of the Gate one at a time.

“Hurgun said the watch-mage’s dead,” he finally said. “That true?”

“Yes,” Bastian said.

“Well...” Scartesh scratched at his thick black naps and looked out at everyone from under his dark eyes. “I was trying to figure out the best way to tell you... But I think I have to just come out and say it... Bluntly.”

He poured himself an ale.

“What you saw outside? That is just a small example of my forces,” Scartesh said. He licked his dark lips, and nodded at the mug of ale, seeming to really enjoy it. The ogre reached for some, but its hand was slapped away. “Just a taste of what I have been able to accomplish... I plan to make some changes in this part of Derome-Delem, and I need you all to help me. You all have a role to play in making this work out the best for everyone involved; even the watch-mage. It is a shame he died.”

“And what is it you have done?” Kazrack asked through gritted teeth.

“I have done what no one has done since the days of General Awzturk Boarblood, uniting many disparate orc tribes for our mutual benefit and that of the world,” Scartesh said.¹⁹² He had been fighting a smile, but it blossomed on his face as he spoke the words. “And there are more tribes pledging themselves to us all the time. I have even contacted our normally reclusive brethren under the mountains. And we have goblin allies, and others...”

¹⁹⁰ This session was played on Sunday, January 15th, 2006.

¹⁹¹ See Session #75

¹⁹² General Bloodboar Awzturk was said to have been the near-immortal off-spring of Ashronk the Boar God, Patron of Orcs. He began the First Humano-Orc War back in 197 H.E., and it lasted for 23 years.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gunthar scoffed, and poured himself yet another glass of wine.

“After nearly two decades of work, I have overcome the resistance and tribal hatreds, and we shall carve a nation for ourselves, not for some evil wizard, self-aggrandizing priest or petty warlord who would use orcs as fodder for their own glory and power, but for ourselves, as other peoples have done and prospered. We will not destroy ourselves by trying to destroy the world of men but take our place in it.” He stood taller when he spoke, and his gaze fell to Ratchis many times.

“Yeah, that’ll go over well,” Gunthar slurred. Scartesh snarled and shot the Neergaardian a look.

“Well, that is a... um... worthy goal, I guess...” Roland said, and sucked down a glass of wine.

“Yes, it is,” Scartesh said. “And *you* will have to take the role I had for the watch-mage, Bastite,” Scartesh said.

“Oh?” Roland looked up curious. “I will try to be accommodating, but I really must know the details.”

“You seem to know a great deal about us. How is that so?” Ratchis asked.

“I have my sources,” Scartesh replied. “Not the least of which are the druids of the Circle of the Thorn.¹⁹³ Regardless, now that the Garvan gnomes and the king of Gothanium have made peace against us...”

“They have? *Against* you? What do you mean?” Bastian asked.

“The arrival of my forces made them both realize they needed to be allies if they were to deal with the multitude of orcs,” Scartesh explained. “It is amazing how an outside threat can unite even the fiercest of enemies... As I was saying, now that they have made peace against us, I need someone to carry the message of my offer to them. I had hoped it could be the watch-mage of Gothanium, but a Bastite will do when it comes to social graces and diplomacy.”

“And the message is?” Roland asked.

“The king must swear fealty to me,” Scartesh replied bluntly. “He and his militia have no hope of resisting us, even with the aid of the gnomes. But if he bends the knee, he may remain as ruler of this area and may even rule over his old enemies, Rhondria and Menovia when I have conquered them. I prefer the foundation of this empire to be as bloodless as possible. It would be better for all our people.”

“I am sure he will appreciate that,” Roland replied, with a smirk.

“Oh, he will not appreciate it,” Scartesh replied.

“I mean, he will understand the wisdom of it,” Roland said. “Not that he’d *like* it.”

“Bastian,” Scartesh turned to the bearded warrior. “You are no longer liked by your people, and for whatever role I played in that I apologize. However, your old reputation may still hold among the hunters and rangers of Archet and the western woods. I am hoping you may be of help in making the transition of power in this area a peaceful one by going to them and explaining the situation.”

Bastian was silent for a long moment, mulling his words as usual. “I am not sure of my own opinion on this matter, but I can still bring your message and explain to the best of my ability to those that will listen.”

Scartesh nodded and then looked to Kazrack. “Dwarf... I have news to give you will not like,” he said.

¹⁹³ The Keepers of the Gate, before they were even known as ‘The Fearless Manticore Killers’ spent nearly a month with the monstrous druids of the Circle of the Thorn. (See Sessions #30 to #33)

“You have already said much I do not like, but my likes and dislikes are inconsequential to this discussion,” Kazrack replied.

“There was a great battle,” Scartesh continued. “The dwarves of the place you called Adoth-Rech, the renovated fortress?¹⁹⁴ It was impossible to parley with them, and they insisted on throwing their lives away in trying to stop our progress here to Greenreed Valley. Some of them escaped, and I imagine they will be bringing the news to their kind any day now, but we also have some prisoners...”

“What would you have of me...?” Kazrack asked, maintaining his temper.

Gunthar looked at Kazrack with amazement. “He just said he killed a whole bunch of stunties! You don’t even care?”¹⁹⁵

Kazrack did not respond.

Scartesh eyed Gunthar, and Dumashg cracked his knuckles. The black orc continued to look down, shifting from foot to foot and occasionally letting out a little growly sighs.

“I wish for you to bring the prisoners back to Abarrane-Abaruch as a sign of good faith, and bring the leaders there my offer, so they might share it in turn with the Nauglimir Merchant Consortium, so that all the dwarves of Derome-Delem might know I plan to deal fairly with them,” Scartesh explained to Kazrack. “And the offer is thus, if the dwarves do not interfere with the founding of our empire from here all the way east to Ettinos, and up to the northern shore, we shall use our resources to destroy the undead forces of Dralmohir which fall in those lands, and allow the dwarves to take back any of their ancient treasures still there and found a temple or other monument to the fallen kingdom that once stood there...”

Kazrack mulled over the words.

“Do you have a scribe, or can you write this offer in your own hand?” Scartesh asked. “I do not want it forgotten or misremembered...”

“I will bring your offer,” Kazrack said in a quieter voice than normal.

“Ratchis of the Darksh...” Scartesh turned to his more monstrous fellow half-orc. “I need good lieutenants. I need men of vision who can help bring our people out of the superstition, destructive rituals, and savagery that passes for our culture. The Darksh have ever been a strong tribe; a strong-*willed* tribe, but their leadership is weak. I want you to kill their leader and *be* their leader and make a difference for your people. I know you value freedom, but answer me this: Can a people ever truly be free if they are made to scurry along the fringes of the civilized worlds like rats? You can help them not only be truly free but teach them how to use their freedom productively...”

Ratchis scratched his chin and narrowed his eyes. “What will the laws of this empire of yours be like?” he asked.

“They will be much like the laws of many lands in Aquerra,” Scartesh shrugged. “Those details will be dealt with when the time comes, until then there will be wars to fight and people to bring into our fold...”

“During times of peace, will slavery be allowed?” Ratchis asked, not letting go of the subject.

“There will be no slavery,” Scartesh did not pause. “Too long have our people been enslaved by others and by each other.”

“I am not sure how my own plans will intertwine with yours...” Ratchis began.

¹⁹⁴ Kazrack spent a night in Adoth-Rech back in Session #76

¹⁹⁵ **DM’s Note:** Gunthar was still being played by Martin’s character.

“Oh, he’ll do it!” Gunthar answered for him with a laugh.

Ratchis scowled but nodded. “If it means a greater peace and a chance to change the fate of my people who have lived their awful lives through no fault of their own, then I shall seek them out...”

“But not today! Today we have urgent business to discuss after the requisite celebration, that is,” Roland said, raising a glass.

“Are you saying you’d like to make a toast?” Scartesh asked, pouring himself another mugful of ale. He did not offer any to his own companions.

“A toast to Hurgun, a wonderful host,” Roland said, and everyone raised their glasses.

“And to the future,” added Scartesh. “May we work together for a new and better world.”

After another round, Scartesh bid them adieu. “I shall come in the morning to bring Ratchis into our camp and retrieve the prisoners... Until then...”

“Wait!” Gunthar held up a hand and stood. “I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Well, you are allied with the dragon, right?” Gunthar asked.

Scartesh nodded.

“So, wouldn’t it be a dragon empire then, and not an orc one?” Gunthar asked.

“Dragons care little for the day to day running of an empire,” Scartesh replied. “She will act as the divine right of our kind, choosing the heir to the empire and legitimizing him by her choice... As Ratchis knows, many of our kind are in awe of dragons. Without her involvement, I would not have been able to bind together as many tribes as I have.”

“Well, it seems not all orcs are bestial,” Kazrack said, looking Scartesh in the eye. “I should know that lesson better because of my friend, D’nar, but still... You have made a good impression on me, Scartesh, and if it comes to conflict, I will show you honor on the battlefield.”

Scartesh nodded, and then turned as a monodrone made to show him and his companions from the Dining Room.

Ratchis suddenly barked out in the orcish tongue to Scartesh, slamming his chest once with a fist. Scartesh nodded, gave a slight smile, and left.¹⁹⁶

The Keepers of the Gate immediately fell to debating Scartesh’s offers.

“Do you think what he can do what he claims; establish an orcish empire?” Kazrack asked.

“If he is allied with the dragon and he has the kinds of forces we got a glimpse of, then yes,” replied Ratchis. “I just do not know how sustainable it would be.”

“But the dragon isn’t really a dragon, right?” Bastian asked. “I mean, it is fuzzy, but I seem to recall it melted into a puddle of snow...”

¹⁹⁶ Here Ratchis yelled in orcish custom “*I am Ratchis, son of Darksb! Can you not see that I am not afraid of you?*”

“We do not know when in the future we were,” Ratchis said. “That might have just been a guardian of the real dragon...”

“Kazrack, do you think the dwarves will agree to this offer?” Roland asked.

“It is doubtful,” the dwarf said. “Dwarves will not bend the knee to a dragon or an orc.”

“There are too many forces to oppose,” Ratchis said. “We have to have faith that a peaceful transition can happen...”

“Heh. I think Scartesh is posturing,” Roland said. “I think what he said about needing the dragon reveals how precarious his grasp on all the orc tribes really is... And I can’t help but keep thinking of the message I received from my goddess when we were in Topaline. The smothering of security? The peril of freedom? These are the choices the sphinx was talking about!”¹⁹⁷

“Perhaps,” Ratchis replied. “And I have not forgotten the alliance of our two goddesses, but this is an opportunity to help my people that I never thought I would get, and I have to take it. Anyway, if Scartesh does plan to rule a savage and enslaving nation, then I want to keep close to him in case he needs be killed.” Ratchis grew grim. “The human kingdoms have no chance against those orc forces, and while the united might of the dwarves may be able to, the humans would be wiped out no matter who they ally themselves with. At least this way, we can buy the Gothianians some time, as well...”

“But the sphinx’s riddle must be kept mind,” Roland said.

“That’s not a riddle, that’s bullshit,” Gunthar said. Kazrack nodded.

“Law and Chaos are spokes in the cosmic wheel as well, do not forget,” Roland said. “There are subtleties at work here.”

“Uh-huh, so when we going to go kill the dragon?” Gunthar asked, changing the subject and looking from face to face.

“SUBTLETIES!” Roland yelled over the Neergardian. “We need to consider well what we do here. We need to gather information!”

“Look, my short-term goal is to prevent the suffering of all those innocents whose lives will be affected by this,” Ratchis said. “If that means allowing the creation of an orcish nation... I think it could be a good thing.”

“Well,” Roland took another sip of wine and stood to pour more. “My short-term goal is to gain wealth, prestige, and power. All in the name of good, of course, but I still want it, and I think paying the King of Gothanius a visit might be the first step in that.”

“My short-term goal is to have another drink, and then bring my brother back, so we can have another drink,” Gunthar slurred. “And *then* go kill the dragon, marry some princesses, and get to fighting orcs and taking booty and doing whatever lordly warriors do!”

“And I will travel to Abarrane-Abaruch and deliver Scartesh’s message as I have pledged to do,” Kazrack said. “The lives of those prisoners are now in my hands, and I must bring them safely back to their people. Also, I must deliver the stone with spirit of the dwarven king to the high priests there. Perhaps while I am there, I might also find some weapon to help us against the dragon.”

“We already got a weapon!” Gunthar yelled. “The Can-On!”

¹⁹⁷ See Session #88

“What about you Bastian? What do you plan to do?” Roland asked the ever-silent Gothianian.

“I will do what I told Scartesh I would do,” Bastian said, in his murmur of a voice. “If there can be peace, I want it. But if there is to be war, well... This is my country and while I left when they began an unjust war, I will fight to defend it when they are warred upon unjustly.”

“Well, said,” Roland replied.

The feast wound down, and Hurgun of the Stone never made another appearance. A monodrone led the Keepers of the Gate back to the Air Room. Bellies bursting and moody from wine, they gladly slipped back into a rejuvenating sleep.

Teflem, the 6th of Ese – 565 H.E.

Ratchis was awakened by a duodrone. It buzzed its wings and its rectangular body bobbed up and down as it led the Friar of Nephthys to the chamber with the stone golem statues of Hurgun. In a room behind a door the party had simply run past, Ratchis found Gunthar in a sitting room, with a brown hunting horn of bone and wood in his hands.

The room was decorated in lacquered wood panels that traced the perimeter of the bare stone walls. There was a large hearth of stone that seemed to have been molded by hand in the far wall. A gold statue of a ram upon a mountain, and another of a horn of plenty, where the stone fruits were colored by being encrusted with tiny jewels, flanked it. There was a plush carpet and stuffed chairs.

Lying on a divan was the motionless form of Martin the Green. He looked worn and skinny, like he had since his experience with *Lacan's Demise*, but the rot of his face was gone. His skin was its normal pallor. Martin had his hands clasped to his chest, and Ratchis gasped as he noticed that the watch-mage was breathing.

“What is this? What is happening?” he asked Gunthar.

“We all got what we wanted,” Gunthar smiled.

Hurgun of the Stone entered the room by means of the solid stone wall on the right.

“Ah, Ratchis... I see you have arrived and have seen your friend alive again. I explained to Gunthar that upon doing more research I realized it might not be a good idea to bring his brother back in the manner I had intended,” Hurgun said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he said something about a debt and being bound to serve Anubis and the good, since the price of his coming back last time was never paid in full,” Gunthar continued to smile broadly, and raised the horn. “Now I just blow on this, and Jeremy shows up all bathed in the celestial light and ready to drink or fight or do whatever. And this way he can pay back his debt and eventually have his soul at rest. I summoned him before, and we talked about it. He's still not happy that I'm his brother, but I think he'll get used to it. I mean, to know me is to love me, right Snuffles?”

Ratchis' grunt was non-committal.

“And that left the boon free to be used to bring back your friend as you and the rest of your companions desired,” Hurgun added, and gestured to Martin. “I asked Gunthar who would be best to wake him, and he said you.”

“I doubt I am the first face he would like to see,” Ratchis replied. “But I guess no one else would be any better of a choice.”

“Before you do wake him, I also wanted to give you two more gifts,” Hurgun said. He walked over to a chest at the end of the divan and pulled out a spear. He handed it to Ratchis. The spear's shaft was an ashen color, and the

spearhead was made of a reddish-black metal. There was an inset cut out in the lower portion of the spear head that had a single eye with a flame-shaped pupil in it. Golden hairs were tied tightly about the top of the shaft to hold the blade in place.

It was the *Spear of the Boarblood*, and Hurgun explained its origins and powers.¹⁹⁸

“Elfbane?” Ratchis asked, wincing. “That means draw, too?”

“Yes,” Hurgun replied.

“Oh, that’s okay then... Thank you very much,” Ratchis shrugged. “I am most grateful.”

“I wanted to replace what you had to give back up to Chochokpi,” Hurgun said. “It might not be as prestigious an item, but I hoped its origins, and the fact that a spear is the weapon of your goddess would please you.”

Ratchis nodded. Hurgun of the Stone also handed him a bright green emerald the size of a large walnut. “And this is just a thanks...”

Ratchis gently touched a calloused finger to Martin’s forehead. The watch-mage’s eyes fluttered open.

“Ratchis! Thank you for bringing me back,” was the first thing he said, as he slowly sat up.

“Actually, you have Gunthar to thank,” Ratchis smiled. He went on to explain about Jeremy. Gunthar and Martin shook hands and the Neergaardian slapped him on the shoulder.

“You’ll be back to being doughy in no time,” Gunthar winked.

There was a happy chittering and Thomas leaped up from where he had dropped onto the divan. Martin scratched his familiar’s head lovingly and brought the squirrel right up to his face to let the little rodent sniff him.

“Is it just me, or...” Martin suddenly looked up at Ratchis. “Did we fight a dragon?”

Ratchis nodded and did his best to explain.

“And where is Richard?”

“Lost in the planes,” Hurgun said, stepping forward. Martin greeted Hurgun with a deep bow. A few moments later, a monodrone showed Kazrack into the sitting room.

The dwarf nearly broke Martin’s back he embraced his companion so hard. Martin looked away embarrassed, and Ratchis laughed in a way neither of them had ever heard before.

Kazrack was given a magical halberd named *Higador*, and a brown diamond, smaller than Ratchis’ stone, but of

¹⁹⁸ This spear reputedly belonged to General Awzturk Boarblood, descendant of Ortag-Kta, who was said to be the son of Ashronk the One-Eyed. Boarblood emulated his forebearer by organizing great armies of orcs and goblins and using those hordes to start the First Humano-Orc War. It is said he also had the blood of man and had lived among humans for years as a mercenary, learning their ways. Legend says the shaft was made from a tree watered with the blood of one hundred elves, and the blade was forged from the enchanted doors of a sacred dwarven vault. Boarblood was slain by the dwarven champion Jochamkar, and his spear thought lost to time and chaos. It is unclear how Hurgun of the Stone came to have it. This is a +1 *spear, elfbane*. In the hands of one with orcish blood, it does an extra +2d6 damage to elves.

near equal value.¹⁹⁹

“Ooh gifts! I love do so love gifts!” Roland squealed after he had finished cooing over a resurrected Martin. The Bastite had left Bastian sleeping in the cloud room they shared the night before when a monodrone was sent for him, but the Gothanian was called soon after. Hurgun gave Roland the *Collar of Fangs* and a jacinth.²⁰⁰ He gifted Bastian some tall leather footwear, called *Bucknard's Boots*.²⁰¹ They were given valuable gems as well.

Martin was given one of Hurgun's Tokens, a large ruby and a fine dark blue robe that changed color the moment Martin tried it on. It had swirls of green in varying shades surrounding peacock feather-like patterns. Hurgun called it *Issek's Robe of Eyes*.²⁰² He also was given back the *Ring of Marked Excellence*, which Hurgun had taken from the body of Ming the Dakkon-King.²⁰³

Hurgun of the Stone led the Keepers of the Gate back to the Dining Room, and they found Cordel, Norena and Razzle waiting for them. They stood and greeted Martin warmly.

“I am sorry that we were at odds,” Martin said to Cordell.

“It is the past and cannot be unwritten,” Cordell of Thoth said. “It does my heart good to see you among the living.”

Everyone sat down to the delicious breakfast spread laid out on the table.

¹⁹⁹ Called “Impaler of Giants,” this halberd was forged for Augusto el Grande, an Indigo giant-killer from what is now the United Kingdom of Superior Families. Its mithral blade is covered in old dwarven runes and is held in place by yellowed frost giant bone tied with the red hair of fire giant. The shaft was made from the club once used by a hill giant; the blades were sharpened on a stone giant's skull. This halberd was enchanted by Ignatio the Crooked, who gave it to Augusto as a reward. The famous giant-killer later lost it when he was served as a stew to the court of a stone giant prince. Hurgun of the Stone received the halberd as a gift when visiting that same court to aid the giants some 50 years later. This is a *halberd +1, giantsbane*. It does an extra +2d6 damage to true giants, and when set to receive a charge, its critical threat range triples to 18-20.

²⁰⁰ This necklace consists of seventeen fangs of various carnivorous animals that have been strung on a silken cord. The teeth were collected from the ashes of the Great Pyre of Hellion the Mad Druid in the Third Age and were crafted into the enchanted necklace by some members of the druidic resistance which eventually toppled the evil reign of that Great Druid. They spent a lot of their time in animal form to avoid detection. This collar may be placed on any willing animal of Small, Medium, or Large size, or may be worn by someone with the druidic *wild shape* ability. (It does not change shape with its wearer and is visible about a shapeshifted wearer's neck). Three times per day as a move-equivalent action, the collar allows the wearer to benefit from the effects of a *greater magic fang* spell. Each use lasts for two hours. In addition, the collar grants a +5 // *enhancement bonus* to move silently.

²⁰¹ Bucknard Bow-legs was the famous ranger/bard of The Mountain Clippers, a group of adventurers who explored mountainous and subterranean areas in both Derome-Delem and Neergaard in search of treasure and song during the early Fourth Age. Bucknard claimed to have won his boots off of the ghost of a Wayfarer of Ptah in a riddling contest; the wandering priest's spirit had been trapped the body of a squid-headed man. But many sages believe Bucknard was prone to liven up his own stories. He and most of his band were killed by dwarves, and the rest imprisoned for many years as a result of a misunderstanding. Hurgun of the Stone gained the boots (among other things) in trade with the dwarves of Torlar-Ang, in exchange for many ancient stone tablets from the time of the Third Grand Dwarven Kingdom. These well-made black leather boots have a dull green inner tongue and lace up to the mid-calf. They grow or shrink to fit anyone of Small or Medium size. The boots increase the wearer's base speed by 10 feet. In addition to this striding ability (considered an enhancement bonus), the boots allow the wearer to make great leaps. She gains a +5 enhancement bonus on jump checks.

²⁰² Issek of the Four Eyes is the only living man known to have entered Dralmohir and returned with some of its secrets, having entered during the Second Humano-Orc War and returning after the war had ended. A former student of Marcosias the Corruptor, Issek is greatly feared for his power and ambition, but his current plans and location are unknown. Many of Issek's spells and objects he created have eyes as part of their theme. Hurgun took this robe from the evil wizard when they battled for control of the Colossus of Abeode. This garment appears to be a normal wizard's robe until it is put on. The wearer can see in all directions at the same moment due to scores of visible, magical eyelike patterns that adorn the robe. The wearer gains these additional benefits: 60-foot darkvision and can see all forms of invisible or ethereal creatures and objects within 60 feet, a +5 competence bonus on Search and Spot checks. The wearer retains his or her Dexterity bonus to AC even when flat-footed and cannot be flanked and may change the color and basic style of the robe's appearance by concentrating for one minute, though it cannot look like anything other than traditional wizard robes and retains the eye pattern in all of its forms. It retains its new appearance until changed again. The wearer also has the following weaknesses: cannot avert or close his or her eyes when confronted by a creature with a gaze attack, a *light* or *continual flame* spell cast directly on a *robe of eyes* causes its wearer to be blinded for 1d3 minutes, and a *daylight* spell blinds it for 2d4 minutes.

²⁰³ Martin gave the Dakkon-King the ring back in Session #93.

“You know, Ratchis,” Razzle Greyish said, back to his talkative self. “You should come visit Ettinos. It's where I call home, even though I am hardly there... It's a half-orc colony, but lovely people. I think you'd really enjoy it.”

“Hurgun? How many days have passed since we entered the Maze?” Martin asked.

“Five days.”

They all chatted breezily, except for Bastian who was as quiet as usual, and Ratchis who seemed to get claustrophobic when too many people talked at once. Gunthar and Norena fell to flirting shamelessly. Roland complained of boredom.

When breakfast ended, Scartesh was shown in again, and this time only the ogre, Dumasg was with him. Martin the Green was introduced, and Scartesh seemed impressed with Hurgun's ability to return him to life. The watch-mage agree to carry the half-orc's message, but added, “However, I will not be an advocate to plead your case. I will merely explain to the king the pros and cons of your offer as I see them.”

“Fair enough,” Scartesh replied. He turned to Ratchis. “Are you ready?”

Ratchis, Scartesh and Dumasg were led to the Entrance Room and up into the Earth Tower and back down through the silent courtyard and out the gate that Ratchis had only seen from above when first coming here.²⁰⁴ The orcs had withdrawn from the courtyard, and he could tell right away that the army here was making ready to move. Sacks were being stuffed, tents taken down, and gear packed high on the backs of the mammoths that bellowed in protest. He even saw half a dozen of the dwarven riding lizards that must have been captured in the battle with the forces of Adoth-Rech. Orcs began to line up as Scartesh walked past, hollering guttural encouragement to him, while some took the opportunity to curse or challenge Ratchis.

The Friar of Nephthys looked to Scartesh, who shrugged, and then he began to walk resolutely towards a large orc who had spat in their direction. The other orcs scattered as Ratchis approached. In a few moments, he had the spitting orc pinned to the ground, arm nearly broken behind its back.

“It is within your right to kill him,” Scartesh said in orcish.

Ratchis jerked the arm hard one last time and let go. “I will not. I prefer he simply know that I could but did not...”

“Some will take your mercy for weakness,” Scartesh said as they continued walking through the camp.

“Then let them come and test my weakness then,” Ratchis replied. “For the others, I hope they can appreciate and learn the quality of mercy from my actions...”

Scartesh nodded. “You will make a good leader for the Darksh. I could have brought the prisoners to the fortress, but I wanted an opportunity to see you among our people. You will do well, but it will still be exceedingly difficult.”

“When has life not be difficult for orcs?” Ratchis said. Scartesh just nodded in agreement.

The dwarven prisoners were chained together in a ditch. There were buckets of slop and excrement, but at least the orcs had kept those buckets separate.

“Traitor!” one of the dwarves suddenly yelled at Ratchis as he appeared with Scartesh at the edge of the ditch. It was a young dwarf, his fine golden beard now as ragged as the remains of stripped armor on his shoulders. Another dwarf that looked exactly like him stood as well. Ratchis recognized them as Golnar and Tolnar. There were nearly a score other dwarves there as well. “I knew he could never be trusted!”

“Foul blood of a bastard race!” Golnar spat. “Where is good Master Delver?”

²⁰⁴ See Session #90

“I have come to bring you and your kin to him,” Ratchis replied with more pity than scorn. “But I have no desire to rob you of your freedom. If you are to come with me, then come of your own accord.” The half-orc called out his goddess’ *word of freedom*, and the chains and manacles dropped off the dwarves.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Keepers of the Gate accompanied Hurgun of the Stone to the top of the Earth Tower to await Ratchis’ return. They looked out on the great host of orcs beginning to march away and wondered where among their number their companion might be. Bastian did his best to estimate how many orcs he saw. It clearly neared a thousand, if not more.

Suddenly there arose a great clamor among the orcs. The Keepers of the Gate and their companions turned to look at where the orcs were marching out of the gap into Greenreed Valley and noticed a silhouette snaking over the ground and looked up to see what it was.

There was a great green and black draconic form swooping over the orcs and headed towards the fortress. Many of the orcs began to break ranks and scatter, but others cowered in fear or awe, covering their eyes, while still others stood in stoic attention.

“Ah, good,” Hurgun of the Stone said. “Now no one do anything to provoke her, there is something I still need to find out about this dragon... Something I suspect from what you told me of your battle with her in the future...”

“At least something interesting is finally happening,” Roland said, as he had been complaining of boredom all morning.

Glamorgana swooped over the courtyard and landed atop the nearby Fire Tower.²⁰⁵ Her claws clattered against the stone as she clung to the side and stretched out her neck towards the Earth Tower.

“Hurgun of the Stone,” She hissed. Her voice snaked up and down their bodies in that unnerving way, reverberating against the fuzzy memory of their battle with her, until it seemed a little clearer. “The agreement is fulfilled. Our worshipers are withdrawing, but now they are ours to command as we like.”

“Yes,” Hurgun replied, not raising his voice despite the gulf between the towers and the moaning of the late autumn wind. “But now you must depart...”

Glamorgana snarled and snapped her wings, pulling her great body in the air. She flew close over the Earth Tower, and the Keepers of the Gate ducked reflexively, but she banked and flew out over the orcs again. The orcs cried out in fear and adoration.

“It is as I suspected,” Hurgun said, when the dragon was out of sight. “That is not Glamorgana. The thing only believes itself to be...”

“What is she then?” Kazrack asked.

“She is a *simulacrum*, made when Glamorgana was younger, and believes herself to be the dragon at that time when she had arrogance and little wisdom,” Hurgun explained. “As dragons get as old as Glamorgana should be now, they withdraw from the world, and grow to have a more balanced view. The petty desires to rule over mortals is a game of adolescence and young adulthood for her kind...”

“So if that is the dragon Scartesh believes to be Glamorgana...” Roland began.

²⁰⁵ The outer fortress of Hurgun’s Maze on Aquerra had four great towers, each topped with a statue representing one of the four elements.

“Then if she is slain, the orc hordes will likely fall apart...” Hurgun finished for him.

“And that is a thing we know can be done,” Martin the Green said. “For we have done it once already...”

“Ratchis seems to feel that the establishment of the orcish empire is inevitable,” Kazrack said. “As is the suffering of the people of the Little Kingdoms...”

“But now it no longer seems inevitable,” Martin replied.

Ratchis of Nephthys led the dwarves back out of the orc camp. The orcs hooted and hollered angrily, but Dumashg escorted them back and there were no attempts to stop them. Everything and everyone stopped when the dragon swooped by overhead. Ratchis cursed and continued, hurrying the awed dwarves along. In fortress courtyard, tridrones were scrubbing the courtyard with pushbrooms while others drew water from the well.

Hurgun and the others came out into the courtyard.

“Master Delver!” Golnar greeted happily. His face brightened and for a moment he looked more like the dwarf Kazrack had seen only a few weeks before. Kazrack clasped hands with each of the dwarves and introduced himself.

Tolnar looked at Ratchis with confusion and remorse, but Ratchis said nothing.

“Your brother, Jolnar?” Kazrack asked.

“He fell running to aid Captain Adalar who was still fighting despite having a leg crushed by one of the behemoths,” Tolnar replied. He looked down. “The captain was crushed under the beast.”

“They fell as any good dwarf should,” Kazrack said to them, gently. “They all did. And though I feel sorry for your loss, I say to you: Do not trouble your hearts with sorrow but look forward to when you may remember your brothers as you slay the enemies of our people.” His voice grew louder, and all the dwarves stood up straighter as Kazrack paced up and down before them. “I shall lead you back to Abarane-Abaruch and bring the news of what has happened here, but I also bring with me good news, though I cannot speak of it now.²⁰⁶ And we shall raise an army to bring glory back to the dwarven people!”

“We are at your service,” Tolnar said. “But we have no arms for the dangerous journey back.”

“You may gather what you need from the fortress armory, though there will be little in the way of armor that will fit dwarves,” Hurgun said. “And now, I must say farewell, and bid you luck in your endeavors. There is much I need to do before I disassemble the Maze... Again, I thank you for your aid, and one day perhaps our paths will cross again.”

“Um, Master Hurgun?” Martin the Green walked over to him meekly. “I was wondering if perhaps we might arrange some training for me, as...”

“I must refuse,” Hurgun replied.

“Okay, well... Is there some message I can bring to the Academy of Wizardry from you?” Martin asked. “I plan to return there soon after I go talk with the King of Gothanuis...”

“The Academy does not concern me,” Hurgun said. “But the king of Gothanuis does... By the time you arrive I will already have gone and paid him a visit and explained some of what has happened.”

²⁰⁶ Kazrack is of course speaking of the spirit of the heir to the dwarven throne in the sapphire.

“Oh really?” Roland perked up. “Can we get a ride with you? A quick *teleport* to Twelve Trolls?”²⁰⁷

“Again, I must refuse,” Hurgun said.

Roland of Bast frowned and nodded.

Martin and Bastian explained to Ratchis what Hurgun had said about the dragon.

“Then it is as important as ever to destroy the dragon,” Ratchis replied. “But not before I take this chance to return to my tribe and sow a seed of goodness in them if I can.”

“We don’t even know where the lair is,” Martin said. “I can use the time to research while I am back at the Academy...I think we all have our own avenues to pursue...”

“And as I said before,” Roland interjected, as Hurgun had left. “We need to gather information. I shall stay here in Gothanius and see what I can find out, and I think I will be seeing if I can collect donations to refurbish and reconsecrate the temple of Bast.”

Kazrack went to Gunthar. “Gunthar, I was hoping you might accompany me and my brethren to Abarrane-Abarruch. Many of them are but new recruits and some are injured from their battle. It will be good to have another sword-arm with us.” The dwarf sounded pained to have to ask.

“Are all the other dwarves like you?” Gunthar asked.

“Yes,” Kazrack did not hesitate.

“Then no, thank you,” Gunthar said, perhaps the first time he had ever been polite. He walked over to join the conversation the others were having with Ratchis. Kazrack joined them as well.

“I can go with you part of the way,” Bastian offered the dwarf. “Archet is close. It won’t matter if I go a few days out of my way.”

“I thank you,” Kazrack replied.

The Keepers of the Gate agreed to travel to Summit where they might gain some information about what had been going on in their absence, and to collect the gear and provisions Kazrack and his new dwarven entourage would need.

They arrived at the outskirts of the town at nightfall.

“Halt! Who goes there?!” cried a familiar voice out of the darkness. It was Finn Fisher and Carlos Diamante leading a squad of local militia men.

There were cheerful greetings, and Finn and Carlos and the others escorted them into town sharing stories of what had happened in the last few weeks.

“I have to warn you, Sir Clerebold is in town,” Finn Fisher said.²⁰⁸ “He lost face with the king when he returned without you, but he and his men decided to stay and help against the orcs when we thought they would be attacking beyond the valley.”

“An honorable man, if misguided,” Martin the Green replied. “But it does not matter if he wants to return me to the

²⁰⁷ Twelve Trolls is the capital of Gothanius, named for the Battle of 12 Trolls.

²⁰⁸ Sir Clerebold Haganricht is the leader of the Company of the Impervious Ward, which the Keepers of the Gate first met in Session #79. They last saw Sir Clerebold when he was keeping to his word regarding his group’s conditions of surrender to the party in Session #87.

king now, as I plan to go there regardless.”

As the others went to the Sun’s Summit Inn, Martin the Green went to see Alderman Henry Horton. Sir Clerebold was meeting with him.

“I shall save the accusations for the King,” the Alderman said coldly. “But I will say that I and the people of Summit are disappointed in you...”

“There was more going on than was ever made clear to you or your people, and for that I apologize,” Martin replied. “But at the time it seemed the best to limit who knew what... In retrospect that may have been a mistake...”

“So I take it the great task you had when we last met has been completed?” Sir Clerebold asked.

“Yes, and I am prepared to meet the king and face his judgment,” Martin said. “The orcs are withdrawing... At least for now... We have time...”

“I shall escort you there on the morrow,” Sir Clerebold said. “And your companions?”

“Roland of Bast shall accompany me, but the others have other tasks still before them,” Martin replied.

“A priest of Bast?” Alderman Horton asked. “Is he here because of the old temple?”

“No, but now that he knows of it, he plans to refurbish and re-consecrate it,” Martin replied.

“Have him return to me when you are done with the king,” the Alderman said. “There will be much re-building needed, and a nearby temple will help to cement the stability and prestige of the area...”

Anulem, the 7th of Ese – 565 H.E. (Remembrance Day)²⁰⁹

The next morning, after a cold breakfast, the Keepers of the Gate gathered to give a prayer for *Remembrance Day* at Roland’s request. When the others were reminded what day it was, they all agreed, even Kazrack, despite it being a day in honor of a human god—as there were many who had fallen in battle he wished to remember in his prayers.

By midday there was no sign of orcs in Greenreed Valley, every banner and standard and mammoth had disappeared over the western horizon. Ratchis informed the others that he would be leaving immediately in order to catch up with them and find the Darksh.

“Ratchis, I wanted you to know that I have the utmost respect for what you are trying to do,” Roland said to him, quietly. “And I respect Scartesh as well, but... You need to ask yourself if you think he can be trusted to make the best decision for everyone and not just for himself and his orcs. Remember, you said you wanted to limit everyone’s suffering, don’t forget that.”

Ratchis nodded. The half-orc shook hands and clasped the shoulders of his companions.

“We meet back at the temple of Bast in three months’ time, right?” he asked with his frightening smile. The others agreed. “I will be stopping at Aze Nuquerna on the way. I want to tell Ethiel what we have learned and see if he has any helpful news...” And he was off.

Bastian wanted to spend more of the day in quiet reflection of fallen comrades, so Kazrack and the dwarves spent their time collecting what food and clothes they could with the help of Finn and Carlos. The town’s constable/smith,

²⁰⁹ It was one (in-game) year ago on this day that the party that would become known as the Fearless Manticore Killers (and later the Keepers of the Gate) had their first battle against goblins.

Maxel, helped them with some spare spears, shields and helms. It was late afternoon when they said their good-byes to the others, heading west across Greenreed Valley and then northwest to Abarrane-Abaruch. It would take a fortnight to get there.

Martin the Green, Roland of Bast, and Gunthar Northrop made their way east across the great Gothanian valley towards Twelve Trolls, escorted by Sir Clerebold and nine of his soldiers. A light snow began to fall as they stopped in the Alder-village of Three Trees and Martin was reminded of the party's last journey in this direction, when they had been arrested in connection with Jana's escape from Ogre Bluff's gaol.²¹⁰

Ralem, the 8th of Ese – 565 H.E.

It was just past midday when Martin, Roland and Gunthar finally gained entrance to Castle Gothanius. The snow had begun to fall harder that mid-morning, and they could barely make out the citadel towers as they made their way across the narrow stone path that bridge the great chasm all around the outer walls.

They were made to wait nearly an hour in the gatehouse with Sir Clerebold, and then finally were shown into the entrance hall. Sir Clerebold was taken away first and a few minutes later a brown-haired young man with a kind round freckled face and a Herman-lander's complexion came out to talk with them. It was Daniel, the castle steward.

"Martin the Green! I had feared something had happened to you while out in the wilderness," the steward said, shaking his hand. The young man's palms were sweaty. Martin introduced Roland and Gunthar.

"I will bring you in to speak with his highness in a few moments. He wants to speak with Sir Clerebold first. I assume you are prepared to explain your whereabouts and your lack of communication since your last visit, and generally since arriving in Gothanius?"

"I shall endeavor to try," Martin replied. "And to that goal I have brought Roland of Bast with me so he might corroborate my story."

"Well, he intends to question you closely, so I hope your wits are sharp today," Daniel said.

"I assume this 'questioning' will be more like yelling?" Martin asked.

"Perhaps... He sent many letters of complaint about you to the Academy, about one a month since last Nueit."

"That's fine," Martin said. "I intend on returning to the Academy for a few weeks when I am done here. I am sure I will have to answer for those letters as well."

A page came over and whispered in Daniel's ear. The steward turned to the three Keepers of the Gate. "Okay, the king is ready for you... Remember your manners and etiquette in the presence of royalty..."

"Martin the Green..." The king allowed the watch-mage's name to roll off his tongue with contempt after Martin and his companions were announced. The king wore a long burgundy robe of velvet and silk slippers. Middle-aged, he had a thick, but well kempt brown beard and green eyes. He sat on an ornate throne. Martin, Roland and Gunthar stood when told they could.

"Two days ago we would have had you thrown in the dungeon or perhaps immediately exiled, Martin the Green," the king continued. "But luckily for you, Hurgun of the Stone stepped out of legend, appeared in my court, and vouched for you and the rest of your *Keepers of the Gate*..."

There was a long pause, but Martin knew to say nothing until he was directly asked a question.

²¹⁰ See Sessions #28 and #29

“However, that does not mean we are not still angry,” the King snarled. “It does not mean we do not think you did a poor job in your duty to keep me apprised of dangers to my realm!”

Another pause.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Martin the Green did his best to explain all he could about Mozek, the Garvan gnomes, and Hurgun’s Maze.

“And now orcs...” The king said.

“Yes and speaking of orcs...” Martin the Green explained about Scartesh and his plans for empire, and his offer to his majesty. Roland interjected describing the number of forces and immediately expounding upon various options the king might have.

“Ah, honored priest of the cat goddess,” the King said. “You do this nation honor by coming here and seeing to its spiritual needs...”

”Yes, and with your leave, your majesty, I hope to repair and re-consecrate the temple of Bast outside of Summit, that I might have a base to work from to guide and protect the people of Gothanius...”

“And help develop a culture that honors the gods...”²¹¹ the King added, obviously eager and happy to have the priest there. Soon Martin was hardly a part of the conversation. He noticed Gunthar shifting from foot to foot, bored out of his mind.

The meeting ended with Roland being invited to be the King’s guest in the castle for the rest of the winter. Martin explained that he would be heading back to the Academy of Wizardry immediately.

“Very well,” King Brevelan replied. “And tell your Academy they owe us a new watch-mage, a *communicative* one, if not one more competent. Your aid is no longer required here. We relieve you of any duties.”

As they left back into the entrance hall Martin said, “Gunthar, will you accompany me to Bountiful? From there I should be able to arrange transport to the Academy with Alexandra the Lavender.”

Gunthar agreed. “But no bleedin’ further than Bountiful!”

“And what will you do with the rest of your time?” Roland asked the Neergardian.

“Eat, drink and whore, of course!” Gunthar smiled broadly. “Now that I can take a break from saving your sorry asses for a few months, I’m gonna take a well-deserved rest!”

“Ah Gunthar, if someone had told me I’d actually find your vileness and comic arrogance endearing I would have thought them crazy,” Roland laughed.

“Keep it in your pants, buddy,” Gunthar shoved the Bastite and winked. “We ain’t at sea...” He walked off.

Martin the Green and Roland of Bast shook hands, embraced, and then shook hands again. “Be wary of the king,” Martin whispered. “We know he is no demonblood, but that does not mean he cannot be petty and vindictive and eager to save face no matter the cost.”²¹²

Roland nodded, finding it hard to keep a serious countenance. “Don’t worry I’ll have him wrapped around my finger in no time... And I plan to go meet all the Aldermen, as well... Are you sure you need to head out immediately?”

²¹¹ Bast is the patron goddess of most art, song, and high culture.

²¹² The Keepers of the Gate found this out from the *Commune* spell cast by Lydia the Holy while they were in Nikar. See Session #72

Why not leave tomorrow?"

"Heh... No, I do not want to test the king's hospitality," Martin replied. "We can reach North Fork Wall by nightfall, there is good inn there if I recall correctly."

"Very well then..." Roland of Bast looked at Martin the Green for a long moment. They shook hands and then embraced. "Three months..."

"Three months..." Martin nodded and agreed.

"But I shall probably be using *sendings* to keep abreast of how it goes with each of us," Roland added.

"Good idea," Martin replied.

"Farewell, and may Great Queen Bast watch over your long journey..." Roland walked Martin out to the castle gate where Gunthar waited for them, and waved as the watch-mage and Neergaardian marched southward into the town proper, out of sight and towards the long road south beyond.

End of Session#104

End of Book IV: Into the Fire

And so ends of the "Out of the Frying Pan Campaign"

AQUERRA