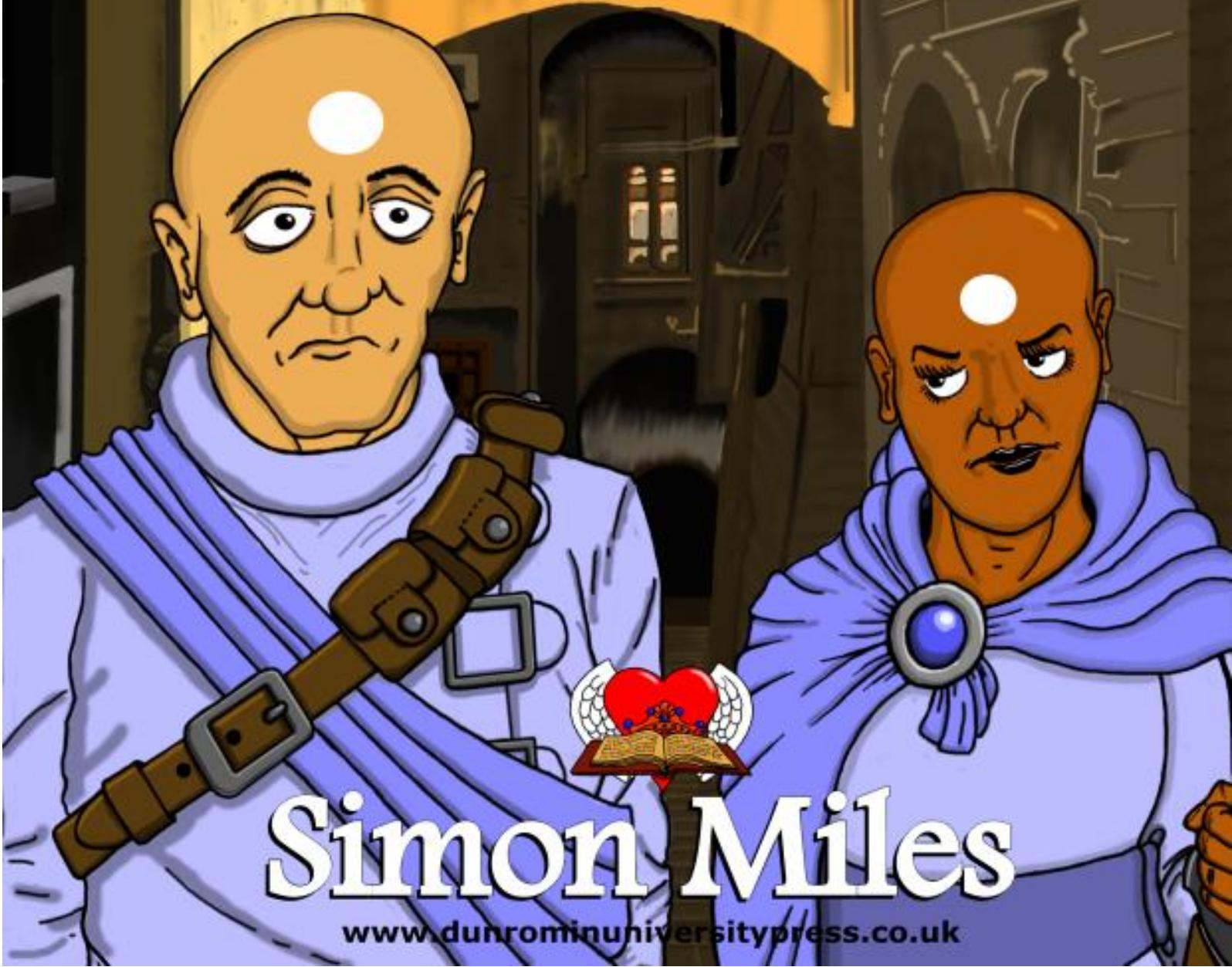


Book one of the  
**Chronicles of Gavin**

# Murder in Wonderland



**Simon Miles**

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# The Chronicles of Gavin Book 1: Murder in Wonderland

By Simon Miles

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Most players of Fantasy Role Playing games like Dungeons and Dragons will have wondered what it might be like to wake up one day in their games, free to explore the worlds of their imagination with swords, magic and monsters.

For Gavin and his friends this ultimate fantasy came true. They found themselves in the bodies of their in-game characters, armed with magical weapons and spells, ready for adventure.

Not only that, but Gavin had been the Dungeon Master in the real world and knew where all the traps were and how to find the best treasure. They were living the dream!

## **But the dream became a nightmare.**

Gavin's friends were slaughtered by an unexpected band of monsters and Gavin came to realise he was trapped and alone among the Frap people of the strange city state of Skull Crag in Barnaynia; a frightening world of supernature, secret cults, terrifying monsters and wars without end.

He fell into a hopeless and depressed state, until one day he happened to overhear a conversation between some sailors at the docks; sailors speaking English!

The sailors had come from the far-off city of Dunromin, capital of the Land of the Young, where everyone speaks English and not Frapper, as they do in Skull Crag. They tell him of a city of warriors, wizards and wonders beyond count!

## **Gavin immediately resolves to journey to the city of Dunromin to find out more**

But he is barely in the city two days before he finds himself trapped in a deadly mystery where a sharp wit is more use than a sharp sword.

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## Chapter 1 – In a New World

Not for the first time Gavin bit hard on his lip to see if the pain would rouse him from his nightmare. It achieved nothing. He couldn't be dreaming all this. It was impossible but it all had to be true. His stomach tied itself in knots again as he tortured himself with recollections of the past six months. The strangest few months he could imagine, or possibly that he couldn't imagine, but he could remember them all too clearly and he bit his lip again, trying not to cry.

Gavin was standing on the prow of a ship in the morning sunshine, looking out across a bay towards the mouth of the River Greyflood on the horizon. The winter wind was biting and cold, as usual, but the sleet flurries of the early morning had abated to the occasional sharp stab of rain. They had left Skull Crag on the Lady Dance three weeks ago, sailing all around the headland of the peninsula that contained the Land of the Young, from south to north. From there they had skirted westwards along the southern side of the Bay of Storms, sighting grim clouds and the odd iceberg on the northern horizon. On the southern, landward side they had seen high moors and perilous cliffs, the sea crashing at their feet, snow lingering at their top. Now they approached the mouth of the river Greyflood for the final stage of their journey to Dunromin, the capital of the Land of the Young. This great city was at the centre of this great peninsula.

Gavin was clothed in a simple robe over a tunic and cotton breeches, all dyed the same grey-blue, and wrapped with a thick cloak of layers of wool under white, waterproof canvas. At his waist, a stout leather bandolier held a scabbard which contained a slightly curved fighting knife. There were some pouches around the bandolier that held his tinderbox, a smaller knife, some other odds and ends and some small tools in a felt roll. His feet were kept warm in woollen socks inside simple leather boots, the ankles of which were wound in cotton puttees for warmth, dyed light blue like his robe.

His other possessions, including his scimitar and iron wrist-guards, or bracers, were with his bedroll in the passenger cabin. His Scimitar he'd had for a number of years, taking it from the dead hands of an Orc in a panic when he broke his own preferred weapon, a Bardiche. Only later did he discover that the new weapon was magical; not an unusual thing in what was a magical world, but something nice to have – an item he cherished deeply. The Iron Bracers were also magical. Despite being made of a dull metal they were remarkably light and formed an invisible field about him upon which some dangerous blows glanced off harmlessly. He had gained these on their last adventure, taking them from a goblin witch-doctor they had just killed. They were not pretty to look at and, despite a snug fit, rubbed the back of his hands. To address this, he'd had them sewn into tight fitting cotton sleeves, with some extra padding, which he normally wore under his tunic.

As he gnawed at his lip, the wind tickling his bare head, the fresh sea air was rich in his lungs after the close, fetid confines of the cabin. As well as a hairless head he had a white circle on his forehead, the sign of his church, the symbol of the Moon. The Moon Goddess was the patron of supernature, the magic of life and the power of the mind. The circle had been made by the Cream of the Goddess in a ceremony when he passed from being an initiate onto the role of a full Brother of the Moon – his graduation – at the age of fifteen. The ceremony was done at the full moon. First a diluted mixture of The Cream was rubbed into the whole of his head, thereby preventing hair from growing on his head or face every again. Then the raw cream was used to draw the symbol of the Moon on his forehead, staining the flesh white; a chemical burn that would mark him for life.

Gavin only remembered the experience vaguely as he had been given some mushrooms to salve the pain first. Despite this it had been a very unpleasant experience that had left him in a coma for a week. When he recovered he was reborn as a servant of the Moon. He remembered the exhilaration afterwards; he still felt the power of the Moon flowing through him from that day, energising him. A familiar and yet unfamiliar experience; an experience of only half his history, half his memory.

He shook himself away from his day dream and looked back out to sea. It was a cold morning. There had been ice on the rails at dawn, although somehow the discomfort of the cold reassured him a little. The discomfort felt deserved, felt like something just and right. Was he punishing himself? Perhaps. Survivor Guilt? Probably.

The ship was making good progress, their passing leaving white water in their wake, a streak across the undulating bulk of the jade-green sea beneath them. This was despite the fact the ship had no sails nor oars and the wind was in their starboard quarter. At the stern was the captain, Murvellin, and the first mate Guthrey, minding the rudder. Murvellin was a broad and muscular man with thick black hair and beard. Guthrey was thinner, with pale skin and ginger hair, his face scarred with patterns representing the sea. The rest of the small crew busied themselves with the duties assigned to them, save one, Santillion, who sat on the top of the cabin with his back to the single mast, watching the horizon. The wizened, thin figure looked much older than he probably was, although his real age was unguessable. His weathered and tanned flesh was a mess of bad tattoos of eldritch symbols of great power. His eyes were dull at present, gazing into the distance without seeing, but sparkled with wit when relaxed. He wore warm furs but these had slipped from his shoulders exposing his leathery flesh to the elements.

Santillion was a Diabolist – a wizard who used ancient rites and strange bargaining powers to bring forward the powerful entities of the outer planes – and he was Murvellin’s business partner. Santillion had called forth, some years ago, a powerful water elemental called Assarisah whom he had magically bound to the keel of the ship for ten years, in return for Gavin knew not what. The power of this creature drove the ship forward and steady in all winds and weathers. In doing so it had made Murvellin and Santillion rich over the many trips they had made to and from Skull Crag in the far south.

The other-worldly nature of the ship meant its design bore little resemblance to other ancient watercraft. At the stern was a raised area for the helmsman, high enough to see over the covered centre of the ship, which resembled a long hut rather than a cabin. In this hut were quarters for the crew and passengers, below this was pure storage. Without the necessity for oars nor sail cloth there was a huge amount of room for cargo. There was even a section of deck that could be removed to allow horses or other livestock to be loaded and transported. There was a section of the bow-end of the hold that was fenced off and contained a placid cow called Fairweather and some chickens for fresh eggs. The mast only needed to support the crow’s nest, containing two crew with keen eyes and excellent crossbow skills. At the bow was a small hut with an out-fall over the gunwale as a latrine, on top of the hut was a ballista. There were many crossbows, loaded and ready, all around the ship, as well as long spears. There was more danger than just the bad weather in these waters. The twenty-strong crew were not pure sailors but rather mariners or Marines, employed for their weapon skills as much as their sea-legs. Gavin was merely a paying passenger, a bodyguard for another servant of his temple, the young warrior priestess Sula Id-Affleghamerk, whom was standing next to him at the prow of the ship.

Sula was barely fifteen years old but had been training in the service of the Moon Goddess all her life. Her name, Id-Affleghamerk, was more like a title, and meant “the silver blade that shines in the moonlight” if translated from their

native Frapper to the smoother Common tongue of the Land of the Young. She stood now in folds of a soft grey mantle covering a dark blue robe, her form indistinct even in the bright sunlight. Her skin was deep olive save for the same moon-shaped white scar that marked her forehead, her dark eyes were the deepest brown and her hair chemically removed like Gavin's. Her figure was stocky and yet to fill with the curves of full womanhood. Her robes concealed two sharp fighting knives, similar to Gavin's but longer, and her brows were locked in a permanent scowl. Gavin couldn't recall ever seeing her smile and her mood was always either sullen or angry.

Their reason for being there, on that brisk winter morning, was Sula's dream; a Visionary dream. In this dream the Moon Goddess had spoken to her and instructed her to seek out the Lunatic in the Land of the Young, for he would save Skull Crag from a great danger. Sula's teachers, the strange priests of Skull Crag, had examined her claim carefully, both magically and through more mundane, sinister methods. After a week of this cross-examination they had immediately obtained passage for her and a bodyguard aboard the Lady Dance. Gavin had been told to be her guardian, which was ideal as he also wanted to journey to Dunromin too, to the capital of the Land of the Young, the richest and most powerful trading nation in all the civilised lands around the Wide Sea.

He didn't know how it was that he had been selected, but the reason for Gavin himself wanting to go to Dunromin was simple – they spoke his native tongue there and he didn't know how. In Skull Crag they all spoke Frapper, a complicated, guttural speech that belied the intricacies and beauty of its imagery. Gavin spoke Frapper like a native, indeed he somehow was, but he had also discovered he spoke the "Common" language of the Land of the Young, quite by accident, when he overheard some sailors speaking it on the quayside. It had confused him at first and he had asked them where they had learned to speak it. They replied that everyone in the Land of the Young spoke Common, but Gavin had told them he thought the language was from a very different place, a place where it was called English.

Gavin Holmes was a computer programmer from Reading, Berkshire, England. It was 1999 and he was 23 years old. He had been born in Slough and had attended the local comprehensive school until leaving, age 18, after his A-Levels to study for a degree in Computer Science at Reading University. He had passed, just, and got a job as a programmer for a local software firm. That was all normal and straight forward – he had a driving license, a car, and shared a flat in Tilehurst with a friend called Micky Smith. He played football on his company's five-a-side team once a week and followed Reading Town, although he couldn't afford a Season Ticket. And on Sunday nights Micky, Gavin and two other friends called Tony and Alan sat down to a game of Dungeons and Dragons, in which Gavin was the Dungeon Master.

At their last such meeting they had begun a new game, starting from scratch, in a new game-world, which Gavin had sketched out in lazy evenings only the week before. He had started with a city called Skull Crag and he had created a non-player character monk called Sea Breeze to take them all on their first adventure. That had been his last night on Earth and when he awoke on Monday morning he had found himself in a warm bedroll under a tree in an alien landscape.

Gavin had been on the strange world of Barnaynia now for over six months. In that time, he had known wonder, elation, fear and absolute despair. When he had awoken, on that late Summer morning, and found himself in the body of a character, Sea Breeze the Monk from a game he had created, he had been elated. It had felt like some strange fantasy come true, accompanied by his three best friends, each as their own characters from their Dungeons and Dragons game of the evening before.

Besides the dream-like surroundings, Gavin had marvelled at the change in his capabilities as a human being and the strange powers and skills he suddenly, somehow, knew and understood. He understood his fighting skills and knowledge of the Cult of the Moon as well as the computer language he had programmed in at his job on Earth. He hadn't changed much physically, although now his slim figure was hard and wiry, his hands swift and accurate. His eyes worked without glasses and his legs powered him around in ways he had never dreamed of before – he was fleet of foot and as graceful as an acrobat. It was a revelation!

The world about him had filled his mind with wonder too – it was everything he had imagined and more. Where he had planned plains and woods on undulating land climbing to a horizon of high mountains, his mind's vision had been filled out in glorious detail. Strange animals and plants filled every nook and cranny, the plains smelled of rich earth and recent rain on grass, soft winds teased his senses. The cries of colourful birds turned his head this way and that, and the mountains soared, snow capped and sinister, a jagged edge to the shadowy wood that crowded at their roots.

After some bizarre experiments to test the veracity of their surroundings, they had concluded that they probably weren't dreaming, but that they might be dead and enjoying some kind of afterlife. The four adventurers had all jubilantly exchanged experiences for hours, trying out new skills and abilities. They fenced skilfully with the keen blades they each carried, discussing what might have happened and how much fun it might be to explore a little more – perhaps even carry on with their plans? To adventure in the lands around Skull Crag and beyond them; to achieve fame and fortune in this marvellous fantasy realm.

Skull Crag had been a name on a fictional map until that morning. Something Gavin had made up in a moment and fleshed out with a parody of some African tribal belief system he had read about he knew not where. It now existed as a very real place in all their memories – curious parallel memories and as recent and consistent as their own real lives earning humble salaries on Earth. It was as if their minds held two complete sets of memories. As well as a childhood in Reading, Gavin remembered, quite clearly, growing up on the coast near Skull Crag, diving for oysters for his father. He remembered his father and mother, not his real ones of course, his fantasy ones, dying in a terrible gale. He had been taken in by the Temple of the Moon in Skull Crag then and taught the ways of a Monk of the Hard Blue – the fighting order of the Temple. Once he had passed his final initiation he had served in the Temple for a few years, building up his skills with minor missions escorting senior temple members about the city and further out into the country. At last he had been entrusted with a minor solo mission to retrieve a petty artefact from a tribe of Goblins some distance to the west. To achieve this, he was instructed to get some adventurers to help him.

Gavin, or Sea Breeze as he was in this world, remembered all this as simply and clearly as his credit card PIN number and his boss's name. He also remembered his way around Skull Crag and the curious hierarchy of men and women, holy folk and citizens that determined what streets he might walk in and with whom he might talk. He remembered these as clearly as the streets of Reading, the location of his favourite pub there, the Purple Turtle, and the short-cuts and alleys that he used to get to work.

Gavin remembered, as Sea Breeze, that he met with and enlisted the other characters to help him on his mission, exactly as the plot had described in their Sunday game. The four adventurers had walked across the farmlands around Skull Crag and out into wider planes for two weeks, to where the villages were fewer and were walled against raiders. As the land began to rise they left these civilised lands behind them. Now they moved with more caution, avoiding summits and ridges so as not to silhouette themselves against the sky. They walked away from obvious trails and ancient, ruined roads in order to steer clear

of any ambush by the bandits and monsters. After several days of such terrain they were in a broken land where stunted trees and bushes gave shelter in the steep valleys and streams were more common. The four had settled into camp one night, in a steep delve with good views about them, so as to see without being seen, and fallen into slumber. Then they had awoken as strangers – alien minds had taken over their bodies and their own identities were gone. Gavin and his friends had arrived on the fantasy world of Barnaynia.

After coming, a little, to terms with their new life, the Earthly adventurers had set off in their new bodies to find and raid the goblin lair as they had planned. But now Gavin had inside knowledge of their foe, since he had designed the adventure, and so they had been very successful. They had found the lair easily and taken a hidden side-entrance to emerge behind the main defences. They side-stepped all the traps and main sentry posts, located the main treasures, including Gavin's Iron Bracers, killed the witch doctor, the chief and enough goblins to drive off the rest and then fled back home. It had gone superbly, except for one thing – the pain.

In their fights with the goblins they had each suffered several cuts and bashes. These had hurt – they had hurt a lot. Those wounds, although light in terms of the game they had played, had shocked them all into a grim realisation that they definitely weren't in a game any more. Somehow, they had been completely transported into the bodies of the characters of their collective imaginations. It wasn't a virtual reality, it wasn't a dream. It became immediately very, very real and utterly terrifying.

Over the days that followed they realised that adventuring wasn't as carefree and charming as they had hoped – it was grim and dangerous. They struggled to light fires to cook the dried meats they carried. They discovered the joys of living rough in a world without toilet paper. They learned very quickly how alert and careful they had to be in every moment, day and night. They knew this, their alter-ego adventuring characters knew all this, it was second-nature to them, but for the four lost boys from Reading it was hard and scary. It was relentless. Danger was there when they went to sleep, it was there when the sentry roused them to be on their guard against strange sounds in the darkness. It was there as they crept across the landscape, desperate to avoid detection by the searching goblins, to avoid detection by anything. And they didn't know how to make it stop, how to stop the game, how to get back to Earth.

On this return trip from the goblin lair, weighed down with treasure but aching, tired and bickering, things had suddenly got a whole lot worse. As they settled down one evening around a fresh campfire to discuss how far they had to go before they were back in the civilised lands around Skull Crag, a great evil had fallen upon them. Three humanoid creatures with colourless skin, jagged, many-eyed heads and no mouths had loomed out of the shadows and attacked them with claws and Mind Powers. Gavin had fought momentarily and then fled in blind panic from the monsters. His reason and determination left him as he saw one friend, Tony, struck down in a splash of entrails. Gavin had gaped helplessly as one of his oldest school friends shrieked at he saw his own intestines glistening on the rocks before him. And then the other two, Micky and Alan, were caught by jagged, hooked claws and torn to pieces.

When the dawn came Gavin was alone in the wilderness, his face streaked with tears, his heart and his will broken. Days past as he wandered vaguely east, he hoped, stunned, unable to sleep, exhausted and terrified. Somehow, he managed to find his way back to friendly lands and a wandering Moon Priest had got him back to his temple in Skull Crag.

There he had been nursed and slowly recovered from his wounds, at least the physical ones. His sleep was still fitful, his mind filled with anxious terrors. They tried to help him but he seemed lost to them. His strange tales of a

scientific and technological world called Earth confused the elders, although they could tell he was neither insane nor lying to them. Despite his frantic questions he made no progress as regards finding out how or why he was there, nor any hint of a way home.

The artefact and diamonds he had taken from the goblins, which he somehow hadn't dropped in the attack, bought him favour in the temple and he had been promoted and trained within their hierarchy, despite his strange other-world preoccupations. In his mind he understood in game terms that he had become a fifth level monk. He was now immune to disease and could talk to animals in their own, simple tongue. In reality he found his prowess increased, his skills broadening and growing. His spirit was getting stronger and he revelled in the power of the moonlight and the speed of his blade and fists. Speaking to animals was a strange experience, although he soon discovered their limited knowledge and limited curiosity a little frustrating. As he slowly came to terms with his bizarre experiences he became alternately resolute to make the best of it, or depressed and hopeless a world away from his home and family with all his friends dead. He considered suicide as an escape but could not bring himself to do it. It had to be a last resort: a terrible path to walk only when every other possibility had been exhausted.

On some dreadful nights he stared into the flames of the lamps and tried to remember his family, his home, but the images began to be more difficult to summon. Perhaps this was all real and Earth was the dream? But that could not be. Despite the intricacy of the reality he occupied, it was flawed. He could see the workings of the world, like he was peering over the shoulder of God and seeing how He made the world work.

Gavin knew the rules of Dungeons and Dragons. He knew they were far from complete or comprehensive, they were just a role-playing game after all, but they were a framework on which a fantasy could be built. Here in Skull Crag they became real. Their implications and enforcement lent life a bizarre quality that Gavin quickly realised his unique understanding of the mechanics of the world allowed him to exploit. His teachers spoke of great powers that might be harnessed with the approval of his goddess and might enable a powerful priestess to bring his friends back to life. He knew this was a Resurrection Spell and that he needed a Cleric of level 17 or more to cast it. Or perhaps he might find a magical scroll with the spell inscribed onto it. Whatever, this gave him the means to bring his friends back to life – he resolved to make that his purpose. He couldn't use the lesser spells of bringing the dead back to life. He had no bodies. Only a Resurrection spell would work, but even then, he would still need something, a finger-bone or less perhaps, but something. Perhaps that was what he should do first? Find his friends' remains, somehow, somewhere, and then seek out the spells required later? If he could get one of his friends back then he would know if death was an escape. If it was then they could all escape. If it wasn't, he would Resurrect the others and they would all then work together to find a way home.

It was while he was considering these options that he heard the sailors talking at the quayside and recognised their strange words as his own. And he realised what he must do next. When he returned to his temple to seek leave to travel to Dunromin, the capital city of the ones who spoke English, he was first accosted by his master and told they had a mission for him. Fate, it seemed, or perhaps some other higher power, was blazing a clear trail for him to follow.

## **Chapter 2 – The Ruins of Grey Havens**

Their voyage had been reasonably uneventful. They had been alerted several times to potentially hostile sails on the horizon and spurts of water that may have been dangerous beasts, but they had remained unmolested. The

weather had been fair most of the way, although rain showers common. In daylight Gavin and Sula preferred to be above decks as the cabins stank of human waste and vomit. This was due to the whole crew always taking shelter there in storms and the cleaning thereafter left something to be desired. Their course had followed the coastline, seeking a friendly fishing village or other safe anchorage in the dark nights. On moonlit nights they had sailed on, guided by the stars, but headed out from the coast a way, despite occasional swells, to avoid cliffs and reefs in the low light. In the mornings they headed closer back into shore again for easier navigation, safety and calmer seas. Everyone slept aboard even when in port. On this morning they had skirted more of the north coast of the Land of the Young through flurries of sleet and hail, passing tall cliffs topped by rugged moorland. The sea to the north stretched to the horizon, with only the odd island, other ships or a distant stormfront to break the view.

Santillion chanted a few strange phrases and the ship jerked to a halt, almost throwing Gavin from his feet. The mysterious Water Elemental hidden below the water held the ship perfectly still, about half a mile off shore, at the mouth of the river Greyflood. Around them Gavin could see two other ships, both rowing galleys with lateen sails furled, held steady on anchor chains. He could also see the mouth of the river ahead, and to the left, east bank, a town with a harbour and buildings of brown stone and grey roofs. The town looked peaceful enough, with tall walls and towers surrounding it and a stout castle on some high ground on the side away from the river. He could see flags and banners on the towers and knew these would be the coats of arms of the major civic dignitaries, perhaps even the ruler if the Land of the Young was a feudal society.

It occurred to Gavin then that he knew little of where he was going nor what he should do when he got there. Throughout the voyage it had suited him to play the aloof monk, guarding his charge and watching and exercising in the sea air. By not talking he had been allowed time to himself but he had spent much of this time with dark thoughts, yearning for his family and home in Reading. It occurred to him that he had missed his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday while in Skull Crag. Birthdays were a big event in his family and he had suddenly, intensely missed his mother. It had been a grim voyage despite the warm winter sunshine and fresh air.

Sula also spoke little as she lacked confidence with the Common speech of the crew and viewed Gavin with suspicion, failing to understand his otherworldly claims and references. They had passed the voyage in virtual silence, each alone with their thoughts. Left that way Gavin's mind had strayed to more and more morbid thoughts of his friends; a strange hopelessness in his quest that discomfited him. He felt very alone, very afraid.

Stirred from his thoughts by a shout from one of the crew to the captain, he realised some small boats were being rowed out from the harbour towards them. There were three shallow-drafted boats, long and thin, painted a brilliant white and rowed from the rear by four oarsman each. The forward half of each boat supported a tent-like gazebo of white cotton rattling in the wind, inside which could be seen a figure seated in finely ornamented robes, each carrying a staff. It looked like they were approaching one to each visiting ship.

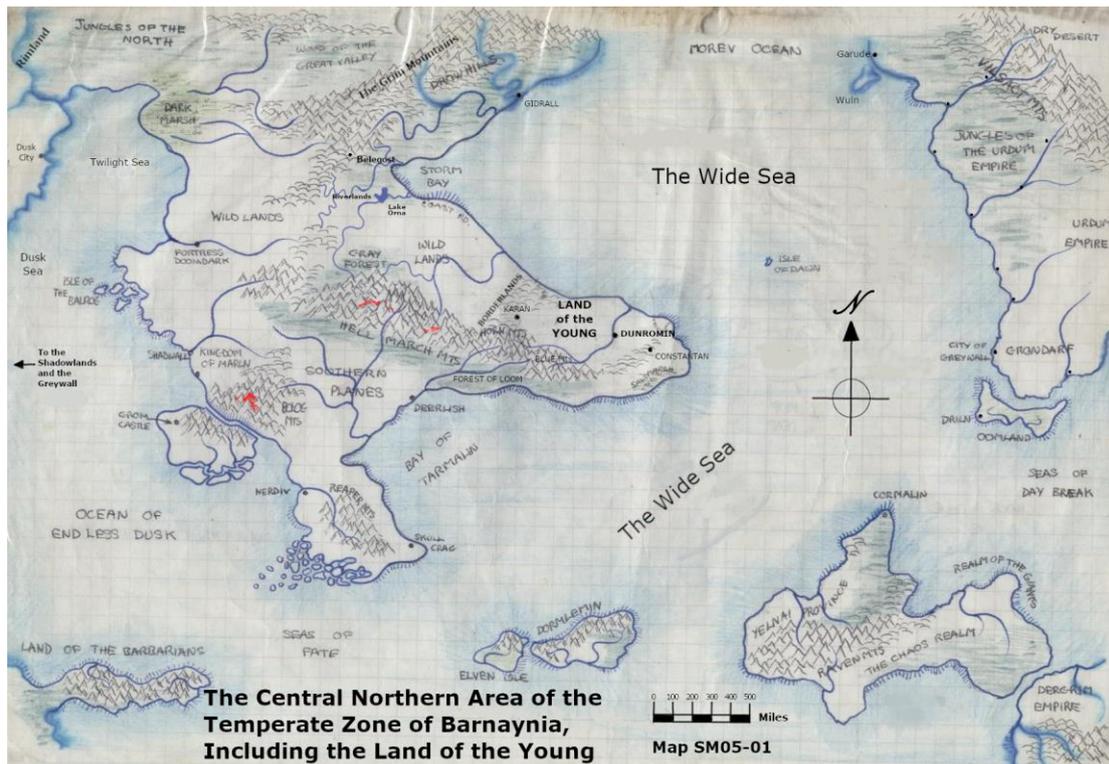
"What are we waiting for?" Gavin asked a crewman called Gifford, who happened to be stood next to him.

"High tide," replied Gifford, a carefree youth whose teenage hands and face were already aged to thirty with salt spray and wind.

"When's that?" asked Gavin. In response Gifford gave him a strange look.

"Noon," he replied, as if the knowledge was so common that Gavin was exhibiting alien tendencies by not knowing this. "High tide's always at noon."

Gavin nodded. He should have known that. The World of Barnaynia worked by different rules to Earth. He turned a glanced up at the sun. It arose



in the northeast every morning. It being winter now, the sun span a slow, low path over the eastern hemisphere and would sink into the southeast at the end of the day. In summer the arc it followed was higher, rising almost overhead. At night the moon was usually visible somewhere in the western sky. The moon traced a slow path across the western hemisphere, taking 22 days to complete an orbit, defining a lunar month and the festivals, and spending half this time below the horizon. When visible, a shadow somehow defined the phases of the month but the shapes of the shadows on its face were strange and alien.

Gavin had taken some time to get his head around the Barnaynian calendar. There were 16 months each of 21 days, or three weeks. These were grouped into the four seasons, each of 4 months. The seasons were split by the festivals, each of 3 or 5 days, to balance out the short months with the real lunar months, all adding up to a year of 352 days. He had been told that the Land of the Young had defined this calendar and Skull Crag had copied it. Previous to that they had simply had 16 months of 22 days each and no breaks. This was significant to Gavin's temple as they held the new calendar an abomination and still followed the old lunar calendar as laid down by their goddess. This allowed for no festivals or holidays however, and was unpopular with all other factions. Gavin was no astronomer but was pretty sure this was impossible under normal laws of cosmology. As yet he'd had no opportunity to investigate this further.

Gavin walked back to ask more of the captain, unsure of Gifford's manner.

"Why do we have to wait for high tide?" Gavin asked Captain Murvellin.

In response the captain pointed at the eastern side of the river mouth. "If you look there you can see the waves breaking on something just under the surface." He explained, speaking Common (or English?) with what sounded like a slightly west-country accent, or perhaps Somerset? Whatever, the man was thickly built with the kind of rock-hard, stocky musculature that would soon slump to pot-bellied without a busy life. His beard and hair were thick but well-kept, save for the endless wind. His eyes were dark blue and his nose broken, with scarring on his brow and cheek from some ancient mishap. "That's the ruins of the old Grey Havens, the old port that was sunk under the waves when an old Baron offended a powerful mage. It was a couple of hundred years ago I think

but the ruins are still there. They stretch halfway across the river and there's only enough clearance to sail over it at high tide."

"Why not sail around it, to the right side of the river?"

"That's where the other side of the old river mouth fell in, and that side of the river mouth was where the old townspeople buried their dead." Explained the captain, "And what with the old temples and such going under the water there's a lot of undead paddling about down there. It's not healthy at all. And there's trolls down there too."

"Marine ghouls and marine trolls," murmured Gavin, remembering his D&D monsters. The captain nodded. Gavin went on "So, who are the guys on the boats?"

"Them are priests of the river gods, come to offer us their services to help our safe passage," replied the captain, "It's rare for the trolls to attack in daylight, but the ghouls are often taking a stab at passing trade. The priests fend them off with their piety and blessings from their gods. And charge us fifty gold for passage."

"A nice little earner for a bit of ghoul-turning," muttered Gavin. 'Turning' was the term for the magical control over undead that priests and clerics could exert. Gavin considered suggesting Sula protect them, but then he remembered she was only first level – she would have a poor chance of using her ability to Turn a gang of ghouls away.

Gavin sat back on the rail and watched as one of the boats moored to the Lady Dance and the priest climbed awkwardly aboard. He was a portly gent and was sweating despite the chill air. His robes were fine and grand but not designed for climbing on and off ships. After he was on board Murvellin gave him a bag of coin and his boat was rowed back to shore without him. The priest glanced up at the sun, now at its highest, and rang a small gong he produced from under his robes. Two similar gongs answered from the other two ships and the priest nodded to the captain.

Santillion chanted another phrase and the Lady Dance jerked forward again. The other two ships were not so well equipped and a steady thump of a row-master's drum coaxed the closest one slowly into life. Due to its unearthly nature the Lady Dance was soon pulling ahead of the other two ships and was first to enter the opening of the river mouth, leaning steadily south.

As they drew closer to the opening Gavin could see the grey and black rocks of the ruined harbour beneath the clear waters. The rough surface made the shapes indistinct and clouds of kelp further camouflaged the nature of the buildings they sailed over, if their ancient purposes could have been determined at all. Gavin fancied he caught glimpses of silvery fish in the depths and fleeting other shapes, dark and of sinister aspect. Mindful of his charge, Gavin hastily retrieved his scimitar from his bedroll and went to Sula's side. As he returned Sula was talking to the priest and pointing to something off their Port bow.

Gavin looked and saw about a dozen stone pillars rising out of the surf. There were figures tied to two of them, men stripped naked and screaming for the sailors to save them.

"Criminals," replied the priest in a high, whistling voice, "They are sent here from the surrounding baronies. They are animal thieves, rapists, murderers or bandits caught by patrols. Their sentence is to be tied to these posts and await their fate. It serves both as a deterrent and a distraction from us."

"Nasty," murmured Gavin, "How long do they last?"

As if in answer he heard a shriek cut short by a splash. Glancing back Gavin saw one of the figures had vanished, although there was a splash of blood pooling on the surface of the water. The other's screams gave way to a panting,

breathless whine of sheer panic and terror, his pleading gone now in the hopelessness of his position. Gavin felt a little sick.

"They used to get more bandits and captured raiders to put on the poles," continued the Priest, "But now the west bank is better patrolled so there are fewer that get this far from the Borderlands. New baronies have been better secured all the way along the old coast road. The Land of the Young is still growing."

"What about the trolls?" asked Gavin, trying to distract himself, "You can't Turn them with your holy symbols, they aren't undead?"

"They rarely come out in the day time," replied the priest, "And if they do I have my staff. And the Gryphon riders of Dunromin keep watch too." At this he pointed up to the nearest and largest wall-tower. Gavin followed his finger and saw the southern side of the tower, shielded from the seaward, had a landing platform there. He could see several figures in armour with long spears. They were stood close to larger, brown creatures that playfully stretched and furled their wings. Gavin remembered from his games that Gryphons were half lion, half eagle, beasts from Greek legend. He remembered statistics and fighting capabilities – the ubiquitous claw/claw/bite attack routine and a preference for horseflesh, or something. These creatures seemed very large and different to the books – flesh made real. They were quite chilling to behold, magnificent but frightening.

"From Dunromin, you say. Do they fly out here every day then?" asked Gavin, trying to ignore the noise of the remaining victim.

"No, they base some here," replied the priest, "Lord King Mordred commands a squadron of them and they cycle half a dozen of them at a time through here to back up the local baron's own troops, which guard the town."

"How is trade?" asked the Captain, possibly also uncomfortable with the vicious brand of justice practiced here.

"Slow, as always," said the Priest, making an unpleasant face. "All the trade goes direct up the river, the town market is almost deserted these days." The Priest peered over the side into the depths. "We still have fishermen on the east dock that fish the bay and coastline for shellfish and so on. They do some trade with the nomads of the Moors to the east. And even the lizardmen and other tribes that live out there now. Apart from that we only have the fruit, wool and mutton sellers who come here to sell to traders from upriver."

"You trade with humanoid then?" asked Gavin, a little astonished. From his knowledge of D&D the humans and demi-humans (elves, dwarves, gnomes and halflings) were friendly enough, but the humanoids (lizardmen, orcs, goblins, gnolls and bugbears) he thought were just monsters to be fought and killed.

"The ones on the moors are hardly dangerous," replied the Priest, "They've been trading with us for centuries. They even worship our gods now. It would be a shame to kill them all when they supply such cheap meat and labour from their hunting. Furs too, in fact mainly furs, skins and leathers. There's a tannery in the Baron Geshelt twenty miles upriver that's the biggest in the land. They get almost all their leather that isn't cowhide or pig from the tribes on the Moors."

"Do all the barons serve the Lord King Mordred then?" asked Gavin, wondering again about the politics of the Land. Skull Crag was a theocracy with very strange customs and orders. Mentions of Lords and Barons sounded much more feudal and easier to understand.

"First time in the Land is it?" asked the Priest.

"It is, yes," said Gavin.

"You speak Common like a native," the priest observed, nodding his approval, "I would swear you even have a Dunromin accent."

"I learned it a long time ago," muttered Gavin, "It's a long story. Is Mordred a King or a Lord then?"

"He's both!" said the Priest, "He's Mordred Luftheart, Mordred the Mighty, Lord of Dunromin and King of the Land of the Young, first of his name. He was a mighty warrior once, still is I suppose, although he's fifty if he's a day. He earned his spurs in the Borderlands over thirty years ago. He's not the oldest brother though, that was Morev, he was a great warrior. He died way out west in the Shadowlands beyond the Wildlands, fighting a Balor Demon in the Paladin wars or some such."

"So, Mordred's a high-level fighter then?" asked Gavin, despite himself, "A powerful warrior I mean."

"He's a high-level cavalier I heard," said the Captain, seemingly easy with Gavin's game terminology. "Patron of the Fighter's Guild in Dunromin, but then the king always is I think. Of course, he doesn't do much fighting now. He's got a canny business head on him, you see? Trade's where the real money is these days, not adventuring. Too dangerous."

"So, there's not many adventurers in the Land of the Young then?"

"Oh yes, there's still plenty that try. There's plenty of young idiots that hear the old stories and get mad ideas. Even more now, after Garibaldi's had so much success in the War of the Ring and such," said the Priest, "What with all his Heroes getting so much renown. There's been a load of new young lads and lasses looking to learn an adventuring trade. But most of them don't make it to their first adventure, they soon see it's easier and safer to follow their parents' trade. Fewer still come back from their first foray into the Borderlands, the Burning Woods or where ever. It's not a secure trade by any means. I gave it up myself long ago. I lost too many friends to strange traps and dragons."

"What was the War of the Ring then?" wondered Gavin, remembering the films and books by Tolkien.

He didn't get a reply. They were all distracted by a shout of alarm from the last ship behind them. Gavin looked back in time to see a froth in the water and grey and black bodies swarming up over the stern of the last ship. There seemed to be dozens of quick, skinny humans climbing and jumping out of the water. It was Gavin's first sight of undead and he saw their dark skins looked like melted bin-liners draped over a skeletal structure. Their limbs moved with quick, furtive actions and their faces were tight in a rictus of hatred and delight. Their mouths displayed jagged wracks of teeth while their eyes flashed bright yellow. One of the lead ones dodged nimbly around a sailor as he flailed at it with a broadsword. Then a flash of red blood sprayed out of the poor man as he juddered, shook and fell to the floor, writhing in pain and increasing paralysis. The smell of fresh blood delighted the ghouls and they sent up a whistling hiss of bloodlust.

"Should we help them?" wondered Gavin, seeing the rest of crew of the attacked ship turn and flee from the incursion of razor-sharp claws and fangs.

"My Brother Emfledel will have it in hand," replied the priest, smiling in delight at the spectacle.

As if in response to the priest's request the sunlight glinted on a holy symbol and a white figure stood forth before the frothing mass of dark flesh. The intoned words of power vibrated across the water and the ghouls shrieked again. The front line, maybe ten of them, seemed to jump up and back, wriggling and shaking in a shock of the power of the man's voice. An instant later their frenzied movement froze for a moment and the creatures seemed to just fall apart. Their limbs and body broke up like chunks of charcoal and fell to the deck in pieces, all about them clouds of black dust catching on the breeze. The remaining ghouls, although still numerous, must have recognised the hopelessness of their position.

They turned and fled with another shriek, leaping from the ship into the water in a shower of splashing limbs.

Brother Emfledel walked up to the gunwale to inspect his work, a triumphant grin on his face. The bedraggled remains of his victims lay scattered on the deck like black offal in a slaughterhouse. The sailors quickly returned, whooping with delight. Two of them retrieved their fallen comrade and took him away to a cabin to recover from the ghoul's paralysing touch.

Gavin found himself impressed again with the presence and power of magic in the strange world. His friends had used many spells in their fight with the goblins but Gavin was still thrilled with the spectacle of spellcraft. Each time the voice of the caster took on a special resonance, his moves and gestures seemed to flow and blur, and then the culmination of the spell, even a relatively mundane one, shook the air about it. Gavin always felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as the echoes of the energy transformation sent out ripples and echoes across the astral plane. Holy magic, it seemed, was no less impressive.

"Destruction," Gavin murmured, "There was at least eight, maybe ten taken out there. He must be, what, eleventh level?"

"Twelfth," said the Lady Dance's own priest, "Brother Emfledel is the head of our order here in Greypport. We always put the strongest of us in the last ship you see. The ghouls always seem to target the last ship."

"Tail-end Charlie," nodded Gavin.

"I always like to be first through," said Captain Murvellin, "It's not failed me yet. I'd hate to have one of those slimy things scratching my ship's sides."

"They couldn't catch you," laughed the priest, "That enchantment on your keel is a marvel. It's always a pleasure to ride through the estuary with you. Although I notice there are more with a similar power these days."

At this point Santillion joined the conversation, seeming to refocus his eyes from the horizon as if he had been listening the whole time. "My brothers Hector and Thelebas have mastered similar spirits on the galleys Evenstar and Wavecrest," he informed them in his clear, precise voice. He sounded like a Shakespearian actor. "I am aware of no others?"

"Gadrax has copied your style," said the priest, "We've had two of his merchantmen through in the last two weeks. They don't have Diabolists aboard either, Gadrax's enchantments are commanded by the ship's captain."

"Gadrax is a charlatan," snarled the normally placid Santillion, "He uses the ancient powers of the other worlds to drive petty enchantments to light lady's boudoirs and warm privies. He treats the Spirits like slaves and chattels. His casual manners will catch up with him one day, mark my words."

The captain laughed, "You've been saying that for a long time," he observed, "Yet it hasn't stopped Gadrax becoming very rich."

Santillion snorted in contempt and then pointed at the riverbank. "We are clear of the ruins of the Grey Havens now, don't miss your landing. We have to put our good priest here ashore."

"Aye, and get supplies," agreed the captain and told Guthrey to steer the ship landwards. "I am sick of hard tack and salt beef. We shall have fresh mutton and apples tonight."

### **Chapter 3 – Sailing South up the Greyflood**

The Lady Dance was skilfully steered against an ancient stone quay and Santillion quietly asked Assarisah to be still. Beyond the quay Gavin could see that there were stalls and traders busying themselves in anticipation of the arrival of the three ships. Beyond them the two-storey buildings of brown stone and

grey slate roofs of the town went back a short distance to the town wall. Now he was closer Gavin could see the town was not big, but stretched thin along the edge of the river inland nearly half a mile. At the end of that was a pair of broad, squat towers that marked the gatehouse for the South road – the land-bound path to Dunromin.

Captain Murvellin shook hands with the priest, who walked ashore to be met by two men in less gaudy robes but still of the Sun Gods. Gavin recognised the symbols they wore and thought that the Celtic pantheon must be prevalent in this area. It certainly made sense with the proximity of the bleak moors to the east and the seas to the north. The captain had also mentioned some marshland to the south over which the south road followed an ancient causeway called up by an old wizard many centuries ago. The Celtic deities seemed to thrive in such dreary places, the pine forests and tough heather of the moors were ideal for their ceremonial hunts. Gavin didn't fancy the idea himself – too often their quarry would be possessed by wild nature spirits and a simple boar hunt could turn into a bloodbath.

"If you want to go ashore and stretch your legs," said Guthrey to Gavin and Sula, "You'll need to pay the harbourmaster a toll." The gnarled little man pointed at a town official in an ermine wrap and silver chain of office. The captain was talking to him already and coins were changing hands to pay for the space at the quayside.

"What's the toll?" asked Gavin.

"A quid a head," said Guthrey, "But mind you're back soon, we'll be sailing in an hour or less."

"A quid?" asked Gavin, his mind spinning at the casual use of earth slang that he was familiar with.

"A silver piece I mean," replied the sailor, "Sorry, I forgot you're not from Dunromin. We call silver pieces quids there. A gold is a score and a platinum is a pony."

Gavin chuckled to himself. "And coppers are pennies I guess?"

"You got it," smiled the sailor.

Gavin turned and looked across the profusion of humanity scattered about the dock. Men and women bustled hither and thither about their business. Their clothes varied from warm furs to practical leather coats or simple fleeces tied around their shoulders. Gavin guessed by their dress that the crowds ranged from poor labourers and dockers to merchants and the town hoi polloi. Scattered in among these he was surprised to see a group of three lizardmen, carrying rough nets filled with oysters, and two hobgoblins, heavily armed but more concerned with bartering with a wine seller than starting a fight.

"I think I shall stay aboard," replied Gavin, noticing also some rather shifty looking characters eyeing the passing trade and one or two rather provocatively dressed young, or maybe not so young, ladies talking to the captain.

"I think so too," said Sula, breaking her silence, "This place smells of fish and shit."

Gavin gaped at her, it was the first time he had heard her swear, in any language. She saw his surprise and looked concerned.

"This is the right word?" she asked in Frapper, "Shit means mess, yes?"

"Erm, yes," said Gavin, "Yes, I suppose it does. Where did you learn Common, Sula?"

"We had a teacher at the temple for a short while, he was a sailor I think."

This response provoked a peal of laughter from Guthrey and Gavin found himself grinning as well. Sula was not impressed. "You make fun of me!" she growled.

"I'm sorry, no offence meant," replied Gavin in Frapper, "It's just mess isn't the best translation. The word you used means 'shit'. I suspect your teacher was using some rather glib translations."

Sula looked shocked and then blushed deeply and moved away.

"Sailors are the same on every world," Gavin muttered to himself.

"Every world?" asked Guthrey, "Been to many have you?" The man was grinning but a twinkle in his eye suggested it was more than an off-hand comment.

Gavin sighed, his mind had been diverted from thoughts of home for a while, now he realised his gloom was still with him. He missed his home too much. "This is my second," he replied softly but shook off his melancholy, seeking another distraction. "Look, the captain's returning with some fruit and a joint of pork by the looks of it."

He was and while some of the crew stowed the new supplies the rest made ready to leave again while Santillion skilfully reversed them back out of the quay. As they went he neatly avoided the other two ships now coming in to dock, one of them with a crewman still sweeping bits of destroyed ghoul into the river.

Gavin moved back to the bow and looked upriver as they turned south. The river was very broad and slow here, almost at its terminus, and the lands to either bank stretched away across the flood plain. To the right on the west bank were woods and higher and drier ground. Pleasant hillside and forests stretched away to the horizon. On the left, the east bank, were mangroves back to the line of the causeway, which moved steadily away from the river on a more direct path. Beyond this were more swamps for some distance and then the hard escarpment of the moors rose from the mists a great distance away, its tops covered in heather and its craggy valleys filled with trees and darkness.

"How far to Dunromin?" Gavin asked the Captain, who had joined him on the bow. Guthrey was on the tiller, Santillion was once more sat at the mast, murmuring reassurances and instructions to Assarisah.

"Eighty mile or thereabouts," Murvellin replied, "With the Lady Dance we'll be there by afternoon tomorrow. Them galleys with oars will take days, maybe a week as they're going against the flow."

"Impressive," said Gavin, "Wouldn't it be quicker by land for them?"

"In time, yes, marginally," replied the captain, "But it would be a lot more expensive. You'd need to hire a caravan, and guards if you had a valuable cargo. Then you'd have to pay for food and accommodation all the way, and tolls for the bridges and the baronies. All the river barons charge caravans a toll for using their roads. The river's a lot cheaper, although they might hitch up to a dray team when they're clear of the swamps on the east bank. The south road follows the riverbank then and they often use a team of oxen to tow them upriver. It's the fastest way, saves the rowers but they still have to pay tolls then. I've got the best of both worlds, the Lady Dance is a fine ship, thanks to Santillion's watery mate."

Gavin nodded. He watched the other river traffic for a while. Smaller boats were heading up and down stream, almost exclusively tight to the eastern bank. Some were long and sleek with sails bulging in the offshore breeze, others were large punts or skiffs and their masters polled them about in the shallows. On the shores were scattered dwellings, some made of stone but mostly log cabins with thatched rooves, some on stilts among the mangroves. Both banks were dotted with farmsteads and fishermen's cottages, where the ground was solid enough, but Gavin noticed they were far fewer on the west bank and those he could see all had stouter walls, smaller windows and usually an enclosure of a bank and ditch. He observed this to the captain.

"The west bank has only recently been cleared," he replied, "Up until about ten year ago the last River Baron's land stopped forty miles inland, where the land gets higher and richer and easier to defend. There's four new baronies now along the bank that's bringing a bit of order to the country, kicking out the old orc bands and other creatures that ran about there. There's more Baronies along the coast too, although they're still perilous places as you get further west. The land's not so good out there and there's more raiders to deal with, but there's coal and other useful stuff too. The farming gets better nearer Karan but this whole area's not as civilised as the lands further south."

"I guess you don't call the new baronies out there 'River Barons' do you?"

"No, nor are they March Barons, who have their lands along the Great West Road, from Dunromin to Karan," The captain seemed happy to talk to his mysterious passenger at last. He had been suspicious of both Gavin and Sula for the whole voyage but knew it was bad for business to ask too many questions. Now he was happy to tell all he knew, knowing that in return he might find out a little more about Gavin and his mysterious charge. "Besides the River Barons and the March Barons, there's the normal ones, the just plain 'Barons' who rule the lands south and east of Dunromin. A lot more civilised it is down there, all the way to the Blue Mountains in the south and the Horn Mountains and the Borderlands in the west. Very peaceful, the heartland of the Land of the Young. Even the War of the Ring only tickled the edges really."

"And all these barons owe loyalty to Mordred, the king?"

"Yes, he's the big boss," nodded the captain, "He pulls all the strings, although since the war he's had to be a bit more careful. He wasn't too clever about coming to help the Baronies that were attacked – a bit slow off the mark some say. Some of those baronies are still deserted, the old inhabitants too scared to go back or settled elsewhere now."

"What happened with the war?" asked Gavin "And why is it called the War of the Ring?"

The captain laughed. "I am surprised stories of it didn't reach Scull Crag?" he said at last, "It didn't last long, maybe a month if you exclude the mopping up that's still going on, but it almost destroyed Mordred and Dunromin. Have you heard nothing of it in Skull Crag?"

"Nothing," said Gavin, "At least I have not. I have been out of the city for a while though, and when I got back I was concentrating on my studies."

"I have heard about it," said Sula, who had walked up behind them unnoticed. "I heard that an ancient undead king invaded the south of the Land of the Young. When Mordred rode out to face him a second force attacked the city from beneath, through the Darkworld. Only the efforts of the powerful and brave heroes saved the city from ruin. The Undead King was slain in the city by the greatest hero of Dunromin, but I know no more than that."

"It was Kzenzakai of the Dark Horde who attacked the land," said the captain, "A mighty and ancient barbarian warlord from the far west of the Wildlands. The Witch-King they called him. He attacked us with a vast army in the west and a second army in the Blue Mountains attacking the dwarves there. The force that attacked the city was smaller and had sneaked through the endless caverns and old dungeons far below the surface. They then dug tunnels up to the surface to attack the Old City and the castle. Foul beasts and undead were swarming through the streets, lead by vampires and other such. It was the Priests and the Wizards that saved us. And Garibaldi and his Heroes of course. Mordred was already riding south to intercept the invaders in the main army. There's no way he could have got back in time."

"You saw all this?" asked Gavin.

"Only the aftermath," said Murvellin, "I was returning from a trip to Deerlish, but I saw enough. A lot of the oldest buildings in the city were burnt down, there were huge holes in the Royal Mint and the barracks of the Royal Guard. The streets were still stained with the stuff the invaders bled and they were still burying our fallen. It was horrible."

Gavin nodded. Undead again. He wondered once more what the beasts were that had killed his friends. No one seemed to know and they said there were many of them appearing all over the land, even threatening Skull Crag itself. Where they came from, why and how there were so many of them no one knew, but Skull Crag was poorly equipped to defend against such an army – they didn't have a Garibaldi or a gang of heroes to pull their fat from the fire. Gavin suspected this was the reason the senior priests had approved Sula's mission, looking for aid from the strange lands of the north.

No one spoke for a minute, each absorbed by their own thoughts. The captain's face was grim, his eyes had a faraway look as if recollecting sights he hoped he would never see again. Gavin decided not to ask any more questions, instead he watched the land as they passed it. The afternoon was drawing on and rain clouds filled the southern sky. To the east the swamp continued and they drew slowly passed a distant caravan of ox carts heading south on the causeway. To the west the land looked a lot more pleasant, with hillsides and forests of trees still and skeletal in the late grip of winter. They passed villages from which rose inviting wreaths of wood smoke. Occasionally children playing by the water's edge would wave to the passing ship, their gestures returned by the sailors who were happy to be on the homeward leg and passed the dangerous ruins of the river mouth.

"Looks like rain overnight," observed the captain, returning from his reverie, "We'll need to tie down the roof stays."

He hurried off and Gavin was left with Sula to watch the traffic and the scenery. Gavin turned his head and watched Sula for a while. She seemed to be looking without seeing, lost in thought. He fancied he saw a twinkle of firelight in her eyes and then she nodded to herself.

"A penny for your thoughts?" said Gavin.

Sula turned to return his gaze, her face clouded again with suspicion.

"My thoughts are my own," she replied coldly, "We must consider what we must do when we get to Dunromin."

"I was thinking the same," said Gavin, "How will we seek out this Lunatic you're looking for?"

"I think he may be already known to us," said Sula, "We must find out more about this Garibaldi person. If he can save Dunromin from Vampires and Witch Kings, maybe he can do the same for us."

Gavin nodded and turned his gaze back to the river.

"And you?" asked Sula, "What will you do when we get to Dunromin?"

Gavin was a little taken aback. "I am your guard," he responded, "I will help you."

"You are not here to help me, I think," she replied, her tone even more hostile, "You are following your own designs. You have your own plans to work out and I think they coincide with my own only so far as Dunromin."

Gavin shrugged, there seemed no reason to hide his thoughts. "I don't know really. It's not clear to me what I should do when I get there. I will help you as best I can as I promised. I don't see any reason to leave you."

There was a pause.

"What is the word for 'mess' in Common," she asked. They had been talking in Frapper, Gavin was pleased when he realised how easily he could switch between the two languages. He replied with the correct word for 'mess'.

Sula nodded. Then she seemed to remember something else and remained silent for a few moments.

"Never laugh at me again," she hissed and walked away.

## **Chapter 4 – Dunromin Docks**

The night passed quietly, the passengers keeping their thoughts to themselves as they ate their new, fresh food. In contrast, the crew were in high spirits and looking forward to seeing their loved ones again, having been away for nearly four months. Gavin and Sula, ate alone at the captain's table as Murvellin was checking the cargo, retired early, keeping their own counsel.

The morning broke heavy and grim. Overnight the rain had fallen on everything and with the morning came a thin, cold drizzle that soon soaked anyone straying from the shelter of the cabins. Only Santillion, under a canvas rain hood, remained on deck for any time, continuing his occasional chant and watching the river snaking away from them. A tent-like structure had also been erected over the helm and the captain was now quietly steering the vessel up the still swollen river alone while Guthrey slept.

The character of the river banks had changed a lot overnight. As they drew closer to the capital the density of farms and the extent of cultivated land had grown. Now the banks were regularly crowded with villages of wooden houses and thatched rooves. As the morning wore on more and more stone buildings, with tile or slate rooves began appearing soon becoming more common than the cottages. Ferries plied the waters, carrying everything from people to carts across the river. More and more small watercraft were apparent, going about their daily business. In the night they had passed many of the River Baron's castles and, had they seen them, they would have realised that the castles and keeps they now passed were grander and older than those nearer the coast, but less well maintained and less familiar with the strains of war and raiders. Some were obviously almost abandoned, the local landowners and Barons preferring comfortable manor houses to cold castles in these more peaceful times.

They passed several bigger ships too, going up and down river, and even two war galleys that bore the abundance of flags and symbols Gavin recognised as a diplomatic mission from Skull Crag, now returning home. He wondered what had been their purpose in Dunromin and whether they had completed their task.

Some of the other river craft reminded Gavin of the deep-draught barges of the Rhine and the Thames that he had seen on television. The cargoes he saw transported ranged from coal to livestock and everything in between. Many were towed, from either bank now they were in civilised lands, but sail power and oar power predominated. The craft sailing downriver were more often sailed in the middle of the water, using the natural current to propel them rather than any artificial means. It was apparent that the Greyflood was a major artery for all levels of commerce in the Land of the Young, still nearly a mile across even this far up, with Dunromin at its heart.

By late morning the fields next to the river and the small streams and rivers feeding it were positively teeming with life. They passed waterwheels and large farmsteads. They passed villages of exclusively stone buildings and more and more rich villas obviously built in times so safe that no concession to defence was necessary. They passed complexes of buildings that served some unknown purpose; monasteries or magic colleges perhaps, or temple complexes, and larger sites that were obviously built with a single purpose in mind – boatyards or the

precursors of factories, but instead dedicated to rearing animals, brewing wine or beer, or tending huge orchards of fruit trees. The people they saw were more numerous and less interested in the passage of a ship. There was a cosmopolitan mix of humans, elves and halflings, and Gavin spotted his first gnomes as well. There were dwarves too, although they were a common sight in Skull Crag as well. Gavin spotted some gnolls and orcs in a caravan of trade goods, one large cart even had an ogre as a guard.

The folk they passed seemed dressed in more decorative clothes than Gavin was used to in Skull Crag. While the basic form of clothes, that being long tunic under cotton or woollen jackets for men and heavy cotton ankle-length dresses for the women, were simple enough. But here the clothes were often dyed more colours; the most common being shades of green, brown and orange. Many wore hats of various designs too and their shoes and other garments displayed laces and even buttons. Many of the more well-off persons would have even more colourful clothes, fancy shoes, decorations of scarves, mantles and fur trim on their clothes. Luke observed many wearing boots, sturdy and well-made presumably by skilled cobblers; a trade sadly lacking in Skull Crag.

Some time just after noon the captain called out to Gavin and pointed up ahead. Gavin turned and as they came around a slow bend crowded with oak trees he saw a huge granite escarpment rising from the landscape ahead of them. As they drew closer he saw the red, jagged top of the escarpment was not rock but the red tile roof of a huge castle, many times the size of any they had seen so far. To the left of the castle a tall wall followed the line of the escarpment east, down back to the level of the fertile plane surrounding it. This wall enclosed many more buildings, with towers, turrets, long roofs and flags flying in the breeze. And from the vast space behind this high ground rose a grey fog of woodsmoke, a huge column produced by industry and many homes, rising slowly into the still, damp air. Gavin was looking at the northwest corner of Dunromin, capital of the Land of the Young. They had arrived.

Gavin was just starting to take in the sheer size of the vision before him when he was assailed with a wave of foul-smelling air.

"Bloody hell!" he exclaimed, clamping his cloak over his nose and mouth, "What the hell is that smell?"

The captain and helmsman laughed. "That's the Ponds," Murvellin explained, pointing at the east shore. "There's not much of a breeze so I thought we would catch a whiff of them."

Gavin looked eastwards. Before the land rose towards the escarpment he saw there were a number of large flat areas of brown water, each surrounded by elegant but evidently ancient stone walls. "What are the ponds?" he wondered. Now looking closer he could see there were figures working amongst the vast ponds, which were partly screened with trees and not immediately obvious save for the stench. These figures were working in a pool that looked to have been drained, shovelling muck onto carts.

"What are the Ponds for?" asked Sula, her face as disgusted as Gavin's.

"All the..." the captain paused, "Mess from the city." He decided was a safe turn of phrase in front of a young lady, particularly one so well armed as Sula. "The sewers collect all the, erm, mess from the people living in the city and it's channelled down here. They use water from the river to settle it and then wash the water back out into the river. The Dwarves set it up centuries ago."

"Why don't they throw it in the street like civilised people?" muttered Sula.

"Because then the streets would fill up with... mess," replied the Captain, "Like they do in other cities."

"Not at all," replied Sula, "In Skull Crag it is all washed clean by the rain."

Gavin frowned at her. "No, it's not," he corrected her, "The shellereen clean it away at night."

Sula looked confused, as did the captain.

"What are shellereen?" he asked.

"Night soil men," replied Gavin, but they both still looked confused. "Shit shovellers? They shovel up all the, erm, mess overnight and take it out of the city to dumps."

The captain nodded but Sula still looked confused. "The shellereen are real?" she asked "But they are just a fairy story made up to scare novices into not sneaking out at night?"

Gavin laughed out loud. "Seriously?" he wondered, "You genuinely believe that? The shellereen are very real. Criminals, people who forgot the Manners and just the wasters who aren't fit to do anything else." Gavin realised that something he accepted as a given here was actually a pretty terrible practice. He knew that many of the shellereen were people with mental illnesses or learning difficulties, condemned to a life of shovelling human excrement by their inability to live by the Manners.

Sula didn't respond, but her expression told Gavin that she was caught between not believing him and a revelation that something she had taken for granted her whole life wasn't true. He then realised that Sula had led a closeted life, her whole childhood had been spent in the temple compound or the country colleges. She had never set foot on the streets after dark.

The smell from the ponds was starting to clear as they continued upstream, closer to the city. "What do they do with it all?" Gavin asked, pointing at one of the carts.

"I don't know," said Murvellin, watching the cart with a puzzled look on his face.

"They spread it in the farms, I heard," said the helmsman. "They say it makes stuff grow better." Muvellin laughed, evidently thinking this some old wives tail of strange practices. Gavin just nodded. It was a remarkable recycling process for such a primitive culture, but it made a lot of sense.

"And these old Dwarven sewers run under the whole city?" he asked.

"That's what I heard," replied the captain, "There's wells and sewers across the whole place. Big enough to walk down in the old city, I heard. There used to be ponds to the south too but they converted them into the docks, oh, hundreds of years ago."

"Very impressive," muttered Gavin.

"The scrapers make a decent living too," the helmsman added, waving his thumb back towards the ponds, evidently referring to the men they had seen shovelling. "If you can stand the smell that is. They shovel shit all day but they find all sorts in the muck. Stuff people drop. Money, jewellery. All sorts. And then there's the bodies."

"Bodies?" asked Gavin.

"It's a punishment that the old street guilds use," grinned the helmsman, "If you do something they don't like, they give you a beating. If you do it again they put you in a sack with some rocks, tie it up around your neck and throw you in the ponds. Not a nice way to go."

Gavin nodded. He could guess what the "old street guilds" were too. It sounded like Dunromin had its criminal underbelly too, just like any good fantasy city should.

As they sailed closer to the city the smell cleared completely and Gavin began to realise the enormous size of the place. On earth he was used to large cities, teeming metropolises like London and Birmingham, but he had seen

nothing on this scale on Barnaynia – not even Skull Crag. The castle hill loomed before him and then moved to the left as they looped around to the harbour in the southwest of the city. Gavin smiled and nodded. This was a proper D&D fantasy city. Down the south side of the Castle Mount he could see rising above the walls the tops of temples and other huge buildings decorated with domes, towers of coloured stone with flags flying from their tops and windows. In between them and scattered throughout were flashes of green gardens or parks with trees around them. Frothing all about these grand structures were red and grey tiled roofs amongst grey and brown walls of stone, brick and wood. He could imagine among them streets of houses crammed in together in great numbers, streets overflowing with life.

Outside the west gate, in front of which they passed, dodging between the ferries, was a chaotic conglomeration of dwellings both permanent and transitory that had grown up around the gate but outside the city walls. The captain told Gavin this was known as Shanty Town, a set of hundreds of dwellings for people unable or unwilling to get accommodation inside the city walls. The buildings were all inferior quality, although many obviously very old. Wooden walls and thatched roofs showed the signs of many hasty repairs, refuse and waste was piled in the spaces between the dwelling and various animals foraged, tethered or free-range, about in the muck. Around these disreputable dwellings there were some fields, many with horses. Along the riverbank there were moorings for river craft here as well but nothing big enough to accommodate the Lady Dance or the big barges Gavin had seen.

As they passed this Shanty Town area in front of the West Gate Gavin could see ahead that more attention was paid here to the upkeep of the river bank itself. Huge wooden piles and stone walls had been built to protect the bank from erosion, the walls themselves providing support for businesses and workshops where all manner of goods were being manufactured and materials washed and prepared for sale in the city itself. Soon they saw that the river progressed south but a branch of deep water had been cut to the east bank and this made a huge channel, nearly a hundred feet across, led into the heart of the city. They followed this branch left and went under a vast arch, over eighty feet high, as they passed through the tall city walls. The top of the arch was a walkway, covered, crenulated and patrolled by armoured men with colourful tabards, and then they were into the harbour proper. The stone quays that surrounded them were jammed with traffic and cargoes, beyond them were huge multi-storeyed stone buildings that must have been warehouses, with cranes dangling cargoes up and down to open windows the size of a barn door. There were also official looking buildings with flags and coats of arms, and common house frontages littered with drying washing.

The whole area was ringing to the shouts, oaths, music and song of a city bursting with life; there was life and activity everywhere. Every street bustled with commoners in colourful woollens, different races of demi-humans and humanoids, everyone in fantastic robes and colourful hats, some matching, many different in style and fabric. After the clear air of the river and the stench of the Ponds, the docks smelt pretty much as he expected. The fragrance of exotic trade goods was lost under the reek of rotting fish. Other smells suggested that the unwelcoming brown of the river-water was not wholly due to silt either. The captain had said these used to be more Ponds so Gavin guessed some of the sewerage from the city came out here too, ready to be washed down the river.

On the south side of the harbour the buildings were less grand, some as bad as the hovels in the Shanty Town. Towards the far end of the south side of the harbour was a sandy island, atop which was perched a tall, slim tower – the “Wizard Tor” the captain informed Gavin, who laughed. Yes, of course, a tall tower for the most powerful wizard in the city – what else could it possibly have been?

The rain had stopped now, although thick low cloud kept the afternoon cold and wintry. Gavin was mesmerised by the people and creatures that hurtled around the streets; by the amazing smells of cooking, industry, people and waste; by the noise, the crashing, banging and shouting. This was a city that seemed more Pratchett than Tolkien, although still unmistakably Dungeons and Dragons. Elves and dwarves rubbed shoulders with tradesmen, preachers, knights and beggars. The shouts of dock-workers mingled endlessly with entertainers providing impromptu distractions and merchants screaming their wares.

"This is more like it," muttered Gavin, "This is more like a proper city."

"What are your plans once we're ashore?" asked Murvellin, having to raise his voice slightly above the bustle of the port.

"We want to find Garibaldi," replied Gavin, "I don't suppose you know where to look for him do you?"

"He's a Baron you know?" replied the captain, "Lord Mordred granted him lands away in the southern borders years ago. It was those lands that were attacked first in the war. That's why Baron Garibaldi was so involved in the fighting. I couldn't tell you where they are but I dare say almost anyone around here would know. I'm sure we could think of someone to help you."

"What about Lady Mary?" asked Guthrey.

To Gavin's surprise Murvellin blushed slightly. "I don't think Master Sea Breeze here would be wanting any of her kind of assistance," he muttered.

"No, not for that," sighed Guthrey, "What about the Lance boy that used to work there? He's one of Garibaldi's heroes now I heard, lucky sod. Getting famous he is, rich too probably. He'll know where to find the Baron."

The captain's face cleared as he realised what his youngest crew-member was driving at. "Yes, of course!" he declared, "Lance would be able to get you in to see Garibaldi, and Lady Mary would be able to get you in touch with Lance, seeing as she brought him up and all."

"I don't follow?" wondered Gavin.

"Lance was a street lad, his mother was, well, she was one of Lady Mary's girls," said the captain, Gavin was beginning to suspect what kind of person Lady Mary was and how she made her living. "She died in childbirth, sad to say, but Lady Mary's got a heart of gold, y'see? Or probably saw some profit in it. Anyhow, she took the lad in and brought him up. When he was older Garibaldi took him on as one of his team, one of his Heroes as they came to be known. A fighting gang they are and Lance is one of 'em."

"I see, they were a band of adventurers then?" asked Gavin.

"Yes, that's the thing," said the captain, "Still are. Garibaldi was already successful, he'd become quite a celebrity y'see, and he put together a team of friends to help him. They're quite a force to be reckoned with now I think. They certainly made a mess of Kzenzakai's boys I can tell you."

"This Garibaldi sounds a great man?" observed Sula.

"He is," agreed Guthrey enthusiastically, "From the Far West they say. I met him once you know? Charming bloke, didn't seem that fierce to me at all!"

"From the Far West you say?" Gavin wondered after a moment or two, "So he's not a native of Dunromin then?"

"Well, so the story goes," said Guthrey, frowning slightly at Gavin's obvious consternation. "As far west as the Twilight Sea maybe? Or at least very far away. They say he came here without a Brass Margaret to his name but within the year was one of the most successful adventurers in the city."

It sounded a true fantasy story – a veteran adventurer, probably very powerful. If anyone could help him get his friends back, he could do worse than starting with Garibaldi.

“We have to find him,” decided Gavin, “Where can we find Lady Mary?”

The sailors looked at each other and then pointedly at Sula. Then they were distracted by a jerk as the ship bumped gently against the quayside and sailors busied themselves about securing it. The gang-plank was pushed out and an official looking man with two armed men marched up it. The man was dressed in simple clothes and a warm robe. He was slightly built with short cropped hair and a smooth-shaven chin. His face suggested he was in his mid-forties but his eyes were watery and sad, making him look a lot older. He carried a ledger and some pens and had a chain around his neck, which seemed to be a badge of office of some kind and had a seal press hanging from it. The armed men looked like city watchmen or soldiers. They wore chain mail shirts under blue tabards decorated with a yellow logo of a portcullis. They carried small round shields and open helms and each had a long sword and dagger at his belt. Their hands were free as their shields were slung on a leather strap over their left shoulders. They didn't seem too alert for trouble and it looked like their weapons were not ready for immediate use. Their presence on newly arrived ships was probably one of protocol rather than necessity.

“Hail and well met Captain Murvellin of the Lady Dance,” announced the man with the ledger, a little too quickly, as if it was a phrase he had to say too often. It certainly indicated that he knew exactly who Murvellin was and seemed at ease with him. “Welcome back to the free city of Dunromin, capital of the Land of the Young. We trust your purpose is peaceful?”

“Hail and well met Gerdy son of Gershut, clerk to the Harbour Master,” replied the Captain grandly, and then softened a little and grinned. “I trust you are well?”

Gerdy smiled softly, “The gout isn't bothering me so much,” he replied, “Although the damp plays mischief with my old bones. How's business?”

The captain pulled a seal ring from a pocket and wiped some dirt off it. “It's good, as it happens, I have a hold full of silks, woollens, parchment, oils and spices. Mainly woollens,” he added, emphasising his cheaper goods as he remembered Gerdy would be thinking about the duty to be paid. “I'll be unloading this afternoon if you could point me out a crew that's light on its feet?”

“Old Kilsey's mob are available I think and there's space in number six lock-up for a load your size,” replied the clerk, taking his ledger and starting to write, “How much do you think?”

Gavin was distracted by the personalities on the quayside while the captain discussed his cargo with the clerk, trying to establish the duty he needed to be paying. The clerk was recording a lot of other information in his ledger too. There was a group of people gathering by the ship's gang-plank, curious as to what was happening. Some looked a trifle unsavoury but others were just dock workers or sailors perhaps after a job. Gavin's idle curiosity was drawn back to Gerdy suddenly.

“Passengers you say?” Gerdy was asking, looking across at Gavin and Sula, “I shall need your names for the Tax Date and it's a three quid toll for coming ashore. Each.”

“Tax Date?” asked Gavin.

“It's a formality,” replied the captain, “If you stay in the city more than a year you have to pay tax. If you leave the city it's important to register that you've gone or they'll charge you tax when you come back. You can register at any of the gates when you leave or re-enter, or with any of the harbour clerks

like Gerdy here if you leave by boat. It's worth your while taking the time to do. There's harsh punishments for tax dodgers."

Gavin and Sula obediently gave their names and the clerk recorded them in his ledger. Gavin noticed that he recorded them in a similar fashion to the way he had recorded their cargo and other details, on the same page.

"What do you do with all this information?" he asked.

"It gets transcribed into the Tax Ledgers," replied the clerk, pausing to sharpen his quill and speaking with the obvious pride of an arch-bureaucrat. "In our Records House, up by the castle, we have recorded every soul to have lived in Dunromin for the last three hundred years. Along with all their life history and taxes paid."

"Wow," muttered Gavin, "A perpetual Doomsday Book. Nice."

"It is the most important duty of the king to maintain it," continued the clerk, obviously pleased with Gavin's reaction. "Of course, the king wants to be able to gather taxes efficiently and accurately. It means it is impossible to dodge paying your tax and you are never over-taxed. It is uniformly popular with all honest citizens."

"I bet," muttered Gavin to himself but he got a bit of a frown from Gerdy.

"I need to know the purpose of your visit to Dunromin?" continued the clerk, his freshly sharpened quill now loaded with ink once more.

"We seek the one called Garibaldi," announced Sula, "Please tell us where we might find him?"

The Clerk frowned, "I am not a tourist guide, young lady," he said as he peered down his nose at her. He then made another note next to her name in his ledger. "I gather information, I don't disseminate it."

"But his whereabouts will be recorded in the tax office?" observed Gavin.

"Only whether or not he is in the city and if he has paid his taxes this year," replied the clerk, "As well as any registered abodes and businesses. But the information is private, only for official use. For what reason do you seek the Baron Garibaldi? Is he a relative perhaps?"

"No, we seek his assistance in protecting our city," replied Sula.

The clerk paused, frowning at her, considering the response for a while. "I shall put 'business' I think," he decided, with a sigh. "That should cover it."

He scribbled again in his notebook.

"Place of origin?" asked the clerk.

"Scull Crag," said Sula, Gavin didn't respond. He considered what this pool of information may have to offer him, if he could get at it. Then another thought occurred to him – if he tried to break the system they might have to take him up to the Tax Office to sort it out.

"I am not of this world," said Gavin, smiling. "I come from another world. I come from Planet Earth."

Sula scowled at Gavin but the clerk seemed to take it in his stride, perhaps the pride of the civil servant preventing him from acknowledging something that has surprised him. Then, to Gavin's surprise he said "Not had anyone from there for a while."

Gavin was stunned. For a while he couldn't speak, struggling to understand what he had just heard. Surely this must be some kind of misunderstanding?

"You've had others from Earth then?" asked Gavin after gaping uselessly for a moment or two.

"Well, not me personally, and no one for a while I'd say," replied the clerk, "We've had a few in a while back, about six months ago I think. We had to

create a new category for it! A right kerfuffle that caused I can tell you. But it's an ill-wind, as they say. It's been a very useful classification since then. We've started filing creatures from other planes and deities incarnating themselves here under the same category. Not that it happens often of course but we didn't have one for them before and now we have. Like I say, we don't get to use it every day of course. Not really every month even. But it does get used on occasion."

Gavin's mind was racing now, so more visitors from Earth six months ago, which was about the time he and his friends had arrived! So, he wasn't alone after all? The news elated him but then he stopped himself. He had no idea whom these others might be and how many there might be of them.

"These others from Earth," he asked, "Where are they now?"

"I have no idea," said the clerk, a little taken aback. "Perhaps they're with Garibaldi. Perhaps they have made their own way in this world. Perhaps they have gone home. How should I know?"

Garibaldi – that name again, but something else the man had said had stunned him.

"How have they gone home?"

"Not a clue, it was just a guess," said the clerk defensively, he seemed to be a bit surprised by Gavin's intensity. Gavin had stepped forward without realising it – he was getting very close to the clerk now, even the guards were taking notice now. "Perhaps if you wish to find them you should ask someone who knows," Gerdy rallied a little, remembering the armed men stood just behind him. "Or maybe hire someone to find them for you, or put an advert on the counsel house wall maybe. Like I said to your young lady-friend, I am not here for your convenience. Your problems are not mine."

"How many of them were there?" persisted Gavin, still seemingly unconscious of the guards, who were also stepping forwards, one with his hand on his sword hilt.

"I have no idea of that either and I really don't have time to stand here gossiping," the clerk was getting quite tetchy now. "I have work to do." Gavin finally noticed the guards and stepped back, holding up his hands in what he hoped was a peaceful gesture. The guards relaxed a little but continued scowling at him.

The clerk pulled out a parchment and scribbled some notes on it. He then used his seal to put a wax emblem on the bottom and passed it to the captain. In turn the captain wrote a note of his own and made his own seal on it.

"No cash I am afraid," Murvellin said, passing the note to Gerdy, "It'll have to be credit until I can sell some of my load." The official frowned but then the captain pulled a fat bottle with a cork sealed with wax from under his cloak and passed it to Gerdy.

"Your credit is good here," smiled Gerdy, taking the bottle and slipping it under his own cloak. "One of the best I might add. Good day to you all."

With the credit note and his little bribe stowed safely away the clerk and his bodyguards left the ship. As they started to walk away Gerdy stopped and turned to Gavin again. "If you can wind your neck in a bit," he announced, "You should ask Baron Garibaldi about the others from Earth. He took them in, looked after them. He seemed to know they were coming – there were posters up about them I think?" as he said this he looked around at one of his bodyguards, who nodded.

"At the Warrior's Guild and in every Inn," replied the man in a deep voice, speaking with an accent Gavin thought sounded almost cockney. "The Baron was looking for anyone saying they were from that, whatever it was, Earth? Offered a reward and all sorts. Not heard anything about it for months now though."

"Reward eh?" wondered Gerdy, looking back at Gavin, but then his expression changed. "Old news I would think. I don't have time for such things. Good day to you all, mind you behave yourselves while you're ashore." The Harbour Master's Clerk marched off the boat followed by his men. The one with the deep voice nodded to Gavin and the Captain, who nodded back at him.

As they walked away the captain unrolled the paper Gerdy had left him and inspected the inventory as it had been taken, and then he frowned.

"Hey, he's charged me your toll!" he exclaimed at Gavin, "That's three quid each you owe me.

Gavin sighed and fished some silver coins from his pockets. He had some cash left, not that he had been given much for his mission. He hoped his gold was good in Dunromin but as he passed six silver coins to the captain they were taken without question. Gavin considered the parchments that had been exchanged and the little pantomime with the wax seals. "So how does a credit note work then?" he asked.

"Don't you have them in Skull Crag?" replied the captain, "You get them all over the world, but here in Dunromin they use magic to secure them so they're a lot better and safer than carrying loads of coin around on you. I write what I owe on a note and mark it with wax from my seal ring," he held his own up to show Gavin, who noticed it glitter even in the watery sunlight. "Gerdy, or the harbourmaster, or whoever, presents it to the bank. If the seal matches mine," he indicated his ring again, "Which they have a copy of to check, then the funds are taken from my account and put into his. It's a lot safer than carrying cash in a place like Dunromin."

This sounded like writing cheques back on Earth, Gavin wondered, and the seal-rings acted like banker's cards. "But what if someone steals your ring?" asked Gavin.

"I report it," said the Captain, "It's dire consequences for trying to fraud a credit. The Guards keep a very close watch on such transgressions and they have ways of tracking down missing rings. Magical ways. The Bank keeps all the city's funds, y'see. All the Guilds, the Temples, even the king. They all keep their gold there. It would be a disaster if someone managed to get it out without permission."

"Still, it looks like it would be easy to do?" wondered Gavin, despite himself.

"There's all sorts of safe guards," replied the captain, "Magical ones, so don't you go getting any clever ideas."

"No of course not!" protested Gavin, "The very idea!"

"Well, just be careful, Dunromin's a grim place when it comes to law, nearly as strict as Skull Crag. Don't go getting yourselves outside it," warned the captain, "That's not to say it's safe though. Keep your nose out of other people's business and watch your pockets."

"Yes, indeed," muttered Gavin, looking out over the crowd that thronged the quayside. "Now, could you direct us to Lady Mary's?"

## **Chapter 5 – A Guided Tour**

After saying their farewells to the captain and his crew Sula and Gavin pushed their way through the throng of people and up a side street as directed by the captain. Their sea-legs wobbled for a while as they got used to hard rock under their feet again but they found it easy enough to move through the crowds. Some gave them funny looks, most ignored them, a few tried to sell them things. Gavin found the walk strangely familiar, the voices around him were speaking English, after all. He recognised a few accents but in the main people sounded



accents and a snatch of Scottish too.

The clothes of the locals showed many different fashions, each limited or enhanced according to the prosperity of the wearer. All but the poorest had shoes, varying from leather socks all the way to quality leather boots and including a lot of pointed shoes of varying practicality. Most people wore woollen trews or cotton trousers, usually secured at the bottom against rats. Over the top of this were shapeless tunics that hung from the shoulders, or tailored tunics that reached to the buttocks or lower, featuring buttons and chord fastenings. Most people wore hats or hoods, or bonnets in the case of women, with scarfs and woollens against the cold. Some of the dockers wore short leather capes, to make carrying sacks easier, and many people had cloaks of different styles, varying from short, highly decorated fashion garments to long, heavy waterproofed and hooded examples for long, outdoor travel. Working women wore similar garments to men, but longer and usually sewn or tied with a belt to show the shape of the body beneath and with a tabard or lighter tunic over the top, slit up the side to allow movement. Quite a few people dressed in a different style that Gavin associated with Roman times. These people had a thigh-length tunic over trousers with shoes, boots or sandals on the feet. Many people wore socks and hoods, often with extravagant shapes, colours and accessories.

Sula looked a lot less comfortable, walking with her hands inside her robe and an angry scowl on her face. Still looking so young she resembled like a sulky teenager made to go on a shopping trip, but Gavin knew that her hands, under her robe, would be resting on the fiendishly sharp fighting knives she had concealed there. Sula was a highly trained warrior, quite able to look after herself in a fight.

The route to Lady Mary's seemed intricate and Gavin doubted he would be able to remember all the directions. He was carrying his bedroll and the simple pack that Sula kept all her things in. She followed him closely, watching the passing crowds with suspicion. The crowds heaved and scurried with little regard for whoever got in its way – quite different from Skull Crag. In that distant city the paving stones of the street and sometimes whole streets were colour coded allowing only certain social ranks to use them. Being a priestess Sula was used to having pathways clear for her and even civic dignitaries and merchants would get out of her way. She had probably not had a member of the public within three feet of her for years, let alone bumping up against her and swearing in a foreign language. It was taking her some time to get used to the new ways of Dunromin and Gavin hoped she could keep her temper as she was jostled. He'd had the foresight to warn her that it would be crowded and hoped she realised this was normal and nothing to get too worried about.

Their path took them through a few mixed streets; narrow and twisty with houses packed in on either side. Every building was three floors or more, leaning perilously inwards as each floor was bigger than the one below. The whole place smelt of filth despite the cold weather. The paths were mostly washed clean by rain and some more conscientious shop-owners. Even on a cold wet day like this the space bustled with people moving hither and thither. Lads carried loads, shop owners and customers chatted, traders shouted their wares. Gavin observed a few armoured warriors among the throng, even a patrol of twelve of the City Watch, or the "Guarde" as they were called locally. These Guarde were wearing the same blue tabards as the ones at the docks and pushed heedlessly through the crowds looking angry and annoyed by the whole process.

After the side-streets up from the port they moved out onto a huge boulevard that stretched east-west from the west wall to the Lower Market. As with all the main streets in Dunromin it was cambered to a trough along the centre of the street. Into these troughs ran the waste of the city. It was washed along by such rainwater as there was and down into the sewer system. intricacies of the Dunromin waste collection system was a wonder of the city as

Captain Murvellin had already intimated in his details of the Ponds. Dunromin had been built on the abandoned ruins of a shallow dwarf city, cut into the escarpment. Cunning builders and craftsmen, the dwarves had designed water traps to prevent their subterranean city from being flooded by the rain but at the same time channelling a constant feed of fresh spring and rainwater to wells for the inhabitants.

The early builders of Dunromin had modified these hidden galleries and used them in their own way to make a sewer system that carried all the rain water, waste and offal of the city down huge underground passages and into the Ponds. Indeed, so extensive were the sewers and the pathways of the old Dwarf City that combined they made a vast complex of subterranean catacombs. Many had tried and failed to explore them thoroughly, others made their livings in the darkness, ferrying contraband into and about the city. Strange creatures dwelt there also, never seeing the light of day, and even noble citizens walked some of the paths, travelling about the city on secret business.

What few knew who still lived was that far beneath even the old Dwarf city was another labyrinth of passages and chambers, cut deep into the granite of the escarpment many thousands of years ago by an ancient and strange race. Some of these passages Kzenzakai had happened upon as his servants tunnelled up beneath the capital in preparation for the war. So cold and forbidding were those tunnels that even Great Kzenzakai's evil minions had deigned not to tread there and sought other tunnels to the surface. Yet there were still things that lurked there, things that now perceived a release from their pits through these new holes. They were slow in coming forth and indeed would die rather than feel the sun's touch, but they were free now and perhaps they will matter some to events later in our story.

Gavin and Sula walked east along the boulevard, falling easily into step with the crowds, until they saw another great street going north, up a gentle slope towards a gatehouse some distance away, that led into the old city atop the escarpment. About halfway up this road they tried to find a side street that connected to a plaza and then another street north of the Maze. The Maze was a tight, narrow area of particularly poor housing and the captain had advised them to avoid it, even in daylight. As Gavin had feared the way to Lady Mary's was a complex one and he was forgetting his way already. They seemed to come adrift and they stopped, with a high white wall ahead of them and the backs of many private houses on either side, to consider their position.

The houses looked occupied but seemed very quiet. Many wind-chimes rang or clunked mournfully in the breeze and Gavin noticed all the doors and windows of the houses were hung with holy symbols or strange marks were painted on the fences or scored into the stone work. The bright white wall ahead of them was at least fifteen feet tall and well maintained. It looked out of place and forbidding, designed to keep something out, or in, but it was not the city wall.

This was in fact the wall of a large area of parkland that occupied much of the area between the sprawl of the docks to the south and the inner wall of the Old City to the north. In the centre of this park was a huge white temple and the parkland around it was strewn with headstones and memorials of a myriad styles and tastes. Gavin and Sula had happened upon the edge of the graveyard, although they didn't know it. The severe temple in the middle of the park, which they couldn't see for the wall and trees, was the temple of Death where all the city's folk came to visit, eventually.

They could see a path to the left and right along the edge of the wall but it looked small and private and not likely to be the way to the city's biggest brothel, which Guthrey had told them Lady Mary's undoubtedly was. The houses around them were cramped together, although all the doors were shut and the windows

dark. This was not a popular place to live, despite the houses being well built and the area cheap. The graveyard had a reputation for occasionally delivering some unquiet dead into the streets after dark, despite the best efforts of the Priests of the Temple to keep them down.

"We are lost I think?" observed Sula.

"Yes, I think we are," replied Gavin, looking back the way they had come. That side-street was quiet enough with only two old women sat in the sunshine in a doorway sewing. "Excuse me," asked Gavin of the ladies, "I wonder if you might direct me to Lady Mary's?"

In hindsight, knowing what he did of his destination, this was perhaps not the best action to have taken. The reaction of the ladies was outspoken to say the least and Gavin and Sula fled back the way they had come under a torrent of abuse and with Gavin smarting from where he had been stabbed with a pin. They found themselves back on the main boulevard up to the old city walls and Gavin sighed, looking around himself to try and determine how far they had come up the road and if they had missed the turning towards the plaza and the, oh, whatever had come after that.

"Maybe he said right at the shrine, not left," he wondered out loud, thinking back to the fountain they had passed about which were hung flowers and offerings of food and wine.

"Lost are we?" said a voice, somewhere below Gavin's gaze.

Gavin looked down to see a halfling peering up at him. That is to say, he guessed it was a halfling, although its dress didn't look like the hobbits of the films he had seen. This Halfling was ill-kempt and smelt. He hobbled on a crooked crutch his left leg was twisted and limp below the knee. His head was covered with a grimy cap that was stained with what looked like blood and, perhaps, curry or some other brown-yellow foodstuff. Or possibly vomit. He was unshaven and grinned up at them through a mouthful of rotten teeth, many missing.

"I think we have missed our turning, yes," replied Gavin. Sula said nothing but was obviously revolted by the diminutive creature. Gavin sensed her move behind him slightly, her feet carefully placed to balance any attack or defence she deemed necessary. The main road was busy and Gavin couldn't imagine anyone would try mugging them here.

"You're in luck!" declared the halfling, "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jerym Twofella, gentleman of the streets and able assistant and friend to all visitors to our Great City." And the short fellow bowed low, doffing his cap and then struggling with his crutch to stand up properly again.

"Yeah, right," wondered Gavin, feeling a little like he had walked onto a Monty Python set.

"What great fortune it is for you that I happened by!" Jerym continued with his sales pitch, "It so happens that I am the patron of a small group of highly skilled, well-motivated and honest young people whose knowledge of the city and its locales is second to none. For the modest sum of three gold pieces a day I will gladly provide you with the services of one of these grand young fellows for the duration of your stay in glorious Dunromin. Or at least until such a time as you feel confident enough of your own way about as you don't need them anymore."

"Three gold?" laughed Gavin, "My arse."

The halfling beamed at the sport. "Such a sum is positively modest for a brilliant and expert service. No limit to hours or locations travelled! Why, my lads even know their way about the Maze and the public galleries of all the temples. There isn't a path nor alleyway in this city they don't know like the back of their honest little hands."

Gavin considered this for a while. It was becoming apparent to him that it was very easy to get lost in Dunromin and a little local knowledge may serve them well. However, placing their trust in someone like Jerym did feel somewhat naïve. They could easily find themselves led into an ambush

"I have come across your sort before," said Gavin, "No sooner have I parted with the cash than your guide leads me a merry dance and is away, before we can catch him, and we are left more lost than we are now."

"That would be a very short-sighted policy," observed Jerym, "How soon would word of such a ruse get about? And indeed, I would be turning my back on earning another three gold coins the next day and so on for as long as you needed a guide! No sir, I am a businessman who depends on his reputation for more business. And my reputation is spotless I can assure you. My guides are the best in the city and will honour any contract agreed upon."

"Or perhaps it's your game to lead us to a shadowy locale and have some heavies waylay us for the rest of the coin in our pockets?" wondered Gavin.

Jerym looked most affronted. "Sir, you misjudge me! I will not deny that there are creatures in this city whose morals and desperation have let them stoop so low, but I am not one of them and nor are any of my boys." Gavin couldn't help thinking of Fagin from *Oliver Twist*, although the physical stature was somewhat lacking. "I understand of course that an experienced traveller such as yourself is well versed in the vulgarities of a cruel world, but I would also ask you to note that I have perceived your scimitar and your companion's knives." This observation did not escape Gavin as he knew Sula's knives were well concealed. Jerym, it seemed, had a god eye for such things. "I am not foolish myself and I realise that one who carries such weapons in the manner, and with such confidence as yourselves, undoubtedly knows how to use them, and probably use them well. With my leg lacking as it is, and no weapons about me, I surely cannot represent much of a threat to your good selves?"

"I have no doubt you have friends who don't lack in limbs or height," said Gavin, "And it is they whom I would suspect of, shall we say, devious plans."

"I can give you no bond but my word and reputation," said the halfling, "Ask any in the city who know me if they would trust my guides. I have worked hard upon my reputation and it is the highest! Indeed, it is my livelihood!"

Gavin considered this for a while, Mr Twofella's reputation couldn't be worth much judging by his appearance. However, Gavin could do with a guide and he could handle himself if need be. He had seen several members of what looked like the city guard around – he suspected Dunromin was fairly law abiding in the main, or at least reasonably well policed. If he kept his wits about him it should suffice to preserve him, he decided.

"Very well, I shall trust you Mr Twofella," said Gavin grandly, it seemed silly but somehow appropriate to the little man. "I shall hire one of your guides, for a gold piece a day."

Jerym winced a little. "I am sorry sir, you may have misheard me. Our daily rate is three pieces of gold. Three score in the vernacular."

"I heard," said Gavin, "Our offer is one to start, two tomorrow, and two per day thereafter until we need you no more. Perhaps a bonus may be in order at that point if we are pleased."

Jerym seemed to consider this for a while. There was a definite gleam in his eye and he certainly seemed to have more on his mind than merely the hire of a guide. Presently he put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill whistle. A boy appeared around a corner, a human boy barely eleven years old Gavin estimated. He was dressed in scruffy but practical clothes and wore a blue cap with a red feather in it.

"This is Gecko of the Wold," Jerym introduced the youth, "A country lad new to my team. His expertise in the many ways of the city is not yet complete, but for the fare you offer I can let you use his powers such as they are. I cannot guarantee he will know every street and inn though."

Gavin addressed the boy. "Do you know the way to Lady Mary's?" he asked.

"I do, sir," said the youth, his manner polite.

"Ok then, Mr Twofella, we shall take your guide," and Gavin presented the boy with a gold piece which he took beaming.

"Lady Mary's is a curious destination for you sir?" wondered Jerym, "And especially for the young lady I would hazard?"

"It's only a brothel," announced Sula bluntly. She had been listening to the conversation and, judging by the look on her face, disapproved of Gavin's choice of guide. "I would be surprised if I have anything to fear there."

Gavin was stumped for a response for a moment but then he and Jerym looked at each other and grinned.

"Well I never," said the Halfling, "Very well, Madam and Sir. Gecko, take the nice people to Old Mary's, and mind you avoid the Maze."

Gavin was encouraged by the warning, remembering the captain's words, and decided that perhaps the Guide Master did indeed have his best interests at heart, at least for as long as he was paying his way. They bid good day to each other and Gecko lead them off up the broad street towards the old city. Gavin and Sula followed behind, watching the young lad's figure leading the way. After a while the boy stopped and looked around at them.

"I can tell you a bit about the old place as we go if you like?" he wondered. "No extra charge. More to pass the time really?"

"By all means," said Gavin, "What can you tell us then?"

Gavin had noticed as they had been walking that the majority of people passing them seemed very determined to be going somewhere else. Unlike the first streets they had walked up there were few shops here and fewer street vendors shouting their wares. The traffic included fewer people, although it was still busy with delivery men, traders, porters, shoppers, holy men, soldiers, Guards and beggars. Gavin saw there were also more ox carts, mule trains, men with barrows and in general bulkier items and larger quantities of goods being moved about.

"This is the main road between the docks," Gecko pointed behind them, "And the old city." He pointed up ahead to the gatehouse. "Beyond that gatehouse is the Old City and the gatehouse marks the position of the old city walls. Years ago, Dunromin got built out beyond the old city walls and in the end, they built the new city walls to go all the way around the new stuff. The new city walls go all the way from the West Gate by the Castle, down and around the docks, away east to beyond the pasture and the new town areas there, and up to the north to enclose the elven quarter, the Magic College and the University." As he spoke Gecko pointed off in all directions, generally describing a circle all around them. As he spoke he feigned a slightly worldlier accent than his normal speaking voice, as if imitating a tour guide. "There's thousands of people living and working all over the city and even beyond the new city walls now, but the Old City is still the heart of it all. All the major Guilds have their Guildhouses up there. All the most famous merchants, the tax office, the older temples, the richer bars and inns, the slave market, the circus, the counsel house, the bank, and of course the castle itself. All of 'em are in the Old City."

"And this road connects the Old City with the docks?" wondered Gavin. It was like a medieval motorway.

“And the South Gate, which is the second busiest gate in the city, after the West Gate,” added Gecko. He absentmindedly lifted an apple off a passing cart and bit into it. “The lands to the south of Dunromin are some of the richest farmland in the country. That’s where I’m from. My old man runs a fruit farm in Wold, a barony about three days south of here. I’m his second son and don’t stand to get the farm, so I came to the city to seek my fortune.”

“Very romantic,” said Gavin.

“All the traffic for the lower market comes this way too,” continued Gecko, apparently recalling more details as he went along. “In fact, pretty much every part of the southern half of the city is connected to the Old City along this road. There’s most of the new businesses down there, not so much in the East side of the city, because of the lake and the elf woods, so I guess it all comes along here really. It’s always busy.”

“An arterial route,” muttered Gavin, but his mind was wandering back to the task in hand. “How far to Lady Mary’s?”

“We’re still going around the Maze,” said Gecko, pointing down an alleyway to the right. Gavin followed his finger and saw the street narrow quickly to a dark corridor between older looking houses. The style was similar to the other streets he had seen, but narrower and without the drainage to the sewers. He could see washing strung out across the gap between the houses and there was a definitely stronger smell coming from it. Although the houses they had seen varied in the quality of their upkeep, the buildings Gavin could see in the Maze were old and mouldering, their wooden beams bending and the plaster crumbling.

“What is the Maze?” asked Gavin.

“It was a slave camp once,” replied their young guide, “At least that’s the story. Before they built the new City Wall there was a gang of slaves and poor folk living there and working in the city. When they built the rest of the city they kind of built it around the Maze so it stayed old and decrepit. It’s not a good place to be wandering about for too long. It’s tight and twisty and dark even in the daytime. It’s very easy to get lost in there and when you do, you might not come out with everything you went in with, if you come out at all.”

“Sounds lovely,” muttered Gavin. Sula glared at him, missing the sarcasm in his tone perhaps.

Gecko led them on and they continued towards the Old City gate ahead, the road rising gently as they went but increasing in steepness not far ahead. As they moved through the crowds Gavin was leading, careful to check back on Sula, who was just behind him and obviously anxious or angry about the crowds. She was evidently missing the space to move she would have had in Skull Crag. There she even had access to the Red Walks, over-head bridges and walkways where commoners were forbidden. The less structured streets of Dunromin were evidently vexing her.

Gavin was enjoying the cold afternoon air as they walked, the temperature keeping down most of the smell, and watching the other inhabitants of the city as they went about their business. This road was certainly busier and more crowded than the docks. As Gecko had suggested, most people seemed to be intent on getting from one place to another, not pausing here for long, if at all. The streets and alleys off the main road looked quieter, but still with plenty of people moving about or doing some job or other. He was curious to see that many of the shops and businesses not only had signs advertising their offerings but were also named with their trade or even the proprietor’s name. He guessed this meant a higher level of literacy among the population than in medieval England or even Skull Crag.



Gavin had also noted a blend of races rubbing shoulders and bustling about that, although predominantly human, also included dwarves, elves and halflings, some gnomes and the occasional knot of orcs, goblins or possibly half-orcs, usually employed as labourers carrying trade goods of one sort or another. As far as he could see there was no discrimination apparent, although most people would give the humanoid a wide berth if they could.

"Lots of humanoids about," observed Gavin, "No one seems to mind them being in the city?"

"They have to be out by nightfall," replied Gecko, "And they're not popular with most people, especially the Babylonians down in the big temple on the Lower Market. They beat them up at the slightest opportunity. The King's only let them in over the last few years. People say it encourages trade but I don't know about that. They're supposed protected as tradesman by the law but it only works until they upset someone, or someone decides they've been upset by them. No one is likely to stand up for them and there's a lot looking for an opportunity to sort them out. If a few of them get killed along the way the Guard tend to be a bit lazy in their investigations, even lazier than normal, if you know what I mean."

"I think so," muttered Gavin.

"Stop! Thief!" Gavin's attention was drawn to a man to his right, pushing through the crowd in pursuit of a young vagabond who was dodging through the mass of people far better than his pursuer. Gavin was aware of a figure looming from the crowds to his right, a fighting man in worn chainmail, his expression fierce beneath a chainmail hood and worn riding cape. His face was weathered and grim, lined with age and surrounded by white whiskers. In a swift move, one huge fist caught the running lad by the upper arm.

"Not so fast, you shen-g'va," hissed the man, his Common speech heavy with what sounded to Gavin like a Russian accent. Certainly, Gavin had no idea what a shen-g'va was but doubted it was pleasant. "In Deerlish pick-pockets lose their hands!" the warrior continued. His tone suggested he was eager to meat out the punishment himself, there and then. The crowd around the confrontation thinned a little and slowed to watch, nearby was another armoured man, much younger, but wearing a blue tabard displaying a portcullis, indicating he was a part of the City Garde. This Guardesman's head was bare, exposing thick black hair cut roughly into a bowl, and he was munching on a pie. The Guardesman seemed as amused by the encounter as everyone else and seemed to have no notion of getting involved.

"Thank-you good sir!" shouted the victim, still pushing through the crowd, but his thanks were premature.

As the crowd moved about the little scene there was a flurry of movement. Two other figures, larger than the thief but still teenagers in ragged clothes, materialised through the crowd, to either side of the warrior. Blades glittered in the sunlight and the warrior yelled in rage, collapsing on his left leg as he did so. He released the thief, gripping his bleeding right hand in his left before collapsing, cursing, onto his backside. The three thieves were gone, lost in the crowd without so much as a shout or a shove.

The victim at last emerged to stand by the felled warrior, who was swearing and wincing with pain.

"You let them go!" cried the victim, although his tone was a lament rather than a recrimination. He could see the warrior was injured. As well as the blood streaming from a slash on his hand, which had been cut to the bone from wrist to knuckle, blood was spreading on the woollen trousers he wore, around the back of his left leg. It was evident he had been ham-strung from behind as well, one of the youths having slashed the tendons in the back of his knee.

The victim was pulling a cloth from his pocket to help stop the bleeding on the warrior's hand and looking around for assistance. Most of the crowd was turning away already, seeing the entertainment was over and not wishing to waste any more time. The victim's eyes caught those of the Guardesman, still munching on his pie.

"Why didn't you stop them?" the victim demanded, "You're the bloody Guardes! You're supposed to arrest thieves!"

"Am off duty," the Watchman spluttered through his pie and turned to walk away. "None of my business."

The victim snorted in exasperation and leant down again to the injured soldier. No one else seemed to be paying them any more attention, the crowd had already started its flow again, everyone with somewhere else to be.

"Are we going?" asked Gecko, innocently. His young city life was so accustomed to such events as to be oblivious of even the possibility that it might involve him or that he might help.

"Er, yeah," muttered Gavin, stunned by the sudden violence, the mess of blood now pooling on the road. But Sula walked over to the fallen warrior and knelt beside him.

"I am Sula Id-Affleghamerk, Servant of Our Lady the Moon," she reassured the angry man, "Allow me to help you."

She bowed her head slightly and started whispering soft words in a strange language. The noise of the words wove together into a murmur of sound like distant thunder. She then lay her hands onto the injured man's head and Gavin could see her shaking a little. The sound of her chant became slightly louder and then there was a hiss, short, like a snake, and Sula lifted her arms.

The warrior wiped the blood from his hand and the cut was gone. He bowed his head to Sula and made effusive thanks. Gavin recognised the spell that Sula had cast on him was called a Cure Light Wounds, being a simple Clerical spell designed to alleviate minor injuries. It was probably the total extent of Sula's magical ability, as she was only level 1, and it had been a very generous gesture indeed.

"Your leg will not be completely healed," she explained to the injured man, "The cut was deep. The bleeding will have stopped but you must get yourself to a bed or your temple. The cut will need more work to make it better again."

The warrior continued his thanks, wishing Sula many great boons in at least two languages. The victim helped support him although he looked less than

happy to have to help. Sula nodded an acknowledgment of the thanks and returned to Gavin's side.

"That was kind," Gavin said.

"That was the right thing to do," replied Sula, inferring she had no choice but didn't resent having to do it. "This city is a pitiless place. I cannot see how we can find anyone here who might help us."

Without another word they turned to follow Gecko. Whatever the young guide's opinions of Sula's magical power, he seemed unimpressed by the spectacle and made no comment. He led them a little further up the main road towards the gatehouse and then turned right.

"This is Deepdale Road," Gecko picked up his banter again. "Lots of good businesses along here and more steps up to the old city around the corner. Part of the Old City wall was dismantled there to let more trade through. There's lots of craftspeople around here. It's close enough to the city for their customers but far enough away so as the smoke doesn't bother no one too much. If you need anything making or repairing this I the place. I know some people too. I could get you a good price." Gavin observed smithies and other buildings that looked designed to facilitate some ancient industry or other.

"That's the Bawdy Wench," continued Gecko, pointing at a large, rambling building with many doors and windows. A sign showing a laughing woman hung over what was probably the main entrance and sounds of many voices and drinking came from within. By the door two large men lounged, evidently bouncers, looking bored and vaguely numb to the world. "It's the most famous inn in the city, maybe in the land. You can meet all sorts in there. Lady Mary's is around the next bend on the right, on the north side of the Maze."

As they passed the far end of the Bawdy Wench Gavin noticed that the wall of the escarpment rose steeply behind it. In fact, part of the pub and the houses and businesses about it seemed to be built into the rock face. The rise towards the old city walls was steepest here, sloping more gently nearer the gatehouse they had left behind and shallower again onward around to the northeast. Gavin could see it was all topped by the city wall, presumably the continuation of the old city wall Gecko had mentioned. Certainly, it was shorter than the huge City Wall they had sailed along the side of, and it looked older and less well tended. There were still towers along it though, every few hundred feet, and these were of a width and form that suggested they contained more than just guards.

"Are those watchtowers?" he asked Gecko, pointing up at the old wall.

"Yep," said the lad, "And barracks for some of the Guard. And some are gaols. There's lots of regiments of Guard and each looks after a different bit of the city. From the flag on the roof of a tower you can tell which regiment it is. That one's the Ward, you can tell by the picture of a gate on their flags and tabards."

"There seems to be a lot of Guard?" wondered Gavin.

"More around here than usual," replied the lad, "The Royals have their training ground and horse yards just around the corner to our left, up towards the Magic College and the University on the North Wall. Plus, that tower's the main barracks for the Ward," Gecko pointed at the next tower along the Old City Wall. This tower was the largest since the gatehouse, with several turrets and a long stretch of wall on the top of which were a number of gibbets and spikes bearing rotting heads. Gavin felt a little queasy.

"That's Gibbet Tower," continued Gecko, "That's where they hang everyone sentenced to death by any of the Guard Captains. They dole out the general punishments and fines at the relevant Guard Houses, but if it's a death sentence they're brought here to be hung, or chopped, or burnt or whatever.

That's Traitors Stand up there – they put the heads on show there for a month after they've been done, as a warning to others. They used to be up there a lot longer but the Priests at the Temple of Death said it was uncivilised to treat the dead like that."

"So, the Guard Captains judge anyone caught and deal out the punishments if it's not a death sentence?" asked Gavin.

"Yep, unless the person caught is important enough to appeal to the King," As Gecko said 'important enough' he rubbed his fingers together as if to indicate importance was measured by how much the person could afford to pay. "And here we are at Lady Mary's!" he announced.

## **Chapter 6 – At Lady Mary's**

Before them, in a small plaza of its own with an alley into the Maze on the far side of it, was a large, bulging three-storey structure built in the same style as many of the buildings down towards the docks. That is, the lower two floors were evidently stone, roughly cut and mortared together, while the upper floor was timber-framed and coloured plaster with large windows and many small balconies. Above this was a wood-framed roof of gaily coloured roof tiles. Smoke rose from many chimneys and a number of the windows had their shutters open and curtains blowing in the breeze. There were a number of individuals gathered around the main entrance, mainly waiting or passing the time in idle chat. Several were street sellers, others were obviously guides like Gecko, as they wore the same coloured feather in their hats and waved a curious greeting like a gang-sign as the trio approached. Of the others in the group hanging around the doorway there were two dressed in chainmail with swords, playing dice by the wall, and one tall, elegant man with fine robes, who looked like a priest.

Gecko ignored all but his fellow guides and walked up to the door after returning their curious salutes. At the door he rang a bell and smiled around at Gavin and Sula.

"I'll wait out here," he said, "I'm not allowed in as I'm not a paying customer. No gawkers allowed, Old Mary says. She's quite particular about that."

Before they could reply Gavin felt a tug on his sleeve.

"Fear not, noble traveller," said a voice. Gavin turned to face the owner of the voice and saw it was the man he had taken to be a priest. As soon as he had Gavin's attention he launched into a stream of what was evidently a well-practiced speech, although delivered with gusto and a huge grin. "The blessings of Aphrodite be upon you, sir, and your good lady. May the yearning of your loins be sated and satisfied by the rampant, wanton peoples who lie within. Rest yourselves from your labours and happily pound your hips in merry abandonment! I am Herropolontus. When you are used and sated please ask for me. My lady Aphrodite may help with any ailment or gladly accept any thanks for your relief for the most meagre of donations." The strange man rattled a collection box under Gavin's nose and brandished a collection of small clay phalluses on leather thongs. "Charms to help your vigour perhaps? To provide you with the blessings of Wanton Aphrodite and help your fount of wonder rise to the occasion? Some ancient magic to help keep your loins girded with warmth and passion?"

"Erm," wondered Gavin pushing away the dangling obscenities. "No thanks." He was relieved to hear the door opening and he and Sula were ushered in by a demurely dressed young woman in a full length, rather shapeless robe.

"Good day sir, and lady," she said, as she led them through a lobby, the doors of which were screened by heavy velvet curtains to keep out the cold.

From there they entered into a seating area in front of some grand stairs going up to a first-floor balcony that went all around the edge of the room above them. On the balcony several women lounged, some smoking pipes, and watched Gavin and Sula with vague interest. They could hear music playing in the distance and somewhere there was laughing and shouting but it was dulled by heavy drapes and thick walls. The room was evidently an entrance hall but was a small proportion of the building as a whole.

In here the air was warm and heavily scented with a rich mix of spice and perfume. There were a number of comfortable, if a little worn, over-stuffed sofas in the room. A low table supported a bottle of wine, a pair of jugs and a dozen glasses. Gavin immediately began to sweat. Not so much because he was nervous in being in such a place, although the notion amused him, but after being out in the winter chill for so long it was strange to be somewhere so warm and close. Light was provided by many hooded lanterns and incense burners, adding more to the sumptuous heat and atmosphere of the room.

"In what way may Lady Mary's emporium and her delightful ladies be of service to you today?" asked the girl who had invited them in, whom Gavin guessed to be a hostess rather than Lady Mary herself. Her manner was civil enough but there was a slight note of boredom in her voice.

Despite himself Gavin glanced up at the ladies on the balcony, many of whom smiled back at him. They were dressed in fashionable clothes, mainly of a revealing nature, and seemed to be of a varied but uniformly attractive appearance. Gavin noted one was an elf and one looked orcish, or at least half orcish. One may have even been a man in drag, of that he wasn't sure. He surmised that Lady Mary's offered a varied menu of services and wondered what they might be. He tried not to think about what could be going on, at that very moment, behind any of the many doors he could see down the corridors discretely half-hidden behind curtains of cloth or beads. The place was well furnished, although the furnishings were quite worn. A large fireplace on one wall was the main heat source for the room.

As Gavin watched he noticed a young man, broadly built with a strong cheek bones, emerge from a doorway off the balcony and join the ladies there in watching the new arrivals.

"All tastes catered for I see," he observed.

"Whatever your heart's, or your body's, desire," replied the hostess, smiling a little too sweetly and looking far too young to be working in such a place.

"We are not here for sex," blurted Sula suddenly, evidently impatient with Gavin's manner. "We wish to speak with Lady Mary regarding the matter of an introduction."

"Really?" said the hostess, "Very well, I shall see if she's free. Can I ask what this 'introduction' entails?"

"We believe she knows an adventurer called Lance," explained Gavin, "And that he in turn knows the Baron Garibaldi. We wish to meet Lance and ask if he would introduce us to Garibaldi."

The hostess nodded. "Garibaldi is also a friend of my mother's," she announced, "And Lance is my step-brother. What business do you have with Garibaldi that you have to go about it in such a bizarre way?"

"So, you're Lady Mary's daughter?" wondered Gavin, "Our pleasure to meet you, and please excuse our manner. We are strangers to the city. In fact, I am a stranger to this world. We were led to believe by the captain of the ship that brought us here that your mother would be the best and quickest way to meet Garibaldi."

The hostess paused, apparently considering the request. "How strange you are? I suppose it makes a kind of sense. Maybe. Anyway, you have wasted your time. Garibaldi and Lance aren't even in the city at present," she announced, "I am afraid we have no idea of when they might return."

"Oh," said Gavin, a little deflated. "Is there anyone who might know his whereabouts at present or when he might be planning to be back?"

"I don't know," replied the hostess, "Adventurers rarely have schedules known to the public."

"Might your mother know?" asked Sula, "It is vital that we speak to Garibaldi. My city is in grave peril and we believe Garibaldi may be able to help us. The Goddess of the Moon came to me in a dream and told me to seek out the Lunatic of Dunromin."

The hostess looked politely sad, although a little confused by Sula's outburst. "I am sorry," she replied.

Gavin frowned and looked around the room for inspiration. It looked like they may have to stay in Dunromin and wait, or seek out Garibaldi in some other way. This looked like a dead end but he had a feeling there was something else here. Something else that seemed reluctant to share itself with him.

Just as he looked around he saw one door was ajar, which he was sure had been shut when they came in, and he caught a glimpse of a figure through it, watching him. He took a step forward but as he did so the door opened fully and an elegant lady emerged, her eyes fixed on his and a devious smile playing on her lips.

"Pardon my curiosity," murmured the newcomer, gliding silently across the thick rugs towards them, "I couldn't help overhearing your discussion." She was a middle-aged lady, although the make-up she wore might conceal older years than she would care to admit. She was not tall, but stood elegantly in clothes of the finest green silk. Her hair was dark brown and fell in rich curls down to her shoulders. She wore jewellery too, although not gaudy or showy, but twinkling in a manner that suggested great taste mixed with great worth.

"Lady Mary I presume?" wondered Gavin, smiling despite himself.

"You have the advantage, sir," replied the brothel's owner.

"I'm sorry, my name is Sea Breeze," replied Gavin with an odd kind of half-nod, half bow. Something about Lady Mary made him very uncomfortable but still fascinated. "I am a disciple of the Moon Goddess of Skull Crag. My companion here is Sula, a priestess of the same goddess."

"A pleasure to meet you both," said Lady Mary, "Skull Crag indeed? You have travelled a great distance to see Garibaldi and my stepson, Lance. Does it indeed seem like a different world here in Dunromin, as you said?"

"What? No. Erm, what?" said Gavin, pausing a moment. He didn't want to share all his personal details with these strangers but he felt strangely compelled, as if manners were taking over his brain and forcing him to divest himself of all guilty secrets. It occurred to him, even as his mouth ran away with itself, that there may be some enchantment at work here. "I am from Earth, a world very different to this one. I came here six months ago with three friends. These friends were all slain by monsters. I came to Dunromin because you speak the same language I do on Earth, you all speak what I call English. Since I got here I have learnt also that others have come from another world, and that Baron Garibaldi has been a friend to them. I want to speak to him to see if he might help me. Also, I know that powerful priests in Barnaynia have the ability to bring my friends back from the dead. I wish to have them back and I wish to go home. I am hoping Garibaldi will help me with this. And Sula wishes to speak to him too, for the reasons she said."

Sula seemed agitated by Gavin's outburst, or perhaps something else, but said nothing. Lady Mary just nodded, considering the information.

"I would suggest you try at the Temple of Olympus," Lady Mary announced at last, "Garibaldi has a room there as he is a priest of Hecate, Goddess of the Moon and Magic, and sister to Aphrodite, our own patron here. If anyone might know of Garibaldi's location it is they. Tell me, did you know of our World when you lived on Earth?"

"I don't know," said Gavin, again feeling quite convinced a completely candid approach was the only one appropriate. "I didn't know of anywhere called Dunromin. The word itself is a bit of a pun really. And I'm not known as Sea Breeze there, my Earth name is Gavin Holmes. And I am not a Disciple on Earth, or a Monk as I should be known, but a computer programmer. Would you like me to explain what a computer is?"

"You are a most honest young man, a credit to your masters," purred Lady Mary, "Are you sure you knew nothing of this land or Garibaldi when you lived on your previous World?"

"I am," said Gavin, "I have heard the name before, but not as regards an adventurer or a Moon Priest. It is an old, foreign name on Earth. A revolutionary I think. There's a biscuit named after him too." He was gabbling, he felt hot but not uncomfortable. He felt relaxed. He felt unburdened of the information, as if Lady Mary was helping him clear his mind, sort things out. He felt he could trust her.

"And your companion, Priestess Sula, is she from Earth as well?" asked Lady Mary.

"No," said Gavin before Sula could reply, "She is of the Frapp from Scull Crag. She is a novice of the order whom they have sent here as she seems to be gifted or chosen by their, er, I mean our deity. She has dreams and visions. She foretells of the doom of the city of Skull Crag. She believes Garibaldi is the only one who can help us. It is her first time out of the city."

"You are supposed to be protecting me," snarled Sula, evidently upset by Gavin's frankness. "If Garibaldi is not here then I suggest we leave. Now."

Lady Mary smiled and gestured towards the door. "Of course, my dears," she soothed, "I apologise for my curiosity. I don't wish to offend you. Lance is my adopted son and I have only a mother's need to be sure I am bringing no harm his way."

Sula frowned, unconvinced and pulled urgently on Gavin's sleeve. "It is time we should leaving."

"Peace be with you," Lady Mary said, as her daughter opened the door to allow them to leave.

Gavin felt suddenly reluctant to go but Sula, impatiently, more or less dragged him through the door and out into the street. Outside the afternoon was wearing on, the sun was starting to drop in the sky and it seemed dreadfully cold after the warmth of the brothel. The door closed behind them and Gecko stumped up with a cheeky grin on his face.

"You weren't long," he observed.

Sula ignored him and set about chastening Gavin, who felt confused by something, not entirely aware of where he was. As the cold washed over him he shivered and his thoughts started moving quicker, although he had not been aware that they had slowed.

"You had no business telling that Harlot I was a novice!" scalded Sula in Frapper, "I am not anyway! I am an Acolyte!"

"Sorry," muttered Gavin, still bothered by something. His mind swam slightly, as if he were drunk, but only inside his head, not in the way he perceived the world.

"I am beginning to wonder even more where your real loyalties lie, Sea Breeze," continued Sula, "At every turn you seem determined to ignore our mission and insist on chasing this fantasy world you claim to be from. You have no business pursuing your own ends while Skull Crag is in danger!"

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" snapped Gavin, aroused from his reverie, "Can't you bloody see that Garibaldi's the key to your mission and mine? We're on the same bloody side, you silly little girl!"

Sula reddened. "You took an oath!" she growled, "You took an oath to protect me and now you do everything in your power to betray me."

Gavin sighed, she had a point. "I think there's more going on than we expected," he confessed, "I had no intention of telling anyone all that. In fact, I have a distinct feeling I was under some sort of enchantment in there. I am pretty sure that there's more to Lady Mary than meets the eye."

Sula didn't reply but was looking suspiciously at Gavin while he thought harder about what had happened. Had he been charmed? Surely, he would have done more than just told the truth? Some kind of truth spell probably, but try as he might he could remember no such thing from the D&D rules he had read.

"So, where to now?" asked Gecko brightly, seeming to disregard his patrons' argument. Neither of them replied for a moment. Sula had stood back a little, her arms folded and she was shivering, or possibly shaking with rage. Gavin shook his head, trying to remember what had been said.

"Lady Mary has suggested we ask at the Temple of Olympus," replied Gavin, "Is that far from here?"

Gecko shrugged. "It's near the South Gate, about half a mile from here as the crow flies, best route is east from here until the Green Dragon, and then south down the back of the Monastery and the Convent."

"There's a monastery in Dunromin then?" Gavin asked as they set off.

"Oh yes," said Gecko, "It's a very private and secluded building with gardens and outhouses. Not a good place to go poking around uninvited though - very dangerous people when aroused, Monk's are."

"Oh really," muttered Sula, "You do surprise me."

## **Chapter 7 – Word of Gavin Spreads**

Shortly after the three of them had turned a corner, leaving the curious shape of the brothel behind them, a door opened to one side of the structure and the shape of Lady Mary's daughter appeared, silhouetted by the light of the candles within. She called one of the Guide Boys over, whispered him a message and gave him some silver coins. The boy took the money and the door closed again with Lady Mary's daughter safely back inside. The boy hurried off into the wintry afternoon, heading for the Bawdy Wench.

The messenger dodged in through one of the many doors to that salubrious establishment and asked a barman if a certain character was in. He was directed to a quiet lounge bar and soon located his mission.

Luke son of Ajax was sat at a table discussing business with Guthoug the Crimson and Filmesh of the Red Cloud, both priests of the Babylonian temple. Luke was a young man who looked much older than his seventeen years. He'd had a hard life on the streets for many years after his mother, the widow of a fisherman on the river, had been unable to afford to feed him. He had survived on his wits for many years, running with a street gang and acting as a messenger for Twofella over the years, along with petty theft and some burglary. The years

of sleeping rough and eating scraps had withered him early and his face bore the scars of malnutrition and many desperate street brawls.

Despite his petty criminal background Luke had high ambitions. For as long as he could remember he had been in awe of the brave and noble knights whom forayed out from Dunromin and the Baronies on missions of great daring and valour. Luke wanted, yearned, was driven, to be a Knight of the Realm. Being of the least noble birth was no hindrance, he believed, to this ambition. Many tales were told of knights and lords who had risen from modest stock and become great heroes of the land. These had, he noticed, all managed to achieve a great and wonderful task or been selected by a deity or patron for training and tutorship. Until a few years ago Luke had had no luck with either, although he still saved whatever cash he could. Despite the jeers of his friends he had fought to retain the dream that he might be able to fund for himself a membership of the Guild of Fighters. From there he had believed he might meet a suitable patron, or at least learn the sword-craft and fighting skills he would need to make his dreams come true. His savings had been small and his dream ever more distant.

It was while working as a Guide for Twofella that his luck had changed. By some chance of fate, it was Luke who had been the first person in Dunromin that Garibaldi had spoken to after returning from his first adventure in the Southern Baronies. At first Garibaldi had been just another mark but Luke had quickly realised that this stranger to the city had hidden knowledge and, Luke felt sure, was destined for greater things. Seeing his chance Luke had endeavoured to form a sort of friendship with Garibaldi, making sure he was always the Guide and Messenger Garibaldi used for his business in the city. The plan had worked. As Garibaldi had grown in fame and fortune, so by association this had rubbed off on Luke. The skinny street-rat whom Garibaldi had first employed as a guide had now grown into an able and shrewd young man.

Although Luke had offered his services for free, Garibaldi had made sure he was well looked after and good food, exercise and the surety of a secure future had helped Luke grow up broad and strong. His income was negligible, so he had not achieved his ambition of joining the fighting guild yet, but he was every day closer to realising the funds he needed to enter the Guild. He had risen in Garibaldi's service to the rank of Herald, and Garibaldi and the other Heroes had learned to trust and rely on him to take care of their city business for them while they were away. So close was this relationship now that Luke had even represented Garibaldi, whom he now called his Master, at meetings of the City Council and spoken for him at Council with the King himself.

Today, however, it was the business of another of Garibaldi's heroes that brought Luke to the Bawdy Wench. As Lady Mary's messenger found Luke his conversation with the two Priests of Babylon was drawing to a close. Although many of Garibaldi's heroes had a friend, deputy or business partner in the city, Luke was keen to keep a tight watch on the responsibilities entrusted to him. One such matter was the wine importation business run by Lance and Elegrin, another of Garibaldi's "Heroes", and Luke had become aware that there was a risk here that a significant customer was moving their account elsewhere.

He had intercepted the two Babylonian priests after he had seen them talking to a competitor, a man called Hafflebass. Luke had been concerned that the considerable amount of wine that the Babylonians bought from Lance and Elegrin may be obtained elsewhere. Their short discussion had confirmed his suspicions.

"We feel betrayed by your supply," said Guthoug, his face sour and his words edged with ill-concealed fury. The priests of Babylon were thick-set and powerful individuals, trained in combat and piety from their early years. Guthoug's face was a mess of scars from training fights, suggesting he was more of a thinker than a fighter. "We had always dealt with Lance and we believed the

merchandise he supplied us with was of the best quality. We have discovered this is not the case."

"The wine you supply is tainted," said Filmesh even more passionately, before Luke could speak. Filmesh was thinner than Guthoug but had unnaturally wide shoulders and narrow hips. His features were sharper too, with a hooked, beak-like nose and deep grey bags under his eyes. "You have smuggled filth into the very heart of our Holiest Shrines. You have insulted us and our gods."

"I don't understand," replied Luke, although he did have an inkling, and suspected Lance may have been less than honest in his dealings with the temple. "Our suppliers always give us the best vintages, the best wine?"

"Your suppliers are the problem," replied Filmesh, "If we had known Lance's wine came from the demon-spawn of Loom we would have stabbed his eyes out there and then. When we catch the deceitful little swine we will flay the very skin from his bones!"

Luke at once understood the issue. "Gentlemen-" he began but got no further.

"Save your placations street rat," snarled Guthoug, "Were we not in Dunromin, once city of the fair, I would be introducing you to your own entrails even now. Your business has smuggled desecration into one of our holiest of shrines, into the very heart of purity on the planet, and there passed demon piss into the fonts and chalices of our holy patrons."

"You will all burn for this," hissed Filmesh, a little phlegm escaping his lips and spraying onto Luke's chest. "We are not without influence in this city and this land. Even a friendship with Baron Garibaldi will not save you from the wrath of our mighty Lord Balgamesh. Garibaldi too will rue the day he crossed the high temple of Babylon!"

With this last exclamation the two priests rose and stormed from the chamber. As they did so they pushed past the arriving messenger, although Filmesh, whose rage was as cold and practical as a crocodile, noticed the urgency in the messenger's step and wondered a little. Out of Luke's sight the priest stopped and waited, wondering what might be afoot.

Luke sighed and leant back against the wall. He was quite astonished Lance had managed to get any business out of the Babylonians at all, he must be a better salesman than Luke had thought. The Babylonians were one of the most dangerous and unpredictable cults in the city, but also one of the biggest and most widely connected. The head priest was the mysterious Witch-king Balgamesh and their huge temple at the centre of the Lower Market was a hive of sinister activity, including blood sacrifice, burnings and murder.

Core to the Babylonian philosophy was the purity of the human race and the belief that all non-humans, regardless of disposition, were the incarnations of demons sent to torment, distract and corrupt all men. The priests were fervent in their beliefs that the elves, dwarves and gnomes should be cast from the city, and the recent approval by the king of trade with orcs, goblins and lizardmen had stirred them into a frenzy of activity. It was a source of great distress to them that Mordred had inherited the throne rather than his elder brother, Morev. Indeed, Morev had even courted conversion to the Babylonian doctrine after his warrior mentality had been inspired by their blood-thirsty policies on the fate of all non-humans. When news had reached the city of Morev's death some twenty years ago, the plans of the Babylonian temple had felt his loss deeply. Mordred was quite the opposite of his brother, seeing the other races not as potential enemies but rather potential customers. When Mordred had married Olana Half-elven even the most dogmatic proponents of the Babylonian Racial Purity had realised they were fighting a losing battle.

The Babylonians had merely changed tack at that point however, rather than giving up completely. As more and more non-human trade came into the city business became more competitive for the traditional human tradesmen. Frustrated merchants resenting having to work harder for their money were increasingly seeking instead to join the Babylonians in their calls for the humanoids, and even the demi-humans who had been there for centuries, to be ejected from the city.

What Lance had evidently not told his customers was that all his wine was sourced from elven suppliers, either in the warmer eastern areas of the Land of the Young or the forests of Loom beyond the Blue Mountains. Elegrin himself was an elf and his business partnership with Lance must have been rather tricky to keep from the Babylonians. Since blood sacrifice was outlawed in Dunromin, at least to a certain extent, the Babylonians had used red wine in their ceremonies for many years. The idea that elven wine had been supplied to them by Lance actually amused Luke to a certain extent, although the parting comments of the priests did worry him. He knew well that the Babylonians did not make idle threats. He resolved to get home to their wine importation business immediately. Neither Elegrin nor Lance was there, true, but he might be able to figure out a way to get a message to them. He was distracted by the arrival of the messenger.

"I come from Lady Mary," said the boy, "There is a new Earther in the city, one called Sea Breeze who is a monk. He travels with a young priestess from Skull Crag. They seek Garibaldi. Lady Mary has sent them to the Temple of Olympus to enquire for Garibaldi there." The message was delivered as a careful recital in a low voice that was difficult to eavesdrop. The use of messengers was common enough in Dunromin but rarely was it a verbal message only, due to the errors that might creep into a complex message. Only when secrecy was important was no note written. Luke appreciated immediately the importance of the message – no more Earthers were expected by Garibaldi, this new arrival may be a fake, in which case their purpose must be ascertained.

Luke gave the boy a gold coin, a generous reward, and hurried from the inn out into the growing gloom of dusk. As he went he didn't see Filmesh waiting in a shadowy corridor. The priest had keen ears and could read lips. He too realised the significance of this news.

## **Chapter 8 – At the Temple of Olympus**

Gecko led Luke and Sula through the streets towards the south side of the city. Now out of the warm brothel they realised how cold the air was getting. The sky was heavy with cloud and as dusk approached they could see the shapes of ice starting to form in the puddles in the gutters. The sky had covered over from the west and promised snow which reminded Gavin that they had yet to secure any accommodation.

He asked Gecko about this as they walked and was reassured that many inns would have rooms free at this time of the year – fewer merchants and farmers were travelling to the city with produce in the midst of winter, especially through the south gate which was closest to the Olympian Temple.

Gavin noted as well that as the afternoon turned to evening the character of the people in the street was changing. The street sellers were still there, now offering hot potatoes and roasted nuts from griddles, or strange over-cooked meats that smelt vaguely enticing but unnatural. Fewer tradesmen and fewer still carts passed them, however, and while hardly any orcs and goblins remained, more elves were abroad, their delicate forms drifting through the twilight like ghosts in garments of the pastel shades of winter.

The trio came to the Temple of Olympus through the northern of two entrances, which led them into a wide courtyard lined with a lawn and ornamental

trees, currently naked of any foliage. The whole temple was enclosed by a white marble wall of great height and inside where there was a garden, smooth flags of white marble marking out paths and processions, statues and even a pond. The buildings were taller than most in Dunromin and built to a much higher quality of marble and well-dressed stone. The purpose of the buildings appeared to be two-fold in that they were all temples and shrines to one deity of the Olympian pantheon or other, but that many side chambers existed for accommodation of the temple staff and servants as well.

At the gate some beggars still sat with their bowls, watching the passers-by hoping for a coin to help them survive the cold night ahead. They weren't allowed into the compound by the temple guards, who were tall men in brilliant white tunics, golden breastplates and plumed helms. These guards carried huge round shields and broad-headed spears with short stabbing swords hung at their belts. There were two such guards at each gate and two at the entrances to the three main temples. They made no attempt to stop Luke and Sula entering but watched Gecko closely as he passed.

Gecko led them to the largest structure in the compound, an acropolis over two hundred feet broad and fronted with a row of pillars eight feet thick and forty feet high. The gables of the sloped roof were decorated with marble statues of gods and heroes and red banners hung down the walls, wafting majestically in the gentle breeze. As the trio walked through the entry way they found themselves in the main altar room of Zeus. It was on its own about a third of the volume of the building and was wreathed in smoke laden with strong incense. Light was sparse, provided by four large, flickering braziers that scattered fearful shadows around the periphery of the great chamber.

There were quite a few individuals in the room, mostly prostrate before an altar bearing a massive depiction of the god in marble painted with pure gold and decorated in jade. The figure of Zeus was sat erect in a vast chair, his skin golden, his hair black. Across his lap lay a white lightning rod and a swan rested on his left shoulder. Around his feet were trays and plates bearing offerings, on each a little pile of ashes where the paper prayer of the donator had been ceremoniously burnt.

All around the edges of the vast chamber hung more heavy red drapes, concealing several iron-bound wooden doors, mostly closed. Gecko led them to one of the doors that was open to the right and into a short, wide room half the height of the building. This room was very dark as it was lit only by a single candle that burned with a soft blue flame. The solitary, still light cast a dim glow on a white stone disc on the far wall, into which was carved the figure of a beautiful woman, her face wreathed in shadow, her hands clasping one a dagger, the other a bunch of grapes. It was a common depiction of the moon goddess known to the Olympians as Hecate, but known to Sula and Sea Breeze simply as 'Our Lady'.

Sula and Gavin debased themselves instinctively before the familiar image, although the style of the statue and the other decorations were unfamiliar. There were many lunar Deities in the world but evidently Skull Crag and the Dunromin Temple of Olympus shared the same perception of their own.

After they had completed their main ritual, they were joined from the shadows by a slim woman of advanced years. She wore a light blue dress with a grey cotton wrap. About her head was a silver construction that resembled the moon, and her face was obscured slightly by a white veil of lace.

"Welcome to the Shrine of Hecate, mistress of night and moon," said the priestess.

"Thank-you," said Gavin, bowing his head slightly, "It is a pleasure to see a familiar sight in a strange city. My name is Sea Breeze."

"I am Sula of Our Lady," Sula introduced herself, "I am a Shadow Blade of the Temple of the Moon in Skull Crag. I am here on a mission from Our Lady to seek out the one they call the Lunatic."

"There are many Lunatics in the Land of the Young," replied the Priestess, "Indeed, I am one of the oldest, though I know nothing of the temples of Skull Crag."

"The one we seek is called Garibaldi," said Gavin, remembering that all devotees of the Moon Goddess were called Lunatics. It still amused him a little. "Baron Garibaldi."

The priestess nodded. "He is well known to us," she replied, "May I ask why you seek him?"

"He will help to save our city from disaster," replied Sula, "Our Lady spoke to me in a dream and bade me seek him here for this purpose."

The priestess seemed momentarily confused by this, the shadow of disbelief flashed across her face. Then, after a short pause, she smiled. She stepped to one side and gestured them to walk into the shadows. As Gavin looked he could see part of the darkness seemed darker and realised there was a doorway there. Sula walked into the opening and pulled aside a curtain that let them into a comfortable living area, furnished with soft benches, chairs, low tables and desks. This area was also lit poorly by several candles but there were three other women here, reading or writing at the desks but dressed like the priestess they had already met.

As they entered the priestess that had brought them motioned them to sit and went over to speak to one of the others. This second priestess turned to look at them and then nodded. She was much younger than the first priestess but there was a definite air of leadership about her, the gentle lines of her face were strong and elegant, her eyes clear and commanding. As she stood Gavin saw she was painfully thin, although the way the muscles knotted on her body suggested she was far from weak.

"I am Meleera," the new priestess introduced herself, "I am head Priestess of Hecate in Dunromin and I bid you welcome, Sula and Sea Breeze, to our shrine."

"Thank-you, highness," replied Gavin and Sula together, as was the appropriate response.

"I understand you seek Lord High Priest of Hecate, the Baron Garibaldi?" continued Meleera.

"We are on a mission of the holiest undertaking," replied Sula, "From Our Lady herself, she bade me seek him out in a dream. We have been informed we might find him here. He is a High Priest of Our Lady?"

"Garibaldi is one of our most respected Warrior Priests," replied Meleera, "He is a powerful adventurer and some would say saviour of the city. He is a good friend to us all here and we are very loyal to his comradeship. Pray tell how you come to know of him?"

"I was told to seek the Lunatic of Dunromin," repeated Sula, "Our Lady came to me in a dream amidst the shapes of the moon. She told me to seek out the Lunatic of Dunromin so we came here. Sea Breeze is supposed to be my protector and servant. Our enquiries have led us to believe this Lunatic of Dunromin to be Garibaldi, and have led us here. Is Garibaldi present at the temple and may we speak with him?"

Meleera shook her head. "Lord High Priest, the Baron Garibaldi is not in the city," she sighed, "He may be at his own temple or castle in the Barony of Garibaldi on the south borderlands, or he may be adventuring away in the Wild Lands or the mountains."

"He could be anywhere then?" sighed Gavin.

Meleera nodded. "His castle was attacked some time ago by six ancient dragons," said Meleera, "Garibaldi and his Heroes slew them and then went to seek their horde, high in the western Hellmarch Mountains. I believe they have found it but it was already taken by others. What has happened since then we do not know for certain. It was a perilous path and we have felt that death may have claimed some of the Heroes. We know Baron Garibaldi yet lives though."

"Six ancient dragons," Gavin whistled softly, "Garibaldi and his Heroes must be a pretty heavy operator to take them down?"

Meleera seemed momentarily confused by Gavin's turn of phrase but then ignored it. "Baron Garibaldi, Lord High Priest of Hecate and Prince of the Murmur is one of the most powerful heroes of the land," replied Meleera, "It is our honour to have him guard our land's borders and watch over our temple here."

"Then we must seek him first at his seat in his barony," decided Sula, "How far is it from here?"

Meleera considered the question. "It is a long way and there are many routes. The most direct is through the Baronies of the south and west, but it is complicated and you would need a guide. It would still take at least ten days riding to get there. The Great West Road is easier to follow. Go west to Karan and then take the border road south past the Darkwood and to Baron Garibaldi by the new trade routes, the Wine Road. It's simpler and probably safer that way, for the most part, but it's a good fifteen days in the saddle at least."

"We have a guide," said Sula, meaning Gecko.

"Your boy may know the city but he will not know the baronies beyond the city walls," replied Meleera, evidently knowing about Gecko waiting back at the temple entrance. "There are guides to be hired if you ask at the City Gates. Go to the South Gate if you wish to go the shorter route, the West Gate for the longer, surer road."

"Thank-you," said Gavin, "You have been most helpful. I don't think we could start out tonight so could you advise us of a warm place to stay the night?"

"All our beds here are full, else we would be delighted to accommodate you here," said Meleera, "But if you ask your boy to take you to the Green Dragon or the Traveller's Respite you will find good rooms there at a reasonable rate. If you choose the Traveller's Respite, which is by the South Gate, tell them I sent you and they will be able to advise you on a reliable guide for your journey. Horses you may buy in the morning from the Pasture near the East Gate, just over the back wall of our Temple here, or from the many horse traders in Shanty Town outside the West Gate."

"It is dark already," observed Sula, "I have not heard the Curfew Bell. Are we allowed to walk outside?"

Meleera looked confused but Gavin realised immediately what Sula meant, the same though having occurred to him but being dismissed.

"In Skull Crag it is considered Bad Manners to be out after Curfew," explained Gavin, "It is not permitted except for those on Good Business, such as Moon Cultists on a Full Moon. No one else is allowed in the streets after dark. I suspect this isn't the case in Dunromin?"

Meleera laughed a little. "Dear me no, we are quite free to go about our business at any time of day or night," she explained, "Although I suspect the Guard might quite prefer your customs."

"People are allowed out at night?" wondered Sula, looking a little angry at the idea. Such a thing would be very Bad Manners in Skull Crag, a thing unthinkable. "But they might do anything and be hidden in the darkness!"

"And they do!" replied Meleera, with a chuckle. "I think such a law might indeed lessen the peril of the night in the city but I also suspect that business could not cope with the change."

"Business?" Sula almost squawked in shock, "You mean people do business after dark? By the light of the Moon, blessed are her people?"

Meleera nodded. "In Dunromin business is almost a cult in itself. People do business whenever and where-ever they can. Many shops will stay open late on certain days. The inns and bars do most of their business after dark. In fact, I am sure there are some businesses that only open at night! All the city knows that the doors of the Bawdy Wench and the Black Magic Guild are never closed to those with gold to spend."

While Sula marvelled at this unholy revelation, Meleera called for food to be brought. Sula's mind was spinning, her confusion at the differences in Dunromin was growing and she obviously felt uncomfortable with such Rude behaviour. Skull Crag was managed on a completely different level of state interference. Everything was governed by the Manners and to be Rude was unthinkable. Gavin too, in the mind of Sea Breeze, also felt the tug of discomfort at the changes, but as Gavin he was far more familiar and comfortable with the more 21<sup>st</sup> century British attitudes to personal freedom evident in Dunromin.

Warm food and some weak wine were brought for them and they enjoyed a simple meal with the priestesses. Gavin attempted to glean some more information from them regarding Garibaldi but they changed the subject to their journey whenever he asked. He guessed that they were reluctant to tell them too much detail in case the purpose of their errand was not as innocent as they suggested, but he didn't mind that so much. He realised that, in game terms, as a High Priest Garibaldi must be a high-level cleric and this cheered him – it meant Garibaldi himself might be able to bring Gavin's fallen friends back to life.

They learned much of the lands they would be travelling through over the course of the meal and elected to get a guide and travel the shorter route after some consideration. They learned from Meleera that the granite tor of Dunromin was sited in the middle of a wide, flat and fertile valley that marked the ancient flood-plain of the River Greyflood. The Baronies within the valley were very civilised and filled with farms, villages, towns and other habitations. Between these population centres were woods and forests, some of those inhabited as well.

Further upstream southwards the lands continued much the same until the river turned west near the Blue Mountains. All this land was as fertile and a well populated as the lower valley. Both areas were a major source of food and trade goods to the city and beyond, these good coming downstream from the south or along the great West Road. West of the Greyflood the land rose to gentle downs, cold in winter and warm in summer. As one went west these undulations of the terrain became more and more marked until the area was a jagged blend of steep valleys and low hills, all over-grown with forests and woodland. There were many names for this landscape and there were settlements here too, although fewer and generally poorer than on the plain. Even further west one almost reached the borderlands, but before then there was a little clump of civilisation sometimes called the Border Baronies.

The land in this area was gentler again, and dotted with more farms and woodland. The southern border of this area was the Horn Mountains, as the Blue Mountains came to be known west beyond the areas civilised and inhabited by Dwarves. It was here that Sula and Gavin would find the Barony of Garibaldi, based around two towns called Border Creek and Troll Bridge. Between the civilised lands and the Horn Mountains was Burning Wood, so named because over a quarter of the trees were the ancient and tall Haflar tree, or Red Elder, whose leaves were not green but deep brown and even appeared red in the

distance. These trees grew nowhere else and were once prized for the straightness of their limbs. But pine was found to be a superior timber and Burning Wood was no longer tended by woodsmen.

Many of the Border Baronies had been destroyed in the War of the Ring, their populations killed or driven off, their rulers slain. It was tradition that a new Baron from another family could not be appointed for a year and a day after the death of the last, to give family a chance to come forward to inherit. For half a dozen of the furthest baronies no heirs were known and no successor had yet been appointed by the king. These Baronies were being managed by Stewards, appointed by the king, but these men, however capable, were not barons and the power of the throne in these parts was waning. Only the furthest westerly one, the Barony of Garibaldi, remained properly run, providing a peninsula of civilisation. It was almost surrounded by wilderness, pushing out towards the Horn Mountains to the south, with Burning Wood to the southeast, the borderlands to the southwest, and the mysteries of Darkwood to the west. Only to the north and northeast lay friendly farmed lands of the surviving Baronies of Karan and the March Barons.

Gavin and Sula discovered that the quickest overland route towards Baron Garibaldi was to pick the trade-routes to the farmlands to the southwest of Dunromin. They would travel these lands as they rose steadily towards their destination, sleeping in the various villages and towns that they passed through. Gavin discovered that any collection of houses or farms could be termed a village, a town was the capital of a Barony and contained the baron's castle. A city needed to have a king or a prince ruling it, and therefore there were only two cities in the Land of the Young; Dunromin and Karan. Karan being a city on the edge of the borderlands at the end of the Great West Road, ruled by King Mordred's cousin, Prince Garan of Karan.

The route that was described to them was complex and Meleera wasn't sure of much of it. She listed the names of the Baronies she could remember, but then corrected herself, reconsidered, started again, and then gave up.

"You will need to use local guides as you progress I am sure," she confessed, "Or a map, if you can afford one detailed enough and small enough to carry. Guides will be cheaper."

After their meal Sula and Gavin thanked the priestesses and the first priestess they had met lead them back out into the night air. It was dark now but the snow that threatened had yet to fall. Their breath fogged heavily in front of them and the night looked lonely and forbidding after the warmth of the temple. Out on the streets, lamps were hung from the front of those businesses that could afford such generosity, but many of the streets this far from the affluent Old City were silent and dark.

Gecko was waiting for them at the entrance to the Temple of Zeus, stamping his feet against the cold and hugging himself. Gavin was surprised to see Sula had kept some bread, meat and a little wine along for him, for which he was very grateful. Gecko led them towards the inn called the Traveller's Respite as he ate. As they walked he also informed them this inn was not far to the west, close to the South Gate as Meleera had told them. They could make out where the twin towers of the South Gate were from the lamps burning near the sentry posts on the wall top, but they could see no detail in the darkness.

They did not notice as they left the Olympian Temple that a figure emerged from the shadows about the trees in the plaza of the temple and fell into step a short distance behind them as they walked. This figure was dressed in a drab cloak, pulled tight against the cold, and dogged their footsteps as far as the inn. The figure watched them taking rooms through a small window by the door, and then headed back to the temple.

## Chapter 9 – Retiring to the Inn

The Traveller's Respite was a well kept, wide building with three floors. Only the ground floor was stone with the rest made of half-timber with thick wattle and daub. There were lots of windows and the lower eaves, where the slightly wider first floor overlapped the ground floor, were hung with flower baskets, planted with heather for the winter.

Inside the place was clean and tidy to an extent that seemed unnatural in such an old city. The air smelt of cloves, pipe smoke, cooking and beer, and the customers who crowded the bar spaces looked like merchants and shop keepers from the surrounding area. There didn't seem to be many elves or dwarves, if any, and although several people were dressed like travellers they didn't look like they had come far.

Gecko was told to wait outside by a stern looking woman behind the bar, and Gavin's worst suspicions seemed to be proved by the distrustful looks she gave him and Sula. Things changed the instant they said Meleera had sent them, however. The landlady, it seemed, was very keen to keep religious types happy and quickly offered Gavin and Sula rooms on the first floor at what she said was a discounted rate. She also confirmed that she could put them in touch with a guide that could probably get them some way to where they needed to go, although she seemed unsure of how far nor which direction the towns of Border Creek and Troll Bridge were.

After the long day, all the walking and the cold Gavin soon found himself yawning in the warmth of the fire. Four gold a night, including breakfast, sounded a little steep but he could find no enthusiasm in himself to argue and offered the coins up. He and Sula were then told the rooms would be ready shortly and were offered a mug of beer or a glass of wine while they waited. Gavin accepted a beer while Sula asked for a mug of milk, and then they found a spare stall near the fire to sit and wait.

Sula seemed less agitated than she had been but the scowl she had worn all day was still there. She ate slowly, after a muttered prayer of thanks and watched Gavin while she chewed.

"I have a question," she announced after a while, "On the docks, you looked out at the city and smiled. Then you said 'This is more like it'; what did you mean?"

Gavin realised he had to be careful. Sula had already explained how unhappy she was with his tales of Earth and the general demeanour he had as regards the urgency of her mission compared to his own ambitions.

"A big city," Gavin replied, "Not travelling slowly up the river, through endless villages and fields. It's nice to see more people. Nice to experience new things."

Sula made a grunting noise that seemed to express dissatisfaction for this opinion. "The Gritterscram here have no Manners. So many are really Rude. Most of the others as well."

The Gritterscram were the working classes of Skull Crag, it was a generic term referring to everyone not working directly for the Priesthood. Sula and Gavin belonged to the Libitzinker, which meant Priesthood but included everyone working for the government – religious or military. Above these were the Ulfblest; the military and religious leadership. Her reference to Manners was due to her upbringing in Scull Crag. The Manners were the code of laws and ethics that everyone in that land was expected to live their life by. Most of these rules were common sense and based on mutual respect, but some were very odd. If you didn't follow the rules and were Rude lots of bad things happened to you. Certainly, persistently Rude people were not tolerated and those among the

Libitzinker who were Rude met a very mysterious end in a vast, abandoned building in the centre of the city.

"People are different here," explained Gavin, "They live their life by a different set of Rules."

Sula grimaced at this, as if the idea of a different set of Rules was a disgusting concept. "I find it very unsettling."

"I know what you mean," Gavin tried to reassure her, "Meeting people with such a different value system to you is very strange. Finding common ground to share is tricky, but we are all the same underneath. We all want peace and friendship, we all want to get along with each other."

"I realise this," replied Sula, "So I forgive them their Rudeness. As you say, they know no better. But it is a strain. It is so hard to not take offense. So hard to realise that they are not being disrespectful on purpose, only out of ignorance of the correct way of doing things."

"Being Correct is a relative thing," replied Gavin, "What is correct for you may not be correct for them."

"Yes," she sighed, "As I said, they do not know they are wrong. They are ignorant of the proper way to behave. They have yet to learn what it is to be civilised. But it would take too long and be too much of a distraction from our mission for me to explain to them how they should be doing things."

"All right," said Gavin, deciding to leave it at that. Perhaps Sula might become more tolerant with time and exposure to different cultures. It certainly must be a strain to be confronted with so much freedom of choice and after the strict and sheltered upbringing she had experienced.

"But you must watch yourself too," she chastised him, "I have seen you being Rude already. We must demonstrate the correct behaviour, we cannot forget our Manners, no matter what the barbarity of the society we find ourselves in."

Gavin felt angry at this but realised arguing with her would only make things worse. He had a mission to do for her, he had given his word, and he did feel he owed her some loyalty. At least until some way of getting back to Earth became apparent.

"If my behaviour has offended you, I apologise," he said, trying to sound sincere.

"I appreciate your apology," she replied, although her tone was patronising, like she was explaining to a child how they needed to learn to behave. "Although the Ulfblestgver in Skull Crag may not be so forgiving. You need to mend your ways, Sea Breeze."

Gavin bit his tongue and nodded. The Ulfblestgver were the ruling Priest-elite of Skull Crag, the leaders of the Ulfblest, ruling every one of the Frapp, as the people of that land called themselves, Gritterscram and Libitzinker alike, with inflexible rules and judgements. It was Gavin's intention never to return to Skull Crag but he was not one to burn bridges. He returned his attention to his drink.

It was hard to tell what the time was but Gavin suspected it was gone eight. The people in the bar seemed to be leaving, evidently only in the inn to relax for a while after work, before heading home to their families. It seemed a strangely modern idea for a city like this, but then Gavin had only experienced Skull Crag which had no inns and little fun. The murmur of talking and the occasional burst of laughter slowly lowered in volume as the evening wore on. The inn had several sitting and eating areas of different styles and, for one reason or another, the pair soon found themselves alone in the small area they were in. This suited them well, although Gavin felt more inclined to doze than discuss their day and plans for tomorrow. Sula however, was insistent.

"Ten days ride," she complained, "At least! I have never ridden a horse in my life! How long would it take to walk it? Or could we afford a carriage, or a cart even?"

Gavin was also aware he had no real skill with a horse although he did at least know how to stay in the saddle on one. Suddenly, his training in meditation, the correct way to drink tea, flower arranging and the flora and fauna of the lands around Scull Crag seemed less than useful.

"And how do we get a horse?" Sula continued, apparently having rejected her other ideas without discussion. "I have no idea what to look for in such an animal. I couldn't tell a donkey from a warhorse. Ten days! It would be twice that to walk I suppose?"

"Probably," muttered Gavin.

"And we would need a new guide," considered Sula, "Well, at least the bar lady seems to be able to help us there if Gecko is of no further use to us I suppose."

"Gecko!" realised Gavin, and got up. He walked over to the door, realising their guide would be out there freezing. He opened the door and peered out into the darkness. There was no sign of the lad and he stepped out to look around.

Snow was starting to flurry, at first a few flakes and then heavier clouds were sinking slowly down all around him, limiting how far he could see. The streets were rapidly emptying of people, the occasional dark, huddled figures flitted through the flakes and vanished into the growing storm.

"Gecko?" called Gavin, "Are you out there?"

"I have sent your guide home," said a voice beside Gavin, making him jump and instinctively stiffen into a fighting stance. "You will not need him tonight. I was just on my way in to introduce myself."

Through the white blur of the snow fall Gavin saw a human of about his own height but broader built. In the shadows he could see no more detail but a soft grey cloak upon which snowflakes were starting to settle.

"Who are you?" asked Gavin.

"I mean you no harm," replied the stranger, his voice calm but his hands and face remained hidden under the cloak. "My name is Luke son of Ajax. You will not have heard of me but I can be of great use to you. Come, let's go back inside and continue our discussion in the warmth."

Vaguely reassured by the stranger's gentle manner and suggestion to move back to a better lit, safer place, Gavin followed him back into the inn and they joined Sula by the fire. Sula seemed a little angered by the appearance of the stranger and Gavin noticed her hand move to grip the hilt of one of her fighting knives.

"Good evening, Priestess Sula," said Luke, bowing reverently, "I am Luke son of Ajax. Please forgive my appearance, it is shaping up to be an unpleasant night outside."

"Good evening," replied Sula, without relaxing her grip on the knife.

"I have heard much of your activities today," continued Luke, "I must apologise for not making myself known to you sooner."

Now Gavin could see Luke in the firelight he saw that the man was barely more than a teenager but he seemed careworn and older, evidently the product of a harsh life. His hair was thick and dark about a broad, handsome face that bore some scarring across the side of the brow. His eyes were dark brown and sparkled in the firelight, his lips smiled in a way that might have been delight or deviousness. His nose, while not obviously broken, was neither naturally straight and his lips still bore a teenager fluff, evidently never shaven. As he removed his cape and gloves Gavin noticed he wore heavy, black cotton shirt and trousers,

with a black belt of the armoured variety with hooks for weapons and pouches. None of these hooks were occupied apart from a single money pouch and a short sword in a plain sheath. Gavin also noticed his hands were worn and cracked from hard labour in the cold.

"What is your business then, Luke son of Ajax?" asked Gavin. He was guessing this man was a thief, or at least had trained as one, but Gavin didn't feel threatened, as yet, by his manner.

"I have the honour of working for Baron Garibaldi," replied Luke, "I represent his interests in the city while he is away and I act as his Herald on the City Counsel."

"Really?" wondered Gavin. This seemed a little too convenient. For a moment he feared for Gecko and wondered what this man might have really done with him.

"We are looking for your master," announced Sula, apparently taking the stranger's words at face value.

"Indeed," said Luke, "Lady Mary told me you had been to see her. And I have spoken to the Priestess Meleera at the Shrine of Hecate, the Shadow of the Moon. She knows me and trusts me."

Sula didn't respond to this. Gavin guessed her trust was only skin deep and was reassured she wasn't as naïve as she sometimes appeared.

"Where is your master?" asked Gavin.

"In his home in the Barony of Garibaldi, I believe," replied Luke, "But let us make ourselves comfortable first, before we get down to business." He turned at this and waved over a serving girl, "A bottle of wine please, with three glasses. Something elven please, from Loom if you have such?"

The maid curtsied and hurried off.

"This is poor weather to see our wonderful city for the first time," said Luke, "It rarely snows in Dunromin this late in the winter. We barely get a dusting normally but tonight it is colder than any I can remember."

"Perhaps some mage is practicing his magic?" wondered Gavin, Luke laughed a little in response.

"Yes perhaps, or there's some wily druids hereabouts as well," he agreed, "There's no knowing what those madmen might get up to next. They seem to spend too much of their time out of their minds on whatever fungus they smoke."

The maid returned with three thick, inelegant but functional glasses and a delicate bottle made of soft green glass and stoppered with wax. Luke took the bottle, opened it with a practiced movement and filled the three glasses, he then raised his own in a toast.

"Allow me to formally welcome you to the fair city of Dunromin," he announced with a flourish, "Capital of the Land of the Young and greatest city in the World! May your stay here be a prosperous and happy one." He paused while they raised their own glasses in return and then they all clinked them together.

"Thank you," said Sula, risking a little sip.

Luke took a delicate sniff at his own, frowned and took a draught. He swilled it in his mouth a little and then swallowed, nodding.

"Loomish indeed, although I couldn't place it myself. Probably from one of the coastal wineries," Luke muttered, "Not the best but it will suffice. Certainly, better than anything I'd expected to find in this place."

"Like your wine, do you?" wondered Gavin, avoiding sipping any but returning to his beer.

"Two of Garibaldi's heroes, Lance and Elegrin, run their own wine merchanting business," replied Luke, "I look after that too, when they're all away, as they are now. I've got to be quite an expert on elven wines and most of the vineyards in the east, but I'm not what you might call a connoisseur. Not like Elegrin, if you know what I mean?" Luke grinned.

"Not really," replied Gavin, "I don't know any of these people you mentioned."

"Of course," Luke nodded, "But you will know Sir Percival, Blacklight, Pogue Mahone and the others from Earth?"

"I'm afraid not," said Gavin, "I've not heard of any of them."

"Kretos then? Qugg or Mongrol?" Gavin shook his head again.

Luke frowned, "But surely you know them from Earth?" he wondered.

"Nope," said Gavin, "I've never met any of the ones you've mentioned."

Luke looked puzzled. "Pardon me for being blunt, but Lady Mary said you claimed to be from Earth?"

"I am," said Gavin, "Are you?"

Luke looked astonished, "No I am not, and I would have thought someone from Earth would know that? I would certainly have thought you'd know the others who have come here?"

"Earth's a big place," said Gavin, "And I might know them but I don't recognise the names you have mentioned. They might go by different names on Earth but then I would have no idea if I knew them or not."

Luke remained silent for a short while. His open approach may not have been so wise after all. His experience of Earthers was that they all knew of Garibaldi, indeed, they all recognised his name immediately. Luke was immediately suspicious of Gavin.

"If you are from Earth, tell me a little about it?" Luke demanded.

"I think perhaps we'd like to know a little more about you first," said Gavin, "I don't want to appear ungrateful, but your manner has been a bit 'in your face', don't you think?"

Luke frowned. There was certainly something strange about Gavin but it was hard to say if it was other-worldly. Indeed, the young lady seemed odder than Gavin but then she did say that she was from Skull Crag and they were all an odd bunch down there, Luke had heard. The other Earthers he had met seemed glad to meet Luke when he had been the first to welcome them to Dunromin, although he had been told their names in advance by Garibaldi which reassured them all. Garibaldi had known they were coming and had told Luke who to look for. And they had known Garibaldi, or at least known of him. But Luke had not been warned of any more arrivals and there certainly hadn't been any for at least six months.

"Other than asking someone here who I am I don't really have any way to identify myself," replied Luke cautiously and then looked around. "And even then, I am not so well known on this side of the city."

"Tell us a little of Garibaldi then?" asked Gavin, "His ways perhaps, something that sets him apart?"

Luke considered this. "He has the Sight," Luke declared at last, "He has dreams of things that come to pass. It is the secret of his success, a gift of the Moon he says. He has memories from dreams of how places are that he has never been to before. He knew his way into and around many monsters' lairs. He knew how to slay many terrible beasts and he has become a hero of the city for it. He is famed for his power and wisdom."

"Indeed?" muttered Gavin, thinking back to his own adventure with the goblins. Their lair had been exactly as he had designed it in his D&D game back on Earth. He had found all the treasure and avoided all the traps. It had been the only adventure he had written for his new game world but suppose Garibaldi had been a Dungeon Master on earth? Suppose he had written many adventures and had merely wandered around the richest ones gathering the loot and picking up all the best magic items? It would be very easy to get pretty powerful very quickly if you had that kind of information to hand. But that supposed that Garibaldi was from Earth as well, and what Luke was saying, and everything they had been told so far, didn't suggest this.

"And now it is your turn," said Luke, "Tell me something of your world. I have listened to the other Earth-people talking and I think I know a little of what they speak."

"OK," considered Gavin, "Where to begin? Earth is very like this world, but different as well. We have the same kinds of trees and grasses, plants and flowers in the main. We have the same animals, goats, cows dogs and such, but we only have humans, none of the other races. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. In the summer it goes nearly over your head. The country I come from on Earth is called England. The language you call Common we call English. England is a very technological society, with machines doing the work of many. There is no magic there. At least, none that I have come across besides conjuring tricks and illusions. But the technology we have you might think of as magic."

He paused because Sula had snorted in contempt. Gavin glanced across at her but she was looking at the wine glass in front of her, which was still only missing one small sip. Gavin glanced back and met Luke's eyes. The teenager was watching Gavin closely, taking in his words, observing the way he spoke. He was evidently trying to work out how he might try and catch Gavin out. Gavin wondered how he might convince this young man he was telling the truth. But then again, did he need to? There was too much he didn't know, too much he couldn't check.

"The other Earthers have mentioned England before," Luke nodded, "One said he worked as a merchant on Earth, selling things. Another was a baker. What did you do there?"

"I worked with devices called computers," replied Gavin, "They are mechanical thinking machines that run on electricity. I program them to do useful tasks, that is I set them up to do what people want them to do."

"I have heard mention of these things," nodded Luke, "And what do you know of Barnaynia?"

Gavin sighed. Since he didn't know what the others said he saw no reason to lie. What did it matter if he wasn't believed. "It's a game," he replied, "The whole world is just somewhere we made up. Something we imagined. It's all part of a game called Dungeons and Dragons. D&D for short."

A light seemed to come on in Luke's mind. "D&D," he repeated, "A game. They have mentioned this often. Perhaps I will believe that you are what you say you are."

"Good," sighed Gavin, although it proved nothing really. He decided he might as well play along and see where it got him. "Can you help us get to the Barony of Garibaldi? We have been told it is a ten-day ride."

"It is," confirmed Luke, "And that's with a good horse and fair weather. But the heroes use magic to travel there and back in a few minutes. Elegrin and Garibaldi do it often. Garibaldi uses his powers to bring his friends and heroes with him."

Gavin guessed these were Teleport spells. Clerics had an equivalent called Word of Recall. It would certainly make living in the Barony less remote.

"How powerful is Garibaldi?" asked Gavin.

"I am not sure why you would ask such a question," grinned Luke, "But never mind, it is no great secret. He is a great holy man and a warrior. He serves Hecate of the Moon, as do I, and outranks even Meleera. But his greatest power is in magic."

"So, a Magic-user-Cleric then?" asked Gavin.

"He is also a great swordsman," said Luke, "One of the best in the land."

"Fighter, magic-user, cleric," pondered Gavin, "Useful mix." Luke didn't react to this statement. The terminology was pure D&D but Gavin had heard all the terms used in his months here as well. They were common terms of reference, as common as calling a man who worked with lead pipes a plumber. "And is he from Earth as well?" Gavin wondered.

Luke stopped, his glass halfway to his mouth. "You don't know?"

Gavin shook his head. "The captain of the ship that brought us here said he was from the far west, but I think he perhaps comes from somewhere stranger than that. Is he from Earth?"

"No," said Luke, "Your captain was correct. He is the last of the Murmur, a magical people from the far west, from the islands of the Twilight Sea. They were blessed by the Moon but fell foul of Kzenzakai a thousand years ago."

"I thought the War of the Ring was a recent thing?" asked Sula, "How is it this Kzenzakai was so old?"

"Fell creatures like Kzenzakai don't die of old age," replied Luke, smiling and smug. "Some say the whole war was just Kzenzakai hunting Garibaldi down. The last of his hated enemy. But we know that isn't the case. Coincidence."

"So, what was he after?" asked Gavin.

"The Ring!" exclaimed Luke, "Why do you think it was called the War of the Ring? The Mighty Wunn forged the ring thousands of years ago and invested it with great powers of unlife. Kzenzakai slew Wunn and took the ring for himself. Used its power to build himself an army and an empire in the west. Then it was cut from Kzenzakai's finger in the Paladin Wars and thought lost. It was found again and," Luke sat back. "Well, I'm not sure about the rest. I think someone found it, someone from Dunromin, so he came here looking for it, started the war to reclaim it. He didn't find it though. They managed to destroy it. Then he was vulnerable, and Baron Garibaldi killed him. Here, in Dunromin."

Gavin was staggered. "That story is very familiar to me," he muttered, "Well, kind of. But with different names."

Luke smiled and nodded. "The others from Earth, they said this too. It amused them."

Gavin took a sip from his beer glass. A bad parody of the Lord of the Rings seemed to fit exactly with what he had discovered on his travels so far.

"So, tell me something of yourself, Sea Breeze, or might I call you Gavin?" suggested Luke.

"I don't mind what you call me," replied Gavin, "I came here six months ago. Just went to sleep on Earth and woke up here, with three of my friends."

"It was the same for the others," replied Gavin, "What happened to your friends? Are they coming after you?"

"They were killed by monsters," said Gavin, "I was wondering if Garibaldi might be powerful enough to resurrect them."

Luke paused to consider this, weighing up the information to see if it made any real sense. It didn't really, except in the context of what he already knew.

Gavin's story was extraordinary but at least it was consistent with most of the facts as he understood them. Most of them. He knew there had been nearly twenty other Earthers on Barnaynia, but they all knew each other. They also recognised the name Garibaldi, although he didn't know how, and Garibaldi knew them. Or knew of them. And he had known that they were coming; he had prepared for them and made them welcome when they arrived. Luke didn't think Garibaldi had met any of them in the flesh before then though, he had only seen them in his dreams. How was it that Gavin didn't know Garibaldi at all?

"The others from Earth that came when you did," said Luke, "They all came through in little groups. Are you sure you do not recognise their names?"

"Sure," said Gavin, now sampling his wine. "But they wouldn't go by their character names on Earth. Did they have any other names?"

Luke nodded. "They had other names they called each other sometimes" said Luke, "Jon and Pete are two that seemed wisest, I think. And there's Mart, Adrian, Taff and Mikey."

"These are all Earthly names, but not proper, full names," said Gavin, "On earth you usually have two names. The first is a common name, like John or Gavin, or Mike or Adrian, the second is your family name. My family name is Holmes, hence Gavin Holmes. But people normally only use their first names, or even nicknames. Taff is a common nickname for someone from a country called Wales. Have you heard any of their other names?"

"No," said Luke, "Not that I can remember. And they went by the names I mentioned before most of the time, like you go by the name of Sea Breeze."

Gavin nodded. It made sense for them to go by their character names. He did, after all, when dealing with people from this world. But this didn't help either of them. Gavin was no surer that Luke was the friend he pretended to be and nor did Luke know for sure Gavin was really from Earth.

"You are different to the others," Luke wondered, "I wonder what that means?"

Gavin shrugged. "From what you say, I came here at about the same time. The only difference seems to be that Garibaldi doesn't know of me. How did the others get here?"

"No one knows," replied Luke, "They just woke up here, they said, just like you said."

"But Garibaldi knew they were coming," replied Gavin, "Did he summon them?"

"No," replied Luke, "Hecate told him they were coming. He has the Sight you see? Hecate shows him the way. He knows what will happen, some of what will happen anyway. He dreams the future. He dreams the secrets."

"Handy for him," muttered Gavin, which made Luke frown.

They fell silent for a short time. While they considered their drinks the landlady returned and advised them their rooms were ready and then waited to show them up. Luke nodded, stood and finished his glass.

"I will return in the morning and we will talk some more," he announced, "If you want to go to the Barony of Garibaldi to meet him then I will need to sort you out a guide and some transport."

"That is very generous of you," said Sula.

"Very generous of Baron Garibaldi," replied Luke, "He said months ago that if anyone from Earth came to Dunromin that I am to make them welcome. I had to make sure you were from Earth first, which I think you are, although it all seems very different to before. Whatever the way of it, I will help you however I can until Baron Garibaldi tells me otherwise."

"So, you believe me then?" asked Gavin.

Luke shrugged. "I can see no reason why you would lie. Some of what you say matches what I know, the rest sounds reasonable, I think. I can see no harm in giving you the benefit of the doubt. For the time being."

"That's very generous of you," said Gavin, "We'll see you in the morning then?"

"Yes," said Luke, bowed low, and then added "Good night" before turning and leaving the bar.

Sula and Gavin were shown to their rooms on the first floor and there they went quickly to bed. Gavin was tired but his head was spinning. Despite his full day his mind was not sleepy but a torrent of hope and doubt. He was puzzled by the strange Luke, but at the same time found him easy company and almost trustworthy. And yet the enchantment that Lady Mary seemed to have cast on him worried him. Had she passed the charm to Luke and Gavin was falling under her spell anew? He sighed and rolled over and back again in bed, distracted only occasionally by the noises of the night outside. It was his first night in the wondrous city of Dunromin but his mind was too full of questions to think too much of his surroundings at that time.

When at last sleep overcame him, it was fitful and his dreams were filled with the shadows of his dead friends and disjointed memories of his old life on Earth.

## **Chapter 10 – Things Take a Turn for the Worse**

When Gavin awoke it was shortly after dawn. The room he had was small with a bed, chest and table, the table being under the window and supporting a bowl and a pitcher of water.

Gavin looked out of the window but discovered the glass was manufactured only to a standard where it would let light in but not drafts. It was bubbled and varied hugely in thickness. Only by pressing his face close up to it and closing one eye could he see out into the street and the snowscape that Dunromin had become. The snow was deadening some of the sounds of the morning but he could hear street sellers and travellers shouting and arguing already below. He ran a finger over the cold glass and wondered casually where it was made, if it was imported and how much it cost. In Skull Crag there had been precious little glass of any form. Here in Dunromin even the poorest houses had glass in the windows, although it was in rough, uneven shapes held in place with lead or pitch.

In the room next door Sula was doing exactly the same thing, although without any knowledge of the quality of glass available on earth she was just fascinated by the wealth and accomplishment of a civilisation that could afford such an extravagance.

Gavin quickly washed, gathered his gear up and headed downstairs for breakfast. While in Skull Crag, Gavin had stayed in a dormitory at the Moon Temple so here the luxury of a private room and the freedom to eat and move as he wished was a welcome return to an almost forgotten lifestyle. Sula joined him by the fire and they exchanged morning greetings. Gavin had forgotten his morning exercises but he suspected Sula had not her own.

"How did you sleep?" Gavin asked.

"Not well," sighed Sula, "After the ship for so long, here it feels too steady. I woke up feeling seasick three times in the night." Gavin recalled she had suffered terribly from seasickness at the beginning of their voyage. She had only got used to it after a week or so of suffering.

At that point a serving girl brought them both a bowl of broth and some bread. The broth's main constituent seemed to be turnip but Gavin welcomed the warming feeling. They were offered milk to accompany it too, or weak ale.

Gavin had come across this in Skull Crag too – the brewing process cleaned the water so ale was safer than water as a staple drink. It did mean that a significant proportion of the population were mildly intoxicated all the time.

“So, what’s the plan for today then?” asked Gavin but they were distracted before Sula could answer.

The main front door was opened noisily and six armoured men trooped in. They wore chainmail that had seen better days, under a tabard of black cloth bearing an emblem of a storm cloud complete with dirty yellow streak of lightning. They each wore swords and long night-sticks at their belt, with long black cloaks, heavy leather gloves, iron-shod boots and open-face helmets. They looked slovenly and rather way-worn. Their chins were unshaven, they had signs of wounds on their faces, old and new, two had rather frightening skin diseases. Their bodies were heavy and thick-set, their movements suggested they were quite at home in their armour, their smell suggested they may sleep in it. Gavin guessed they must be members of the Guard or some other military or para-military organisation that required strong arms and little wit. Their leader, who had a black plume on his helmet like a Roman centurion, attracted the landlady’s attention and they had a brief, urgent discussion.

With a growing sense of foreboding Gavin saw the landlady’s face turn from concern to horror. She looked around the room and then, Gavin felt a grim inevitability about it, pointed at Sula and himself. The armoured men immediately marched over to them, drawing their nightsticks. The two at the back were also carrying irons and shackles.

“Damn,” muttered Gavin, realising his sword was in his bundle under his seat.

“You’re under arrest,” announced the head guard.

Sula was already on her feet with a knife in her hand, Gavin also found himself on his feet and assuming a fighting stance.

“On whose authority?” demanded Gavin, but they didn’t even bother to answer. Two of the men lunged for Gavin with their sticks. He dodged them easily and punched one of them back, aware that hitting the chainmail that hard hurt his fist only a little. He was distracted momentarily as Sula screamed Frapper oaths as she was grappled to the floor by another soldier and this let his own opponents inside his defences. He was bundled to the floor and then suffered what he could only describe as a thorough kicking. Quickly his mouth was filled with blood and sick, his eyes closed and his body was punched and kicked into a painful, blurred red unconsciousness.

Cold and white was the next sensation he had. He became vaguely aware that he was laid face down in the snow, wet through and cold, with his hands bound behind him. He also became aware of the pain, all over his body, varying between dull aches and sharp, precise burning sensations. His face felt rubbery, swollen, numbed by the same cold that had aroused him, but his brain swam in a fog of concussion.

Only very distant impressions seemed to exist beyond his pain and frustration. The awareness that his ankles were shackled blended with a vague awareness of raised voices arguing. The sound of flesh on flesh of a loud slap rang in his head, but it wasn’t him being slapped.

“Stop hitting her!” demanded a voice, vaguely familiar despite his state.

“We’ve got a job to do,” replied a gruff voice, “If she resists, we’ll persuade her not to.”

“This has to be a mistake,” protested the familiar voice again, “Who is it they’re supposed to have killed anyway?”

Gavin registered vague alarm among the terror and anger already flooding his system.

"That you will have to take up with the Captain," said the voice, "I was just told to bring `em in. Take `em lads."

Gavin felt hands hook under his shoulders and he was hoisted up and dragged along the floor. He could smell the musty odour of the men carrying him, poor hygiene mixed with sweat and what smelt a little like horse manure. Gavin's grogginess continued and he swayed in and out of consciousness as they went, only half aware of the continuing arguments behind him.

How far he was taken he couldn't guess, but darkness drove out the white blur of snow and hard stone greeted him suddenly after he was flung across a room. He slid to the wall in what was a mixture of hay, urine and excrement. Harsh crashes of doors being shut and locked rattled his ears. He was violently sick again and then all was still and quiet.

"Shit," he muttered, cursing and observing simultaneously, "Just bloody perfect." After a few moments he managed to drag himself to his elbows and then he felt hands on him, helping him to sit up. The shackles had been removed at some point. The smell of excrement was softened slightly by the musky oil he recognised as Sula's unique scent.

"Can you hear me Sea Breeze?" she asked, "Are you awake?"

"I think so," hissed Gavin, aware his lip was the wrong shape and seemed to fill half his mouth.

"By the Lady," muttered Sula, "They gave you a terrible beating."

Gavin didn't respond. He sat back against the wall and grimaced. His hands and feet were still bound.

He sat for a short while, exploring his body in his mind, trying to concentrate. It was difficult. His stomach and kidneys seemed to have taken most of the pounding, although his face was hot with pain and felt wet and swollen all over. His right ear was ringing loudly.

Yet even as he began to register exactly where the pain was he became aware of it receding. Sula was chanting a soft, determined prayer while her hands rubbed his sides gently up and down. Gavin felt his body warming where she touched him, hot sensation driving back and silencing some of the pain from his kidneys. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and he shivered with a sensation approaching pleasure. There was the hiss again and the pain receded from some of the areas of his body.

"Cure Light Wounds," he muttered, "That has helped a lot. Thank-you."

Even as he said it, his vision cleared, the pain in his stomach had gone although his face remained swollen and aching. He now became aware of other bruising on his arms and thighs, but at least he could think straight. Sula's healing magic may have been a mundane, first level spell on the scale of Dungeons and Dragons, but its effect on Gavin was huge. He felt instantly better. Focused, aware, angry and, he had to admit, terrified. Even the human excrement that covered his side and the stench that filled his nose didn't distract him for a moment. But his focus was passing – even as the warmth of the spell soothed him, the impact of the remaining wounds pained him.

"What happened?" he asked at last, looking around their little cell.

The space they were in was about five feet wide by eight long. There was a scattering of old straw on the floor, but this was now coated with filth. The walls were rough stone and scratched with various graffiti. The entrance was a heavy iron mess of bars bolted from the outside and locked with a heavy, if primitive, padlock. At the other end of the room was a window, also barred, about seven feet off the ground. From the view Gavin saw that they were below street level as he could see the legs of people and animals passing, a comfortable distance from the smelly hole in the wall. There was no furniture, not even a bucket, and there was ice on the bars and walls. Beyond the door Gavin could

see a short corridor with more cells on the near and far side. He could hear talking and some sobbing but it was quiet otherwise. The cold probably kept the worst of the smell down but it still stank.

"We have been arrested for murder," replied Sula, he noticed she was bleeding from a cut on her cheek. "They say we killed some jeweller last night, and his wife and son. They say we broke in, killed him and robbed him. They have a witness."

Gavin's head span. He half wanted to laugh but the memory of those poor creatures tied to the poles in the river near Grey Havens terrified him. He could feel panic growing in him, utter terror at the prospect of being at the hands of a merciless and unreasonable government.

"What do we do?" he gasped.

"Luke appeared as we were being dragged out, when they were wiping your blood from their boots," continued Sula, "He kept protesting and then hurried off ahead of them to talk to their captain. I haven't seen him since."

"Damn," muttered Gavin again, unsure if he could rely on Luke or even how the legal system here worked. Would there be a trial? Would they be examined under some sort of magic truth detection? He very much hoped so. His body continued to ache and he shrank into a corner, his limbs feeling like lead weights around him, a cocoon within which he was helpless. He may have even been crying – he didn't really have any control over himself at that moment.

Sula watched him collapse, wondering how badly injured he was, then she knelt and began to chant a soft prayer to reassure herself and plead for help and guidance.

Gavin stared into space, feeling very sorry for himself, thinking about the soldiers that had arrested him. A new passion crowded out of his subconscious. Hatred and anger filled him and he got up and screamed out of the door a string of obscenities in Common and Frapper alike. He beat his shoulders on the immovable bars and then stood, panting and glaring away into the shadows. Far away he heard laughing.

## **Chapter 11 – Sir Garin of the Storm**

Luke had made straight for the regimental headquarters of the Storm Regiment of the Guard, which was located at the East Gate, getting there before Sula and Sea Breeze. The Storm were perhaps the least glamorous of the Guard Regiments with a reputation for brutality, intransigence and, it was said, a fanatical loyalty to their Regiment, their Captain, and the King, in that order. Of all the Guard Regiments to be arrested by they were probably the worst. Indeed, the Traveller's Respite was outside their normal jurisdiction so Luke's mind was already racing as regards what might have happened to get his new friends into this predicament. That they were innocent he had no doubt, although he realised he might be being a little naïve in that.

He hurtled up the steps into the public room of the Guardhouse and went straight up to the clerk's bench. At the bench sat an old sergeant, his left eye hidden by a patch, several of his fingers missing, arguing with an old woman about some stolen fruit. Luke didn't even bother listening, he just pushed to the front.

"I want to speak with Captain," he demanded, "I am Luke son of Ajax, Herald of Baron Garibaldi."

The sergeant seemed half happy to ignore the old woman, half angry at the interruption.

"Do you have an appointment?" he demanded.

"I am here to ask him the reasons behind the arrest of two visitors from Skull Crag," replied Luke, "I wish to help the Captain avoid making a terrible mistake."

"Do you have an appointment?" persisted the sergeant.

"Is the Captain in?" Luke asked, avoiding a direct answer, but with his right-hand fishing in his pocket for some coins.

The Sergeant noticed the hand and realised what was happening. "He's very busy," he said.

Luke took some gold coins from his pocket and put them on the desk. The old woman, who had been silent for a while, set off shouting and demanding again. The Sergeant took the coins and called another clerk, ordering him to take Luke up to the Captain's office.

Luke was led through a side door and up a spiral staircase. As he left the room he glanced across to the area behind the desk sergeant where the patrol was bringing in Sula and Gavin. Gavin was still out cold, his face was a mess and there was a trail of blood down the street marking their passage.

Up in the Captain's office the air was clearer and warmer. A fire burned in a hearth and there were several large pieces of comfortable furniture about the place. Luke recognised the form of Captain Garin behind the largest table, examining some paperwork. Two scribes were there too, making notes and warming some wax for a seal.

Captain Garin was a well-known figure among the hierarchy of the city. Like all Guard Captains his rank was equivalent to a Baron, but unlike most of the others his background was clouded by strange rumours and stories of his origins. What was known was that he had been taken in by the King as the bastard son of his dead elder brother. What remained ugly rumour was the precise nature of his parentage, other than it was a casual relationship with one of the courtesans of the period, or an unknown street girl, or perhaps the disgraced daughter of an unknown baron. Regardless of this, his royal uncle had given him a good home, the best training and his family name. Sir Garin Luftheart of the Storm was a force to be reckoned with, even without the backing of his regiment.

Garin had fought in numerous wars for the King and had dragged himself up through the ranks with skill and bloody-mindedness to become the captain of a regiment he had then beaten into his own shape. Despite his adopted parents he had undoubtedly achieved his current position on merit. Although gruff and mean he was shrewd and was very aware of his position in the city, and frustrated by the glass ceiling he was now banging against. He liked being a Guard Captain and he was proud of his regiment, but he would be happy, in all probability, to have handed in the poison chalice of his rank if it meant he didn't have to deal with the general public any more. However, his face didn't fit. He doubted he would ever achieve further promotion to a Baronial role, regardless of his prowess in battle or wisdom in judgement.

A Guard Captain's responsibilities were relatively simple. He was required to keep his regiment up to strength; ready for war at all times and he was responsible for the enforcement of the law within a defined area of the city. This latter duty was the most tiresome, as it required him to sit in judgement over common people and their gripes and grievances. Sir Garin had no real interest in the common people nor the justice they might seek or deserve, although he realised he had to be seen to be doing an efficient job. To this end he dealt with whatever crossed his path as quickly and simply as possible. He preferred to spend his time on marshalling his men and managing the Manor he had founded between two baronies three days to the east. This was already a sizable domain and was used as a training camp for the Storm Regiment and the

militias of the Barons of the Eastfold, who paid him well for his skill in shaping their recruits into a fighting force.

As he looked up and saw Luke and a private soldier walking in, he guessed immediately what the issue was. He just didn't, as yet, know which of the cases he had judged in the last month Luke was specifically concerned with. Nor did he know who Luke was, although the dress suggested a petty noble or other self-important busy-body pain in the arse. Maybe even an adventurer. Captain Garin hated adventurers.

"Good Morning, Captain Garin," said Luke, bowing, "I am Luke son of Ajax, Herald of Baron Garibaldi."

The Captain registered the name Garibaldi and his countenance flickered slightly in recognition. It was not necessarily a good sign.

"What is it?" asked the Captain, his voice deep and steady.

"You have in your custody two friends of Baron Garibaldi, unjustly arrested," replied Luke, "I have come to you to appeal for their release."

"Who?" asked the Captain.

"Sea Breeze and the Priestess Sula from Scull Crag," replied Luke.

"Ah, the murderers from Scull Crag," confirmed Captain Garin. "I am afraid your trip has been wasted. There is no doubt of their guilt. One of my own sergeants saw them fleeing the scene of the crime."

"I cannot imagine how this could be," argued Luke, "When did the murder take place?"

"Like I said, you have wasted your time," replied Captain. "I have heard the evidence and sentenced them to death. There is no question of their guilt."

"But they have only just been arrested!" exclaimed Luke. Even for Dunromin, this was hasty justice.

"I saw no reason to delay proceedings, I am always short of cell space," responded Captain. "Good day, Herald of Baron Garibaldi." The man remained seated, staring pointedly at Luke, waiting for him to leave.

Luke paused. He saw grim determination in the Guard Captain's eyes. There was something else going on here, there must be some reason for this persecution. "When was the crime committed?" he asked again.

"Shortly after midnight last night," replied the captain, "They broke into a jewellers on Down Street, killed the jeweller, his wife and son, and took their stock. One of my sergeants was off duty in the area and saw them fleeing the premises. He was in uniform, full armour, so he couldn't catch them. He saw them clearly however, and they headed west, towards the south gate. They were apprehended near there this morning."

"And the stolen goods, were they found on them?"

"No, and nor in their room," said the Captain, "We believe they had already hidden them somewhere. They may even have already had a buyer waiting for them."

"That isn't possible," denied Luke, "They only arrived in the city yesterday. They spent most of the day searching for their friend Baron Garibaldi. They had no time to plan such a theft and they hadn't even been to that area of town!"

"I have an unimpeachable witness," responded the Captain after a pause, "And I said 'Good Day'."

Luke sighed. "I beg you to reconsider," he suggested, "This is a great injustice. I can only imagine your sergeant was mistaken."

"Good day, Herald of Baron Garibaldi," the Captain snarled, "I will not say it again."

Luke paused for a moment, nodded a bow and then left. He had to figure out what he could do about this.

Behind him, after he had gone, the Captain turned to a clerk, "Get Sergeant Bullard up here," he ordered and sat back sucking his teeth.

Outside Luke scooted around the edge of the guardhouse to the place where the prisoner's cells could be seen into, at the gutter at the side of the street. Peering through the stinking grates he ran along them until he saw the one in which Gavin and Sula were being kept. He was about to call into it when a loud torrent of abuse greeted him and he noticed Gavin was hanging on the door to the cell screaming at the guards. Certainly not the best way to ingratiate himself with them, Luke thought, but it probably helped Gavin to feel better about it all.

"Sea Breeze, my Lady Sula," Luke called into the grate, trying not to breathe through his nose.

Gavin's face, battered, bloody and now smeared with mud or some such appeared at the grate.

"Luke!" exclaimed the Earther, apparently exhausted and dazed. "Bloody hell! Am I glad to see you? What the hell is going on?"

"You have been accused of the murder of a jeweller, his wife and son, and the robbery of his shop," replied Luke, "You have been sentenced to death."

"Whuh?" managed Gavin, his loins tightening to a knot and horrible drowning sensation flooding his body.

"I am sure you are innocent but they claim to have a witness," continued Luke, "One of the Guard Sergeants has said he saw you and chased you. Baron Garibaldi has many friends, but many enemies as well. I must find out what is going on and what can be done about it. I must work quickly. Please do not fear, I will not let you down."

Luke then turned and ran off before they could press him on what he was planning to do, praying he could keep his word.

## **Chapter 12 – Sir Tristram Luftheart**

Luke headed off down the street, his mind racing as to what could be done. He had no doubt in his mind that Sir Garin would waste no time in arranging the execution and he dreaded the thought of Gavin's and Sula's heads decorating Traitor's Wall high up above the Bawdy Wench. As he ran he heard his name called out from his left, then again louder. He managed to stop without falling over on the snow and he saw that it was Gecko. He soon discovered that the young guide had gathered what had happened at the inn and was on his way to see if he could help his customers at all.

Luke quickly explained to him about the charge of murder and was reassured that the young street fighter was just as convinced as he that Gavin and Sula were innocent. Without another word Gecko shot off down a side street, evidently with a plan of his own in mind. Luke shouted after him that he might run some errands for him but to no avail. He paused, aware that a street urchin like Gecko was not likely to show anything like this kind of loyalty to a customer, and wondered if his old boss Jerym Twofella might have some interest in Sula and Gavin beyond a simple Guide job.

Frowning, Luke turned back to his own tasks, he could worry about Gecko later. What should Luke do now? Who could help him? If Garibaldi or any of the heroes had been in the city then would they have the necessary rank and reputation to talk to Sir Garin and perhaps re-open the investigation? Without their direct intervention or instructions Luke's own influence was very limited. He

needed to think of someone in the city sympathetic to Garibaldi's cause but with the necessary rank and connections in the Guardie to interfere on Luke's behalf.

The priests at the Olympian Temple were the obvious choice and Luke headed first there, entering Hecate's shrine and catching up with Meleera. He quickly discovered his efforts here were in vain. The Guardie and the city temples, it seemed, had little to do with one another. Meleera was sympathetic but explained that this was due to a basic conflict of opinion with the Guardie common across all the temples.

The temples believed that their gods and holy position made them above the law in terms of how their behaviour should be judged while in the city. Needless to say, the Guardie, and indeed the King, saw things differently. There was an ongoing and passionate debate as to the jurisdiction of the Guardie within the temples that had gone on for hundreds of years and was unlikely to reach any useful conclusion any time soon. Given the nature of the absolutes involved, any kind of compromise was an anathema to both parties. This meant that any intervention on the part of the Temple on the behalf of Sula and Gavin was more likely to further antagonise the situation.

Luke fled in despair and wracked his brains for an alternative. His own contacts were in the main concerned with the business community in the Old City, in fact he had few customers let alone friends in this part of the city. This was in common with all of the Heroes and, as far as he knew, their influence with the Guardie was negligible even in the Old City. In fact, the only person with any connections at all with the powers of justice were Basil, a hero who was a priest of Athena, and Sir Bedevere, who acted as chief justice and sheriff for Garibaldi in the Barony of Garibaldi and was a Paladin of the Norse Temple. Neither were in the city and would have probably had the same limited influence as the temples.

Luke stopped. A light of hope twinkled in his mind. Sir Bedevere was a paladin, a great and brave knight of justice and the rightness of humanity, chivalry and fairness. Among the Earthers who had arrived before were three more paladins – Sir Gawain, Sir Anton and Sir Lancelot. Of these Sir Gawain had been in the service of Sir Tristram, a nephew of the King who lived in a fine townhouse not far from where Luke was standing. And Sir Tristram and Sir Garin were old comrades. If Luke might persuade Sir Tristram to intervene in the matter, at least until Baron Garibaldi returned, then he might achieve a stay of execution.

Opinions in the city as regards the social abilities of Sir Tristram varied, but he was a devoted knight of the king and warrior for justice and freedom across the world. He had fought for the king many times and held a respected place at court. He was also a devoted enemy of the Deep Elves, the cursed race of elves doomed to hide in the deep places of the world, and torment the surface world with their devious attacks. Luke thought Sir Tristram may be impressed by Garibaldi's recent successful exploits against these residents of the Darkworld and followers of the Spider Queen.

Luke quickly found himself at Sir Tristram's door and pounded the heavy knocker against the oak frame. After a short pause the door was opened by a manservant and Luke was asked his business.

"I am Luke son of Ajax, Herald of Baron Garibaldi," Luke announced, "I am here on an errand of the gravest urgency. I would talk with Sir Tristram as soon as is possible please?"

The servant nodded and opened the door wider to let Luke in.

The main entrance had seen better days. The walls were hung with trophies and flags of previous campaigns and a rich coat of arms was hung from above a set of stairs that led upwards. However, the paint was peeling, the rugs worn, dust and cobwebs hung from the trophies. There was an air of neglect about the place and the unmistakable tang of damp in the air. It was cold too,

the hearth dark and without a fire. The only light was from a guttering lamp at the foot of the stairs.

Luke was asked to wait there and he spent a few minutes inspecting the decorations while he waited, hugging himself to keep warm. He saw there were various weapons hanging on the walls, mostly rusted and decayed, and of foreign or evil manufacture. Flags bore crests of vanquished tribes of humanoids and there were totems of the type borne by the Deep Elf Houses into battle. Sir Tristram had organised many campaigns against the Deep Elves of the Horn Mountains but rumour suggested he rarely achieved much. The same rumours claimed the loot from his last crusade had barely covered his costs.

Luke was distracted by the sound of a door opening upstairs and the figure of a tall, broad man appeared from the shadows beyond the dim lamp.

"Well met, Herald of Baron Garibaldi," said the figure, advancing into the light so that Luke could see him. "Pray come upstairs into the warm and tell me what urgent message you bear."

Sir Tristram was not a young man, being the eldest son of the king's eldest sister. In fact, Luke suspected he was older than the king or at least very close in age. Sir Tristram's face was distinguished but lined and scarred, his pale grey eyes sparkled but grey strands mixed with the black of his bowl of short hair. He had lost none of his vitality to age, however and moved with ease and grace, despite the heavy cotton robes and fur cape he wore.

"Thank you, my Lord," replied Luke, and followed the middle-aged man upstairs, into a side sitting chamber where a fire burnt in the hearth and comfortable sitting chairs had been arranged next to piles of books and papers. A lady sat to one side working on some embroidery and smiled and nodded at Luke as he entered. In return Luke bowed low, guessing this was Lady Helena, Sir Tristram's wife. She had come from an obscure but rich farming family from the south and had once been the toast of the city. It seemed to Luke that age had done little to dull her grandeur. Indeed, she had a regal poise and presence that he found quite enchanting. Sadly, Sir Tristram and Helena had not been blessed with children and, after so many years of campaigning, their fortunes seemed to be on the wane. While not without influence, Sir Tristram and his wife were not the potentates they once were. Perhaps Luke was grasping at straws.

"Pray be seated and take some wine," said Sir Tristram, pouring a glass himself. Evidently, they kept few servants.

"Thank-you Sir Tristram," replied Luke, "You are most kind."

The old knight seated himself, as he moved Luke noticed the glint of a sword, still in its scabbard, to hand to one side of the chair.

"Now, please tell me your mission," continued the knight, "And how I might be of assistance to the Slayer of The Spider Queen."

Luke was stumped for a moment by the mention of the beast that had been the Empress of the Deep Elves. The Spider Queen had been killed by Garibaldi the year before in an epic chase to the heart of her realm, deep in the Hellmarch Mountains. Despite her death the mention of her name still chilled the air slightly and the heavy curtains wavered in a non-existent breeze.

It was good news though that Sir Tristram knew the story of Garibaldi's victory over the Queen of the Deep Elves – Luke had hoped it marked Garibaldi and Tristram with a common cause, and a cause in which Garibaldi had achieved much more than Tristram.

"There is a friend of Garibaldi's new to the city," explained Luke, "Forgive my haste but it is a matter most urgent. This friend and his companion have been arrested by the Storm Guard. Sir Garin has sentenced them to death for a murder I am convinced they did not, that they could not, have committed. It is a terrible miscarriage of justice."

Sir Tristram nodded thoughtfully while his wife tutted at her work.

"You are convinced of their innocence?" he wondered.

"Yes," said Luke, "The victim was a jeweller near the East Gate, his shop in a quiet street off the main thoroughfares. Sea Breeze and Sula could not have even known where it was. Even if they had heard of the shop they had not time to visit it and determine how to attack it in the few hours they were in Dunromin."

"Yet Sir Garin seems convinced of their guilt, to have moved and sentenced them so quickly?" observed Sir Tristram.

"He claims to have a witness, a sergeant of the Guardie who saw the attackers leaving the shop but failed to catch them," said Luke, "The witness claims to have recognised them, though I know not where from."

"A Sergeant of the Guardie though," wondered Sir Tristram, "A reliable character."

"We were beset by a snow storm last night," said Luke, "As you know, and the crime was committed after midnight, on the darkest of nights. I wonder if the good soldier could not have been mistaken? Could he be sure of his hand in front of his face on such a night, let alone two strangers fleeing away from him in haste?"

Sir Tristram sat back and considered this. He nodded slowly, as if agreeing that the evidence seemed, on the face of it, tenuous.

"Can you not contact your master?"

"Baron Garibaldi is out of the city, as are all the Heroes," replied Luke, "His temple has little influence on the Guardie and I thought you might help. I know you admire Baron Garibaldi's accomplishments, an admiration which is mutual I know. I also know you are proud of our city's reputation for fair justice. I ask only that you press Sir Garin for a stay of execution, to allow my master to investigate the matter further."

"It is a curious story," the knight agreed, "But I would think Sir Garin must be sure of his facts to take a witness seriously in these circumstances." The knight frowned and stared into the fire. "And yet, could it be he has acted in haste? Perhaps the weight of his office has distracted him from the attention to the minutiae of his duties."

"I have already spoken with Sir Garin but he is intransigent," said Luke, "I fear he mistook my honest pleas for some attack on his judgement perhaps. I wondered if you might address him on my master's behalf? Your fame and reputation are such that he might consider your thoughts more deeply."

Sir Tristram nodded. "He might," he agreed, "And he is an old friend and comrade from battles long, long ago. Perhaps he might be more inclined to at least explain his reasoning more clearly to me."

### **Chapter 13 – Gavin in the Cells**

After Luke had left them Gavin and Sula had done very little. Sula was still praying and Gavin knew better than to disturb her. After casting a spell, a cleric needed to pray to restore the ability to cast the spell again. They didn't have to do it straight away but since Sula was doing nothing else it made sense. Gavin knew that to disturb her would interrupt the astral flow and she would have to start again. Instead he tried to distract himself from the gloomy fate that awaited him.

Luke's enthusiasm had cheered him at first. After Garibaldi's Herald had gone Gavin had relaxed a little, feeling sure the young man would find some way to get them out. He had tried to find a comfortable way to sit but the cold floor of the cell chilled him to the marrow. Instead he had tried talking to his cell

mates but the gaoler had shouted down a threat to throw a bucket of cold water over them if they didn't shut up.

Gavin had then remained quiet. He watched the passers-by through the grate and wondered what weird and wonderful stories they might have, but that just made him think of his own story. He wondered about his dead friends, he wondered how soon he might join them. He wondered if he might find himself back on earth if he died but then he dreaded to find out. He was getting colder and colder as he stood, his breath fogging before him, the slow mumble of Sula's prayers in his ears, still audible in the shouting and clanging of the street beyond his cage. Soon Gavin was shivering uncontrollably, his mind fogging slightly and his imagination coming to the slow, desperate realisation that he was starting to suffer from hypothermia. By the grate the snow that had melted was re-freezing in a little ice waterfall. Gavin realised that in this little stone cell, below ground level, he was below freezing point and wearing clothes entirely unsuited for his situation.

He had seen that the Guards had taken his possessions other than the clothes on his back, including the magic items he had been equipped with when he arrived in Barnaynia. He had a magic scimitar that had lain impotent in his bedroll beneath the table during the fight. With it had been the bracers, arm-bands that stretched half the distance from his wrists to his elbows and imbued his skin with the qualities of chainmail armour, without the weight or texture. They were of a cold iron inlaid with swirling patterns of adamantine, but the edges scratched the heels of his thumbs and they clanged together when he folded his arms or whatever. The padding he had fitted eased this but he had yet to get used to them.

And the Guards had taken his ring. His Ring of Protection. It was a gaudy signet ring inlaid with a diamond but it conferred on him the blessing of the Fire Gods and aided him in avoiding harm of any form. It was not a strong magic though and the Guards's blows had avoided its enchantments. Indeed, Gavin was altogether very unhappy with his showing in the fight in the inn. Of course, he realised they were hardened and experienced fighters and that they were probably very strong and had considerable specialisation in their weapons, but he was still disappointed in himself. He was a fifth level monk after all, yet he had failed to make more than a meagre one of his attacks hit home. And even that hadn't so much as knocked a guardsman over. He promised himself that if he ever got out of this cell he would have a better go at whosoever dared to get in his way again. But that was a pretty big "if". He had to make a try to make a plan to save himself. He had to try something.

He was distracted from his thoughts by someone calling his name.

Turning he saw Gecko knelt at the grate calling to him. The voice sounded distant and blurry and Gavin realised he was slipping further away from reality – perhaps some strange magic, perhaps hypothermia. To his relief Gecko was pushing a jumper and a blanket through the bars.

Gavin grabbed the items, put the jumper on, a huge misshapen thing that smelt of sweat, and put the blanket around Sula. He realised the jumper was warm and that Gecko must have warmed it on a fire before bringing it to him, but he also realised that his hands and feet were now unbound but couldn't recall his bindings being removed.

"Gecko, you are a marvel!" exclaimed Gavin, his mind losing its fog almost immediately. "How on earth did you smuggle these in to us?"

"We are allowed to bring prisoners things," replied Gecko, looking a little confused, "How else would you live?"

Gavin remembered reading somewhere that in medieval prisons the convicts were given neither food nor clothes and it was up to relatives to keep them alive until they served their term. It was grim news.

"Thank-you Gecko," said Gavin again, "If we ever get out I will not forget your kindness."

"It might be sooner than you think," replied the boy, "I've just been talking with the Captain."

Gavin gaped. "Really? What did he say?"

"He asked me many questions about you," replied Gecko, "He asked me where I had met you and where you went yesterday. And he asked me lots of questions about what I thought you knew about the city and how you might find your way around."

"Did he seek you out to ask these questions?" asked Gavin, wondering if the investigative powers of the Guardes were more energetic than he had thought.

"No, he asked me when I brought Lady Mary's note," replied Gecko, "That's where I went when I heard you'd been brought here. Lady Mary seemed to be known to you so I wondered if she might know what they'd arrested you for. I mean really arrested you for, as opposed to the murder. We all know you couldn't have done that. There's something else going on here and I thought Lady Mary might know something of it."

Gavin's mind was reeling. He had utterly underestimated this young man.

"Anyhow," Gecko continued, "She was most upset by my tale and wrote me a note to deliver to the Captain. She told me to give it to him in person mind, and not let anyone take it from me. It took a bit of stubbornness to get past the desk soldier."

"Good lad," said Gavin, "What was in the note?"

"I don't know," replied Gecko, "But the Captain read it, read it twice I think, and then he scowled at me and I thought he was going to drop me, right there and then," Gecko's eyes were wide and he was telling the tale with the breathless excitement of a small child on Christmas Eve. "Then he chucked it in the fire and I thought that was that. But then he started asking me questions, loads of questions, one after the other. It went on for some time but then he told me to get out and not come back."

Gavin frowned again now. "That doesn't sound too promising," he muttered. "So, what did you do then?"

"I came here, after getting the blanket and the jumper," said Gecko, "I'm sure the captain will understand the truth of what I have told him. He'll see you cannot be guilty. However, I am out of cash now though so if you could see your way to helping me out?"

Gavin sighed. "The Guardes took all my money," he explained, and was alarmed to see Gecko's face cloud with confusion and then frustration. "Don't worry though!" he quickly added, realising this link with freedom was only interested in making money. Gecko's motives were profit, not kindness, but Gavin was hardly in a position to be fussy about that. "We have other resources, we can get more money when we get out."

Gecko looked unsure.

"And Baron Garibaldi is bound to reward anyone who helped us," Gavin added, "He will make sure you're all right."

Gecko smiled and nodded. "I knew there was something special about you," he announced, "I could tell there was."

Gavin turned and walked to the cell door. Looking up and down the corridor he noticed the hulking figure of the gaoler, draped in fetid woollens, walking down the cells and checking on his charges. Gavin waited until he got closer and called to him.

"Excuse me, Gaoler," he called, "I believe we are to be released. Our guide here informs us the Captain has re-opened the investigation."

The gaoler looked at him for a moment, as if stunned, but then started laughing in a gurgling, hooting and hissing kind of cacophony. He kept up this wheezing chaos of humour for a while and then started a wracking, heavy coughing. At last he spat out a huge gobbet of phlegm and just shook his head.

"You'll be dangling on Traitor's Gate by ten bells tomorrow," he announced, "Old Bully saw you clear as day fleeing from the crime. Practically caught you red-handed he said. Just he was in chainmail and you weren't so you got away. He recognised you though, he was quite sure of that. Now why would the Captain re-open such a case and call one of his best sergeants a liar eh?"

"But it wasn't us!" exclaimed Gavin, "He must be mistaken."

The gaoler shook his head. "He got a right eyeful he said," continued the rather grim man, his face a battleground where the war was far from over. "Old Bully told me all about it. He told me the mess you made of those poor people. Gnomes they might have been, but you had no right to do that to them. You'll swing matey boy, they'll stretch your neck good and tight. And that little she-bitch you've got there too."

"Be careful what you say," snarled Sula, "We have powerful friends in the Temple of Hecate."

"Temple folk ain't got no say down here," grinned the foul man, "We's the law here. The Captain don't give two farts about what no Priests prattle on about. Mark my words, you'll be meeting your nice goddess in person by noon tomorrow. Maybe she'll explain it to you then."

With that he turned and walked away, ignoring Gavin's continued protests.

"Bastards," muttered Gavin at last and went back to the grate. "I am afraid your testimony seems to have done little good," he told Gecko, "They are going to hang us tomorrow."

Gecko didn't look very impressed with this, evidently wondering how he might now make good on the investment he had made in the jumper and blanket.

"Don't worry Gecko," Gavin lied, "We've been in deeper shit than this before. We'll figure something out."

"There's more than bars and false accusations we have to worry about," said Sula in Frapper. She had finished her prayer and was now sitting, listening to the conversation. "Even if it had been us killing those people, how would the garde have recognised us?"

Gavin looked at her puzzled.

"Did you see any garde in the black tabards yesterday?" she asked him, "And even if he had been in civvies and noticed us wandering around in the streets, how could he have recognised us in the dark, in a snow-storm?"

"You're right," muttered Gavin, working through Sula's line of reasoning himself. No one could have identified anyone in that mess last night. Someone was making it all up deliberately. "It's not just a mistake. Someone's fitting us up on purpose. This 'Bully' bloke, whoever he is, must be trying to frame us up to cover for someone else – maybe himself!"

"This is what I am thinking," said Sula, "But I don't know how we can prove this. We are here and we are strangers in this town. No one owes any favours to us I think."

"Yeah," agreed Gavin, still speaking in Frapper. "We're right in the shit. I hope Luke has more luck finding us some help. With these bars here opening onto the street a break-out should be pretty easy."

"I don't think we would get far," argued Sula.

Before Gavin could respond he heard someone else calling him from the grate. He turned to see Luke knelt next to Gecko. Behind him stood a knight. It was obvious the man was a knight, although he wore no armour. Sir Tristram

had a bearing it was impossible to mistake. He wore heavy grey cloak but it was pulled open at the front, revealing heavy woollen clothes bearing a heraldic symbol, a rampant silver leopard, with a huge sword at his belt. His head was bare, displaying short dark hair streaked with silver, and a grim, smooth-shaven face marked with years of care and bravery.

"Sea Breeze, Sula," called Luke again, "This is Sir Tristram Luftheart, a knight of justice. He is a nephew of the king and cousin to the Captain of the Storm Guard. He is also an ally of Garibaldi's and has come here as a favour to me and my master to see if he can help you."

Gavin turned to the knight. "We are grateful to you, sir," he said, "Whatever you can do for us would be much appreciated."

In reply the knight held up one hand for silence. He steadily intoned a prayer and Gavin realised this was a spell. He suspected the knight was a paladin and realised in the game of D&D this meant that if Sir Tristram was of high enough level he would have cleric spells, of a similar type to Sula. Gavin wondered what spell the man was casting now.

"Did you kill the jeweller?" asked the knight, his voice loud and authoritative.

"No," said Gavin, realising the spell was probably Detect Lie or something similar.

Sir Tristram turned to Sula. "And did you kill the jeweller, young lady?"

"I did not," she replied, "But I think I know who did!"

"Oh really?" asked the knight.

"The Guard who claims he saw us do it," replied Sula, "We believe he has lied about us to protect himself."

"A guard sergeant murder a citizen to rob them?" wondered Sir Tristram, shaking his head, "I think not."

"I have heard of worse," said Gavin but immediately regretted it. They needed help from this man and you didn't get that by arguing with him. But it seemed Sir Tristram had no interest in Gavin's comment.

"Never mind that," said Sir Tristram, "Were you at the jewellers when the crime was committed?"

"No," replied Gavin and then added "We don't even know where it is. We don't know our way around the city at all. We had to hire a guide, Gecko there, to find our way to a brothel and the Olympian Temple."

"That they did sir!" added Gecko enthusiastically.

Sir Tristram frowned at the mention of the Olympian Temple, or it may have been the Brothel. He stood back and stroked his chin.

"So, other than this fancy that the Guardsman killed the gnome, you have no idea who really did it?"

"No idea," said Gavin, "I didn't even know the jeweller was a gnome until you just mentioned it."

Sir Tristram nodded. "And you have never been to the victim's house where the crime was committed?"

"No, we have no idea where it is, even approximately," replied Gavin as calmly as he could, making sure to stare the knight in the eye in as honest a manner as he could.

Sir Tristram paused for a while, and then shook his head. "Come Luke," he decided, "We must ask the good Captain his thoughts on the matter."

## Chapter 14 – A meeting of Old Comrades

Sir Tristram walked into the offices of the Storm regiment of the Guard and asked the desk sergeant if Sir Garin had any visitors with him at that time. The rather shocked sergeant, who was still arguing with the old woman, stood hurriedly, saluted and answered in the negative. Sir Tristram, who had simply ignored the woman and talked over her, nodded and headed straight for the door to the stairs up to the Captain's offices. Luke followed, offering a polite smile and nod to the sergeant, who seemed uninterested in stopping either of them.

They found Sir Garin deep in thought, a long clay pipe in his mouth and staring, with a glazed expression, into the fire. He was alone in his rooms, the clerks gone, the paperwork piled up neatly on his desk. As his visitors entered, after a discrete knock, he looked around and then beamed with delight.

"Good day Sir Garin, Captain of the Storm Guard," said Sir Tristram.

"Dear cousin!" responded the Captain, but then he saw Luke and his face fell a little. "It is always an honour and a pleasure to see you, although I suspect this is not a social call?"

Sir Tristram nodded, "I see so little of you these days, Garin my friend, it is sad that we should only get together at such times. The last time we spoke it was under a stormy sky too."

"Yes, I recall," nodded the captain, getting up and embracing Sir Tristram, "The fight with Kzenzakai's undead host near the North Gate. A grim day." He paused for a moment, the two old warriors holding each other's gaze, exchanging more than words could say. "Will you both join me in a glass of wine?" Garin added, recovering his composure a little.

"Very kind of you," said Tristram, "It was a dark day, indeed, although we were victorious at the end."

"Due in no small part to you," observed Sir Garin

"And to your men, they fought bravely that day!" returned Sir Tristram.

"Indeed, they made me proud," sighed the Captain, pausing again but then shaking away whatever distraction had caught him. "But to business. I guess you wish to discuss two of my prisoners and their fate?" He pulled a bottle from a shelf and lifted down two glasses, pointedly not getting one for Luke.

"Yes, I believe Sea Breeze and Sula to be innocent of the murder," announced Sir Tristram. Sir Garin nodded as he poured the wine.

"I suspected you might," said Sir Garin, "But I have the eye-witness testimony of one of my longest serving sergeants. How can you come to believe them to be innocent?"

"I have tested them with the powers of my gods," said Sir Tristram, bowing his head slightly in reverence of his deity. "I know they tell no lie."

"And they are good and loyal followers of Odin are they?" wondered Sir Garin.

Sir Tristram sighed. "No, they follow the Olympian goddess of the Moon."

"I am sorry cousin," Sir Garin shook his head, "But you know that even if they were the most devout servants of your Lord Odin this cannot be considered in matters of law. We in the Guard long ago discovered that the magics of the gods serve may only their own vanity and the hopes of their cause, they are not always an instrument of pure truth. The gods might be powerful but the fallibility of their magic is dependent on the faith of the accused. It has long been our policy to disregard such evidence as truth saying spells and the testimony of the dead, whatever its form. I know your honour and honesty are beyond reproach, but I cannot ignore the King's Law for whatever reasons."

"Then mark the time and nature of the crime," countered Sir Tristram after a pause. He was obviously affronted by the suggestion his gods of justice

might be biased, or even fallible, but managed to control his ire. Sir Tristram believed Gavin and Sula were innocent but now realised more than his belief was required. The honour of the Guard and therefore the King himself was at stake. "Can you be sure of your man's eyes on the darkest night, through a blizzard and while his helmet was on?"

"What do you think they were here, in our city, to do?" Sir Garin changed the subject a little hastily. "What was their purpose in travelling so far?"

Sir Tristram frowned and did not respond.

"Sea Breeze the Monk seeks Garibaldi as a friend of the Earth people, and to help him raise his dead friends," replied Luke for Sir Tristram, "The Priestess Sula seeks Baron Garibaldi's assistance in defeating some menace that is threatening her city."

"A curious Priestess," muttered Sir Garin. He stood and walked over to a pile of sacks that lay behind the door. He pulled one open and tipped its contents to the floor. Out fell two bed rolls, a scimitar, several knives and fighting daggers, and the rest of Sula and Gavin's kit. Sir Garin picked up one of the fighting knives and a leather bundle. "Deadly knives, lock-picks, climbing gear and other tools for burglary. Curious tools for a Priestess, don't you think?"

Luke surveyed the tools presented to him, knowing a similar set of devices were in his own adventuring kit. "You could find such devices on almost any adventurer in the city. They do more than help burglars in their trade. And besides, regardless of what their intentions in the city were, the crime they stand accused of is murder. I can see no blood on those weapons."

"What Luke says is correct," agreed Sir Tristram, "Regardless of their true purposes in this city, you cannot falsely accuse them of murder to prevent them committing some other crime."

"What would you have me do?" demanded Sir Garin, a passion rising in his tone. "Should I accuse my sergeant of lying to me? Should I leave the terrible murder of a family of good standing and reputation to go unpunished?"

"Find the real murderers," countered Sir Tristram, his own anger rising. He was frustrated at his cousin's intransigence. "And do not use this crime as an excuse to take the liberty and lives of two innocent travellers to our fair city! What kind of a welcome is that?"

"Innocent you say? I wonder," replied Sir Garin, "What do we know of their purposes apart from what they have told us?"

"We have no reason to distrust them," said Luke.

"Have we not?" persisted Sir Garin, his tone a little more vicious. "They claim to be friends of Garibaldi. I think that reason enough."

"What are you saying?" It was Luke's turn to be affronted now. He felt himself to be the protector of his master's reputation in Dunromin.

"What do we know of Garibaldi, exactly?" demanded Sir Garin, "He appears from nowhere, a wanderer from the Wild Lands, and within a couple of years he's the favourite of the king and regularly auctioning such booty from his adventures as we have not seen in a long, long time."

"He has done great services to the city," said Sir Tristram, holding up a hand to calm Luke's temper. "Without his efforts we might all have fallen before Kzenzakai's Dark Hordes. Certainly, more of the southern Baronies and maybe even Dunromin itself would have been destroyed."

"I think there is something awry with all of that," continued Sir Garin, "Something leaves me puzzled by it all. The Great Kzenzakai's capital is Doomdank – far out upon the western shores of the Wild Lands. Why travel so far to wage his war? Why not annex the lands in between first? Why strike here? Why risk so much to attack us?"

"We are the most powerful trading nation in the near world," replied Sir Tristram, "Our king has made us great – the great attract the envy of those who wish for greatness. Perhaps no others within his reach offered such a rich prize."

"What of the Darkworld?" said Garin, "He travelled through great tracks of that deep place to get here, passing by civilisations that he might have plundered far more easily. What of the cities of the Grey Dwarves? Or the Deep Elves, the Orcs and the Deep Gnomes? Why not strike them first?"

"These are hardly soft targets," said Sir Tristram, "And we do not know what fights and pacts he might have made on his way over here. We cannot say that Dunromin should be a softer target than a Deep Elf city by any means, nor the vaults of the Orcs and all the others. Indeed, Trolls and Giants were his allies, who can guess the motives of such creatures?"

"What has this to do with Garibaldi?" demanded Luke.

"Garibaldi is Murmur, one of the last of the Murmur if not the last," answered Sir Garin, who had been present at many of the meetings between Garibaldi and the king and knew much of the Baron. "He is one of the last of an ancient tribe whom Kzenzakai persecuted many hundreds of years ago. Who can say what ancient hatred might have lain in Kzenzakai's heart for Garibaldi's brethren? What might he have thought when word reached his ears of the resurgence in the fortunes of the last of his old enemy? I wonder if Kzenzakai's quarry wasn't us or our city, but Garibaldi himself."

"That makes no sense," said Sir Tristram, "Why strike at Dunromin at all then? And why marshal a whole army and come with great dread and fear before you? Better to send an assassin in the night, to come and go without fanfare. No. To make war to get at Garibaldi alone makes no sense."

"Perhaps not," conceded Sir Garin, after a pause. "But I feel a deep unequity about it all. Something in my gut makes me distrusting of Garibaldi and his heroes. And the strangers he has brought among us. All these travellers from another world, friends of Garibaldi, popping up all over the place. Why are they here I wonder?"

"Garibaldi has sworn an oath of fealty to Lord Mordred the Mighty and his rule," said Luke, "He is as loyal a subject as any of your men. There is no reason to suspect his friends from Earth of any less honour."

"We might not know that," interrupted Sir Tristram, evidently offended that Luke would compare the honour of the likes of Sea Breeze and Sula to the reputation and standing of the Guard. "But what right does that give us to lock them up for murders they did not commit?"

"Murders for which they stand accused by a worthy accuser," Sir Garin corrected him, "I have passed judgement on them already. There can be no doubt in the matter."

The Guard Captain sat back down and refreshed his glass, offering the bottle to Sir Tristram, who shook his head. The Guard captain took up his pipe once more and leant back in his chair.

"I have known you well for many years, dear cousin," sighed Sir Tristram, lowering his voice and watching the Guard Captain carefully. "And I think I can read you well. Something had passed before we got here. Something that has made you think twice about all of this." The old knight raised a finger and waved it at the door. "When we arrived, you were deep in thought. Something I think is preying on your mind, on your conscience perhaps? Do you really still believe Sea Breeze and Sula murdered those Gnomes?"

Sir Garin returned Sir Tristram's stare for a short while, toying on his pipe in thought. Then he turned to Luke. "Luke, Herald of Garibaldi, do you vouch for their trustworthiness?"

"I was charged by Garibaldi some time ago to look after all Earth people coming to our city," replied Luke, "I would vouch for them with my life and my honour."

Garin nodded, puffing little folds of smoke out of the side of his mouth. His eyes betrayed nothing of whether he thought Luke's honour worth a jot or not. Probably not, Luke would have said, on balance. But he was the Herald of Garibaldi. He was trusted by a powerful baron and to question his honour was, perhaps, to question his master's.

"If I was to bind them over into your keeping, could I count on you to make sure they did not then attempt to evade the justice of the king?" asked the Captain.

"Absolutely," replied Luke, sitting up and giving the Captain what he thought was a sincere stare. He hoped his appearance did not betray the sudden doubt in his heart.

"They are my only suspects," explained Garin, "I have nothing else that suggests they are not to blame other than your arguments. A prisoner in my cell is worth more than the theories of their confederates." Tristram seemed to bristle at this word but said nothing. "I want Sula and Sea Breeze to find the guilty party if it is indeed not they. I will give them one week. I expect you to help them in this. On your honour and that of your master. Make sure what they do is legitimate and any discoveries they make are a true and accurate record of what really happened last night. Would you see that they found the real party guilty of this terrible murder?"

"Yes, sir," said Luke.

"And if they betrayed you?" asked Sir Garin.

"If they fled the city I would hunt them down and kill them," replied Luke without a pause, "I may as well do it properly now he was in it. He desperately hoped Garibaldi's faith in him was up to the task. "All of Baron Garibaldi's supporters would. And then I would return myself to your custody for your judgement on my naivety."

Sir Garin nodded slowly, considering his options. The fire crackled and the shouts and bustle of the world outside the room invaded the peace slightly. The Guard Captain was considering something that affected him deeply. Something that was not only a question of judgement and of trust and justice, but also one of honour. In even considering this course of action he was opening his whole regiment, his life to question. His own honour, as well as that of the regiment and, ultimately, the king was being put on the line.

"It is time for plain speaking," he announced at last. He leaned forwards and looked to Sir Tristram again. "For reasons I do not fully understand I have begun to suspect my loyal sergeant has misled me in this matter. Why and to what end I do not know, but I have sent him away for the time being. I am sure he will see his error and make amends at some point. In the mean time I will release Sula and Sea Breeze to your custody, Luke son of Ajax, yours and yours alone. You will be guilty of any crimes they have committed or do commit in the future. You will stay with them and make sure they find out what really happened with these gnomes. And bring me the name of the creature that slaughtered them. In one week from today at the very latest, you will present Sea Breeze, Sula and yourself here, to me. If you have not found the real culprit then you will all be held responsible for the murder, and you will all hang. Do I make myself clear?"

Luke paused. Inside he felt his whole being recoil from the situation, his mind span and the room, so snug and cosy, felt cold as ice. In twelve short hours he had gone from selling wine to putting his life at risk on the word of strangers and nothing more than a gut feeling. Was he really that stupid? This

went against everything he had learned on the streets; everything that he had learned growing up relying on nothing but his wits and the speed of his feet.

But then this was what the stories said you had to do, if you wanted to be a knight, wasn't it? This was truth and honour. The glory of the selfless quest. This was what it meant to hold yourself to a higher standard than you would, could ever expect of anyone else.

"You do," said Luke grimly, trying to keep the panic from his voice. Is this what the heroes felt when they pledged to do or die? Is this what bravery felt like? He was terrified. "We will abide by your ruling. You have my word."

## **Chapter 15 – Luke the Wine Merchant**

Gavin was elated to be let out of the cell at last and readily agreed to the conditions of his release, only half listening to the news and intricacies of what Luke was telling him. Part of his brain wondered how on earth he might find the real murderers but he certainly saw no issue in being bound over to Luke's protection. In his eagerness to be free of the cell, to be warm again, he would have agreed to anything. He did not see how pale Luke had become, how firmly the young man insisted that Sea Breeze and Sula pledge to bend their every moment to finding the real murderer. Sula kept her peace throughout the rather rapid negotiation and followed quietly as they were led away from the grim gaol.

Once out of earshot they were effusive in their thanks to their saviours and soon discovered that Sir Tristram suspected they owed a great deal of Sir Garin's leniency to Gecko's testimony. Gecko was promised rich rewards for his loyalty and the company headed off in a much better mood. They walked Sir Tristram back to his decaying townhouse and left him there, promising to keep him updated on their progress. Luke, preoccupied and watchful but with Gecko following cheerfully on behind, keen to make good on his contract, took the two stinking ex-prisoners home. People gave them a wide berth as they walked, quite a few making faces at the smell or passing a comment or two. Gavin half registered that a medieval city should smell like this all the time but his brain was still fogged with the cold. He remembered little of the journey until they arrived at what appeared to be their destination.

They walked back halfway across the city, slipping on the ice and filthy slush that the snow had become, beyond Lady Mary's and almost as far as the Bawdy Wench. They arrived at last at the Wine Merchant's business that Luke called home. The modest sized building from which Elegrin and Lance ran their wine importation business was a newly built three-storey, stone building with an attic. It was situated on the junction of two streets in an irregular plaza called Round Square, not far from where they had first met Gecko. The frontage was impressive; broad and tall wall with windows and a long balcony above. There was a rather anaesthetic tower with narrow windows built into the centre of the building and next to this a wide passage through to a courtyard beyond. This outside area was a store for probably empty barrels and led to a small yard and large access to the huge cellar. The ground floor was storage and a wide room of samples and bottles for entertaining customers and doing business. The first floor was the living rooms and kitchen for the few individuals that lived there. The second floor was a set of small rooms that served as Lance, Elegrin and Luke's bed chambers. The attics contained several small rooms that could serve any purpose, but were currently empty.

The staff consisted of three store-men and a housekeeper-come-cook called Old May, none of whom lived on the premises. When the group arrived the store-men were unloading a large cart that had brought a fresh load of barrels of wine up from the docks. Sula and Gavin were sent upstairs, with Old May, to clean themselves, warm up by the fire and get some hot food inside them. Gecko went with them while Luke remained downstairs to catch up with business.

Once washed and in dry clothes, established by a roaring fire with some



hot mulled wine, Gavin and Sula considered their position.

That they had had been very lucky was beyond doubt, and that they owed a great deal to Sir Tristram, Luke and Gecko was not to be disputed. Their purses were empty when they were returned to them, a matter Gavin had thought prudent to let lie for the time being. They had all the rest of their kit, his magical Ring of Protection and other magical items included, returned to them. Gavin suspected this was a very unusual turn of affairs given the normal manner in which the gaolers seemed to manage the inmates' possessions.

"So, we must find out who really killed those gnomes as quickly as possible," observed Gavin, his mind only just starting to work again after the numbing cold of his incarceration.

"I think the sergeant who was the witness must have more to tell on that matter," said Sula, "We need to find out where they sent him. I say we should start with him!" They were speaking in Frapper and Sula was more animated than she had been in the street, although she didn't seem angry. There was a coldness to her manner, clinical almost, that was more intimidating than her usual hot temper.

"He's been sent away for that very reason I suspect," said Gavin, "I'm guessing that he has been silenced such that he might not bring the regiment into further disrepute. Even if we could interrogate him I doubt he would tell us the truth and we have no means ourselves to test his words with magic. No, I think we'll have to find out what he really saw, or didn't see, without his assistance."

Sula didn't respond but frowned, perhaps not understanding why they couldn't track the man down or perhaps wondering how else they might start their search. At this point Luke came upstairs, sat down and poured himself a mulled wine.

"Twenty barrels of Loom's finest just down the river from the High Passes," he announced, evidently very pleased with himself. "They'll fetch a pretty penny on the market, certainly to the higher-class establishments in the Old City. Indeed, I've sold half of them already at a steady profit." He was determined to retain his carefree appearance. Inside he was more terrified that Sea Breeze and Sula were deceiving him than he could ever have explained.

"The wine business is good then?" asked Gavin.

"Very much so," replied Luke, "And we shall make our fortunes before it settles down. Elegrin is a good judge of a marketable vintage and Lance can recognise a quick route to market when he sees one."

"Wine importers or warriors and mystics I wonder?" asked Gavin, "I thought you were adventurers, not businessmen."

"We're both," replied Luke, trying not to show his annoyance. "When Kzenzakai invaded he cleared the paths between us and the lands of the Dwarves in the Blue Mountains, and then through their high passes to the wine producing areas of the forests of Loom. When Garibaldi got rid of Kzenzakai he placed watch forts all along the trade route before any monsters could move back in. It's not safe by a long way, but it's a lot better than it was. There's loads of produce and merchantable items coming through now – the Barony of Garibaldi is the gateway to the western Dwarf Realms of the Blue Mountains and the Elf Realm of Loom beyond. There's more coming through there now than ever came through the more easterly routes over Long Drop Pass. Wine is just one of many businesses that are taking advantage. Elven lace, silks, herbs. You name it. And the more that comes through, the safer it gets. Even dwarven cooking utensils are coming through. Pots and pans!"

"The local providers can't be happy," observed Gavin.

"There aren't any," said Luke, "Not with wine and beer anyway. There's something strange about the land around here that while it's fertile and grows all kinds of food, grapes grow withered and poor. Dunromin wine isn't fit for cooking vinegar. The beer isn't much better, although the local grain ale is drinkable if you flavour it a bit. All the wines and ales are imported from at least two days travel away. Dunromin's wines and ales are infamous the world over."

"Astonishing," muttered Gavin, wondering what weird magic might have made such a sad state of affairs. From walking around the city Gavin had noticed that Dunromin's wealth was very much based on trade rather than conquest – there were very few soldiers, military buildings and such, but lots of merchants, shops and goods on the move. This made sense if they could never be completely self-sufficient in something as necessary to a medieval economy as wine and ale. "So, with this new trade route open you are the only ones bringing in the wine?"

"At present yes, but it won't last," said Luke, "At the moment we can charge the old prices at the new costs. It's excellent trade. But it's already drawing in. Wine from the southern baronies is getting cheaper as they can see what's happening. At the moment we're buying that up too and importing it next to the expensive stuff. It's making us a fortune but we're not so stupid as to think it will last forever."

"Boom and bust," muttered Gavin, "So the sooner we can find out who killed the gnomes the sooner we can head off to the Barony of Garibaldi and you can concentrate on your business?"

"Yes," agreed Luke, reluctant to be reminded of the gravity of their situation. "We have a week. We must start our investigations as soon as possible. Are you feeling better?"

"Quite," replied Gavin, "I think I am made of sterner stuff than I give myself credit for. Sula?"

"I am well," she replied, now wearing a thicker woollen cloak over her priestess's robes, all serving to hide her weapons once more. After washing they had both put on clean clothes, Old May taking their soiled garments to wash. It was lucky that the servants of the Moon took their personal hygiene so seriously as to have a spare set of clothes.

"I have some ideas," announced Gavin, he had been thinking back about all the cop shows and detective films he had watched on Earth. While he was by no means a detective of any merit, he felt sure by combining the methods he had seen used he would be able to do something better than the people of Dunromin were capable of. Plus, he had been thinking about what was possible by careful use of the magic that lay all around him in this D&D world.

"Where to start then?" asked Luke.

"Well, there are three witnesses that have yet to be consulted," observed Gavin, "I believe we only need a reasonable level cleric and we can cast a Speak With Dead spell. That should render us some answers pretty quickly."

Luke shook his head. "All the dead of the city are taken to the Temple of Death for preparation for their final journey. The Black Carts collect the bodies every morning. The priests of that temple take a dim view of any disturbance of the dead. They will not permit us to cast any kind of spell like that around them."

Gavin frowned. "Really? Can't we cast it from here? Surely Garibaldi's friends at the Temple of Olympus would-"

"They would not," Luke interrupted, "It is a matter of great import for the officials of one temple not to intrude upon the sacred rites of another. You will find no one willing to go against the wishes of the Death Men. Whilst in the city at least, probably nowhere in the Land."

Gavin sighed. A whole avenue shut off to him! He had put a lot of hope in that. He shouldn't be so smug; he needed to stay realistic. "Well, a look at the crime scene would help," he suggested, "Surely we could have a look around there? It'll allow us to see what the hell we're supposed to have done at least."

"I am sure that could be arranged," said Luke, "Gecko, will you take a message to Sir Garin? Tell him we need a note to allow us to look around the gnome's home. Meet us there when you have it."

The street urchin nodded and ran off. Luke stood and retrieved his warm cloak from its hanger behind the door, he then awaited the others. Gavin got up as well, but Sula was reluctant to leave the fire's warmth after her ordeal that morning. In the end Luke and Gavin left without her.

## **Chapter 16 – Crime Scene Investigation**

When they got to the small gnomish jewellers it was late afternoon and the darkness of dusk was close to falling on the city. Lights were shining from welcoming doorways and there was no sign of any more snow. The fall from the previous night had been trodden to slush on the roads and by-ways, but still lay thick on the roofs and wall tops. The streets still teemed with life, the never-ending whirl of city business at all levels, but as the shadows lengthened the character of the travellers seemed to darken.

Gavin felt he understood the city better now and was getting a keener eye for the subtle signs and hints that the other citizens let slip as they went about their business. He was beginning to understand who was from what walk of life. He could now tell his tradesmen from his merchants, and his thieves from his adventurers.

The gnomes' house was a fairly normal store front, much the same as many they had seen around the city. It was only two floors high and over-looked by three-storey buildings on either side. The ground floor was of well-dressed

stone with heavily barred and shuttered windows. The upper floor was less robust and some smaller windows in the roof suggested there were rooms in the attic as well.

A guardsman wearing the uniform of the Storm Regiment stamped his feet to keep warm by the front door but there was no other sign that this was a crime scene. Gavin couldn't help wondering if there shouldn't be some yellow tape over the doors and windows but this was something he realised was unlikely in such an ancient setting. In fact, having any sentry at all at the place seemed strangely modern. He would have to learn more of the city's legal procedures and policing methods.

Gecko was waiting for them and had already given the guardsman the letter from Captain Garin. They were allowed into the dark house without too much ado. As they entered Gavin advised them to touch nothing and watch even what they were treading on. His first problem was light, as the house was in darkness. With the windows closed and shuttered it was as dark as a tomb inside. Despite the cold there was a warm smell of spices like an air freshener in there, but below that the acrid smell of blood and death pervaded the whole place.

Suddenly the whole room was bathed in bright, white light. Gavin blinked for a few moments and then realised Luke was holding a small rod in his hand, on the end of which was a glowing orb of furious intensity. Gavin realised at once that this must be a Continual Light spell cast upon a small artificial torch like a pen. As his eyes got used to the brilliance of the spell he noticed a thick cloth bag that Luke seemed to have pulled it from. Gavin saw this was a very useful thing for anyone to have and made a mental note to get one himself.

In the light they could see they were in a room laid out like any jewellery store anywhere. Glass cases lined the walls with locked panels. They were all empty and showed no signs of forced entry. At the back of the shop a door lead into a back room that was fitted out as a work shop and general store room. There was a door at the back that was heavily barred and locked tight. Simple domestic stairs lead up and down from the left side of the back room. There was a fireplace here but the grate was dark and cold. At the bottom of the stairs was a shadow of dried blood that seemed to have pooled from someone laid on the second or third step up. The blood had collected at the bottom of the stairs and a number of footprints, all large and evidently from boots of several kinds had walked through it, leaving tracks hither and thither. Gavin bent down and examined the pooled blood, looking for anything that might seem odd or out of place. He wasn't really sure what he might discern but he quickly saw a small hand print, small even for a gnome, on the wall by the pool of gore. He then determined there were smaller footprints muddled with the bigger ones, heading down towards the cellar steps. He observed these to Luke.

They decided to check the cellar first and found themselves in a low-ceilinged workspace with boxes, crates and tools piled and hung around a small forge and some complicated apparatus that looked like a mould of some kind. In one wall there was what had evidently been a well-hidden but large strong room. The door hung open, the shelves inside were empty. They also soon found another pool of blood there, in a corner away from the stair bottom behind a pile of tools and a rack laid on its side. The pool was small and Gavin guessed this was where the child had hidden and had been found.

He looked closely around the door to the strong-room. There was no sign of violence here and the boxes and bags that were left inside suggested the thieves had spent some time cleaning it out. This made him consider again the story of the Sergeant and realised it did not bear out his witness.

"If the Sergeant saw the intruders kill the gnomes and chased them away, how did they have time to chase the boy down here and then ransack the strong-

room after killing them all?" wondered Gavin, "I think they killed the gnomes and then took what they wanted at their leisure."

"Unless the murderers came down here first were disturbed by the gnomes while clearing out the strong-room?" asked Luke.

"Then why did the boy run down here and hide after he found the body on the stairs up there?" asked Gavin, "He would have run upwards if they were already down here. No. The murders were done first."

Gavin examined the large strong-room door closely, specifically around the intricate lock.

"Luke, how long would it take someone to pick a lock like this?" he wondered.

Luke blushed slightly. "What makes you think I would know anything about picking locks?" he asked.

"Stop pissing about," sighed Gavin, "How long? And wouldn't you leave some sign that you had done it? Scratches on the metal or something?"

Luke shrugged, looking over the door quickly. "You might leave a sign, yes. But it's hard iron, not easy to scratch. It would take ages though, and some specialised tools. I couldn't open it with my kit," confessed Luke, "Nor Sula with hers," he added, giving Gavin a knowing look.

Gavin smiled and nodded. "Then they had the keys or they knew what they would be coming up against and had brought the right tools."

They gave the room another quick look around and then headed back upstairs and up again. This time they had to crouch as the ceiling was barely five feet high, as would suit gnomes. This was evidently the living area and kitchen, with the access down only through a heavy door that was also unlocked. They found the last pool of blood here, guessing it to be the jeweller himself that had died fighting the intruders here. A table was upturned and there was broken crockery and a broken chair strewn around the room. Gavin quickly located a fighting knife under a cabinet as well, guessing it had been kicked there in the scuffle and missed by the Guard. Luke confirmed it was of gnomish style, the gnomes of the land apparently enjoying knife-fights as a popular sport. There was a streak of red blood down the blade which indicated that the jeweller had got some payback from his attackers.

They continued up into the attic and found three bedrooms there, comfortable enough if you were only three feet tall, one evidently a guest room and showing no signs of recent use. The bedclothes in the other two rooms were strewn about the beds and Gavin quickly found the scabbard for the fighting knife by the larger of the two beds. He also found some more blood on the sheets, which he guessed to probably belong to the gnome due to its location in the centre of the bed.

They also found the window to the back of the guest room had been forced. Snow had blown in and melted about the floor, leaving a pool of water. They looked out and onto the roof but the snow had fallen since it was used and obliterated any tracks. As they were about to give up and head back down Gavin noticed one more significant clue. There was a drop of dried blood on the inside of the window, smeared slightly as if it had been made by a hand pushing the window, or holding it in place. Gavin had a sudden moment of clarity.

"They left the same way they arrived," he murmured, "The gnome got one of them as they fought. He didn't kill him but he made him bleed. He dropped this blood as he left."

Gavin turned and hurried back downstairs to the front door again. He looked closely now at the heavy metal bars that held the door shut and at how they had been bent. The metal was bent heavily back, the doorframe shattered around the fixing pins with the splintered wood scattered about the inside of the

doorway. Even under the snow outside he found no shards of wood outside the door. The door had been battered down from the outside. Whoever smashed the door down, they didn't have anything to do with the person or persons who had come in and left by the roof.

"I think I've seen enough," said Gavin, acutely aware the Storm Guardsman was stood at the door watching and listening to everything. "Come on, I want to have a look at the bodies next, if the Death Men at the temple will let us?"

The party of would-be detectives made their way back in the darkness to Luke's business. It was no use calling on the Temple of Death at that hour, the temple and the graveyard gates would be locked tight. Instead they thought a discussion and a glass or two of wine before a warm bed would be a better plan. All the way home Gavin refused to discuss what they had found.

At last they were sat around the table again, with Sula. Old May and the store-men had left for the night and Luke locked up his stock room and the doors, heavy shutters, bars and padlocks took a long time to sort out. Dunromin was not a place to take the security of your business lightly. They then settled by the fire to discuss their findings. Luke was keen to find out what Gavin thought he had found and Gecko too had been allowed to stay, a bed being made for him from some rugs and blanket by the fire.

"The burglars came in by the roof," said Gavin, "The window lock had been jemmied, even I could tell that. They then attacked the gnome in his bed, maybe trying at first to force him into giving them the keys, maybe just trying to kill him to keep him quiet."

"How do you know that?" asked Gecko.

"They would have to be a pretty poor killer to fail to kill two gnomes in their sleep," said Gavin, "I think they awoke them to find out where the keys were. Maybe holding a knife to the wife to force the jeweller to reveal his keys. But it went wrong. For whatever reason the jeweller was allowed to get to his knife. The wife and the kid ran downstairs while the gnome fought the intruders. The fight spread to the middle floor but the burglars were too good for the gnome. With the husband dead and bleeding on the bed, they then caught the wife at the bottom of the stairs and killed her there. And then they chased the kid to the cellar and got him there. With all the doors locked and windows barred the poor kid had no way out – they had him trapped."

"Nasty," muttered Luke.

"Yes, very," agreed Gavin, "They didn't think twice about killing the lot of them. I don't think they ever intended to let any of them live. Anyway, with the family out of the way the robbers could then take their time to find the keys if they hadn't already found out where they were." Gavin paused to consider this. It didn't matter whether the gnome had given up the keys or not but it bothered him. He wondered if the attackers had been as ready to torture a mother in front of her child? They were dealing with some pretty nasty people. He continued, "So, they got the keys, opened the strong room and helped themselves. When they had everything they wanted, they left the way they came, out by the roof, leaving one drop of blood on the window frame." Gavin nodded to himself and frowned. "That was their plan – in and out, no sign of them anywhere visible from the street. No one should have been any the wiser until the jeweller didn't open the next day. By that time, they would be away, free and safe, but something else went on."

"But the Sergeant saw them and gave chase," said Luke, "So they were blown."

"Nope," said Gavin, "I don't think the Sergeant saw anything. That's the bit I can't figure out yet."

"What do you mean?" asked Luke.

"The front door was forced from the outside," replied Gavin, "Probably by the Sergeant or his men. The back of that building is on an enclosed square. There's no way a sergeant would have seen the burglars on the roof from street level in that blizzard. He went in after they had gone, or at least while they were escaping. I think seeing them and chasing them was completely made up. He was lying about all of that."

"I don't understand?" said Sula, "Why would he lie about that?"

"That's the big question," said Gavin, "Or at least one of them. The other one is why did the Sergeant knock in the door? What made him think the place was being robbed?"

"Are you sure it was the Sergeant?" asked Luke.

"It can't have been the murderers," said Gavin, "Knocking the door in would have woken up the whole street and they wouldn't have had time to do anything. No, the door must have been knocked in after everything else was cleared out. And I can't see why anyone else would knock the door in and then scarper. No. But I still don't understand why the idiot got it into his head to smash the door down?"

"Maybe he saw something inside?" suggested Gecko.

"There was no light in the front shop area," Gavin was frowning, trying to remember. There had been no lamps, broken or otherwise, and only the cold grate in the back. "And any light beyond that would just be the normal shop light - nothing suspicious in that. The showcases would have been empty, all the goods would have been put away in the strong-room every night. There was nothing there to attract anyone's attention from the front. Nothing at all. So why did the daft bastard batter the door down?"

The others remained silent, each trying to catch up with Gavin's reasoning. Luke was struggling to figure out how Gavin was deducing all this, following through on his suggestions, trying to figure out how Gavin was linking the different ideas together. It was like a clever confidence trick, leaving little clues and hints for the target to follow, except Gavin was explaining how he was figuring it all out. Luke felt a bit silly, if he was honest with himself, that he hadn't thought of this before. It seemed so obvious when it was all laid out in front of him like this, but Luke had seen the same things as Gavin, Gavin had even pointed some of them out to him, like the blood on the window. But Luke hadn't made the connection at all.

For Sula the approach was more cynical. Like Luke, she understood how Gavin was linking things together once they were pointed out to her. Unlike Luke she did not take things on face value. Her experiences had led her to distrust Gavin's motives and she was examining the evidence herself, trying to work out if there could be another explanation. There might be, but she couldn't think of it at that moment. She yawned, still feeling unwell after their time in the freezing prison cell.

"I think we have two definite things going on here, but we don't know if they're related or coincidence," Gavin muttered. He was frowning at his glass of wine now, it wasn't clear if he was even aware he was thinking out loud. "The burglars broke in some time after the gnomes had gone to bed, but before midnight. They killed all the gnomes, found the keys and took what they wanted and then they left through the roof, back the way they came, out the attic window and away. Then, at some later time, for some unknown reason, the sergeant battered the door down. Why would he do that? Maybe through a tip-off. Or maybe he was on a separate mission all of his own. Anyway, he found the bodies and the evidence of the burglary and raised the alarm. And then he makes up the whole thing about chasing the burglars to explain what he was

doing. And for some reason he has made up this story to blame us for it. But why would he do that? Why us? Was he deliberately targeting us or were we just a convenient excuse? We've only been in the city one day, how can he even know about us, never mind want to target us in such an elaborate scheme? It's very strange. A lot of it just doesn't make sense at all."

"My mind is spinning," muttered Luke, frowning as he processed the different pieces of information. He couldn't for the life of him come up with an alternative that made any more sense. "How did you work all that out?"

"Elementary, my dear Luke," smiled Gavin, then realised that no one on Barnaynia could have got the joke. No one would have been exposed to any detective stories or cop shows – no one would understand evidence-based deductive reasoning in the context he did, even from his less than intensive observations of terrestrial TV Detective shows. Had anyone even heard of the Scientific Method? Or even the word "evidence"? He sighed, reminding himself not to get too cocky. "I'm just looking for things that look odd, and trying to explain them I think. But we still have a lot of questions unanswered. I wonder how many burglars there were?"

"There were a lot of tracks in the blood," observed Luke, remembering the mess at the bottom of the stairs. "Could we tell from that?"

"I think they were mostly guardsmen," said Gavin. "I can't think of a way of telling who left what print from that mess." He then paused to consider what he had seen so far. "How did the wife and child get passed the burglars and down the stairs while the jeweller fought them off do you think?"

Luke considered this and then nodded. "It would be difficult, impossible maybe, for the jeweller to occupy more than one attacker at a time. Unless he was in the doorway."

"Yes, that makes sense," agreed Gavin, "If it was one burglar, or at least only one that was up for a fight, then they couldn't have stopped the wife and kid. They would have been pretty much occupied by the jeweller himself. When we have a look at those bodies tomorrow we should find all the wounds were made by one weapon, or something like that. Or not." He sighed. "How on earth can you tell two sword slashes apart, or whatever weapon they used? I'm not sure if we would be able to determine if there was any more than one attacker from the wounds. We might get lucky I guess, but I don't know. How else can we tell how many of them there were?"

They fell silent, each considering the horror of the previous night in that little house. The gnome's wife and child fleeing in panic. Perhaps they saw their husband and father slain, perhaps they just heard his last gasp. Gavin shivered. Having seen the simple home of the gnomes and the little things that made their lives so real and intimate he found himself seething with anger at the burglar who had hacked them down. Regardless of the Captain's instructions Gavin now wanted to find these criminals for himself. He wanted to solve the crime for his own sense of justice and for the vengeance of the gnomes in that little shop. He would do nothing else until they were brought to justice.

But how? He was no detective. He was clutching at straws. His observations might have impressed Luke but Gavin knew he was out of his depth. The raw pain of the cold of the cell was still fresh in his mind, the sudden terror of hearing he had been sentenced to death still knotted his stomach. Who was he trying to fool? Whatever had happened, he had no idea if he had any chance of proving his innocence. And now Luke's life was on the line as well. He suddenly felt hopeless, lonely and a long way from home. Thoughts of his family, his mother, drifted unbidden into his mind and he felt tears swelling in him, his nose itching.

His self-pity was disturbed by the soft snoring of Gecko in his makeshift bed. Realising the lateness of the hour Luke suggested they should all retire for

the night. Gavin agreed, feeling very tired and aching in every muscle. Sula merely nodded. Luke showed them up the stairs to the next floor; Sula to Elegrin's bedroom, Gavin to Lance's.

Lance's room was comfortably furnished, with racks for armour and weapons and a number of trophies and keep-sakes hung on the walls. On the dressing table were some perfumes and lotions that suggested Lance liked to play the part of a successful businessman when in the city. The clothes in the wardrobe suggested a broader physique than Gavin, but of approximately the same height, perhaps slightly shorter. The clothes were stylish and expensive and Gavin noticed some leather armour on a rack too. It seemed Lance was perhaps an adventuring thief, sometimes called a Rogue, as well as a warrior, judging by the style of his equipment. Perhaps that fitted with being brought up in a brothel.

## Chapter 17 – Heroes Return

Gavin awoke the following morning between clean sheets, snug and warm in a room heated by a cheerful fire in a grate in the corner. He could hear the splat of sleet against the window, the noise of talking and the creak of movement downstairs. He guessed that someone had come in to light the fire for him but he ignored the worry that he had slept through this disturbance and he revelled in contentment for a while. This was the closest thing to a proper, European bed he had been in for far too long. In Skull Crag his bed had been a mat on the floor, his pillow a round chunk of wood. On the boat he had used a hammock. Besides toilet paper and a flushing toilet this was probably the one thing he missed most from home. He stopped himself before his mind wandered too far and made him morose. His muscles ached but reminded him that he should be doing his morning exercise, the pain from his wounds were still dulled by Sula's magic.

Despite his comfort, his body's old habits won and he got up, washed at a bowl of clean water by the window and headed downstairs. He found the others, except Sula who would still be doing her morning meditations, seated around the table in the common room discussing business and eating breakfast. Old May passed Gavin a bowl of bread and porridge and sent one of her daughters upstairs to clean his room. The porridge was hot but the bread only slightly warmed by it, evidently not fresh from the oven that day

"What's on for today then?" asked Luke, his own porridge bowl empty and a few scant crumbs marking the passing of his bread. "Still planning to head to the graveyard? It's a filthy morning out there. Ice and sleet since before dawn."

Gavin shrugged. "We can wait. To be honest I'm not sure what we could tell from the bodies without some pretty complex forensics. I was hoping we might be able to determine what sort of weapons killed them but the more I think about it the less sure I am I will be able to tell. I'm no forensic pathologist."

Luke frowned. "I have no idea what you're talking about?"

Gavin nodded. He had been thinking out loud, not really considering his use of words. He once more peered over the gulf between his memories and his currently realities. Memories of sitting on a warm sofa watching Sunday night detective dramas with his mother and father swept through his mind unbidden. He tried to distract himself.

"A forensic pathologist is an expert in examining dead bodies for the cause of death," Gavin explained, trying to keep the pain from his voice, worried Luke would think of it as frustration with him. The last thing Gavin wished to do was to offend his saviour. "They can look at the marks and details left behind and tell all sorts of things about how the person died, what happened to them before and after they died. They have ways of telling when wounds were suffered, whether before or after death, what actually killed the person. If they can look inside a

corpse they can tell all sorts of other things about what the victim did in the hours before they died. All sorts of stuff like that."

Luke nodded. He was sure there must be someone in the city who could do things like that but he couldn't think of anyone. His own knowledge of magic was limited to what he had heard and what he had observed. "Can we afford to waste any time?" He wondered. Gavin just shrugged.

"What else is there to do then?" asked Gecko.

"With no access to the witness I'm not sure. We'll have to come at it from another angle, we need another avenue to investigate." Gavin considered this for a while, running over the same things he had wondered about as he fell asleep the night before. He wasn't sure how to phrase his next question. "We know, for instance, that the burglar who killed the gnomes also took a quantity of jewellery and gems. If we could find out what he took we might be able to find out if any of it has turned up on the market anywhere. Whoever was selling it might know bit more if we asked them in the right way."

Luke sat back, watching Gavin closely. Gecko was less careful about what he said.

"We can ask at the Guild," he said, addressing his remark to Luke, who glared back at him.

Gavin turned to look at Luke, his face was a picture of innocence but inside he wanted to laugh at Gecko's naiveté. "What does he mean? Which Guild?"

Luke sighed and leaned back into the table. It was one of those open secrets he supposed. Everyone knew about the Old Street Guild, by which Gecko meant the Thieves' Guild, which was the too-civilised name for the core of organised crime that fed off the vulnerable underbelly of the city. Or rather the Guilds, for there were at least three of them in Dunromin.

"Your diminutive idiot there is referring to the Western Old Guild," replied Luke, and then added "Although I am not sure such a thing really exists." Which was a lie for the benefit of the others in the room. His manner suggested he knew full well that everyone realised he was a member of the Poorhouse Guild but would never admit it. Old May and her daughters were being studiously busy but no doubt listening to every word. That was the trouble with the Guilds; anyone might be a member of one of them, any one of them. You never knew where loyalties lay. He had to be very careful.

"Ah," said Gavin. No surprises there then. Every fantasy city should have a Thieves' Guild, it went with the territory. Gavin had suspected as much and had thought that Luke might know a bit more about it. His next question was lost however as strange events overtook the small room.

Gavin felt it first and reacted the most, Luke might have felt it but didn't react, being more used to it. All the hairs stood up on the back of Gavin's neck. His mind was pricked by a sudden, widening sense of dread. His stomach tightened and he instinctively jumped to his feet in a defensive stance, his chair tipped over onto the floor behind him.

Something was happening to the room and even as Gavin registered it was something highly magical, the air before him was starting to blur and shimmer. The view of the room beyond the centre of the open space to the left of the table started to change and bend, the shapes of things around the space deforming. These dull coloured patterns swarmed and pulsed and then started to solidify into another shape. An amorphous mass was forming in the air next to them, a large mass. As the colours swirled they started to define two figures, both man-size, both stood, calmly, one with his hand on the other's shoulder. The words 'Teleport Spell' were forming in Gavin's head even as the colours stopped spinning and there were two people stood in the room before him,

apparently as calm and content as if they had been stood there for some time. Gavin shivered, a cold draft had whistled around the room as if a door had been opened; the temperature had dropped a little.

"It's good to be home," said a voice cheerily, "It's damn cold in Garibaldi's castle I can tell you. Luke old man! Glad I caught you in. Got any wine open?"

The speaking figure was an elf, at least Gavin thought he looked like an elf. In fact, he looked exactly like an elf; a proper elf, the kind of elf Tolkien wrote about in the endless navel-gazing books that came after his main trilogy. The elf stood about five and a half feet tall and wore a grey cloak of soft, glistening material like woollen spiders' web. This was clasped at his shoulder by a large brooch of green enamel shaped in a rosette pattern. Beneath the cloak Gavin could see elegantly shaped interlocking plates of complex armour and an intricately decorated sword-belt. A long sword with an elaborate pommel hung at his side and next to it a leather tube holding a wand of some sort. Over his back was a small pack with a long bow strapped to it, and a quiver hung low on his left side, behind a kite-shaped shield that was decorated with an abstract mixture of suns and moons. His head was covered by a great helm, his visor open. Two slender hands in heavy, ugly gauntlets reached up and lifted off the helm as he spoke. The gauntlets didn't match the rest of the armour – they looked more dwarven in their manufacture. Beneath the helm was a tall, slim head, not handsome but refined. Sparkling, inquisitive eyes of a very dark blue twinkled beneath a long main of straight, strawberry blond hair. Blond elves were uncommon, Gavin knew, but not unknown.

The elf's companion was of a less fantastic appearance. An unshaven young man of somewhat plain apparel with dark eyes and nearly black hair, uncut and dirty, hanging as far as his shoulders. He wore comfortable cotton clothes like Luke, but coloured dark grey and black, with soft grey felt boots. He had a cloak on that shimmered, appearing both black and silver and glass-like, depending how the light fell on it. He too had a long sword at his side, with a bow over his shoulder and quiver by his side. One hand he rested on the elf's shoulder, the other gripped the top of a bulging leather sack.

"A bit early for wine, surely?" beamed Luke, "And you forget yourself, we have company!"

The elf started and looked around at Gavin and Gecko. Gavin very much got the impression the man, for the other was no elf, had noticed them already but had dismissed them as posing no threat.

"Oh, pardon me!" exclaimed the elf, his jubilation not dropping for a moment. Gavin had the feeling spending too long with this elf could be quite tiresome. "I do apologise good sir, pray allow me to introduce myself. I am Elegrin Utherassell of Loom, adventurer, knight, wizard and purveyor of fine wines. The finest wines indeed!" Elegrin bowed courteously and smiled.

"Delighted I am sure," replied Gavin, relaxing a little, disarmed by the elf's manner despite his warlike dress. "My name is Sea Breeze, a Monk of the Moon Goddess, recently arrived from Skull Crag. This is Gecko, my guide and a native of the city."

Gavin was taking in more detail now – these newcomers had something more sinister about them. He now noticed tears and repairs in their clothes, stains and markers of many combats. What could only be dried blood, of red and black varieties, was obvious in the cracks and folds of their armour and capes. It looked like their life had been a grim one and their slightly pale, drawn expressions suggested it had not been any easy one.

"And my surly companion here is Lance Surefoot," continued Elegrin, waving toward Lance when he realised the man wasn't going to introduce himself. "A native of Dunromin and my partner in the wine trade."

"With things to do," added Lance, his manner cold and short. He turned and headed out of the door and down the stairs without so much as a "Good day". Gavin watched him go, wondering what he made of Gavin and whether this was what had prompted his sudden exit. Or perhaps he was concerned with more urgent matters and Gavin was being paranoid.

"Charming," said Elegrin and then shouted after him. "That's all right Lance, no need to thank me, any time you fancy free loading!" The exuberant elf then turned back into the room and smiled again at Gavin. "Please excuse his manners. He's a busy man."

"Good to have you back Elegrin," said Luke, moving to hug the elf, a greeting that was returned with enthusiasm. "How goes the Dragon Hunting?"

"We found no more. It seems we got them all at the Dragon Mount, as Garibaldi has now named it," said Elegrin, "I'm sure he'll mark it on one of his finickity maps and let the University know where it is. Damned if I am in any hurry to go back there. Has it been a season already? Seems too near. We ran into some trolls in one of the valleys nearby yesterday. We thought nothing of it but a skirmish but they were bait. What a mess! But nothing like the mountain. I tell you, those peaks are cursed. I'll be bugged if I am going back up there, regardless of what Garibaldi thinks is prudent. But let me get out of this armour first and pour me a glass for all our sakes! Finish our guest's business first and then I shall tell you all about it. There's much to tell and much to do."

Elegrin nodded again at Gavin and then leapt up the stairs three at a time, his speed and grace in defiance of the heavy armour he wore. Luke hurried after him.

"One moment Elegrin you have another guest in your-" said Luke but his warning was too slow.

"Great oaks of my fathers!" exclaimed Elegrin, "There's a woman in my room!"

Luke and Gavin caught up with Elegrin at the door to his room. He had opened the door to discover Sula knelt in dedication, facing west. At his entrance she had stood and was now holding both her fighting knives ready to defend herself. Elegrin seemed to have dissipated her anger already though, by bowing graciously and introducing himself. As Sula in turn introduced herself, and sheathed her knives, Gavin took in what could only be described as Elegrin's boudoir.

While Lance's room was simply furnished with only the slightest nod to the individuality of its owner, Elegrin's somewhat larger room was more flamboyantly decorated. The plaster walls were hung with heavy red velvet drapes, which extended all around the room and were matched by more drapes around the large, heavily-wooden four-poster bed. The floor was covered with an assortment of deep red, mauve and purple rugs, the ceiling hung with thin red fabrics. At the end of the bed was a large blanket-box of the same dark wood as the bed. A chest of drawers and a wardrobe, of the same wood, furnished the wall opposite the bed. There was a writing desk under the window with several racks of scrolls and books behind the drapes next to it. Behind the door was a rack for hanging armour on. The room had a fragrant, if slightly stale smell to it, and Gavin noticed an incense burner on the top of the chest of drawers with a number of personal knick-knacks.

"I trust you found my apartments comfortable, my lady?" beamed Elegrin.

"Yes thank-you," replied Sula, "Thank-you for allowing Sea Breeze and myself to stay here."

Elegrin turned to face Gavin and then looked questioningly at Luke.

"Sea Breeze is from Earth," said Luke simply, "They both arrived in the city yesterday looking for Garibaldi. I looked after them as Garibaldi had instructed us to do."

"Another Earther!" gushed Elegrin, "Well! This is most unexpected. Most of your friends have already gone I fear, only a few elected to stay after," he paused, "What happened..."

Gavin wondered what he might mean, for a moment confused as to what to ask after first. Elegrin continued before he had time to ask anything.

"But there's time enough for that! I feel like I have been wearing this armour for a week. Well, I probably have. Longer in fact! Luke, ask May to draw me some hot water in the parlour for a bath while I make myself comfortable, if you would excuse me madam?"

Sula bowed and moved downstairs, Gavin followed her, wondering whether their new acquaintance was really as care-free as he appeared. This camp elf was the first of Garibaldi's "heroes" that he had met and, while impressed with the arsenal of weapons and armour, he had to confess himself a little frustrated by the creature's remorselessly cheerful banter. Despite the dried blood on his clothes and the fatigue in his face his manner was light, almost flippant.

Gavin and Sula sat at the table once more and Sula was supplied with a bowl of porridge and bread. Then one of the store-men marched in and put four glasses and a bottle of wine on the table, evidently used to Elegrin's demands. They were joined a short while later by Luke who carried some parchments and a quill and ink. Luke laid out two of the parchments, which bore lists of something written in a smooth, elegant hand, probably Elegrin's. Gavin could of course read well, although he had yet to master writing legibly with a quill. He glanced at the list and was amazed by what he saw.

"Excuse me," he wondered, as Luke began writing on a third, blank parchment. "Is that a list of magical items?"

"It's the last of the booty from the battle of Dragon Mount, Elegrin said," said Luke, "I am guessing this is the last few items they found in the Dragons' Horde that they have decided that they don't want to keep."

"They're not keeping these?" exclaimed Gavin. Several of the items were of significant power. The list was long and Gavin realised the trove had to have been huge if this was just the last "few" things that they had found there.

"Whenever they finish an adventure they sell off the magic items, jewellery and other kit they don't want to keep," explained Luke, "It's become a famous event – people travel for hundreds of miles to bid for the stuff. Garibaldi will sell to anyone and the auctions are open to all. Whatever he gets for them is invested in his property, researches or whatever, after it's split between the heroes of course. There's one auction already scheduled for a few weeks. These items need to be added to the book."

"It must make a fortune!" wondered Gavin, "Who on earth can afford to buy such things?"

"Most of it's done on credit," replied Luke, "Barons and adventurers will use their own fortunes, land or other goods as security against loans. Everyone wants the best advantage in the field of war, or adventuring or whatever. These things can give you an edge so people are prepared to pay. Garibaldi then in turn deposits the payments and credit notes with the bank or trades them for whatever he needs. A lot goes to the Magic Guild for research costs, or to the temple in donations. No actual hard cash changes hands most of the time, just the transfer of wealth. It makes a massive addition to the city's coffers and it's all profit. Travellers come from all over the world to bid for it. They have to deposit gems or gold to ensure their credit notes of course."

"That's impossible," wondered Gavin. To him the credit notes still sounded like cheques, but he still couldn't match modern banking methods with a medieval society. "It's like barter on a huge scale, but there must be someone who vouches for the worth of things?"

Luke shrugged. "It's generally a matter of honour, although no goods change hands until the credit worthiness of the buyer is checked. Usually title deeds need to be signed by the king or similar."

"And people travel from all over you say?" asked Gavin.

"Yes, from Skull Crag too, or even further, word gets about," said Luke, finishing his note and collecting the papers up. "Garibaldi times the auctions for festival days so the whole thing becomes a party. Travellers and traders come from all over. Garibaldi says that this way the wealth gets pumped back into the city and other good works. Everyone benefits. Dunromin's been booming on the back of it all."

"Even us guides make a fortune," said Gecko, "It's a grand time when Garibaldi calls an auction. It's the main thing he's famous for, that and being a Great Adventurer of course."

Gavin watched as Luke rolled up the notes and sealed the package with some candle wax. He then produced a seal ring from a pocket or hidden fold, and pressed it into the wax. He then passed the lot to Gecko.

"I hope you don't mind me borrowing Gecko for a short while?" he asked as he passed the scrolls. "Gecko, take these to Lovejoy's auction house. And get a receipt from Lovejoy himself, mind. Make sure he checks the lists and understands what all the words are. If there's anything there he doesn't recognise ask him to come by this evening and Elegrin will explain it in more detail."

"Yes, Master," said Gecko, taking the package and heading off out into the morning sleet.

"And mind you keep it dry!" Luke called after him.

Luke then sat back and helped himself to a glass of wine.

"So that's the booty from the Dragon Horde is it?" asked Gavin.

Luke nodded his head. "Elegrin said it got a bit messy. Very bad. Lots of deaths. I've not had the full story yet as they've all had lots of things to do. There was chaos when they came back, terrible casualties. It took them a long while to get everyone fit again and then they were sorting out getting the Earthers back, those that wanted to go back that is, which was most of them. None of the Heroes came back here for quite a while, and even then they seemed unwilling to tell the tale. After the Dragon Mount fight I think some of the Earthers lost their lust for adventure. They just wanted to get home again."

"Back to Earth?" gasped Gavin, "There's a way home?"

Luke nodded again. "Yes, there's a portal on the Isle of Dawn. An ancient magical gateway that can take you anywhere and any-when they say. It's not easy to get to but Garibaldi has been there before. He knows the way."

Gavin just gaped. They could go home? Just like that?

"You say not all of them wanted to go back?" asked Gavin after a pause.

"I'm not sure who stayed, just a few of them I think," said Luke, "The rest have already travelled to the Isle of Dawn with the Baron and headed away."

Gavin nodded. His mind went to his friends and how he might get them back. Plans were forming in his head but there was too much to get straight. He sighed and leant back in his chair. "Do you think Garibaldi would help me get home?"

Luke shrugged. "I don't see why not, but you'd have to ask him yourself," then Luke remembered the situation, "Once we have proved your innocence?"

"Of course," said Gavin after a slightly too-long pause. "So, what do you think happened at Dragon Mount?"

"Well, Elegrin's just said he's going to sort himself out and then he'll be down to tell me, and you of course, now, all about it. I asked him what was going on as he promised me he would tell me last time he was back, but then didn't," Luke took a sip of wine and they heard a Elegrin singing in his bath across the stairway in the parlour. Luke smiled to hear it – a high lilting voice singing in an unknown language, probably Loomish Gavin surmised. It sounded like a love song with a kind of lamenting folk-song feel to it. "Elegrin's not bad at telling stories but Olnor's better. Olnor's a proper story-teller. He can keep an inn of serious drinkers spell-bound for hours."

"Who's Olnor?" asked Gavin.

"Another of the heroes," replied Luke, "One of two elven twins, both princes of Loom. Olnor and Eldir Morwaan. Olnor's very gregarious and likes a crowd, Eldir much more reserved. They're very different but also very close. Excellent archers and swordsmen of course, and learning the art of magic too. Eldir has made a special study of the outer planes. He's a Diabolist."

Gavin remembered the figure of Santillion on the Lady Dance, they had called him a Diabolist too, although Gavin didn't recognise it as anything from D&D that he could remember. There was a lot in this world that didn't tie too tightly with the rules as he had known them. Whatever Dungeon Master ran this world he had a fairly homebrew interpretation of the core rules of the game. That made Gavin consider their situation more deeply. The nature of the game world he was now living in was very consistent with his own knowledge of the core rules, Skull Crag was exactly as he'd imagined it. But there was much more to Barnaynia than he had considered. It wasn't just his own imagination at work here. He wondered how many different minds had made it? Was Elegrin a player character as well perhaps? And what about the other Heroes? And the Earthers?

"How many heroes are there?" asked Gavin, "There seems to be plenty of them!"

Luke nodded, "There are these days, the number has slowly increased over time. Originally it was just Abu, Sir Bedevere and Elegrin. I'm not sure how many there are now? Let's see." He considered the point for a moment and then pulled out a piece of parchment. He wrote their names and numbered them as he named them. "Elegrin, Sir Bedevere is a Paladin and now Sheriff of the Barony of Garibaldi," he began, "Basil Culpepper is more of an old friend of Garibaldi, but still one of the Heroes of course. He's a priest of Athena, and his wife Libby of course, sorry, Liberia, and she's a Druid. Lance, Olnor and Eldir like I said already. Then there's Vic, he's a heavy-duty swordsman, very famous, and his best mate Gunther. There's Gothmog, a prince of the Murmurkin, which is a tribe from the far west of the Wild Lands. Garibaldi's a Murmur as well, but from a different family to Gothmog. They call Garibaldi a Pureblood, but I am not sure what that means. Gothmog's right hand man is Kurt, and they each have a wife, Barbarossa and Alissa respectively, who are just as dangerous as them. Barbarossa's a wizard too."

Luke paused to take another drink.

"The Murmur are a tribe you say?" wondered Gavin, "Like barbarians then?"

"Yes, but wild, old barbarians, touched by the Moon Goddess and powerful in the ways of magic and slaughter. They're as dangerous as a gang of hungry trolls and as mad as a bag of cats." He laughed, "But when the trouble starts you want them on your side I can tell you. I've not seen them in action myself but

you just have to look at them to see they mean business. Really scary." He considered this statement for a while. "They all are really."

"So, there's," Gavin counted the names on the list, "er, thirteen of them?"

"Oh no, I'm not finished yet," Luke went on, "There's Aramis son of Arrarat, a Ranger, Grimm and Gruff the dwarves. Grimm's a priest of some Rock God or other and Gruff's his bodyguard. And, erm, oh yes! Abu Ratep like I said at the start! How could I forget Abu? Quickest and most faithful of them all. Abu's been with Garibaldi the longest." Luke nodded slowly, "So that's seventeen, eighteen including Garibaldi himself."

"A big party," muttered Gavin, frowning slightly. He noticed that Luke had described the Heroes but none of the Earthers; Luke seemed more interested in the Heroes generally. Gavin was still wondering if these people were likely to help him. What kind of creatures might they be? If Elegrin and Lance was anything to go by they were likely as different to one another as can be. An Adventuring party was usually a collection of individuals with a common purpose and complimentary skills. Mixing different professions and abilities made a more flexible group, more likely to survive the vagaries of the Dark World. A party usually only had four to eight members in Gavin's experience so the Heroes were a big group. This meant they would have more fire power but might be hard to coordinate and it certainly meant their share of any treasure would be small. Gavin wondered how they might work together and, as more sleet slapped against the windows, sought a distraction from their need to go outside. "Tell me more about them, would you?"

## **Chapter 18 – Of the Rest of the Heroes**

Luke settled back with his glass of wine, evidently now in his element. Luke was a fan. The cult of celebrity that had grown up around the exploits of Garibaldi and his Heroes was the source of many tales and songs in the inns and by-ways of the Land of the Young. Luke was probably the best informed and most devout of all their fan base. His close association with Garibaldi for so long meant he also had an insider's view of the personalities and events, and it had done nothing to dampen his enthusiasm.

"Abu has been with Garibaldi the longest," Luke repeated, "So I'll start with him. He was a beggar and a pick-pocket in a desert realm Garibaldi was adventuring in. This was a curious place because it had been trapped in a rift between planes, the prime material plane, our world that is, and the source of negative energy. It was a terrible place riddled with evil and undead. How Garibaldi got there is a bit of a mystery but we think it was a trap or a plot by one of his enemies. Anyway, once there he met Abu and got along with him pretty well. Abu helped him find a tomb wherein Garibaldi found the Gate home, and Garibaldi brought Abu back with him. Ever since Abu's been like a bodyguard, utterly devoted to Garibaldi, but also quite a character in his own right. He's not popular in Dunromin though, his manner and attitude seem to be at odds with the way that you're supposed to behave in court. People think he's too aggressive, not respectful enough, although I think he's great fun. I'm quite grateful for that though – if Abu could get along better with people Garibaldi maybe wouldn't need me.

"Grimm and Gruff are both dwarves, like I said," Luke continued after checking the list, "Grimm's a member of a royal family or something from the Blue Mountains, but he's a priest of a Rock God that has a long-abandoned temple deep in the far west of the Horn Mountains. Garibaldi found the temple and found an ancient artefact down there. He gave it back to the Dwarves for free. In gratitude Grimm asked if he might come along to lend Garibaldi support and assistance along the way. Gruff came with him of course. Gruff's a tough fighter, hard as nails and rather, erm, earthy in his outlook. Grimm's quite posh,

for a dwarf, and helps out with Garibaldi's relations with the Lords of the Blue Mountains for trade routes and such. Garibaldi was also able to warn them of Kzenzakai's attack in the War of the Ring. Kzenzakai attacked the dwarves as well, but thanks to Garibaldi they were ready for him and he failed."

Luke took another drink. "Aramis is one of the youngest of the Heroes, only Lance is younger. Aramis is a ranger. He came to the city after growing up in the moors to the north, near the coast. I knew him before he became a Hero, although I didn't know him well. He hung about the 'Wench when he wasn't working as a caravan guard so I knew him from there. He regularly got into fights. A real hot-head. He fancied making a name for himself and decided the best way of doing this was to find Garibaldi and challenge him to a duel. When Aramis actually met Garibaldi though he realised how stupid that was and asked to join the Heroes instead. I'm not sure why Garibaldi indulged him but he did, and now Aramis is one of the best swordsmen in the land. He's still a bit moody and always out to prove himself. But he can go through a fight like a whirlwind. He's pretty handy with a bow too.

"The Murmurkin are like a little group within a group kind of thing," Luke seemed to struggle for a moment, unhappy with the way he was describing them perhaps. "I'm not even sure if they would really see themselves as Heroes of Garibaldi like the others. I think they see themselves as a separate unit. They still get stuck in with the others in a fight but they tend to operate as a team to themselves, always together. The others tend to mix and match to suit the occasion. In between times they're always off on their own, doing stuff. Not that the others don't go off on other little jobs, it's just the Murmurkin seem to always be doing it. They're all massive warriors and bloody scary. When they're all done up in their blue war paint they look like a bunch of wild animals. Gothmog's got an idea of founding a new tribe and fancies setting up in Kzenzakai's old capital in Doomdank, but he's got a way to go yet. They're got about five kids between them now and they're looking for allies in the various other wandering barbarian hordes too, but they're not really popular among the various clans in the Wild Lands. The Murmurkin are from the far west, the shores and islands of the Twilight Sea, so pretty foreign really. Plus, they use magic, which the eastern tribes don't trust. You know what barbarians are like.

"I suppose I know the least about the Murmurkin, they hardly ever come to the city. I've only met them a couple of times but I know them well enough to know they're dangerous, but quite funny too. Kurt in particular is a hoot. He's got a real talent at impersonating people. He's really good at it. He does this brilliant one of Garibaldi. Hillarious."

Luke paused again, as if considering whether to mimic Kurt's party piece. He decided better of it. Across the hall Elegrin was shouting for more towels and one of May's daughters was hurrying around for them. Luke looked down at the list again and tapped the next name; Basil Culpepper.

"Basil was an acolyte at the Temple of Olympus when Garibaldi first turned up in Dunromin," Luke continued, "Garibaldi's got a room at the temple you see, being a priest of Hecate, and Basil was the trainee priest first assigned to look after him. From there Basil started accompanying Garibaldi and the guys on adventures. Professionally he's done rather well out of it and is the head priest at the Olympian Temple in the Barony of Garibaldi now. He's not had such a good time of it personally though. He's been killed in action a few times and been Raised from the Dead. Three times that I know of, maybe more? It's made him a bit grim and he has these fits of melancholia that last for days, weeks even, when it's best just to leave him alone. He just sits in the woods I think. Libby looks after him. She's his wife you see? Libby the Tree is a Druid who was tight with the Druid in the Woods, the head Druid here in Dunromin. When she met Garibaldi, in the 'Wench I think it was, she was quite taken with the ideas he was talking to people about. Equal rights for women and weird stuff like that.

Anyway, she started knocking about with the Heroes after that and then went adventuring with them. For a while people said she was Garibaldi's lover but that was just rumour, nothing in it – she ended up marrying Basil after all! About a year ago that was, after the War of the Ring. She's got a grove in the Barony of Garibaldi, a place called Owl Wood that Garibaldi has given to her. I've heard it's beautiful there, although I've never been."

"Very idyllic," said Gavin nodding, "So she's quite a powerful Druid then?"

Luke nodded. "And a real looker too," he said, "I mean, she's beautiful. No one knows what happened between her and Basil, how they got together and all that. Not that Basil's not a nice bloke of course, but he is a bit morbid. Well, a lot morbid really. And very quiet, for a priest. Anyway, after the War of the Ring they just up and got married. They don't get as involved with the group any more, well not all the time like they used to. They just run the temple and the Grove and that's more or less it."

"You mentioned Basil has been Raised from the Dead a few times?" asked Gavin, "Who did that?"

"Garibaldi mostly, I think," said Luke, "He is a powerful priest after all. Quite a few of the Heroes have been killed and brought back. There's a few that didn't come back too, and some that left after their first fight, couldn't keep up the pace, but I couldn't tell you their names or what they're doing now. I can't remember them very well."

Gavin got the feeling Luke could remember them very well but chose not to talk about them. Perhaps the idea of making it into Garibaldi's cosy little band of dysfunctionals and then leaving was something Luke simply couldn't understand. The thought of such a betrayal obviously didn't sit well with him.

"Go on," prompted Gavin, looking at the parchment on the table. Luke was working backwards up the list. "Sir Bedevere's next."

"Yes," agreed Luke, "Sir Bedevere's a top bloke. He's a true knight of power, honour and humility. He was one of Sir Tristram's Crusaders against the Deep Elves but he came a bit of a cropper. He was in a scouting party mapping the Darkworld for Tristram's next campaign when they got caught. Not by the Deep Elves but by some deep-water creatures called Kuo-Toans. Have you heard of them?" Gavin wasn't sure and shrugged. "Anyway, Bedevere's party were all killed and eaten one by one until there was only Bedevere left. That was when Garibaldi found him. Garibaldi was smashing his way through the place at the time and Sir Bedevere swore an oath of servitude to Garibaldi for rescuing him. He still holds true to that oath, although he's more of a friend than a vassal now. Garibaldi made him Sheriff of the Barony of Garibaldi because he is so honest and trustworthy. He looks after the upholding of the Law in the Barony now. And being a Paladin, he has good contacts with all the other Barons as well, the ones that are Lords anyway, so he acts as Garibaldi's ambassador a lot too. I like Sir Bedevere most of all. He's a really nice bloke but a great knight as well. It's my ambition to be like him, although I'm no Paladin."

Luke was grinning, his mind evidently day-dreaming about becoming a great knight. For a moment he looked younger, his eyes gleaming with an optimism of youth more in keeping with his years than his experiences. Then he remembered himself and checked the list. "Victor and Gunther are a pair – they've always been together. Vic's the second son of Baron Malware and Gunther's a nephew or something of Garan of Karan, the king's cousin. They grew up together and but neither of them was going to inherit anything so they used to adventure together. Other stuff too. They've told me some tales but they usually end up in hysterics remembering them and the stories never get finished properly. After Garibaldi destroyed the Slavers of the Yellow Banner a lot of the slaves he released were serfs from the Barony of Malware. Vic was quite taken with Garibaldi and offered to let Garibaldi join his party, that is him and

Gunther. Although now I think about it I think there were a couple of others with them? Not sure, but no matter. It kind of went the other way anyway and Vic and Gunther joined the Heroes instead." Luke looked distracted for a moment, as if troubled by not being able to remember Vic and Gunther's old comrades. Then he adjusted his seat and leaned back against the wall by the bench he was sat on.

"Olnor and Eldir are twins, like I said. Grey Elf twins are very rare but you probably know that?" he continued, "They're nephews of a Princess of Loom whom Garibaldi rescued. I think it was when he was fighting the Giants in the Borderlands. I seem to remember she was a prisoner of the Frost Giant king, although I have no idea what a Princess was doing up in those mountains. Anyway, it was Garibaldi that rescued her. In return she sent Olnor and Eldir to serve Garibaldi for a year and a day. That was a good three years ago. They've got quite successful off the back of it and everyone likes them. You wouldn't think either was an adventurer, though. Eldir's a bookworm, he's quiet and studious and always researching something or other up at the Great Library or in some private collection somewhere. He's a Diabolist like I said but he's also learning to be a wizard too. Olnor's a completely different sort, quite the opposite, candles to coal. Olnor's a comic and a story-teller. A brilliant story teller. He knows all the old classics and more besides. Makes his own up too. Brilliant. He can keep you transfixed for hours with his tales. He's a bit fickle though, always getting distracted and talking to any old soul they meet along the way. Him and Eldir couldn't be more different, but they are the same to look at. Twins you see? Identical. And they love fishing. After an adventure they spend weeks roaming about the Wild looking for the best fishing spots. They do that a lot around the Barony of Garibaldi, even in Dark Wood, but then they get along better with the Fey King than most so they don't have much to fear there."

Gavin was realising he had a lot to learn about this amazing world he had found himself in. It was all quite extraordinary. One thing he longed for was a map, so that he could relate all these places to one another and find out how everything fitted together.

"And last but not least is Elegrin and Lance," announced Elegrin descending from upstairs, wearing a simple but very elegant grey mantle and breeches. "A very comprehensive list, my dear Luke, though I am glad you have saved the best to last! Be a good fellow and pour me a glass, would you?"

Luke poured some wine into the remaining empty glass, although Sula had not touched hers yet. In fact, she had sat through the whole list just listening and watching as Luke spoke with increasing enthusiasm of his old friends and idols. Quite what was on her mind was difficult to discern but her brown eyes reflected the light from the windows almost without blinking.

"Won't you tell your own part of the story?" Luke asked Elegrin as he sat down.

Elegrin tasted the wine and considered it for a moment. "Loom fifty five?" he wondered. Luke nodded.

"A fine tippie," Elegrin beamed, "Yes, and now my own, humble little part of the whole show. Let me see...?"

Gavin settled back, seeing this might take a while. Luke was grinning, evidently keen to hear Elegrin's version.

"I was the representative, shall we say, of one of the better wineries of Loom, sent to the Land of the Young to see if we could sell our products here," Elegrin began, "We felt sure that the famously barren grapes of Dunromin would have their owners screaming for some decent vintages and Dunromin was, and still is, famously rich. We were proved right in the long run," he gestured expansively to the building around them, meaning the stores of wine downstairs. "But I digress. The sad fact of the matter was that we didn't actually know where

the Land of the Young was. Or at least no one told me." He paused for another sip of wine. "I was told 'They're North of the Mountains somewhere,' and off I went, North of the mountains. I ended up somewhere for sure but where that somewhere was I hadn't the slightest inclination. Within six weeks I was hopelessly lost and trying to find a pass or trail back through the mountains to the south. A week later I had drunk all our samples out of desperation. Then I happened upon some unsavoury characters in a forest glade, in a rainstorm would you believe? It was late at night and before you could say 'Dropped my sword' I found myself a prisoner of a tribe of giants."

Elegrin sighed, the memory obviously one of some discomfort for him.

"My travelling companions were slain and put in the pot of course, my own favourite servant amongst them. A great loss," Elegrin continued, his tone now more subdued but hardly tearful. "He was a splendid fellow, more a friend than a servant from when I was a carefree young elf. And those bastards..." The elf took another sip, already halfway down his glass. After a moment he seemed to rally again and the light returned to his voice. "Well, it seemed my destiny was the same pot I would say, except I was rescued in the nick of time by good old Garibaldi. He was going through the place like a fire in a stable. Gods alone know how many giants and ogres he'd slain already. He got me and a couple of others out, not from my company, I was the only survivor. There was a gnome I think? A Dwarf perhaps? I am not sure. And then he torched the whole place. Good riddance! To Garibaldi and his artful sword hand!" exclaimed the elf, raising his glass and drinking it dry. He then passed it to Luke who re-filled it while Elegrin carried on. "I quickly discovered Garibaldi was from Dunromin and so asked his permission to accompany him. And Abu of course, Abu was with him although it was clear that Garibaldi was in charge. Abu was the first of Garibaldi's companions you see? His "Heroes" as they call us now." The elf giggled, amused by the apparent absurdity of the title. "Heroes! We just kill monsters and sell their treasure. Not very heroic I would have thought, but never mind. So, you see, I have the honour of being the second longest serving of the Heroes."

"Garibaldi rescued Elegrin during his adventures against the giants," explained Luke, "After the Hill Giants Garibaldi, Abu and Elegrin went on and attacked a number of other strongholds. The Deep Elves were supposed to be trying to get the giants to fight for them, although it might have been Kzenzakai behind it all along. After Garibaldi killed the Slavers of the Yellow Sails, the King had asked him to find out what was going on up in the mountains. It was some time before Garibaldi, Abu and Elegrin got back here."

"Indeed," said Elegrin, "We first had to slay the Frost Giant Jarl and Snurre Iron Belly the Fire Giant and all their hordes. And rescue my lady Princess Imelia, daughter of Queen Moonglum of Loom and aunt to Olnor and Eldir, of whom you have been told already."

"So, you helped rescue the Princess?" asked Gavin.

Elegrin looked a little uncomfortable. "Not really," he confessed, "I was there, certainly, and did my bit to my best, but there was an incident with a white dragon. A grim time. Garibaldi brought me back and still gave me an equal share of the treasure though. A fine chap. I've no regrets. Garibaldi helped me with my magic too. Shared his spell books with me, gave me advice and hints and such. He was a mentor as well as a friend. Abu, Garibaldi and I became quite close in those nightmare caverns. The friends you make in war aren't like any other relationship you ever know. We are bonded spirits, blood brothers, if you will.

"Anyway, after the Giants I rested up here and started laying the foundations of the wine trade, working out the market potential and such. But it was a crowded market, and expensive. Everyone was bringing their wine in through Long Drop Pass over to the east. A horrendous journey! Months! I felt

sure there had to be a better way. I felt it in my bones. And I was right! Although it was a while before we opened the route through the western mountains they call the Wine Road now. But while I was doing that Garibaldi headed off hunting Deep Elves in the depths of the Horn Mountains. Abu didn't go with him, still recovering I think. Or training. Garibaldi never did much training, nor research for that matter. Back then, that is. He does lots of research now, planar travel and navigation and such. But not back then. Always away doing something. Maybe he would be even more powerful if he had spent some time in his studies? Although, maybe not. Who can say? Anyway, he'd found some information about the Deep Elves from the Slavers. Maps and suchlike of the Darkworld under the Horn Mountains. That's where he rescued Sir Bedevere, of course. I suppose he rescued a few of us really, but then that's what heroes do, isn't it? Rescue people, find lost treasures, slay foul monsters. And I don't think I'm being too immodest if I do say our merry little band is the best of the lot at it."

"Hear, hear!," agreed Luke, tapping his glass and grinning.

Gavin nodded, the names of the giants reminded him of something he'd read long ago, on line perhaps? All this talk of fighting creatures under mountains reminded him of stories he had read or heard many years before but he couldn't recall in any detail.

"And then there's Lance, whom I have told you about before," decided Luke, "And that's Garibaldi's company of heroes, at least the ones of the originals that are left. We haven't mentioned any of the people from Earth of course, but that brings us up to date!" To make the point he ticked off the last two names on the list, crumpled up the paper and threw it in the fire. "Now, Elegrin, please tell us what went on in Dragon Mount, as you called it, and since then. And how everyone is now?"

Elegrin took another deep draught from his glass. "Another grim tale," he murmured, "One of the grimmest I have had the misfortune to be involved with, although things are looking up now. We are all well, I think, as well as can be expected, recovered at least, but we have been through the grinder. The worst week of adventuring I have known, of that I am sure. Many fell. It all started when--"

Quite what Elegrin was going to say next was lost as a large rock, the size of Gavin's fist, burst through one of the windows and bounced across the table, sending Sula and Gavin's untouched glasses to the floor and shattering.

## **Chapter 19 – The Natives Are Restless**

The eruption of the stone was accompanied by many shouts from the street below, none sounding very friendly. Luke dashed over to the window and looked out. To his surprise Gavin discovered he was standing with his scimitar already drawn and ready. Sula too had her knives out and was checking the back windows, away from the broken ones.

"There's a gang of gnomes and dwarves outside," announced Luke, "And they don't look too friendly."

"May, get me my sword!" demanded Elegrin, finishing his glass and getting to his feet. The housekeeper sent one of her daughters off up the stairs.

Gavin could hear the roar of many voices now, shouting and chanting in a very agitated manner. Gavin made out some words and a sinking feeling started over him. This was not good. "Gnome killer!" was one shout, "Send the murderers out so we can deal with them!" demanded another.

"Great," muttered Gavin, approaching the window cautiously, "A half-pint lynch-mob."

His suspicions were confirmed. In the street below were about thirty gnomes and dwarves waving spears, axes and other weapons up at the building. They appeared to be shouting for justice and Gavin heard a crunch downstairs as someone tried to batter the front door down. Gavin could see that the rest of the population of the street were stood back watching, from a safe distance, to see what was going to happen next.

Gavin also noticed further up the street to the west a half-dozen of the Guarde, although they looked unwilling to step in and confront the mob. These guarde were not of the Storm Regiment but instead had blue tabards with a yellow sun on the front. Gavin ruefully recalled Gecko's warning from the day before. He had suggested that some regiments of the Guarde were less enthusiastic in the execution of their duty. These men looked like the kind of Guarde who would rather wait for the dust to settle and then go in and arrest the survivors. Gavin had to admit that there was little six men, even heavily armed and wearing the symbols of law, could do against an angry mob of thirty or more. Gavin also noted that many of the gnomes and dwarves were heavily armed too, in plate mail and chainmail in many cases, wielding vicious looking weapons.

Elegrin, however, appeared determined to confront the mob, alone if need be. Once armed with his sword and wand he threw open the shattered window and leaned out.

"I am Elegrin Utherassell, Hero of Garibaldi!" he shouted down at the crowd, dodging a frozen turnip that bounced off the window frame. "And I demand to know what business you have here?"

Gavin frowned, wondering how he might quickly explain the events of the last two days. He didn't have to – the gnomes seemed quite keen to explain matters themselves.

"We know you've got the murderers up there!" shouted one voice, evidently a leader of some sort, "Send them out or we'll burn the place down!"

"You shall do nothing of the sort!" responded Elegrin, brandishing his wand. In the mob below many took a few steps away, realising what might be about to happen. "We have no murderers in this house! Go about your business in peace!"

"Give us the monk and the witch from Skull Crag!" screamed the voice in response. "Murderers and Thieves! They might have powerful friends in the Guarde but we're going to hang them anyway!"

Elegrin turned and looked pointedly at Gavin. "Murderers?" he asked.

"No, not at all," replied Gavin, "It was a case of mistaken identity. We're quite innocent."

"They have been bound over into my custody," interrupted Luke, "Until we can find the real murderers and clear their names."

Elegrin frowned at Gavin, and then turned back to the mob.

"I will meet your leader at the door!" he shouted, "And anyone who throws anything else will get a Fireball up his arse!"

Elegrin turned from the windows and stormed downstairs, muttering something to himself about the cost of glass these days. Luke hurried after him while Gavin and Sula paused at the top of the stairs to listen.

There was a clank of a heavy door opening and the noise of loud shouts and growls from the angry mob. There was a flash and a shout and the noise abated somewhat.

"That was a warning!" Elegrin shouted, "I am one of the Heroes of Garibaldi, triumphant over the army of Great Kzenzakai of the Dark Horde! I am one of the people who saved your homes and your families from his undead and all the other evil creatures he brought up from the Darkworld! Do you doubt us?"

Are you so ungrateful for your deliverance? Now behave in a civilised manner before I fry the lot of you!"

"You're not the only one that knows some magic, elf!" came a response, "One false move with that wand and I'll wither your arms!"

"Send out the murderers!" shouted another.

"Sea Breeze and Sula are not murderers!" shouted Elegrin, "They have been released because they are innocent!"

"Liar! They've been released because they have powerful friends!" replied the voice that had claimed knowledge of magic. "Just because they're mates with Baron Garibaldi they think they can kill a family of gnomes and get away with it!"

"We won't stand for it!" shouted another voice.

"Burn the bastards!" screamed another.

"Hang the baby-killers!" bellowed another.

"Baby killers?" wondered Elegrin.

"They were accused of killing a gnome jeweller and his family," explained Luke, leaning forward to talk into Elegrin's ear. "They didn't, they couldn't have done it. They weren't within a mile of the place."

"A Sergeant of the garde saw them!" shouted the magical gnome, evidently hearing Luke's explanation. "He's been sent away by his captain to keep him quiet!"

"We won't stand for it!" shouted another voice, "We're citizens too! We have rights!"

Gavin sighed and wondered what he might do to help Elegrin. He was pretty sure the Garde would have little inclination to assist them and he doubted they could prevail if it did come to a fight. In fact, that would be the worst outcome. Should any of the gnomes be killed then they would have a very genuine grievance. Gavin considered his position, wondering how he might get away. He thought about the back windows and the maze of streets beyond that might offer a safe get-away. Then he shook his head. This was all ridiculous. He tightened his belt and marched down the stairs.

"No one's denying you your rights!" Elegrin was saying, "Sea Breeze and Sula did not kill these gnomes!"

"There he is!" shouted the other voice and Gavin saw a particularly ugly little gnome with a battleaxe pointing at him.

"I did not kill any of your friends!" bellowed Gavin in his most authoritative voice, quite surprising himself with the volume and strength he could get behind it.

"Liar!" screamed another of the crowd, a dwarf this time in heavy chainmail and armed with another, even bigger battleaxe. Another frozen turnip whistled past, followed by a rock.

"You are being played for fools!" shouted Gavin in response. "Whoever did kill your friends is laughing at you now! They've fed you lies and borne false witness and sent you off to do their dirty work for them!"

"The Garde arrested you and then set you free!" declared the gnome, "They sentenced you to death and then one word from one of your powerful friends and they let you loose to kill again!"

"We didn't kill anyone!" Gavin shouted again, "Whoever did is out there now, and might kill again. They're out there living it up on the spoils they got from your friend's shop and you're here making fools of yourselves doing exactly what they want you to do!"

Elegrin seemed to warm to this suggestion. "The Guard of King Mordred don't let murders go! Are you going to have some sneak thief make a fool of you all? Are you so blind with hate you can't see the nose in front of your face!"

"Leave our noses out of this!" shouted someone at the back.

"You should be hunting down whoever's selling the stolen jewellery!" shouted Gavin, "You must have contacts all over the city and I bet you'd recognise his wares anywhere! You can soon track down the real killer by tracking down the stolen items."

Despite the mob mentality Gavin was aware the noise of shouting and the waving of weapons were less prevalent than it had been. Despite the passion of the assembly Gavin's honesty and readiness to confront them seemed to have made an impression. Although, to be fair, gnomes, who were in the majority here, were a lot more pragmatic than humans tended to be. They were less likely to get carried away in a mob mentality in the first place and certainly quicker to calm down. Dwarves tended to be calmer in adversity than humans too, quicker to anger, but quicker to calm too.

Elegrin sensed the change as well and saw an opportunity to further quell the temper of the moment. "You all know me, I am Elegrin, one of the heroes of Garibaldi," he announced, "I say to you now, before all the gods, I swear that I, and all the heroes, will not rest until the murderers of your friends are brought to justice." He pointed at the ugly gnome, "What is your name, citizen?"

"I am Siddy Garl, son of Tinker Garl," replied the gnome, puffing out his chest in pride.

"I make this oath to you, Siddy son of Garl," declared Elegrin, "Do you doubt the word of a Hero of the City?"

"Easy words, elf!" declared the magical gnome, who seemed more reluctant to calm himself. He stood forward next to Siddy. "How do you plan to find them then?"

The temper of the crowd was ebbing quickly. They knew all too well who Elegrin was and who his friends were. Those that might cynically disbelieve his promises had the sense to be scared of his power at least.

"We know something already," said Gavin, "I beseech you to help us in tracking down those that have done you harm."

"What do you know?" demanded Siddy Garl.

"We have been charged by the Guard Captain to prove our innocence," announced Gavin, "He allowed us to inspect the shop, to see if the real killers had left any clues. They had. We know that the killer entered and left by the roof, not the front door." Gavin paused. They were silent now. Many frowned, all glared, but they were listening to him. Gavin realised this had nothing to do with his eloquence and everything to do with the Wand of Fire, as Gavin had realised it must be, that Elegrin held. "In the snow storm last night there was no way the Guard sergeant could have seen the murderer. The villain entered by a roof window and attacked the gnomes as they slept. They fought valiantly but he chased them down and slew them all. The child he caught in the cellar, hiding and terrified. He slew the child's parents probably right in front of him. Then he found his hiding place and..." Gavin recalled the pool of gore in the corner and dreaded knowing what horror that innocent child might have seen before he was killed.

"How do you know this?" hissed Siddy Garl, adjusting his grip on his axe.

"I have done nothing any tracker from the woods couldn't have done," replied Gavin, "I looked with my eyes open and saw the signs of the intruder's passing. He broke in, slew the gnomes as I have described, opened the strong room with the gnome's own keys and took whatever he wanted. He then left the

same way he arrived. The Guard Sergeant broke in the door later but I don't know yet why he did that."

Gavin was suddenly acutely aware that the crowd of small figures were staring fixedly at him. They were listening to him very closely, as was Elegrin and Luke, they seemed ready to hear him, although suspicion still shone in their eyes. Gavin suspected that his case was actually being helped by the gnomes' and dwarves' themselves. These peoples were shrewd and quick. They weren't the wildly unpredictable crowds that men could be when gathered and incensed. Their slow, deliberate lives tempered them to examine what they were offered more carefully than some other races. Although the dwarves were dour and the gnomes selfish and greedy, they shared their Rock Gods in common and they shared a strong sense of cynicism, even if it was founded on very different philosophies. Like minorities everywhere, they were used to watching and listening carefully to what came to pass.

"So how will you find the killer?" asked the magical gnome.

"For that I need help," replied Gavin, deliberately calming his voice and trying to sound earnest. "Like I said, a burglar must dispose of his loot somehow. You can't spend gems and jewellery in the street so they will need to be selling their stolen goods somewhere. I beg you all look to your business connections. I know you are all honest folk and would not have any dealings in this kind of business," Gavin noticed a couple of the gnomes glanced at one gnome in particular at the back, and that gnome seemed to feign innocence as best he could. "But you may well come across such things in your normal line of business. See if any of you could find anything out about who might have some new loot to sell. Let's work together to find out the vicious bastard that slew your friend and his family"

"And suppose he wants to horde it?" persisted the gnome mage, "Or take it elsewhere to sell? And who is to say you won't be taking it all back to Skull Crag with you?"

"We are not returning to Skull Crag any time soon," said Gavin, "But even if the murderer does not want to sell his loot immediately, he will have made mistakes, he will have left traces. I must find those clues and follow them to his lair. When I have done that I will deliver him up to the Guard for justice. I will not let the deaths of your gnome friends go unavenged. I am innocent of the charge but I am glad to seek justice for them!"

Gavin felt certain of this, the words came easily to him. It felt like a game, play-acting like it had at home, on Earth, but it also felt real and he felt comfortable with that. He had a confidence now, a confidence he hadn't felt since his friends had been killed. Perhaps that was what it was. Perhaps now he had hope and a purpose. From despairing of the loss of his friends a few days ago he now had hope. While he doubted if even half the stories of Garibaldi and the others from Earth were true, it was apparent Gavin was not as alone and lost as he thought he had been. He had allies, powerful and famous allies it seemed. His short time in Dunromin was proving most interesting indeed.

The crowd remained silent but reluctant to simply let the matter drop. The mage seemed to have been selected as their spokesperson and several were muttering things to him. With the fury of the mob as a whole seemingly dissipated the Guard now felt safe enough to intervene and advanced, weapons drawn, ordering the crowd to disperse. This the dwarves did straight away, the gnomes following suit soon after, although reluctantly and with many a doubting stare at Elegrin and Gavin. As they turned Sidy Garl pointed a finger at Gavin and scowled.

"We'll be watching you, monk," he warned, "We'll be watching you very close. One false move and we'll have you!"

"I will not betray you," said Gavin and he knew that he wouldn't. He wasn't sure whether he was excited or surprised.

They watched the crowd disperse. Elegrin closed the door and turned to Gavin. "I think you have a story to tell, Sea Breeze," he observed, "And I think I'm going to like you."

"The tears were a good touch," observed Luke, "You looked like you really meant it."

"I did," said Gavin, feeling his cheek. It was wet and he suddenly realised that he must have been crying as he described the plight of the child gnome. He shivered and followed the others upstairs.

## **Chapter 20 – More Stories and Wine**

It took about an hour and two bottles of wine to tell Elegrin of all Gavin's adventures to that point. Elegrin was keen to double-check the facts and details, as if making sure he wasn't being lied to, but also so that he might understand exactly what was happening. When they had finished Elegrin sat back and ruminated on the information. It was nearly noon and the sun was now shining outside, the snow clouds having moved steadily south. Luke had fixed a blanket across the broken window and a glazier had been sent for. Elegrin had been amused to observe most glaziers were gnomes and perhaps they should demand the work be done for free.

The door downstairs opened and they all looked around to see Lance returning from his morning's work. He looked fresh faced from the cold and had evidently been moving quickly. He was accompanied by Gecko who had a note for Elegrin from the auction house confirming the arrangements.

"I hear you've been busy," announced Lance, "The streets are humming with it. The visitors from Skull Crag have faced down a mob that was baying for their blood. Hundreds of gnomes I have heard, cowed by the young monk's silver tongue."

"Hardly hundreds," giggled Luke.

"Hardly silver tongued," said Gavin.

"Never the less impressive!" declared Elegrin, "After what I have seen of you and the other Earthers I am impressed by the blood that runs in your veins, young Sea Breeze. I think we have much to learn from you."

"Elegrin is right," declared Sula, the first time she had spoken that morning. "You were a good choice to be my bodyguard. I see that now and I am grateful for it."

Gavin was stunned by this statement. He was very much of the opinion that Sula didn't like him very much. She had made her concerns about his dedication to the mission quite clear and he was in no position to argue with that. He had very much allowed himself to become obsessed with his own plans. Gavin blushed despite himself, at which Elegrin laughed deeply. Even Lance smiled.

"So, what do you plan to do now?" asked Luke.

Gavin sat back. "I need to think," he announced and then remembered something he'd thought about before. "Forgive me if I speak plainly for a few moments."

The others watched him cautiously.

"I think there are two plots going on," he announced, "And I need your connections, Luke, and you Lance I would imagine, to find out more for me."

"What do you mean?" asked Luke, cautious again despite himself. Lance didn't speak.

"I have heard you mention the Old Guilds," said Gavin, "And I think they are the type of guild that is not represented at the counsel house nor known well to the King. And I suspect you two know a great deal about them?"

Neither Luke nor Lance spoke this time. Lance feigned puzzlement but Gavin noticed Elegrin was smiling again.

"I would ask you to use whatever contacts you have to find out anything you can about that gnome's business, anything at all," he continued, "His customers, his enemies, his debtors and his creditors. Someone knew some details about him. Someone planned this, I think. Planned it very carefully indeed. I also need to know what you know about the Storm Regiment, and in particular the Guard Sergeant that claimed to have seen us. Bully they called him, a nick-name probably. He's lying about what he was up to. Why did he break the door down? I think someone tipped him off that the robbery had happened. I think he may have helped himself to some of the leftovers before he raised the alarm. Or maybe he was even working with the thief."

Gavin paused to see if there was any reaction to any of this. Sula was watching him very carefully, her serious face as still as stone. Gecko had a look of astonishment on his face. Lance and Luke remained much as they were but the smile had vanished from Elegrin's face.

"And then the second puzzle is why they chose to frame us?" Gavin continued, "Why, out of all the people in Dunromin he could have picked, did he pick us? Two strangers with no enemies in town, fresh off the boat that morning. I can't imagine that they had us in mind when they made their plans. Did the sergeant even know us or was he instructed to blame us by someone else? I don't see how it could have been a part of the original plan, I am sure this had all been worked out long before we arrived. So why pick us out? In fact, why blame it on anyone at all? They seem to have got away free and easy before the Sergeant broke down the door. I'm pretty sure this kind of thing happens fairly frequently in this city. The fuss will have blown over in time. Why try to frame anyone for it and risk making it a bigger deal than it needs to be?"

The others didn't speak for a while, considering his words.

Elegrin was the first to voice his thoughts. "You have been thinking a lot about this," he murmured, approvingly. "We need to know what the connection is between the Guard Sergeant and the Thieves, if any. It seems strange that any of the Guard could have anything to do with such creatures. But, like you, I think they must have been connected in some way. Now you say these things I see how you have come to your conclusions, but I am impressed nonetheless. Like I said, I think we have a lot to learn from you Sea Breeze."

"Being under a threat of a death sentence does focus the mind somewhat," replied Gavin with a shrug.

"Your suspicion about the Old Guild is correct, but not completely," said Lance, "I think you suspect there is a Thieves' Guild in Dunromin, to use the common term?"

"That's what I was thinking," replied Gavin.

"Dunromin has three such Guilds," said Lance, "It's not exactly common knowledge but hardly a difficult secret to discover. They are the Poorhouse, which runs most of the southern half of the city, the Western Old Guild, which operates in the Old City, and the Arboretum, which is based in the Elven Quarter, to the northeast, if it's based anywhere at all. Elves do everything differently." This last comment was directed at Elegrin with a cheeky grin. The elf shrugged.

Gavin nodded. Three Thieves' Guilds? That complicated matters, but then perhaps it simplified them too. If the jeweller was paying protection to one of them then that Guild might want to save some face somehow. Gavin waited for Lance to add anything else but he obviously wasn't going to.

"Would I be right in assuming that the gnome jewellers is on the Poorhouse territory then?" Gavin asked.

"You would," said Lance, "I've been there this morning. Teller Brighteye was one of the jewellers we often used to sell Garibaldi's booty through."

Gavin paused. This was the first time he had heard the gnome's name. The images of the crime scene flashed through his mind's eye once more, he half imagined the little family going about its daily chores, oblivious of the doom gathering on them. He shivered. It seemed bad that he hadn't asked their names before. It also made him think of something else.

"If you are selling gems and jewellery in your upcoming auction then you might be best leaving it for a little while," he said, "Lest our gnome friends think you are fencing our stolen goods."

"I had already thought of that," said Lance, "I have put them in the bank for safekeeping until I find a buyer. Luckily, I had only spoken to two before I went to talk to Teller and found the place abandoned. Then I found out what was going on. The auction wasn't going to be until the Spring Equinox anyway, the Festival of New Life, so we shall see if we want to include the gems and such nearer the time."

Gavin continued with his original query. "Would I be right in thinking that these jewellers would pay the Thieves' Guild protection money?" he wondered.

"Probably," shrugged Lance.

"If so, then the Poorhouse Guild will also be wanting to find out who knocked over the shop," he observed, "Whoever did it was operating on their turf. They will have face to save."

At this Lance frowned. His mind seemed to be working on something in double-quick time.

"I have to go out," he announced quickly and stood up. "I'll have to move quickly to avert a misunderstanding." And with that he fled.

Gavin frowned and then realised what Lance might be hinting at. If the word on the streets was that he and Sula were the ones to attack the gnome then the Poorhouse might have already put a contract on their heads. In his stomach Gavin felt queasy. If he was right then he prayed Lance could get to speak to the right people in time. He wondered if Luke hadn't thought of this already, but then another thought occurred to him.

"What's got into him?" wondered Elegrin, pointing his thumb after the departed Lance.

"I wonder if he isn't a member of the Poorhouse Guild," said Gavin, "And he doesn't want anyone thinking that whatever guild he is in was behind the robbery. Since we appear to be friends of Lance someone might think that we work with him, or even for him. Since we are accused of the robbery then so is he. Unless the Poorhouse Guild already know we are innocent they might react in a manner akin to the gnomes who visited earlier. I would imagine a war between two of the guilds would be a bad and messy affair."

Elegrin sighed loudly. "My head is spinning!" he declared and reached for the last of the second wine bottle. "And not in a good way I might add. My dear Sea Breeze, your mind is like a complex trick or trap. You think and realise things far faster than I can even see after I have had them explained to me! It makes me wonder how they train their monks in Skull Crag, or is this perhaps something you learned on Earth?"

Gavin smiled, not sure how he could explain the concept of detective novels to the elf. It was a long time since Gavin had read any Sherlock Holmes but he felt sure he was doing the old detective passion of his childhood justice

here. However, he needed a distraction to give him time to consider what could be done next.

"Anyway, we have not yet heard your tales about the Dragon Horde," he observed, "Won't you tell us what has happened that has left you in such a, erm, drinking mood?"

"It doesn't take much to get Elegrin in a drinking mood," said Luke.

"I am always in a drinking mood," agreed Elegrin, although he frowned as he said it as if the idea were not an entirely agreeable one to him. He was still apparently sober despite the two bottles he had drunk to himself. "But you are right. I should tell you of our adventure. Tell me, how much do you know already?"

"We heard that the barony had been attacked some months ago by six ancient dragons, acting together," said Luke, "We also heard that Garibaldi slew them all."

"A few months already?" murmured Elegrin, "After the horrors of Dragon Mount it seems much closer..." He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose. "But I digress, Garibaldi did not, as you report, slay all of them. As always the tales of his personal role in the affair have been exaggerated." Gavin smiled. Despite having never met the man Gavin was already finding he resented Garibaldi's fame and success a little. The famed baron seemed a bit too good to be true, a bit of a paper tiger perhaps? Gavin wondered just how much of the legend was real.

Elegrin continued, taking his time to explain and include many details, as well as he could remember them. "But there were indeed six of them, four red and two blue. Ancient, huge and gnarly wyrms they were, with cruel minds and razor-sharp talons. They fought hard and brought terrible destruction to the town, but Garibaldi was not alone in fighting them. As the beasts swooped and spiralled about the town setting the centre afire several people were actively engaged in bringing them down. I myself played no small part, hitting both blue dragons with fireballs and one of the reds with a Lightning Bolt. While it may be argued that Garibaldi, through his Fly spell, did the lion's share of the damage it is not the case. I saw all of the crashed carcasses and they were all pierced by many arrows too, bearing the coloured flights of Aramis, Olnor and Eldir. And even Basil. It was very much a joint effort."

"So, they continued to attack the town even though they were gravely wounded?" wondered Gavin, knowing that in the rules Dragons were very selfish and cowardly beasts. The idea of Blue and Red dragons acting in unison was strange enough, but knowing they pressed home their attack after many wounds and even with some of them being killed was strange to say the least.

Elegrin fixed Gavin him an intense stare. "You are a man of great knowledge indeed, it seems," he murmured. "Have you fought many dragons?"

"No, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, I was only thinking aloud," stammered Gavin hastily, "I meant no disrespect."

"Of course," said Elegrin, "I took none. I was honestly impressed by your insight. In fact, Schell, one of the other Earthers, had the same thought. I take it you know the other Earthers, or know of them at least?"

"No," said Gavin, "That is, Luke has told me a little of them, but I have one heard of them since I have been in Dunromin. Previous to that all I knew was that the people of Dunromin spoke the same language that I did on Earth, what we call English."

"You don't know the others personally?" asked Elegrin.

"I don't think so," replied Gavin, as he had before. "I haven't met them yet and I don't know their names. I don't know if I know them or not."

Elegrin seemed distracted now and a little suspicious. "Garibaldi told us a check that we should be careful of anyone who claimed to be from Earth," he announced, "Something he learned through his dreams of Earth, his visions of the future and the place of the Earthers in it. He told us to ask them a little of their world, to see if it rang true to what he had dreamed."

Gavin blinked at the announcement. He knew that Garibaldi had some kind of visions or prescience as regards Kzenzakai and the other visitors from Earth, but he didn't know what it was. It was another mystery he needed to puzzle out.

"What parts did he describe to you?" asked Gavin.

"That, as they say, is for you to tell us," replied Elegrin, moving his glass to one side and leaning forwards to fix Gavin with a steely eye. Gavin was also aware that Luke's hand had moved to his sword, as if from some unseen signal from Elegrin. Gavin suddenly realised he had come to a reckoning. Whatever he had claimed to be it was now to be tested. Elegrin's jovial manner was gone. His eyes were steady and clear, probably steadier than Gavin's own and he had drunk only half a glass.

"There's so much," Gavin replied, "I've no idea where to start. There's a lot of it that I would struggle to describe in ways you would understand."

The elf waited patiently. Gavin cleared his throat, where to start?

"We have horseless carts," he decided, "We call them cars, or automobiles. They are metal and carry two, four, twelve or more people. They move by an engine, a machine that uses oil to give it the power it needs to move. There's no magic on Earth. We use machines and electricity to do our work for us. The machines can carry people or goods all over. The really big ones run on rails, called trains. We have ones that fly as well, called aeroplanes, and huge ships made of iron and steel. They travel across the whole world very quickly, in a matter of hours when it comes to flying." Gavin paused and looked over at Luke, whose hand had moved away from his blade again.

Elegrin shrugged and took another drink. "Yes, that's the general kind of stuff Garibaldi went on about. It didn't make any sense coming from him either. I didn't really doubt you," confessed Elegrin and then pointed at his heart. "I knew in here you were telling the truth. But Garibaldi would insist on a check being made. You have passed. I trust you."

Gavin took another drink of wine. Sula remained silent, watching with those angry eyes of hers. She seemed impatient but remained motionless, her wine still untouched. Gavin then looked back at Elegrin. "So, what happened after you slew the dragons?"

Elegrin nodded, Luke had also relaxed a bit again. "Well, yes, the next event is a significant one. It was a grave error of judgement on Garibaldi's part. Something he felt necessary at the time but that would prove ill. He promised the Dragon Horde to those of the town who had suffered from the attack."

Gavin frowned. He sensed there was more to this but Elegrin was pouring another glass. Old May arrived with a fresh bottle.

"You see," said Elegrin at last, "The Barony of Garibaldi has become isolated in recent times. It is strong, and has a growing population, growing very fast indeed, but since the War of the Ring it has become a frontier. Not everyone likes to live on a frontier. They are exposed on two sides, south and west. To the north are friendly lands but to the east, while the lands are friendly, Kzenzakai's hordes slew many of the inhabitants. They have become wild places now, without order, open to anything that wanders down from the wild."

He paused again, considering how he might explain the intricacies of the error of Garibaldi's promise. Gavin tried to make sense of all of this in his mind's

eye image of the country. He really needed a map. Everything in D&D was based around maps; he was truly lost without one.

"Garibaldi came back down after flying up and fighting the dragons," he went on, talking about extraordinary magical combats as if they were something he did every day; perhaps he did? "And he came back to a shattered town. Much of the centre was on fire, many buildings had been smashed. Livestock and the farmers that tended them had been killed. It was not long since the population had been terrorised by Great Kzenzakai's Orc Legions, this shook them again to their very core. Garibaldi could see that they might up and leave his barony there and then, that very night. Without people to live there, to till the earth and keep the peace his barony would be ruined and his dreams of a haven of peace and a third city of the Land of the Young with it. He called to all the surviving townspeople then and made them this promise. He swore he would hunt down whence those dragons had come and bring back their horde. We knew there would be no question of dragons of that age and power not having a horde and Garibaldi meant to find it and bring it back."

Gavin nodded. He was intrigued by this idea; especially given the nature of the game he knew them all to be playing. Yet Garibaldi was playing politics. What did he care if the Barony prevailed? It seemed that Garibaldi cared more for the Land of the Young than was usual in the feudal leaders he had heard about.

"He set out the next day," Elegrin said after a pause. "Of course, all the fires were out by then and rebuilding starting already. Libby and one of the Earthers, a Druid named Wittigis Green-Acre, called down a deluge that put out the fires. With the power of the elves and dwarves of the Heroes it was easy to start gathering building materials. Indeed, by the light of day it could be seen that the damage to the town as a whole was limited. The counsel house was a ruin, and Garibaldi's own villa was gutted by fire, but the castle was untouched and only those large wooden businesses of the town centre were completely destroyed. There were many stone buildings as well which had suffered minimal damage. It was felt that it might be repaired quickly."

"But Garibaldi had made a promise," observed Gavin.

"Indeed," nodded Elegrin, "And being a man of his word, he intended to make good on that promise and flew south. Using divinations and interrogating creatures he met along the way, he spent four days searching the Hellmarch Mountains, pushing further west and south as he went. He must have covered hundreds of miles. Anyway, at last he found the lair of the Dragons, Dragon Mount he called it. It was high in the Horn Mountains nearly three hundred miles from his Barony, but he found it."

"Why so far?" wondered Gavin, "Why would six old and, one must presume, wise dragons fly so far to attack such a powerful and well defended target? It doesn't make any sense."

"It does not, you are quite correct," agreed Elegrin, "But perhaps I will come to that. What is key is that Garibaldi explored the mountain. He landed at the main gate and, concealed with more spells, entered it and searched the first few chambers. What he found quickly bewildered him and despite his concealment he soon found himself in a great fight. Moving down the main entry hallway he spotted, with his magics, a concealed doorway to one side. This led him into a twisting, slick and dark lair of many fell beasts, many Borroharradrim. Deep Race I think they are called by Humans?"

"Dark Race?" exclaimed Gavin, it was a name he had heard before – one of the sages in Skull Crag had once suggested they might be the beasts that did for his friends. "What are they?"

"Nasty things, fast and deadly," replied Elegrin, waving his hand about to add emphasis to his words. "You normally only encounter them in threes, if at

all. Beasts of the deep Darkworld. They use powerful mind control to enslave populations and feed off them. Quite horrible. And there were dozens of them! The Borroharradrim seemed to be inhabiting the caverns beneath the dragons you see? And there was a dirty great Deep Elf city far below that as well, deep in the Darkworld. We discovered that later when the Deep Elves came after the dragons' horde too. Of course, they had to get through the Borroharradrim first. And it was upon this combat that Garibaldi happened.

"He came upon the rear of the Dark Race, as they were distracted by the Dark Elves it must be admitted, and he unloaded great magics upon them, slaughtering a great many and even coming upon a spearhead of encroaching Dark Elves. Garibaldi has unusual tactics, it must be understood, in such circumstances. Where many might make trenches and lay siege, or charge in with sword and axe and spell, Garibaldi uses what he calls 'Guerrilla Tactics'. He fights and flees. He appears, where he might think himself least expected, fairly deluges all he can see with hot fire and then leaves before an organised retaliation might trap him or even hurt him.

"But even these tactics were insufficient. Even though he slew many of the Borroharradrim and even cornered their three most powerful mages in a small chamber, he had to leave after he had killed them. For he was spent and weak. The Borroharradrim were returning in force although bemused at the death of their leaders. And the Deep Elves were hot on their heels, hungry for the Dragon Gold."

Elegin paused to re-fill his glass, again.

"It was at this time Garibaldi came back to us in his Barony. We had worked hard to try and rebuild the damaged homes and rekindle his defences, but when he returned, burned, wounded and bleeding, we wondered at what powerful foe he had found. We were hugely afraid but he called us to him, bade us ready ourselves for battle as we had not known before. His oath, you see? His oath to his people would drive him to the very edge of his own destruction. He had such fear of losing face before the commoners perhaps. He was blinded, I suppose, by his own reputation. He couldn't imagine himself failing, he couldn't bear it. Pride is a fearful thing. He knew the Deep Elves would now brush the remaining Borroharradrim to one side. He knew they would seize the Dragon Horde and be away with it into the depths where he might never find it again. But he was mad for getting the gold himself, mad for his promise

"He rallied us that very afternoon and transported us with his magic back to the Dragon Mount. There we laid siege to the Deep Elves, and to the Orcs that served them, and to the Borroharradrim who fought on, and even then to the terrible Older Ones, the ancient Rakuli, who were master of both Deep Elf and Dragon. We came upon them in dark caverns, all the Heroes together one last time, with all the Earthers besides, and we fought. We hacked and spelled and bled and screamed in the maddening darkness for..."

Elegin paused. He closed his eyes and frowned. Gavin had no idea what a Rakuli was but didn't want to interrupt.

"Only a few months you say?" He murmured, "Less than eight days we were in the mountain I think. Indeed, with the time spent since and the few days recovering in the tunnels, perhaps only five days fighting in all. Five days!" he exclaimed, "Endless tunnels, dark and twisting, powerful foes on every side, behind every rock. And relentless! Driving fanatics pressing on their attacks regardless of loss. Wave after wave clambering over the bodies of the dead and dying. Five days! It felt like forever. Every minute felt like a hundred. Relentless! Never a moment to compose oneself. Never a moment to mourn the dead."

"Dead?" wondered Luke, timidly.

"Many fell," replied Elegrin, "Despite the healing magics of Garibaldi, Basil and the others we suffered many dead. Maybe two thirds of the Earthers were killed. Of the heroes Basil, Vic, Gunther and Sir Bedevere were hacked down by Deep Elf, Orc or other strangeness. Libby was blown to pieces in a terrible battle with the most powerful of the Deep Elves, and, alas, even Garibaldi fell in the darkness, stabbed in the back by a Deep Elf and blasted with great magics."

For a long moment no one spoke. Everyone gaped at the tipsy elf, wondering if they had heard him correctly. He was staring at his wine, remembering the fight, the chaos of battle, the shrieks of the dead and dying. Then he realised the intensity of their stares and laughed, a momentary, nervous laugh. Gavin was as confused as the others. Garibaldi dead? Was that it? One glance at Sula told him her mind was thinking the same. And so many other names too. How many of the Heroes were there? Or were these the Earthers they had been talking about? Wittigis Green-Acre didn't sound like an English name. Could Garibaldi and his heroes not even be British? American perhaps? D&D was an American game after all, perhaps he had been naïve to think that they would be British.

"I am sorry, my friends," Elegrin hastened to add as he saw their faces. "Do not despair; not all my news is bad. Pray wait while the end of the tale. Of course, Garibaldi is a great wizard as well as a warrior and priest. He had made preparations for such a grim eventuality. His mortal remains, along with all that which he bore with him, were transported on the instant of his death to this very city, to the Temple of Olympus in fact. As you know, there is a great priest there called Gragarius Timius, who is an old friend and comrade of Garibaldi. His mentor when he first came here in fact, Basil's mentor. Garibaldi and Gregarius had a long-held agreement that if either was to turn up dead at the temple the other would use the power of the gods and a spell of Resurrection to bring them back. This Gregarius did and Garibaldi was restored to us. As soon as he could he used his magic again to return to the Siege of Dragon Mount, but it did leave us a little wild and wary for some ten hours when we thought him dead. The darkest ten hours of my recent life I must confess."

Elegrin paused again to take another drink.

"When Garibaldi was struck down we had no idea where he was," the elf continued, "I myself was actually quite close to him then I think, fighting Deep Elves in the upper halls of the Dragon Caves. Garibaldi was somewhat ahead of me fighting the commanders of the troops I was fighting you see? Anyway, even as Garibaldi fell I and the Murmurkin who were fighting with me, and perhaps Abu I think, were triumphant. The Deep Elves were using magical darkness to hide their movements and confuse us. The whole place was as black as pitch and you could only judge things by listening for the whispered passwords we had and the noise of the people around you. You heard explosions and screams near and far and had no idea who or what they might be. I had no idea whether we were winning or not.

"Anyway, there were some Earthers near us, who had been fighting near Garibaldi they said, and they told us of his fall. They were angry and fearful, as any would be, as all of us were. The Earthers were not as powerful as Garibaldi, most not even as powerful as us I think. It was folly to take them there. They were out of their depth. Garibaldi's mind was clouded I think. He certainly didn't seem to be thinking straight. He was hasty, troubled I would say. More angry and eager than I have known him. We didn't really notice it at the time I think? Certainly, I didn't. But looking back, I don't know, some mania was in him." Elegrin was looking at his wine without seeing, his mind elsewhere. After a moment he shook himself and continued. "Anyway, the Earthers had found a secret side passage and thought they could hide there while we recovered a little from the onslaught and decided what we could do next. We had no idea how we were going to get out of there. We knew the way out but couldn't get to it.

Every way was crowded with Deep Elves, Orcs and other things. Summoned beasts from the Pit, Frog Demons, even some Borroharradrim were left! And even if we managed to get to the exit we would still have been high in the mountains, with no way down and no idea which way was home. So, we hid." The elf went quiet again, his eyes unseeing, his mind recalling the blackness of those halls.

"Well, we hid in those damned secret tunnels for several hours, in silence and magical light, healing ourselves, counting our losses and revising our spells. It was a tight, stinking place and we were not happy to be there. It was the Murmurkin and one of the Earthers, one called Kretos, who found other secret tunnels. Secrets within secrets. We had been lucky. The tunnel we were in connected with several others carved by the Borroharradrim within their own chambers to allow them to come up behind invaders and trap them. It quickly became apparent that these tunnels led us into the base of the Deep Elf invasion, into corners where some Borroharradrim still survived and into other places besides.

"It also became apparent that the Deep Elves were bringing up strong reinforcements. Through secret spy-holes we saw more and more Orcs, Deep Elves and Goblins being brought to the front. They were still searching for us, or perhaps just getting ready if we came back. We also saw the Dragon Horde, now found and recovered by the Deep Elves, being transported back into the depths of the Earth. They were using the Goblins as pack-mules to carry sacks of coins and other treasure. Realising this was the whole reason Garibaldi had brought us there we quickly resolved to counter-attack in force, at two separate points, using our knowledge of the tunnels in our favour. We felt honour bound to try and follow through on our friend's' ambition, even though we didn't know if he was alive or dead then.

"The Heroes attacked at what we took to be close to the Deep Elf leaders, the Earthers attacked further down, at a narrow point where the reinforcements coming up and the treasure going down were blocking each other's way. We felt we could pinch off their reinforcements there and use the enclosed space to prevent them out-flanking us.

"It was a well-conceived plan and at the sign we burst from our hiding places and fell upon the foe with great ferocity. We slaughtered them. We seemed to be winning, and winning well, at least at first. We had guessed our enemies' power and nerve well. When we drove into them we caught their leaders napping and slew a great many of them. Headless and panicked many of the enemy's forces fled or hid, but too many recovered too quickly. They simply held their own, fighting and dying but relentless, terrified, perhaps, of what might happen to them if they retreated. We were ground down as well, of course. Before we started the attack, many of us were gaunt and spent from the fight already. It was in this time that many of the Earthers fell, isolated by the sheer numbers of their enemies. They fought hard and their strategies were successful to a degree, but each time they managed to catch their breath fewer and fewer of them were left to fight on.

"The Heroes fared better, maybe through experience or personal power, but even that did not last. We came upon the worst of the foes just as we thought we had achieved a victory. Alas, the powerful Deep Elves we had burnt down were only the bodyguards of the true masters of that deep place. There were Great Old Ones behind all this dark plotting, using even the most powerful Deep Elves as their slaves. The Rakuli. Have you heard of them?"

Elegrin was directing the question at Gavin. He shook his head. "You mentioned them before, I haven't heard of them I don't think. What are they?"

"The Great Old Ones the human scholars call them," Elegrin continued, "The Deep Elves call them Rakuli, which means Ancient Shadows. Other ancient

racers of the Darkworld call them Cachari-menth, or Old Masters. It is widely held that they ruled the whole World, the World of Light as well as the World of Darkness, many thousands of years ago. The stories suggest the Rakuli even created so many of the abominations that we see in the world around us today. Ancient stories, not well known. The Grey Elves refuse to believe they ever existed, many other scholars agree with them. But the Deep Elves say they went to sleep at the very peak of their power, perceiving some great disaster and seeking to sleep through it. They sleep still, it is said, but several were walking with the Deep Elves under Dragon Mount that day. Only a few, mind you, we think we counted seven, maybe eight, but they were enough to tip the balance. They were enough to make even the greatest Heroes look small, to make us all look weak."

Elegrin was looking into his wine again.

"I faced one of them you know?" he muttered, "He was already injured from the weapons we had fired in our attack but he shrugged it off. Intricately folded mesh of metal made his armour and beneath that he had muscles that rippled and bulged with power and fury. He sent Frog Demons before him and even they were terrified of his powers, they fought to the death against us rather than retreat. But I faced it, or rather we faced it, with Vic and Gunther. They fell before me, hacked by his sword, while I fired every spell I could think of into his flesh. Only when he closed on me did the surviving Murmurkin appear and fall upon his rear. They saved me then, I owe them a great deal. Were it not for their fast blades I would not be here now to tell you this. None of us would have escaped."

He paused for dramatic effect. Looking about each of his audience. And then took a ferocious slug of wine.

"But there were more of them than just that one," he said at last, "Seven or eight in all, as I said, and commanding Deep Elves, Orcs, Goblins, Frog Demons, Borroharradrim and Dragon alike it seemed. It must have been they that drove the Dragons against us in the first place, but to what end? I can't begin to guess their strange plans. Anyway, they were rallying these foes against us, the survivors that is, but there were many. They turned every tunnel and cave into a horror of war. We could neither turn nor run, only fight and fight and hack and hack, for our very lives.

"Thank the Moon it was at this, our darkest hour that Garibaldi managed to return to us. Refreshed, alive and flowing with magic he tore into our enemies and put them to flight. He caught the Deep Elves and the Rakuli distracted in a cave below the darkest level and froze them in time for just long enough to split them asunder. He was like a whirlwind, a streak of living Hell pouring fire and steel on his enemies. He bottled up the Borroharradrim in a small cave and pumped in Fireball after Fireball. Only with most of our number dead and all of us weary and blasted to our last, desperate hope, did Garibaldi finally deliver us, reducing himself to spent fury in the process – as fatigued as us by the time all the Rakali we had seen were accounted for.

"But even then, even after smashing all these fantastic beasts to pulp, we were not free of the torment. Far below we knew the Deep Elves and their servants were rallying. We might have killed their leaders, or some of them, and the Rakuli, but we had not yet secured the Dragon Horde for which they thirsted beyond all sense or reason. Garibaldi brought us together there, quickly bringing in all our stragglers and selecting only the richest items and quickest to steal of the Horde. In that haste he brought us back to his barony by magic, after he had rescued the wounded and dead first of course. It was a sorry, horrible pile of shattered bodies. The horde we recovered was great, vast indeed, but we left much silver and gold in the halls. The magic and gems we got, and a lot of gold, but two thirds, at least, we left behind. And then we rested at last..."

Elegrin smiled then, savouring the taste of the wine. Not a smile of joy but a smile of satisfaction. "We rested, Garibaldi rested, the dead rested. Garibaldi called down great magics and brought life back to all the dead, his Raise Dead spells. Moon be praised they all came back to us. None were as they were of course. All were paler and sadder than before, all were marked by what they had seen. How could anyone not be? The horror of those caves and then the sight of the darkness beyond the veil." He paused, searching for the words but they would not come. He sighed. "But all were alive. That is, all but Libby. She was so blasted and burnt that she could not be Raised and Garibaldi had to first summon back what flesh he could with one spell, and then Resurrect her with another. She came back, more's the miracle, but it tested Garibaldi's powers greatly.

"That spell took the last of his strength and he took to his bed for weeks. Even now he is marked by the experience, the whole experience. He looks tired all the time, we all do I suppose? But Garibaldi is the most marked by it, I think. It was his idea. He blames himself for it, regrets that he so nearly brought us all to disaster like that. His soul was worn out and he could not bear to cast magic for a long a while. He is still weak I think. That is why he sent Lance and I back to Dunromin without him, but bearing his messages and missions." The elf waved his glass at the parchments scattered on the table, some now marked with the rings of the wine glasses, then he poured himself another glass.

Gavin watched Elegrin then lean back and sigh heavily. The telling of the tale had evidently tired him, perhaps the memory of the fighting in those dark caves disturbed him even here, in the brightly lit dining room of a wealthy wine importation business. Yet it didn't quite seem real. Although the description seemed consistent, perhaps, and Elegrin's witness reliable, Gavin's own understanding of the world he was in at that time was dependent on the rules of Dungeons and Dragons. Under those rules there was plenty of scope for dead heroes to be resurrected. There was plenty of scope for endless fights and spells in dark corridors beneath the ground – indeed, that was what the whole game was about. But there were limits. There was a certain level of reason to be applied to all this data. The sheer magnitude and short time frame of the conflict Elegrin had described beggared belief.

"Wow," Gavin concluded, "Garibaldi must be a seriously high level to do all that stuff."

Elegrin turned to face Gavin but didn't speak or smile. He just held his gaze for a moment, shrugged, nodded gently, and took another drink.

## **Chapter 21 – At the Temple of Death**

Gavin wasn't allowed much time to think after the telling of Elegrin's tale. Lance demanded that he tell them all about Gavin's experiences so far once more and all that he had done to identify the real murderers of the gnomes. This he did and as he retold the story, with interruptions from Luke, his mind turned again to the mystery. So many things didn't add up at all, it seemed to him, yet others added up too easily. Above all the one key clue that remained unfound was the motive for choosing him and Sula as the scapegoats.

"So, what do you plan to do now?" asked Elegrin.

"You mentioned viewing the bodies of the gnomes, but that you wouldn't know what you might find there?" recalled Luke.

"Yes," said Gavin, "I do think that might be worth it, if only to make sure we miss nothing. Is it acceptable to turn up at the Temple of Death with such a request?"

"Perhaps, when we explain ourselves," said Elegrin, "I will come with you. I am known to them and my association with Baron Garibaldi and my own ranking will stand us in good stead."

"Do you think?" Wondered Lance.

Elegrin frowned as he considered this. "Yes, but we'd best not mention that I have been brought back from the dead more than once. It would not sit well with them."

A short time later Elegrin, dressed in an elegant show-white fur-lined cloak, Gavin, Sula, Gecko and Luke headed out into the wintry afternoon. The sleet had stopped and the snow on the street had turned to slush and was already stained with the detritus of city life. It collected about the drains and the edge of the road, while the usual maelstrom of city traffic heaved to and fro in the street. Gavin was still not used to it. Every time he thought he'd kind of got the hang of it something else would catch his eye and remind him of how unreal his situation was. He spotted gryphons and their riders circling the great castle on the northwest side of the city, he caught glimpses of tiny humanoid fey with gossamer wings flitting between holes in the eaves of the buildings. A man dressed in chainmail and carrying several swords held three huge hyenas, with golden coats, on chains like hunting dogs. Elves shimmered through the crowds wearing garments made from iridescent materials. Dwarves stalked past with a swaying, deliberate gait that seemed the way the whole race walked. Every person seemed to have something about them, some little detail of the way they dressed, moved or looked, that made them just that little bit strange.

The five of them headed out west onto the road to the Old Gate again and back down it towards the docks. They turned onto the road down to the docks but then headed west again. Gavin recognised some of the buildings from their first walk up from the docks two days before. Only two days? It seemed a long time ago now, so much had happened to them, so much confusion had entered their lives.

As they progressed west they passed the Halls of the Rock Gods, the temple of the dwarves and gnomes that still followed their traditional cults. This was a magnificent building of sharp angles of beautifully dressed black stone. It stood three storeys tall with a low-pitched rook of smooth slate. From the entranceway two dwarf sentries watched them pass, their eyes hidden beneath huge war helms too ornamental for anything but ceremonial purposes. Gavin wondered if they had been present at the morning's near-riot, but he couldn't recall any armour of this design there then, nor anyone wearing the robes of a priest. There was another small group of dwarves stood at the corner, smiling and talking, who stopped, their smiles vanishing, as they watched Gavin's little group pass them.

Luke led Gavin and the others to the right, around this corner, and north through an ornate gateway of white stone and wrought iron gates. This gateway led through a tall white wall which Gavin recognised from their first day. It was the wall they had found themselves standing next to that first day, when they were lost, just before they met Jerym Twofella and employed Gecko.

Through the gates of the Graveyard the scene changed completely. Instead of tall houses crowding and pushing against each other and thronging streets, all around them were lines of differently shaped white mounds of snow. In some places, sheltered by trees or cleaned specifically, Gavin could see the shapes were tombs and headstones, small barrows and strange platforms. Around these grew trees and shrubs of various sizes and species, all now weighed down with heavy mounds of pure white snow. The woodland was so dense that they could see barely thirty or forty yards from the main path, but every floorspace seemed crowded with decorations, graves and tombs. The main path

wound its way up to the temple itself and as they walked they passed a few mourners and holy men going about their business in sombre benediction.

The priests of Death, Gavin noted, wore white or grey habits that obscured their bodies as far as their ankles and folded around their hands also. Over their face they wore Death Masks, likenesses of skulls of a formulated and slightly Celtic style. These were made, it seemed, of gold, silver or pewter, depending on the rank or role of the wearer perhaps. Gavin also noted that some of the priests they passed clanked as they walked, and some had swords ill-concealed beneath their robes, which were slit down the front to allow the wearer access to his weapon. Gavin asked Luke about this, wondering that priests should be armed with swords when his recollection, certainly of the normal D&D rules, was that clerics were only allowed blunt weapons such as maces and clubs.

"I believe that is the case for the Babylonians," replied Luke, "Certainly they seem very keen on their strange maces, but most of the Temples seem to allow their priests any weapon they chose."

"There are some restrictions on their weapons," interrupted Elegrin, "They have limited choices of arms that are approved of by their deities. I know from Basil that the Olympians will only use spears, short bows and shortswords. I think the Heliopians are only allowed maces or Kopeshes. It varies."

"I see," said Gavin, "And why are they so heavily armed here?"

"The unquiet dead," said Elegrin, waving at the many graves, "Are never too far from the surface. Most nights something crawls out in search of, well, whatever it is these undead creatures search for."

"That doesn't sound safe?" said Gavin.

"Hardly," agreed Elegrin, "You have to remember that there are nearly six hundred years worth of bodies inhumed here, and from one of the biggest cities in the world. Below many of these tombs and mounds are tunnels stretching into extensive catacombs. They even link with the sewers and deeper, older tunnels too I expect. There usually is on such ancient sites. Then there's the plague pits from the Century Plagues, which are why the temple was built here in the first place. There's a lot of dead down there and a lot of magic too. These things never seem to mix in a nice way. The Acolytes and Priests of the Temple of Death are some of the most experienced warriors in the city. The new initiates are expected to help protect the place from the day they join. Fighting at least one undead beastie or other every week soon teaches you how to fight. That or you die."

"So much magic?" wondered Gavin, "And where does that come from?"

"Why, Dunromin itself!" exclaimed the elf with a chuckle. "Haven't you heard? The stone of the castle rock is highly charged with a deep, old magic from the day of the Creation itself." As he spoke he pointed ahead of them. Through breaks in the trees Gavin caught glimpses of the huge hill that the Old City was built on, with the castle rising above it. "It is said that what is now the castle rock is the base, or stub that was left when the Moon was created. As you know the Moon is the source of all magic in the world but there are stronger channels to many special places in the world, above and below. The junctions of Ley Lines for instance, where the magic has come to concentrate, either temporarily or permanently. Dunromin is one of the most powerful of those, it is said. It's why the local population here is so thick with wizards and visionaries and madmen. It's why people here are so used to generally weird things happening all the time. Like the curse that stops the beer and wine tasting any good, you know? Super-Nature, the academics call it. And there's people using that kind power for all kinds of things. And there are strange things happening, random events, just because of the power, all the time. The Guild of Black Magic is the worst for it, up by the North Gate on the east side of the Castle Mount. There's things going on in there that would make you feel quite unwell."

"The Guild of Black Magic?" wondered Gavin.

"Yes, Low Magic they call it at the College, or Dirt Magic if they are being mean," explained Elegrin, "I studied at the College myself, a Wizard of the High White Magic, proper magic they would have you believe. But I am not so bigoted as some of them as regards the lower forms of the art. The Witches and the Diabolists use more basic forms, closer to nature I think. Less bidden by the fine minds of wizards and priests. But they all have their uses I think, even if their methods are, shall we say, a little gauche?"

Gavin nodded and wanted to ask more but he was distracted by the vista before him – they rounded a grove of willow trees and beheld the Temple of Death. He stopped and looked up in awe despite the many strange sights he had almost got used to. This structure was not as grand and imposing as some of the higher status civic buildings he had seen but it had a definite presence as one might associate with such a great mausoleum. Something about the simple, elegant lines reeked of calm power, the whole place made Gavin's skin itch with latent waves of grim, magical energy. The Temple itself was faced entirely with white marble and the snow made it appear as if intricately carved of ice, glistening in the late afternoon sunshine. The basic shape appeared to be a square, with a grand main entrance flanked with pillars and abstract carvings of repeating patterns. The roof was flat but festooned with flag poles from which hung long, plain white banners. Also, on the roof were about a dozen bending black spikes, curling up from the corners of the build like the ribs of a huge skeleton, perhaps twenty feet tall but not meeting at the top. There were balconies and terraces up the sides of the structure, and long, white ribbons fluttered from horizontal poles placed on these, lending an ethereal air to the place. Guards in bright white habits and armed with long spears could be seen dotted about the place in pairs, apparently ready to defend the structure from external attack at any moment.

Instead of going through the main front entrance Elegrin lead them all around to one of the side doors. This was open and they entered a plain chamber of white with some simple chairs of black wood. The inner walls were plaster and painted white, a row of white tiles decorated the base and top. The ceiling was high and smooth with a candelabra hanging in the centre, made of the same black wood as the chairs. Standing waiting for them, it seemed, was a short priest in a grey habit and rather sullen looking silver Death Mask. Judging by his hands this priest was quite old, although he still walked quite erect and was sprightly enough on his feet.

"Good day gentle folk," said the priest, "How might we be of service?"

"We are come to pay our respects to a family of dead gnomes," replied Elegrin, "They were murdered by burglars the night before last and we have been charged by Sir Garin, Captain of the Guard, to find their murderer or murderers."

The priest shot a sideways glance pointedly at Gavin and Sula. "Indeed," he said, "Rumour of these unusual events have reached our ears. Might I enquire what you intend with regard to their mortal remains?"

Elegrin seemed to understand what was meant here. "I can assure you that their spiritual peace will remain inviolate," he reassured the priest, "And the last thing we would want to do is alarm or offend the family of the deceased. Or yourselves."

The priest seemed unconvinced. "You are somewhat violated yourself, I note," he said, waving a dismissive finger at Elegrin. "I see the core of your soul has been twisted by strong magic away from the Next Path already. More than once I sense."

"A risk of my occupation," replied Elegrin, lightly. He even shrugged almost guiltily. "My Final Time is not yet upon me I think."

"Perhaps that should not be for you to decide?" wondered the priest, his tone very much indicating a deep contempt for Elegrin clinging onto his life so determinedly. "But this is beside the point. My concern is that your irreverence for your own mortality should not extend to others. What assurances do I have that you will not disturb their peace?"

"Our word of honour," said Elegrin, as if this was obvious. "Our purpose is nothing so morbid. Rather my friend Sea Breeze here has some theories about signs left upon the body. These marks may give some clue of the nature of their death."

The priest took a step backwards. "You want to inspect the bodies!" he exclaimed. His over-reaction was quite startling and more than a little camp. Gavin struggled not to laugh.

"Well, a little," muttered Elegrin, realising he didn't actually know what Gavin intended. "Erm, I think. But only a little, Sea Breeze?" he looked across at Gavin.

"These marks are left on mortal remains as a result of the way they have died," said Gavin, coming to Elegrin's rescue once he had regained control of himself. He tried to keep his tone calm, almost cheerful. "To the initiated they are as clear as a written letter. They are the final messages to the living from the deceased." He felt quite pleased with this little turn of phrase and it seemed to work.

The priest calmed a little, intrigued by this explanation. Despite the apparent passion of his previous stance these Death Priests were able to quickly become quite calm and circumspect when it suited them.

"And you are initiated in this are you?" asked the priest.

Gavin was reluctant to lie but realised that admitting he had no idea what he was looking for would not help them. "There could be all kinds of these marks as a result of the events surrounding their deaths. The marks could be evidence confirming or denying our theories."

"Tell me what marks you would expect the find?" the Priest wondered, a casual test, perhaps. Gavin suspected the man didn't believe him for one moment..

"I am a well-informed amateur, not an expert, I must warn you," hastened Gavin, realising his mouth might be writing cheques his skill couldn't cash. His memory was hastily searching through the vague technical phrases he could remember from his many hours spent stupefied in front of the family TV. "Defensive wounds," he recollected somehow, "And the angle and direction of the attack. They may have grasped some last trace of their attacker as well, some blood or hair under their fingernails."

The Priest nodded approvingly. "Not so much of an initiate," he observed, "Tell me, know you much of death and its delivery?"

"No," replied Gavin, "Only stories and the theories of story tellers."

The priest considered what had been said, evidently weighing up his options.

"I cannot allow you to view the bodies," he announced at length and held up his hands to placate Elegrin's immediate protests. "The family have expressly forbidden it. The deceased's brother is in an adjacent room mourning with is own family. I must respect their wishes and I fear they may not be so understanding about your being here as I am."

"Then our trip here has been wasted?" wondered Elegrin, evidently not ready to leave just yet. His hand was stroking his money pouch as if he was considering a bribe. Gavin saw this and realised that the priest would be the last

person to try such a move on. Evidently Elegrin wasn't as shrewd or worldly wise as he would have them believe. Or maybe he was just drunk.

"You have something else to tell us, though?" Gavin asked, before Elegrin could say anything more.

"Perhaps," wondered the priest. "Wait here."

They waited while the priest left through a side door. He wasn't gone long and when he returned he held something in his hand. He made straight for Gavin.

"Teller Brighteye the jeweller was stabbed four times by a long, slightly curved blade, from above," said the priest, his tone stiff and respectful. He seemed to have decided Gavin was worthy of his time and possibly, genuinely wanted to help. "His attacker was taller than he, and probably right-handed. His wife was slain by a stab from the same weapon and then broke her neck somehow as she fell. The child was slain by the same weapon as his parents. A simple thrust, accurate but perhaps more violent than was actually necessary, if such an act might ever be called 'Necessary'."

"Can you tell me anything else about the weapon?" asked Gavin.

"A long weapon," repeated the priest, "Longer than your lady's daggers. Curved but straighter than your own scimitar which would slash rather than stab I would imagine?"

"Yes," smiled Gavin. Forensic evidence of his innocence – that his sword was not the murder weapon. He felt himself clean again, a rush of relief through his whole body, although he doubted what credence Gavin would give such testimony. "Anything else you can tell me?"

The priest held up a small wooden tool, like a narrow spatula. On its end was a lump of dark material.

"Your mention of defensive wounds made me wonder," said the priest, "I scraped this from under his left middle fingernail."

Gavin looked at the material at the end of the scraping tool, realising it was this and not the tool the priest was referring to. It appeared to be a dark, damp material, but under it was some other, lighter material like rust. Gavin gently took the scraper and held it up under the candles that lit the room, turning it slightly to see better. After that he held it to the end of his tongue and carefully tasted it. His face changed and he nodded, looking over at the priest.

"Blood," he told him, "And something else like ink or tar."

"Scraped from his killer in his death throes," agreed the priest.

"So, our suspect will have a fresh scratch, on his face perhaps," said Gavin, "And has used face paint of some description, probably face-black, to disguise himself in the dark."

The priest seemed pleased with Gavin's observation and bowed reverently. He then walked past them and turned with his arm out to the door, inviting them to leave.

"Thank-you for your time and your patience," said Gavin, "Sula and I are forever in your debt."

"Peace be with you," said the priest as they left. "May your ending be gentle."

## **Chapter 22 – Download from Jerym Twofella**

Outside the sun had gone down and the moon was hidden behind more low cloud. The darkness of the graveyard was lessened by small pools of green light that marked the edge of the path back to the front gate. As they walked they couldn't help themselves but glance side to side, into the opaque blackness

between tombs and headstones. They all felt uncomfortable in the place and Gavin was particularly aware that all the hairs on the back of his neck were stood on end. It was an uncanny feeling he had probably never truly felt before, as if a cold breeze was caressing him. He turned his head but there was nothing there. The shadows at the margins of his vision seemed to froth and wobble, but as he turned to look they were still, the spaces he could see devoid of any apparent threat.

"This is a bad place to be in after dark," he muttered.

"There are many things unseen and unknown here," whispered Elegrin, "The dead of Dunromin are rarely quiet for long."

They hurried back into the gate, which was opened for them by four of the temple guards, and onto the broad street beyond, now alight with many lanterns and lamps both fixed and carried by people going about their nocturnal business. This area was evidently more affluent, or at least busier than the streets around the gnome jeweller's shop, even than around the Inn they had stayed in the night before. It was easy to see one's way here and they walked briskly back up the hill towards the Old Town, glad to be away from the graveyard and its sinister watchfulness.

All, however, was not well and Gavin could not shake the feeling of being watched, even turning several times to try and discern someone glaring at him from the shadows. There was no one, save once, when his eyes met two bloodshot eyes glowering out at him from beneath a bushy brow. It was a dwarf, but walking across their path, not following them. Word of their activities must have spread throughout the dwarven and gnomish communities. Nowhere among them would Gavin be likely to see a friendly face.

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"Good day to you, fair gentry!" said a voice next to Gavin suddenly, loud and proud, quite enough to make Gavin jump. He looked around and down into the decrepit face of Jerym Twofella, Master of Guides. "Do not pause here good sir," the hobbit quickly went on in a slightly hushed but urgent voice, ushering Gavin onwards. "None of these streets are safe for you after dark now. Head for the 'Wench and I shall meet you there. I have news you may be willing to spend some time and money on." And with that the hobbit was gone, not so much vanished by a spell nor swept away in the crowds but simply not there any more.

Gavin was not the only one that had heard this message and Sula looked at him with alarm. Luke and Gecko had also stopped but then hurried him on; their manner suggesting they knew who Jerym was and were not alarmed by his sudden appearance. Only Elegrin seemed oblivious to their small messenger.

"Does he mean the Bawdy Wench?" wondered Gavin.

"No other," said Luke, "You've heard of it then?"

"The inn?" asked Elegrin, his ears pricking, "What a splendid idea!"

"It may be a trap," suggested Sula.

"My boss's business is information," said Gecko, "And the 'Wench is about as safe a place as you can go in Dunromin outside the Lord's Keep. Well, as long as you have friends in there, and I have. No one's about to risk crossing Big Tom and have a go at you in there. You can talk safe of being overheard, as long as we pay the barkeep for his peace."

Gavin shivered. The night seemed less and less friendly, the city itself seemed colder around him. It seemed a long time since they had stepped off the ship in the harbour and Gavin had revelled in the sight, sounds and smell of a heaving fantasy metropolis. For some reason he felt both terrified and intrigued by the thought of going to this infamous hostelry. He dreaded to think what strangeness might lurk in its beer-soaked back rooms.

"Follow me," instructed Gecko, hurrying off. The others followed, Sula least sure of all but far more afraid of being left alone. Elegrin's step was fastest of course and his hands were already searching out some change for drinks.

"Tell me something of the place," Gavin asked Luke, "And who's Big Tom?"

"Tom Dunug," said Luke, "Strictly speaking he's the owner of the place, but it's against the law for trolls to own property."

"He's a troll?" exclaimed Gavin.

"He wasn't always," replied Luke, "Once he was a powerful warrior, a very successful adventurer. He got hacked down one adventure though, and his mate, a magician, used a spell to bring him back. It got a bit messed up though and he came back as a troll. His mate didn't come back from that adventure."

"Reincarnation," muttered Gavin, smiling. "But if he was already a bit tasty with a weapon and now he's a troll that would make him, erm, quite something to be reckoned with?"

"Yes," said Luke, "No one messes with Tom. Nor his business partner Sid Nurtrid. Sid's a half-ogre they say. I don't know about that but he's built like a house and as ugly as a slapped goblin."

"Sounds delightful," muttered Sula, "So explain to me why we are going there?"

"Everyone goes there!" beamed Elegrin, "Finest wine in the city, one of our best customers. It's the very heart of the city I would say. Or at the very least its fleshy underbelly."

The walk to the inn didn't seem to take long and Elegrin led them in through a door to one side of the main entrance. It led into a dimly-lit and low-ceilinged lounge bar choking with pipe smoke and the smell of perfumes, oils and strange ointments. Around the room, which was irregularly shaped, were many lounge chairs and low tables. In many of the chairs were seated people, mainly elves, smoking, drinking, talking and playing strange board games. The conversation level was low and overlaid with the soft plucking of a lute and a half-moaned, half chanted melody, the source of which wasn't immediately obvious. Elegrin expertly attracted the attention of a waitress, a buxom and slightly dour looking young lady, and ordered a bottle of some wine he named by its vineyard. "And four glasses," he added.

He located two free chairs and frowned around looking for more. Another elf hailed him and they exchanged a quick conversation in a rolling, colourful language that sounded remarkably like French but that Gavin took to be Loomish, the most common form of Elfish spoken in the Land of the Young.

Sula took one of the chairs and Elegrin seemed to be waiting for Gavin to take the other. Gavin wasn't sure he liked this place. The air was so thick with smoke that it made his eyes water and the smells, although individually quite subtle and charming, when mixed became suffocating.

"Thanks, I'll stand," smiled Gavin and Elegrin dropped elegantly into the soft cushions of the chair. Luke also remained standing, looking carefully around the room's occupants. Gecko touched Gavin's elbow and pointed to a doorway, his eyes wide and a silly grin on his face but looking around nervously, as if checking for something.

"Jerym will be through in the Lower Dark Bar," said Gecko, leading the way through the door and deeper into the Inn. Luke followed but Elegrin indicated he would stay and suggested Sula do the same, muttering something about the place being unsuitable for young ladies.

Gavin was relieved to follow Gecko, finding the air clearer through the doorway, although still pretty thick with smoke. Gecko led him, with Luke following, down a short corridor and through some other small bars. They passed many doors, closed and ajar, that seemed to lead to cellars, stairways, secluded rooms and sculleries. The place was rank with the smell of smoke, sweat, perfume and beer, and the noise from some of the rooms was quite alarming. They passed through the edge of one large chamber that seemed to span two floors, the upper one a balcony surrounding the centre of the lower one, where there was a shallow pit. Here where dozens of people shouting and roaring in a great excitement. Gavin couldn't see through the crowd but guessed from the nature of the shouts and challenges that there was some kind of organised fight or other physical competition going on in there.

Beyond this Gecko led them through a side corridor and down a short stairway, by which time they must have been at the rear of the building and more than halfway down it. The walls were no longer wood but seemed to be carved from stone, as if the inn was built into the cliff behind it; the cliff that supported the walls of the Old City. They went through another door into a dingy area lit by small orange candles and segmented into small sitting areas by high partitions. There was a table in each area and a blackboard with chalk at the end. Gecko sat at one table while Luke scratched three chalk marks on the board and sat on the other side. Gavin sat himself down too, next to Luke, and looked around the room. From his seated position he could actually see very little but he guessed, from the hushed whispers he could hear, that this was exactly what was intended. He felt sure that nefarious deals and strange secrets were being dealt all around him.

Presently a waiter arrived with a tray of three beers and Luke paid him nine silvers, which seemed quite steep to Luke although he wasn't sure. The waiter was wearing workaday clothes with a grimy apron. His face was thin and looked permanently contorted into a sneer. His long, straight hair was tied back. He seemed to be of indeterminate age and made no comment on the payment, the beer nor anything else.

Gavin tasted the beer and discovered it was rather characterless ale, heavily water down. He made a face and put it to one side.

"This isn't a drinker's bar," Luke told him; neither he nor Gecko touched their beers. "The beer's more to offer a way of paying for the table than getting you any kind of pleasure. This is the Lower Dark Bar, the place where people come who do not wish to be overheard."

"Does it work?" wondered Gavin.

Luke smiled, but said nothing. Gavin very much suspected that this bar was the kind of place where nothing remained secret for long unless the people holding the secret were appropriately respectful of the management.

Presently they were joined by Jerym, who hauled himself up onto the seat next to Gecko, added a chalk mark to the board and then underlined the four marks.

"Once again, good evening," he said, his voice low but not whispered.

"And to you," said Gavin, electing himself spokesman since the crippled hobbit seemed to be addressing him. "Your message in the street implied we were in danger?"

"Not in here," said Jerym, patting the side of his nose with his forefinger. A gesture Gavin recognised from Earth and one he hoped he interpreted correctly as indicating that there was a safe or shared secret. "But you'd best be on your guard out there in the shadows. There's mischief afoot and no mistake." The halfling placed three silvers on the table with a curious flourish.

Gavin said nothing. Jerym leaned back as the waiter returned. He nodded at Jerym as he took the coins and delivered another mug of weak ale. He then glanced at the chalk-board and moved quickly away.

"I have heard strange tales this day," said Jerym, once the man was out of earshot. "Dark things have been said. Wrong things too, but a thing being wrong alone will not stop it. It will need to be stopped."

"What has been said?" asked Gavin.

"I have heard of your meeting in the street earlier with Sidy Garl and his brethren," continued Jerym after moving the mug of beer to one side, untouched. "And I have heard rumour that your friend Lance has been running to his masters at the Wog squealing like a scared rabbit. I wonder if you knew that, yes indeed? But this isn't why I am here."

Jerym paused, looking meaningfully at the bare space on the table between their mugs. Gavin struggled with 'Wog' for a moment, reflecting on its Earthly background, but then realised one of the thieves Guilds Lance had referred to was the Western Old Guild, evidently this was the 'Wog', and it must be the Guild Lance and probably Luke were members of. After a few moments Luke sighed and fished in his clothes for some coins. He laid six gold on the table and then pulled four of them back, leaving them by his own drink. Jerym seemed to understand whatever this meant and continued.

"A Friend has told me that Teller Brighteye's shop had a visitor today," he said, "A very particular visitor. One as hasn't been seen around here for a long time. It was a diamond merchant from Constantan by the name of Glib Widewalk, a gnome of no small means and reputation he is. And he had four men with him. Serious men they were, strong in blade and bow and spell. Paid guards and paid a lot or I'm a turnip. Mr Widewalk was very angry to find that Mr Brighteye's dead, he was. Not sad angry neither. I'd guess he had some important business with the late Mr Brighteye that wouldn't now be done. I suspect he may have been considerably out of pocket with it."

"What business I wonder?" muttered Luke.

Gavin said nothing, he was thinking hard about this. He knew that Constantan was the capital of the Gnome Hills, to the southeast of the Land of the Young, on the southern edge of the end of the peninsula. It was the capital of the Gnome lands in that direction, with a major Gnomish population. It was a few days' travel away, maybe a week? Not a casual journey and it didn't sound like a social call.

"Did Mr Widewalk have much luggage with him at all?" Gavin asked.

"He had notes of credit, several of them," said Jerym. "My friend didn't recognise the seals but they had the look of the gnomes about them."

"And what did Mr Widewalk do when he found his contacts gone?" wondered Gavin.

"He looked angry, Mr Sea Breeze, sir," replied Jerym, "And not a little scared. He paid off his guards in gold there and then and fled the city. By pony no less! A most demeaning form of transport for a gnome of his stature, though expeditiously rapid."

"I see," murmured Gavin, "Tell me, Mr Twofella, I wonder if you had heard of anyone seeking to sell a quantity of diamonds in a hurry at all of late? Or perhaps a tale of someone losing a quantity that they were somewhat eager to regain?"

Jerym's eyes twinkled, evidently pleased with Gavin's deduction. "Why there is a tale I have heard, no more than a whisper, and I honestly couldn't vouchsafe its rightness. It sounds extraordinary, perhaps too wild to be true. But I have heard that someone managed to lift some such gems from a Temple down in the Lower Market."

At this Luke almost choked on his ale. "What?" he spluttered, and then remembered himself. "What?" he asked again in a lower voice.

Jerym didn't reply for a short while. The conversation at the other tables had gone quiet at Luke's outburst. Jerym kept his peace until the dull murmur of other conspiracies returned.

"It's just what I heard," confirmed Jerym, grinning, "Although I could scarcely credit it myself."

"What temple is in the Lower Market?" asked Gavin.

"The Babylonian," replied Gecko.

"And to consider stealing something of value from there would be a bad idea would it?" continued Gavin, rather fancying that he could guess the answer.

"Stealing from any of the Temples would be foolhardy," confirmed Jerym, "But, barring the Heliopian, the Babylonian is probably the most hazardous. So yes, a very bad idea. Very bad indeed."

"They don't kill burglars there," said Luke, "Or rather, they don't *just* kill burglars there."

"I see," said Gavin, "But if someone did rob such a place and got away with it wouldn't that be a bit embarrassing for the temple? Am I right in thinking that the Babylonians are unlikely to make much of a fuss about it, publicly anyway, for fear of their reputation?"

Jerym raised one eyebrow but said nothing. He then leant back and looked across at Luke. Luke leant back too, pushing the remaining coins over towards Jerym.

"Something else you might be able to help me with," said Gavin, as Jerym slid the gold into his pocket and appeared to be making ready to leave, "Would you happen to know if the good gnome Teller Brighteye had a private security arrangement with any of the more secretive organisations of the city?"

Jerym smiled again. "Now that's a thing," he said, "A successful business like that you'd think he would have to wouldn't you? Perhaps even with all of them."

"All of them?" wondered Gavin, "And then he would have access to some very lucrative trade I would think. But I would think he would also presume himself safe from, erm, molestation, shall we say?"

"Yes indeed," said Jerym, "Very safe indeed, and rightly so. Should something have happened to him in that circumstance I think a great number of very significant noses would be put well out of joint." The halfling stood and shook his head. "It doesn't bear thinking about," he muttered theatrically and grinned again. "A very goodnight to you all, gents. I will leave you in Gecko's very good care, Mr Sea Breeze. If there is anything else I can do for you, just ask him. He'll know where to find me."

Gavin nodded in response and thanked him for his help. They watched him leave and Luke looked around at Gavin with curiosity in his eyes. Gavin shook his head and stood up as well.

"It's getting late," Gavin observed, "Let's get Sula and Elegrin and head for home. I need a sleep and a think. And I need to think out loud." He waved his finger at the general surroundings and the others understood.

## **Chapter 23 – Sea Breeze Remembers his Dance**

Having found Elegrin and Sula deep in conversation and retrieved them, the band then left the Bawdy Wench to its nocturnal habits and headed back for Elegrin and Lance's place of business. On the way they all kept a careful watch out, heeding Jerym's words of warning and avoiding dark corners and narrow alleys.

Back at the winery the fire was in the grate and Old May and two of her daughters had cooked them supper. As they ate they talked, relaying Jerym's warnings to Elegrin and Sula, along with the cryptic news he had passed on. Just as they finished the tale Lance returned and they had to repeat everything again, although Lance knew some of it already.

"So, someone has stolen some diamonds from the Babylonians?" said Sula.

"That's what it sounds like to me," said Gavin, "And whoever it is they passed the diamonds onto Teller Brighteye who was getting ready to sell them on to this Widewalk person."

Sula nodded.

"Brighteye was paying protection to all the Guilds," Lance confirmed, "And fencing a lot of gear for them as well. Despite his little shop he was one of the richest people in the city. Sells a lot of his stuff to merchants in Constantan and the Blue Mountains. The gnomes and the dwarves always want more gems and jewels. The elves too I think. But he had a lot of friends in the city too and I mean very dangerous friends. Whoever's going to knock him over must have the balls of a Sun God."

"It would have to be a freelancer, a non-Guildmember," observed Gavin, "Maybe even someone new to the city? I would have thought a known thief would have been noticed, his style recognised. They'd have been down on him like a ton of bricks."

"You're right there," said Lance, "A Guildmember wouldn't even consider it. It'd be suicide. And then where would he go to sell the goods? It would have to be an outsider, and a bloody brave one at that. Or stupid."

Despite all the information Gavin now had about the events of the city associated with the crime, he was rapidly getting to a point where he could get no further without some very specific information from the Guard Sergeant. That or a much better understanding of the city and its underworld machinations. He pressed Lance and Luke once more about interrogating their connections but they expressed doubt that they could get any better information than Jerym had already supplied. Lance could only add that serious meetings of the Guilds were happening that night to discuss matters. He wasn't quite sure they wouldn't all have a contract on their heads by the morning, although his own information and that of Jerym, who of course had contacts there too, would help.

"I've got lots of questions and very few provable answers at the moment," announced Gavin, "I don't even have a suspect yet, at least nothing specific. I only have a general perception of him. Or them even, although the fact that all the Gnomes seem to have been killed with the same weapon seems to support a one-assailant theory."

"Fresh light and clear heads are needed," suggested Elegrin, "Let's retire for the night and see what we what a new sun might bring us."

They agreed and each retired to their allotted sleeping place. Sula had Elegrin's room again and Elegrin went in with Lance. Gavin was furnished with a cot in Luke's room, which suited him well enough and was certainly an improvement on the hard floors and benches of Skull Crag.

Gavin slept deeply but with dreams troubled by the ghoulish remains of his old friends demanding that he follow the Yellow Brick Road and find the Wizard of Garibaldi. He awoke early, before the sun, and stretched himself. Luke was still sleeping peacefully but Gavin was wide awake. His mind was clear, perhaps calm, but his whole body ached. It was a sharp, bone-deep ache in all his limbs that demanded action of him.

He realised in a moment that since he had arrived in Dunromin he had done little exercise save for walking and getting beaten up. His arrest and the ease with which the Guards had captured him still burned his pride. He knew he needed to give his disciplines more attention. That was something else he had never thought about when playing his games on Earth. All his D&D characters were really like highly tuned racing cars. They all needed to burn off energy and work-out to keep in shape. On some level Gavin must have known that they would have to do this but it was so implicit in the make-up of the game that he assumed it must have happened like breathing and going to the toilet, with no active input from the players.

Gavin rose, dressed and went downstairs. The gate to the storage yard out the back was heavily barred but he let himself out and found himself in a lumpy white wonderland lit by a bright blue moon. The magical light showed that more snow had fallen in the night, weighing down the yard and neighbouring roofs with over six inches of fresh, smooth cotton-wool. Gavin moved to the centre of the open area in the middle of the yard and prepared himself. Despite the cold pricking his skin and the wet snow smothering his bare feet he closed his eyes and folded his mind inwards.

In steady, deliberate mind discipline he stepped through each activity that was buzzing in his imagination and shut it down. He gradually closed his mind down and focused all his will on silence, steady concentration and the perfection of the moves he needed to practice.

Then began his ballet.

With precise, sweeping movements alternating from sudden bursts and thrusts of limbs and fists to wide, gentle strokes of limbs and feet he processed through and back and through again his rehearsed manoeuvres. His ghost-like form swept silently around the yard, moving as surely and comfortably through the white drifts as if he were in a warm practice room back in Skull Crag, with grippy reed mats. As the moon sank the snow started again, small flurries of coalescing flakes drifted and scurried about him as he exercised. The sun rose slowly in the northeast and the noises of the city outside the yard grew in volume as the world awoke itself and set about the task of surviving another day. In his enclosed mind of still concentration and whirling limbs Gavin remained oblivious to it all.

After going through his mime and back countless times he slowed to a halt and folded himself into a tight ball, which he held for a while, feeling the sweat on his skin and his hot breath on his knees. Then he stood, stretched and relaxed. He opened his eyes and saw the sun was up, the noise of the city was loud in his ears again and two people were clapping him. He looked around and saw that Lance and one of Old May's daughters, who was called Rose he thought, were smiling at him and applauding.

"Very impressive," said Lance. Gavin noted Lance was fully dressed, in light grey woollen tunic and trousers, all of them showing wet patches suggesting he too had been active outside in the early hours.

"That was amazing!" said Rose, her face aglow with admiration. "It was like you were dancing or something. So graceful, so precise. You went back and forth like one of those wind-up toys. It was beautiful to watch. Really beautiful."

"Thank-you," said Gavin. He walked over to a small bucket that had been left out, punched through the ice that covered the water inside and then up-ended it over his head. His whole body rejoiced in the shock of the sensation, his every cell tingling with life and magic.

"I must find a towel and get Luke up," he told Lance, "I have had an idea."

## **Chapter 24 – Sherlock Sea Breeze**

The group assembled once again in the dining area and tucked into their morning meal of a fish stew, warm and tasty. Elegrin seemed none the worse for his evening's drinking but his mood was subdued and he mentioned he had jobs to do for Baron Garibaldi that he had left alone for too long. He also mentioned he had some magic studying or revision to do. He would not be able to help Gavin today.

Gavin, however, was more intent on getting Luke and perhaps Lance to find out some things for him.

"I want you to go to Lady Mary's," he told Luke, and presented him with the small sample of oil and blood the priest at the Temple of Death had given him. "I am sure those good ladies will be very familiar with face paint, oils and such substances. I want you to ask if any of them can identify this."

"Easily done," said Luke, taking the small piece of wood from Gavin. "Anything else?"

"Yes, something I have to ask you and Lance here," said Gavin, "Forgive me but I couldn't help noticing the equipment and personal items you each have in your rooms. And I noted that you, Lance, were wearing light coloured clothes this morning, so as to better blend in with the snow as you moved about the city perhaps?"

"Yes," said Lance, "Sometimes it's better to go about one's business unobserved."

"Yet I've seen no face paint in your own equipment," continued Gavin, "How do you hide your white faces at night?"

"With hoods," replied Luke, producing a balaclava of black silk from a hidden pocket. "Face paint is no good in a city as you need to wash it off once you have finished. Walking into a crowded place after escaping from, well, whatever, you would be under immediate suspicion. With a hood you merely take it off."

Gavin nodded. "And these hoods are widely available?"

"In various forms yes," replied Lance, "We all use them when we need to. I don't know anyone who uses face paint. Why would you?"

Gavin smiled. "I had an idea while I was exercising," he announced, "I don't think we are looking for a thief."

"We are looking for a murderer," agreed Lance, "What's your point?"

"What I mean is I don't think the murderer makes his living as a thief," continued Gavin, "I think he might be anything. A fighter perhaps, or even a monk."

"You are a monk," observed Sula.

"Which is what made me think it," replied Gavin. "The person we are looking for knows the city well, he targeted the gnome's jewellers perfectly, yet he can't be known to the various Guilds. If he was they would have identified him and punished him for breaking into a protected establishment. I think this

means he's not a member of any of the guilds. Yet he scaled a tall wall in a snowstorm, no mean feat. It's something I could do, as is forcing the window silently and killing the gnomes. Any Fighting Disciple worth his salt would be capable of doing all of this but wouldn't be known to the guilds. He might have unusual methods as well, methods that a professional thief would have abandoned early in his career as being irrelevant. Like using face paint."

The others frowned at him.

"But why a monk?" asked Lance, "Why not a free-lancer of another profession?"

"Because somehow this all involves the Babylonians and I bet the Babylonian temple has a number of very good monks in it."

"How does it involve the Babylonians?" asked Luke.

"From what Jerym said last night I have formed a theory," replied Gavin, "I think someone, perhaps a professional thief, perhaps someone else, has robbed the Babylonian Temple. Whatever they took was small enough for the Babylonians to keep its theft a secret, but valuable enough to warrant them going to some lengths to recover it. Something made of diamonds I think, since the gnome who came to buy something from Brighteye was a diamond specialist. Somehow the Babylonians discovered that the thief had sold the item, or items, to Teller Brighteye, perhaps they even knew he had a buyer coming into town to pick it up, so they knew they had to act fast. They sent the Monk to kill the gnomes and get back their treasure. Perhaps they even tipped off the Guard Sergeant once it was complete, they may have even put us in the frame, for whatever reason, to shift suspicion to an easy mark. If we had been hung yesterday this would all be forgotten by now."

"That's quite a story!" snorted Lance, "What proof do you have and how do we identify the Monk?"

"I have no proof and I know no Monks here," replied Gavin, "But I recall Gecko saying there was a monastery in the city. Perhaps I should go there and meet some of my brethren."

"Not to the Babylonian Temple then?" wondered Luke.

"Not yet, no," said Gavin, "If I am right they might guess I am on to them and take action directly against me. If I am wrong then it could still be a dangerous place for someone from another country or world. I understand they take great exception to strangers?"

"Non-humans, certainly," confirmed Gecko, "But I am sure they would welcome you."

"Really?" wondered Gavin, "Well now there's a thought. But I think I shall try the Monastery first."

"You do that," said Lance, "I shall wait here and get some sleep. I have numerous errands to run but I think they can wait. Until you find whoever took Brighteye's stock there's precious little I can risk selling without making things more uncomfortable for everyone."

Sula had still not emerged from her room so Gavin left a message for her with Old May and asked Gecko to show him to the Monastery.

## **Chapter 25 – At the Monastery**

Luke headed off to Lady Mary's and Gavin and Gecko made for the Monastery. The streets seemed quieter than normal, the heavy snow having evidently kept a lot of the casual travellers indoors. Although not as miserable as the sleet of the day before, it was colder today and Gavin suspected that many would rather preserve themselves indoors than brave the chill.

They found their way to the Monastery quite quickly and Gavin observed that it was a building of high, smooth stone walls of a red-brown, a low-pitched roof and no windows on the ground floor. The eaves of the roof were made of wood, carved into various mystic symbols, some of which he recognised, and painted red. The windows were narrow and had wooden shutters, also painted red, rather than glass in them. It struck Gavin that this place would be very easy to come and go from in complete secrecy, should one wish to. Looking about he also noticed that it had a wide garden at the back surrounded by a high stone wall. Someone agile enough could easily be able to climb from almost any window to the roof and from there depart the monastery in any direction without been seen, maybe even in daylight.

Gecko showed Gavin to the main entrance and said he would wait outside. Gavin went through the large doorway and found himself in a clean, wide room painted cream with a wooden floor. The only furnishing was a plain woollen rug. There was no one else in the room. The air was fresh enough, and cold, and Gavin detected a faint aroma of perfume as if someone near was burning incense. He paused for a while, wondering what the correct protocol might be for attracting the attention of the staff. He didn't wonder for long.

A small, slim man of great age came in the opposite door and smiled warmly at Gavin. The man said nothing but stopped in front of Gavin and waited patiently for Gavin to explain himself.

"Hello," said Gavin, feeling a little uncomfortable, "My name is Sea Breeze of the Moon Goddess and I have come to Dunromin from Skull Crag. I am a monk new to the city and I have come here to make myself known to your order and assure you that I come in peace."

"Hail and well met, Sea Breeze of the Moon Sect," said the little old man, his voice smooth and surprisingly deep. "As a brother Fighting Disciple you are welcome here and may move freely in our halls. My name is Flat Palm and I am a Master of the Dragon Sect. These humble halls are shared by three sects, the Dragon Sect which is local to our lands here, and the Cloud and Howling Tree Sects which you may have heard of before?"

Gavin nodded. He knew of the Dragon Sect, as there were two Disciples of that sect visiting Skull Crag at the moment. Likewise, he knew the Cloud Sect were a wandering cult that had a main temple high in the mountains and served Storm Deities exclusively. The Howling Tree were less well known to him and he knew only that they were a small band that travelled about the world together following wherever the winds drove them. Evidently, they had chosen Dunromin as their current residence, at least for the moment.

"I am honoured by your hospitality," said Gavin, "I wonder if I might look around your fair building? Perhaps make the acquaintance of some of your brothers here?"

Flat Hand bowed and beamed even wider. "Most certainly, I will summon you a guide."

The old man clapped his hands and shortly a young girl arrived, evidently an initiate in training, and bowed to them both.

"This is Brother Bright Star," said Flat Hand, "She will guide you around the halls and answer your questions." It was a matter of protocol that all the monks in the world referred to each other as 'brother'. The allusion to male siblings was a coincidence as the term derived from a much more ancient word meaning 'dedicated to the spirit'.

"Do you require refreshment?" asked Bright Star. She was barely a teenager but had the stiff yet graceful bearing of one used to physical hardship and exercise. Her hair was cut into a short bob of shining black, her face and pale complexion framed her blue eyes perfectly. She wore a simple cotton tunic

and treads with leather sandals. "The dining hall and kitchen are close, as is the wash room and midden?"

"No thank-you," replied Gavin, "Tell me, are any of your brethren in training at the moment?"

"Yes," replied the girl, "All the initiates are doing their mid-morning dance, and there are some Masters with them. Would you care to watch?"

Gavin said that he would and was led down a corridor to a doorway into a courtyard open to the sky. The broad space was surrounded on three sides by the monastery itself, three storeys high at this central point. The last side of the square was a high, ornamental wall with wall-walk and an open gateway that probably led out into the gardens beyond. In the area itself had been swept clear of snow and there were about thirty individuals arranged in lines according to height and age. Each was dressed in a simple white tunic and belt as Bright Star. They were evidently part way through their ritual and Gavin was allowed to sit and watch from the edge as they completed their ministrations.

Gavin had been involved in similar exercises at his own temple and noted with some satisfaction that he could recognise most of their moves and quickly grade the expertise of the monks by the accuracy and grace of their skills. Of the thirty people present, most were under the age of enlightenment and would be apprentices like Bright Star. On the left side were several individuals that were far more skilled, and they also wore slightly different clothes, their rank and sect marked by belt colour or patterns on their tunic. Of all the people there it seemed to be about a third women or girls, which was unheard of in Skull Crag, but all were human. This wasn't unusual in of itself and Gavin knew no demi-humans who were monks, but in a society as gregarious as Dunromin he was surprised to see no elves or dwarves here. The ages of the enlightened monks were also mixed, with mostly young adults with only a few middle and old-aged disciples.

The remainder of the exercise lasted about an hour and then the monks stopped without a word, paused for a short while and then headed off in different directions to go about their chores. Gavin noticed two of the disciples withdrew to a corner and watched Gavin closely whilst appearing to be meditating. They were a middle-aged man and a young woman, each with a badge depicting a dark-haired man wrestling a bull on their tunics. The belts they wore were red but Gavin didn't know the significance of this.

"Would you like to see the gardens?" asked Bright Star.

"Very much," replied Gavin and was led across the exercise square and through the gate opposite. As he went he smiled and nodded to the two monks watching him, the middle-aged man frowned back at him but the younger woman smiled coyly and even blushed a little.

Through the gateway Gavin saw the garden evidently served two purposes. Low walls and secluded groves of vines and small trees served the ceremonial and aesthetic requirements of the place, while between them elegantly ordered plots of various vegetables and fruit bushes provided food for the monks. There were no gardeners tending the crops now, the cold of winter holding the growth of the various plants in check for a while, but everywhere were the signs of steady, dedicated effort in keeping everything as ordered and controlled as possible. The plots were strangely devoid of snow, the green shoots of the plants growing there visible in the dark earth. Gavin asked Bright Star about this but she seemed puzzled and explained that the plants could not grow if they were covered in snow. Gavin decided to not push his enquiry any further.

After a short circuit of the garden, with Bright Star remaining silent throughout, they went back into the building proper by a different entrance and Gavin was shown the practice rooms. In each of these chambers were arranged the tools and devices of combat training. Hard, jagged wooden edifices helped

monks toughen their arms and muscles as they beat themselves against them. Dummy weapons and even real ones were hung in readiness for practice fights. In one room they waited while two adolescent monks, both boys with close-cropped hair, set about each other with long staves. Gavin watched as they took it in turns to attack and defend, tuning their reflexes and rehearsing the moves that must become instinctive to be of any use in a real fight. Gavin felt his limbs ache in sympathy recalling his own training, but then wondered how real the memory could be, being as it were very different from the upbringing he also recalled at school in England. An upbringing involving a lot more sitting around watching TV than hard exercise.

"Do you fight with the staff as well, Sea Breeze of Skull Crag?" asked a voice behind them. Gavin started a little and turned to see that the man and woman from the courtyard were stood uncomfortably close behind him. He hadn't sensed their approach. Could they be that good or had he merely been distracted?

"I do," said Sea Breeze, "Forgive me, I don't know your names?"

"I apologise," continued the man, nodding and smiling awkwardly, but not retreating from Sea Breeze. "My name is Fallanx and my apprentice here is Faylin. We are both Enlightened ones of Gilgamesh the Pure."

"Gilgamesh of the Babylonians?" asked Gavin, noting that their names were of a different form to both that of the Moon and Dragon sects.

"Indeed, you know of our master then?" said Fallanx. He seemed to swell with pride at the mention of his patron deity. He was a lean man with narrow, quick features. His eyes were grey but lined with many laughter lines, giving his hawkish build a gentler tone. His words were smooth and quick but betrayed a slight accent which, to Gavin, sounded almost Germanic.

"I know a little of him," said Gavin. He indeed knew very little, save that he fought a magical bull at some point, which would be the story behind the badge they both wore. "But you are not of the Dragon Sect by your names?"

"Oh, we are," Fallanx corrected him, "Our names are given by our temple, not our sect. In this way we differ from you I think?"

"When the chosen ones are initiated into the Babylonian Temple we are all given names," said Faylin, her voice gentle and a little high. She smiled as she spoke, her eyes twinkling almost flirtatiously. Something about her made Gavin uncomfortable, she seemed younger than she looked, almost immature. "Those that pass the tests at their tenth year are enrolled as priests, those that fail become temple guards. Of the ones that pass the best are selected for the path of the Disciple or the path of Enforcement, and are then trained as Monks or Paladins." She was evidently boasting, the inference that by being selected as a Monk she was the best of the best. Again, her manner was almost childish, hardly the bearing of solemnity Gavin was taught.

"And you are trained in all the weapons and techniques from that age then?" asked Gavin. "Were you trained here?"

"Here and at the temple," replied Faylin.

"The monastery provides for our physical needs, the temple for our spiritual enlightenment," added Fallanx. "I wonder, would you care to show us your own prowess with the staff?"

Gavin noticed that the boys had stopped their practice and were listening politely to the conversation. At the suggestion one bowed and offered Gavin his staff.

This was something Gavin hadn't expected and wondered how he might approach it. At first, he thought that perhaps they wished to fight him but then he realised they merely wanted a demonstration of his technique. He wondered what he might do now. His mind was already racing, wondering how many

monks of Babylon were in the monastery and if any of them might be the murderer. Indeed Fallanx, despite his kind eyes, might hide a deeper, darker secret and a ruthlessness more akin to his order's uncompromising views on non-humans.

"Surely," said Gavin after a pause, "Although you must excuse my stiffness. Since I was enlightened I have concentrated my time on the bardiché, scimitar and the fist. I have not practiced my staff dance for some years." In fact, he couldn't remember when he had last done it. Although this was good, by demonstrating a certain level of ineptitude they might be inclined to underestimate his abilities.

Gavin walked to the centre of the room and stood for a moment, listening to his breathing, one by one closing down the distractions and the thoughts spinning around his mind. A warm whiteness and gentle calm slowly seeped over his consciousness and, almost without realising it and without remembering the moves, his body started its dance. It moved easily around the wooden implement, his eyes tight shut, trusting his feet to the floor and his memory of the walls and the echo of his breathing against them. As he span his mind tuned itself more tightly to the gentle precision of deadly combat. He became aware, though he knew not how, of the other five people in the room, feeling the heat of their bodies when he passed close to them, hearing the shallow froth of their breathing.

His moves became more grand, his momentum building. His mind was stung now and then as he missed his beat, or his grip slipped slightly from the perfect. He was out of practice indeed but it would do no harm to his plan for his audience to see these failings. Then he became aware of something else, something faster. One of his audience was reacting to his dance! He felt their breathing deepen, their heart-rate hasten. The proximity of the thrashing staff was exciting them. He knew without checking that it was Faylin and was flattered. Yet at the same time he knew it wasn't him that excited her. Somehow it was the movement and the whirling shapes, even the violence of the movements that entranced her. And again, these were not the enthusiasms of a Monk. The martial arts were but a tool, not a fetish.

Something else changed around him and he stopped suddenly, his stance defensive, aimed at an intruder, a sixth audience member. He opened his eyes and Flat Hand's ancient face beamed back at him.

"Thank-you for showing us your dance," said the old man generously, realising his arrival had surprised Gavin.

"Although some practice is perhaps in order?" wondered Fallanx, a slightly too pleased glimmer in his eye. Gavin was elated at this reaction but suppressed his own thoughts into a shrug and a guilty smile. He was somewhat shocked when Fallanx then rounded on Flat Hand.

"Flat Hand, I must protest that you have even allowed Sea Breeze into the monastery," he announced with sudden venom. "We are a solemn and highly respected establishment for the betterment of those dedicated individuals confined here, not a bolt-hole for criminals."

"I am not a criminal!" protested Gavin, shocked by the sudden change in Fallanx although he noted that Flat Hand remained blissfully unaffected by the tirade. Gavin caught himself quickly. He had to guard his feelings. If Gavin's theories were correct, Fallanx could be a very grave threat. Gavin couldn't afford to give him any opportunity to damage Gavin's reputation further.

"On your very first night in the city you were seen fleeing the scene of a triple murder," Fallanx snapped back, "How, other than as a criminal, would you describe one who behaves thus?"

"The witness was in error," replied Gavin, his voice calmer now, determined to follow Flat Hand's excellent example. "The Guard Captain released us."

"We all know how far the reach of Garibaldi and his Outsiders goes," sneered Fallanx back at him. "And we all know how easily palms in Dunromin are greased. I would take the word of a trusted Guard Sergeant over the tomfoolery of a criminal conspiracy and have you strung up. Why even your actions here tell of a weakened character and careless disregard for your solemn duties. We have just witnessed you demonstrate little craft and even try to seduce another disciple, or were we mistaken too?"

Gavin gaped. "What?"

"Don't think I haven't seen the stolen glances nor misunderstand the guile of your demeanour," Fallanx continued, his voice cold but less irate now. This was not a rant but a calculated attack. This was something he had been working out for some time. "Faylin, take yourself to your cell until such time as Sea Breeze might be removed from here."

Gavin continued to gape, his mind racing for some logic to this. He quickly examined his actions since he had arrived but could think of nothing that might have aroused such outrage. In fact, Faylin also looked confused by the outburst and her face was boiling red with affront.

Flat Hand alone remained serene. "Sea Breeze is accused of no crime. He is free to come and go and even live here if he pleases."

"Accused of no crime?" hissed Fallanx, then to his side he added. "Faylin, to your cell, I will not repeat it again." Fallanx then rounded back on Gavin. "I would accuse him of many! Since he has arrived in the city this supposed Disciple of the Moon has consorted with street whores, mixed easily with street urchins and demi-human filth, and killed and robbed with impunity. He brings his sect and everything he comes into contact with into disrepute!"

As Fallanx continued Faylin retreated, paused, and then stormed off further into the building like a petulant teenager. Gavin knew neither whether to react angrily to Fallanx's accusations or just laugh it off. While Fallanx's protests were vicious Gavin couldn't help but sense a superficiality to the attack. And he realised from the reference to his visit to Lady Mary's that Fallanx was trying to intimidate him, to let him know that he was being watched. Gavin was wondering already if there was a game of double-bluff going on here. Despite his immediate and passionate affront, a part of Gavin's brain was unwilling to react in any way to the accusations. He realised he was being taunted and wanted to remain calm. Then, like a spark of light he realised Fallanx wanted him to take a swing at him! Fallanx had seen his prowess now and wanted an excuse to fight him and, presumably, to kill him.

Gavin stepped back, slightly behind Flat Hand, trying to keep his body language inoffensive, exuding calm.

"Sea Breeze is a guest in our Monastery," persisted Flat Hand, "And should be treated appropriately. His status as such will only be rebuked if the king, Lord Mordred, or one of his Guard Captains or Barons should pronounce Sea Breeze guilty of a crime or order his arrest. Until such a time he is our guest and you will moderate your behaviour and speech in respect of that." Flat Hand's tone was even, almost disinterested, until the last 'will' when a hard edge entered his voice, emphasising that what he decreed should be what would come to pass, regardless of Fallanx's opinions.

"And perhaps that will happen sooner than you think," said Fallanx, his eyes flashing with conceit, "For even now my master Filmesh of the Red Cloud is petitioning the King for a warrant for Sea Breeze's arrest. And that of the strange female he consorts with in his plans."

Gavin paused again before responding, checking himself and wondering what small signs he might have missed along the way. Whatever rebuke he might have summoned however, would have been wasted. Fallanx chose that moment, presumably thinking his attack complete and being unable to get Gavin to react, to turn and march away into the deeper rooms of the monastery.

Flat Hand watched him go before saying anything else, Gavin remained silent, listening to the foot falls as they receded. A door closed and Flat Hand turned to face him.

"You waste no time in making powerful enemies, young Sea Breeze," observed Flat Hand.

"So it would seem, although I don't know what I've done that would so infuriate Master Fallanx," agreed Gavin.

"Quite the opposite indeed, I would have thought," said Flat Hand, his tone remaining even, as if observing the weather or reciting the instructions of a cake recipe. "Given the nature of the crime of which he accuses you. The murder of a demi-human within the city wall is grave indeed, but I might have thought a Babylonian would applaud it, given their attitude towards all non-humans. A mystery indeed."

"I am not of this world," confessed Gavin, "Perhaps this is sufficient for Master Fallanx to think me the worse of the two evils and prefer a gnome over me."

"Perhaps," said Flat Hand but said no more on the matter. "Has Bright Star completed your tour?"

Gavin looked around but the young girl was gone, as were the two boys who had been fighting. "I don't know," replied Gavin, "I have seen nought of the inner sanctums of the building yet, but I have seen a lot."

"Then perhaps it is the time to end your tour," Flat Hand nodded, "I fear that your presence will not be welcome here after all, at least among some. I fear you will not find comfort here until such times as misunderstandings can be resolved, here and elsewhere. Do you have lodging elsewhere in the city?"

"I have," said Gavin, "But does the opinion of one monk, Master though he is, count for so much?"

Flat Hand sighed. "The Temple of Babylon is a powerful voice in our little world here," said the old man, starting to walk up a side corridor that Gavin guessed led back to the entrance. "Our little house is perhaps a microcosm of the city as a whole. Here the voice of Gilgamesh grows louder and his doctrines of purity and supremacy gain credence, just as the King's laws open our streets to the humanoid hordes in the name of trade and 'Good Business'." The ancient monk said the last words as if they were poison to him. "We have had many years of peace within this country, between men, elves and dwarves, despite the protestations of the Babylonians. But suddenly their preaching rings true, their warnings are showing their proof. Where once demi-humans were only just tolerated, now even humanoids are welcomed with open arms. Such is what the Babylonians have warned against for many years. And such is what has come to pass. Many now hear this message and see a truth in it. Many now lend their prayers to those of the followers of Gilgamesh."

Gavin nodded slightly, sensitive to the subtext of Flat Hand's even voice. He suspected the old Monk may even have his own sympathies with the racist chants of the Babylonians.

"Do you think my behaviour was inappropriate towards Master Fallanx's charge?" wondered Gavin.

Flat Hand paused and frowned momentarily before answering. "Brother Faylin is a very capable young lady. She has been placed in our care by her masters at the Babylonian Temple such that we may train her in our ways and

arts as best we might," he paused again, considering his answer carefully. "She has a curious temperament which is sometimes her undoing. I believe she has been raised by priestesses at the temple since her birth, her unique prowess and favour with the gods was identified very early in her life. She has been sheltered and groomed for whatever task has been decided for her. Perhaps her exposure to men in the real world has been limited. She tends to over-react."

Gavin nodded. "Not exactly the behaviour one would normally expect of a monk?"

"She is very passionate and impulsive, traits one would expect of one younger than she is. But she displays incredible talent and is of course faultless in her devotion to her temple. While I suspect some of her whims would not be tolerated in anyone else, her masters are keen for her to complete her training."

"She sounds like a rare prodigy," wondered Gavin. She had looked like any girl of sixteen or seventeen, although as powerfully built as a gymnast, as far as he could tell beneath her tunic, with flashing eyes and a ready smile. But her temperament was immature and she had an intensity that had made him uncomfortable.

"She is. She excels at combat, climbing, running and balance. She has the stamina of a horse and strength that belies her slight form. Yet she has a temper too and drives herself and her peers hard," replied the old man, "And few, if any of her peers measure up to her, even when their temperament is better, which is increasingly rare. I fear the Babylonians seem to be lowering their standards everywhere, she is not alone in being permitted greater leniency as regards her overall performance."

"Surely they would only do that if they wanted quantity over quality when it came to recruiting new followers?" suggested Gavin.

"One would have thought so," replied Flat Hand, sighing slightly. The situation obviously disturbed him. A man who had devoted his life to the singular perfection of his craft appeared to be being forced to lower the standards he demanded of his pupils to keep his superiors happy. The reason for that could only be the funding the Babylonian temple gave the monastery in return for training their followers. Could the monastery be that desperate for money? It hardly sat well with the philosophy Gavin understood to be prevalent in his profession.

"Does your order need their patronage so desperately?" asked Gavin.

"In Dunromin, money is power," said Flat Hand bluntly, "And those with money have the power. Where their philosophies are so much at odds with one another, then hostility will result. The Babylonians are not happy with the order of things in Dunromin. Our Monastery is neither powerful enough nor inclined to disagree with them. We have no reason to refuse their advances, at present."

"They are preparing for war, perhaps," Gavin wondered.

"That would seem to be a foolish course," said Flat Hand, although he then paused to consider Gavin's suggestion more deeply. "Their animosity towards the non-humans in the city is no secret," he observed at last, "And they have a point."

They continued in silence for a few steps, now travelling up a long corridor with many doors off it. The smell suggested that, while clean, a lot of young bodies existed here. This was possibly the sleeping cells. Everywhere the décor was the same, with wooden floors and white-painted wooden walls and ceilings. Everywhere was clear and tidy but lacking in any homeliness or humanity.

"And you, Master Flat Hand?" asked Gavin, "Do you think that, perhaps, too many outsiders are walking the streets of Dunromin?"

Flat Hand stopped and turned to face Gavin, his eyes dark and piercing.

"You are an outsider," he observed, "And I welcome you here."

"Would you welcome me if I was an orc?"

Flat Hand didn't respond directly. "There are many that say your crime, your alleged crime that is, I suppose, was right and just. They say that too long have these gnomish vampires been sucking off the cream of the wealth of our Great City and selling it cheap to our enemies." He said these things evenly, without emphasis or passion but the words themselves seemed loaded with venom. He continued, like a robot reciting someone else's opinions. "There are others that say these were good people, earning an honest living, paying their taxes and adding more wealth and prosperity to the Land of the Young." The old man paused again and they turned a corner. Two youths went past, pausing to bow to them out of respect. Gavin and Flat Palm nodded back. The old man continued "In the end I fear everyone in this city has their good graces deflected by money and whether it is flowing into or out of their pocket."

"And how are the pockets of the monastery?" asked Gavin, sensing that perhaps the old man was not as welcoming as he pretended.

"They are well," said the old man, "More than half of our initiates are Babylonians. Their fees are paid generously, early and in full by their Witch-King Balgamesh and his order." The man's tone remained even but there was something deeper in the information he was sharing. He was warning Gavin, but was he warning Gavin to steer clear or that others wanted him to steer clear?

They had reached the entrance again. Gavin realised that there was more at stake here than his reputation. Bigger political games were being played out around him. How big his role was within them he didn't know nor understand, but there was something else at stake, something far greater than the murder of a gnome and his family or the fate of two strangers in a vast city.

"Would you welcome me here again?" asked Gavin. The old man knew a lot more than he was letting on, or thought he did. But Gavin didn't know if his motives were peaceable toward Gavin or not, he didn't even know for sure if Flat Palm's loyalties were to the monastery or to the Babylonians and their politics.

Flat Hand looked Gavin in the eye again. His face was still, for once not neutral and benign but hard and grim. When he spoke now his tone was lower, far more severe than it had been. He was talking directly at Gavin, testing him.

"You are a follower of the Moon," he said, "The magic of moonbeams should be the key to your soul and your faith, although as an outsider I know not how your loyalties sit."

Gavin said nothing, not sure what the old man was asking of him.

"This is a sacred place," said Flat Hand at last, "Here we each answer to our patrons, be it Moon, Cloud or Dragon. Here we speak plainly."

"Ask me what you will, you will know whether I lie," replied Gavin.

"Did you kill the gnome?" hissed the old monk in a hard whisper. He was shaking slightly, angry but perhaps not with Gavin. Something else was playing in his mind.

"I did not," said Gavin, returning the old monk's stare without blinking.

They remained thus for a little while but then Flat Hand's gaze softened, and he sucked his teeth.

"So it is then, perhaps," he muttered but then added, as he walked back towards the inner rooms of the monastery, "And perhaps it is a pity that you did not, for if you had a great many minds would rest easier. And, given that, perhaps it is better that you do not visit us here again."

The door closed behind the old man and Gavin was alone with the door out of the monastery before him. He ground his teeth, amused that so much had been revealed to him, but angry that no real answers were apparent. Only the

night before Jerym had warned him that Sea Breeze and Sula were in danger. Now it seemed that they were in danger from many directions. How convenient if Gavin and Sula were found to be guilty? The whole thing would be settled and forgotten, perhaps. He remembered Falanx's cold accusations, the surety in his tone. Sir Garin the Guard Captain would probably be quite happy to put a noose around Gavin's neck and be done with him. The Babylonians would probably be delighted to know there was little danger of anyone discovering whatever it was that they'd had stolen, if Gavin's suspicions were true. And of course, all the Thieves' Guild would be happy to see any doubts in the security of their protection rackets smoothed back over again.

## Chapter 26 – A Suspect is Named

Back at Elegrin's wine merchants Gavin found Luke and Sula playing with an assortment of face-paints, brushes and creams. Gavin noted that Sula had painted both their faces in the sigils and patterns of the Moon and now they both looked like Coven Witches ready for a Full Moon festival. On Sula it looked like the night had spun a web of shadows around her face, with her eyes like the dusk-stars glinting sharp and hard in the evening. On Luke they looked strange, his brutish, Northern bones making the patterns less delicate, wider even, and him looking like a clown.

Gavin laughed and congratulated Sula on her handiwork.

"We were experimenting," said Sula, "We have been thinking about what you said earlier."

"Really?" asked Gavin, "Which part?"

In reply Luke stood, walked to the window and opened it.

"It was your talk of removing the disguise," said Luke, "Like a hood or whatever." He reached out of the window and pulled in a big handful of snow. He then rubbed it hard into his face, scrubbing at the runes Sula had painted there. After a few moments he stopped and looked at Gavin, grinning. Gavin collapsed into peels of laughter. Luke's face was still painted but the shapes had stretched and changed into a mess of black and blue lines. Sula also laughed.

"I knew this," she giggled, "I wanted to see if you would fall for it."

Luke then also laughed and picked up a looking glass from the table to examine himself. "We have at least disproved that theory."

Gavin looked at the pots and jars on the table, sniffing them and recognising the scent.

"So, you know what the paint was?" he asked.

"Yes, Lady Mary identified it in an instant," said Luke, "Face Paint, as common as, well, female faces. Everyone uses it, it's one of the most common types in Dunromin. There's three sellers offer it, imported from Greez in the Barony of Shelt. It's easy to use, cheap and comes off without leaving any marks, as long as you use vinegar to get it off."

"Vinegar?" asked Gavin.

In reply Sula opened a small pot of clear liquid, poured some onto a small cloth and wiped it over Luke's face. It didn't wash all the paint off easily but left a clear streak and a smell behind.

"Easiest trail in the city to follow," said Luke, "You don't even need dogs or a Familiar, almost any elf worth his nose could pick it out in a crowd. But it also means there's nothing special about it, nothing that would mark out our suspect as unusual. There's as many men use face paint as women after all. Well, nearly."

Gavin sat down heavily and sighed. He had been so sure that the face paint would have given them a pointer. So sure there was something that

strange Death Cleric was trying to tell him. Or maybe he was just trying to distract Gavin, trying to give him something else to follow.

"So, what did you find at the monastery?" asked Sula.

"Bad news," replied Gavin, "There's a lot more going on here than just some common murder and robbery. Politics is getting in on the act. I have a nasty feeling that so many people are involved in this little mess that it would be far easier for all involved if Sula and myself had been blamed and strung up the other day. Since we weren't, there seems to be an awful lot of people getting quite irate about it all."

"Really?" asked Luke, "Like who?"

"Well, I seem to be a bit of an embarrassment to the Monastery," said Gavin, "And there's quite a few people in the Babylonian Temple seem to think Sula and I only got away with the murder of the gnomes by some kind of bribe, probably funded or originating with Baron Garibaldi."

"A bribe?" exclaimed Luke, "By the Moon! Don't let Sir Tristram hear that! If he thinks someone is saying he's taken a bribe, or given one to Garin, he'd be around to the Babylonians like a thunderbolt with his sword out."

"Then don't tell him," said Gavin, "And while I think about it, do you know someone called Filmesh of the Red Cloud?"

Luke's face glowed with delight.

"Yes," he confessed, "He used to be a customer. We used to supply the Babylonian Temple with wine. They use it in their rituals. It has to be the best, purist wine available, untouched by unclean hands. Of course, 'unclean' to them is anything non-human. We've been selling them elfish wine for months and they only just realised. I had a bit of run-in with them the day you arrived in Dunromin in fact. They had found out it was elven wine we had been selling them and were very upset. Quite threatening in fact." Luke's face dropped, "You don't think...?"

"Possibly, yes, that's very interesting," said Gavin, feeling his stomach tighten slightly. Whatever was going on definitely seemed to involve the Babylonian Temple and the Guard. He wondered how high the rot might have got. How high could the Babylonians reach? "And this Filmesh of the Red Cloud, does he have the King's ear at all?"

Luke paused. "I don't know for sure but probably not," he muttered, "I've seen him in court now and then. He's fairly high up in the Babylonian Temple I suppose, but I don't for a moment think that Lord Mordred gives two hoots for their opinion."

"He might, if they represented a significant portion of the community," said Gavin, wondering how many people were a part of the Babylonian Temple – or how many of the Guard were in that temple. "I suspect that, faced with enough popular pressure, even the Lord Mordred wouldn't be too averse to casting a few sacrificial lambs onto the fire of public opinion. Anything to stop a riot."

"The sacrificial lambs in question being you and Sula I take it?" asked Luke, "What have you found out in the Monastery then?"

"Quite a lot," replied Gavin, dragging his mind back from the precipice he was looking down. "And I think I know who our murderer is."

"Quite a morning then?" said Luke.

Sula said nothing but she exchanged a look with Gavin that told him she realised the news was not entirely good. Sula was, after all, a very bright young lady. She had been trained to be silent and observant in all things and he sometimes forgot that, despite her youth, she had been trained in many secret arts. Even with the differences in culture between Skull Crag and Dunromin

Gavin was pretty sure she could tell what people were thinking, Gavin particularly, by the usual little hidden signs; body language, tone of voice and so on. He also recalled that she would have been trained how to kill quickly and silently if she needed to, and those talents may well be present in their quarry as well.

"The Babylonian Temple has a significant presence in the Monastery," explained Gavin, "And they fund a great deal of it through sponsoring their own initiates through the training. That way I'd bet they buy a great deal of influence and freedom for their favoured ones, the really talented ones they want to be their little fanatics in any future conflict. I met one in particular that if she hadn't been bank-rolled through the process then I don't know how the hell she would have been allowed to complete her training."

"A female monk?" asked Sula, "They allow that here?"

"And more besides," said Gavin, "What I have heard today backs up my theory that the Babylonians arranged the assassination of the Brighteye family because they were holding something that had been stolen from the Babylonian Temple. What's more, the fact that we have been acquitted of the crime really ruins their plans. They urgently need to reclaim us as their scapegoat and seem to be quite determined to do that. I think we might have a limited amount of time in which we can prove our innocence. I have no doubt that representatives from the Babylonian Temple are, probably at this minute, lobbying the king about the whole thing. The gnome protestors we had putting our windows in yesterday will be an excellent example of why this matter needs to be put to bed as soon as possible, probably with our necks in the noose. We need to move quicker than we suspected or we'll probably be arrested again and this time on the King's orders. He may soon want to try and placate some vociferous members of the Babylonian community."

"You said you know who the killer is?" asked Sula.

"I have a suspect," replied Gavin, "Master Fallanx of the Dragon. He has both the motive, if my suspicions are correct, and the ability."

"So, let's drag the bugger down to Garin and get him strung up!" exclaimed Luke.

"Not as easy as that," sighed Gavin, "You see, I have no proof."

The others listened intently as Gavin described his morning with the monks and concluded with his description of Fallanx's deliberate attempt to provoke him. Luke seemed unconvinced, unwilling to accept that a Monk might be capable of a climbing up the side of a house in a snowstorm. Gavin was determined that they had to find some way of linking Fallanx to the crime, but outside of beating a confession out of him they could think of nothing. After much discussion Gavin and Sula left with Gecko to investigate the shops selling the face paint, while Luke headed for the castle to see what he could find out about what trouble Filmesh was stirring up for them.

## **Chapter 27 – Luke at the City Counsel**

Keen to discover what was being said to the king by the Babylonians Luke hurried to the Counsel House to get the latest gossip from his friends there. While the king himself would probably not be present at the sessions his royal representatives would be, specifically his spiritual adviser High Priest Erick Munsta of the Bear Sarks, and Master of Justice and Chief Judge, Captain Godram of the Moon Guard, who was also captain of the Castle Watch.

The Counsel House was a broad, tall building of handsome design. Its peaked roof kept the rain off five storeys of offices and counsel chambers. While a grand design and full of life in the time of Dunromin's brief Republic, most of the corridors and offices were quiet these days. The Republic had been too

revolutionary for the majority of the people with the real power and a Feudal system had been reinstated after only a few years, along with a number of expeditious executions. The building had barely been finished and the king of the time decided to re-purpose the place with a nod to the grievances that had led to the revolution in the first place. Here the general population could get their views heard by a number of clerks skilled in the city law and customs. Significant grievances were escalated up a rough structure, lubricated with money and favours.

Now these Clerks of the Counsel occupied a number of meeting rooms on the ground floor. Above this the Barons were allotted space but few used it to any useful purpose. Several were known to use it as a place to sleep when in the city, or to hide from their wives. Only the first two floors were ever consistently staffed and those mainly for civil issues too mundane to trouble the main counsel or as over-flow for the Tax Offices which were too small, in truth, for their real purpose. It was regularly suggested that the Tax Office and Counsel house should exchange roles, the one being too big for its purpose and the other too small, but this never seemed to happen. It always proved too costly and difficult to counter-spell the various mystic protections on the tax office and then replicate them on the Counsel House.

The dressed stone frontage of the building was decorated in a classical style in keeping with the Castle to the north and the Royal Mint to the South. Hidden deep under these buildings were tunnels and armouries connecting the three most important civic buildings in the country. Across the square were the equally fine Bank of Dunromin and the Records House, connected in their turn by subterranean passages to the other main buildings.

Despite the grand design of all these buildings the space was dominated by the castle. A huge gatehouse rose high above even the Counsel House. Beyond its walls, huge turrets and the Great Keep and the Holdfast itself rose even higher. It seemed to grow from the very rock of the Tor and its walls were smooth, beautiful and impregnable, crowned with brilliant red roof tiles. The glittering helms of the Guardes could be seen patrolling the battlements and scanning the horizons perpetually for enemies. Shadows flitted over the walls as Griffon Riders, hunting eagles and the Royal Magpies spiralled about the dreaming spires and hidden gardens of the castle's inner sanctums. In the current soft winds from the plains the heavy, frosty flags of the King and his family barely lifted themselves from the flagpoles, but when the wind blew more strongly these huge banners arrogantly flashed and snapped their rich colours wide, visible miles from the city.

Far below, the square across which Luke hurried across was the finest in the city; paved perfectly flat and smooth with pale yellow and cream marble and patrolled by the Moon Guardes. Unlike everywhere else in Dunromin no street traders, beggars or loiterers were permitted in this space, named The Capitol but more commonly known as the White Square. More Guardes stood on duty at most doorways and every turret, preventing all but the correctly sanctioned from entry.

As Herald of Garibaldi and therefore the recognised representative of a Royal Baron, Luke was permitted entry into the Counsel House after showing his seal ring. He hurried through the vestibule, oblivious of its high arched roof above him and landings to all floors with their grim flags of recent battle honours and the greatest of warriors. In contrast to the gleaming creams of the buildings outside, the floors and pillars of the inside were made of marble of the softest pinks and most rich reds. There were no Guardes in sight inside but rather the spaces were dotted with scurrying servants and scribes, regal Counsel Members and subdued citizens calling there on city business.

The main Counsel Hall was a grand affair. It was often loud with heated debate and full of worthy citizens seeking justice or publicity. However, the

nature of Dunromin politics being as it was, any serious decision about anything important had, in truth, already been made by the King and his Private Counsel before the matter reached public debate.

Luke ignored the grand staircase to the Council Hall and made for the central clerk's desk where a record of all speakers and counsellors in the building was kept. He quickly discovered that Filmesh was in private counsel with Captain Godram and could not be disturbed. He learnt also that Erick Munsta, second only to the Witch King in the Babylonian Temple hierarchy, had berated Filmesh in the atrium earlier. The two had enjoyed a blazing row that had attracted quite a crowd. The subject of their discussion was apparently Filmesh's insistence on speaking to the King without Erick being present. In the end Filmesh had been denied the king's ear and Erick denied the option of attendance on the meeting with the king's assigned delegate, Captain Godram. Erick had stormed from the House in a foul temper.

Luke wondered what he might do then and asked that an appointment be made for him with Captain Godram on a matter most urgent and relevant to Filmesh's protestations. After being told that a request would be made and he would be answered within two hours, Luke walked a small distance from the desk and paused, at a loss as to what to do now. His pondering was short as he was disturbed by the arrival of another acquaintance of his, Sir Devon, the uncle and Herald of Baron Le Shirt, a neighbour of Baron Garibaldi's and one of the few of that house to survive the War of the Ring.

Sir Devon was an old man, small and portly, and despite his title neither a warrior nor a traveller. He lived in Dunromin permanently and communicated with his nephew by messenger, keeping the family of Le Shirt in the mix as regards the political machinations of the country. Despite his homely appearance Sir Devon was a shrewd player with many friends and much influence. Key among his achievements was that he was currently a High Counsellor to the King, one of only seven appointed annually, and was often consulted on matters of policy and diplomacy. The role was a great honour and only really one step down from the King's Privy Counsel; the highest office in the land available to non-royalty.

"Good day and well met Sir Devon," beamed Luke.

"And to you young Luke," replied the old man with a smile. His voice was loud and clear, perfect for the counsel chambers but of little use in a covert conversation. "Why, your ears must have been burning these few days after the tumultuous news from the East Gate?"

Luke frowned, feigning innocence. "I am not sure I know what you mean?"

"Well!" beamed Sir Devon, "Two scandalous murderers caught practically red-handed and sentenced to death the next day. But then one word from you and they are released! The king was most aggrieved when he heard. He summoned Sir Garin at once!"

Luke forced a laugh, noticing some ears about them were twitching. "A simple case of mistaken identity," he replied, "Priestess Sula of the Moon and Sea Breeze the Monk could never have been in the area. They were fast asleep in an Inn the whole night. When Sir Garin appreciated the error, not his of course, they were released into my custody until the real killer is found."

"That is not how it was told to the King?" wondered Sir Devon.

"And I can guess whose version of events were taken to him," sighed Luke, "Tell me, was Sir Garin able to allay his fears?"

Sir Devon shrugged. "He may have been, I must confess once things quietened down I quite lost interest in the matter."

"Yet there remains the matter of the riot at your place of business," added another voice. They turned to see Salek Drood, a merchant of high standing in the city but with a reputation for pushing the bounds of what is deemed 'fair' trading as far as he could manage. The Drood family infested the various businesses of the city like an unwelcome smell but were rich beyond the dreams of avarice. "I would hardly call hundreds of non-humans rioting and baying for blood on the streets a case of mistaken identity?"

Luke noted that the merchant referenced the rioters as 'non-humans' and wondered how long his sympathies had been allied to the Babylonians, assuming that was where the rather distasteful generalisation came from. He would need to investigate this as the Droods would not ally themselves with a temple unless there was a significant benefit in it for them. "You should test your sources more thoroughly, then," replied Luke. Wine importation was one of the few businesses the Drood family had no interest in, but Luke had met the man on too many occasions to take his interest lightly. "There were barely thirty good gnomes and dwarves there, not the hundreds you claim, and their temperament was more that of concerned citizens than rioters."

"Broken windows, spells cast in the street," muttered Drood, "Are you saying none of this occurred?"

"One window, one spell," said Luke, "And the crowd dispersed peacefully when we had-"

"Forcibly broken up by the direct action of our noble City Guard I heard," interrupted Drood.

"They were already dispersing when the Guard arrived," said Luke.

"Then you say the report given to our King by one of his own Captains was a lie?" mused Drood, "I heard it with my own ears. A mere single patrol were hard pressed to calm the mob, it was said. Brave men we have in our Guard. Brave to a man, as I have often said, but too few to police streets awash with wickedness and outsiders. They have enough on their plates without any extra incitement of the masses."

Sir Devon looked on in mild amusement while Luke became increasingly agitated at Drood's manner.

"There was no 'riot' and the crowd went about their business quite contentedly once Sea Breeze and Elegrin had explained the matter," Luke avoided any discussion of the relative truthfulness of the Guard Captains or their men. "If you would like another opinion of the affair I suggest you consult Sidy Garl or one of the other gnomes or dwarves who were actually there. Ask them if they were forcibly dispersed by the Guard."

"Take a non-human's word over a Guard?" cried Drood, a camp look of horror on his face. Luke realised that the man was speaking too loud for the circumstances. He wanted to be overheard and an audience was ready to listen, all feigning indifference but with their ears pricked. "Perish the thought! And I am not alone in voicing my concerns to the King and his representatives about this whole affair. Your nefarious activities have alarmed a great many of the Great and the Good of the City."

"Nefarious!" exclaimed Luke, trying to look casually unconcerned. "We are honest business people as well you know."

"Giving shelter to murderers?" Drood feigned astonishment again. "As I understand it your scandalous visitors were not released but bound over to yourself until the truth of the matter could be ascertained. So not free at all but merely bailed on your say-so. Hardly honest."

Luke sighed and glanced around the thickening crowd of people quite determinedly not appearing to be taking any interest in the matter. Luke decided to stick to the facts.

"It was a simple case of mistaken identity," he repeated and then tried to seize back the upper hand. "You seem very eager that the crime be put onto my friends rather than any effort being made to identify the real murderers and bring them to justice?"

"I think the real murderers are well known," said Drood, "And they-"

"Yes, I think too well known," interrupted Luke, "It seems that a lot of people are more keen to string up two innocent travellers than be sure of the true facts of the night. The truth will out when the booty comes to light!"

This suggestion seemed to stop Drood, his prepared rebuke dumb in his throat. He pursed his lips and stood back slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Whoever killed the gnome Brighteye also took his fortune," said Luke. "And they will find themselves short of places where they might use that plunder. There is not a money changer, jeweller or banker in the city that would take them now. Nor would I guess are the Old Guilds likely to sit still and let this matter lie, given their reputation could be at stake." Luke was using Gavin's suggestions as fact but he knew enough to make such a suggestion and be taken seriously. He had no doubt Drood was very well aware of the various protectionist arrangements rife in the city: It was common parlance even here that the 'Old Guilds' were the thieves' guilds. Their influence was generally acknowledged to be wide, although no one would ever admit to any direct relationship with them.

"When the murderers discover they can't sell them anywhere and can't get them out of the city, they may soon find they can't eat diamonds and rubies," Luke continued. "If I knew who had made off with the loot I would be advising them to look to their own backs and lay low for a long while. Besides the ire of the Old Guilds, Gnomes and Dwarves can sniff out such riches with remarkable skill. And they have famously unforgiving memories for those that cross them."

"That's interesting," put in Sir Devon, interrupting before the now frowning Drood could respond. "I have heard that Garibaldi's merry band have set up another of their famous auctions for next month. Have they come into a sum as well then?"

Sir Devon seemed to be taking some amusement from the conflict. Even more people passing them seemed to walk uncommonly slowly and conversations hushed as they passed, such that they might catch what was being discussed. Not that this was at all difficult, as Salek Drood was making no attempt to lower his voice in the echoing chamber. However, Sir Devon's sudden observation reminded Luke of what was his real priority here as Herald of Garibaldi, not Sula and Sea Breeze. He glanced around, annoyed with himself for letting Drood bait him in such a way.

"Garibaldi's campaign at Dragon Mount has proved most profitable," replied Luke, struggling to keep his voice and tone calm. He was all too aware how this might look from what Lance had said. "Surely you have heard of the dragon attack on Garibaldi's capital? A monumental conflict indeed."

"I had heard something about a dragon spotted somewhere near the Barony of Garibaldi," said Drood, casually, "But I would have thought such things common affairs out there in the wilds."

"Six ancient dragons," said Luke clearly and carefully, for all to hear. "They directly attacked Garibaldi's castle and town. Four red and two blue, ancient wyrms with mouths like volcanoes and claws the size of scythes. Baron Garibaldi and the heroes slew them all."

"Indeed?" sighed Drood with contempt, "How bravely convenient for them."

"Garibaldi tracked down their horde and found the place over-run with Deep Elves and other nasties," continued Luke, determined not to be baited further. "There was a great fight in which the Heroes were sorely tested."

"Deep Elves and Dragons, you say?" wondered Drood, "An odd combination?"

"They were all slain in the end and Garibaldi has returned with their treasure to share the spoils of their victory with the whole city, as is his known practice," said Luke and then raised his voice to be clear to the assembly. "I recommend it to everyone. Ancient treasures that have not seen the light of day for decades, centuries even! It will be a great auction – I have seen the list of lots and there are a huge number of items of fantastic power."

"A sudden deluge of many treasures then?" asked Drood, "How very, erm, distracting."

Luke paused, not sure how to respond but Drood took that opportunity to wish them a good day and wandered off. Luke needed to let Lance know how the merchant had been referring to non-humans throughout his conversation and the likelihood that if Salek was in the Babylonian camp then the whole Drood family would be, and their allies. Luke suspected there would be more to it than mere religious fervour though – for Salek Drood, indeed for any member of the Drood family, nothing was done without a profit being involved.

"These Deep Elves and such that you mentioned," wondered Sir Devon, "Any danger of them spreading at all?" His tone was a little more cautious now. He had enjoyed the argument between Luke and Drood as a fan of heated debate, but this was dire news that could affect his family seat as it neighboured Garibaldi's and lay close to the Horn Mountains.

"Garibaldi discovered them deep in the mountains a great distance from the Land of the Young," replied Luke, "And he sent them all back, deep into their holes. There is no need for your nephew to fear for his lands again."

"Good," said Sir Devon and then sighed. "This is all a very unfortunate business. Of course, the whole of the Barony of Le Shirt is deeply grateful to Garibaldi and his heroes for coming to our rescue when Kzenzakai attacked us. It was a dark time and although we suffered greatly, it could have been far worse."

"It could have been, yes," said Luke, wondering where the old man was leading him now. Le Shirt had been attacked by a war band that had split off from Kzenzakai's main attack, which had been aimed at the Barony of Garibaldi. Baron Le Shirt had been ill-prepared for the attack and would have fallen if not relieved at the last minute by several of the Heroes and a band of militia.

"Politics in the Land of the Young is a fickle mistress," sighed Sir Devon, for once his voice dropping to a more normal level, practically a whisper for him. "But like the gnomes and dwarves, the Le Shirts have long memories. Fear not for your flank to the northeast, but I would look to bolstering your supporters among the gnomes and dwarves, even the elves. While Filmesh is stirring up hatred among the humans, the King will stand by his wife's folk if they stand by him. But they may turn again on those accused of the murder. And their friends." He referred here to the Queen, who was a half-elf. The insinuation being that the finger of suspicion was still very much pointed at Sea Breeze and Sula, and the association with Lance and Elegrin might generate ill-feeling.

Luke nodded slowly, perhaps he had more friends than he had thought. "But what of the followers of Gilgamesh?" he asked, "They grow in number and have the ear of the king it would seem. Can he deny their demands for long?"

"They are a small group yet," said Sir Devon, shaking his head, "Small but loud and dangerous. Though I believe that not everyone is so stupid as to believe their stories. The demi-humans have been our friends for centuries. Such history is not easily cast aside. I think the Babylonians will find the common man in the streets of our great city less easy to rouse than the yokels of Oomland. Or where-ever it is that their Witch King comes from."

Luke didn't bother correcting Sir Devon about the Witch King's origins, nor did he think the rabble of Dunromin so hard to rally, especially if they could be made to believe their livelihoods were at risk. Luke nodded and hurried off to speak to his contacts among the elven community. Wine didn't drink itself and he had many friends and customers among that area of the city. As he hurried off he didn't notice Filmesh of the Red Cloud emerge from a counsel chamber and be intercepted by a messenger. They exchanged a brief few words and then Filmesh's countenance, already unsettled, blackened to a thunderstorm. Sir Devon did see this and intercepted the messenger in turn after Filmesh had gone. There was a subtle glimmer of gold and the messenger was repeating his message to Sir Devon. The old man nodded and walked away towards the castle. He suspected his king would need his counsel soon.

## **Chapter 28 – A Diversion to a Revelation**

Some three hours later a despondent Gavin and Sula were walking back along the road from the East Gate with Gecko, having spent their time chasing around the shops selling the face paint and discovering, via some rather wily questioning, that practically everyone who was anyone in Dunromin was buying it, or knew someone who was buying it. Gavin was pretty much at his wits end, fearing the heavy hand of the city guards on his shoulder at any moment and unable to think of any plan that might enable him to prove his suspicions about Fallanx to anyone, even himself.

The road was soaked with melt water as the temperature had risen through the day and only the most sheltered of the previous days' snow remained. The city looked dreary and dull, with the inhabitants trudging about their tasks with less enthusiasm than they normally displayed. The colours seemed muted, the buildings showing signs of poor repair now they weren't clothed in snow. The character of the city seemed changed, like a once beautiful flower gone to seed. Although warmer it was still cold and there was no sign of any improvement in the sky. More heavy, grey clouds were drifting in promising more snow or, more likely, sleet and cold rain.

They were walking on the path by the side of the central area of the street, where the heavy traffic went, being jostled and pushed by the street sellers and citizens that were hurrying through the afternoon chill. As they went Sula followed closely behind Gavin, who followed Gecko, weaving skilfully between the thrashing populous. As they passed the open front of a blacksmiths Gavin felt Sula grasp his arm and pull him to a stop. She pointed at something in the shop but it was evident this was to disguise her real intent.

"Sea Breeze, we are being followed," she said to him in Frapper, pointing to a large iron-work gate that was laid against the wall of the smithy.

"You're sure?" he asked, pretending to inspect the gate and nodding, fighting the temptation to turn around and look.

"I thought so when we went to the first shop but I didn't see them for a while after that," she replied, "But since the last place I have seen them several times and each time they have avoided my gaze."

"Who and where?" asked Gavin.

"A woman I think by her step," said Sula, "Dressed in a simple cloak to hide her face. A grey cloak reaching almost to the knees, grey trousers and ankle boots of calfskin. Last time I looked she was across the street and two buildings back. Be careful how you look for her."

Gavin paused and looked ahead for Gecko, who had vanished from sight. "Gecko!" he shouted, glancing around and quickly taking in the individuals on the other side of the road. He saw no one who matched Sula's description.

"I didn't see her," he sighed.

Gecko returned and asked them what was the matter.

"We think we are being followed," replied Gavin, "Sula has seen a woman in a simple cloak but I have not seen her yet."

"So, my game is up?" said a voice behind them.

Gavin span around and found himself looking down into the impish features of Faylin the Monk, grinning back at him. "You should take greater care of yourself. I could have been an assassin."

Gavin frowned, she was right. He had not sensed her approach. He needed to concentrate more.

"The city is not a dangerous place for one such as I," replied Gavin.

"The city is always a dangerous place for outsiders," replied Faylin, "And getting more dangerous by the minute." Her tone was playful and she continued to smile as she looked theatrically about them. Gavin sensed she was bubbling with excitement, like a child at Christmas time, she could hardly contain herself.

Faylin's gaze had now switched to Sula and the two young women were measuring each other up. Sula with ill-concealed contempt and Faylin with a mischievous glint in her eye. Gavin had never sensed such animosity from Sula before, but then Faylin was being deliberately provocative.

"How could any harm come to us when you have been so carefully guarding our backs since we left our friends' house?" asked Gavin.

Faylin's eyes flashed angrily but then she smiled again. "You're bluffing," she said, wagging a finger at him. Was she flirting with him? "You have only just noticed me."

"I saw you trip on the corner when that boy ran from behind the horse," said Sula, coldly. "And I saw you get showered by the melting snow too." She pointed at a damp patch on Faylin's shoulder as she said it.

Faylin scowled at her but then turned back to Gavin, "So what are you doing then? Shopping for something to improve your girl's looks?"

"I am not his girl," said Sula.

"Indeed?" said Faylin, smiling back at her. "But is that by your choice or his?"

"What do you want, Faylin?" demanded Gavin, tiring of her childish games and seeking to intervene before Sula, whose face was as black as thunder, punched the dizzy girl.

"Only to know what you really think," she replied, "Of me, I mean, and what Master Fallanx said. I was wondering if he was right about you? But I think I know now. All that energy, in the monastery, sparks flying in the quiet halls. It was almost exciting. Almost."

"I don't know what you mean," wondered Gavin, realising this might be an opportunity. Faylin was a relatively naïve agent of Fallanx's. She might have some useful information or might be fooled into revealing something about her master that Gavin could use against him. "Do you mean when Fallanx was trying to get a rise out of me?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, perhaps confused by his slang.

"He was trying to pick a fight with me," replied Gavin, "Surely you could see that?" She looked doubtful for a moment but then smiled, her eyes glittering with impish charm.

"He was only jealous," said Faylin and seemed to address her next comment to Sula. "He thought you were trying to seduce me. Perhaps you were?"

Sula scowled but did not rise to the challenge this time.

"Fallanx is a paranoid fool," sighed Gavin, "I have no wish to bandy words with him and his petty intrigues."

This fired Faylin's quick temper, exactly as it was intended to. "My master is neither petty nor a fool. And neither is he one to suffer the unclean to walk free."

"Unclean am I?" wondered Gavin, quite pleased with Faylin's reaction, "Is that why he feared I might seduce you?" Gavin moved closer, invading Faylin's personal space, looking into her eyes and smiling wickedly. She smelt fresh in the afternoon cold, he felt her heat, her passion about whatever was on her mind, intensely. He also detected another smell, now he was close. An old smell left on her clothes perhaps, but still strong enough for him to smell. Somehow, he couldn't place it though. "Perhaps there has been too much purity in your life? Perhaps you thirst for what you haven't known?"

Faylin blushed, looking away and stumbling slightly. She was evidently uncomfortable with emotional aggression, but then any monk her age would be. Gavin himself found the action unfamiliar here, it being a tactic he was more used to using in the hot nightclubs of Reading back on Earth. He was also used to a more relaxed reaction, even approval. Faylin's obvious vulnerability both excited and frightened him. She might be an enlightened monk with great combat prowess, but she was still little more than a girl.

"I... I..." she stammered, but then rallied, "My master has taught me much about the tricks of the enemies of Gilgamesh!" She glared back at him, facing up to his approach and pushing back against him with her chest. It was a slightly ironic manoeuvre.

"Good!" said Gavin, stepping back and grinning, "Then you will be all right to come with us?"

"With you?" she was puzzled again, but still angry, "Where to?"

"We're going to see Sir Tristram, to seek his advice," replied Gavin, "Gecko was leading us there." Sula flashed a questioning glance at him but knew better than to say anything. She was learning to read him quickly

"I was?" wondered Gecko.

"Yes," said Gavin, glaring at him, "Before we were interrupted."

"Indeed, this way," said Gecko, realising Gavin's intent and pointing to a side road.

"To Sir Tristram's?" asked Faylin, her tone suggesting a certain amount of disdain for the man. "That soft old goat, why there?"

"For his counsel," replied Gavin, noting that Faylin seemed to have very well-established opinions of many people. "He is wise in the ways of criminals and murders from fighting them all his life. I want to ask him his opinion on the next actions of our quarry."

Gavin strode purposefully off after Gecko while Faylin hurried to catch up. Sula followed on behind, observing and listening intently, realising Gavin was up to something.

"So, you are still determined to prove your innocence then?" asked Faylin.

"Of course," said Gavin, "Does that surprise you?"

Faylin smiled impishly. "I suppose not. But won't it be difficult to prove?"

"Yes, but not impossible," said Gavin.

"Then how?" wondered Faylin, "You were seen leaving the scene of the crime and you have a motive."

"Motive?" asked Gavin, stopping suddenly, "What motive do you think we have?"

"Theft, of course," said Faylin, "The gnome's treasure trove was positively brimming with the fruits of his nefarious labours."

"It was?" asked Gavin.

"So, I have heard," said Faylin, recoiling slightly. "Why, I was told he was receiving most of the stolen property of the city and selling it on to his fellow conspirators in the hills around Constantan."

"Really?" wondered Gavin, setting off again but his mind racing ahead in their conversation. He had to keep up the pace, keep her off-balance, perhaps trap her into revealing something, anything about Fallanx's activities. "Who told you that?"

Faylin shrugged. "It is well known," she said.

"And what do you think we did with all that loot?" asked Gavin.

"I don't know," said Faylin, "Buried it perhaps?"

"A whole treasure trove carried off and buried on a snowy night, in a city we don't know?" wondered Gavin, "How?"

"Perhaps you had accomplices?"

"But the witness reported only the two of us," said Gavin.

"It was a snowy night, perhaps he didn't see the others," said Faylin, now relishing the game. It was hard to tell just how bright she was. Her answers were fast but perhaps obvious.

"And how did a city guard fail to catch us?" asked Gavin, "Weighed down as we were with all that treasure and him a fit man."

"Well, Sergeant Bullard is hardly a fit man," laughed Faylin, "And he could hardly climb up and chase you over the rooftops."

Gavin paused in speaking but kept up his brisk walking pace, her words fired his imagination. A mistake on her part indeed, and one so easily achieved. Suddenly a different idea was forming in his head. His pulse was racing. He had not thought of it before but everyone had seemed to think that the chase had happened at street level. Gavin then remembered he had told Jerym of his discovery and his theory of the thief entering and leaving by the rooftops. Perhaps Fallanx bought information from the halfling too, Gavin had no illusions about the loyalties of the diminutive Guide-master. Gavin pondered how widely Fallanx's net was spread, into what dark chambers his influence seeped and how up to date he was with things. And what was he prepared to do to win? How inviolate were his beliefs? It didn't surprise him that Jerym would sell him the information, but it seemed incongruous that Fallanx should go to a non-human for information.

"It wouldn't be easy to out run anyone," suggested Gavin, "All the way up on the roof carrying all that gear in that snow, with the wind."

"Oh, it wasn't that windy that night and I don't think jewels weigh much do they?" she replied, oblivious of the details she was giving away.

"Maybe if it was just a few choice items," said Gavin.

Faylin smiled again. "Really? I suppose so. And easier to hide that way do you think?" she agreed, evidently thinking this was just some game, too excited by the flirtation to guard her words.

"But then what happened to the rest of his huge trove?" asked Gavin, "You're not suggesting the sergeant took it? That would be immoral! It would be a breach of his solemn oath to protect all city folk."

At the suggestion of immorality a strange look passed over her face, as if the very seed of a doubt had been pricked by his comment, but it passed. "They were only non-humans," she said, more quietly, almost as if trying to convince herself. "It's not as if they mattered."

Gavin was chilled by the statement but was quickly distracted by their arrival at Sir Tristram's house. Gavin saw the rather decrepit appearance of the place and sighed, having learnt of Tristram's recent financial pains. The building was of a grand design with carved wooden window frames and other architectural highlights. But the paint was old, cracked and peeling. The stains of damp ran up some of the plaster in the walls and he could see some of the upper windows had broken panes covered over with pieces of cheap wood. Gavin knocked and stood back to wait for a reply.

"So, you think the Guard Sergeant took the rest of the loot?" Gavin pressed on.

"Must have done," she replied, and then checked herself, "Or maybe someone else while he was away chasing you over the rooftops."

Gavin forced a laugh and tried a gamble. "Can you really see Sergeant Bullard chasing me across the rooftops?" he asked, and then pushed it a bit further. "He's not the most athletic member of the Guard is he?"

Faylin also laughed, nodding, and then stopped herself and grinned. "So, you saw him then! You know what he looks like! You saw him chasing you?" It was framed as a question, a frown starting on her face. She wasn't sure suddenly, something didn't make sense to her.

"No," replied Gavin, "Never met him."

Sir Tristram's hard-pressed servant answered the door with the same morose look of someone who was struggling through every day as before.

"How can I help you?" asked the servant, in a thin voice. His eyes, heavy with fatigue, glanced slowly from one visitor to the other.

"Is Sir Tristram in?" asked Gavin.

"What's your business with my master?" persisted the servant.

"My name is Sea Breeze of Skull Crag and this is my companion Sula the Moon Priestess, also from Skull Crag," replied Gavin, "We met Sir Tristram the day before yesterday. And this is Brother Faylin, a disciple of Gilgamesh. We all wish to talk to Sir Tristram regarding the business we discussed with him before."

The servant bowed and ushered them into the hall. While they waited there he headed upstairs to find his master. The hall was as drab as Gavin recalled it being, with the slight smell of damp now all-pervasive after so much snow. The décor was lavish but old, cobwebbed and covered in dust on the higher surfaces. Grand trophies of ancient battles gathered dust in the cold silence. Faylin wandered over to the trophies on the wall and inspected them. Gavin noticed that many of the banners were of different Deep Elf Clans, the evil elves of the Darkworld, but he wasn't sure where this knowledge came from. Perhaps he had seen similar sigils and badges somewhere before? Or maybe Sea Breeze knew these things and Gavin did not.

As Faylin had passed him Gavin had got a scent of the strong, old smell she had about her robes. It teased him again with a half recollection, at the seaside with his mum, fish and chips. His mind clenched on the inspiration like a maniac, the significance of it so great and his reaction to it so sudden that he was sure he must have gasped, even squawked when he realised it. Vinegar! Faylin's clothes smelt of vinegar! Gavin remained silent as his mind struggled with this new revelation. He was pretty sure that Monks didn't use face-paint, but he didn't know if the Babylonians might have some other use for make-up or even vinegar in their ceremonies. He glanced sideways at Sula. She frowned back at him.

"It smells funny in here," he observed and nodded towards Faylin.

"Old money, gone bad," said Faylin, still looking around the room. "I heard Tristram once had a lot of land out to the west but that he sold it to pay for his campaigns against the Deep Elves."

"He must have spent a fortune on it," muttered Gavin, Sula looked confused and mouthed "what?" at him. Exasperated, he turned back to watching Faylin carefully, a deeper concern gripping his heart. Cold fingers of fear wondered what kind of creature he might be sharing a casual conversation with.

"He is a good man, with good values," said Faylin, "But he is old now, weak and lost. It is a pity his friend the king does not share his animosity for the non-humans."

"The Deep Elves," said Gavin, "He only hates the Deep Elves."

"A good start," replied Faylin. Gavin saw it again then, the gleam of hatred in her eye. A childish passion, like a tantrum, but also cold and clinical and capable of any extreme of behaviour. The rest of her reply and Gavin's train of thought were interrupted by Tristram's arrival.

"A very poor start," added a voice from the top of the stairs. They looked up to observe the knight standing there, a pale wraith in the half light of the huge chamber. "No matter how many we slew their cities were always re-occupied when we returned. But you are wrong about the king, he supported my campaigns in every way he could."

"Hypocrisy," hissed Faylin, "He pays you to go to the ends of the earth to slay them and then invites them into his own home for dinner."

Sir Tristram walked slowly down the stairs, choosing to ignore Faylin's comment. "I have so little left to finance my expeditions now," he muttered, "I fear those cities are full to over-flowing once again. And I hear news every day of more raids on the baronies in the west and our other friends in the mountains. Sea Breeze, I had not expected news so soon. Tell me, have you found the murderer?"

"I believe I have," said Gavin, "Although I lack proof and I am not sure. I may be jumping to too many false conclusions. I wondered if I might seek your counsel on this?" As he said this he tried to watch Faylin's reaction. She appeared distracted by the trophies on the wall but he thought he saw her start slightly when he said he thought he knew the murderer but it was so hard to tell in this light. "This is Faylin of the Babylonian Temple, by the way."

"Yes, I thought she was," he murmured.

Faylin nodded politely but she seemed unhappy that he had not replied to her comment about the king.

"I would be delighted to help," replied the old man, although his tone suggested he did have more urgent matters to attend to. "Come this way, I have a sitting room over here that catches the sun at this time of day, what little there is of it in this season."

He led them to a side chamber that was evidently a reception room furnished in more lavish times. The heavy drapes and wall coverings were dusty and there was some mould in one corner. Tristram opened the curtains and a soft light filled the room, accompanied by the sounds of the street outside. The windows were glazed in heavy, foggy glass but Gavin could make out bars on the outside of the window. The furniture consisted of a large table to one wall with four ornate chairs about it. There were also three large armchairs around the cold hearth, although they all smelt of damp. Everything was decorated in shades of dark green which probably looked sumptuous when new, but the brass fittings were tarnished now and the room just looked dingy. Tristram waited politely for the ladies to sit in two of the armchairs and then seated himself in the last. Gavin drew up a chair from the table and sat on that. Gecko had been left in the hall.

"So," said Sir Tristram, "And who is your suspect?"

"I have discovered much in the last three days," said Gavin, "I fear that the petty crime of which I was accused is but a taste of the intrigue to which it is associated."

"Murder is hardly a petty crime," observed Sir Tristram with bitterness.

"Indeed, but how serious when compared with civil war, or even Genocide?" asked Gavin, "For it is the threads of this that I have come across."

No one responded, Faylin was still and watching Sir Tristram politely. He had expected some reaction from her at the term "Genocide" but perhaps he had been getting ahead of himself. Perhaps she didn't even know what the word meant.

"The murder was committed by an angry man," said Gavin, "A man who felt the most sacred sanctum, the most cherished space of his existence, had been violated by unclean hands. He believed that one of his enemies had stolen a most precious artefact, a thing so valued and treasured by his peers that its loss was a disgrace to their entire order. Its return was his highest priority and when he discovered, I know not how, that it had been sold to a Gnome by the name of Brighteye he could contain his fury no longer."

Gavin was watching carefully out of the corner of his eye Faylin's face, hoping her naivety would betray her understanding – he had positioned his chair so that he could see her clearly. He was not disappointed. Her eyes fixed on him at the mention of an artefact and he saw her frown slightly. He believed that that he had guessed right. He decided to test his theory a little more.

"To others it might even be a worthless trinket, a superstitious curio better suited to a child's toy box than a powerful but misguided temple, but to our murderer and his people it was beyond value." His test was rewarded, he saw Faylin bite back a remark and a look of anger flashed over her when he mentioned 'misguided'. He went on.

"Our murderer is a cunning man, with many friends upon whose loyalty he could rely absolutely," Gavin leant forward, still looking directly at Sir Tristram but conscious of Faylin out of the corner of his eye. From here Sula, who was to his left, was almost out of his sight. Sir Tristram's face betrayed nothing but Gavin was sure the old man was listening more intently than he appeared to be. "He had deceived many friends and followers into obeying him. Perhaps they were in on the plot but I suspect they are more likely unwitting, foolish tools of his greater ambitions. Victims themselves being used by his office." Gavin was gratified to see Faylin clutch the arms of her chair more tightly, her knuckles white with the effort. "Among these friends were members of the City Guard and he planned to use them to help his plan, perhaps unwittingly, but certainly to help him."

"You think the Guard were in league with him?" cried Sir Tristram, "Sea Breeze we cannot impeach the Guard! Anarchy would--"

"Please let me finish," said Sea Breeze, "All will become clear."

Tristram took a breath, scowled, and then nodded.

"The murderer planned to break into the jewellers that night, perhaps he knew a buyer was on his way, perhaps he just wanted to act as quickly as possible. Whatever, he painted his face black so that he might hide his white skin in the darkness and skilfully climbed the roof of the row of houses containing the jewellers. No mean feat in a snowstorm. He had no difficulty locating the right house and forced a window in an attic room to gain entry. Quite what happened then is hard to say. He certainly meant to kill all the gnomes in their sleep and he had got into their main bedroom with great stealth before being discovered. But he made a mistake, a careless blunder betrayed by his haste and lack of wit perhaps. Whatever the reason, he awoke the gnome."

Gavin was again watching Faylin. At the mention of the mistake he was sure he saw her flinch, although it was harder now to tell in the poor light. She was being more guarded about herself now as well. Perhaps Sula too was watching the strange girl and he hoped Sula had noticed her behaviour as well. Gavin had taken the opportunity to look at Faylin carefully in the lobby, inspecting her skin for any sign of the face paint or the wound he thought the gnomes had inflicted upon her. There was no sign of anything but the temple had many skilled healers; the signs might easily be removed. He could think of no other explanation for the scent of vinegar on her clothes than that she had been there, that she had been wearing the face paint.

"How bravely that little chap fought," wondered Gavin, "Accosted in his marital bed by a thief in the night. The lowest cur with murderous intent there in his bedroom, the brave gnome stood his ground. Selflessly this noble shopkeeper stood battle with the despicable intruder and they fought while the gnome's innocent wife and child sought to escape the terrible, evil attacker and the terrible fate he had planned for them."

Gavin detected an intake of breath at the word 'evil' but Faylin didn't say anything.

"The intruder slew the gnome there, I suspect with a shortsword or similar weapon," Gavin continued, "And then he gave chase to the wife and child, his eyes shining with anger, his mind racing with bloodlust, an inhuman craving he desperately sought to satisfy." Gavin sensed more stifled indignation from Faylin at the suggestion the murderer was 'inhuman' but she remained silent. Sir Tristram was frowning now, puzzled no doubt by Gavin's evocative language. "The murderer caught the wife at the foot of the stairs and slew her there, her gentle form gutted like a fish. The child escaped to the cellar, seeking a safe place there. Terrified, looking for a familiar space, perhaps somewhere he often played when he kept his father company during his labours. He hid in the cellar, close to the strong room. And there the murderer found him. And there he plunged his sword into the small creature's delicate body. There he watched the life bleed from those innocent eyes."

"Another dead gnome," snarled Faylin, unable to stop herself, "It's hardly a tragedy."

"Oh really? Have you ever killed a gnome?" asked Gavin, turning to face her but with contempt in his face.

"I have killed a lot of non-humans," boasted Faylin in response. "We often go hunting goblins and orcs in the borderlands. It's part of our training. On our last trip we slew an entire tribe."

"Even the females and young?" wondered Sula, disgust in her voice.

"Of course!" replied Faylin, "We built a huge pyre and threw them on it. We slew many of them first but not all. Don't pretend to me that this is wrong. You are weak and stupid. You are blind! They are the very incarnation of evil! Goblins and orcs and all the other non-human filth that stains our streets, they must all be wiped out to allow the pure peoples of the world to survive."

Gavin hastened on, hoping to keep Faylin's passion up.

"With the family dead, the murderer searched for his prize. He found the key to the strong room, perhaps with a spell or perhaps someone else had told him where it was hidden. However, he got it and with the strong room open he took his prize, this silly trinket worth the lives of so many innocents."

"What is this treasure he sought?" asked Sir Tristram.

"It's the ..." Gavin stumbled, and then looked confused, "Oh bugger it, what's the damn thing called? Diamonds, set beautifully, although not the best craftsmanship. It's on the tip of my tongue! It's the erm, of what'sit?" he looked around at Sula in confusion and then at Faylin. Their eyes met and he saw it

immediately. Some realisation in her eyes, some sign that she knew what he was thinking of but was avoiding helping him. Her lips were pursed, her body shaking with fury. She was on to him but he masked his own realisation well. "It's very important to the Babylonians," he went on, "A stupid little thing but they think it's all this symbolic rubbish, like stars fallen to earth or something." He was guessing now, thinking about diamonds, hoping that they were the diamonds Jerym had told him of, hoping that Faylin would fall for it. She wouldn't.

Gavin floundered and Faylin said nothing, watching him closely. Gavin looked at her, his whole being willing her to name the damned thing. He desperately needed her to fall into his trap, but she had sensed it, she was getting cautious now. Silence prevailed, but only for a moment.

"Do you mean the Stars of Be'el?" wondered Sir Tristram, "I had no idea that they had been stolen?"

"They haven't," said Faylin, too hastily. Caught off-guard by the knight's suggestion. "They're in the Inner Blood Chamber, where they have always been."

"Hardly mere trinkets, either," observed Sir Tristram.

"When compared to the lives of three innocent gnomes, I would count them worthless," replied Gavin, trying to incite Faylin again. She was getting angrier but still didn't bite his dangled lure.

"And they are not stolen," she denied again, "Your theories are nothing."

"And who is your murderer anyway?" asked Sir Tristram, "Are you suggesting it was one of the Babylonian Priests?"

"No, a monk," replied Gavin, deciding to persist with his offensive, although he doubted Faylin would reveal anything now. His heart was sinking, he had been over-confident. She wasn't as foolish as he thought, or perhaps as he had hoped. "It would have to be one taught the skills of climbing and balance, like all monks are taught. To climb those walls in a snowstorm so surely would require great skill. The man who did it is indeed a master." Gavin rounded on Faylin, "Master Fallanx in fact!"

Faylin gaped at him, her face immediately colouring up with fury she sprang to her feet. "That's a lie! Master Fallanx is a great man! He is no sneak-thief!"

"He has the method, the motive and the means to do it," replied Gavin.

"Explain yourself," said Sir Tristram, his voice stern. He seemed to be on Faylin's side, his instinctive belief in the great and good of society not letting him believe such an accusation.

Gavin needed to get something from this. If he had blown it, as it appeared, he wanted to show them that he had worked it out at least. He was close to not caring about being strung up for this now, but he wanted them to know that he knew. He wanted Faylin to know that she hadn't been half as clever as she thought she had. "He had to get back the Stars, perhaps they were even stolen while he was on guard, or his servants were on guard," said Gavin, "It was a matter of honour for him that they be returned."

"But they were never stolen," snarled Faylin.

"It would have needed someone of his skill to climb a wall like that, to match a professional thief's skills. And someone with his skill in weapons to beat a swordsman of the experience of Mr Brighteye."

"Any monk or thief worth their salt could climb that wall!" denied Faylin, "It was poorly plastered and brickwork was chipped. It was an easy climb."

"Any monk you say?" sneered Gavin, feeling desperate now. "In the snow and the wind and the cold? I don't think so! I could perhaps do it, if I had the right tools, but there's no way you could do it! No way could a mere girl like you get up there!"

"I am a better climber than you!" Faylin was snarling now, her eyes narrow with anger. "I could climb that wall no problem, even in the dark!"

"Oh? And slice up the gnomes too?" laughed Gavin, "I don't believe it. There's no way a silly little girl like you could do that. No way! Nasty little goblins are one thing, but a perfect little gnome child, like a miniature human baby, looking up at you like that? You'd be crying for your mother!"

"It was an ugly little thing!" continued Faylin, her hand slipping to the hilt of a dagger under her cloak, "It squawked like a seagull when I gutted it. Filth! I didn't hesitate for one second, not for one second!"

Even as she spoke the dagger came out and Gavin threw himself backwards away from the chair. He felt a hot pain across his wrist but rolled to a crouch, ready to lunge back at her assailant. Tristram was on his feet as well, moving a lot faster than his elderly frame suggested was possible, swinging an occasional table up to parry Faylin's blade. The dagger bit deep, sticking into the old furniture. For a second the young murderess and the old man struggled, but then the dagger came free and they fell away from each other. Tristram tripped over his chair and collapsed behind it, muttering oaths. Faylin kept her feet and turned her wrath once more towards Gavin, now on his feet, tensed in a fighting stance.

Faylin drew her curved shortsword out now, whirling it above her head and ready for an attack Gavin could see he was ill-equipped to parry. For a moment he felt his stomach clench, he felt the adrenalin of fear flood his system with cold, he realised his training was preparing him for what was to come. Even as he watched the blade his mind was working out a parry, his left arm was turning out, his left fist unclenching ready to catch. Another part of his brain looked at the blade – shorter and less curved than his scimitar, just as the Priest of the Temple of Death had predicted. Gavin's right fist clenched harder for the retaliatory strike. He could do it. He honestly believed he could do it. But then a movement behind Faylin distracted him. A familiar shape loomed in the shadows behind her, the pale sunlight glinted on another blade.

"Don't kill her!" he cried even as the blade vanished behind Faylin. "For Christ's sake, don't kill her!"

Faylin seemed to realise at the last possible moment that something was going on that she hadn't allowed for. Perhaps she saw something in Gavin's eye, his focus moving from her. Or maybe it was that first piercing of the skin as the blade shot home, the hot pain too bright and strong to really be understood. First confusion and then realisation washed over her face. Anger and denial as she realised that she was going to lose. Her mouth opened slightly, her eyes widened, fury turned to panic. Faylin span to the left, too slow to avoid the blade as it ripped out from between her fourth and fifth rib, from where it had been pushed, hard and up, almost slicing her heart in two. Her body was dead before it hit the floor, her last shivering gasp, the last twitching of her brain stem as it realised that she was dead. That everything was gone, everything that she had ever done was over and that it had all come to nothing.

## **Chapter 29 – The Murderer Unmasked?**

Gavin, Sir Tristram and Sula all stood and stared at Faylin's body. She lay face down but slightly on her left side, her back arched, her face turned to the right. Her sightless eyes were wide, her mouth slightly open. Her right arm was outstretched, her right fist still clutched tight around her curved short sword. Her left hand was empty, the dagger in the dust beneath a chair. Her plain tunic was already staining red as the huge wound in her back poured out into the afternoon sunlight. So deep and large was the wound that a faint blueness was already coming to her once-cherry lips, her face increasingly pale.

Sula stood back slightly from where she had struck the death blow, her right hand still clutched her own curved fighting knife, the blade red from point to hilt, the blood starting to form into dark drips. Her stance was ready to defend against another attack but her face one of horror, her eyes wide in shock at the conception of what she had done. The first time. Despite years of training, many more practice fights than she cared to remember, accidents and mistakes, but this was the first time she had taken a life herself. Her first kill.

Gavin found himself trembling. As he calmed himself down he became aware of the pain across his forearm where Faylin's dagger swipe had caught him. Blood was seeping from his sleeve, dripping over his belt and down his left leg. But he couldn't move. His body was locked in a spasm. His face a grimace of disgust and fear, staring at Faylin's hazel eyes.

Sir Tristram was the first to speak, he was leant on the arm of his chair, panting. Lean and vital as he was he was not a young man and the fight had caught him unprepared. Gavin felt a little ridiculous and angry with himself for having let it go so far. Yet if he had not, if he had intervened, then perhaps his tactic would have failed and she would not have made her unintentional confession.

"When the Babylonians hear about this there's going to be Hell to pay," Sir Tristram muttered hoarsely and shouted for his servant. The man appeared almost instantaneously, armed with a club, evidently responding to the sounds of combat earlier rather than his master's voice.

Gavin was trying to make his body work. His mind was already moving on, thinking about how they could manage this, but his body, part of his brain, was still staring at the dead girl on the floor. Something about her had snagged in him, perhaps it was the first time he had seen a woman killed, perhaps a woman he fancied? It was all too close, too personal. She had been a vicious, bigoted bitch, but she'd had the brain of a child. Her concepts of responsibility, of humanity, had been short-changed. She had been cheated of her life by the temple she served. Another young life wasted in the name of religion, the name of belief.

"Sod 'em," said Gavin at last, "They got her to do it. They wanted a civil war."

Sir Tristram had been instructing his somewhat stunned butler to send messengers to Captain Garin and to the Temple of Death. He turned and looked at Gavin with some surprise on his face.

"Are you serious?" he asked, "How can they start a civil war by killing a jeweller?"

"That was expedient," replied Gavin, "They had no way of stealing the diamonds back without letting people know they had been stolen in the first place. The gnome would have told his people. The story would have spread. It would have made the Babylonians a laughing stock – they take their temple and the efficiency of their followers so seriously. They couldn't leave the gnomes alive, but likewise they couldn't afford to let anyone trace it back to them. They needed a patsy."

"A what?" asked Tristram.

"A Patsy," said Gavin, "Sorry, a scapegoat. Patsy's a slang term from my world for someone wrongly blamed for a crime but unable to prove they didn't do it. The best patsies are then killed before they can blab their stories. The Babylonians had hoped we would be their patsies. Your testimony saved our necks, Sir Tristram, and we thank you again for that. But in doing so you might have brought about a much greater conflict."

"I am always a servant of truth regardless of consequences. There is no other path for me. But why did Faylin pick you to be her patsy?" replied Sir Tristram.

"She didn't, she didn't come up with this all by herself, she was following orders," muttered Gavin, sitting and clutching his wrist. Sula hastened over to help him, her blade sheathed again but her hands still shaking.

"Ordered by whom?" asked Tristram.

"She was probably ordered to do it to prove herself to the Temple," said Gavin, the warmth of Sula's healing magic flooded through his body. His pain had been growing, as the adrenalin that had distracted him left his body, but now it receded again, his arm a dull ache instead of burning pain, like memories of too much exercise the day before.

"Who by?" asked Tristram, "They must come to justice too!"

"We cannot bring them to justice," said Gavin, "There's no proof and too much politics tied up in all of this. We have become players in a bigger game. Regardless of how we tried to prosecute the real culprits, the people behind all of this, they would have cast iron defences, legal and physical. If we were to accuse them of a conspiracy we would be playing right into their hands, giving them just the excuse they need to start fighting, to start a war."

Sir Tristram frowned. "I am not sure I understand what you mean?"

"It was no accident that they chose Sula and myself to blame for the murders," said Gavin, "I am from another world and am a friend of Garibaldi. The Babylonians have some issue with Garibaldi, mainly because he is an outsider himself and consorts with so many non-humans. As I understand it he has risen in power quite suddenly and his grace and favour with the king is seen by the Babylonians as a threat."

"And they wished to disgrace him by associating him with murderers?" said Tristram.

"Yes, as well as causing him some personal grief," said Gavin, "Two birds with one stone you might say, except it all went wrong. We were released. And now Faylin has confessed to her part in the plot, confessed to the murder. Not that anyone will believe us of course, especially as we have no proof that the diamonds were stolen in the first place."

"My word of her confession is sufficient to prove your innocence," said Sir Tristram, "Sir Garin and the King will believe my testimony. But I cannot allow her co-conspirators to go free! We must catch them all!"

"We cannot, at least not yet," said Gavin. He looked over at Sula, who had withdrawn slightly and was watching him again with her suspicious eyes. He looked at her youthful face, blood, his own or Faylin's perhaps, splashed on her right side. "Thank-you Sula, you have once again proved generous beyond asking and brave to a fault."

"I thought perhaps you might be angry that I killed her?" wondered Sula, "I did not mean to. I reacted faster than I might have wished. My training took over, I did what I have been taught to do since I was a little girl. Instinct drove my knife into her."

"You may have saved my life," replied Gavin, "And for that I can be nothing but grateful."

"You handle a knife well," observed Sir Tristram, "That was a punishing thrust for one so meek. They have trained you since you were little, you say?"

"I am Id-Affleghamerk," replied the young priestess, "It means I am a Silver Blade that shines in the Moonlight. We are the silent truth of the Moon Goddess. We are the instrument of Her will as it is given through her servants, the. They teach us how to fight well in Skull Crag allowing herself a proud smile."

"The King might believe you Sir Tristram, maybe even Captain Garin, since he is your friend," said Gavin after a pause, "But I doubt the Babylonians will. Or they will choose not to. Others likewise. We need to figure out now how a disaster might be averted. We need to stop the Babylonians making this into an excuse to attack our friends and allies. In fact, they'll probably attack anyone they like. Since I am an Outsider and I have friends among Garibaldi's Heroes they have every reason to claim we are all working together. They will use any excuse to brand the non-humans of the city complicit with the plot and strike at them. As I understand it they may have the ear of the King as well so they may even try to bring him into the conflict on their side, claiming Garibaldi was privy to the whole conspiracy. At the very least they will look to make the King powerless to intercede on the side of Garibaldi or the non-humans without making himself look like he is acting against the humans of the city. I think they have sown enough hatred among their followers and enough doubt in other minds."

Sir Tristram was not convinced. "This is all clever word play but I cannot see how this will all tie together. So many tenuous links, so much which is only half truths. How can it be so?"

"In my world we call it 'Spin'," replied Gavin. "Who will the Babylonians choose to blame for the murder of the gnomes and now the murder of one of their most promising young devotees?"

"They will hear what Sir Garin shall say and he will hear what I shall say," replied Tristram, "They must believe him!"

"You credit them with too much honesty," said Gavin, "Whether they believe you or not, they won't admit it. They will claim that we killed Faylin and invented her confession. They may even accuse yourself and Sir Garin to be complicit in the plot. Sir Garin may not be able to uphold your statement at all, they may have already placed him too far from the establishment to support you without foregoing his own position."

"Be careful what you say, young monk," said Tristram, "Sir Garin is among the most trusted of my friends. You throw accusations around like confetti."

"What would you do in his position?" wondered Gavin, "If he agrees that Faylin is the murderer then one of his sergeants is a liar and the whole of the Babylonian Temple will be crying foul. If he denies your witness then he loses a friend. That's all."

"He is a man of honour!" growled Sir Tristram.

"He is also a practical man," said Gavin. "He owes loyalty to both you and the city, and for the city he is responsible for his regiment and the reputation of the king. I suggest we await him here and see what he says."

"We shall," replied Sir Tristram, "It is not a long walk to the East Gate and he will be here before the pawl bearers from the Temple of Death I think. I worry about my judgement of you, Sea Breeze. I took you for an honourable man but I see now I was mistaken. Perhaps you didn't kill the gnomes but you are not the man of honour fighting for his name that I took you for!"

"On the contrary!" scalded Sula, intervening in the discourse suddenly and with a great passion. "Sea Breeze is a man of such great personal integrity that he would put the peace of the city before his own life! Honour is a selfish trait, putting all else aside before one's own chivalric vanity. Listen to yourself Sir Tristram! You are a great and valiant man, but here you condemn the reputation of a man who regrets the proving of his own innocence because it might give others the very excuse they have needed to wage their war!"

Sir Tristram was speechless for a moment. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but no words came out.

"The priestess speaks right, husband," said a new voice. Sir Tristram's wife emerged from the shadows at the door. She crossed to the body of Faylin and inspected it for a moment, a look of sadness in her eye, and then she laid a sheet she had brought over those unseeing eyes. "You are the greatest of warriors, my love," she continued, "But there are greater perils than the innocence of Sea Breeze and Sula to be considered here."

Sir Tristram looked at his wife for a long time, no one spoke. It seemed the man was taking some time to unravel the complications presented to him. His mind was one of absolutes. Everything had to be black or white, and if it was even slightly grey then it was black. In his own iron-bound sense of honour he had no comprehension of anyone who didn't have the same steadfastness.

"We will await Sir Garin," replied Sir Tristram, scowling at Gavin but refusing to argue with Sula or his wife. "I will say no lie."

"And I would not ask you to," said Gavin, "But it probably doesn't matter what you say. It may be the truth is just too inconvenient for everyone. We will only know where we all stand when Sir Garin gets here. And until then I need to sit and think. We need to rescue some peace from this chaos if we can. There must be a way we can prevent the Babylonians from achieving their goal of war with the non-humans without Sula and I having to be hanged. At least I hope there is."

### **Chapter 30 – Consequences to be Faced**

Captain Garin arrived at Sir Tristram's house accompanied by his bodyguard of six militiamen and three sergeants. Word of the afternoon's events had travelled through the local community by the time they arrived and several clumps of listless on-lookers were to be seen hanging around close to the building. The armoured Guards clanked purposefully down the street, paused while the door was answered and marched inside. They left two men by the door and dispatched another two to the back door of the house, which was actually a gate into a rear courtyard, decoratively festooned with planters and trellises hidden beneath the last dregs of the snow.

Leaving the last two guards and the sergeants in the hall Sir Garin, Captain of the Storm Guard, was led into the scene of the death of Faylin by Sir Tristram's servant, now without his club but still pale and shocked by what he had seen. Faylin's shroud was stained now, a delicate rosette where it had hung close to the wound. The weapons still lay close, Sir Tristram and his wife stood by the window, hand in hand. Gavin and Sula were in the shadows near the door. Captain Garin bowed silently to Tristram, who returned the bow, he then he lifted the shroud and glanced over Faylin's form.

"She wears the robes of a monk of Gilgamesh," Garin observed, before dropping the shroud. "And she has been stabbed in the back."

Sir Tristram left his wife by the window and stepped forward. The two men stood facing each other for a moment before Tristram spoke.

"Before her death she confessed to killing the gnomes," he announced, "Sea Breeze lured her here, perhaps hoping that she might be interested in finding out how our investigations were going. He questioned her skilfully and put her conscience under some stress. In the end she relented with passion and confessed. She struck out at Sea Breeze, wounding him, and would have struck again but the Priestess Sula struck her a deadly blow from behind."

Captain Garin looked at Sula, one eyebrow raised, sucked his cheeks and looked back at his old friend.

"A single blow?" he asked.

"From behind," confirmed Sir Tristram.

It was evident that Captain Garin was remembering the bundle of knives and other tools he had seen among Sula's equipment. "And you were wounded?" Garin directed the question at Sea Breeze.

Gavin held up his tunic where it was blood-stained. "Sula has used healing magic on me since the wound was delivered."

Garin turned to face Sula, leaning slightly towards her and staring her in the eye. She stood, immobile, and returned his stare. Her face remained impassive, neither proud nor defiant. In her training she had been confronted many times in this way and was used to wearing a 'grey face'. She was passive without submission or aggression. She merely was.

"A killing blow?" wondered Garin, "Skillfully delivered."

"I am a warrior Priestess of the Moon," replied Sula in a soft voice. "She was going to kill my friend. I would not allow that so long as it was within my power to prevent it."

Garin continued to watch her for a while. Gavin had heard the statement quite clearly and realised, suddenly, even more than he had realised she had saved his life, that she had called him 'friend'. Of course, there was a chance that her basic understanding of the common tongue had made her use the wrong word, perhaps "comrade" or "fellow initiate" would have been more appropriate, but she had called him "friend" and he liked that. It made him feel better, better about what he was doing. Better about the strangeness he was barely managing to cope with around him.

Captain Garin turned back to face Sir Tristram.

"So, they trapped her here," he said, "And berated her until she confessed?"

"No," replied Sir Tristram, "How she was here I do not know but it was not against her will. Sea Breeze did her no direct harm. He played on her pride, he teased, as one might tease a child, but her confession was real enough. She demonstrated that she had committed the crime both deliberately and without conscience. She admitted information only the murderer could know. The City is a better place without her in it."

Captain Garin considered this again, walking back to the blood-stained shroud and still sucking his teeth.

"This is all very convenient for you," he observed, looking this time at Gavin.

"Do you doubt my word?" demanded Sir Tristram, an edge to his voice. Perhaps Gavin's comments from earlier were preying on his mind.

Garin stopped and turned to face his old friend. His face was grim, his eyes glinting with anger and shame.

"I do not doubt your word, old friend, but I do wonder if some magic is at work here," he said, "Can you be sure no Charm is about your head? Can you be sure that no innocent blood is shed here?"

Sir Tristram paused for a long while before answering. As he waited he looked carefully across at Sea Breeze. He also looked at Sula and glanced down at the blade she wore by her side. He then inhaled deeply and turned to face Captain Garin.

"I have no doubt that my mind is clear," he replied.

Captain Garin walked across to the window and stood looking out of it for some time. "And that, my old friend, may be a problem for us all." No one else spoke, deep in contemplation of their own thoughts and fears, wondering how the Captain might react. Even Sir Tristram held his peace, although his eyes blazed with fury. He had realised perhaps that Gavin's fears were well-founded. His

long-held beliefs and faith in the honour of his peers had been dealt a sturdy blow.

The afternoon sun was lowering in the sky now. In the southeast, as is the way in Barnaynia, and its rays fell directly through the window and burned glowing, twisting worms in the dust that rose from the ancient carpet. Outside the clatter of the street seemed dull, softened by the magnitude of their predicament.

"This puts me in an awkward position," murmured Captain Garin, softly, at last.

"Do you doubt me, Sir?" asked Sir Tristram, his low voice burning with indignation, his hold body shaking with suppressed fury, desperate to remain in control and not lash out, there and then, with steel against his old friend.

"No, old friend," replied the Captain gently, realising Sir Tristram's plight. His words were not meant softly though, perhaps more pitying the old fool's naivety than reassuring him. "Would that I could and this might all be an easy problem to solve. I doubt you not. Nor your simplicity in seeing all ends of this afternoon simple and obvious when they are not."

Tristram stepped back, closer to his wife. "Then I am in debt to our friend Sea Breeze here," he said, his voice cracking slightly, "And I owe him an apology. I doubted him and he doubted you, but I see now that he knows you better than I. Perhaps I am too old and stupid for the strange times we live in."

Captain Garin turned and looked sternly at Gavin, who stood forward slightly and stared back at him, defiantly perhaps. The two men realised the position they were in, they realised too clearly the repercussions that the truth of the afternoon's events would have. Truth meant doom for many, the easy solution death only for Gavin and Sula.

"I have been thinking," said Gavin, seeing that he was only a word away from the gallows and Sir Tristram's faith in him, valiant though it would be, would not save him. "Thinking about a great many things while we have been waiting here."

Captain Garin didn't speak but turned again and looked out of the window again.

"Tell me what became of the sergeant that claimed he saw us leaving the scene of the crime?" asked Gavin.

"He is dead," said Garin with no emotion.

Gavin nodded. He had a feeling that might be the case.

"How did he die?" demanded Sir Tristram, anger rising again in his voice but his wife placed a calming hand on his sword-arm. Gavin had a nasty feeling he already knew, or could guess what had happened to the hapless Sergeant Bully. An unfortunate nick-name for an unfortunate man.

"I was suspicious of his motives," said Garin candidly, without taking his gaze from the window, although he must have been able to see little through the deformed glass it was made of. "I asked two of my other sergeants to ask him what exactly had happened that night. Two of the three that stand outside this room now. They spoke with him for some time. Then they took him downstairs and interrogated him further. Then he died."

Gavin coughed slightly. It was not what he had expected after all.

"And what did he tell your sergeants?" asked Sir Tristram, deciding to leave a deeper inquest for a little while.

"Only that he found the door broken in and all the valuables gone," replied Garin, "And the family murdered."

"Do you think he spoke the truth?" asked Tristram.

Garin sighed. "I have since discovered," he murmured slowly, "That my good sergeant was a trusted and worthy devotee of Gilgamesh the Bull-fighter, a deity of the Temple of the Babylonians."

Gavin nodded slowly, having suspected as much. It was how the sergeant knew the crime had taken place. It was why he had been told of it and spoke in itself of how good and honourable Faylin really was. She wouldn't have committed any common theft. She would only have taken what she was told to take. It was left to the sergeant to get the real worth of the gnome, to make it look like a proper robbery.

"Might I guess," wondered Gavin, his stomach churning, "That perhaps the sergeants that interrogated him were also followers of the Babylonian Temple, or even Gilgamesh himself?"

Garin remained impassive.

"And that perhaps whatever the sergeant confessed to them before he died by their hand, the tale you heard of it was not one of truth but one of convenience to their plot. And by "their plot" I mean the Babylonian Temple's plot, by which I mean the senior temple staff."

Garin again said nothing but rocked slightly, back and forth on his heels.

"And you, Captain Garin, to which Temple do you go to when in danger or in doubt?" Gavin was getting a bit worried now. If Captain Garin was another follower of Gilgamesh things were about to get even more fraught. He wished he had brought his scimitar with him that afternoon even more heartily than he had when he had looked into Faylin's clear, determined eyes. He also sensed Sir Tristram stiffen, his hands searching uselessly for a sword at his side once. It reminded him, once more, that his great blade was upstairs, where he had left it when he came to answer the door to Gavin. Sir Tristram was unarmed.

Garin turned to look at Gavin, his eyes ice-hard, his arms resting easily on the sword and dagger hilts he wore at his waist. For a moment they stared again at each other, now the unspoken question more instant, more dangerous even than it had been before.

"I am and always have been," began the Captain, "A loyal devotee of Odin, the god of wisdom, as is Sir Tristram, and of Thor, the god of justice."

Gavin felt himself exhale, the moment of tension broken. He almost felt like he was released. Home safe. Or perhaps not.

"But I cannot ignore the fact that most, if not all my Guard of the Storm Regiment, now worship Gilgamesh," continued Captain Garin, "And I regret that this sea change had happened without my knowledge."

Gavin felt himself tighten again but then a small voice spoke to him. A small voice which renewed his hope. It was the voice of Flat Hand from the morning, one simple statement. "Money," said Gavin out loud.

"What?" said Sir Tristram.

"Faylin was told to murder the gnomes and steal back the diamonds," he muttered.

"The Stars of Be'el," said Sula.

"Yes, whether or not they were really stolen or perhaps given to the gnome in some deception, as a lure," said Gavin, his mind already distracting him with deeper, even more convoluted conspiracies. "Anyway, she found them and brought them out as she had been ordered. She killed the gnomes because they got in the way, or maybe she had been told to. It doesn't really matter. The sergeant had already been told the jewellers would be turned over. He already knew that if he knocked the door down he would find the place full of dead people. He also knew he would find the strong room open and full of valuables. He could clear them out and then raise the alarm. He was the safety net in case

Faylin cocked up. She probably didn't even know about him. If the gnomes were alive and Faylin dead then he could disguise her identity and cover up the true origins of the crime. That's all he had to do. If he was ever asked if he killed the gnomes he could answer, truthfully, that he didn't and he had no idea who did. Enough to fool a priest even. Faylin was vital to the Temple's plans but she was as disposable as the gnomes in truth."

"So where is the gnomes' treasure now?" asked Sir Tristram.

"That is a good question," replied Captain Garin, "My sergeant had very little on him and I have no doubt his interrogators took none either."

"Whoever has that treasure holds the proof of the murder," said Gavin, "If we could find that, we could be sure, one way or the other, and prove ourselves. If it remains hidden our allegations are without foundation even with Sir Tristram's testimony. The Babylonians will call Sula and I murderers and we will be back to where we started but with nothing to save us all from death. Us by the hangman's noose, the rest of you by, well, civil war or just bloody insurrection. I don't know. But the treasure itself is useless without a market for it."

They were disturbed at this point by a pounding on the front door. One of the guards posted outside knocked and entered the room and saluted Garin.

"There is a senior priest of the Temple of Babylon demanding entrance," he announced.

Garin's face went black as thunder. "Send him in."

Sir Tristram marched forward and blocked the door. "By no power shall I let any slime from that house in my halls!" he exclaimed, "I am sorry Sir Garin, though you may be a friend of old, from what I have learnt today you must interview this man in the street or in your own hall. I will not give him sully the air in mine."

Captain Garin said nothing for a moment, evidently given pause for thought. "I would not ask you to compromise your feelings in this, old friend," he announced, perhaps too loudly, loud enough to be heard at the front door. "I will meet with this Priest in the street." He then headed out of the room followed by Tristram. Gavin paused for a moment and then followed, Sula and Tristram's wife at his heels.

Outside the twin main doors had been thrown open and two of the guards stood across it, barring the way with their spears. Beyond stood a tall slim man in golden scale-mail, his dark hair braided in tight knots, his feet wrapped in layers of soft pelts. In his hair and around his ears were woven delicate threads of gold and his brown eyes flashed thunder beneath a tall, slim headdress of white silk looped around a pair of bullhorns.

"I am Filmesh of the Red Cloud, Bullfighter of Gilgamesh the Babylonian," the man shouted, as much for the street-full of bystanders as for the threat it announced on Sir Tristram, "And I accuse you, Sir Tristram, of harbouring the murderer of one of our temple's most beloved daughters!"

"You will be silent now, by order of the king and his servants," replied Captain Garin calmly, his voice cold, smooth and deliberate.

Filmesh stood back a pace, opened his mouth and then closed it again. He was more than readily aware that to deny the direct order of a Captain of the Guard was treason in itself. There was a murmur among the crowd and the sound of even the endless street-sellers was silenced. Having stood Filmesh down, however momentarily, Garin then looked around the assembled crowd of onlookers.

"Be it heard here!" Garin then shouted, "That the murderer of the Brighteye family has been found and killed. The mystery is solved and the perpetrator punished. Those individuals known as Sea Breeze and Sula the Moon

Goddess are proved innocent of the crime and are free to go. These conclusions are sanctioned by me, Captain Garin of the Storm, by the authority of the king. Anyone disputing these true and legal findings will answer to me."

The crowd didn't react, either ignorant of the murder or of the name of the victim. Filmesh however rallied, blustering with indignation he stepped forward and then stepped back again, his hand moving to the wickedly barbed mace at his belt.

Captain Garin then turned and walked back into Sir Tristram's house, ignoring the group of people he walked through. He paused only at one of the sergeants that had formed his bodyguard and spoke quietly to him. Gavin was stood close and heard every word.

"Tell your master Filmesh," said the Captain to the sergeant, "That I have a thorough inventory of the dead gnome's treasure. I have already taken steps that the reputable establishments of the city that might recognise such items, the banks, jewellers and the Merchants' Guild, have all been appraised of the list. Anyone, and I mean anyone, found to be dealing in such will be held and investigated." He paused further, looking the Guard Sergeant in the eye. "And I will accept your resignation now and that of Sergeant Hilman."

Gavin considered the words closely, wondering what powers then might wheel behind the scenes. The good Captain could perhaps do no more. There was strife approaching and he was but a tourniquet, his victory perhaps only a brief respite. Gavin looked back out to the crowd and was for a moment shocked to catch the eye of Filmesh, who must have heard the exchange as well. They looked at each other for a moment.

"I know you, Sea Breeze, Monk of the Moon," said the priest, his anger making his words hiss between his teeth.

Gavin felt his blood chill slightly, knowing what these priests of Gilgamesh were and realising already what nightmares they might unleash at any moment. He thought about the power of spells, but then he thought about how awkward and obvious they were to cast. He paused a moment to draw his breath but then sighed. He looked up at the sky, clear and blue now the snow clouds were at last clearing, and wrung red with the setting sun. Around the street stood crowds of onlookers, their faces drawn and ignorant in the half-light. All around them the buildings of the city looked cold and distant, familiar despite the shortness of his stay. Gavin looked at last back at the cruel eyes of the High Priest of Gilgamesh and saw impotent but malignant hatred in those eyes. Filmesh had realised that his plan was thwarted, but that he was free. Gavin was not so stupid as to think he had not gained a powerful and determined enemy.

"That's nice, dear," Gavin said at last in his best patronising tone, loud enough for the Guard and the nearest spectators to hear. "Now you just run along home until you're clever enough to play with the big boys, eh?"

### **Chapter 31 – Old Friends Reconciled**

The funereal bier from the Temple of Death arrived about half an hour after that. Faylin's body, now wrapped in a shroud, was then carried out reverently by the faceless acolytes of the Temple. The funeral cortege then made its way back west towards the graveyard, accompanied by Filmesh and several of his order who wished to attend to the ceremonies now called for. The two Guard Sergeants followed, stripped of their Regimental Tabards and arms.

The crowd around Sir Tristram's house eventually dispersed, realising nothing else interesting was likely to happen. The group that had been seated in the room of the fight now made their peace with one another and ventured out into the dusk, heading home. Gavin and Sula were first to leave, guided by Gecko back towards the wine shop. Captain Garin warned them that they were

far from safe and that dark times were ahead for them all, but they parted, if not as friends then at least not as enemies.

"Tell your friend Luke, Herald of Garibaldi, that I hold his mission complete and he is freed of his binding to your honour," said the Captain to Gavin as they left. "Tell him that he and his master can go in peace with the Guard and King of Dunromin."

Gavin and Sula bowed in respect.

"Thank-you for your faith in us," said Sula, her young face appearing tired, her eyes strangely dull. "I hope that your brave choice will not prove ill for yourself or your city. And thank-you Sir Tristram for your honesty and courage."

Gavin could add no more and so bowed, to each knight in turn, and they left. Gavin then dismissed his remaining bodyguard and turned to look at his friend Sir Tristram and his wife, Helena, once more. Helena was dressed in a long green shift and headdress of a style that was a little behind the fashion. Her face was serene but lined with years of worry for her oft-absent husband. Her eyes were deepest blue, almost elven, and betrayed not one ounce of weakness.

"Do not think badly of me, cousin," the Captain murmured slowly, "Truth is not always the easiest path, nor even the best."

"I do not blame you for your reluctance, my dear friend," replied Tristram, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I know that for me Truth is the only path, regardless of the pain it might be paved with. But I am not so narrow minded as to not realise others make different choices for good reasons also. I have not the wherewithal to see into the conspiracies that lie in the hearts of some men, I trust too well. But I have learned much this afternoon."

"Thank-you," smiled Gavin, his face remained hard but his tone was softer than it had been. "I would hate to think I had damaged our friendship with my concerns for the welfare of the city. I have been faced with a choice for many days and I was teetering. I very, very nearly fell. It would have been so much easier to throw the monk and the priestess to the mob, to string them up and have done with it." The man sighed, wondering where his career, his life, might be headed now. He must hasten to the King and report the truth of the matter. He knew the King would more readily trust the word of Sir Tristram but could not put his friend through that. "Your example saved me. I saw that not only was I answerable to Thor for my choices, but that it would only be a delay. I think the storm clouds that are gathering will break, regardless of what we try and do. It behoves me that I must be a servant of the Truth as well as the King and the City, a guardian of the innocent, not so ready to cast their lives aside so easily."

Sir Tristram nodded slowly and looked out of the door at the nameless faces of the crowds dispersing into the soft grey of the evening. He wondered how many knew or even suspected what had come to pass that afternoon in his front parlour. A grave miscarriage of justice had been avoided, no doubt, but what of Sea Breeze's dour predictions? Would the Babylonians really not accept his word? Would the King acquiesce to their demands for the sake of peace? Would the king really offer up Sea Breeze and Sula, and in consequence Sir Gavin, to the Babylonians' outrage?

He had not thought much of intrigues within the city in the past. His mind always sought out enemies in the Darkworld beneath the mountains, looking for the Deep Elves and their ill works. For him the enemy was always without the boundaries of what he thought was civilisation. Everything within those battle-lines was, by definition, good and trustworthy. He had always assumed that everyone in the city wanted the same things really, in general; peace and happiness. Until this last week he had never considered that the various peoples of the Land of the Young might themselves seek to undo the kingdom to their own ends.

"It is the New Year," Sir Tristram observed, "Barely a week old and already I fear its end will be a bloody one. Sea Breeze believes the Babylonians will not let their grievances end here. Indeed, they may have more reason now to hasten their plans."

"The Elves and the Dwarves will fight them," said Garin, "Politically and physically. But the weight of the merchants in the city are humans and it is trade that the King has placed his faith in. I am not sure the Elves and Dwarves alone will be enough to stop them."

Tristram sucked his teeth. "I cannot see the King siding with the Babylonians against the Elves, against his wife's people."

"But he is not the warrior his brother was," observed Helena, "He is a good man, but he is a businessman as well. He loves the city and will do everything he can to avoid war. I admire him for it. But I am not sure it will enough."

"Sea Breeze said the Babylonian think war is inevitable," said Tristram.

Garin nodded sadly. "Sea Breeze has learned much of our city in the short time he has been here. The Babylonians wish to eject all the non-humans from the city and from the land. They will not rest until that aim is achieved. I think many of us have underestimated how deeply that mania flows in them, and how easily some of our citizens can be fooled into thinking the non-humans are all responsible for their ills. It is weak, it is lazy thinking, but it is easy and attractive for that. Perhaps there is no course now but war despite all the king's best efforts. It only remains to see from what corner the call to arms will come first, and who sides with whom when the break comes." He turned and offered Tristram his hand, which the elder knight took happily. "Let us trust to friendship and good reason in the dark times ahead. If you call me, I will not fail you again, my friend."

"I fear it is not I that will calling you," said Sir Tristram, "I think it is you, as a member of the city Guard, whom will be calling for all your friends to aid you. And I will be there for you, of course."

"And what others might we call friends now, do you think?" wondered Helena, "What of Sula and Sea Breeze? What of Baron Garibaldi and his strange allies?"

"Aye," sighed Sir Garin, "I wonder, and I am not alone, who is this Garibaldi after all? I thought him a good man, a slayer of the Deep Elves. He came from nowhere to become one of the most powerful men in the land. In our hour of need when Great Kzenzakai's dark forces were battering down our door it was he and not the king who delivered us. Yet since then the idleness of peace seems to threaten us even more than Kzenzakai's ill hordes did. Is Garibaldi to save us again? Yet he seems now to be the main cause of our strife. Or one of its willing conspirators at least."

"And he keeps strange company indeed," added Sir Tristram, "Those adventurers that who joined him from Earth were grim and battle hardened, but their eyes shone with childish excitement. It was like the terrors of this world were just a great adventure for them, a fairy story or a holiday. I do not know what strange powers Garibaldi holds to have brought them here but if they are to be our saviours, I wonder how dark must our aggressors be?"

"Strange indeed," agreed Garin.

## **Chapter 32 – Lance Alone in the Darkness**

The night had closed in across the city once more as Sula and Gavin returned to Elegrin's home. They found that the Elf was alone in his parlour, contemplating another bottle of wine. They sat with him and told the tale of what had happened. It was a time for celebrations, perhaps, but no one felt much had

been achieved. They had escaped execution but for what? To witness the plunge of the city into civil war?

Not far away, on the western edge of the Maze the streets were slick with snowmelt and the sounds of the night mingled with endless dripping noises. Lance emerged from a dark corridor between decrepit houses and then quickly stepped sideways into the darkness of another alley. A moment later another man, small and slim and dressed in drab brown woollens and hood, followed him down the second alley, glancing around himself, eager to see which way Lance went. A moment later the man re-emerged from the shadows, looking around in panic, eager to spot whither Lance had gone. He paused, listening, and then swore to himself before running off back down the second alley.

High on the roof to the right of the entrance to the alley a shadow moved.

Lance uncoiled himself from his hiding place in the crook of a chimney about thirty feet above the frustrated man below. Lance gave himself a wry smile. He didn't recognise his pursuer but guessed the man was in the employ of one of the Old Guilds, probably the Poorhouse Gang. It didn't really matter. Lance wasn't sure if he had any more spies following him, perhaps with better skills or some magic, but he had no more time to waste. Garibaldi had asked him to look into a small matter for him and Lance had delayed it too long.

Lance had been a tile-runner since he was a small child. The paths across the stronger roofs of the city were well known to him, although it wasn't as easy for him these days. Years of growth, a better diet and hard training meant Lance probably weighed three times what he had way back then, so some of the precipitous walkways of his youth would no longer support him. This was not so much of a problem in this area of the city, however, if he took care. Secure in this knowledge he deftly scuttled along the eaves of the houses and westwards towards his destination near the graveyard and the temple of death.

He soon reached Southgate, the busy main route from the old city to the docks where Gavin and Sula had first met Jerym and Gecko a scant few days earlier. As a main road there was some attempt at street lighting here and sparse globes of magical light provided enough illumination to see one's way and recognise a friend. Even at night there were many persons moving about and the gap between the buildings on the east and west sides of the street was far too broad to jump. After watching for a few minutes Lance slid down the corner of a building, hidden from the passers-by, and emerged, grey and anonymous, into the street. He crossed as far from the light as he could and headed back into the darkened side streets and alleys on the western side. As soon as he thought he was beyond normal observation he clambered back up onto the roof of the nearest house. His passage here was safer; this close to the graveyard the roofs were better built and maintained. This was a sensible precaution for any homeowner as ghouls occasionally emerged from the graveyard and seemed to favour breaking into houses looking for victims via a damaged roof.

Lance now set about finding the house Garibaldi had directed him towards. Up here he could not check the numbers, which were written on most houses with variable legibility, so instead he made his way silently to each chimney. Pausing by each one he felt the side of the chimney and sniffed the air. If the smell of smoke or any warmth was apparent he hurried on. At the fourth house he found the stone cold, the chimney smoke free. Lance paused. Could this be the one? To be sure he checked the other houses on the row and quickly established this was the only unoccupied house.

Lance then pulled a flat, metal bar from its concealed place down his back. This bar he then used to gently and silently lift some of the roof tiles. This exposed a hole between the rafters but too small for him to climb through and packed with old straw anyway. After glancing in to make sure the attic was unoccupied, he pushed his arm through the hole and felt forwards and backwards

along the line of the roofs. He didn't find what he was looking for and replaced the tiles. He then repeated the whole process at another point, and then another.

The third time he found what he was looking for, and began to remove more of the tiles about the hole he had made. In a city the age of Dunromin the buildings were far from of a uniform building standard or form. With most houses, indeed every one in his experience, there would be a point where the rafters were bowed, or broken or some other mishap left enough space for a slim, muscular man like Lance to squeeze between them. Having located just such a point Lance had a final check that he wasn't being observed, and then climbed in through his new hole. Windows were an easier way into a house, it was true, but the roof was less likely to be overlooked or spotted by accident by someone glancing upwards.

Inside the house it was still and quiet. The air was heavy with the stench of rot and rats and, he was relieved to note, nothing else. Every house-breaker dreaded the smell of fresh flowers or herbs, particularly rosemary, in an attic. It was a sure sign that some fey creature had adopted that building as their home. The shrewd burglar should make their exit then, before some Pixie or Bookah took umbrage at them and made their life a misery, or shortened it, suddenly.

Lance lowered himself through the ceiling, which was far from complete, and down to the upper floor. This floor looked abandoned long ago. Some collections of rotting wood were visible but all furniture had gone and the place left to decay. He then located the stairs and silently made his way down to the middle floor of the building. Here the floorboards were scuffed and blankets had been put over the windows, the air smelled very slightly of a stale odour of living creatures and sweat. There was the stump of a candle on a wobbly stool and scrapes and shapes in the grime suggested human-shaped creatures had laid down in here. Lance was no tracker and couldn't be certain but it seemed several people had been here recently, probably sleeping here.

More cautiously now, Lance crept on down the stairs to the next floor, a dagger in his hand ready for a close fight. This ground floor also showed scuff marks about the bottom of the stairs and the back door. The front window was shuttered but cracked. Anyone looking in would only see a deserted house, however, with no sign of anyone living there for some time. The exception was a concentration of scuff marks around the door to the cellar stairs, the door had evidently been used a lot recently. There were sprays of white dust as well, along with a broken tool handle, possibly from a pick or a shovel. Lance paused again, sniffing the air. It smelt of building site rubble and the same body odour as upstairs. It was the smell of some creatures working hard but it wasn't a common body odour, somehow drier and more bitter than sour. It reminded him of the smell of elves but was somehow different as well.

Lance adjusted his grip on the dagger and on his left hand span the ring he wore on his middle finger. The ring shimmered slightly in the darkness, a pool of deeper darkness than was all around them. Lance's form, already indistinct in the shadows, slowly faded from sight, the objects behind him becoming clearly visible through where he stood. Rings of Invisibility were much sought after but many were not as marvellous as the legendary ones of the great stories. Lance's was very old, he had been told, and the magic was wearing thin. He would still be apparent in bright light as a pale shadow of himself, and the magic wore off after just half an hour or so, then needing the ring to be left alone for a day before being used again. Lance didn't mind; it was still a very useful item in his line of work.

To an observer the cellar door then appeared to swing open by itself and someone watching carefully would have noticed the top step bend slightly, as if under an unseen load. Silent and invisible, Lance crept down the cellar steps. He

wore soft shoes, crafted of the best hide. Dunromin was a trading centre and products from everywhere in the world could be found, eventually. The craftspeople of the city knew their skills and knew the best material to use. The elves were the best climbers in the world and Felentinir was probably the best maker of climbing shoes in the world. The old elf claimed that the leather he used was kangaroo hide. Although Lance had little idea what a kangaroo was he had no reason to doubt the wily elf; the shoes were superb. Soft but strong, with the sole glued with a second layer, inside out, that gripped a surface almost as well as bare flesh. Perfect for climbing and scampering across the rooves of a sleeping city.

Lance delicately stepped down the cellar steps, crouching so as to better see across the room below. Down here the starlight that had helped him upstairs could not reach and he was in complete darkness. Being Human, Lance didn't have the mysterious Darkvision of the demi-humans and humanoids of the Dark World, sometimes called Infravision by the mages, but he did have another ring. This was a gnomish relic, always worn on his right little finger, which conferred him magical sight in complete darkness. After waiting a few moments Lance could see a swaying monotone mess of images and shapes. It took some skill to be able to work out what he was seeing but it allowed him to move easily and safely even in the inky unlight of deep caverns. With this eerie vision living creatures were brighter and clearer and, for some reason, the undead glowed like white sheets in the dusk.

The steps were covered in many light grey footprints, as was the floor of the cellar below. The whole place was a mess of digging although still and unoccupied now. Every corner was piled high with the spoil from a square pit dug into the ground. Up from this pit there was the faint but unmistakable stench of the sewers mixing with the smell of strange sweat. Lance peered into the hole and saw it went down at least fifteen feet and that there was a series of metal hoops, like the rungs of a ladder, fastened into the side of the pit nearest him. Sheathing his dagger and testing each rung before putting his weight on it, Lance now climbed slowly down into the hole. His ears were pricked for even the faintest of sounds, his nose flared for any unusual scent.

At the bottom was a small room, a rough chamber maybe fifteen feet across with a low and irregular ceiling. There was more digging spoil here and numerous buckets and tools. To one side a low passageway led off in an easterly direction, Lance estimated. This he followed.

The passage went on for only about twelve feet before stopping, blocked with a curious roughly oval door that reminded Lance of the inside of a shield. The stench of the sewers was much stronger here too. Lance looked at the door and saw it was an odd shape; not rounded but jagged, and not with a random shape but a regular one of rectangles piled on top of each other. Around the edge was fastened a canvas material, evidently the edges of a covering for the other side of the door. Lance realised this must be the back of a secret door. It was cut to fit into the shape of the brickwork of the side of the sewers, a shape he recognised in the edges of the end of the tunnel now that he thought to look. The canvas was probably painted to resemble the normal wall and covered the wooden nature of the door to make it appear invisible against the stone blocks of the sewers.

There was a sturdy latch on one side and Lance cautiously lifted this, allowing him to pull the door away from its very snug fit into the wall and open it up. A rush of fetid air and a foul stench immediately battered his senses, making him gag and his eyes water. The door was a good fit it seemed, practically airtight. After composing himself Lance peered cautiously around the door, glancing up and down what appeared to be a fairly normal part of one of the main sewers. It was impossible for him to say where he was exactly, but he had explored the sewers many times and recognised the cunning, ancient handiwork of the

Dwarves that built the sewers throughout the city. He was stood on the narrow walkway that was halfway up the side of all the sewers in the city, below him was a short drop to a level of human and animal waste-filled water that flowed, gently, left to right past him. For a moment Lance wondered what to do now but then registered more dusty footprints that were just about visible on the walkway, leading to his left.

Turning to look in this direction, which Lance estimated to be north-ish, probably, Lance could see a very faint light in the opaque air, some distance and many corners away. Changing his dagger for his sword as he had more space down here, Lance began walking along the walkway. He also took a moment to check the leather thong that was tied to his sword handle was looped about his wrist – the last thing he wanted was to drop his sword in this muck.

He moved slowly and carefully; careful to keep his footing on the slippery stonework, careful to remain as quiet as possible. He walked some distance, turned left and then right, several smaller tunnels fed onto this one along the way. The pale footprints he was following turned left again off the main sewer and into a smaller pipe, still with a walkway to one side, sloping slightly upwards. This pipe weaved more than the other and had many small pipes, just over a foot wide, coming into it from all around. The instantly recognisable shapes among the muck turned Lance's stomach and he struggled to remain focused.

At last, ahead of him, he heard some noise. Voices, mashed to nonsense by the distance, the echoes and the slurping of the sewer water. Lance steadied himself to listen, identifying two voices, possibly, before the conversation stopped. Then there was a scraping a rubbing noise and then silence again. What was the noise? It seemed familiar but he was too distracted by everything around him to think clearly. He pressed on.

He walked through maybe thirty or fifty feet of corridor but the light had gone now, he was in complete darkness again and he could hear nothing. What had that noise been? It seemed so familiar. The scraped of fabric or wood against stone.

Lance realised what the sound was as he started to hear it again – the noise of the Secret Door opening!

Barely ten feet in front of him light filled the corridor as another secret door, much as the last one, was opened and a figure emerged, initially oblivious of Lance. It was a short person, wearing black, tight leather and with a short sword and dagger at their belt. The skin about their hands and throat was pale grey, the long hair that emerged from beneath a leather helmet was silver and glittered. The features were thin and delicate. As the eyes turned to look down the sewer towards him Lance saw they were glistening black pools of hate. A Deep Elf!

A Deep Elf? Lance's mind span. In Dunromin? Even as Lance remembered the sword in his hand the elf's eyes caught sight of him and widened with surprise. Lance realised the invisibility charm of his ring must have worn off and he quickly lunged at the elf.

Lance was well skilled in the use of his sword but he was distracted and aware of his unsteady footing. The elf sprang backwards, the blade scraped off the leather armour on the elf's forearm and into the wall with a clang. Muttering a curse Lance made to follow. As he turned the corner to peer into the opening behind the secret door he suddenly remembered Garibaldi's clear instructions: "Just see what's happening," the wise man had said, "Don't get caught up in anything. If it's what I think it is then you might quickly find yourself out of your depth and there won't be anyone to help nearby."

Lance stopped himself in the doorway just as he recognised three more figures down the corridor before him. He turned to flee just as the unmistakable clunk of a crossbow reached his ears, he skidded as he tried to turn away and

down the sewer but something knocked his thigh, like a light hit with a wooden bat or something, hardly anything. But in his precarious position in the sewers, it was enough for Lance to slip from the walkway.

"Arse!" he hissed as he plunged into the muck.

### **Chapter 33 – Plans for the Future**

Back at the wine shop Gavin and Sula were seated at the parlour table with Elegrin. The elf was in an uncharacteristically sombre mood, having spent the day, it seemed, at the College of Magic discussing matters with his old friends and tutors there. It seemed everyone everywhere was noticing the increasingly volatile machinations of the populous when it came to matters of business with non-humans. The teachings of Babylon and the divisive policies of the king seemed to have ignited a fever in a great many people, and those people were igniting indignation against them in others. Elegrin refreshed everyone's glasses with wine, even Sula seemed to want a drink this evening. As he left the Magic College he had heard rumour of the confrontation at Sir Tristram's, it being close to the Magic College, and now wanted more details.

Gavin quietly retold the story while Elegrin listened, with Sula sat in a corner, silent and watchful as always. After the remonstrations of the day she looked tired and drawn, her young features greyer than they had been, perhaps even more solemn. As Gavin described how she had killed Faylin Sula watched him closely, her eyes glittered but her mouth betrayed neither a smile nor a frown. As he completed the story she nodded and took a sizable sip from her wine.

Now thoughts of war were also on Elegrin's mind also. He wondered aloud how soon it would be that any other tiny event, any other such petty feud as the murder of Brighteye, would touch off a greater fight and plunge the whole kingdom into a civil war. "The largest avalanche needs only the smallest stone to start it," he observed, "It seems to me that the king's rule is teetering on the brink and I don't know if anything could be done to save it from chaos."

Gavin had no answers to that. "The Babylonians want a war," he said, a sadness in his voice despite being a newcomer and stranger to the city. "They want the chance to sweep the streets clean, to slaughter every non-human in the city. As you say, the slightest excuse, the smallest justification would be enough for them. To their credit, they are at least lawful people for all their intolerance. Their leader will need to justify their outrage. They will need a good excuse to start their war, but once they have one I doubt the king will be able to keep them down."

"How grim that things come to this," wondered Elegrin, "It seems we never have a moment when there aren't at least a dozen enemies ready to destroy our peace. What a time to live! Was it ever thus, I wonder?"

"It's the nature of civilisation I think," said Sula, thoughtfully, "We seek purity, we seek to do the best thing for everyone, but there are always those that refuse to accept that we are correct, regardless. Whether it's the tribes of the west, orcs, bugbears and whatever from the darkness below, or Deep Elves and their spider-gods from the mountains."

"The Spider Queen is dead," observed Elegrin. Gavin stopped and looked at him, eyebrows raised in silent astonishment. "Yes, about a year and a half ago," the elf confirmed, "Garibaldi fought her in the depths of the Hellmarch mountains, in the Deep Elf Vault he said, and he drove her back to the Pit. Then he gathered us heroes together and we went after her. Across the planes and into the infinity of the pit. Twisted and strange it was, confusing. Very confusing. Horrible and terrible too, the most frightening thing we had ever confronted until then, although now I think the tunnels beneath Dragon Mount

were worse, somehow. Anyway, we prevailed. Through demons and spiders and, well, other things. We got through to her palace, to her very throne room! And while we held off her guards, Garibaldi slew her in single combat. It wasn't easy, obviously, but he managed it somehow. The Queen of the Demon-web Pits was dead and the majority of the Deep Elves were suddenly without her power to maintain their own magic. Civil war erupted for them, between the Spider Cults, the Moon Cults and all the others. It rages still." He managed a grin, "We did that, we really did! But keep it to yourself, eh? We don't want every Deep Elf under the mountains hunting us down for revenge."

"But you killed a Demon Lord in the Pit?" muttered Gavin. "Wow." It was impressive to say the least, impossible one might think but, in the game-reality of Dungeons and Dragons, all the creatures of Hell and the Pit were just more monsters to kill, if you were powerful enough.

"I had heard rumours," muttered Sula, "There is a Spider Cult in Skull Crag. It is small and crooked but it exists and has some influence. They don't have any Ulfblestgver but they have some high Ulfblest. 'Had' I should say. They fell from grace about a year ago. I don't know what happened but they simply weren't there any more. No one mentioned them again and I thought no more of it. Until now. You killed Spawn-Ungoliant the Spider Queen?"

"Yes, we did," agreed Elegrin, "Although I have not heard her called that before. The Demon Queen of the Spiders? Well, I doubt there's more than one. And since then we have defeated an even greater force of foes, greater than the Land of the Young has faced in centuries, when Great Kzenzakai came calling. And we were generous in victory, as we always are! We shared our new wealth with the city. Trade booms and new customers and routes are being opened up in the west as have not been seen since the great glory days of the Empire of Karan. The Land of the Young is riding higher in terms of military prowess and trading potential than it has probably ever done." Elegrin was frowning as he explained himself, "And yet here we sit, gloom on our faces and talk of Civil War on our tongues. The King failed to stop Kzenzakai striking at the very heart of the kingdom. The northern barons arose in open rebellion and had to be put down with force. Good King Mordred has called up his favourites to be Earls, once more to patrol his borders and keep his barons in line. We seem to stumble from bad fortune to good and back again. Many people are getting rich but it seems people are angrier than ever about, well, they seem to be angry about everything. These are strange and unpredictable times."

"Strange indeed," agreed Gavin, wondering who might be dreaming all this up. Was there a Dungeon Master out there? Maybe these were figments of his own subconscious. Maybe he was the Dungeon Master? He wondered if he was perhaps a little drunk. He turned to look at Sula instead.

They had been talking for some time and now only two candles and the fire lit the room, leaving much in shadow and flickering half-light. His young charge was barely visible in the shadow, only the tip of her sandals peeking out from the looming night. "How are you Sula?" he wondered, "You've had a terrible day."

The young woman nodded and then shivered. "I am perhaps in need of my sleep or some quiet time to contemplate the Moon," she murmured, "Either way, I think our time here is done. We must take our leave of our kind hosts." She said this with a nod to Elegrin, who smiled and raised his glass in return. "This city that has become even more unsafe for us since we have been shown to be innocent, it seems. I think we must seek out Baron Garibaldi at first light."

Gavin nodded. He had almost forgotten the main reason they were there; the chaos of the last few days had distracted him. But yes, she was quite correct. They needed to get out of the city. Gavin didn't need anyone to tell him that he was in great danger now. He had a strong suspicion the Babylonians would not

be above hiring assassins to complete the job Captain Garin had been so noble and generous to refuse. They needed to meet with Baron Garibaldi, although the thought of weeks in the saddle to get to him did not appeal to Gavin in the slightest.

"Baron Garibaldi has no plans to come here," said Elegrin, "As far as I am aware. He only comes to the capital now to study, to research at the University and the Magic College. But he has little chance for that at the moment. He will still be at his castle, over-seeing the rebuilding of the town as I left him. How do you think you will-" he paused for a moment, curling his nose and looking to the door. "By the stars!" he muttered, "What is that smell?"

They all noticed it now; it was hard to miss. A thick reek of sewage and offal that seemed to be coming up the stairs. As they turned to look the door was flung open and a drenched creature stood on the threshold, swaying with fatigue, wet through and covered, head to foot, in filth. For a moment they were all stunned by its entrance but then slowly realised it was Lance that stood before them.

"Draw me a bath for all the gods' sakes!" barked the odorous man, "And fetch some more buckets of water so that I may wash the worst of this muck off me! I have used all the water that I can reach in the butt in the yard and the foul stuff still fills every crevice and crease! If I live to be a hundred never again will Garibaldi have cause to ask another favour of me, I am telling you that now and for nought!"

Elegrin, in his turn, burst into loud peels of laughter and it was some minutes before he was able to regain any control of himself.

"What on earth happened to you?" asked Gavin.

"Never mind that!" scalded Sula, "Get buckets and water towels. Lance! Get those sticking clothes off you. They'll need burning for sure."

Lance was stunned for a moment as the young priestess started to pull quite determinedly at his breeches. "Not my armour," he mumbled, "Don't burn that. It's magical. So is my belt. And the tools. In fact, don't burn anything until I have sorted it all out!"

Elegrin waved his hands at them to calm them, tears streaming from his eyes. "Stop, stop," he whimpered, "I can't stand any more! The thought of seeing Sula stripping you naked is too much for a mere elf to bear." He giggled some more and staggered off towards his room. "Hold there. I have a cantrip I can use for this. Let me read it from the book. It will be safe enough I think and more thorough than cold water and scrubbing."

He returned in a moment flicking through a spell-book bound in red velvet.

"Aha, I have it," he muttered, holding the open book close to a candle. He read for a little while, nodding to himself. Gavin felt queasy but Sula had moved away from Lance again, blushing a little perhaps, although it was hard to tell in this light.

Elegrin put the book down and turned to Lance. He made a delicate shape with his fingers and then mimed what might have been a scrubbing action while murmuring strange syllables. Gavin felt the air about him tighten and then a sensation like a myriad tiny drafts all about his body. A brown blur crept across Lance's body and then faded. With the blurred light went the smell and the mess went with it.

"Light some more candles," said Elegrin after the magic had faded, "Old May has some perfumed ones in the top cupboard. That will finish the smell. And we shall need another bottle or two I think."

Gavin fetched the candle while Elegrin went downstairs and fetched some more stock for them. Gavin giggled to himself in wonder at the spell. Casting directly from the spell book was supposed to be dangerous but the rules in D&D

allowed it and evidently Elegrin had thought the circumstances dire enough to justify the risk. In a few minutes they were all sat back down, the air was scented now with vanilla and the smell of the sewers almost gone. Lance had taken off his dark armour and was wearing only a silk shirt and his leather trousers, looking for all the world like Jim Morrison, Gavin thought. Lance's feet were bare too and wriggling happily before the fire.

Once they were settled again Gavin repeated his request to know what had happened to Lance.

"I have been to the highest houses in the city to try and mend some of the misery that has come from your intrigues," he replied, his tone mocking but not resentful, "And I am glad to report that I think the King's men are now very concerned with tracking down where all Brighteye's fortune has gone. More concerned with it, I should say, than exacting any recompense on his accused murderers, whoever they might be today."

"The matter of the murder of Brighteye is settled," replied Gavin, with a sigh. He clenched his teeth but then forced himself to relax again. "At least so far as it stands. I fear the ramifications will prove a whole bigger shit-storm to deal with later. The High Counsel and the King will have their work cut out for them then, I think. But surely they didn't cover you in sewage before they sent you on your way?"

"No, I left there some time after four bells, although I think Luke is still in the halls of the Guilds or the inns their members frequent, casting what oil as he has available to him on those troubled waters," said Lance, picking some of his equipment from his belt and pockets and inspecting it. He seemed very impressed with Elegrin's spell. "I think he will be there until much later discussing matters with those Guildmasters he can get access to. He is a shrewd lad, I've never seen the like when it comes to making powerful friends and squeezing their true intentions from them."

"Garibaldi chose his ambassador well," agreed Elegrin, "So what word is there from these high counsels and where have you been since noon?"

"Jerym Twofella accosted me in the street just now," replied Lance, "The little rat seems to be everywhere at once! Even he turned up his nose at my state but was still keen to let me know the latest. He told me that the Old Guilds are simmering a little lower now and are keen to press some consideration for their woes from the Babylonians. The Babylonians themselves are in uproar, as are many of their followers. They are screaming for the heads of everyone involved in your merry dances the last few days. They reject the story offered, as you might expect, and are desperate in the hunt for revenge of their fallen daughter. But they dare not cross the King yet."

"And what of the King himself?" asked Elegrin.

"I heard he was in a fine rage this morning," said Lance, "The Babylonians had been stirring up a hornet's nest for Sir Garin. I heard the King was practically screaming for the heads of Sula and Sea Breeze on a spear."

"Has his mood changed since the death of Faylin?" asked Gavin.

"Faylin?" asked Lance, and then nodded, half-recognising the name, or at least its style. "Was that the name of the Babylonian minx then? Well, yes, yes it has. Well, his mood is just as bad but he's not screaming for your blood any more. The King is standing by Garin. What else can he do? The Babylonians are still baying for blood though. They're calling everyone involved every name under the Moon and demanding action. It's hard to tell whether the King will relent or not. It's certainly not safe here for you two any more."

"Thanks for the warning but we already guessed that. We mean to leave as soon as possible," said Gavin, "But you said you left the Counsel House after

four bells. You haven't yet told us how you came to be, well, covered in, erm, mess?"

In response Lance searched in his small pack for something and then cast it upon the table. Gavin inspected it without touching it. It was a small crossbow bolt, tiny compared to the things he had seen carried by the Guard and others. It was delicately made with flights of a membranous, grey matter and a small head that glistened with a black, oily substance. He knew somehow that this was a bad omen. Its style rang old memories in his mind, perhaps old stories from playing D&D back on earth, perhaps something else from his life in Skull Crag. Elegrin also peered at the object, huffing as his mirth eased, wiping his eyes with a cloth.

"A bolt from a hand crossbow," he observed. "Looks like it's been coated with a poison and those flights look like bats wings. I would say this was the weapon of a Deep Elf. Where did you come by this then?"

"In the sewers," replied Lance, his manner serious again after the pleasure of being warm and dry again. "Or rather I found it stuck in my belt pouch, after I had pulled myself from one of the deeper sewage troughs. Down near the docks by the time I dragged myself out."

"And what were you doing down there?" asked Gavin.

"Garibaldi asked me to look something up for him," replied Lance, "He said it was of the uppermost importance. As soon as I had finished cashing in our loot from the Siege of Dragon Mount he wanted me to check out what was going on at a few specific locations in the city. One of these was an abandoned house off Southgate."

"What did Garibaldi expect you to find there?" asked Gavin.

Lance shrugged. "He didn't say," he replied, "I don't even know where he got the address from. Anyway, it seemed abandoned all right so I went inside. There wasn't anyone in it all right, but it wasn't abandoned. I found someone had been digging in the cellar, digging down to connect to the Sewers. They might have been looking for the Undercity or the Catacombs but they found the Sewers. I tried following their trail, through the sewers." Lance turned his nose up and shook his head. The recollection was not a pleasant one. He took another drink of wine.

"And while you were down there you were attacked by Deep Elf?" asked Gavin, rolling the dart back and forth on the table with his finger.

"Yes," replied Lance after swallowing, "I spotted one going into a secret passage but when I got up to him another one shot me with that. It didn't hit me anywhere that hurt but it was just enough to knock me off balance. I fell in."

"A Deep Elf?" gasped Elegrin, "Here, in the city?"

"Yes," repeated Lance, "At least four of them."

Whatever else he was going to say was lost when the door downstairs was opened and heavy footsteps marched up the stairs to the still-open door. They all turned to face the new intruder and their eyes fell upon a broad boned man dressed in gloriously polished plate armour of the finest quality.

The new arrival also wore a fine velvet cape of exquisite craft, lined with mink. His head was bare although he carried a plumed helmet under one arm, and his face was that of a young man, clean shaven with a head of close-cropped dark hair, circled by a gold headband. His features were plain, not ugly but never handsome, but his build suggested tremendous physical power in its squat height. His eyes, glittering beneath thick brows, were the deepest brown and seemed sad despite his obvious good fortune. At either hip hung a shortsword, each of differing style and ornamentation suggesting they were trophies of war rather than designed accessories to his clothes. One was made of grey metal and styled with thin, delicate wires making its hilt and handle glitter in the candlelight.

The other was of thicker, simpler design and the hilt and pommel were of brass. Gavin also observed that a short-bow and quiver of arrows were strapped to his back, beneath the cloak stretched across large shoulder plates. The armour was golden in texture, a massive chest piece and armoured lower legs and arms. The upper arms were not armoured but hung with white cotton, trimmed in red, over warm woollens. About his waste was a skirt of stiff leather strips covered in white cotton and red trim again. The style reminded Gavin of Alexander's Hoplite heavy infantry. The helmet looked like that of a Roman Centurion but with a high peak, curved face-plate and horizontal eye-slits.

As the armoured figure entered Gavin noticed Elegrin and Lance relax a little, but then the face of the newcomer contorted into a comedic grimace of discomfort.

"By all that is holy!" he announced in a deep voice thick with the Dunromin accent. "What the hell is that foul reek?"

"That, my dear Basil, is Lance," replied Elegrin, "Or was Lance. Recently returned from some strange mission to the darkest most hideous depths of our Undercity. There he did battle with some Deep Elves, it would seem, and got a dunking in the crap for his troubles."

"Basil Culpepper?" wondered Gavin aloud. It seemed he was meeting another of the legendary Heroes of Garibaldi. Elegrin's description of him as a noble and brave priest did him good justice. His figure seemed to glow with power, the richness of his garb appeared entirely appropriate to one so famous and revered. Yet a cloud followed him, Gavin remembered being told. Despite his riches, his fame, his beautiful wife and his success, a deep shadow was draped about his mind and was reflected in the dour turn of his thin mouth. Basil's journey had been most perilous and even the razor whirlwind of his short-swords had not saved him from ruin on several occasions. Each time his soul had found itself on the Stygian shores Garibaldi's magic had brought him back to life, but the sight of those dark shores did not leave a man unscathed. More than any of the Heroes, Basil's days between adventures were heavy with self-doubt and melancholy.

"In the flesh," replied Basil, managing a nod of acknowledgement to Gavin, "Master Sea Breeze, I take it, and the Priestess Sula?" he nodded in turn to Sula, "I am delighted to make your acquaintance at last. I have heard much of you from my comrades at the Temple of Olympus this day. But pray let me catch up first with what Lance has been up to, or down to perhaps. Deep Elves in the city sewers? Are you sure?"

"Very much so," said Lance, "Garibaldi asked me to look into some matters for him and I came across them in the sewers beneath an abandoned house. I am wondering if Garibaldi already suspected they were here."

"Typical," sighed Elegrin, "Garibaldi always seems to know what's going on before everyone else, even when he's laid up back at the Barony without so much as a crystal ball."

"He does have a Crystal Ball," observed Basil, "He just doesn't seem to need it a lot of the time."

"Sometimes I wish he'd tell us a bit more about what he thinks is going on," replied Lance, petulantly. "I think he not only knows they're there, he knows what they're up to as well."

"Then we must get word to him as soon as possible," replied Basil, "I will travel back to the Grove on the morrow. I was planning to go anyway and only came over here to see if you had anything you wished me to take back with me."

"I saw four of them for sure," said Lance, "In the lower levels, but they seemed to be working at something, digging secret passages. I'd already tried the other two locations Garibaldi gave me so this was, oh, only about a couple of

hours ago I think? Maybe less. Anyway, I was under the old Southgate Road, like I said, and I came across some very dark passages. I was invisible, of course, and trying to be quiet. Or I thought I was. My ring you know? It must have worn off. They spotted me and I was about to get out of there when I slipped and fell."

"Have you any idea what they were doing?" asked Elegrin.

"A tunnel, but I don't know how deep," said Lance, "It may even be one of the ones Great Kzenzakai dug when he attacked the city. I could see nothing unusual about it, save that the cut was not faced as the sewer walls are and went up a little to prevent flooding and then steeply down. That's all I saw. They had concealed it all behind a secret door they had made. No one exploring the sewers would have found it if they hadn't known it was there."

"A tunnel to the Darkworld under the very centre of Dunromin?" wondered Elegrin, "Bad news indeed. But I thought all of Kzenzakai's tunnels were blocked and enchanted with great protections?"

"Not all perhaps," muttered Basil.

"How long have you been in the city, Basil?" Lance asked.

"I arrived this morning," replied Basil, "I have spent the day at the Temple of Olympus, catching up with my old friends and taking counsel from my Temple Heads. That is how I know of Sula and Sea Breeze here."

"It is nice to meet you," said Gavin, "Sula and I need to travel to the Barony of Garibaldi as well. Can I ask how you got here?"

"By magic," replied Basil. "As we always do these days. Some say we take liberties with the powers of the gods but if they disapproved they would not lend us the power." He pulled a scroll tube from beneath his cloak and passed it to Elegrin. "These are two credit notes made out to the Temple of Olympus from Garibaldi and myself. Our Temple Dues. Lance, have you paid our treasure into the bank?"

Lance nodded but had returned his attention to his equipment pouches, checking to see if he had lost anything during his unfortunate swim. "I have, in so far as gold and jewels and what-not anyway," he said, he then looked to Elegrin. "Sold to the highest bidder or just sold on through our usual, trusted channels. It's been a bit tricky with everything that's been going on and I've had to reduce the prices a little to move them quickly. But these people are old customers of mine. We got a princely sum, all settled by credit note and added to our own shares in the bank. I have receipts and balances in my room to take back to Garibaldi, if you are going tomorrow, Basil? What of the more valuable items and the magic items, Elegrin?"

"An auction is arranged, but I am sure there are adequate funds in our accounts to cover these," said the elf, taking the scroll tube. "I will pay these in for you in the morning. I trust you will go as you came?"

"Yes, I will cast my spell soon after dawn, perhaps I will stay for breakfast," said Basil, and then turned to Gavin and Sula. "I have sufficient power for two guests I think, if you would like to come with me?"

Gavin and Sula agreed enthusiastically and another bottle of wine was opened...

**Here ends Book One of the Chronicles of Gavin.**

Sula and Sea Breeze continue their travels in Book Two, wherein they finally meet the renown Baron Garibaldi, find themselves fighting for their lives alongside Orcs against the Deep Elves, and discover even more secrets of the strange and fabulous World of Barnaynia.

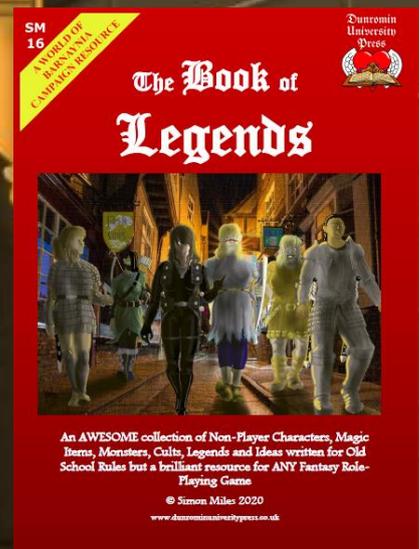
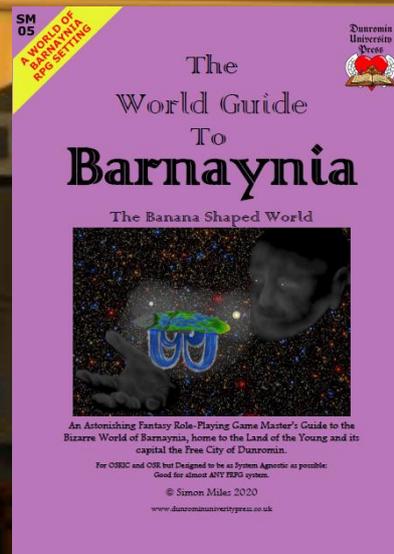
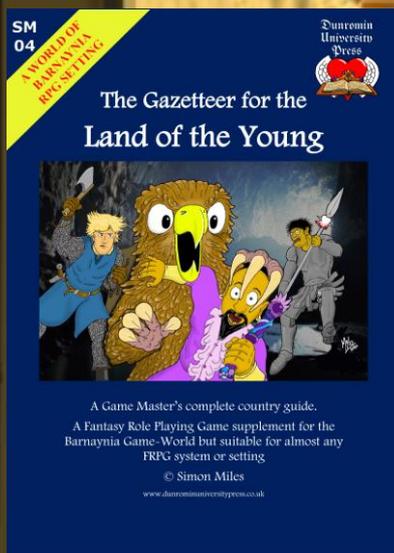
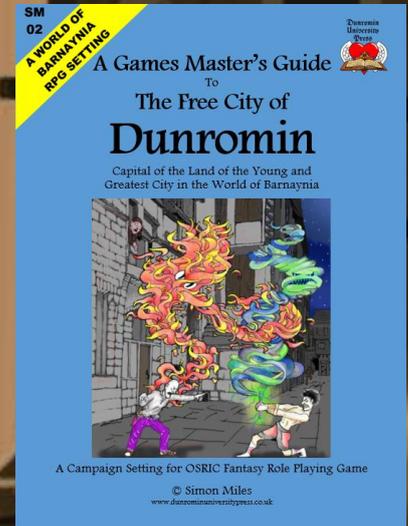
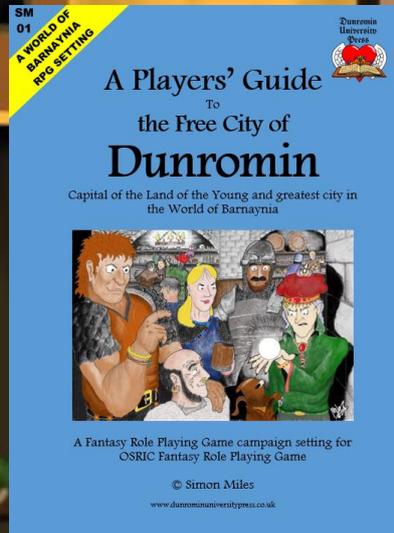
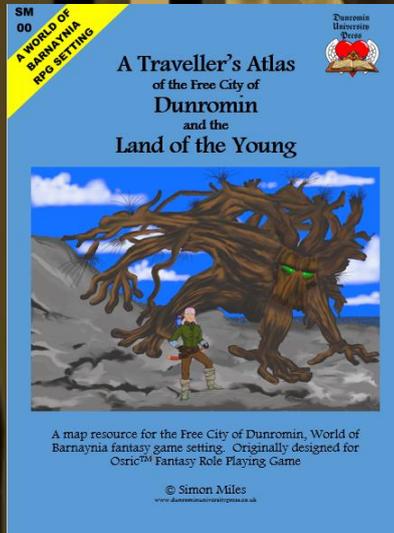
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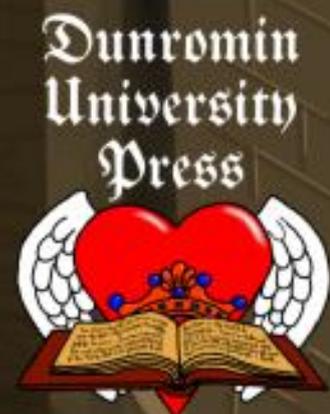


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