

ORDER
&
CHAOS

This story is dedicated to my family and friends, without whose patience and support its authorship would not have been possible.

Sincerely,

Matt Darrow 2013

Character List

Alex: A young, subordinate Mage of Coermantyr. He has red hair. Alex practices traditional magic but is appreciative and studious of the experimental incantations of his half-ghoul friend, Leif.

Athros and Zalkos: A pair of specters from the Plane of Chaos.

Anemone: A Dagonite Captain. She is Marlin's girlfriend. The merwoman found the Orb of Paryphax in a salmon and bears it in a necklace.

Ankharet, the Dire Queen of Arkadia: She is a white-haired troll woman whose ambition and ruthlessness have caused her to be estranged from her people. Ankharet has become aligned with goblins in her region and has built her Abyssal Cairn there.

Axel: A gnome pilot.

Barracuda and Nautilus: A female and male pair of fish hunters in Lord Dagon's ocean region.

Satvinder and Jalhi Bengal: Leaders of the Bengal Clan of Tiger Trolls in the Ghastly Fens.

Blueblood: An Orc Captain from the lairs in Mount Crow. He is accepted as a member of Rauros' reformed Harad Ghul.

Bors, Keeper of Bard's Inn and Burgomeister of Wood's End: He is a burly, middle-aged troll who has grown sons, the oldest of whom is named Torvald. Bors is concerned about the recent invasions of wolf-creatures and specters into his home region, Mystic Down. He is a good cook and fights with a hefty, studded mace.

Cara and Fangoz: A stone troll couple who assist the mercenaries on their journey to Lich Town in the Ghastly Fens.

Charles: A wood troll Guard of the City of Arborea.

Claude: A dethroned Vampire Lord trapped in Guardon's Spires.

Cooper: The Unofficial Leader of the Maegar Council.

Lord Dagon, Leader of the Dagonites: He is a practical mertroll who is aware of Ankharet's conjurings on the land. Dagon was petitioned by her to join her cause but declined. Recently he's been concerned over rumors of the disappearance of Key Captains in his ocean region. His son, Marlin, has been included in the list.

Dakros: The Second-in-Command of the Harad Ghul, a faction of goblin assassins led by Rauros.

Dar'ghaz: A giant muskrat that found Sharon. He healed her injuries and took her to the Muskrat Leader in the Garaz Forest of Coermantyr.

Miles Davenport: The Mayor of Tinkerburg.

Deirdre: A wood nymph in the deep woods of Mystic Down.

Driptwist, Formshift and Swirlmass: Morphozoids found in the Under Earth of Guardon's Spires. They allied themselves with Bjorn Roundtree and his companions.

Drumtone and Oxholm: Two Maegar Dwarf brothers. Their clan originally resided in the Under Earth of the Arkadian Mountain Range but migrated to the Gorgon Plane due to increasing invasions by Stalactite Orcs.

Dweeble Dworx: An Arachnoid who resides in the Gorgon Plane.

Einar: An Assistant Guard of Lich Town.

Flamering and Starfling: Jalhi Bengal's wyvern familiars.

Ben Frostberry: Bjorn Roundtree's uncle.

Gabrielle: A fledgling vampire in the Arkadian Mountains.

Galatia: A female gnome engineer.

Gearzon: A disoriented gnome engineer protecting Guardon's Spires.

Gilead, Key Mage of Coermantyr and Innkeeper of the Wolf's Fang: He is affianced to Lady Redthorne. Their partnership is practical and industrious. He is outgoing and keeps a watchful eye on the visitors to his tavern. Gilead cares for Sharon but, in the name of diplomacy and tactical defense, allows her to consort with other troll folk.

Glasslook: An analytic, brown-haired seraphim troll woman from the Plane of Order.

Gnoll: Skjold's Bodyguard. He is a husky wood troll who hearkens from the distant region of Arborea. The Leader of the Wood Trolls, Skjold, was slain by Ankharet's Vizier and his Orb of Paryphax stolen. Gnoll has been captured along with other Gaeans by Ankharet's rampant spatial rifts. The troll has begun a growing friendship with Bjorn Roundtree and other humanoids in the Gorgon Plane.

Grondol: The Leader of a group of Ice Goblins. They caught Sharon spying on them and chased her into a pyrrhic battle.

Grumbold: The King of the Maegar Dwarves.

Guardon, the Gorgon King: He is a daemon in the Spatial Plane of the Gorgons. Guardon has become allied with Ankharet through her arcane rift-making and summoning.

Heartsing: An empathetic, blond seraphim troll from the Plane of Order.

Hydro: One of the larger Entities in the Plane of Order.

Ichthos: The Leader of the Nozroth.

Leif: A lich-troll spawned from the bonding of troll and ghoul. He is an adept magic-user. Leif applies his knowledge to aggressively defend his friends and destroy his enemies. Siegemunde at the Martial Academy in the Ghastly Fens educated him. The Fens are the home region of the lich folk.

Llewellyn: A Captain of the Qualinesti Elves.

Loki: A goblin assassin who has remained loyal to the Harad Ghul after the defeat of the Dire Queen and Gorgon King.

Listhew: An administrative, red-haired seraphim troll woman from the Plane of Order.

Mara: A silver dragon from the Plane of Order.

Nighthawk: A defected goblin healed of injuries inflicted by the beholders while fighting them in the Gorgon Plane.

Petra and Volcan: Stone giants. A pair of Terranoids living in the depths of Guardon's Spires.

Raphael: Claude's apprentice.

Rauros: The Chief Assassin of the Harad Ghul, an octet of Ankharet's elite goblins.

Raven: A blue-haired student at Jefferson Community College. She is friends with Michelle and hopes to transfer to a university somewhere in California. Her dreams are woven with fantastic people and places, namely Baroness Sharon's companions and the regions of Gaea.

Sharon Redthorne, Baroness and Liege Lady of Coermantyr: An amber-haired troll woman who inherited her Dais from a matrilineal descent. She is ambitious, protective of her region and highly trained in swordplay, archery and armored combat. Sharon possesses a mysterious ruby amulet that she suspects is from a Spatial Plane alien to her home world, Gaea.

Reoren: A merchant lich-troll and amateur magic-user caught with other Gaeans in the Gorgon Plane.

Restadicus, Leader of the Lore Masters: He is a grizened wizard who has become a counselor and advisor to the mercenaries in their quest to defeat Ankharet and Guardon. Restadicus lives with the Council of Mages in Coermantyr Castle.

Rex: An enterprising troll from Wood's End who takes up arms against the Harad Ghul.

Rodnik: Sharon's Sergeant-at-Arms. He grooms the warhorses of the mercenaries. Rodnik is a flaxen-haired troll who helps Bors in setting the nightly camp, cleaning the weapons and keeping watch over the sleeping fighters.

Bjorn Roundtree: An active, middle-aged halfling.

Siegemunde, Director of the Martial Academy: He is an old acquaintance of Restadicus' and has relocated to the Ghastly Fens in an attempt to focus on new magical methods to help combat the goblin and Lykanthros invasions. Siegemunde is bald and wears a silver earring.

Senegoth: An aged troll, scarred from years of battle with stone trolls and goblins. Senegoth lives in a tree fortress in the Garaz Forest. He helped the Baroness in a time of need.

Sigrid: A Sentinel lich-troll woman who assists Siegemunde and is Leif's friend.

Smithforge: An industrious, black-haired seraphim troll from the Plane of Order.

Squidge: Lord Dagon's assistant in the administration of the affairs of the Dagonites.

Taliesin, Liege Lord of Mystic Down: He is ambitious and would have married Sharon. She declined but has agreed to unite with him on a campaign to protect Gaea and eliminate the Summoners and Illusionaries, Ankharet and Guardon.

Themistokles: The Vizier of the Dire Queen. He killed Skjold for the Orb of Paryphax and was himself killed by Leif's experimental sorcery. He summoned the specters, Flotsam, Jetsam and Mayhem who now run free of his holding spell.

Thoth: A Demigod who rules the Plane of Chaos. He is attended by the Drystyx Monks.

Tiamat: A five-headed Chaotic Behemoth Dragon.

The Watcher: An ancient halfling long caught in Guardon's Spires. He functions as the Daemon King's record-keeper and historian. The Watcher has consented to assist Lord Taliesin and his companions in their mission to liberate Gaea.

Thorgrym: The Captain of the Lich Town Guard. He is protective of his region and people.

Trilobite: A stocky mertroll who meets the returning Marlin and Anemone.

Valinor: The eldest of the Qualinesti Elves.

Woodfist: A dryad in the Forest of Mystic Down.

Wotan: A subordinate Lore Master in Coermantyr Castle.

Zolgnath: The firbolg Leader of the Drystyx Monks.

Prologue

Most people live out their lives in steady routines. These include the morning drive of the kids to school, the nine to five shift at the office, the commute home and preparation of the evening meal.

It is in the night that the human mind unravels its sublimated wishes. In the depths of sleep the brain continues to function. The Realm of Gaea is strengthened when the dream weavers roam the dimension of the unconscious.

Some dream weavers become groves and are satisfied to sense the coming and going of the personifications of others. Many weavers travel the windswept Forests of Gaea as troll folk and goblins.

The Dharmic Equilibrium shifts constantly as dreamers around the world are affected by wars and famines, prosperity and celebrations.

Somewhere in California a woman dreams after a day of classes at the prestigious Jefferson Community College. Her name is Raven. But when she sleeps she is Sharon Redthorne, a Baroness who fiercely defends the troll folk of her land, Coermantyr.

Coermantyr is a thriving region within the changing Realm of Gaea. Although Gypsies and minstrels travel from one region to the next, most Denizens of Gaea reside in one place and make their homes merry.

As Sharon, Raven is able to run free. She relies on her longbow and sword to drive away intrusive marauders, namely the Lykanthros and their goblin cohorts. The wolf-like creatures seek supplemental food sources at the behest of the Dire Queen of Arkadia, Ankharet.

The last few lunar cycles have seen the proliferating Lykanthros packs exhaust the existing caches of wild prey in the untamed wilderness of Arkadia. The wolf-beasts are usually satisfied with the occasional boar or turkey. When these staples are unavailable they crave the comparatively easy pickings of cured hams and meats stored in the wattle and daub homes of the villages of Coermantyr and Mystic Down.

The Baroness was a good shot and turned the hungry Lykanthros that appeared in groups of three or four at a time. Her longbow was strong and a few steel-tipped shafts deterred even the most aggressive of beasts.

Chapter One: Sharon and the Ice Goblins

An icy wind blasted through the spindly trees. As Sharon Redthorne patrolled her hunting grove, goblin voices emanated from the Under Earth near the roots of one of the larger oaks. The Baroness of Coermantyr ran across the snowy ground and slipped into the increasing darkness.

She drew close to the massive oak. The troll woman hunched over, feeling for something through the encrusted snow. Sharon paused when the goblin speech ceased and uttered a whispered curse from her cowl. The Baroness fled through the deepening snow.

The Liege Lady was making good progress when she stumbled over a root buried beneath the icy surface. At the same moment in which she hit the snow eleven Ice Goblins leaped from a portal at the base of the oak. They were variously armed and sized.

Sharon struggled to lift herself but faltered. She gasped in frustration. The Ice Goblins unsheathed their swords and wielded their bows and daggers. There were various types: three with red skin, two with green and six with bronze complexions.

The archers shot their arrows through the cold wind. One shaft hit the troll woman squarely and bounced off like an eagle's plume caught in a zephyr. When the arrow pierced the dark cloak, golden sparks flew forth. A reverberating ring of steel upon steel was muffled in the wind.

The Baroness, now on her feet, was shaken. In the dying light she tilted her head back, causing her cowl to fall. There stood revealed the amber locks and smooth features of a troll woman. Sharon skittered into the surrounding woods.



As soon as the troll woman rushed into the safety of the trees a pair of goblins ran behind the oak to return with several, glowing lanterns.

Sharon crawled desperately, hoping for someone to aid her in an escape. There was no one, though, and the Ice Goblins closed in upon her. The multicolored humanoids were able trackers.

The troll woman searched for a hiding place. She ran a bit further, stopped and coughed as she found a spot with enough snow for the task. The Baroness dug with all her might and her fingers bled from the jagged rocks hidden beneath the snow. At last the hole was big enough. The Liege Lady crawled in and covered herself.

The goblins advanced to within two hundred paces of Sharon's hiding place when she succeeded in burying herself entirely. In a few moments, two goblins stood upon the troll woman's makeshift shelter.

Below the surface of the snow the Liege Lady thought about the goblins hunting her. She was supposed to be the one doing the hunting. Her air supply began to run out when she heard the angry voices of the goblins from above.

With her last breath the Baroness recalled the items her Key Mage, Gilead, had given her. They were the troll-made Orbs of Falstaff, providing the gifts of animal sense, temporary invisibility, fire being, poly-morph self and water being. Sharon felt as if her lungs would burst for want of air, but kept herself in check. She reached to her waist pack and closed her numbing fingers around one of the orbs. She couldn't tell which orb it was. Her only hope was that it would get her out of her predicament.

Suddenly, she was aware of life around her. Most of the living things rested in a dormant state. Yet, somehow, she sensed a different presence close to her. She asserted her last bit of strength, wriggling through the snow toward this presence. Just before she blacked out Sharon felt the snow under her give way. Something firmly grasped her arm.

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The warm hearth in the main room of The Wolf's Fang Inn had a cheerful ambiance. Gilead, the Proprietor and Key Mage of Coermantyr, was about to close up for the night. Amid the lingering crowd he overheard tales. The patrons jested about giant muskrats that lived deep under the snow and devoured unsuspecting travelers. They recalled encounters with Ice Goblins that they credited with cunning, skill at tracking and ruthlessness in battle.

Just as Gilead was throwing out the revelers, one of the last trolls slurred, "I gave my good will to Sharon as she left on an adventure early this morning."

"Are you sure it was the Baroness?" Gilead asked.

"Of course it was. Don't you trust me?" answered the inebriated town troll.

"No," the middle-aged troll replied. "Which way do you remember she went?"

"She headed west to the Garaz Forest. You know, where Baago told everyone he saw those goblins roaming around last week."

Gilead thanked the troll and hurriedly pressed a gold piece into his hand. He rushed into the night, calling for Max, the stable hand, to fetch his swiftest steed with his finest bow and blade fastened to the saddle.

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Sharon awoke in a warm, dark place. She felt strangely serene, at first thinking she was in Coermantyr. There was a pressing stiffness in her chest and she couldn't draw breath without coughing painfully. The troll woman heard a stirring near her

and felt something warm and rough brush her forehead. The Liege Lady sat up quickly.

Then the troll woman remembered the Ice Goblins, the snow and the cold. She realized that one of the five orbs had taken effect.

The Baroness tried to deduce which of the orbs she had chosen. It couldn't have been that with the gift of temporary invisibility for cold can bite flesh unseen. It couldn't have been fire being for she would've drowned in the melting snow. It couldn't have been water being for she would have frozen; and, it couldn't have been polymorph self for she hadn't had any time to think before she blacked out.

Only one orb remained as a possibility. It must have been the remaining orb, that with the gift of animal sense. An intelligent forest animal who answered her call had rescued Sharon.

The Liege Lady felt a presence nearby and perceived what the Entity was hearing, seeing and thinking. She sensed the coolness of a flowing river and saw a bright, golden sun. Reeds and willows bowed in the wind. Near her were the homes of many creatures. Then the Baroness was herself again and knew she was with friends.

Out of the corner of her eye the troll woman glimpsed a red glow. As she turned to locate its source her gaze fixed on a wall of earth. Then she spotted a furry figure as it ran across the light of a lamp.

The red light burst into brightness and Sharon saw she was in a cave. In front of the only apparent way out was a strange creature. The troll woman thought it to be a cross between a large muskrat and a badger.

She reached for her sword, but it was gone. Before panic set in the creature spoke and, surprisingly, she understood its words.

The anthromorph said, "Do not be alarmed. I am a giant muskrat. My name is Dar'ghaz. You crawled out of a mound of snow that fell from the roof of my cave. I healed your injuries but you will be stiff. We haven't seen one of your kin for many years. Our Grand Rat would like to speak with you. Please, follow me."

Curious more than scared, the Baroness followed the giant muskrat through twisting tunnels. They passed the entrances to passages on their right and left. She heard voices singing far in the darkness. For a time they moved downward into the Under Earth. Then the roof of the tunnel disappeared. The walls of the passage leapt away from each other and became carved stone.

In the center of this hall was a murmuring crowd of similar furry creatures. When they spied the troll woman, however, they scurried into dark corners in the distance. This left an old, gray muskrat sitting on a stone Dais.

He grunted, "Are you she that summoned Dar'ghaz with the Old Magic?"

Sharon replied, "My Key Mage gave me five orbs of power."

Cries emerged from the dark corners.

"Falstaff! Falstaff!"

The gray muskrat was still for a moment. His eyes glazed over as he remembered days when rivers were young and trees were alive.

He said, "How was it that you were in our wood? I heard there was a band of Ice Goblins nearby."

The troll woman answered, "My parents were killed by goblins in the war. I came to avenge them. But, my luck turned and the Ice Goblins ambushed me. I was badly wounded. My only chance was to hide in the snow."

"We know of your injuries," said the old rat. "Your rib was bruised when Dar'ghaz found you."

The Muskrat Leader continued, "I remember a stronghold built by your people during a war in ages past. It lies in the heart of the wood. You will find sanctuary there and many weapons. We have received word from other friends of the forest that the eleven goblins are close on your trail.

"You are now an hour's march from the stronghold. If your luck goes well you may once again see Coermantyr Castle. Remember, you have eleven desperate trackers on your trail and they know that if you ever reach home alive their dooms are sealed."

"Thank you, Grand Muskrat," replied Sharon. "I vow if I reach home my folk will repay you well!"

"Regretfully that must never happen. The goblins have hunted my brethren for many generations. This secret of the forest must be kept safe at all costs."

"But, then why did you rescue me? Why is it we address one another as friends?" asked the Baroness.

"The answer is in the orbs," the Muskrat Leader answered.

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Gilead rode for hours. He stooped over his warhorse, looking for signs on the ground. He relied on the light of the moons and stars to guide him. The crunching of his warhorse's hooves was the only sound in the stillness of the early morning forest.

The Key Mage of Coermantyr continued to follow his Lady's trail through the silver fingers of the sleeping trees.

Sharon's tracks came to a stop. The troll was in a small clearing. Directly in front of him was a large oak. Many smaller tracks curved around the tree and doubled back. Leading away from the looping tracks were several more identical markings. Before following these footprints Gilead inspected the area behind the oak.

Circling around, he found a door, about four feet high and three feet wide. It was ajar. The Key Mage silently drew his sword and looked inside.

Bending through the low door, Gilead crouched inside a room carved out of the tree. There was an opening in the floor with a ladder going down. He approached the ladder cautiously. The Key Mage descended a short distance when his feet touched the ground. He was in a room with a table at its center. There were rows of shelves covered with tools and jars.

The troll saw little of use but noted that several trunks around the room had been hurriedly flung open and rummaged through.

The Key Mage of Coermantyr realized that the place was a repository for goblins and that Sharon had run into trouble there. Taking one last look around, the troll climbed back up the ladder. Once outside the tree he followed the trail of the goblins and the staggering of a troll woman leading into the wood.

Gilead found a place where the footprints abruptly stopped in a pile of snow. Reluctantly he dug, afraid of what he might find.

Then he smelled the odor of a creature the troll vowed never to approach again. He realized who had found the troll woman. Gilead knew of another entrance to the creatures' dwelling places. The Key Mage feared that not only was the Baroness being stalked by Ice Goblins but that she had been informed of the old fortress. Sharon's arrival there must be avoided at all costs.

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The Baroness of Coermantyr bade the muskrats farewell and stepped out into the light. The briars and bushes clenched tightly behind her. She was in an unfamiliar part of the wood. There was no more snow and the trees were the waving, green ash, spruce and elm of summer. Sharon stood at the bottom of a steep hill covered with impassable thorns and hedges. Before her was a glade bordered by the trees.

The Baroness recalled the advice of the Muskrat Leader and followed the path of the sun. It was dark when she saw the ancient battle haven. The huge tree formed a silhouette before the setting sun. This was the heart of the Garaz Forest. High in its

branches generations of birds thrived. The fields around it were scarred with ages of arcane combat.

The troll woman was taken aback. This tree had elaborate structure. During every siege it was hollowed out and built taller. For centuries skillful artisans dedicated their lives to this fortress. She passed through the main gate. Sharon marveled at the bas-reliefs in the walls. The etchings climbed up into the creaking darkness.

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Grondol and his ten comrades followed the troll woman's tracks for nearly a day. They stalked her through snow, cold and thicket. It was nearing dusk when the forest opened to a field and a giant tree. The goblins sensed that their prey was prowling around inside somewhere.

The band of Ice Goblins piled brushwood in a perimeter around the tree. This wood, once ignited, would provide light for the marksmen and created a barrier against a charge. Around the main fire Grondol's nephew, Rundig, and his comrade, Ulmo, sharpened axes. It was only a matter of time. They would wait until dark.

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Sharon walked for a while. The sole source of light was from an opening above. Torches ignited alongside her, illuminating a long hallway. As she neared the end she saw that it opened into a huge room. There sat a large troll, looking directly at her.

The troll woman spoke, "I am Sharon Redthorne, Baroness of Coermantyr. I am pursued by eleven goblins. I've been told I might find refuge here and gain aid in battle."

The troll answered, "Call me Senegoth. I understand your predicament. I'll help you fight these goblins. They are outside. We have an advantage, however, for I know this tree well. It has many surprises. I also have a plentiful store of weapons. Come, we must hurry. We have much work to do!"

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Sharon and Senegoth waited at their posts. Among their battle preparations they found uses for the four remaining orbs.

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Gilead rode tirelessly. He scooped a handful of water from a flowing brook. When he looked up he saw a pillar of smoke stretching above the treetops. Although he was just a few miles away, some of the thickest brush in the woods was between him and Sharon. The Key Mage of Coermantyr doubled his pace.

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Noli and Roli wrapped swabs of cloth around arrowheads and dipped them in an acrid mixture. They lit the fires. Immediately the tree fortress was bathed in an eerie, red glow. The goblins charged. It was about one hundred yards between the tree and the fires. Before the humanoids came any closer Senegoth raised his longbow and fired a shot that arched in the air.

As it hit the ground directly in front of the goblins, Grondol, the eldest, saw that the usual, iron head had been replaced by a glowing, crimson sphere. The burst of an explosion blinded the wiry humanoids. Two goblins were burned to a crisp in the preternatural fire and a third was thrown hard to the earth, never to rise again.

The goblins, angered by the deaths of their kin, ran in frenzy toward the gate. There they found the orb of water being. It lay just a few inches under the ground's surface in a sack of pressure-reactive spark dust. All the goblins heard was a faint click before four of them were swept away in a torrential flood.

Unleashing a battle cry, Sharon and Senegoth simultaneously leaped from the tree. Mid-way through their fall the Baroness transformed into a were-bear while Senegoth disappeared completely.

Standing bewildered, one unlucky goblin found his shoulder cut while another felt a dagger in his back. The latter goblin managed to turn and thrust his own blade into Senegoth's chest.

Sharon surged in were-bear form at the last two goblins. The she-bear knocked them out of consciousness.

Gilead galloped into the battle scene.

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Grondol awoke with his head burning with pain. In the stillness he thought he was the only survivor of the battle. He walked over to Rundig, his dead nephew, to mourn him. Then he saw other living people.

Standing over the body of the big troll was a pair of troll folk, mourning their ally.

Gilead sensed the goblin watching him and spun around, his eyes burning with rage and his sword drawn. The Ice Goblin wielded his axe and growled like a wild animal. Gilead and Sharon looked at Senegoth. Grondol stared down at Rundig. The enemies gave each other a final look of sadness and resignation. They each sheathed their weapons and picked up their slain kinsmen. They headed in opposite directions.

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Upon her return to the safety of The Wolf's Fang Inn Sharon visited with the residents of Coermantyr. Over mugs of ale they discussed the latest happenings around Gaea. When not assailed by the Lykanthros, the trolls and troll women worked in varying trades. These skills ranged from weapons craftsmanship to the fabrication of fine cloths and regalia to be bartered with visiting Gypsies and pilgrims.

Gilead brought the Baroness a pan of scones, still steaming from the oven.

"What news, Gilead?"

Sharon tasted her supper.

"Not much beyond the usual business, Milady. There are visitors talking among themselves in the far corner. They've been here for some time and have something afoot. You should go speak with them and see if they have need of your assistance."

The Innkeeper of The Wolf's Fang was a sturdy troll with a ruddy face and a pocketed leather apron that he wore over his homespun tunic and breeches. His boots and belt were made of tanned and cured wolf hide.

Sharon glanced casually at the visitors in question. They were a secretive bunch as they chatted with each other in the dim candlelight of the quietest section of the tavern. She tossed back her braided, amber hair and pulled her buttoned vest about her as she ambled over to the party of newcomers.

There were three people at the table. They sipped mugs of ale drawn from a pitcher set next to the candle. Upon closer inspection, one of them was a troll whose face was partially obscured by a dark cowl. He looked at the Liege Lady as she extended her hand to him in greeting.

"Hello, I am Sharon Redthorne, Baroness of Coermantyr. What brings you folks to town?"

"Goblins, unfortunately," said the burly troll.

He took the troll woman's hand and shook it robustly.

"I am Lord Taliesin, of Mystic Down. My lich-troll friend here is Leif. He hails from the Ghastly Fens and is a member of the scrupulous order of magic users known as the Sentinels. Our halfling scout is Bjorn Roundtree. We need help. We happened upon a cave on our way here from my region. At first I took it to be a fine place to provide us with shelter during the cold night."

"I discovered we were not the first band of visitors to make use of the location," Taliesin continued. "As we settled before a cook-fire I saw piles of skeletal remains scattered around the floor of the cave. A few of the bones and rags contained jewelry and gold upon further investigation. The chamber extends deep into the

Under Earth. I wanted to travel inward to inspect the full extent of the cavern's riches. We chose to press on to Coermantyr, though. There were large, strange-looking caterpillars building silk nests in notches of rock. At times I heard pattering foot falls deep in the darkness."

Lord Taliesin paused to take a sip from his mug of ale before he continued.

"If you are willing to take your bow into our employ, we will gladly share with you what values we encounter in the depths of the cave."

"Perhaps your Innkeeper friend would care to join us on our enterprise," said Bjorn.

The halfling's green eyes shone with a palpable eagerness.

"I'm sure he'll be glad to accompany us," answered Sharon.

As if on cue, Gilead approached the table with a platter of hearth bread and a fresh pitcher of ale.

"What business interests Milady with you fine fellows?" the Key Mage asked.

"These gentlemen wish for me to join them on a treasure hunt. They were just saying that they thought you'd make an excellent team member," said the troll woman.

"Aye, and I'm sure there'll be goblins involved," Gilead scoffed. "I'll join your band, for what it's worth. My assistant, Max, will mind The Wolf's Fang in my absence. Whenever the Baroness sets off on risky missions of this nature I like to escort her. I'm a protective troll at heart. I'm handy with a short sword, too," Gilead chuckled.

The group of adventurers left for the mysterious cavern first thing in the morning. They marched quickly through the wilderness outside of Coermantyr. Although the untamed regions of Gaea were the homes for many hostile creatures, the travelers reached the mouth of the cave without interception.

Sharon saw several gatherings of old bones scattered within the cave's entrance. There were also the ashy remains of the original campfire left by Lord Taliesin and his acquaintances.

As they traversed inward they saw the large caterpillars. Several of them had sealed themselves in silk cocoons. A few had metamorphosed and arisen as large, shimmering, purple and blue butterflies. They clung to the walls of the cavern and flapped their wings so they would dry.

The cave extended into the depths of the Under Earth. Sharon and her friends heard the trickling of subterranean rivulets flowing through the rocks.

The lengthy cave expanded and became a spacious chamber. A clan of green-skinned goblins muttered around a cook fire. The smoke rose high into the dark cave to dissipate in unseen crevasses.

“Who are you?” asked a large goblin.

“We are travelers who happened upon the remains of those unfortunate people at the front of this cave. Do you know who they were and how they met their fate?” the Baroness replied.

“Yes, they were nosy pilgrims, just like you. We don’t take kindly to sharing our hoard.”

The goblin wielded a glinting saber.

“I advise you people to flee now or face the full brunt of our wrath.”

“That is not an option, Foul Goblin,” answered Gilead. “You have done wrong by these travelers and will suffer the consequences of your actions.”

The group of goblins drew their weapons and charged the troll woman’s band en masse. Bjorn felled two of the humanoid with his sling. Sharon dispatched a pair of the goblins with her arrows.

The remaining six goblins engaged the party with their sabers. The magician, Leif, waylaid the closest with an ice bolt spell.

“Frigidos!”

The goblin was encased in ice crystals. He was shattered entirely when smitten by another of Sharon’s arrows.

The last five humanoid fought viciously with the travelers. Lord Taliesin was cut a glancing blow on his left shoulder. They finished off the goblins, however. The last of which was victim to the Baroness’ steel sword.

“What a tragedy for those unlucky souls,” Bjorn said. “It surely is a risk to traverse the wilderness of Coermantyr without an armed escort.”

Gilead found a small chest that was unlocked. It held a collection of silver and gold bracelets, along with a large ruby amulet. He gave the amulet to the Baroness.

“These goblins must have been using this cave as an ambush for unwary visitors. It’s a good thing that we foiled their plans,” said the Key Mage of Coermantyr.

“Let’s return home and tell the people what happened here.”

Chapter Two: Lykanthros Invasion

The welcoming lights of Bard's Inn brought visitors from throughout the region of Mystic Down. Bjorn Roundtree enjoyed relaxing in a quiet corner of the bustling tavern. Short in stature, the enterprising halfling waited for the jovial travelers and wayward villagers to become immersed and distracted in mirthful conversation and tankards of ale. It was at times like these that potentially valuable items found themselves in Bjorn's travel pack.

When Bors, the Proprietor, closed up for the night, Bjorn slipped out the front door and prepared to retire for the evening. As he walked below the side window he was startled by a commotion at the hitching post of the inn. A tall, gaunt lich-troll, dressed in fine attire was berating Bors about something.

"There's no way I could've misplaced it. I'm a new visitor here and pay for all my supplies with honest coins. One of you townsfolk has purloined my orb!"

“I’m sorry, Sir. I have no idea of what you speak. This is an honest establishment and my reputation reaches far in this territory. If you have truly lost this item I cannot guess as to it’s whereabouts.”

“I am very put out. Inform your patrons that I shall return and expect information regarding my missing property.”

The mysterious lich-troll glowered at the barkeep with an intimidating visage.

Bjorn was intrigued. He had not expected anything interesting to happen after the inn closed for the night. Although planning to retire for the evening, he was curious about this strange visitor to Wood’s End and decided to follow him undetected. Bjorn paused to ensure that the contents of his travel pack were in order. He had only a few baubles that had been discarded throughout the village that day.

Among the wood and pewter figurines, whittling tools and spectacles he noticed a dark, glass ball. It was cool to the touch and small enough to fit easily into his pudgy hand. Bjorn had noticed it lain among some ale mugs and empty plates on a table under which he’d been resting. The tall stranger had been sitting there. He’d seemed lost in thought, contemplating his mug of ale. The enterprising halfling thought it unnecessary to disturb the ghoulish troll.

Bjorn followed the lich-troll beyond the outskirts of Wood’s End.

That’s unusual, he thought. If travelers don’t stay in rooms at Bard’s Inn they normally find lodging in one of the many livery stables around town.

The gaunt fellow walked another mile into the woods before arriving at a clearing in the trees. A fire ring was prepared and a black, Arkadian Stallion fed on mashed oats while tethered nearby. The enigmatic traveler rummaged through the pockets of his lavish cloak and struck flint with steel to start a crackling fire. As the flames rose he tossed in a handful of glittering powder that he drew from a pouch fastened to his belt.

Bjorn watched in awe as a preternatural, blue mist gathered over the flames.

“Your servant awaits your counsel, My Queen.”

The tall troll genuflected before the spiraling flames as the heated mist condensed into the likeness of the Dire Queen, Ankharet. Her hair had turned white prematurely from the strain of her magical experiments.

“Well done, Themistokles. Your reward awaits your return to the Abyssal Cairn. I have maintained correspondence with Guardon, the Gorgon King through my scrying glass. He will continue to send his Lykanthros through the planar gateway but demands the Orb of Paryphax. He must unlock it’s energy in the Gorgon

Plane in order to appease the ever-hungry Spirits of Chaos. Where is the orb, Themistokles?”

“I regret to inform you that it has become misplaced, My Queen. I took it from the decrepit Wood Mage with little resistance. His sorcery has faded and I liquidated him with minimal difficulty. Unfortunately, somewhere along my journey here the orb simply disappeared. I have no idea how or when. There must be some impeding enchantment afoot. If this is the case it is a magic I have not yet encountered. These accursed woods are a menace.”

“There is little time for such inconveniences! You must find the Orb of Paryphax without hesitation if you wish to extricate yourself from my displeasure.”

Ankharet was furious and let her rage be known to her sometime liaison.

“Do not fail in your task, Themistokles, or you shall not only reckon with me, but with Guardon, as well.”

“I understand, My Dire Queen. I will find your orb and deliver it to you with the utmost haste.”

The wavering representation of Ankharet dissolved.

Rather than go to sleep for the night, the Dire Queen’s Vizier focused on the task of preparing an arcane summoning.

“Alas, I have not the time to hire bumbling stone trolls or impoverished orcs,” the thin lich-troll declared aloud.

As Bjorn watched from a cluster of dense underbrush, the Vizier once again tossed a handful of shimmering powder into his fire. This substance he drew from a different pouch from the first. As the flames swirled into a bright, crimson pyre, Themistokles uttered an incantation from a spell book.

“Flotsam, Jetsam, Mayhem come forth. I take upon myself the burden of your chaos. If your bonds are broken, I shall be banished to the Gorgon Plane in your place.”

Bjorn marveled as the crimson pyre condensed and intensified. Three Ephemeral Entities were pulled through the rift opened by the conniving Vizier’s magic. In the dark of the moonless night the trio of freshly-summoned creatures glowed with an arcane light.

“What is your bidding? We await your direction,” the largest specter, Flotsam hissed.

It had a rough, humanoid shape but was entirely translucent, as were the other two. They all levitated with impatient buoyancy.

“I seek an object of great value to me. I have already claimed it once this day and it carries my signature. You will perceive its proximity for it is a mark made of the same magic that binds you to this Realm. By no mistake of mine it has clearly been taken. I want you to find it and return it to me immediately,” the tall mage commanded.

“What shall we do with the current owners?” asked Mayhem, a smaller specter that bore an especially sinister expression.

“It is none of my concern. Deal with the pickpockets, as you will. Just make sure they never steal again,” Themistokles answered.

The scene in the forest fascinated Bjorn. He figured he would tell his uncle, Ben Frostberry, what he had seen and heard. The agile halfling was familiar with the woods of Mystic Down and knew of animal trails and dried riverbeds that escaped detection by large lich-trolls and orcs. He traversed narrow tunnels worn through the thick underbrush by badgers and foxes. Some distance behind him he heard whispering voices wafting among the treetops.

“I sense the orb. It is in this forest. Someone bears it away from our master.”

“Yes, it is true. We must pursue.”

Bjorn supposed the specters were talking about the glass ball he’d found in Bard’s Inn earlier that evening. It didn’t seem very special to him. He thought he might use it to augment a necklace or pendant.

“It sure will be good to see old Ben again. I wonder if he has any of his strawberry pie.”

To Bjorn Roundtree’s relief his longtime companion’s house was just as he remembered. Even more enticing was the aroma of freshly-baked strawberry pie that drifted from the kitchen window. The morning sun was dawning. Bjorn was amazed that he had traveled through the uncharted woods all night long.

“Hello, Ben! It’s me, your nephew, Bjorn!”

The outgoing halfling took it upon himself to open his uncle’s unlocked front door and step inside.

“What a pleasant surprise, Bjorn!”

The older halfling was lifting the last of his batch of pies from the hearth.

“I didn’t expect to see you here today. What brings you to this neck of the woods?” Ben Frostberry queried.

“It’s a good thing you should ask. I wish I could say it was your strawberry pie. Unfortunately I seem to be in a bit of a pickle. I picked up a few trinkets from here and there and happened upon this glass marble.”

Bjorn showed the object in question to his uncle.

“It seems there are a few specters that are determined to find it at any cost. I was thinking I might dispose of it by sticking it into a smidgen of your pie and leaving it for a badger.”

“Well, you come bearing unusual news, Nephew. I think I have a better solution to your dilemma.”

The grey-haired halfling rubbed his chin whiskers in contemplation.

“I happen to know of a stream nearby where I catch delicious salmon. The young fish swim down the current to the sea where they pursue their own romantic encounters. Let us make haste to my fishing spot, place your marble in a piece of my pie and feed it to the hearty fish.”

It took the fleet-footed halflings a few minutes to reach the bank of the stream. Bjorn followed his experienced uncle’s advice and placed the Orb of Paryphax into a narrow wedge of Ben’s strawberry pie. He tossed it into the water with a splash. Both humanoids were surprised at how quickly the fins of a strong, young salmon grazed the surface of the river as it gulped the tasty morsel. It was a large fish and would certainly venture downstream soon in search of a prospective mate.

The two halflings shook hands over their ingenious collaboration and walked home for a savory breakfast of their own.

* * * * *

Even before the advent of recorded history, Mystic Down was home to many species of creatures. Laden with magic and the etchings of ancient battles between Titans, whose names are long forgotten, the Down has become a crossroads of sorts. It is here that lich folk and stone trolls struggle for a viable existence with were-beasts and multitudes of entities.

As groups of species united in their perpetual, feudal conflicts, Liege Lords soon rose to lead and defend their clans. One such Liege is Lord Taliesin. He is a troll who bears the telltale markings of his race. His eyes are a dark hazel. They reflect the color of the trees of the wold that grow perpetually and, some say, move on their own cognizance.

Taliesin is an ambitious troll, craving both power and recognition. He admires these characteristics in his relationships as well. Thus, the Liege Lord has experienced limited success with the fairer sex. Although Taliesin courted her for several months, Sharon ultimately shunned the Lord.

She opted for the placid countenance of her Key Mage, Gilead. She too is an independent-minded, willful warrior, not lacking in courage or craving for power.

Although a Liege Lord's noble bearing is cause for esteem and provides an opportunity for leadership, true notoriety for any Lord or Lady of Gaea is determined in the battlefield after arduous and dangerous campaigns.

Mystic Down is a chaotic and untamed region. Taliesin's homeland is beset with ongoing invasions and terrors. Of late the Dire Queen, Ankharet, poses an intrusive threat. She has caused a palpable disturbance in the spatial continuity of the Down. Her evil, experimental sorcery have summoned creatures from Planes untapped for centuries.

The Dire Queen plans to crush the Denizens of Gaea and claim it as her own. This has never been done. She understands the magical gambit that must be played. The Spirits of Gaea are not easily swayed under any mortal's influence.

If she is to be victorious Ankharet must either destroy Taliesin and his brother and sister Lieges or obtain their acquiescence, a feat that will not be done without bloodshed and travesty.

Lord Taliesin is aware of the spatial disturbance in his region. His dreams have been filled with the cries of the wild things deep in the uncharted woods. He is bonded to them in preternatural ways. The Down is in his blood. They are of the same magic.

The howling of the wolves in the kennels of Lord Taliesin's Tower reflected his solemn melancholy. Ever since his rejection by Sharon he felt out of sorts. He prided himself on his abilities to persuade and cajole even the most impervious of visitors to his domain.

The Baroness of Coermantyr was an aggravating exception. She'd arrived in the Down the previous fortnight, seeking his counsel as Liege Lord of the trolls in his region. The conflict with the Summoners had become a serious problem in the Realm of Gaea.

"Taliesin, we must do something. Mystic Down is aught from this spatial imbalance. My wizards have reported Summoners and Illusionaries as far as Deep Tree. They have placed watching eyes on the borders and urge me that more of the Dire Queen's strange creatures are migrating here. We must ally ourselves with the other Liege Lords and penetrate the picket line of Arkadia."

The Baroness wore her usual colors of dark, silky blue and a shimmering cape lined with burgundy. Her bright, blue eyes glowered with an uncanny expression of determination and vehemence.

"I intend to assist you," Taliesin said. "We must make an account of our resources. The Dire Queen has proven to be a formidable adversary. The spatial

balance of the Down is indeed askew. I have had troublesome dreams of late. My minions are anxious and prowl this region with increased discontent. I would not like to initiate a direct conflict with the Dire Queen, Ankharet, but her recent activities demand further investigation. We should gather a party of travelers and infiltrate her borders without detection.”

Taliesin recalled the meeting well. He did not doubt it foreshadowed approaching tribulations. He had asked the Baroness to take his hand in the Rites of Matrimony but she had refused. The Troll Lord had thought it a suitable match. The Baroness was not a troll woman to be easily persuaded or influenced. She had a wily, independent mind and would not be willingly beholden to him.

“Sharon, if you will not have me, let us embark to the core of the woods. We must investigate the source of the turmoil that winds itself around the hearts of the creatures of the Down. Our lands must be restored to their harmonious state. I will not be remembered as the son who let his father’s land turn to magical disarray.”

The Liege of Mystic Down addressed the Baroness who stood before his gargoyle-etched dais. A hooded troll stood behind each of her shoulders, cloaked in the same, blue motif.

“If you insist, Taliesin, my trolls and I will join you on your quest. The beasts and villagers of Coermantyr are also ill at ease with this new disturbance. The trees have changed. When I look out the window of my stronghold, the wilderness is not what I knew. There is a foul blackness that permeates the land. I feel it in my bones.”

“I have been petitioned by the people to restore the sunlight,” the Baroness continued. “They are desperate for their crops to grow once again. My mages have seen strange creatures through their scrying glasses. They warn me that cattle and fish have disappeared where they once prospered. I will seal this alliance with you although I will not take your hand. You are a respectable Liege Lord and merit the responsibilities inherent to this undertaking.”

Taliesin and Sharon readied themselves for their journey. Their entourage included several pack-horses, the Liege Lady’s Sergeant-at-Arms, Rodnik, and two mages of the Baroness’ Castle, Gilead and Alex. They departed over the Tower’s drawbridge the next morning, despite the chilling rain.

Magical phenomena soon became evident along the road that led toward the deep woods. Indications of banditry and foul play were abundant. Along the roadside, wagons lay ransacked and overturned. The traveling party found deceased horses and oxen that eerily had not putrefied. Drained of their fluids, the carcasses possessed large puncture wounds at arterial locations.

“Something awful has happened here,” remarked Alex. “There are ill spirits adrift.”

“I concur,” murmured Sharon. “I fear for the safety of the villagers in this region. Let us seek the counsel of the Burgomeister and take shelter for the night. I am loath to camp here. These woods are ominous.”

Lord Taliesin and his party reached the outskirts of the village of Wood’s End as dusk began to fall. The sporadic wails of rogue wolves echoed over the shanties and cleared land. Few trolls were visible and those that lingered outdoors hurried to bring their last loads of firewood into their homes. The windows were boarded and the doors of the shacks steadfastly barred. As the riders approached the town’s square, church bells rang out, announcing the impending nightfall.

Bard’s Inn was the town’s center. Through the ornate, close-framed windows the light of its glowing lamps and hearth fires created ghostly rays in the passing fog. The riders eagerly stationed their warhorses to the hitching post and proceeded inward.

About two-dozen trolls and troll women filled the tables of the main room of the inn. They ate simple meals of pot roast, carrots and potatoes. Several of the villagers quaffed mugs of ale freshly tapped from the inn’s rotund barrels. The din of their conversation was subdued. They did not appear to take much notice of the travelers’ fine clothing.

The troll woman was the first to wend her way through the tables to the counter. She caught the attention of the barkeep.

“I am Sharon Redthorne, Baroness of Coermantyr. I am looking for the Burgomeister of this village.”

“That’s me,” answered the barkeep.

He was a stout troll with a coarse, brown beard and oval face.

“My name is Bors. It’s a good thing you folks showed up. We were about to send a committee to Lord Taliesin’s Tower. Wood’s End has been under a curse for the last fortnight. Strange, feral creatures have felled many of our oxen and steeds. No doubt it is Ankharet’s doing. Since her minions built her cairn in the heart of the Arkadian Forest, evil beasts have roamed the land, killing at leisure. They are not spawned from this Plane. Alien magic constitutes them. We call them Lykanthros. They have no other name.”

“You seem to know quite a bit about them. Is there any chance you or these other trolls would consider joining us?” asked the Baroness.

“We certainly need the extra manpower. We can compensate you and your family.”

Sharon set a jingling pouch of coins upon the counter.

“Salutations, Lady Redthorne and Friends. I’ll join you on another quest,” bellowed a cowed lich-troll.

He pulled back his hood to display his familiar face.

“It is I, Leif.”

His skin was drawn deathly thin and his eyes were coal black pools which simply absorbed the light. He was a lich-troll, spawned from the union of troll and ghoul. His cloak was stitched with cryptic runes indicative of the class of mages known as the Sentinels.

“There’s no point in waiting here, for death to take us from behind, Comrades. As you are aware, I studied spell-craft and archery at the Martial Academy in the Ghastly Fens. In tough situations I can prove to be a helpful ally. We needn’t try tilling fields or raising beef with these nocturnal predators afoot.”

“Well said, Friend Leif. We will find you a suitable mount and armor. Your assistance is a blessing.”

Lord Taliesin grabbed the lich-troll’s shoulder and clutched his hand.

Bors distributed a free round of beverages for the patrons that remained.

“I have dreamed of this day for some weeks. My sons are grown and can manage the inn on my behalf. I will join your band. I can cook and handle myself in a fight.”

The sturdy barkeep ceremoniously loosened his apron and tossed it under the counter.

“Well, Sharon, it appears we have collected a substantial band to aid us on our mission,” Taliesin boasted.

“It won’t surprise me if we encounter additional, prospective allies as we traverse the woods. There are bound to be many residents of Mystic Down who are weary of the antagonism of the Lykanthros.”

The Lord, Lady and their motley band of mercenaries set out on the forest road at the dawn. As they moved into the dense overgrowth, the looming pines and oaks virtually whispered of unseen nemeses. From time to time the travelers saw broken branches and gashed bark. Sections of the earthen path were mottled with the tracks of multitudes of large, feral paws.

The warhorses were anxious and proceeded only with coaxing encouragement from their riders.

“I sense alien sorcery in effect,” Leif proclaimed. “The trees are out of sorts. A spatial rift has been intentionally hewed in the magical Plane of Mystic Down. The sinister intentions that possess the Dire Queen to delve into these Chaotic Forces will be her undoing. There are many Planes known to sorcerers for centuries. They have been left unexplored for good reason.”

“You speak the truth, Friend Sentinel,” Alex replied. “Some arcane magic is not malleable. Forces exist which do not lend themselves to molding or coercion by mortal desires. I fear what Ankharet has done and intends to bring about.”

Bors proved his value to the group once the travelers were back on the road. He was a constant source of entertainment, frequently breaking into song or limerick. He had a seemingly endless supply of ballads about unruly sailors and wayward adventurers. He sang as he rode a steady Clydesdale Mount.

*“Marching o’er hill and dale, the Knight, Geoffrey, searched true.
His Lady waited valleys yon, whilst her champion the dragon slew.
Numbered many were his tasks, with ne’er a squire to aid him.
Peasants counted on Geoffrey’s valor, as did the loyal maiden.
But fortune is a fickle muse, eluded by victory he was.
For the Stone Lord Tariz felled many with a heart callus.
Spurned by his love the stone troll roamed, wreaking havoc on his minions.
Deaf ears he turned to peaceful truce and diplomat’s opinions.
Geoffrey vowed to fell Tariz, and bring harmony to his land.
But the stone troll’s sword was forged of steel made by a Titan’s hand.
The two trolls clashed in full combat, which rang out o’er the vale.
And both warriors perished from their wounds and thus shall end this tale.”*

When the journeyers camped that evening they had forded the great river, Oakfast, and were stationed at the outer limits of the forest primeval.

Taliesin addressed the band as Alex and Gilead practiced their incantations by igniting a small cook-fire for Bors to prepare a modest stew.

“At last we are nearing Deep Tree,” proclaimed the determined Lord. “Our ancestors waged battles against preternatural foes betwixt the roots of that ancient oak. We are sure to be harangued by the Dire Queen’s foul offspring this night. I fear that the Lykanthros are sensitive to the moons’ light more than any other celestial bodies. They have surely claimed this region of the wold and prowl the forest with growing abandon under the light of the full moons.”

“Verily, Friend Taliesin,” the Baroness concurred. “The villagers have reported the greatest movement of the beasts when the moons shine brightest. Both of our lands remain at risk until we find a means with which we may dispose of the feral beings. I carry Xenon, my father’s sword. With this enchanted blade he shattered many stone trolls during his reign. It will serve me well and dispatch these alien Lykanthros swiftly if the occasion arises.”

Sharon was adamant. She clearly intended to offer no quarter.

“We should set a rotating watch to assure that we will not be taken by surprise should trouble draw near.”

Leif addressed his companions as he fingered through a pair of compact, leather-bound tomes.

“I shall prepare some sorcery of my own device should your martial tactics prove inadequate.”

“I will take the first shift,” Bors proclaimed.

The burly Burgomeister cheerfully ladled steaming servings of his stew into porridge bowls for his friends.

“I regret that my trusty mace has no name. Perhaps I shall call it Wolf’s Bane for I expect that it shall be the bane of many wolf beasts tonight.”

Strange things twisted and howled in the shadows of the moonlit forest as Bors kept watch. He was sure that he spotted the crimson light of malevolent eyes watching his flickering fire. He hastily added bundles of wood to the flames and roused his acquaintances.

“The night creatures are abounding, My Friends. Prepare yourselves!”

“Arcane magic envelopes us,” Leif cried.

Silver light misted and gathered over the fire, forming the likeness of Ankharet. Her blanched hair billowed in the gusts her spell casting created. The feral howls and moans intensified.

“I have watched you through my scrying glass, Liege Lords. Your intentions are clear. Your insignificant band will not hinder my access of the Gorgon Plane. My pets will eliminate you and shall soon infiltrate and usurp your petty fiefdoms.”

The ghostly, Ephemeral Image waned and faded to a diminishing cackle.

Lord Taliesin moved quickly to take several, flaming brands from the fire and toss them in a hasty perimeter. The warhorses shied and whinnied, pulling against their tethers as the crimson eyes scrambled closer to the camp.

Sharon drew her blade and called out, “Come, Foul Creatures. My blade thirsts to taste your blood from the Nether Realms.”

A wily beast leaped from the shadows, clearing the arching flames that rose from the heart of the fire. Before the Lykanthros was able to charge Bors, Leif uttered an incantation of his Sentinel Order.

“Trentak!”

Bright, electric bolts lit from the cowed mage’s outstretched hands, capturing the large, wolf-creature in mid-attack. It howled in pain. The stench of seared fur and sinew permeated the air as the beast crumbled in ashes.

Bors spotted another of the Lykanthros as it rushed in from the woods. The slaving beast let out a hideous snarl as it leapt for the troll’s throat. He swung his studded mace deftly, striking the predator squarely in the cranium. It fell to the earth, never to rise again.

Alex and the Key Mage worked as a team. The ruddy-faced Alex grimaced as he summoned a vibrant sphere of green flame. At the same moment, Gilead issued forth an arcing, prehensile electric bolt that clutched and guided the scorching, green sphere directly in the path of three of the attacking Lykanthros. The creatures were scalded badly and made a hasty retreat.

Lord Taliesin and Rodnik, the Sergeant-at-Arms, advanced in unison toward five of the snarling beasts. The wolf-creatures had already hesitated when seeing the magical disposal of their companions. The remaining Lykanthros gave a courageous rally and clawed viciously at the two trolls. Both of the trolls were heavily armored and used the close proximity of their adversaries to run the beasts through with their hardened, steel weapons.

Although the band of travelers heard at least a dozen different howls and grunts from the moonlit trees, the feral cries receded into the perimeter, giving the strong impression that they would not return that night.

“We are victorious!” Bors cried. “I felled one of the accursed beasts with my mace and gave a solid wallop to two or three more.”

“As did I, friend Bors,” answered Sharon. “We all deserve praise for our courage and discipline. Each of us is a valuable team member in our quest to gain knowledge about the Dire Queen’s doings. I salute you all.”

The Baroness gave a chivalric embrace to the members of the band.

Indeed the group did not experience any more encounters with the Lykanthros that night. The only peculiarity that they noted at the dawn was a missing bowl of stew that no one attested to having eaten.

Mystic Down is an untamed wilderness. Even in the light of summer chill winds blow through the trees and crisp rains fall.

As the group traversed the forest road Sharon drew her cloak about her.

“This is a stinging breeze. I hope our warhorses fare well.”

“Never to fear, My Lady,” replied Rodnik, “These steeds have born harsher climes than this.”

As they rode, Leif pulled close to Bors and whispered.

“Don’t look but I believe we’re being followed.”

“Aye, Friend Wizard, I’m sure someone or something is responsible for my missing stew. I wager we’ll meet our shy companion when the time is right,” the barkeep chuckled.

The following afternoon, Taliesin’s entourage camped in the open field around Deep Tree. The massive branches of the archaic oak reached above the canopy of the surrounding woods. Falcons and birds of prey circled among the branches. In high boughs the birds nested, safe from the reach of land-faring predators.

As the group settled down for a modest dinner, they were quickly roused by the sound of clattering pans and Bors arguing with a small, impish voice.

“I beg your pardon, Sir. I was hoping I’d borrow a crust of bread.”

The speaker was a halfling with a spry, inquisitive demeanor. His right arm was caught by the cook’s meaty fist.

“I have no food for conniving halflings or any other vagabonds that happen upon this camp, so be gone!”

“Leave him be, Bors. This halfling may provide useful reconnaissance,” Lord Taliesin said.

The ominous Paladin addressed the sprite-like fellow.

“Well met, My Friend, Bjorn Roundtree. It is good to see you again. We are on a mission to gain knowledge about the troublesome machinations of the Dire Queen, Ankharet. Would you care to join us on our quest? There is food to spare, of course.”

“Yes, My Lord. I am at your service. I have a sling and will do my best to help you on your mission.”

“Excellent, Bjorn. I am sure our friend, Bors, will gladly serve you some of his renowned stew.”

“As you wish, Lord Taliesin,” the Burgomeister grumbled.

The band of travelers retired for the evening and rested without harassment from the denizens of the untamed woods. When the dawn arrived the massive tree silhouetted the lingering moons.

“This tree has seen the passage of many ages,” Leif marveled. “If it could speak it would tell us of numerous engagements fought by our forefathers. I perceive magic

that remains here. It lies in the earth of this clearing and among the roots of Deep Tree. There is an ongoing struggle among the arcane spirits of the wold. It has been manifested in different forms through time. I suspect that the Dire Queen, Ankharet, is but a contemporary representation of an ancient, coercive Entity whose identity yet lies beyond our ken.”

“This is true, Sentinel,” Gilead said. “Deep Tree marks the border between Mystic Down and Arkadia. It is here that specters and wild ghosts patrol the picket line which separates the uncharted woods from us.”

Sharon’s Key Mage scratched his brown beard in a contemplative manner. He addressed his friend.

“Tell me, Alex, why do you think the finest horses are taken from Arkadia yet it is also the source of some of the foulest sorcery?”

“Perhaps the same turbulent spirit founds them both. In my mind wild magic is neutral in disposition. It is mortal desire that harnesses it to good or ill.”

The younger, red-haired mage smiled.

The appearance of the Arkadian Woods confirmed the wild reputation of the region. There was no real road beyond the clearing of Deep Tree. Rodnik and Bors gained passage for the traveling party by using hatchets to break boughs and clinging brambles. Well-trained, the warhorses did not falter on the cumbersome trail. The wind whistled and moaned through the tops of the oak and spruce trees.

No one doubted that menacing and malicious Entities were adrift. Among the shadows and dark places within the forest wild ghosts moved quickly in querulous, circular motions before fading, only to reappear in another section of the Arkadian Forest. The specters were fearless. Six of them flew through the paths of the warhorses, spiraling around their armored legs and their riders.

“Gilead, is there something you can do about these ghosts? They are a nuisance to our mounts,” Sharon said.

“Yes, My Lady.”

The Key Mage uttered an incantation.

“Sentiex!”

A glittering cloud of gold light surrounded the group. When the specters breached the cloud, ripples attracted tiny motes of light toward the point of intrusion. They surrounded the specters and drove them back into the dark woods.

* * * * *

The Dire Queen sat impatiently on her Throne. Within her Abyssal Cairn the goblins whined and scurried among the torches and mirrors that lined the colonnades

of her Throne Room. The ceiling was vaulted a hundred yards above and reflected the torchlight that flickered from the passage of the nervous goblins. Themistokles strode to the glossy, obsidian base of his Queen's Throne. There he knelt in humble servitude.

"I can tell from your expression of angst that you still do not possess the Orb of Paryphax. How does it continue to elude you, Themistokles? I have little patience for this and Guardon none at all."

"I offer my apology, My Queen. Magic forces intercepted me on my journey here from the old Wood Mage's hermitage. The orb has been cast into the sea. A fish carries it. You must consult with the Dagonites. They may yet retrieve it to us."

"Very well, Themistokles," Ankharet answered.

"I have another task for you. I have been monitoring the movements of Taliesin and his party. They intend to intrude upon this Cairn and harass me. I want you to lead a garrison of my elite goblins, the Harad Ghul. They have been trained in subterfuge. The Harad Ghul will prove helpful on your mission to eliminate the Liege Lord and his motley band. Rise, Themistokles, and meet your octet of assassins."

The eight goblins wore gray armor emblazoned with a red ankh on each shoulder and helmet. The Harad Ghul carried sheathed scimitars at their waists and compound bows at their backs. Their faces were wrinkled and tan from years of travel under sun and moons alike. The eyes of the Goblin Masters were deep set and glistened with discipline and determination.

"Rauros, step forward."

The Dire Queen reached for the largest of the Harad Ghul.

"I await your command, My Queen."

The Leader of the newly founded Guild of Assassins took Ankharet's pale hand in his tawny one.

"Travel with Themistokles through the Arkadian Forest until you intercept Taliesin and his group of mercenaries. Convince them that Mystic Down and its neighboring regions, including Coermantyr, are now under my control. I must ready these lands for the exploitation of Guardon and his legions of Lykanthros. Go now, all of you. Your steeds are ready and waiting. I have other business to attend to."

Themistokles and the Harad Ghul bowed and strode hastily out of the pillared Throne Room.

"Goblins, fetch my scrying glass!"

The nervous, cowed creatures whimpered as they pushed and dragged a swaying frame with a dark, crystalline shard mounted in iron at the center.

“Dagon, it is I, Ankharet. I have need of your assistance.”

The Throne Room of the Abyssal Cairn became awash in wavering, blue light emanating from the scrying glass.

“Ankharet, what drives you to disturb me? You have caused enough turmoil in your domain. Leave me be.”

The voice of Lord Dagon was deep and cautious.

“I have a favor to ask of you. An orb of mine has been cast into the belly of a fish. I want it back for my own purposes. Please have your Dagonites retrieve it for me.”

“I’m not sure why I should be concerned about your missing trophy, Ankharet. I am quite busy with the affairs of my people. The ocean is a chaotic place. There is nary a time when some whale pod or sirens are not intruding upon our colonies. What will my merfolk have to gain by retrieving this orb?”

“It is the Orb of Paryphax. Its owner was the Wood Mage of Arborea for the past several decades. My assistant has recently accumulated enough magical resources to defeat the doddering wizard and claim it for my comrade, Guardon, the Ruler of the Gorgon Plane. By tapping the orb’s power he will be able to establish a permanent, spatial breach between his Plane and ours. The great legions of Lykanthros and the Hive Builders will infiltrate and conquer Mystic Down and the neighboring regions. If you assist me, I will grant you sovereign control of the entire ocean that covers Gaea. What say you, Lord Dagon, Leader of the Dagonites?”

“My people will watch and wait. If this orb is found and brought to my attention, I will notify you. I must say, Ankharet, my region has not suffered under the Lieges of Mystic Down. I do not wish to become involved in your coup d’etat.”

“Do as you wish, Dagon. Just keep in mind your assistance will be rewarded by Guardon, as well. Neither of us know what leviathans of the deep he may release for us. He needs only the power to open a rift large enough.”

* * * * *

As the group of travelers moved onward the passage through the Arkadian Forest became increasingly difficult. The specters flew around them with the apparent intentions of intercepting and hindering the party. Gilead’s incantation was resilient, though, and prevented the ghosts from inhibiting the band of riders.

“We should push on to the Abyssal Cairn. It is clear that the situation in Mystic Down will not improve until we contend with Ankharet herself,” Taliesin said.

“I agree,” stated Sharon. “The townspeople of Coermantyr have remained beset by the hordes of Lykanthros for too long. We must delve through these woods to the source of their invasion. If we can we should close the portal from which they are emerging before any more of them arrive.”

* * * * *

Lord Dagon fretted as he sat on his coral Dais.

I am loath to trust Terrans, regardless of their moral preclusion. Ankharet is determined to find this Orb of Paryphax. Her quest for power through sorcery is endless.

The ocean world was perpetually turbulent. The turning of the Planet, Gaea, and its seasonal cycles caused disturbances in the tides of the deep. The Dagonites favored the sunlit shallows of sea-mounts.

It was not unusual for the colonies of the marine people to be uprooted and cast adrift by the current. The tides shifted with the seasons and the orbits of the moons. This caused the coral and marble balustrades of the merfolk to frequently become toppled and scattered. Such was the way of life of the Dagonites. They craved the bright shallows for they were sure to harbor the densest schools of fish and crustaceans. There were chains of reefs known to the amphibious trolls that sheltered generations of fish and edible creatures ripe for the hunting.

Narrow, finned, whalebone spears etched with sharpened tips were their weapons of choice. The merfolk also rolled and bound stringy sinews to arm darted crossbows and bolt-throwers. These hunting tools accurately hurled missiles through the water and were the means by which the Dagonites acquired their food.

The fish also migrated throughout Lord Dagon’s aquatic region. There was little time for his hunters and farmers to search for Ankharet’s lost orb.

Dagon was troubled and feared that he would not know peace any time soon. He had known for some time that magical combat was flaring on the land and sensed the strange rifts hewn by Ankharet’s experimental sorcery.

The Ruler of the Dagonites reached for his regal conch and pressed it to his blue lips. He blew forth a resonating vibration that traveled between the marble columns of his Throne Room to the city beyond. It was his established way of summoning Squidge, his adviser.

His counselor swam into the chamber and passed through several rays of sunlight that descended from the ocean’s surface far above.

He hummed a note of supplication before his Ruler.

“What news from the scrying glass, My Lord?”

Squidge's vestigial tentacles puffed and billowed from his head and back. He trod water with his webbed hands and feet.

"I've been petitioned by Ankharet, the Dire Queen of Arkadia, to retrieve a certain object for her. She calls it the Orb of Paryphax. Do you know of it, Squidge?"

"There are many orbs throughout the known universe, Lord Dagon. It is likely that the Dire Queen has sought this one for its reputation as a source of magical energy. The Orb of Paryphax is a battery of sorts. We know that she has meddled with rift-making and inter-dimensional portals of late. Such an orb would certainly allow her to tap into more Chaotic Planes without interruption or fatigue. It is clear that she intends to dominate the lands of Mystic Down and Coermantyr so that she may push on to weaker regions of Gaea."

Squidge moved Dagon's scrying glass to the side as he addressed his Lord.

"Although we have control of the sea, I fear what beasts she may be able to summon with this additional source of power. I suggest that we do not dedicate too many of our resources to finding the fish which carries this orb. Our hands are full in the pursuit of the great schools of albacore and yellow-tail. We should inform our Captains of this orb and request that they deliver it to us in the event of its appearance. Otherwise we should bide our time."

"I agree, Squidge," Dagon sighed. "We have known of the existence of alien Planes for ages. It is wise to leave them undisturbed."

* * * * *

As the group pressed on the brush and bracken of the Arkadian Woods became increasingly inhibiting. The malevolent specters maintained their attempt to stop the warhorses. Gilead's protective incantation held, though, and they were unable to approach the mounts.

The Lykanthros returned in greater numbers. Gilead, Leif and Alex were prepared for such a contingency. They combined their resources to generate a strengthened, violet sphere around Taliesin's band of mercenaries. The cell of energy was larger and more intense than the original shield. Its walls swirled and crackled with sparks of arcane force. The trio of magic-users bowed their heads in concentration.

"Let's drive off these repugnant beasts once and for all," grunted Gilead.

En masse the horde of Lykanthros scrambled at the group. Cord-like tendrils extended from the energy ball, spiraling around the legs and bodies of the nearest attackers. Many of the wolf creatures were turned away, but a handful of them

remained, desperate to thwart the entourage. The Lykanthros clawed and gnawed at the violet barrier, making it waver and warp.

Lord Taliesin and Lady Sharon responded quickly by thrusting their glinting swords through the energy matrix, slaying a pair of the wolf-creatures.

“Beware, My Friends!” bellowed Bors. “I see goblins moving through the trees. They ride these creatures like horses.”

Several arrows flew at the mercenaries, narrowly missing the grappling Lykanthros. The bolts of the Harad Ghul struck Taliesin and Sharon. Their armor was steadfast and the arrows ricocheted in a shower of sparks.

“Taliesin, we cannot hold this shield any longer,” Leif said. “A Summoner is nearby and we must rally our abilities to confront him.”

The violet shield faded. Rodnik intercepted a pair of Lykanthros using his hatchet and a rondache, a small, circular shield. He struck them with short, glancing blows while avoiding their teeth and claws. Bors, the Burgomeister of Wood’s End, joined Rodnik in defeating the last of the attacking Lykanthros.

Themistokles and the Harad Ghul broke through the dense underbrush. The adept Summoner was immersed in bright, green energy that sparkled and trailed behind him and his Lykanthros mount. His subordinate specters, Flotsam, Jetsam and Mayhem wailed with expectation of the coming conflict.

Drawing their scimitars, the Harad Ghul charged Taliesin and his allies. The din of the ensuing clash reverberated through the Arkadian Woods. The Goblin Masters battled fiercely. They wielded their blades in a whirling, spinning attack pattern. In a practiced formation the saddled Lykanthros encircled the mercenaries. Rodnik and Bors engaged their opponents eagerly. Using parrying motions to hold the assassins at bay, Taliesin and Gilead swung at the legs of two of the mounted wolf beasts, bringing them down.

Gilead and Alex uttered the same incantation.

“Vectrox!”

They gestured toward the clawed specters as they fired pulses of blue energy at them. Mayhem was struck squarely and dematerialized. Flotsam and Jetsam were also hit and wavered from the energy drain. The weakened Entities retreated into the woods.

Rodnik and Bors succeeded in tossing the remaining Harad Ghul from their saddles, flailing accurately at the legs and shoulders of the Lykanthros. The armored assassins engaged the mercenaries in direct, hand-to-hand combat. They fought fiercely, issuing glancing blows to the hardened armor of Taliesin and Sharon as well

as Rodnik's rondache and Bors' mace. Their strategy was compromised, though, and the goblins fell among the confusion of the energy bolts of Alex and Gilead.

Leif contended with Themistokles.

He unleashed his practiced spell.

"Trentak!"

The Chief Wizard of the Dire Queen was covered in energy bolts. Themistokles issued forth a counter spell.

"Fensores!"

He surrounded himself in an opaque sphere that blocked the attack and spoke another incantation.

"Acentus!"

Sharon and Gilead were captured in cocoons of green energy.

Taliesin and Rodnik thrust their weapons at Themistokles but could not breach his opaque shield. Bjorn Roundtree pelted the barrier with stones from his sling, but his attempts were also in vain.

"Leif, you must do something!" yelled Taliesin.

The cloaked mage of the Sentinel Order pressed his hands together. His eyes flared with inner fire. He enchanted a different sorcery.

"Carvex!"

A larger sphere surrounded Themistokles' barrier. It had protruding spikes that extended inward. Leif's sphere contracted, forcing the spikes through the Summoner's shield, impaling him. The Vizier of the Dire Queen was dead. The cocoons surrounding Sharon and Gilead dissolved.

"There is no time to waste," said Lord Taliesin. "We must push on to the Abyssal Cairn and deal with Ankharet. She is sure to summon more of these Lykanthros if she is able."

At last the external buttresses of Ankharet's fortress rose above the canopy of the oak forest. Crows and scavenger birds circled among the towers and immense, looming gargoyles. A generation of goblins had labored to build the massive structure.

Thorny, disheveled rose hedges lined the entrance to the Abyssal Cairn. The plants had grown wild and untended. They simply rooted in the clearing leveled by the goblins during their initial construction of Ankharet's Abyssal Cairn. As Lord Taliesin and his allies cut their way through the overgrown roses they saw obsidian fountains and elaborate statues of gargoyles and Lykanthros. The structure had also become partially obscured by the spreading flowers.

“These blossoms are quite beautiful,” observed Sharon.

She brushed her gloved hand over a standing bouquet of white and red blooms. As the travelers neared the gateway to the cairn they saw the hobbling shapes of goblins. They stayed away from the group and made no attempt to impede them.

The portcullis was raised and the large, bronze doors were not barred. Bors and Rodnik pushed one of them inward with little difficulty. They tethered their warhorses to a row of brambles and proceeded within.

As the mercenaries scaled several, spiraling flights of stairs they remained cautious and ready for battle. There were indications of goblins everywhere. Pattering echoes of footsteps and whispered grumbling emanated from smaller, torch-lit passageways. The hall before Ankharet’s Audience Chamber was carpeted and lined with ornate facades depicting strange creatures and beings alien to Gaea. At last they passed through the final set of arching columns and entered the Throne Room of the Dire Queen.

Ankharet sat in her tall Dais. Her scrying glass radiated red light as it hung from its scaffolding at her side. Before her raised Throne stood a gaping, oval rift in the fabric of space. The planar portal revealed an expansive landscape, strewn with resilient bushes and trees. Among the rolling plains lay large, volcanic boulders. The hills of the alien world swarmed with packs of Lykanthros. They prowled among the dark stones in search of any herbivorous prey they could find. On a distant hilltop spindly Arachnoids carried the heavy, volcanic stones in their mandibles. They used the boulders to assemble a great, vented Hive. The Lykanthros packs made sure to stay clear of the Hive Builders as they hunted for food.

“At last you are here, Taliesin,” Ankharet said. “I watched your friends eliminate my Vizier and assassins through my scrying glass. You are valiant fighters and strategists. I commend you.”

“Ankharet, you must stop tapping foreign Planes. The creatures that you’ve released have killed many of our beasts of burden and are a nuisance to farmers and ranchers alike. Your position is untenable,” said Lord Taliesin.

“I defy you, Taliesin,” said the Dire Queen scornfully. “I claim Mystic Down and Coermantyr for my own. Soon all of Gaea will fall under my influence. You and Sharon must abdicate your regions now or suffer.”

“No, Ankharet!”

Taliesin drew his sword and pointed it at the Dire Queen.

“Close this foul portal and stop your invasions of our lands!”

The Dire Queen rose from her Throne, gathering her shimmering raiment in one hand while unleashing a spell with the other.

“Drisenta!”

Eerie illusions flew about the Throne Room. Many of the images bore the likenesses of despotic Kings from the past. They baffled the mercenaries, although only briefly. Rodnik and Taliesin charged Ankharet as Gilead and Alex spoke their attacking spell.

“Vectrox!”

The Dire Queen uttered the incantation of shielding.

“Fensores!”

Ankharet’s opaque shield deflected the pulses of energy emitted by Gilead and Alex. Rodnik and Taliesin swung at the Queen with their weapons but were unable to breach her defensive barrier.

Leif moved closer to issue the same spell he’d used to dispatch Themistokles.

“Carvex!”

A spike-laden sphere of energy surrounded the protected Queen.

As it contracted she called out, “Guardon, come forth! Lend me your aid!”

A clawed fist gripped the edge of the spatial portal. Then emerged a cloven-hoofed leg and shoulder that extended to a bowed wing. The bronze, scaled arm flexed and Guardon pulled himself into the Throne Room. His bullish head and chest glistened from the exertion of the task. His red eyes focused on Ankharet. Guardon reached through the two energy spheres and lifted Ankharet in his arms. He pulled her free and stepped toward the portal. Leif and the other mages fired bursts of energy at Guardon but he was not affected by their impact.

Taliesin, Bors, Sharon and Rodnik swung their weapons at the hulking daemon. Their blades glanced off Guardon’s bronze, scaled hide. The Ruler of the Gorgon Plane swung a hefty blow at the fighters, knocking them to the floor.

“Do not interfere with us. We will return to claim this Plane and its inhabitants,” Guardon said.

It was at this time that Bjorn noticed a sparkling anklet around Guardon’s left leg. He thought it would make an excellent souvenir of his adventure. The halfling reached for it as the large daemon lumbered toward the portal. The copper chain was fused together. Bjorn needed just a few licks with his metal file to break it loose. He had a firm grip on the anklet as Guardon passed through the portal to the Gorgon Plane.

The spatial rift dissipated and the stunned mercenaries rose to their feet.

“What happened?” Bors asked.

“Ankharet escaped. The portal is closed,” Taliesin said. “I expect that we won’t be bothered by creatures from that place any time soon.”

“Where’s Bjorn?” Bors queried of his friends.

“I’m afraid he stuck his fingers where he shouldn’t. He must have been pulled into the Gorgon Plane along with Guardon and Ankharet,” Leif said. “Our work here is done. We must travel to Coermantyr and meet with the Lore Masters if we wish to see our troublesome halfling friend again.”

Lord Taliesin collected Ankharet’s scrying glass.

“I’ll take this contraption to the Lore Masters. Perhaps they can find a constructive use for it.”

The journey to Mystic Down from the weakened region of Arkadia was uneventful. The Lykanthros were nowhere to be seen. The hostile specters of the woods also remained out of sight. The band of travelers took time to water and feed their horses. They slept on a rotating shift and hit the road early each morning.

Chapter Three: Scrying Glasses and Regatherings

The State of Coermantyr lay beyond Mystic Down. The friends passed through the cobblestone streets of Wood's End. They decided to stop and supply their horses at Bors' establishment.

The villagers cheered upon their entrance. The withdrawal of the packs of Lykanthros was noticed before their arrival. The air had changed upon Ankharet's passing to the Gorgon Plane. Bors was reluctant to share the news of Bjorn Roundtree's disappearance. The halfling was a source of laughter and entertainment for many of the residents of Wood's End on cold nights.

The Lore Masters were known throughout Coermantyr and Mystic Down as adept magic users.

They specialized in monitoring and joining with the various energies that evolved throughout the States of Gaea. Certain areas of Gaea hardly fit the definition of States although they are labeled as such on the maps of Lieges like Taliesin and Sharon.

The Ghastly Fens were untamed and wild. This was also the case for the Woods of Coermantyr and the mountainous regions east of Arkadia.

The villagers of Wood's End understood the necessity of the meeting with the Lore Masters in Coermantyr. They hurried the traveler's warhorses to the livery stable where they were groomed with currycombs and fed grain. Bors briefed his eldest son, Torvald, about the disappearance of the Dire Queen from Arkadia.

A minority of the patrons of Bard's Inn vocalized a lack of enthusiasm to retrieve Bjorn Roundtree. For absent items some had blamed him.

Bors clearly wished to recruit additional forces to assist his friends on their mission. The members of the band had no choice but to resign themselves to their own resources. Although Bors addressed the patrons of his tavern in a booming speech, they would not be swayed to accompany him.

The warriors set out on the road to Coermantyr in the morning, with Sharon and her mages leading the way. The farmland and woods were serene in comparison with the wild tracts of trees they saw in Arkadia.

As the horses passed the tilled and irrigated fields of squash and wheat, Bors paused to gather an apron-full of ripe strawberries.

“These will make an excellent pie,” he said.

The outskirts of the City of Coermantyr were bustling with activity. The farmers and ranchers who avoided the open roads under the rampage of the Lykanthros now crowded the city gates. Lord Taliesin and his friends guided their mounts gently through flocks of sheep and herds of cattle.

Several of Sharon’s guards struggled to push a disabled wagon to the shoulder of the road. She spoke to the Captain in charge.

“How fare things in the city, Captain?”

“Not well, My Lady. The roads are jammed with merchants and peddlers. Everyone is trying to sell the fruits of their harvest before they spoil. I’d advise you to rest at a tavern until nightfall. Things should quiet down by then and you’ll have clear passage to the castle.”

That night the moons of Gaea shone brightly as parallel crescents. The streets were settled and Taliesin’s band traversed the road to the castle with ease.

The large ramp leading to the drawbridge was lined with marble sculptures of valkyries and heroines of legend. In Coermantyr the office of the Baroness was passed through the generations on a matriarchal basis, from mother to daughter.

Sharon’s parents had both died several years before. She was accustomed to the duties of her role and was in no hurry to provide her State with an heiress.

Gilead met briefly with some mages at the castle entrance. The warriors’ horses were taken to the stable. Lord Taliesin and his friends scaled several spiraling flights of stairs to a great dining hall. Courtesans and gendarmes of the State applauded the travelers upon their entrance.

There was a resplendent banquet prepared for the returning adventurers. Musicians and dancers filled the Central Hall of Coermantyr Castle with a jovial ambiance. At a large table the Baroness dined with her friends.

“My compliments on this excellent feast, Sharon,” Bors said.

He was chewing on a leg of turkey with gusto. The Burgomeister appeared to be enjoying himself thoroughly.

Gilead spoke to the group at the table.

“My Friends, I have arranged for a meeting with the Lore Masters tomorrow. They will advise us about the Plane where Bjorn was taken. Perhaps they will make some use of the scrying glass which Lord Taliesin retrieved.”

“Thank you, Gilead,” Taliesin said. “I look forward to finding a way to rescue our halfling friend. I also hope that the Lore Masters will give us some information as to how we can prevent such an invasion from occurring again.”

The traveling band was given lodging in the castle. Each of them was glad to have a sound night’s sleep after so many days on the roads of Mystic Down.

The next morning castle pages escorted the mercenaries. They were led to the Council Chamber of the Lore Masters. The Lore Masters were a group of a dozen mages who specialized in the storage of documents. Their massive libraries included both folkloric and historical scrolls.

The Chief Archivist of the Lore Masters was Restadicus. He wore a magenta robe tied with a silver belt. His hoary beard and shoulder length hair were braided and intertwined with strands of the same magenta thread.

The Lore Masters sat at a crescent-shaped table. Their Council Chamber was lit with bright candelabras and an iron chandelier that was suspended by a large chain hanging from the vaulted ceiling. The walls were covered with shelves of scrolls and leather-bound journals.

“Baroness Sharon, we are heartened that you and your allies have made a safe return to Coermantyr. The State has been beset by the Lykanthros for some time. Their eradication is a blessing to us all. As you have seen, the farmers and merchants have swamped the city streets in their enthusiasm to regain their lost profits.”

Lord Taliesin opened his travel pack and placed the dark, glass shard he’d taken from the Abyssal Cairn on the Lore Masters’ table.

“Restadicus, tell us what you can about this scrying glass. It belonged to the Dire Queen, Ankharet. She was using it to communicate with Guardon in the Gorgon Plane.”

The Leader of the Lore Masters extended his spindly fingers over the black glass.

“This glass has been used to communicate with more than one Plane,” Restadicus said. “I perceive a spatial breach that has been sealed. This must be the portal which Ankharet generated to channel her Lykanthros into this Realm.”

The grizzly mage gazed at the scrying glass with an interested expression.

“Your friend, Bjorn, is stuck with magic users of a hazardous, reckless persuasion. I regret constructing a new breach to rescue him when Guardon and

Ankharet are still desirous of usurping our lands. Let us think on the appropriate course of action and meet here again, tomorrow. We have much to learn from this magic shard.

Restadicus pocketed the glass in his robe for later research.

Bors and Rodnik relished their stay in the luxuriant setting of Coermantyr Castle. They enjoyed not having to work all day. They reclined decadently on the pillows in their quarters. Servants of the region regaled them with cool beverages and sumptuous food.

Leif appreciated the sophistication of the library of the Lore Masters. He and his friends waited for the Council of Mages to reach a consensus as to their course of action.

The ghou-troll perused the vast archives of scrolls and leather tomes. Although an adept spell-craft and magic user, there were ancient casting and enchanting techniques that he had never seen before.

Many volumes spoke of legendary orbs, different in appearance and function from the Orb of Paryphax. Among the lists were the Orbs of Falstaff, which, according to several journal entries, provided greatly needed assistance to their bearers in battle situations. An unwanted side effect of these orbs was that they vanished out of place and time once used.

Leif, the half-undead mage, noticed a shelf of tomes written by Restadicus himself. He'd recorded every message received about the Baroness' progression toward the Abyssal Cairn of the Dire Queen. As Wood's End and the subsequent forest were cleansed of the marauding Lykanthros, farmers and ranchers raced to Coermantyr to deliver word of the disappearance of the predators.

The Sentinel hoped that Restadicus would find a way to make use of the scrying glass that Lord Taliesin brought. It might enhance the ability of Coermantyr to observe events that threatened the civic harmony of their region.

That night the Lore Masters reached a decision. They had studied Ankharet's scrying glass in private and learned what they could from it. A gathering of several hundred citizens dined in the Central Hall of Coermantyr Castle. Minstrels and jugglers entertained the villagers and children while they ate.

Bors eagerly joined in and sang another of his many songs.

“In ancient times when work was done the clown, Woodruffe, did sing.

The people loved him for his mirth and his colorful vest.

At the fountain the maid, Gwendolyn, fed doves with fluttered wings.

*Woodruffe tried hard to woo her but the maid would not say yes.
Desperate to find a working means to win Gwendolyn's heart,
Woodruffe sought far and wide for an enchanted rose to bring her.
Gwendolyn's Rose he named it so they would never be apart.
She'd be his without dispute once enchanted by the flower.
Magic thickets were abound, the clown was scratched and stung.
Yet faeries led him to the place where the coveted blossom grew.
He plucked the rose without contest although the maid was young.
Still Gwendolyn refused and said, 'I simply don't want you.'
In sadness Woodruffe strode through the town, sniffing at the bloom.
Then he spied another maid sweeping with a broom.
Woodruffe asked her, 'Share my kingdom though it modest be.'
'I will,' she replied and the friends were the merriest pair to see."*

Restadicus and his fellow mages addressed Sharon, Gilead and Taliesin's mercenaries in the spacious Council Chamber of Coermantyr Castle.

"Thank you for your patience, My Friends. My assistants and I have studied the shard you brought us with utmost scrutiny. Ankharet's scrying glass is much like our own. The wizards of this castle use such objects from time to time to access distant regions. We take great care, however, to avoid Planes and Realms alien to Gaea. Testing such waters has proven risky at best and cataclysmic at worst. All scrying glasses hold shadows; memories of places they've seen and Entities they've contacted. That is why this shard is unique. It veritably hums with energies that have run through it. It is clear that its previous possessor had no regard for whom or what gained knowledge of Gaea."

The aged Lore Master scratched his beard.

"We wizards fear to leave your friend, Bjorn, in the Gorgon Plane. Apart from the risk to his well-being, he may be forced by the Dire Queen and her cohorts to divulge intelligence in regard to the locations of settlements and fortresses in Coermantyr and Mystic Down. It isn't wise, however, for us to concert our efforts into recreating a spatial rift such as the one that Leif and the rest of you succeeded in closing. At least not in these populated regions."

"Your Sentinel lich-troll friend has demonstrated an uncanny expertise in untested spell-casting. This is due to his training at the Martial Academy in the Ghastly Fens."

“The Academy is run by an acquaintance of this Council of Mages. An alumnus of the Lore Masters, Siegemunde, has functioned as the Chief Administrator of the Martial Academy there for the last few years. He moved there from our offices during the past conflict with the stone trolls and goblin hordes.”

“In answer to my urgent request, Siegemunde has agreed to see you. You must hasten to the Ghastly Fens. There you will be positioned farther away from the settled regions of Gaea. The lich folk are a resilient and courageous race. Their own spawning was based on an unexpected binding of opposing magics. They will be willing to open a temporary rift upon the guidance of their Leader.”

“Seek your halfling friend, Bjorn Roundtree, in the Gorgon Plane. Do not hasten to disrupt the Mandala of the Planes.”

Restadicus’ brow furrowed with concern.

“If you are confronted by Ankharet and Guardon deal with them, as you must. Be aware, however, that you will be fighting them in their home region and their powers will be functioning at full capacity.”

“Make haste to the Martial Academy in the Ghastly Fens. Siegemunde has my authorization to tap the scrying glass of the Abyssal Cairn once more. He will be cautious and wise to the risks involved.”

Lord Taliesin and the Baroness assembled their friends in the courtyard of Coermantyr Castle. Among the bartering merchants and bleating livestock the two Lieges addressed their companions.

“My Friends, I am grateful for your support and loyalty to this point. You have proven an invaluable assistance to us in our quest to bring peace and civility to the regions of Gaea.”

“Lady Redthorne and I still need your help. We ask that you accompany us to the Martial Academy in the Ghastly Fens. There we shall meet with Leif’s Mentor, Siegemunde.”

“The lich-trolls have experimented with magic more keenly than we have in Mystic Down and Coermantyr. It has been our approach to treat magic use in a traditional manner. Don’t you agree, Gilead?”

“Verily, Lord Taliesin. We care not for risky and daring sorcery. There are too many villages that must remain safe,” the Key Mage said.

“Let’s gather our horses and prepare to travel to the Ghastly Fens. I am sure Leif can navigate us,” said Sharon.

“I can take you to my home region, My Friends. You must understand that my kin are cautious and not readily accepting of visitors. Most of our trade is done at the

Crossroads. It will be best if you allow me to speak for us when we encounter others of my race. The Ghastly Fens are a mysterious place, even to those who call them their home,” the Sentinel said.

The mercenaries set forth on the road to the Martial Academy in the morning. Leif took the lead on his dappled mare. The villagers of Coermantyr cheered their passage.

* * * * *

Bjorn Roundtree awoke in a strange place. He'd lost consciousness upon his passage through the portal. The halfling lay among a cluster of large boulders. His first instinct was to look for Ankharet and Guardon. He climbed cautiously to the top of the nearest rock. The hordes of Lykanthros still swarmed over the hills of the Gorgon Plane. Bjorn observed the movements of the wolf-creatures had taken a circling pattern.

They must detect the presence of their Daemon King, he thought.

The sky was an eerie red yet there was no sun. The Lykanthros spiraled around a distant mountain. Guardon's Spires, the daemon's enchanted fortress, stood at its peak. Its sharply angled towers and flying buttresses crackled with blue, electric bolts that extended miles outward, forming a canopy within the crimson sky.

The halfling was surprised to find he was holding Guardon's copper anklet. The hefty chain sparkled with encrusted jewels. They were of a type he'd never seen. The azure and violet crystals caught the light in a mysterious, almost rhythmic pattern. He also noticed strange writing along the inner circumference of the anklet. The characters were etched deep into the close-linked chain. The letters were fluid and calligraphic.

They said, *Tread not but wisely with gorgons*.

Bjorn was startled by the scratching of talons or claws on the volcanic boulder behind him. He spun around and found himself face to face with a large Arachnoid. Its purple exoskeleton was shiny and covered its segmented body entirely. Before the halfling uttered a word the creature extended its pair of flexible antennae close to his ears. It issued a low frequency vibration that generated buzzing sounds in Bjorn's head.

Dweeble Dworx I am named. I am one of the Hive Builders. I have not seen one of your kin before. Are you a relative of those irritating magic users from the Arkadian Castle?

“I'm afraid not,” the halfling answered. “I am a halfling. My name is Bjorn Roundtree. I arrived in this place accidentally when my friends attempted to stop the

daemon, Guardon, from sending his Lykanthros into our home world. I should get back to them. Do you know of a way to Gaea?”

I'm sorry, Dweeble answered. The wolf-creatures rushed to a foreign place through a spatial portal generated by Guardon and the white-haired Summoner, Ankharet. The gateway is closed now. It disappeared soon after you and they passed through. We should hasten to the Hive. There are other humanoids from your Realm that have gathered there. They too are not allies of the Summoners. If you climb onto my back, I'll take you there quickly.

Bjorn did as the large Arachnoid suggested and ensconced himself on its back. The Hive Builder scrambled over the rocky hills faster than a horse. They rapidly approached a great Hive several hundred feet tall. The dextrous Hive Builders constructed it by fusing the dark, volcanic rocks together with their own resin-like secretions.

The halfling was surprised to see a gathering of Gaeans and Hive Builders at the base of the towering structure. The Lykanthros were nowhere to be seen. The wolf-beasts had an innate apprehension of the sturdy spider-creatures. A dozen of the massive Arachnoids patrolled the perimeter of their lair. They did not tolerate intrusion by the Lykanthros hordes.

Among the ex-residents of Mystic Down, Arborea, Coermantyr, the Ghastly Fens and Arkadia Bjorn recognized several familiar faces. He had a good memory and had spent many nights observing the varieties of visitors to Bard's Inn.

The Arkadians were goblin defectors who had become weary of the despotic, tyrannical bullying of the Dire Queen. The halfling was also startled to see merfolk among the crowd. They were amphibious, possessing both lungs and gills. This allowed them to respire in both terran and aquatic environments. The sea people were noted for their reclusion. They mingled with land-dwellers only in rare circumstances.

Bjorn introduced himself to the gathering of humanoids and Arachnoids. His voice piped sharply as he attempted to gain the attention of the murmuring group.

“Greetings, My Friends! I recognize many of you from your visits to Bard's Inn in Mystic Down. It appears we are stuck here with our hive-building acquaintances. The magical experiments of Guardon and Ankharet have proven a nuisance to all the regions of Gaea. The Lykanthros destroyed many of the crops, fish and livestock that we depend on for food. My mercenary associates, Liege Lord Taliesin and the Baroness Sharon, succeeded in closing the spatial breach that the Dire Queen used to infiltrate our villages. It will only be a matter of time before they find a means with

which to come to our aid and deliver us to our respective regions. The Spires of Guardon, the daemon, stand near us. What shall we do about it?"

The Dagonites were the first to respond.

A muscular, blue-skinned mer troll, whose vestigial tentacles and arms were garnered with brass bands addressed the gathering.

"I am Marlin. My region has been tormented by Ankharet's conjuring. My fellow Captains and I were on our way to lead a fishing expedition when rifts surrounded us in the open sea. We could not help but fall victim to the erratic sorcery.

"Lord Dagon, my father, asked us to look for an orb. He called it the Orb of Paryphax. My companion, Anemone, found it in a salmon she caught. She said the fish was emanating an arcane force that resonated for miles in the water."

"This is true," the merwoman said. "The glass is strange. It hums with alien energy. I fear what harm may be done if it is tapped by the wrong people."

"I was also compromised by random portals," an armored wood troll said. "My name is Gnoll. Our Leader, the Wood Mage of Arborea, originally used the Orb of Paryphax. The Dire Queen's Vizier murdered him and stole the orb. I was on my way to seek aid in Mystic Down when the woods became filled with magical openings.

"I am somewhat familiar with the workings of Anemone's Orb. Its power focuses particularly on living things. The aged Wood Mage, Skjold, tapped the forces held within the orb to monitor and enhance the growth and dispersion of the trees in Arborea. The oaks, spruce, ash and pines function as the eyes and ears of the wood trolls.

"It was not enough, however, to stop the quick attack of the Lykanthros. The trees spoke to us with whispered urgency. I fought desperately at the base of our oak fortress to no avail. The wolf-beasts swamped my trolls and I, although not without having many of their number destroyed. Ankharet's Vizier, Themistokles, stole Skjold's Orb and vanished before he could be stopped.

"Although we would have mourned our fallen Leader in a proper burial, there was no time. We hastened to Mystic Down. The next thing I knew I was trapped by magic in this strange place."

"Such was the case for us, also," a hefty, merchant lich-troll said.

He stood among a closely-knit band of armed lich folk and trolls from Coermantyr, the Ghastly Fens and Mystic Down, respectively.

“My name is Reoren. I just met my friends from Coermantyr and Mystic Down at the Crossroads on the edge of the Ghastly Fens. We were also accosted by the maverick portals.

“We must unite with these great, spider-beings. They are intelligent and sympathetic to our cause. It is clear that their habitat is much harassed by the Lykanthros like our own. The power of Guardon and his daemon clan is considerable but not infinite. In aged carvings and legends the lich folk have recorded encounters with bizarre creatures and malevolent wizards. They were disposed of with the help of outsiders, of course.

“I move that we assemble what weapons and defensive resources we can muster. We should trek to Guardon’s enchanted fortress and eliminate the Daemon King and the Dire Queen permanently.”

Dweeble addressed the gathering of humanoids.

We Hive Builders are impressed by your two-legged resourcefulness and determination to secure your world. My cousins and I will carry you across the volcanic valley to the daemon’s fortress. The battle will be fierce but the time has come for us to do something about these wild wolf-creatures.

They are driven by an arcane force that emanates from sorcery maintained by the Dire Queen and her suitor. If we destroy them the Lykanthros will return to their natural hunting patterns. We must warn you that there are yet other Planes with chaotic forces even more tumultuous than those that the Summoners are tapping here. We must be careful not to open additional rifts in the spatial continuum. If not we may find the dark fortress occupied by a more devious Entity.

The Gaeans mounted their Arachnoid friends with Bjorn and Dweeble Dworx at the lead. They set forth on the downward slope into the valley of Guardon’s Spires.

* * * * *

Raven turned in her sleep. Her alarm clock rang out. It was time to go to Jefferson Community College again. She felt well-rested and would certainly return to the Realm of Gaea in her dreams. She grabbed her mathematics textbook and looked for a suitable outfit to face the day.

As she rode the bus she thought about her plans for the future. The young woman was a fan of fantasy and science fiction books. She was fond of all sorts of books but especially favored those with elaborate stories and unusual settings.

Raven hoped to transfer to a four-year university. The competition was fierce, however, and she had to remind herself to remain optimistic and enthusiastic. She

looked at the trigonometry text on her lap. Her mathematics teacher, Mrs. Egnog, was a serious person.

I wonder why the math and science curricula are associated with a stern and regimented environment, she thought.

The creative writing courses she took had felt more encouraging, as if there were a light at the end of the tunnel. She supposed these were traditional concepts of the opprobrium for the education of young people.

Raven remembered her father had told her about the American science race in the late 1950's. The Soviets were the first to establish a small satellite into orbit around the Earth. He had said that the entire country was afraid of a missile-driven nuclear attack. The President and schools around the country applied themselves to a new-found focus on the sciences. It had been a national effort to ensure the safety of the United States.

She found respite in the characters in her dreams. Somehow they mirrored the troubles that the students confronted in the arduous process of making the grade. Raven felt that she could be somebody important, like a Leader or Congressional Representative. The young woman was concerned that perhaps Mrs. Egnog didn't think so.

The bus stopped and her friend, Michelle, got on. She walked down the narrow aisle and sat next to her.

"Hi, Rave. How goes it?"

"Okay, I guess. I'm really having trouble with these sine and cosine waves. I hope I can do well enough to get a passing grade," Raven said.

Raven had been friends with Michelle since freshman year. She was more outgoing and was a flash at math and chemistry. The tall, dark-haired girl had helped her numerous times over lengthy visits and cell-phone chats.

Michelle had a hand-drawn copy of the periodic table of elements on the cover of her binder. She was a good friend to Raven and made sure that she got at least passing grades on her math exams.

"I appreciate your help, Michelle. You're a godsend. Mrs. Egnog is a challenging and fast-paced teacher. Your tutoring keeps me up with the pace of the class."

The bus stopped and the students disembarked into the Jefferson College quadrant.

"I hope I see Sean, today," Michelle said. "He gets off football practice at nine. I usually sit next to him in physics class."

The friends went their separate ways. They both tried their best to give school the top priority.

* * * * *

Bjorn and Dweeble Dworx galloped across the valley in the Gorgon Plane. The Lykanthros rushed the entourage occasionally, but were no match for the mounted humanoids and numbers of Hive Builders. The crimson sky continued to shine its eerie light. There was no daybreak or sun to set.

The blue lightning emitted from Guardon's fortress arced and split in a web-like perimeter in the sky around the ominous Spires.

"This structure is made of these volcanic stones," Gnoll observed. "There are sure to be guardians at the entrance. We must prepare ourselves for a struggle once we near the stronghold."

"I'll stay in the back," declared Anemone. "Skjold's Orb must be kept safe from the Summoners. The merwoman had fastened a brass mount to the magical sphere. She wore it on a thin chain around her neck."

At the great, stone base of Guardon's Spires the Lykanthros made an ultimate attempt to stop the Gaeans. The wolf-creatures rushed the Arachnoids with reckless abandon. The Hive Builders were staunch fighters and withstood the slashing claws and fangs of the beasts adamantly. The eight-legged allies of the humanoids formed a tactical ring with Bjorn and his friends at the center. Several of the spider-creatures were struck severe injuries and lost the lower joints of some legs.

Reoren, the lich-troll uttered a warding spell to thwart the attackers.

"Grondos!"

The half-ghoul extended his hands and a noxious, green mist spewed forth. Reoren's magic vapor rolled and pulsed through the air as if it had a life of its own. The substance wrapped itself around the throats of many of the Lykanthros. The beasts struggled to no avail as the mist forced itself down their mouths and nostrils. The eyes of the captured wolf-creatures rolled back in their heads, showing a morbid white. Their mouths foamed and their bodies shuddered in a hideous death rattle. Two dozen of the attacking creatures succumbed to the enchantment and fell lifeless to the red earth.

Dweeble's kindred and their companions crossed the great platform. A pair of monolithic, obsidian statues guarded the gateway to the courtyard. They resembled winged gryphons. Their eyes were glinting rubies.

“Those jewels resemble the amulet found in the cave of the murderous goblins,” said Bjorn. “Trade with alien Planes must have been going on longer than we previously thought.”

“The Baroness still carries the unique, ruby necklace in her travel pack. It only bolsters her concern for the welfare of her region,” added Bjorn.

Bjorn and the mercenaries passed between the giant statues, entering a wide, cobbled courtyard. The multiple spires of Guardon’s fortress towered hundreds of feet above.

A screeching voice cried out, “Halt! No one may intrude upon the Lair of the Gorgons!”

The ground shook with a deep, mechanical rumbling. The Hive Builders buzzed a tone of warning among themselves.

Bjorn piped, “Beware, My Friends! Some foul machinery is at work.”

A tall, iron gate at the left side of the courtyard creaked open. The sound of metal hinges emitted a grinding cacophony. The Gaeans were surprised to see a great, waddling battlemech. It was a forged machine with three hydraulic legs and two arms mounted on a swivel. A steam engine powered the device that belched white mist from a pair of pipes on its back. Housed in the massive head was a small humanoid. He wore black goggles and operated the gears with leather gloves.

“I am Gearzon, King of the Gnomes. State your business, if it be just, or be pummeled by my battlemech.”

The machine spun its arms. One held a spiked ball hung from a chain, the other a broad saber.

“We are Gaeans, like you,” said Bjorn. “The spatial rifts of the Dire Queen, Ankharet, caught us in this Plane. Join with us so that we may liberate our regions from this awful intrusion.”

“Nonsense! I was busy in my workshop when I was invited here. The white-haired troll woman and the daemon took my services into their employ for a marginal fee. They said that I should let no one into The Spires, and that includes you.”

Gearzon gripped the levers of his war machine, sending it forward in an attacking maneuver. A dozen of the Arachnoids surrounded the massive machine. They clawed at its armored legs and frame with their spindly legs. The gnome engineer spun the arms of his battlemech rapidly. Several of the Hive Builders were knocked out and rolled against the walls in curled knots. A few of the spider-creatures were slashed severely by the heavy saber, losing legs. They oozed purple fluid from their injuries.

Marlin and Anemone fired their darted crossbows. The bolts lodged in the machine's armor. The steam compressor was punctured and leaked water vapor from multiple locations. Gearzon's battlemech continued to operate. Reoren, the lich-troll, swung at the device with his longsword. The hull was gashed significantly but still the war machine attacked.

Bjorn pelted the device with stones hurled from his sling. He aimed at Gearzon and struck him squarely in the temple. The gnome fainted and his gloved hands fell lax at the levers. The Gaeans extricated him from the defunct machine and laid him on the cobbled pavement.

Anemone gasped, "The Orb of Paryphax! It shudders with strange force. Look, all of you."

The blue-skinned merwoman pulled the chained, glass sphere from her bodice. The orb emitted a vibrant, green light. It yet contained the energy bestowed on it by Skjold over the years he'd used it to guide the growth of the Arborean Forest. Anemone held the orb in her cupped hands and brought it close to the unconscious gnome. He drew a deep breath and rolled his head from side to side.

"What happened?" Gearzon moaned.

"I nailed you with my sling. We're on your side, Friend," Bjorn said.

"The Daemon King and his mistress promised me a new workshop if I helped them. They said they intended to bring a new Age of Order to the regions. Who are you people?"

"We are Gaeans, like you, Foolish Gnome. The Summoners in this fortress are wreaking havoc on our lands. Your people will become enslaved with the rest of us if they are not stopped. Join with us and we shall bring a new Age of Freedom to the world," Gnoll said.

"My machine is damaged. It will take time to fix it," replied Gearzon.

"Nevermind that infernal contraption, Gearz. Ride on a Hive Builder as we scale this fortress. They are fast and agile climbers," Marlin said.

"I'll help you if I am able. Those wolf-creatures were kind of a nuisance to the projects of we gnomes. We haven't seen you tall folks for some time. Why don't you visit our great city, Tinkerburg?"

"I've been there," Bjorn said. "It's the most disorganized town I've seen. Half the machines don't even work and those that do are twice as complicated as they need to be."

“I was sleeping soundly by a fountain when I was nearly crushed by a collapsing catapult. Don’t ask me why there was a catapult. It wasn’t there when I dozed off,” the halfling grumbled.

“Let’s move on, My Friends,” Bjorn said. “I sense watchful eyes upon us from far above. We should deal with the Dire Queen as efficiently as possible.”

Gearzon, the gnome engineer, resigned himself to the recommendation of his new-found friends. He climbed aboard a crouching Hive Builder, pausing to hold his head in agony.

“That sling packs a nasty punch, My Halfling Cousin,” he complained.

The staunch Arachnoids carried their humanoid friends through a creaking, marble archway. They found themselves in a receiving chamber lit by mounted torches and decorated with long tapestries. The fabrics were aged and tattered. They depicted Lykanthros and daemons, similar in form to Guardon but without limbs or wings. The creatures appeared to hover or levitate by some preternatural force.

“Those must be renderings of gorgons,” said Reoren.

He drew his longsword.

“I don’t like the look of those things.”

“This place is strange, indeed,” said one of Gnoll’s wood troll companions. “Look at that staircase and those doorways. They don’t have any ramps or elevators leading to them. Whatever passes through those heights must not have need for walkways.”

“Perhaps Guardon built them for the passage of falcons or doves,” said a lich-troll.

He didn’t sound as if he believed this was the truth.

As if on cue, a half-dozen bizarre creatures floated through stone portals built in the ceiling and walls. Their oval-shaped bodies were covered with protruding, flexible antennae.

A bright, bronze illusion appeared in the air above the mercenaries. It was a manifestation of Guardon’s face.

His curled horns and eyes rolled back as he bellowed angrily.

“Intruders! You have fortitude to venture this far into my domain. My gorgon beholders will dispatch you without mercy if you do not turn back. Your regions are already lost to my betrothed, Ankharet and I. You must acquiesce if you wish to remain in good stead, as my servants. Flee now.”

“That is not an option, Guardon! I have your anklet and will not heed its warning. Beholders and goblins invaded our regions in ancient times. They were

turned away as surely you will be,” answered Bjorn. “Leave the Realm of Gaea in peace or face the full brunt of my wrath. I too have powerful friends and none of us will tolerate your tyrannical usurping.”

Bjorn held his sling at the ready. He flung a stone at the shimmering illusion. Guardon’s image remained, unaffected.

“I refuse, Stubborn Halfling. You have borrowed for the last time. My Love waits here with me. We are not afraid of you. Come to us if you will. This fortress holds many surprises and creatures beyond your knowledge. You have made it this far. Perhaps we shall meet face-to-face, although I doubt you will still be alive.”

The magical projection of the Gorgon King disappeared. The levitating beholders had waited for the signal to attack. They wailed with a combined magical energy. The six creatures enchanted a musical charm spell. It was a permeating, bass-like rhythm that had a disabling effect on the Hive Builders. The Arachnoids shook, tossing their humanoid charges to the floor. They emitted a buzzing note of alarm.

Dweeble Dworx communicated to Bjorn.

The magic of the gorgons poisons us. We cannot hold here. The Hive Builders will wait outside The Spires. Our hopes are with you. If need be, retreat to our lair. We can hold council and return at a later time.

“Thank you, My Friend. Your clan has provided an invaluable service to us. Do not linger here. We will meet again.”

The halfling patted the purple Arachnoid’s knee. Dweeble buzzed a gathering tone and the Hive Builders departed from the fortress.

A pair of gorgons rushed at the fighters. Reoren was ready and uttered a defensive spell.

“Fensores!”

A sphere of energy surrounded the Gaeans. The oval-shaped beholders crashed into the magical field. They were strong and pressed hard into the barrier. As one beholder shoved his single eye through the matrix, the lich-troll thrust with his sword, blinding it. The legless creature howled in pain.

“Beware, My Friends,” Reoren cried. “My magic is not powerful enough to hold these vile gorgons.”

“Fear not, Ghoulis Friend,” Gnoll said. “We wood trolls are prepared.”

“As are we merfolk,” Marlin declared.

Reoren gasped from the strain as his arcane shield was compromised and dissolved. The Gaeans wielded their weapons and engaged the beholders in hand-to-hand combat.

One gorgon bit Gnoll's armored fist. He yelled as he bashed it with his mace. The creature spun through the air erratically, disoriented by the hefty troll's blow.

Marlin, Anemone and their merfolk companions fired their crossbows at the beholders. Several of the bolts hit their intended targets. The stone-colored beings oozed green blood from their wounds.

The mertrolls belted their crossbows and drew short, curved blades. They slashed at the gorgons in a circling attack pattern. Gearz battered at one with an adjustable wrench. The defected goblins used scimitars to parry and ward off the chomping, slaving creatures. Lesser Knights from Coermantyr lunged at the beasts with short lances. They succeeded in skewering one and pinning it lifeless to the cobblestones. Two helmeted trolls from Mystic Down destroyed another with hammering strikes from their hardened-steel blades. They sliced the beholder deeply, ripping it to pieces. The soldiers were covered in green blood and quivering gore.

The four gorgons that remained were enraged by the perseverance of the Gaeans.

"Tractos!" they cried.

They united their magic into a ribbon-like, blue cord. The air gusted with the heat of the scorching enchantment. A goblin screeched in pain as a tendril from the spell wrapped itself around his legs, burning through his leather armor.

Reoren and his lich-troll companions united their magic skills in a desperate attack.

"Nechros!" cried the half-ghouls.

Four, spiraling, blue blades appeared. The lich-trolls perspired with the strain of their incantation. They gestured with their hands, guiding the Ethereal, cutting weapons at the beholders. The outer pair of the united gorgons was run through by the whirling blades. They screamed in agony as the floor was showered with green blood and entrails. The evil beasts slumped to the ground, oozing fluids like rotten pumpkins.

The remaining pair of beholders howled with frustration. The blue spell vanished. The gorgons fled by flying to the portals in the ceiling. Their wails echoed down to the fighters as they ascended far into the heights of Guardon's fortress.

"Nighthawk is injured," a goblin soldier said. "He was burned badly by those creatures."

The wounded goblin lay on the ground, surrounded by his fellows. They smeared his burns with a white lotion poured from a gourd flask. It didn't provide much relief, however.

Anemone rushed to the group of goblins. She again pulled the Orb of Paryphax from her bodice.

“Let me have a look at him,” the merwoman said.

She held the glass sphere in her folded hands. Rays of green light lit from between her fingers. Marlin’s girlfriend held her hands close to the goblin’s legs. The light focused on the wounds and gradually brought the tissue together over them. Nighthawk’s lamentations halted. He looked at the merwoman with clear eyes.

“Thank you, Sea Woman. I can walk again. Your healing magic is powerful. I regret the years that our races have warred with one another.”

The goblin soldier helped his Sergeant to his feet.

“He’ll bear scars, but he will no longer slow us down on our mission,” Anemone said.

“You have an uncanny connection with Skjold’s magic,” Gnoll said. “While he lived he healed many wood trolls but never with such completion or ease as you have demonstrated. Perhaps he yet watches us from the heavens.”

“We have done well, here, My Friends,” said Bjorn. “It is clear that Guardon’s magic and that of the creatures he and Ankharet have summoned is not limitless. The Gorgon King can be defeated as long as we continue to stand united and utilize each of our talents to the best of our ability. Let us march further into this mysterious fortress. The safety of all our regions depends on our victory, here.”

The Gaeans set forth up the only stairway with their weapons drawn. They could only guess as to who or what awaited them within.

* * * * *

“Awaken, Assassin. You have been compromised by the troll folk,” a scratchy voice hissed.

Rauros moaned. His head throbbed from the magical blasts of the Key Mage and his red-haired friend. The Goblin Master opened his creased eyes and saw the translucent face of the specter, Jetsam.

“What happened?” asked the Leader of the Harad Ghul.

“The half-ghoul killed our master, releasing us from his bonds. Our cousin, Mayhem, was destroyed but we fled in time.”

“We yet live as well, Leader. Drink some of this black root tea. It will help you regain your strength.”

Rauros sat up as his comrade, Dakros, pressed a steaming cup to his lips. The tan goblin murmured thankfully as he sipped the bitter liquid. His vision cleared and feeling returned in his legs.

Another of the Harad Ghul, Loki, had captured rabbits in a makeshift trap. He'd skinned them and placed them in a small stew pot. Rauros smelled the gamy meat simmering and realized he was hungry.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

"Two days, Leader. The others of our band fell valiantly. We suspect the Abyssal Cairn is compromised. If this is the case Ankharet is either dead or sealed in the Spatial Plane of her daemon host. The wolf hordes are gone. The woods have been quiet for the last day. The rift hewed by the Dire Queen is broken," Loki said.

He handed his commander a serving of stewed rabbit.

"We should attempt to locate the Orb of Paryphax. We can use it to strengthen the goblin army once more. Let us observe the troll folk from a distance. We shall travel to Mystic Down and learn what we can. An object that is said to possess such magical energy is easily found and readily transferred from ocean to land. The Dagonites have been longtime traders with the troll people. If they find the orb, which I believe they shall, they will deliver it to Lord Taliesin and his companions with the intention of establishing a new Wood Mage in Arborea. Come with me, Loki and Dakros. Let us find horses and rebuild the Harad Ghul. Arkadia belongs to the goblins once again!"

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Liege Lord Taliesin and Gilead, Key Mage of Coermantyr, rode side-by-side on the road to the Ghastly Fens. The winter was fast approaching and their faces were stung with droplets of rain propelled by the billowing wind.

"If this weather remains I may be forced to grow out my beard. I'm sure it will be none to Lady Sharon's liking," said the sometime Innkeeper. "I hope Siegemunde will help us. I have Restadicus' letter of request. I wish I knew more about the ways of the lich folk. In honesty I've never dealt with one as closely as I have with Leif. He seems to be a respectable fellow, although a bit withdrawn. I suppose we will be forced to exercise a degree of patience when dealing with the natives of his region."

The Baroness rode up next to the two trolls, "Any sign of goblins afoot?"

"Not yet, My Love," Gilead said. "I expect they will appear as we are traveling into the wilder sections of Coermantyr. The Crossroads are an unruly place. Even in prosperous times it is wise to venture there with armed guards."

The band of mercenaries reached the edge of the Coermantyr Forest at dusk. Bors and Rodnik tethered the horses and fed them grain. The trees grew shorter and the earth was damp and moldy. The fog thickened and rolled over the soil like smoke. Cattails and ferns grew in patches along the roadside.

Crows and owls cried in the damp atmosphere. The mercenaries saw gatherings of ancient, stone buildings long abandoned. The scattered blocks resembled silent guardians in the mist. Many of them bore etchings of runes, the preferred alphabet of the lich folk.

“This is the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens. It was here that my clan gained freedom from the despotic stone trolls centuries ago. An ancient wizard, in desperate need, bonded ghoul with troll, creating the lich folk. We are an honorable and industrious people. Magical knowledge is researched studiously in the Martial Academy. We are prepared to do whatever is necessary to insure the security of our region. Follow me, My Friends. These are dangerous swamps. Many a curious traveler has vanished into the quick mud, never to be seen again,” said Leif.

The Sentinel magic user drew his rune-stitched robe about him as he guided his horse to the head of the convoy. Leif flung back his hood and uttered a guiding spell.

“Lumus, luminares!”

A wide ring of blue light encircled his head. It created a shimmering halo in the condensing fog.

“The Ethereal Light will mark the safe road. Do not stray far. There are many underground lakes here that are filled with binding reeds.”

Rodnik saw salamanders and eels squirming in the shallow pools. He held his hatchet at the ready as the mercenaries traversed the Ghastly Fens. The sounds of owls and birds of prey became more intense as night fell.

“Stop, Gaeans! This is not your home.”

A lumbering stone troll emerged from a straw-covered shack on a hilltop. He was immense, at least twice the height of Taliesin. He carried a rusty, iron club that left a line of turned earth where it dragged on the ground.

A female stone troll emerged from the dimly-lit home. She held a lantern. The stone troll woman called out with a scratchy voice.

“Show them the risk of venturing to the Ghastly Fens, Fangoz!”

Befitting his name the shaggy stone troll’s lower jaw stuck out with two, spiky teeth curving outward over his upper lip. His whiskers were braided and descended to his chest. He bellowed with a voice that echoed over the Fens.

“Flee now, Intruders. This is our swamp and we have no need for trade with other clans.”

Fangoz rushed at Leif and swung a blow with his club that made a humming noise as it passed through the air. The Sentinel’s dappled mare was trained to evade such an attack. It bucked quickly, striking at the massive weapon with its steel-shod

hooves. Leif was thrown from his horse. He rolled with agility on the soaked moss. His blue halo flickered but was not extinguished.

The towering troll next swung at Taliesin. The Lord deflected the attack with his hardened, steel sword. He then swung his weapon horizontally; cutting the large troll's ribs a painful gash. Fangoz howled in agony and clutched his side with one hand. The stone troll wielded his club single-handed, whirling it over his head like a flail.

Bors and Lady Sharon contended with their massive opponent.

"Be careful, My Love," yelled the female stone troll.

The Baroness swung her sword, which Fangoz blocked. This left the distracted troll vulnerable to Bors' mace. He hurled it through the back of his left knee. The massive troll's legs buckled and he fell to his knees. Leif drew a thin dagger and held it to the fanged troll's neck.

"Surrender, Fangoz, or you shall never see your beloved again."

"Alas!" the stocky troll cried. "I am vanquished. I surrender to you tricky swordsmen. I have not fought a group of such valiant fighters. I commend you."

"You may rise, Stone Troll," Leif said. "We shall tend to your injury. Our band can use your help if you care to assist us."

"Not before having a spot of tea and some muffins. Enough of your exercises, all of you. Come inside and let's get down to business," the female stone troll declared.

"My name is Cara," the large troll woman said.

The mercenaries took her up on her invitation to take a break before trekking further into the swamp. The straw-covered shack was warm. A cast-iron stove puttered in the corner. Leif and Rodnik used strips of cloth to bind Fangoz' barrel chest. He sat on a large, wicker bench.

The Baroness of Coermantyr sipped tea on a tall stool. She spoke with Cara as she brought a tray of giant, carrot muffins to the Gaeans.

"We seek the Martial Academy. Siegemunde, the Director there, can help us to rescue our trapped friend. A spatial breach that existed until recently was sealed with him on the other side."

"Yes, the wolf creatures have vanished. We thought they'd come from an alien place. There hasn't been an invasion like that here for generations. Approach the lich folk if you so wish. They are a reclusive people but will assist you if they can. None of the residents of the Ghastly Fens benefited from the marauding Lykanthros. They

disrupted the cycles of living here as they have throughout Gaea. The Dire Queen, Ankharet, was an insensitive tyrant,” said Cara.

“Fangoz will go with you to the Martial Academy. There are yet goblins running free in the Ghastly Fens. The eels and owls carry messages to those that have the patience to hearken them. They whisper of goblins moving over the moors. My husband is experienced with the tricks of the swamp and will protect you from ambush.”

“We’ll need biscuits, Cara. I don’t know if I’ll be able to lead them straight to Lich Town. Brigands and thieves are abounding. We may be days on the trail. Let us all get a night’s rest here and depart through the Fens, first thing in the morning,” said Fangoz.

He exhaled deeply and laid his head on a pillow at the edge of the bench.

“It is wise advice, Stone Troll,” Leif said. “I have been months from my home region and sense changes to the air since I departed. We will benefit from the extra protection. I don’t envy anyone who finds himself blocking your path.”

The lich-troll wrapped himself in his robes and rested in a corner of the straw shack.

Fangoz consented to join the mercenaries the next morning. He accompanied the mounted travelers on foot. His long legs allowed him to keep up with the trotting horses.

“We are passing through the Greater Fens,” said Leif.

Lady Redthorne observed lich folk who fished in the murky pools with nets. The half-ghouls dressed in dark colors and were constantly on the lookout for marauding goblins.

“These people can use a defensive garrison,” the Baroness observed. “Are there not enough trolls in Lich Town to provide protection for these ghouls-trolls?”

“Regretfully not, My Lady,” Leif answered. “The Fens are an expansive region, wider than Coermantyr and Mystic Down combined. My people depend on fish and wild game for sustenance. Imported goods and food are bartered at Lich Town but the Martial Academy is young. Most adepts leave the area entirely, seeking employment as Viziers for spice caravans and couriers.”

“I help when I can,” Fangoz said. “There are too many unguarded areas, unfortunately.”

The travelers discerned a worn road through the shaggy moss. The reeds and grasses grew tall, meeting the horses’ shoulders.

A band of tiger-women ambushed the fighters. Several held bows with shafts at the ready. They blocked the trail at the front and rear of the group.

“What banditry is this?” Fangoz yelled. “I thought I taught you cats a lesson.”

One orange-furred amazon shot an arrow at the stone troll. It lodged in the center of his rusty club.

“Those were our cousins,” she said. “We’ve been watching you trolls for two days now. No one passes through here without surrendering their weapons and armor to us.”

“That’s not likely, Tigress,” Sharon said. “We have business up ahead and have no time to tarry here. Let us pass or contend with our wrath.”

“So be it,” the orange cat-woman replied. “Show them we mean business, My Sisters!”

The vengeful tiger-women shot their arrows at the mercenaries. Some of the shafts hit the armored riders and were deflected. Leif and Sharon both drew longbows of their own. They fired a volley of shafts at the tigresses, wounding three of them. The rest of the enthusiastic humanoids rushed the horses from front and back. Rodnik swung at them with his hatchet, injuring two more. One cat-woman clawed a gash on the rear thigh of Bors’ Clydesdale before he spun around and struck her shoulder with his mace.

Fangoz attacked the amazons in a fit of rage. He bellowed as he struck two of them with his club. They were knocked down, gasping for breath. The remaining four cat-women fled into the tall reeds.

“We shall return!” yelled one of them, “And seek revenge for our fallen brethren, as well. You haven’t seen the last of the Bengal Clan.”

“Many races thrive on the resources of the fecund Fens, My Comrades,” said the towering stone troll. “The bonding of ghouls with trolls was not the only magic that befell the Fens over the ages. Rogue sorcerers and banished conjurers found sanctuary here in the masking depths of the moors.”

That night Taliesin’s band camped atop a dry hill. The fog rolled endlessly over the mossy earth. Gray clouds filtered the light of Gaea’s moons. The bright haze spread into silver rings. Bors and Rodnik made sure to pile the reeds and driftwood thick atop the fire. The cries of owls and crickets filled the night.

“The tiger-women have returned,” Leif declared.

The Sentinel lich-troll was prepared and uttered a warding spell.

“Protex!”

A luminescent, red ring surrounded the mercenaries. The feline eyes of the amazons reflected the light of the pyre as they approached the Gaeans.

“We are the Bengal Clan. You and your stone troll companion have injured our cousins. You shall pay for your folly. The Ghastly Fens belong to the anthromorphs and no one else. We will take your arms by surrender or force if necessary.”

The speaker was a tall tiger-woman whose orange and black-striped fur rippled as her muscles flexed. She wore plate armor and a leather skirt adorned with steel brads.

“My name is Jalhi. Our family cares not for intrusion by wolf-beasts or scavenging lich folk. En garde!”

A pair of wyverns accompanied the amazons. The young dragons flapped above Jalhi’s shoulders. Screeching loudly, the gold-scaled creatures spat a volley of smoldering fireballs at the mercenaries. Leif’s protective barrier absorbed some of the missiles. The remaining few struck Taliesin and Sharon’s hardened armor. The flaming energy splashed and dissipated in the air.

The tiger-women drew curved daggers. They wielded one of the dangerous-looking blades in each paw. Jalhi and her furry cousins rushed the mercenaries. A few of them were hindered by the Sentinel’s magic shield, but only briefly.

Jalhi cried a tiger attack spell.

“Pranath!”

The dozen amazons were individually covered with aquamarine shields. The scrambling tigresses breached Leif’s barrier. The red ring wavered and then dissolved entirely. Lord Taliesin and Bors stepped forward to meet the anthromorphs. The aquamarine-lit amazons tumbled and rolled at the feet of the fighters, simultaneously thrusting their blades up at the legs and abdomens of their opponents. Taliesin and Gilead sidestepped the attack and swung parrying thrusts with their swords, knocking two of the tiger-women unconscious. Bors was able to move away in time but was stabbed a shallow wound in the stomach.

“Arghh! That smarts!” he yelled.

The burly Burgomeister swung his mace wildly at the slashing anthromorph. He successfully bludgeoned her side, taking her breath away. The gray-furred tigress gasped on the moss in the fetal position.

The wyverns attacked Fangoz at close range. They clawed at his head and shoulders with their razor-like talons. Leif yelled a charm dragon spell.

“Dracos!”

The dragonlings dozed, flapping gently in the air above the stone troll.

“Alas, you are valiant fighters,” said Jalhi.

She signaled to her cousins to sheath their daggers.

“The Ghastly Fens have been a tumultuous place since the invasion of the Lykanthros. We received rumors that Summoners and Illusionaries were building a goblin army in Arkadia.”

The Leader of the Bengal Clan stood before the Baroness. She knelt in acquiescence before the armored Lady.

“There has been much bloodshed between our rival clans. The invasions of the ruthless wolf-creatures have set us all on edge. You foreigners are valiant fighters and remind us of the peace that existed among the regions of Gaea in past ages. We can help you gain safe passage to Lich Town. There are paths known to our amazon clan that we will share with you. Our only request is that you aid us in the event of future alien intrusion.”

“Thank you for your offer of assistance, Jalhi,” the Baroness answered. “We mercenaries have also been on our guard of late. The preternatural experiments of the Dire Queen have threatened the tranquility of affairs for all Gaeans. I apologize for the injuries of your cousins. They are intrepid and valiant warriors. Please help our lich-troll Sentinel navigate us through the moors and fog. The dangerous quagmires have claimed many an unsuspecting adventurer. The Director of the Martial Academy in the chief city of the ghoulish-trolls has agreed to assist us in rescuing our halfling friend, Bjorn Roundtree, from the Gorgon Plane.”

“A more ambitious hope of ours is to dispatch Ankharet and her daemon acquaintance once and for all.”

The tigresses purred their agreement with the peace offering of their Leader. Fangoz patted the furry heads of several of the cat-women amiably.

“I’m sorry about your cousins, too. My wife and I have seen you people running through the mist on many nights. Let us carry on from here in friendship.

“We must ensure the safety of our regions. At this time we know not whether the Summoners will return to our Plane to invade again. Let us march onward for the sake of our lands,” the stone troll rumbled.

Lord Taliesin’s mercenaries traveled through the night, guided by the light of Leif’s halo and the direction of the amazons. Cries of toads and owls reverberated over the mossy hills. The horses ambled cautiously over the damp earth.

Early the next morning a band of armed lich-trolls stood on a crest of hills in the traveler’s path.

“Halt and state your business!” said a gaunt lich-troll.

The half-trolls bore crossbows. They were dressed in flowing, black robes similar to those worn by Leif but without the cryptic runes indicating his training as a Sentinel.

“I am Thorgrym, Captain of the Watch. No one without ghoulish blood may enter Lich Town. The Ghastly Fens are a sacred region and will not tolerate defilement by mercenaries and cut-purses.”

“We are here on legitimate business, Thorgrym,” Leif bellowed. “It has been many months since we shared mushroom brew in Lich Town. Perhaps you don’t remember me. I was the first of the delegates sent by Siegemunde to eliminate the arcane source of the invading wolf-beasts. My name is Leif, of the Sentinel Order.”

The ghoulish-troll Captain struck flint to a gray crystal mounted on an ebony staff. The torch ignited, causing Taliesin’s entourage to cast elongated shadows on the surrounding knolls.

“Ah, Leif, I recognize you now. You must forgive our reticence.”

“The Lykanthros have vanished but the Fens are yet replete with hostile anthromorphs and other creatures,” Thorgrym continued. “I see that you have amazons and a stone troll in your company. How is it that you gained their allegiance?”

“We did not win it freely, My Friend,” the Sentinel attested. “Our stone troll companion was the first to meet us in the Fens. We convinced him of the seriousness of our intentions to permeate the moors. My comrades and I might not have turned the accosting tiger-women without his help.”

The mounted lich-troll turned to his lumbering ally.

“Thanks again, Fangoz.”

“It was nothing,” the stone troll answered.

The orange and black-striped tigress, Jalhi, addressed Thorgrym.

“We have decided to assist the cause of you reclusive lich folk. The Lykanthros hordes proved a detrimental force to our hunting parties. We anthromorphs will soon unite to bring a new Era of Freedom to the Ghastly Fens. Allow us entrance to your Ghoul City, Captain. You will not regret our help in securing the breaches formed by the Arkadian Summoners.”

“Beware, Tigress. We have battled with your cousins for many years. If we allow you entrance into Lich Town do not doubt our archers will keep you in their sights,” the lich-troll Captain replied.

Thorgrym consulted briefly with his armed soldiers.

“Alas,” he sighed. “We will escort you into Lich Town. Keep in mind that we do not tolerate theft or violence in our peace-loving city. Although our ancestors were pulled from the grave after gruesome battles they have ordained that this haven remain sacrosanct and separate from the feuds that wash over the regions of Gaea.”

“You have our gratitude, Staunch Captain,” said the Baroness. “I’m sure that Siegemunde will reward your prudent judgment in this matter. The fate of all our lands lies on the success of our mission.”

Bors, Rodnik and Alex were the first to reach the top of the hills where the lich-trolls stood. They shook hands.

“These are disorienting and confusing moors, Ghoul Trolls. You have chosen a dark and mysterious place to build your city,” said Alex. “I never before traveled beyond the borders of Coermantyr. The memories I’ve collected on this journey will surely last a lifetime.”

Fangoz and Jalhi’s clan strode after the mounted warriors as they marched over the fern-covered crest into a shallow valley. They beheld Lich Town, the city of Leif’s formation and training. The entire settlement was protected by a tall, wicker wall. Around this barrier was a succession of moats and sharpened poles. These traps had been placed as a deterrent for any would-be pillagers. Many of the homes and storage buildings were constructed on top of fired-clay pylons so that they may remain dry above the soaked soil.

“Let us remain quiet and reserved among these people, My Friends,” Gilead said. “They are not accustomed to the appearance of troll folk from the southern regions. We must keep in mind that we look as strange to them as Leif did to us when we first met.”

The Key Mage of Coermantyr drew his wool cloak about his head and shoulders, covering his beard and face.

In accordance with Gilead’s warning the residents of Lich Town kept a respectable distance from the warhorses of the mercenaries. Lich-trolls and troll women who conducted business in the central marketplace grouped together. The ghoul-trolls spoke to each other in hushed tones. Their black within black eyes stared at the travelers with apprehension and uncertainty.

“Don’t be afraid, My Kindred. We are here on official business. My friends helped me to seal the breach from which the Lykanthros invaders emerged. Our mission is to seek Siegemunde and eliminate the usurping Summoners permanently,” Leif yelled.

The villagers did not respond. Several of the shopkeepers lowered the awnings of their stores, closing early for the day.

The warriors neared the raised platforms of the Martial Academy. It consisted of a series of structures connected by swinging bridges and crank-powered elevators. Rows of oil-burning lamps illuminated the multiple-leveled decks of the Academy. Their smoky light created golden rings in the creeping mist.

The main elevator was large enough to lift the band's horses. It took a second trip to hoist Fangoz, whose rusty club alone weighed more than a large troll.

"Leif, I haven't seen you for months. The wolf-creatures have gone. Has Ankharet been defeated?"

A lich-woman addressed the Sentinel. Her cloak was also stitched with the runes indicative of those educated by Siegemunde. Her dark eyes and gaunt face gazed at the magic user with an expression of recognition.

"Sigrid, greetings."

Leif clutched the lich-woman's arms in a hearty embrace. It has been a while since we last spoke. How go the affairs of our people?"

"As good as can be expected. The anthromorphs continue to prove hostile and marauding. I don't suppose your tiger companions have an explanation for this."

The female ghoulish-troll glared accusingly at Jalhi and her clan.

"The Ghastly Fens are ours. The goods that are moved through the Crossroads belong to us as much as they do to you lich folk. Now that the Lykanthros are gone We must come to a truce. I take responsibility for the actions of my cousins. We were tired of scavenging along the margins of the moors," the tigress growled in apology.

She bared her feline fangs and flicked her tail in a posture of frustration.

"So be it, Amazon. The mists speak to all of us of changing times. Let us see Siegemunde and bring an end to the conflict that has be-spoiled our regions if at all possible."

Sigrid took Leif by the hand and led the mercenaries to the Council Chamber of the Martial Academy.

The room was built at the top of the platforms. It held translucent windows and numerous shelves of books. The library was smaller than the one in Coermantyr Castle but many of the tomes and scrolls glistened with a sheen that bespoke of recent research and experimentation.

Siegemunde sat at a candlelit desk at the floor of the Council Forum. A single, silver earring on his left lobe twinkled as it reflected the light. His bald head was

creased from years of reading and record-keeping. The Director of the Martial Academy smiled as the sizable band of warriors descended the steps to his desk.

“Ah, Leif. I’ve been expecting you. Thorgrym’s Guards gave word of your approach during the night. I hope they received you peacefully.”

The wizard smiled and rose to greet his alumnus.

“They were an unusual and motley band to say the least, Director. We were armed and ready in case the anthromorphs and stone troll planned some trickery. They seem to be peaceful enough.”

The Captain of the Lich Town Guards still eyed the amazons with an air of suspicion.

“Very well, Thorgrym. I’m sure you will maintain our safety if the situation arises,” chuckled Siegemunde.

“Tell me, Baroness Sharon, do you have the scrying glass which Restadicus told me of after your arrival in Coermantyr?”

“Yes, Director. Our halfling friend, Bjorn, was caught in the Gorgon Plane when Leif was about to destroy the Dire Queen. She and Guardon escaped through the portal it generated. Please open the gateway once more so that we may come to his aid and dispatch the Summoners permanently,” Sharon asked.

The Baroness of Coermantyr beckoned to the Burgomeister of Bard’s Inn.

“Bors, come here. Open our travel pack and deliver Ankharet’s shard to Siegemunde.”

“As you wish, My Lady,” the Innkeeper said.

He lifted the cumbersome, leather pack from his shoulder and opened it. The burly troll placed the glinting shard on a wooden stand which Siegemunde had ready. The Director of the Martial Academy donned a pair of wire-framed spectacles. He laid his fingers over the jagged glass and hummed with interest.

“This glass has indeed been used for more than simple communication with distant regions of Gaea. It vibrates still with the echoes of dangerous and alien magic. I fear that Ankharet herself does not understand the risk in opening rifts to other Planes. Her folly is that she can maintain control over magic of this nature. I will create a rift with this device but should destroy it upon your return. There are daemons and beings far more powerful that have been awakened by the erratic energies harnessed by this glass. Prepare yourselves, My Friends, for once you are placed in close proximity to the Summoners you will certainly be confronted by diabolical and malevolent Entities in their own element. They will have no restraint upon their base energies.”

“We are ready, Siegemunde,” said Lord Taliesin. “This battle has been long in the making and must be brought to an end for the good of all our lands.”

The husky troll drew his broadsword and held it at the ready. The other mercenaries and anthromorphs wielded their weapons in turn.

The Director uttered a harnessing incantation.

“Spiros!”

The scrying glass shook visibly as it ignited with red light. The arcane rays passed through Siegemunde’s outstretched fingers, forming eerie beams in the smoky air.

“Curses, it burns,” the wizard cried.

His hairless head became dotted with perspiration from the degree of his concentration.

The crimson energy intensified and focused on a point in front of the troll’s desk.

“I will hold for you, My Friends. The breach is forming. Deal with the Summoners as you must. My students will assist me in keeping the gateway open until you return.”

The magic of the scrying glass condensed into a bright sphere. This focal point expanded, forming a doorway. It looked upon the valley of Guardon’s Spires. A gathering of Arachnoids waited patiently outside its walls. The mercenaries did not hesitate and marched in single file through the portal.

“Farewell, Troll Wizard,” said Fangoz.

He was the last to enter the rift. The lumbering stone troll stooped to fit, dragging his metallic club behind him.

“May The Fates be with us,” Siegemunde murmured.

“My Students, hasten to the Council Chambers. I have need of your assistance!”

The Director of the Martial Academy yelled up the stairs with a voice that boomed over the Fens.

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Flotsam and Jetsam hovered behind a cluster of bushes. They watched the gathering of farmers and merchants crowd into Bard’s Inn, the unofficial community center of Wood’s End. The glowing specters dimmed their luminosity, making their appearance as shadow-like as possible. As they passed the hitching post the tethered horses remained docile. A pair of the steeds shook their manes as a chilling breeze wafted across their backs.

Jetsam whispered to his companion as they crouched below an iron-framed window.

“Let’s watch and wait. Now that Themistokles is gone we are free to bring others into this plane. The Gorgon King is but a pawn of the Dire Queen. If we succeed we shall gain control of his Plane and ours. The Drystyx Monks serve only Thoth. With the Orb of Paryphax we can break the Gong Seal at the heart of Guardon’s Spires. The Monks of Chaos will once again be free to move through the Gorgon Plane and eventually take hold of Gaea itself.

Torvald had taken over his father’s capacity as Innkeeper. He made sure that the ale kegs were fresh and the patrons served hearty platters of mutton and roasted potatoes. The swarthy, bearded troll addressed the diners, unaware of the listening specters outside.

“The Lykanthros have been banished, My Friends. Our Lieges travel now to the Ghastly Fens to open a breach to the Gorgon Plane. The halfling, Bjorn Roundtree, will soon be rescued and the Summoners eliminated permanently. An Era of Peace is dawning. Let’s toast our victory!”

The trolls and troll women cheered and quaffed draughts of brew from their steins.

“The orb has been moved,” said Jetsam.

The taller of the two specters gazed into the dark woods of Mystic Down as he contemplated the course of events. The dimly lit, azure specter turned to his brother.

“Let’s return to the Abyssal Cairn. Rauros and the Harad Ghul have completed their reconnaissance of Coermantyr and await us there. He is in the process of reuniting the goblin forces. Now that we are free of Themistokles’ bonds we can visit the Gorgon Plane as we wish. I suspect the Orb of Paryphax has found its way there. Perhaps we shall lead our own garrison of goblins to conquer The Spires in the volcanic Plane on the behalf of the specters and the Drystyx Monks. Thoth is sure to be pleased.”

The Ephemeral Beings chuckled as they sped off into the thick forest outside of Wood’s End.

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Rauros sat on the obsidian Throne at the heart of the Abyssal Cairn in Arkadia. A massive army of goblins and orcs gathered in the spacious Audience Chamber.

The wrinkled Goblin Master addressed his two assistants who stood at his side.

“Loki and Dakros, you have done well to rouse our cousins and relatives from their subterranean lairs. Ankharet had no comprehension of our numbers residing

deep in the Under Earth. The hidden lakes and secret goatherds have brought prosperity to our Kingdom. Arkadia belongs to the goblins and their kin once again!”

The army of goblins and orcs cheered a bellowing roar that reverberated up to the vaulted ceiling. The torches that limned the colonnades flickered with renewed reservoirs of orcish oil.

“Dakros, select a trio of goblins. Loki, choose two. We will return the octet of the Harad Ghul to its original size,” Rauros ordered.

“We have made our selections,” answered Dakros.

A group of five, hulking goblins stepped forward. They hearkened from the Stalactite Tribe. Their pale skin was a distinguishing characteristic of their population. Most Stalactite Goblins and Orcs lived out their lives in clandestine cities built miles within the interconnected caves of the Under Earth. The branching tunnels formed a labyrinthine network of caverns whose full reaches were memorized by only the eldest of pale, goblin navigators.

“Rauros,” Loki asked, “We request that the Harad Ghul be strengthened from its original eight to a group of twelve. We have selected four of our orc cousins to assist us. Their tribes have remained hidden since the bloodshed of the war with the trolls. These assassins hail from the orc lairs in the Arkadian Mountain Range. They have long rejected their troll heritage and wish to be welcomed into the fold of the goblin army.”

The orc soldiers were taller than their goblin kindred. They were muscular and carried jagged broadswords and longbows.

“My name is Blueblood. We offer our allegiance to the Harad Ghul. Each of us is a Captain of the orc tribes in Crow Mountain. We have succeeded in rebuilding our cities since the campaign against the stone trolls and troll folk. Our echelon is prepared to demonstrate the strength of Arkadia to the other regions of Gaea.”

“Very well, Blueblood. I welcome you and your soldiers into our army.”

Rauros rose and embraced each of the four, orc assassins in acceptance. He beckoned for the ceremonial, red paint that he donned on his new recruits.

The pair of specters, Flotsam and Jetsam, glided above the waiting army to face Rauros. Flotsam addressed the Leader of the Harad Ghul.

“Goblin Master, the signature of the Orb of Paryphax, left by Themistokles, has vanished from this Plane. We searched far into Mystic Down and flew past Coermantyr as well. It has been taken to the Gorgon Plane. We offer our assistance to open a breach to Guardon’s Spires. This newly formed goblin and orc army is

operational. If we act now we can claim the orb and its battery of energy for our own uses. The future dominance of the Arkadians will be ensured.”

“Your advice is advantageous, Specters,” Rauros said. “Generate a spatial portal for us. We are weary of the despotism of the Dire Queen’s meddling. We shall dispatch her and convince Guardon to support our cause or be destroyed.”

“Very well, Scrupulous Assassin,” Jetsam answered. “We will yet avenge our lost brother, Mayhem, and acquire the necessary power to create a permanent rift between the planes.”

The Ephemeral Specters hovered before the line of red-marked soldiers. The heavily armed Captains stood in front of Rauros’ obsidian Throne. They faced the goblin and orc army who waited at attention in disciplined regiments below the proscenium.

The ghostly Entities flared brightly as they condensed their energy into a spell, warping space.

“Levrond!” they cried.

An arcane wind blasted over the great Audience Chamber of the Abyssal Cairn. The braids and cloaks of the Harad Ghul flapped and twirled in the powerful gusts. A wave of heat washed over the vaulted room as a bright, red sphere appeared over the proscenium.

Flotsam and Jetsam gestured with their azure claws in a spreading motion. The crimson sphere enlarged and became an oval of arcane energy. The specters trembled as they focused their maximum effort on the spatial portal. It continued to spread as a horizontal oval, dwarfing the dimensions of the original breach formed by Ankharet in her magical experimentation. The specters gasped and shied away from their creation.

“It is done,” Jetsam said. “We are spent. The portal will hold for a goodly time. Rauros, lead your army into our breach and contend with the Summoners as you will. We will also pass through because we have business of our own to attend to. Once we are in the Gorgon Plane our energy reserves will be replenished and we will once again assist your cause with full capacities.”

“Thank you, Strong Specters,” said Rauros. “You have provided us with an invaluable service and shall be rewarded accordingly upon our victory.”

The sun-tanned Leader of the Harad Ghul rose from his black, glass Dais and lofted his scimitar above the goblin and orc army. He addressed his regiments in a scratching timbre.

“My Kindred, our time is at hand. Our forefathers have long contended with the oppressive borders and picket lines of the troll folk of Gaea. We have the resources now to bring an end to their marginalization of our clans and tribes. The orcs have prospered in Mount Crow since the war with the stone trolls. The goblin tribes in the Deep Forests of Arkadia have also rallied upon our summons. They will follow their goblin and orc Captains with a greater degree of loyalty than they did the troll woman imposter and her winged courtesan. March with us, now, through the gateway honed by the blue specters. As you can see, the portal is large enough for all of us to pass. The Council Chamber of the Daemon King is exposed on the other side. Let us rush into his Throne Room and convince him to support us or die!”

The legions of armed goblins raised their brazed, iron weapons in support. They hollered a booming war cry that echoed through the colonnades of the Abyssal Cairn. Side-by-side the orc and goblin cousins marched through the breach. As the last regiment passed the Harad Ghul followed in silence.

Guardon had little warning of the attack on his Throne Room. He warned Ankharet and his gorgon attendants as the crimson sphere appeared before his stone Dais.

“Beware, My Friends. There is a breach forming here. An attack is eminent. Prepare yourselves!”

The single-eyed beholders growled in disdain. They vibrated with agitation.

“What treachery is this? I ordered no one to accompany me to these Spires,” screeched the female Summoner.

Ankharet’s white locks extended outward as she levitated. The troll woman’s eyes rolled white. The Dire Queen condensed her defensive energy in preparation.

A band of goblins and orcs strode through the widened, red oval into the Throne Room. Several gorgons reacted immediately and howled as they enchanted a charm person spell.

The atmosphere was filled with an eerie, atonal melody. Many of the goblins stumbled and stooped in a hypnotic haze. They had fallen under the influence of the beholder’s magic and gazed vacantly into the air. The soldiers forgot their assignments. The gorgons holding the incantation zoomed close to the affected soldiers. The irises of the stone-hued creatures dilated and changed color as they mesmerized their victims.

Successive regiments of Stalactite Orcs marched into the room. Many of them stumbled over their captured companions. They wielded their weapons and yelled in outrage. Two dozen of the goblins swarmed at the beholders. Their numbers were too

great for the creatures and they fell quickly under the spinning attacks of the scimitars and axes.

More gorgons flew into the Chamber from circular openings in the brick walls. The arcane creatures flexed their antennae, which emitted scald and rot spells. Red and green serpentine tendrils were fired from the tips of the appendages. A handful of goblins screeched as the burning sorcery compromised their steel armor. Others rolled in agony as their gloved hands and arms became infected with the curse of the decay spell. Again the Arkadian soldiers were pushed forward from behind as additional troops marched through the spatial breach. The fallen and injured orcs were dragged and pulled to the sides of the Council Chamber as the fresh soldiers contended with the attacking beholders.

The battle grew fierce and the cinder-block masonry reverberated with cries of pain and anguish. Guardon's attendants continued their magic volleys and engaged the goblins with their razor-sharp mandibles. At last Rauros and the Harad Ghul waded through the carnage.

Ankharet screamed in recognition of her onetime liaison.

"Rauros, how dare you? I did not order you to march on these Spires. Return to Gaea while you still live. I do not require the services of you or your scavenging cousins here."

"Your power over the goblins in Arkadia is terminated, Dire Queen. Too many of my Harad Ghul fell in your stead. You must reconcile your debt to the clans of Arkadia and convince Guardon to join us. The only other option is death."

Rauros, Dakros and Loki drew their scimitars and slashed at the nearest gorgons. The Harad Ghul began their approach to the levitating troll woman.

"I'll never bow to you, Old Assassin. This is an outrage. Ventas!"

The Dire Queen generated an opaque shield around Guardon and herself.

Flotsam and Jetsam glided through the spatial breach and attacked Ankharet at once.

"Electros!" cried the azure specters.

They gesticulated rhythmically, guiding a barrage of sparkling spikes through the shield of the Summoners. The Daemon King and his troll woman accomplice were both smitten by the high-velocity bolts. The thick-skinned daemon gasped at the annoying stingers and brushed them from his chest and arms.

The Dire Queen was injured significantly and fell to the floor. The bolts continued to sparkle and her body shuddered convulsively. A pool of green blood formed around her white hair.

“Alas, I am beaten. I curse you specters. I never should have had Themistokles bring you to Gaea. Nevertheless, the Orb of Paryphax is worth the risk. Guardon will yet retrieve it and gain dominance of his Plane and mine. I bid you all farewell.”

Ankharet’s eyes closed and her head lolled to the left as she expired.

The Daemon King was angered by the defeat of his beloved.

He yelled, “I will take vengeance for your aggression, Chaotic Specters. My gorgons, eliminate this army of intruders!”

Guardon entered the fray, swinging at the goblins and orcs with his massive, clawed arms.

“Struxis!” he cried.

His teeth and claws flared red with the energy of the lacerating spell. He maimed several of the goblins in his berserk attack. A wave of pale-skinned orcs leaped over their vanquished comrades and slashed at the daemon wholeheartedly with their single-edged blades. The Leader of the Gorgons was cut gashes on his arms and shoulders. The steel-armored goblins were splattered with the daemon’s acidic, green blood. It steamed and pockmarked their armor.

Flotsam and Jetsam again uttered their electric missile attack.

“Electros!”

The sparkling bolts pierced the bronze skin of the Gorgon King. Rivulets of blood dripped from the entrance wounds. The hulking daemon was angered further and rallied his attendants with a harnessing sorcery.

“Gorgax!”

Red energy extended from his claws and wrapped around the beholders. As he continued to assail the bludgeoning goblins he lashed at them with the chains of gorgons. Each creature chomped viciously at the Arkadians as it whipped past them. A number of the Stalactite Orcs were wounded. Rauros and the Harad Ghul gained ground close to the creatures. They slayed several of the beasts but a multitude remained. The red-painted assassins had the great daemon surrounded. Guardon tossed back his head. His curled horns reflected the crimson light of his sorcery. His eyes squinted with the exertion of the struggle. The daemon flapped his leathery wings and lofted his massive girth above the goblins. At least three dozen of the orcs and their kin pummeled the daemon and his attendants from below.

The majority of the remaining beholders were destroyed. They were hacked to pieces, unable to maneuver out of Guardon’s binding spell. The rest of the battered gorgons spun in the air erratically and retreated through their tunnels.

Flotsam and Jetsam attacked the daemon at close range, clawing at his tough hide with their blue claws. The Harad Ghul, goblins and orcs bashed at him.

At last the mighty Summoner landed on the brick floor. He knelt in a defensive posture as he continued to be struck from every possible angle.

“Enough!” he cried. “This is foolishness. Make your demands for I’ve had enough of this harassment.”

“Halt, My Soldiers!” said Rauros. “You have done well this day. Give us some room so that I may parlay with Guardon.”

The members of the goblin army did as they were ordered and backed away from the bronze daemon. They formed a ring of open space at the center of the crowded Council Chamber.

“I relinquish my claim to Gaea. Ankharet has proven to be a challenge for all of us, I’m sure. Let my Spires remain in peace and I give my word never to venture to your Plane again.”

“Very well, Guardon,” Rauros answered. “You have demonstrated your valiance in combat to us. We are willing to give you a second chance. Leave our region free of invasion and we will consent to a truce.”

“So be it, Goblin Leader. We have an understanding. I regret that the other residents of your Plane will not be so easily assuaged.”

The Gorgon King rose to his feet and lumbered to his Throne. He sat down and rested his head on his fist, pensively.

“Return with your army through the gateway, Assassin King,” Flotsam hissed. “We will remain here, where our power is at its peak. Perhaps we will yet recover the Orb of Paryphax after all.”

“Very well, Specters,” Rauros answered. “We thank you for your aid in dispatching the Dire Queen. You have our support and appreciation.”

The Leader of the Harad Ghul guided his forces through the crimson gateway.

* * * * *

Lord Taliesin and Gilead, the Key Mage, scanned the horizon beyond the foundation of Guardon’s Spires. They saw a group of spider-creatures standing outside the main gate.

There were scattered groups of Lykanthros who were connected with the rhythmic patterns emitted by the electric, blue lightning field. The electricity pulsed from the multitude of steeples and flying buttresses atop the massive fortress. The wolf-creatures did not interfere with the Arachnoids. The Lykanthros had an innate apprehension of the sturdy beings.

“These must be the same spider-creatures we saw through the portal in the Abyssal Cairn,” Gilead said. “They are opponents of the Lykanthros. Let us approach them and communicate if possible.”

The band of Gaean mercenaries marched forward to the tall gateway of The Spires. Dweeble Dworx saw the travelers drawing near and skittered up to meet them. He hummed a greeting to them using mind-song.

Welcome, Humanoids. Your halfling friend and others from your Plane battle inside the daemon’s fortress. We intended to help them but were thwarted by the charm spells of the gorgons. Venture within and assist their efforts. We will hold here and provide transportation for you if the need arises.

“Thank you, Arachnoid Friend. We saw your giant Hive as we approached. You creatures are adept and resourceful engineers. We Gaeans will travel onward but thank you for your offer,” said the Baroness.

The band of fighters passed through the walls outside the courtyard of the towering Spires. They marveled at the pair of guardian colossi that stood at the sides. Sharon gazed at the red-jeweled eyes of the ominous stone griffons.

“The rubies in those statues are the same as the one in the amulet found in the cave of the goblin bandits. It is evident that there has been trade and commerce between the Planes for some time,” observed the Liege Lady.

“We amazons also perceived unusual vibrations in the Ghastly Fens before the arrival of the Lykanthros invaders. The Dire Queen clearly sought both power and wealth through the spatial portals she created. It is good that she was interrupted from her agenda of magical manipulation. The fabric of the space-time continuum is not something to be toyed with for personal gain,” Jalhi said.

Gilead led the group of troll folk and anthromorphs into the structure of Guardon’s Spires. Bjorn Roundtree and his new-found friends were just completing their battle with the gorgons. They were helping Nighthawk to his feet after Anemone healed his injuries. The halfling turned to the arching doorway and recognized his friends.

“Taliesin, Gilead, Sharon, Leif! It’s good to see all of you. I’m enthralled that you are in good health. I take it that you sealed the portal in the Abyssal Cairn?”

The sprite-like halfling scampered to his friends and hugged them around the waist in greeting.

“We are equally heartened to find you in one piece, Mischievous Friend,” Leif said. “Our merry band was concerned for your welfare after you were dragged by Guardon into this Gorgon Plane.”

“I was captivated by his anklet,” Bjorn replied. “It has an intriguing latticework. I can’t speculate as to who made it. The delicate band was not fabricated by the clumsy daemon. It is a lingering mystery that I’m sure we’ll get to the bottom of eventually.”

The halfling pulled the sparkling trinket from his travel pack and briefly displayed its shiny composition to his friends.

“Let us seek the Leader of the Gorgons and his troll woman accomplice in these Spires. We Gaeans, stuck here in this Plane, are just as concerned for the future safety and welfare of our respective regions as you mercenaries are.”

“That is wise advice, Bjorn. We should divide ourselves into groups. The levels of this fortress are sure to hold unseen creatures and items beyond our ken. All of us have battle experience, now. Whatever challenges await us in this great stronghold will meet us with keen hands and fresh minds,” Taliesin said.

The fighters climbed the central stairway of the fortress and came upon a hallway that ended with three wooden doors.

“My wyverns and amazons will travel with Fangoz, Leif, Sigrid and Thorgrym through the left door,” said Jalhi. “We will hold our own and return to this hall once we have thoroughly explored the chambers within.”

“Gilead, Taliesin, Bors, Rodnik, Alex and I will take the central passage. If our suspicions are correct we will confront the daemon and the Dire Queen and eliminate them,” declared Lady Sharon.

“I will go with Nighthawk and his goblins, Reoren and the wood trolls, Gearzon, the Knights of Coermantyr and Mystic Down as well as the merfolk. We will explore the right path,” said Bjorn. “Our team will also return to this place once we have completed our reconnaissance within. May good fortune and victory be with all of you. We have the fate of Gaea resting on our shoulders.”

The enthusiastic halfling shook hands with each member of the group. The fighters and magic-users strapped their travel packs and held their blades and bows at the ready. They each opened their respective doors. The portals were not locked and swung open once pulled by brass handles attached to their centers.

* * * * *

Lady Redthorne, Baroness of Coermantyr, and her companions stood before a spiraling stairway. The carved stone steps were lit with torches. The stairway curled around a great, central pillar that reached up and down into the darkness of Guardon’s Spires. Additional lamps swung in the black void at altering heights,

descending from iron chains attached to the invisible ceiling hundreds of yards above.

“There are surely Lykanthros and unfriendly Denizens of the Under Earth down there,” said the amber-haired troll woman. “The Gorgon Plane is permeated with untamed magic. I wish we had the resources to fully explore the depths of this fortress. I wouldn’t be surprised if the misguided creatures that inhabit this Plane could be convinced of the peaceful intentions of the Gaeans and one day author a truce.”

“I agree, My Lady,” offered Alex. “The tampering of the Summoners in Arkadia has brought a new age upon us. We are destined to experience more contact throughout the Mandala of the Planes, as Restadicus called it, whatever the outcome of our current mission.”

The mercenaries began a careful march up the precipitous stairway, holding their swords and bows at the ready. Without warning a flock of vampire bats plummeted down from the shadows above.

One of the winged mammals attached its claws to Bors’ shoulder when Alex obliterated it with his green, wooden staff. The crushed body of the creature wailed as it spun erratically into the depths of the fortress.

Three more of the bats remained. Sharon wielded Xenon, her father’s sword, and divided one of them as it swooped at her in an attack maneuver.

Alex uttered a flame spell.

“Incenze!”

The top of his staff emitted a cone-shaped flame that scorched one of the circling vampire bats. Its fur and wings ignited and the mammal flew outward until it crashed into the stone wall beyond the hanging chains. The smoldering creature fell into the void.

The last of the bats lunged at Rodnik. The sturdy troll held his hatchet in his hands and bashed it squarely. The vampire bat was squashed by the impact and dropped lifeless onto the stone steps.

“Let us move on, My Friends,” yelled the Sergeant-at-Arms. “The Summoners await us above and must be dealt with.”

The flickering of the torches and creaking of the chains were the only noises in the central stairway of Guardon’s Spires. Taliesin and his acquaintances ascended the steps in silence for a while. An arching, stone bridge met with the great column. It bore a line of torches that reached to the outer wall of the cylindrical void.

“Shall we venture upward or follow this walkway?” asked Gilead.

“Let us traverse this bridge and divulge what awaits us at its terminus,” replied the Liege of Mystic Down.

The mercenaries marched along the bridge. They discovered that it was also an aqueduct. A shallow causeway carried a trickling stream of water from a pipeline bored through the stair column and extended through the doorway in the outside wall. The warriors strode through the opening and found themselves in a study room. Half-a-dozen oak tables were lined in two rows. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. It bore a multitude of brightly burning candles mounted on concentric rings. Shelves of leather-bound books covered all four walls.

An iron door stood closed at the opposite end. Gilead, the Key Mage of Coermantyr, pulled down his woolen hood. He knelt against the surface of it, pressing his ear to the metal.

“It is quiet within,” he said. “Let us take a moment to look over these tomes. They may provide us with clues as to the origin and motivation of the Summoners.”

Taliesin placed his foot on one of the oak benches and opened a book on the table while he held his sword at the ready.

“This book tells of a Plane of Chaos. It is said to be controlled by Thoth, a Demigod who thrives there. It also speaks of a group of Drystyx Monks who aid him. I can’t imagine who wrote this,” declared the Liege of Mystic Down. “It is authored by The Watcher.”

A sound of claws scratching on steel rasped from the door. The band of mercenaries wielded their weapons in preparation.

“Open the door, Gilead,” said the Baroness. “We shall learn who beckons us from within.”

The Key Mage of Coermantyr did as he was asked and flung open the unlocked, metal portal. He jumped clear of it, giving his friends space to contend with whoever lurked beyond.

“Please, harm me not.”

A gaunt, aged halfling cowered in the doorway.

“Long trapped in these Spires am I. In eons past troll mages sealed the Gorgon King here. Young then I was and watched as they blocked the rift to the Plane of Chaos with the great Gong Seal. Greedy I was and covetous of alien jewels. Many have I found since I sneaked through the gateway of the troll wizards. The Daemon King was enraged at first, when separated from his master. Resigned he has become to live here and command his wolf-beast soldiers. In this modest library Guardon consented to let me keep records. Lower your weapons, please.”

The huddled halfling knelt in supplication before the Gaeans.

“Long ago I forgot my name. Call me Watcher, if you will. For the many years I’ve patrolled these Spires that is what I’ve done.”

“So be it, Watcher,” Lord Taliesin answered. “Lead us to Guardon’s Chamber, if you recall its location. You are a Gaeon, like us. We welcome you to return with us to our Home Realm if our mission succeeds.”

“Thank you, Great Warriors. I can see that you are here because of the recent experiments of Guardon and the Dire Queen. Saddened I was to see the hordes of Lykanthros swarm through their rift. Perhaps I will see Mystic Down again, after all.”

The Watcher smiled. Several of his teeth were missing.

“Lead you I will to the Audience Chamber of the Daemon King. Perilous, the route is, however. To reach him directly, only the beholders are able. The network of vertical tunnels they use, which run throughout these Spires. Follow me, Fellow Gaeans. A way to the top I know of, but beware of the minions of Guardon and Thoth. Throughout these chambers they hunt and lurk. To defeat the monsters and the winged architect of this edifice reach, take it will all of our martial resources.”

The gray halfling scurried through the iron door of his library. He beckoned to Lord Taliesin and Gilead for their party of warriors to follow. The Watcher drew an oak shaft and wrapped the head in strips of cloth he carried in his modest waist pack. He opened a small, pewter box and blew onto the smoldering embers it contained. The glowing fibers flared red. The ancient halfling touched the top of his makeshift torch to the tinderbox. It ignited and cast light onto the darkened hallway. The Gaeon mercenaries stood close to him and their shadows formed eerie, writhing shapes on the cinder-block columns.

“Follow me,” said the decrepit humanoid. “Bonded I am with these Spires and over the years have come to know them well.”

He scurried deeper into the passage and gasped. A gathering of kobolds and beholders arose from their encampment. The single-eyed creatures addressed Lord Taliesin and his companions.

“Venture not into this fortress. It is a possession of the gorgons and their allies.”

“Yes,” another beholder said, “We act on the bidding of Thoth to serve Guardon. Refrain from dallying here.”

“Flee now, while you yet live,” declared a Kobold Sergeant.

The wiry-framed being was armed with a short lance, as were his kindred. His spiky, black hair was shaved close at the temples and cast a jagged, porcupine-like shadow on the ceiling behind him.

“We will not turn, Kobold Sergeant,” Sharon answered. “The Knights of Coermantyr have long grappled with the devious machinations of the Arkadian Summoners. My father fell in battle with the goblins. I wield his blade now and yet seek vengeance for his untimely death.”

The armored Baroness stepped forward and swung her sword, Xenon, downward. It struck the Leader of the Kobolds on the collarbone. The hook-nosed lancer was knocked off balance and fell backward, under the beholders.

The eyes of the stone-colored creatures reflected the light of The Watcher’s torch in various hues as the sinews of their large irises dilated with anger. As the gorgons rushed toward Taliesin he hefted his broadsword in a reverse grip. The sturdy troll lifted his arms above his head and thrust the point of his blade through the eye of the nearest creature. It screamed in agony as the Liege Lord continued his charge, pumping his knees high into the spherical beast. At last he brought his arms down, running the creature through entirely and pinning it to the brick floor. The burly Troll Paladin stomped one foot on the nailed beholder, making a gross, crunching sound. He gave his down-turned blade a final twist and pulled it free.

The standing kobolds and gorgons attacked the Gaeans en masse. Gilead, the Key Mage of Coermantyr, spoke a harnessing spell.

“Tractos!”

A blue ribbon of energy extended from his outstretched hands. He guided the Ethereal Cord like a lariat and trapped the kobolds in its viscous energy. As the humanoids struggled, stunned by his incantation, Gilead drew a thin dagger and slew three of them.

The remaining beholders gnashed at Rodnik and Bors with their needle-like fangs. One of the creatures spat a fireball at the Sergeant-at-Arms. The blond troll batted it away with his rondache.

The Gaeans attacked in unison, quickly destroying the last of their opponents. The gaping maw of the unguarded passage lay before them.

“Carry on, we must,” said The Watcher. “Sure to know of our whereabouts the Daemon Lord is. Among themselves the gorgons communicate telepathically as well.”

The path that extended before the mercenaries was marked on both sides by numerous doors. They opted to continue down the main hall and explore the secondary chambers at a later time.

The walls of the hall widened and opened upon a spacious Conference Room. The Gaeen travelers were surprised to see a gathering of sturdy humanoids clustered around a Throne. At the perimeter of the room stood a number of doorways that extended downward into the Under Earth of the Gorgon Plane.

“I haven’t seen folk of this type before,” Lady Sharon offered. “They resemble the dwarves of legend, written of in the tomes of Coermantyr. I wonder if they found a spatial rift in their diggings in the Arkadian Mountains and chose to migrate here in search of alien jewels.”

“Let us approach them and discern whether they will assist us or otherwise give us passage into the upper levels of this fortress,” said Gilead. “I recognize the braided beards and whiskers of these people from aged renderings kept by Restadicus in Coermantyr Castle. If memory serves the dwarves aided the troll folk in their struggles with Summoners and Illusionaries in eons past. It wouldn’t surprise me if we can convince them to grant us passage into this system of tunnels.”

Lady Sharon’s Key Mage stepped forward into the Chamber. As the light of the standing torches shone on his woolen garb the dwarves turned to face him. They gasped in a rumbling tone. A pair of the short, bearded warriors strode to the tall troll and introduced themselves.

“Salutations, we are the Maegar. It is clear that you are from Gaea, like us. My name is Drumtone,” a red-bearded dwarf declared. “My brother here is Oxholm.”

The blond dwarf nodded his head in greeting.

“Our people mined the ore and metal veins in the Arkadian Mountain Range for many generations. We decided to leave, however. The lairs of the pale, Stalactite Orcs and Goblins in Mount Crow have proliferated since the subjugation of the stone trolls and maverick wizards. It has become impossible to raise sheep or youngsters amid their perpetual invasions.”

“We have not been pleased with the rampant experimentation of the Dire Queen and her daemon companion.”

“Neither have we,” the Key Mage offered. “I am Gilead, Key Mage of Coermantyr.”

The troll shook hands with the two dwarves.

Perhaps we can convince your Leader that we Gaeans have a common cause and should unite. The power of the Summoners is limited beyond this Realm. If we can incapacitate or destroy them peace will once again return to our regions.”

“Very well, Troll Magician,” said Oxholm. “Your friends are welcome to enter our Council Chamber. Let us march together to the Throne of our Maegar Chieftain, Grumbold. He will be heartened to see the arrival of experienced fighters and magic-users. Our Leader has grown weary of the constant harassment of the daemon’s gorgon advisors.”

Gilead gestured for Taliesin and his companions to join him in the Main Hall of the Arkadian Dwarves. The mercenaries readily emerged from the shadowy passage and strode with the Key Mage and his newfound friends through the sizeable gathering of male and female dwarves. They formed a semicircle before Grumbold’s Throne. The mature dwarf’s gray beard and mustache were braided and hung to his chest. His wrinkled brow bore a golden circlet, indicating his leadership of the Maegar Clan.

“Welcome, Fellow Gaeans,” the Dwarf King rumbled. “Our spies have brought news of your approach for some hours now. We found residence here in an attempt to acquire a haphazard existence away from the haranguing orcs and goblins. There was a time when my people roamed free through the Arkadian Mountains. The segregation of the stone trolls has caused a military imbalance in the mountains. The goblins now run free over our hills, making mining and farming impossible. As you can see we sealed our tunnels and passed through a spatial portal deep in the Under Earth for the safety of our offspring. Can you aid us in bringing an end to the sacrifices we must leave for the harassing beholders?”

“We can, Maegar King,” said Taliesin. “Grant us the aid of some of your elite warriors and we will concentrate our efforts to gain liberty for all the regions of Gaea.”

“Very well,” Grumbold replied. “Drumtone and Oxholm, venture into the upper tunnels with these troll warriors. Parlay with the Chaotic Summoners or destroy them if they will not consent to peace. I give you my blessing.”

“You have our thanks, Maegar Chieftain,” said Lady Sharon. “Your loyalty will be noted in the annals of the Lore Masters in Coermantyr. Be assured that civility will one day be restored to the mines in Arkadia.”

The blond and red-haired dwarf warriors joined Taliesin and his band. They marched through one of the few portals that inclined upward rather than downward.

Grumbold's dwarves beat their tribal drums and bellowed a war song as they exited their Council Chamber.

As the fighters marched along the serpentine passage they passed many cracks and roughly hewed doorways. The cries of kobolds and beholders emanated from deep in the stone walls.

"Let us not dally here," said Drumtone. "We must conserve our energy to contend with the creatures that guard the passages ahead. These beasts are engaged in their own affairs and will not hinder us if undisturbed."

The trickling of subterranean streams rushed through the air. At times the atmosphere was damp, indicating the proximity of hidden brooks.

The Watcher's torch continued to burn a slow, steady flame. Many of the rocks sparkled with metallic fragments.

"Strange stones there are in this Plane. Subjected to titanic pressures the Under Earth was eons ago. Enough jewels to last several lifetimes have I found in these tunnels. Alas, trade them all I would for safe passage to Mystic Down and my halfling kindred."

"Aye, Halfling, the Maegar have also found many precious stones. It is a shame that this Plane is dominated by such aggressive rulers. We have forged many fine tools and weapons since our arrival here. We dwarves wish more than all else to adequately distribute the arms into the proper hands so that the orcs may be driven from our mountain villages."

"These tunnels are circuitous and confusing. We are blessed to have your guidance, Maegar Dwarves," said Lady Sharon.

"We have mined the veins of copper in this ore-laden granite. The pressurized rock of this Plane is indeed replete with jewels," offered Oxholm.

Alex uttered a spell of incandescence.

"Ignis!"

The top of his green, wood staff became alight with a golden halo. It allowed the Gaeans to gaze farther into the network of interconnected mine shafts.

"You dwarves are capable spelunkers. Many of these rocks appear freshly hewed," said the apprentice wizard.

The band of mercenaries marched for another hour. Frequently the trail curled back on itself, giving the illusion of walking in a circle. Lord Taliesin perceived that the path was spiraling upward continuously.

The fighters reached a spacious cavern that was nearly filled by a lake. Several cascades gushed into the chamber from openings in the rocks above. Sharon paused

to kneel at the lake's edge. She cupped her hand in the shimmering pool and brought the water to her lips.

"Its fresh," she declared. "I wonder if Guardon's Spires were formed from an ancient mountain range. I suspect that there is a high water table. It wouldn't surprise me if our dwarf friends have divulged secrets in these mines unknown to the Daemon Lord himself."

The warriors paused to fill their leather and gourd flasks with the mountain water. They had hardly strapped their canisters and flagons to their belts when a group of gorgons and Lykanthros emerged from an opening at the far end of the lake's shore.

The wolf-beasts howled. Their feral cries echoed over the stalagmites and stalactites that permeated the surface of the water.

"Grr! This chamber belongs to Guardon," said a large Lykanthros. "The wolf pack is weary of the gathering Hive Builders. The Daemon Lord has brought order to our dens. We fight in his name, now, and that of the Dire Queen, Ankharet."

"So do we, Gaeans," bellowed a large, red beholder. "I am Sordryx. We have also grown weary of the intrusion of you dwarves. The jewel offerings we received did not include unlimited exploration of these corridors."

"I am sorry to hear that, Sordryx," said Taliesin. "We are here on legitimate business. Our regions have been upturned and thrown into disarray by the invading Lykanthros. They have slain our livestock unnecessarily and destroyed our crops. Guardon and Ankharet must bring a halt to their tampering with the spatial portals. We are here to convince them of that at all costs."

Alex and Gilead combined their abilities to generate a ring of shielding.

"Fensores!" yelled the Mages of Coermantyr.

An opaque sphere surrounded the group of Gaeans.

"Fear this day have I," said The Watcher. "Long have I avoided the great beholders and their wolf pets. Now inevitable the conflict is."

The Lykanthros charged to the shield and grappled with it. They clawed at the wall of energy with their claws and fangs. Bors and Rodnik did not hesitate and swung their weapons through the energy field, bludgeoning a pair of the attackers.

Sordryx and the lesser gorgons united to emit a charm person spell. Their single eyes focused on the Gaeans as they vibrated their antennae, creating an eerie, subdued harmony.

The Watcher swooned under the effect of the spell.

"Sleepy I feel. Rest I must."

The rickety, old halfling lay on the rocky shore of the lake. His lips flapped as he began to snore.

Gilead released a barrage of electric pulses. He directed the missiles at the Lykanthros as he repeatedly cried the charging spell.

“Solus!”

Half a dozen of the wolf-beasts were scorched severely and threw themselves wholeheartedly into the lake to extinguish their blazing fur. The remaining Lykanthros slashed desperately at the translucent barrier. Their leader struck it hard and broke through the mage’s shield.

Sharon had her bow ready and fired a pair of shots at the aggressors. Both bolts struck their marks and brought the creatures down. The remaining wolf-creatures and lesser beholders attacked the mercenaries at close range.

Taliesin swung his weapon in arching strokes, slicing and maiming at will. Several of the stone-colored beasts spat fireballs at the armored Paladin. His armor was resilient, however, and deflected the blasts completely.

Rodnik and Bors destroyed the last of the Lykanthros and turned their attention to the levitating gorgons. The sphere-shaped beings fought fiercely with the tough, Gaeian warriors. They were no match for their sturdy arms and hammering weapons.

Gilead and Alex united their energies once again to create a ring of ice.

“Crystalix!”

The attacking beholders were frozen into blue shards. They dropped to the rocky floor and shattered into a myriad of pieces.

The fighters next turned their attention to Sordryx, who hovered over the center of the subterranean lake.

The giant, red gorgon enchanted a forceful, charm person spell. Its massive, crimson antennae protruded over the deep water as it pointed them at the troll folk.

The Baroness was entranced by the atonal melody. She gasped and knelt on the rocks at the lake’s edge.

“Carry on, My Friends. I am overcome by this alien magic.”

Gilead and Alex fired successive volleys of electric missiles at the giant creature.

“Trentak!”

The fast-flying blasts of energy struck Sordryx. The girth of the being was at least eighteen yards in diameter. The spherical creature wobbled off kilter from the impact. The gorgon moaned and dipped into the water until halfway submerged.

Lord Taliesin, Bors and Rodnik lofted their weapons in preparation. Drumtone and Oxholm did the same.

The beholder was enraged by the attack and rose, dripping wet from the frigid lake. It charged the troll folk, creating a cresting wake in the surface of the lake as it blew over. Sordryx smashed into the fighters, knocking them off their feet. They regained their balance quickly and lunged at the giant creature, burying their weapons into its thick body to the hilt.

The being rose from the lake's shore with the fighters still clinging to their weapons lodged in its perimeter. The weight of their armored bodies was too great, however. Their swords and axes ripped through the beast. Gravity pulled them down as Sordryx ascended. The mercenaries' weapons came together at the bottom of the hulking body. Their bodies collided and they fell several feet to the ground, weapons in hand.

The giant beholder moaned from its pouring injuries and floated erratically over the lake. It sank slowly into the murky depths.

Sharon and The Watcher awoke from the charm spell.

"What happened?" asked the Baroness.

"The great beholder was strong, but we succeeded in sending it to the bottom of this subterranean lake," Gilead replied. "Are you two alright?"

"Fine, I am. Simply a nap I needed."

"Let us move through the opening at the far end of this beach. I'll wager since many of Guardon's Denizens are traveling through that place it must lead to his Throne Room," said Lady Sharon.

The band of mercenaries did as the Baroness of Coermantyr suggested and marched across the stony beach without any sign of Sordryx or the lesser beholders. The light of Alex's staff and The Watcher's torch shone brightly in the drafty cavern.

The fighters entered a narrow passage carved through the stone of Guardon's Spires.

"The Maegar Dwarves have not previously ventured this far," Drumtone declared. "The mines of our people in the Arkadian Mountains extended more deeply. We haven't had the time to enlarge our settlement in this Plane."

"Often have I wondered about the juxtaposition of the Realms within the Mandala of the Planes," said The Watcher. "The Planes that are known; earth, fire, wood, water, electricity, air, chaos and order by Gaeans are rarely contacted. Ironically our Realm, it seems, has become a hub of sorts, a terminus if you will. If Mystic Down and Coermantyr I reach, consult I will with Restadicus and the troll

folk at Bard's Inn. Upon us a new age burgeons. Make preparations for the impending battle the warriors of Gaea must. But a pawn in a larger power struggle amid arcane Entities is the Daemon Lord, Guardon."

"I fear this is the case, Aged Halfling," offered Gilead. "I have long researched the histories and records in the library of Coermantyr. They frequently spoke of this distribution of elemental forces within the Planar Mandala. I can only guess as to the fullest reaches of these Dharmic Segments."

The tunnel curled upward for some time. The mercenaries continued to hear the trickling of underground water sources running through the rocks. Many of the stones sparkled with crystals and precious metals embedded in the metallic ore. The subterranean passage widened. Taliesin and his friends strode past circular portals hewed in the walls. They were created for the passage of the legless beholders. Gashes and strands of fur were left from the prowling of the Lykanthros hordes.

"We have traveled upward for some distance," said Lady Redthorne. "We must be parallel with Guardon's Council Chamber."

The tunnel curled upward to the left once more. It ended abruptly at a steel door. It had no knob or keyhole.

"Quiet, we should remain," whispered The Watcher. "This portal blocks the entrance to the Throne Room. You magic users must concert your energies to move it asunder."

The fighters stood back as Alex and Gilead focused their attention at the door. They incanted a forceful heat spell.

"Plasmos!"

Waves of heat filled the stone passage. The steel door creaked and popped as it became super-heated from within. Glowing, molten metal pooled around the threshold. At last a hole appeared at the center of the door. It continued to melt. Alex stepped forward and used the base of his green, wood staff to slough away the last of the crimson paste.

The Gaeans marched through the doorway and found themselves in Guardon's Council Chamber. The large daemon sat on his stone Dais. He gazed at the troll folk, dwarves and halfling as they entered his room.

"You are too late. Ankharet is dead. The Harad Ghul killed her with the help of those malevolent specters. I have relinquished my claim to the Gaeon Plane. You have my word that the Lykanthros will leave your regions free of invasion."

"So be it, Guardon," replied Lord Taliesin. "Your wolf-creatures were creating a great nuisance to the welfare of our livestock and crops. It is unfortunate that the

renegade troll woman could not be assuaged with peaceful means. If you agree to leave our lands free of harassment then we have no quarrel.”

“That does not include us, Humanoids.”

Flotsam and Jetsam flew into the chamber from a window overlooking the red hills.

“We act at the behest of Thoth. He brought Guardon here ages ago and wishes that the rift be re-opened to the Plane of Chaos.”

“Do not attempt that, Specters,” ordered the Daemon Lord. “Thoth fathered me in ancient times but is too unruly an Entity to be allowed access to Gaea or this Plane. Your intentions will bring the destruction of the Dharmic Equilibrium as we know it.”

“So be it. The Drystyx Monks have their own agenda. They will fill in the Ethereal Offices held by you and the troll folk. Clear the way, now, so that we may rupture the Gong Seal at your feet.”

“I refuse,” Guardon answered, “and I’m sure these Gaeans reflect my sentiments.”

“Verily, Daemon Lord,” Taliesin intoned.

The mercenaries wielded their weapons. Gilead, the Key Mage of Coermantyr, assailed the specters with a harnessing spell.

“Mezclix!”

A luminescent, red matrix appeared before the adept mage. He gestured toward the specters with his hands and the mesh hurled forward. It wrapped itself around the translucent beings, restraining their movement as they hovered over the Gong Seal.

“This is an outrage,” cried Jetsam. “I demand that you leave us. We will not be thwarted by your childish pranks.”

Guardon rose from his Throne and strode quickly to the struggling specters. He grabbed their restraining net and hurled the bundle against the wall. The blue of the Entities and the red of the matrix burst into a cloud of magical fragments. The Daemon Lord flung his arms through the Ephemeral Mist in an attempt to prevent the specters from reconstituting.

His plan did not work. The fragments that had been Flotsam and Jetsam swirled together in a homogenous mass. The blue energy condensed into an angular, drill shape. It spun rapidly as it descended, boring a large hole through the Gong Seal at the floor of the chamber. As the tip of the spiral broke through the other side of the barrier a vent of steam jetted into the room. Guardon and the Gaeans were thrown against the walls, losing their balance. A jagged crease ran across the diameter of the

magic seal. It split in a thundering boom and was ripped downward into the Plane of Chaos.

Electric bolts writhed from the rift. A voice rumbled into the Throne Room.

“Your work is done, My Son. Return to our abode. My monks and I will secure this plane for our own purposes.”

A pair of gargantuan, clawed hands gripped the sides of the rift. A great, red, draconian head rose into the room. The air was permeated with an acrid, sulfuric odor.

“No, Father,” Guardon answered, “You are not meant to venture here. The Dharmic Equilibrium of the Mandala of the Planes exists to maintain a kharmic balance among the cosmic energies. You know this as well as I. I will prevent you from usurping these Higher Planes for they are neutral ground in the System of Worlds.”

The winged daemon flew over the rift and grappled his father’s massive head. He wrestled and twisted it. The manifestation of Thoth in dragon form howled with frustration. His red, horned head shook from side to side violently but Guardon would not release his grip.

Guardon addressed the Gaeans from his awkward position.

“Mercenaries, return to your Plane. You must regroup and return here. I will seal this breach but it will not last. My father is ambitious and won’t be turned easily from this opportunity.”

The bronze-skinned Leader of the Gorgons gestured into the Throne Room with a free hand. A spatial rift opened. On the other side stood the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens.

Guardon flapped his leathery wings forcefully and pushed Thoth down into the Plane of Chaos. Lord Taliesin and his friends heard the cries and howls of the titanic battle from above. Gusts of caustic flame and pummeled beholders were flung from the rift. A silver disc of magic appeared in the place where the Gong Seal had been. It congealed and became a plug of hardened, black clay. The cacophony of the feud between father and son was cut off.

The Gaeans looked at one another as they rose to their feet. Their breath and weapons were the only audible sounds.

“Alas, broken the Gong Seal is. Return to Gaea we should. Strong the Lore Masters are and Siegemunde too. Help us they can and prepare us they will for the coming War of the Planes,” The Watcher said.

He shook his head and lifted his modest travel pack for the return home.

“The halfling is correct,” observed the Baroness of Coermantyr. “Our ancestors waged campaigns of this nature. We must consult with the historic tomes and gain the advice of the Council of Mages. Bjorn Roundtree and the others will eventually arrive in this Chamber and return to the Crossroads. I will leave a note for them to return to our Home Plane and meet us in the Burial Ruins of the lich folk.”

Lady Redthorne scrawled her message on a sheet of parchment. She posted the letter at the head of Guardon’s Throne with a jeweled dagger.

“That is appropriate, Baroness. We all can use some rest and a solid meal before dealing with these Drystyx Monks. Let’s go, My Friends. There is yet much work to do,” said Lord Taliesin.

The mercenaries marched through Guardon’s spatial breach. They were relieved to set foot on Gaeon soil. Alex and Oxholm gathered what dry wood they could find to build a campfire. The fighters gazed at the crimson-edged portal from time to time. It was impossible to conceal their concern for Bjorn and their other comrades yet to emerge from Guardon’s Spires.

* * * * *

Bjorn stood at the end of another long hallway. A sequence of torches burned brightly. Whoever lit them was nowhere to be seen. The halfling looked toward the end of the lengthy passage.

“This fortress is mysterious,” declared Reoren. “I have not previously encountered such a structure. Its builders surely intended to confuse and deflect any would-be invaders.”

A band of Stalactite Orcs and Lykanthros rushed through the doorway at the opposite end of the hall. A trio of large beholders accompanied them; each of the stone-colored beasts was at least ten feet in diameter.

The pale humanoids were short and quick. They carried curved lances and sprinted down the brightly-lit corridor. The orcs clashed with the armored Knights of Mystic Down and Coermantyr.

The sound of the ensuing melee echoed along the walls, making it seem louder than it already was. The Knights of Coermantyr parried the thrusting blades of the orcs tactfully and counter-attacked a number of them. A pair of the jagged-toothed creatures was stabbed severely and slumped to the floor, unconscious. The soldiers of Mystic Down opted for broadswords and swung at the Lykanthros aggressively. They lunged forward at the slavering wolf-creatures, dipping so far that a knee touched the floor. As the tips of their blades penetrated the hairy bodies of the

Lykanthros they twisted their swords before turning and rendering a fatal blow to the head.

Marlin, Anemone and the blue-skinned merfolk ran in from the flanks. They employed their curved daggers to finish off the grappling wolf-beasts.

Reoren and Gearzon rushed at the giant beholders. The single-eyed creatures cast circular shadows on the walls and ceiling as they hovered to the warriors. The gnome engineer clutched weighty wrenches in his strong hands. He wasn't tall enough to attack them face-to-face but swung his steel tools upward from below. The claws of his wrenches broke through the tough tissue of the beasts. When he pulled them free to swing again he was covered in a cascade of green blood. The beholder he was targeting howled in pain and rotated to identify its attacker. As soon as the giant eye was in range Gearzon struck it hard.

Bjorn assailed the spherical creatures with sharpened stones hurled from his sling. Several of the howling gorgons were gashed deep wounds by the missiles and slumped lifeless to the floor.

Gnoll and the strong wood trolls came to the aid of their gnome friend. They battled the beholders with the help of Nighthawk's goblins and vanquished them. The fighters peered down the hallway in which they stood.

"The malevolence of this massive fortress is palpable," said the Arborean Guard. "It represents a negative energy that is surely meant to drain Gaea of its resources. Our friends are moving through this stronghold in separate paths. They must converge at the Throne Room of the Gorgon King. Let's move onward and learn what we can of the architecture of this mountainous structure."

The friends marched on. They came upon a steel door. It had an ornate knob designed to resemble a gargoyle's head. The halfling, Bjorn, beckoned to Reoren, the lich merchant, to approach.

"Give us some light, Ghoul-Troll. There is a mechanism in this knob which may be convinced to open the portal."

"Certainly, Bjorn," answered the tall trader.

The amateur magic-user enchanted a spell of illumination.

"Lumus, luminares!"

The cloaked Gaeon acquired a halo of golden light. It shone brightly and allowed the halfling to focus on the task at hand. Bjorn withdrew a small set of tools from his travel pack. He tinkered within the metal teeth of the gargoyle knob. The sound of twisting gears was followed by a loud snap as the bolts were thrown free of

the cinder-block wall. The halfling gripped the knob in his pudgy hands and twisted it forcefully. It rotated in a semicircle and the door opened inward.

The fighters beheld a vast cavern. It reached far into the hewn rock of Guardon's Spires. The limits of the rift in the Under Earth lay beyond the range of Reoren's light. A myriad of stalagmites and stalactites penetrated the environment.

"It must have taken centuries for these mineral columns to form from the dripping water," said Gearzon.

"There are similar structures in the Arkadian Mountains. I'm sure orcs and goblins would be as much at home here as they are in their native region," Nighthawk observed.

"I sense a magical disturbance above us," said Anemone. "The Orb of Paryphax hums from the conflict."

The merwoman withdrew the glinting sphere from her bodice and dangled it from her webbed fingers. The crystalline orb shimmered with waves of undulating light. Its emanations ranged from deep crimson to bright green.

"Skjold's Orb has always been highly responsive to flaring sorcery," Gnoll intoned. "When he lived he frequently warned us of impending storms and blizzards days in advance."

"I detect the struggle within the Planar Mandala as well, My Friends," said Reoren.

The tall lich-troll directed his view upward as he attempted to focus on the source of the rippling energy.

"Lord Taliesin and Baroness Sharon have reached Guardon's Throne Room. I'm sure of it," declared Anemone. "There is a driving energy pushing at the Gong Seal far above us. Lord Dagon spoke of it many times as an ancient barrier between the Gorgon Plane and the Plane of Chaos. I fear that the magicians who sought the Orb of Paryphax took drastic measures to retrieve it. It may well have proven their undoing. I perceive untamed Entities that grind at the aged seal with their own volition and motives."

A turbulent temblor shook through the walls and floor. Numbers of boulders and stalactites were dislodged from the stone ceiling and plummeted aimlessly to the distant ground. The agile Gaeans evaded the falling rock deftly. Chunks of ore and minerals shattered into chalky fragments when they collided with the chamber floor at high speed.

"The Seal has been breached!" cried Anemone.

Her merfolk supported her as she swooned from the shock of the rending of the Dharmic Equilibrium.

“I suspect this is the result of the tampering of the specters that Themistokles summoned in Mystic Down to retrieve the orb. They are not of this Plane or Gaea. The Entities must work at the bidding of Thoth and the Drystyx Monks who attend him,” said Bjorn.

“Our regions remain in jeopardy as long as the Planes are linked. At all else we should rendezvous with our friends and return to the Council Chamber of the Lore Masters. Restadicus can help us still and consult with his fellow mages to find a way to bring harmony to our lands.”

The earthquake stopped and the warriors marched forward into the spacious cavern. Bjorn noticed the terrain vaulted downward precipitously, forcing the travelers to take care not to lose their balance.

The stone outcroppings protruding from the pebbly soil became large and monolithic. Another wave of energy permeated the chamber with increased intensity. The Gaeans lost their footholds and struggled to grasp the great boulders in order to regain their balance. The rocks tilted inward.

“Beware, My Friends!” Gearzon yelled. “Stay away from these pillars lest you be crushed.”

The stones closed in upon the fighters unimpeded. Despite the warning of the gnome engineer they were unable to roll free. The boulders rose upward violently. A giant, granite face peered down at the mercenaries with glowing, amethyst eyes.

A booming, female voice laughed.

“I have you now, Fleshlings. Your raucous stumbling awakened me from my slumber. I am Petra. What business have you this deep in The Spires of the Gorgon King?”

“We are here to bring about an Era of Peace in our regions,” said Bjorn. “The random, spatial rifts that appeared throughout Gaea trapped us here. Our races have united with the intention of sealing the invasive breaches that Guardon and Ankharet have been using to usurp and harass our villages.”

“Release us from your grip, if you please, Stone Giant. We have business to attend to within this fortress and cannot linger here,” said Nighthawk.

“As you wish, Warriors. You seem harmless enough. Terranoids are cautious folk and have thrived within this mineral-laden earth for eons. The recent turbulence from the opened breach above has created a disharmony among us as I’m sure you have also detected,” Petra said.

She lowered her massive, rocky hands to the pebbly ground and allowed the many Knights and fighters to disembark.

“The power struggle within the Planar Mandala continues. There is sure to be a fight now that the Great Seal has been shattered. In ages past, Gaeon wizards stood here as you do now with the same goals in mind. They succeeded in ending the invasions conducted by Thoth. Until recently his devious agenda has been sequestered to the Plane of Chaos. I regret that the meddling of the Summoners above has brought about this new challenge. You look like a collection of hardy and stalwart individuals. If anyone is up to the task of liberating the Planes surely it is you,” the stone giant declared.

The mountainous Terranoid addressed Anemone.

“Merwoman, I have a favor to ask of you. Please entrust me with the Orb of Paryphax. The rifts between the Planes have become numerous now and are certain to see the passage of opposing forces in the near future. I will secure the orb of the late Wood Mage in the Terranoid Midden. It will remain safe until such time as the wood trolls have established tranquility in Arborea. I promise to then return it to the tower of its creation.”

“That is a good idea, Petra. We have studied tablets describing the Terranoid race in our coral libraries. You are a trustworthy people and can help us to keep the orb out of the wrong hands.”

The blue-skinned Dagonite lifted the orb and chain from her neck and strode to the massive, stone hand of the giant woman. She climbed onto the granite palm and lay the orb there. Anemone returned to her companions.

“We will venture further into this cavern, Stone Giant,” declared Bjorn. “Our friends can use our help above and each of us misses home. We will consult with Restadicus and the Lore Masters of Coermantyr upon our return to Gaea. They will devise a plan of action to set things straight for all of us. You have our thanks.”

“Very well, Fleshlings. We will await your return,” Petra rumbled.

The subterranean chamber beyond Petra’s Midden widened further. The stalagmites and stalactites extending from the floor and ceiling achieved immense proportions. The minerals from which they had solidified contained multicolored shards of metal and silicon. As the light of Reoren’s magic halo flickered past the columns they sparkled with purple and green crystals.

“The solidity of this Realm is tangible,” said Nighthawk. “Whatever primordial forces created Gaea installed just as much energy into this Gorgon Plane and perhaps others as well.”

The goblin soldier's expression reflected his amazement at the size of the great cavern.

"I wonder if Guardon's Lykanthros and beholders had the courage to venture this deep into the structure of The Spires," Bjorn pondered aloud. "Reoren, is there any chance you can intensify the light of your incantation? This morass is wide. I sense a draft and moisture in the air. A large body of water must be close."

"I will do as you suggest, My Halfling Friend. I have reviewed my arcane manual since our arrival in this Plane."

The skeletal lich-troll uttered a different sorcery.

"Luminex!"

His halo became a disk of light, much like the rings around planets he'd seen through Siegemunde's spyglass. The mercenaries saw clearly to the outer limits of the cave. They were indeed at the edge of a mysterious, iridescent lake. The syrupy surface of the water reflected the light strangely. The ubiquitous breeze created ripples that shone red and blue to the naked eye.

"This pool radiates in an unusual manner," Gnoll observed. "It may not be wise to drink of it."

"I'll test it," Bjorn volunteered.

The sprite-like halfling strode across the pebbly beach to the edge of the natural reservoir. He dipped his furry toe into the meniscus. It generated a sequence of waves that reached across the surface. The ripples broadened and rebounded off the opposing shores. As the waves initiated by Bjorn returned to where the warriors stood they bubbled and coalesced.

"Be careful, My Allies," Marlin warned. "This lake is not as it seems. There are living Entities at work here."

In verification of the Dagonite Captain's words, cylindrical columns rose from the body of water.

"Look at the ceiling!" Gearzon cried.

A second lake of equal magnitude pooled on the top of the immense cavern. Similar, gelatinous columns descended from the surface aloft. They met and intertwined with those on the bottom and formed a myriad of glowing pillars. The largest cylinders mingled at the center of the two reservoirs.

Reoren beckoned to the Knights of Coermantyr, Mystic Down and the Dagonites.

"Gather before me, Staunch Soldiers. We must prepare ourselves for a defensive maneuver if the need arises."

The merchant lich-troll enchanted a spell of shielding.

“Protex!”

A red ring of warding covered the perimeter of the sizeable party. The warriors drew and wielded their respective weapons.

A number of the pillars writhed across the water and stood on the shore. They hesitated for a moment, then assumed humanoid forms, much like the Gaeans. The composition of the magical Entities was simple. Each translucent figure was arbitrarily amorphous. They contained blue and red nuclei with nerve fibers under their skin-like outer membranes.

Reflecting the appearance of the fighters, the underground creatures positioned their nuclei within their head-like extensions, thus mimicking the eyes of the troll folk.

The largest of the beings hummed a bass vibration that resembled speech.

“We heard you vertebrates communicating and will attempt to meld our language with yours. We are Morphozoids. Our colony has sensed magical turbulence shaking through the boulders above. We have already discussed the ramifications of these signs among ourselves and expected the arrival of the forces that countermanded the machinations of the Gorgon King and his Summoner Mistress.”

“The aggressive wolf-creatures and spherical beholders have disturbed our rest and Council many times. The Principle Amoebids are glad you’re here. Call me Driptwist. I’ve been delegated to assist you in bringing an end to the disturbances that emanate above.”

“Very well, Morphozoid Driptwist,” Reoren answered. “Forgive our surprise at the emergence of you strange creatures.”

The gaunt lich-troll gestured casually, dissolving his precautionary barrier.

“You look just as weird to us, Friend,” Driptwist replied. “It will benefit you to know that I can direct you to a tunnel. It will take us upward, ultimately to the Throne Room of the Gorgon King himself.”

“This is good news,” answered Bjorn. “Let us venture onward and meet up with our friends.”

The band of Gaeans followed the gelatinous being along the edge of the lake housing the colony of amorphous creatures. They entered a narrow passage that spiraled upward.

The amicable Morphozoid led the fighters in a steady march for some time. At last they reached the place where Gilead and Alex brought down the steel door

blocking Guardon's Chamber. The number of warriors strode within and beheld the black, clay seal filling the space where the Gong Seal had been. The portal to the Ghastly Fens stood open over the proscenium.

"Alas, the Gong Seal is breached," said Gnoll. "For ages it stood. There is bound to be a war now. The Gaeon Mages did what they could to close the portal to the Plane of Chaos. Their barrier will not hold, for the forces that Skjold spoke of are desperate to tap the resources of the Orb of Paryphax and the Denizens of the Higher Realms."

Nighthawk examined Guardon's Dais.

"There is a note here, where Guardon sat," said the Goblin Sergeant.

His fellow goblins accompanied him as he pulled Sharon's jeweled dagger from the Throne. The pallid humanoids looked over the attached note and handed it to Bjorn.

"This message was written by the Baroness," the halfling declared. "She, Gilead and the others from their party have passed through the portal which remains here. They await our return on the other side. I will enter a postscript of my own for Leif and Jalhi's party when they arrive here. They will know to meet us at the encampment."

Bjorn Roundtree reattached the note to the top of Guardon's Throne.

The various fighters grouped together as they passed through the spatial portal to the Ghastly Fens.

* * * * *

Guardon grappled with his father as they plummeted into the Plane of Chaos. The spatial portal opened by the Ephemeral Specters hovered as a disk in the sky above the volcanic earth. The temple of the red dragon reached upward from a hundred yards below.

Toth howled in frustration as he perceived the insertion of the blocking plug into the place where the Gong Seal had been.

"Do not hinder me, My Son. The time is at hand to deal with the Lesser Planes as we will."

The monstrous, winged Demigod spewed acid flame from his maw. Guardon was familiar with this method of attack and boxed his father's horned head aside, causing the spray of green fire to stream haphazardly into the violet clouds.

Flotsam and Jetsam raced ahead of the struggling pair and swooped into the Drystyx Temple through two of the windows in the highest echelon of the black, stone tower. The Council of Drystyx Monks waited at an oval-shaped table within.

They had a scrying glass of their own. The sorcerers had concerted their arcane energies upon it to stay updated through the eyes of the pair of Entities summoned by Themistokles.

The monks wore black robes and represented a variety of races, some of whom were too large to sit at the table and crouched on the floor instead.

Flotsam addressed the Wizards of Chaos.

“Drystyx Monks! Make haste for Thoth struggles above with Guardon. The Gong Seal in the Gorgon Plane is breached. Let us act and claim the Lesser Planes for our own purposes. We have slain Ankharet, the Arkadian Summoner in her Abyssal Cairn. The fortress in the Gaeian wilderness is now under the control of Rauros and the goblins of Mount Crow. Fly with us to the firmament above and come to the aid of our Demigod.”

Zolgnath, a firbolg, was the Leader of the Monks.

He addressed his companions in a booming voice.

“Now is the time for us to act, My Brethren. The Energies of Chaos, which all of us serve, are reaching the peak of their assertion. The accursed Gong Seal that has kept us separated from the other Planes is now eradicated. Let us leave this tower and take our place at the side of Thoth.”

The Drystyx Monks followed the advice of the specters and their Leader and raised themselves into the air using a levitation spell.

“Levtos!” cried the sorcerers.

The dark-robed wizards became immersed in clouds of green electricity. They hovered above the oval council table then turned and flew out the large windows of the tall tower. The Drystyx Monks left sparkling trails in the air behind them as they spiraled upward to the dueling pair.

Guardon and Thoth continued to fight each other. Both of their hides bore gashes and wounds from their lacerating claws. Zolgnath was the first to reach the dragon and daemon.

“Stop fighting!” yelled the large firbolg.

He uttered a harnessing spell.

“Gorgax!”

The other monks reached the height of the battle and focused their magic on the spell.

Zolgnath used his hands to direct a crimson tendril at the massive, red dragon. The cord of energy wrapped around the muscular arms and torso of the beast. He was

no longer able to attack Guardon. The daemon flapped his wings in one position as he spoke to the Drystyx Monks.

“Greetings, Black Wizards. It has been eons since we last met. As I’m sure you’re aware the Gong Seal has been breached by these Entities.”

He nodded at Flotsam and Jetsam.

“My father responded quickly to their actions and attempted to enter my Plane. I succeeded in turning him back but must ask for your help to keep him away from the Lesser Planes.”

“We are not interested in your agenda of peace, Guardon. You have lost your taste for conquest since your spawning. It is no wonder that your sire had you sent to the Gorgon Plane,” answered the fiery, glowing firbolg. “This is the dawning of a new era for the Hordes of Chaos. We will take the Plane of the Spider-Creatures and after that the whole of Gaea. Leave us to our affairs or be destroyed.”

“Don’t resist us, Guardon. You have kept watch over The Spires long enough. Join us now and witness our campaign to victory!” Thoth rumbled.

“I will not be a part of this, Father. The Dharmic Equilibrium is not something to be tampered with by sole forces within the Mandala. If these are your intentions then you can count me out. I will journey beyond the reach of your Drystyx Temple and live on my own. Do as you wish but do not underestimate the resources of the Gaeon Mages or the Entities that sleep deep in the Under Earth of the Gorgon Plane. I bid you all farewell. Perhaps we will meet again under more diplomatic circumstances.”

The bronze-skinned daemon turned away from the hovering monks and the bound dragon. He flew fast and steady to the violet horizon. In a matter of moments he vanished into the hazy clouds.

“My son is stubborn,” the red dragon said. “He will do as he chooses but will regret his lack of support in this venture. Release me from this childish tether, Zolgnath. I will not pursue Guardon. We must contend with the barrier he created. It will not hold if we concert our forces upon it. Let us return to the Drystyx Temple and combine our legions for transport through the spatial portal. There is much work to be done in little time.”

* * * * *

Jalhi Bengal and her allies stood at the end of a long hallway. Her gold wyverns flapped above her shoulders. They growled impatiently.

“Easy, Starfling. Rest, Flamering,” said the tiger ranger. “We will be free of this confining fortress soon enough. First we must make sure that the Gorgon King and his accomplice will leave the Fens unharmed.”

“That is what I hope for also, Jalhi,” Fangoz offered. “Let us push onward and discover what secrets this stronghold has in store for us.”

The motley band of fighters collected torches posted along the walls of the passage. They used their tinderboxes to ignite them and illuminate their surroundings.

The warriors marched for a short while when they encountered a band of draconian soldiers. They ran toward the Gaeans in upright positions. The reptilian humanoids wielded swords and spears in their clawed hands.

Thorgrym, the Chief Guardian of Lich Town, uttered a warning to the creatures.

“Do not attack us, Lizard Trolls. We have business with Guardon and won’t be turned.”

The draconians did not respond and continued their charge. The sturdy ghoul-troll lifted his crossbow and pulled the trigger. The bolt flew straight to the nearest humanoid, striking him squarely in the chest. His plate armor was compromised and he fell dead to the side of the passage.

Leif and Sigrid combined their magical abilities to engage their opponents.

“Chronos!” they cried.

The thickening mist that appeared around them disoriented the lizard-trolls. They swung their blade-bearing weapons at the Gaeans but were delayed by the sticky clouds. Jalhi’s wyverns easily evaded the assailing blows and roasted two of the dragon-trolls with hot balls of fire.

The band of feline rangers entered the melee with their curved daggers. They utilized their greater numbers to swamp the attackers two to one. The dozen draconians flailed wildly at the anthromorph amazons but were no match for their speed and cunning. Fangoz and Thorgrym strode into the fight with their respective weapons. The strong warriors finished off the remaining reptilian humanoids with hammering strikes.

The Gaeans searched the armored bodies of the lizard-trolls and found a number of silver and copper coins among their trappings. They continued down the passage holding their torches aloft.

“This fortress is strangely quiet,” said Sigrid. “I wonder how our companions fare on their own routes.”

“I’m sure that our experienced friends can fend for themselves,” replied Leif. “For the time that I traveled with them they dispatched any accosting opponents with firm vigor.”

The cinder-block walls of the passageway were made of a fine, brick mixture. Ancient artisans had etched sets of eighteen and twenty-four blocks with bas-reliefs. A number of the renderings resembled gargoyles similar to Guardon, along with needle-toothed beholders and feral Lykanthros. The light of the Gaeans’ torches flickered over the carvings in the walls, giving them the illusion of motion and changing expressions.

The travelers reached an oak door that had a rusty keyhole below its steel handle.

“Let me have a look at the lock on this door,” Thorgrym said.

The sometime Guardian of the City of the Ghoul Trolls held his brightly-burning torch close to the metal lock. He reached to his cummerbund and withdrew a slender knife. The resourceful soldier inserted the tool into the keyhole and twisted it about for a few moments.

“Ah, I think I’ve got the cantilever,” declared Thorgrym.

He gave the handle of his small blade a final twist and the bolt flew free of the wall. The thick, oak door opened inward to the vertical stairway that Gilead and Taliesin reached. The same smoldering lanterns descended to various levels from chains lodged in the distant ceiling.

“We should venture upward with caution,” Fangoz offered.

The great, stone troll rested his heavy club on his shoulder as he looked at the hanging lamps.

“I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that the others reached this staircase before us. It gives the impression of being the central, vertical passage in Guardon’s Spires.”

“That is a good idea, Stone Troll,” Jalhi observed. “My amazon rangers will lead the way. If the Baroness and her acquaintances did traverse these steps then we are sure to encounter the full brunt of whatever sleeping Entities they awakened.”

In accordance with the feline anthromorph’s prediction, the warriors had only marched for a short while when they were interrupted by a gurgling voice.

“My pets have been destroyed by you mortals. They would have grown to full vampires if they had hunted more years. Now I am friendless.”

A looming shadow fell from its hanging place on one of the chains above the steps. A cloaked vampire glided out of its dive and landed before the cat women. As the light of the fighters’ torches shone on the undead troll they got a good look at his

appearance. His face was emaciated and deathly pale. The vampire's ancient eyes bore red irises that dilated to tiny, black dots once exposed to the light.

"I am Claude," said the vampire. "I thirst."

The spindly predator lurched for the nearest ranger, a gray-furred archer. Just as he sunk his sharp fangs into her neck Sigrid uttered a ward undead spell.

"Clarex!"

A bright, blue sphere of light appeared between her opened hands. Claude was startled by the mystic light and released his grip on the anthromorph.

"Leave me be," he cried. "I only seek repayment for my lost kindred."

"That is not acceptable," answered the female Sentinel. "We are here on legitimate business. Do not hinder us again or you shall be destroyed."

"Very well, Sturdy Sorceress," Claude answered. "There was a time that the vampire clans roamed free throughout Mystic Down and Arkadia. The war with the hordes of goblins and renegade stone trolls reduced our numbers drastically. We were hunted without mercy during the daylight hours. The orcs and their kin sought to claim our castles for their own purposes. I fled from my fortress ages ago, casting aside my family name and possessions. In the night I fed on the occasional Lykanthros and goblin. Ultimately I was intercepted by a spatial portal, as I'm sure you also were."

"That is the truth, Vampire Liege," replied Leif. "The haphazard conjuring of Ankharet have proven to be more than a nuisance to the harmony of our regions. We journey now to convince Guardon to leave our Plane."

"So be it, Ghoul-Troll. I wish you luck. Perhaps we will meet again in Gaea once the goblin marauders have been pacified," said Claude.

The gaunt vampire addressed the gray-furred amazon he'd accosted.

"My apologies, Ranger. I've gone without feeding for some time."

"Be careful, Vampire," the anthromorph answered. "You never know when you might need the help of the Bengal Clan."

The cloaked night-feeder lifted the edges of his cloak and leapt from the spiral stairway. The warriors heard scratchy laughter that descended into the darkness.

"I'll wager that won't be the last we see of that vampire. He certainly has his own agenda for the restructuring of Arkadia and the forest beyond," Fangoz said. "My renegade cousins came at odds with the Vampire Lords in the past war. Both of our clans have diminished significantly in size since that internecine campaign. Let us continue our quest to the top of this stronghold, My Friends."

The Gaean fighters joined the immense stone troll in the march up the cylindrical stairway. The warriors of various races traveled for some time. At last they reached the hallway leading to the dissolved door of Guardon's Throne Room. Jalhi and her amazon relatives were the first to reach the threshold of the steel door that Gilead and Alex melted.

Sigrid gazed at the remnants of the door and the hovering portal within.

"It is clear that our companions have passed this point and returned to the Ghastly Fens," the female Sentinel observed.

She noticed the jeweled dagger and note attached to the head of Guardon's Dais. The thin ghoulish troll stepped onto the proscenium and extricated the message from its post. Sigrid read the memorandum quickly and addressed her friends.

"Our suspicions are correct. Both Lord Taliesin's and Bjorn Roundtree's battle parties reached this point ahead of us. The legendary Gong Seal below us has indeed been breached. Only this temporary, clay plug now bars the portal to the Plane of Chaos. Let us return to the Burial Ruins on the other side of the spatial breach standing before us."

The warriors followed Sigrid's advice and strode through the magical gate. They found themselves standing on the mossy earth by the aged stone columns and gravestones of the Ruins at the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens. Taliesin, Bjorn and the other Gaeans huddled by smoky campfires nearby.

"Greetings, Friends!" Leif cried. "We are glad to see that all of you emerged from the Gorgon Plane in one piece. As I'm sure you also discovered Guardon and Ankharet were nowhere to be seen. I imagine that the Ephemeral Specters summoned by Themistokles have something to do with this."

"We must travel to Coermantyr and consult again with Restadicus and the Lore Masters," said Baroness Sharon. "The events that transpired in Guardon's Spires require the attention of the adept sorcerers therein. Before we move south let us concert our arcane resources to close this portal opened by the Daemon Lord when he battled his father. It will do no good to leave an additional breach to the Gorgon Plane here."

"That is wise advice, My Lady," Gilead responded. "Alex, Reoren, Leif and Sigrid let us focus our energies upon this gateway and close it."

The Key Mage of Coermantyr enchanted a spatial sorcery.

"Seros!"

The other magic-users gestured outward with their hands as they assisted Gilead. The portal hovering over the damp soil of the Ghastly Fens wavered for a moment then shrank to a point of white light before disappearing entirely.

The band of Gaeans set forth at a brisk pace to the City of Coermantyr. They hastened through the mist for the rest of the day and set a small camp at nightfall. The mercenaries marched again at first light. By evening they saw the brightly lit pinnacles of the matriarchal stronghold in Sharon's region. As they approached the gates to the settlement the farmers and merchants again cheered the passage of their champions. The warriors marched at a steady pace into the castle. Courtesans and pages hurried the fighters inward.

"Make haste, Mercenaries," a tall concierge said. "Restadicus awaits the latest word."

The Gaeans entered the spacious Council Chamber of the Lore Masters. The hoary, bearded mage and a number of his subordinate associates sat at the broad, crescent-shaped, oak table with oil lamps burning intensely.

"Well, what news brings you from Siegemunde and the Gorgon Plane beyond?" the aged wizard boomed.

"The Gong Seal has been breached by Ephemeral Specters summoned by Ankharet's Vizier from the Plane of Chaos," Sharon said. "We rescued the halfling, Bjorn Roundtree, as you can see. The Dire Queen was killed. Now the Demigod, Thoth, seeks to assert his influence within the Gorgon Plane and Gaea as well. There is bound to be a conflict, Restadicus."

"This does not bode well for the delicate balance of the Planar Mandala," answered the Leader of the Lore Masters.

"I suggest we take some time to review the historic tomes documenting the war that motivated the initial forging of the Gong Seal," offered Gilead. "The opposing kharmic forces within the Dharmic Equilibrium were brought to a lasting peace by our ancestors. There must be a way for us to compartmentalize the Planes once more."

"That is wise advice, Key Mage," answered a flaxen-haired Council Member. "Call me Wotan. Restadicus and I have discussed the ramifications of the Helix of Planes many times. It is possible that if there exist Planes of Elemental, Chaotic Energy, there may also be a Plane of Order, as it were."

The blond wizard stroked his braided mustache and beard in contemplation.

"All of you look tired. You can use a good night's sleep and a solid supper," Restadicus declared. "Your actions and information are invaluable. The Lore Masters

shall hold Council tonight while you recuperate from your mission. We will consult the ancient books and meet again tomorrow. By then we should have agreed as to the appropriate course of action.”

The fighters followed the advice of the Leader of the Coermantyr Wizards. They walked down the red-carpeted stairway from the Council Chamber to the dining hall below. The ambiance was tangibly different from what it had been the last time the warriors ate there. There was plenty of food at the banquet table, but the minstrels and acrobats were noticeably absent.

“Rumors travel swifter than falcons in this castle,” Sharon whispered to her friends over her plate. “The people here are frequently the best source of the latest news. Eat with gusto, My Companions. We are sure to face more challenging tasks on the morn. Let us conserve our strength and rest while we still can.”

Bors was the only member of the party that seemed to be enjoying his meal. The robust Burgomeister of Wood’s End sat down with relish and dug into his second plate of roast beef, carrots and quiche.

“You have my thanks again for your splendid hospitality, Lady Sharon. I will never cease to savor your delicious board of fare,” the Innkeeper said.

The mercenaries retired to separate lodgings and slept well on the wolf-skin rugs.

The next morning Taliesin and his friends gathered again in the Council Chamber of the Lore Masters.

The entire group of adept mages, numbering over two-dozen, was present. Restadicus addressed the group of warriors.

“We wizards burned the midnight oil, so to speak,” the white-bearded mage said. “The observations of Wotan proved accurate. There are records of a variety of Planes, manifesting respective energies in the Latticework of the Planar Helix. Ergo there should be a Plane of Order to balance the Plane of Chaos. The historic tomes speak of Titanic Entities that clashed in the theater of battle that we refer to now as the Burial Ruins of the Ghastly Fens. Just as Thoth once rose to infiltrate the Gorgon Plane and Gaea, so appeared Knights of the Etherium. They emerged through spatial portals of their own to combat the Armies of Chaos. They are dubbed seraphim in the historic texts. Today we will focus our resources upon our scrying glass with the intention of channeling whatever forces or individuals who may linger within the Planar Mandala. Under the threat of invasion by the Legions of Thoth and his Drystyx Monks we cannot be worse off to gain updated knowledge in regard to the Entities that may or may not exist within the kharmic layers of the Dharmic

Equilibrium. I'm sorry to disclose that the old books report little more than wave after successive wave of malevolent forces who marauded the Regions of Gaea, oppressing and destroying with rampant abandon."

"This is profound information," said Baroness Sharon. "Please proceed with your experiment. At this point any forces that may act in the favor of the native residents of Gaea will be a welcome asset for us in the impending battle."

The Lore Masters rose from their seats at the crescent table. Restadicus placed his scrying glass on a tall, wooden stand at the center of the room. He stepped back from the crystal sphere and enchanted a spell of searching with outstretched hands.

"Bindu!"

Shimmering tendrils of white light reached from the hands of each of the wizards. They met on the surface of the scrying glass. Restadicus gasped with wonder.

"So it is. The Helix of the Planar Mandala is as the ancient tomes suggest. Elemental energies beckon from all around us. I see many things. The Spherical Plane of Gaea is here, and below lies the Gorgon Plane and the Layers of Chaos. There is a gyroscopic network of axes, for outward from us lie other Planes. I sense them. There is earth, stone, air, fire, ash, plasma, iron, water, ice, wood, electricity, vacuum, oil and acid. Other Planes, similar to Gaea, exist as well. They don't have names to our knowledge. I suppose that if our situation becomes desperate we may be forced to seek aid from them. These alternate Planes remind me of the far kingdoms to the east, south and west. They exude highly charged patterns of magical energy in comparison to Gaea. Perhaps this is why our lands have fallen victim to attacks in the past. I will focus our energies toward the Layers of Order."

The Leader of the Lore Masters hummed with interest as he scanned the Ordered Plane.

"I perceive strong forces, certainly equal to those of Chaos. Let me focus within that Plane and attempt to contact one of the larger Entities hovering there."

"Hello," Restadicus said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," a bass voice resonated. "It has been a long time since we had correspondence with anyone from Gaea. My name is Hydro. How are things going?"

"Not too well," answered the white-haired wizard. "We are about to be attacked by Thoth and his Legions from the Plane of Chaos. Will you delegate some of your seraphim to help us turn them back, and perhaps forge a new seal in the breach that has been reopened of late?"

“Certainly,” Hydro intoned. “I will target the location of your communication module and send four of our best, Smithforge, Heartsing, Listhew and Glasslook. If you find yourself in need of more assistance feel welcome to contact us or any of the Peripheral Planes. There are quite a few of them down there, you know.”

“Thank you, Hydro. Will will see what we can do with the support of your seraphs. I’m sure we’ll speak again.”

Restadicus lowered his hands, as did the other Lore Masters. Their energy ribbons extinguished. As per Hydro’s message, four, big ovals of white light appeared in the council room. Out of these spatial portals stepped a quartet of large trolls dressed in shiny, steel plate and chain mail armor. They carried long, reflective shields at their backs and broadswords sheathed at their waists. Two of the seraph trolls were female and two were male.

A red-haired troll woman bowed and introduced herself.

“I am Listhew, at your service.”

Next a brown-haired seraph addressed Restadicus.

“Call me Glasslook.”

She shook the wizard’s hand in greeting.

“My name is Heartsing,” said a blond troll.

A swarthy, black-haired troll said, “I am Smithforge. We are glad to be here. Hydro informed us that a breach has been reopened in a neighboring Plane to the Plane of Chaos. I was present at the fabrication of the original seal that prevented Thoth from invading the Higher Realms. I’m sure that once our resources have been adequately accounted for we will succeed in returning a permanent seal to its rightful location.”

“Very well,” said Restadicus. “It heartens us all to be reassured of the existence of Balancing Entities at opposite ends of the Planar Mandala. We welcome you to join with us in an endeavor to establish a redoubt at the edge of the Plane of Chaos. It will take time to forge a new Gong Seal even with the fortitude-laden assistance of you seraphs. Join with us as the Lore Masters generate a new portal to the onetime Throne Room of the Daemon Lord. We will align our wizardry in a tiered line around the temporary plug in order to give Smithforge time to mold a new gong.”

“That is wise advice,” replied Lord Taliesin. “We have long awaited the moment of returned security for our regions. Generate the breach for us, Mages of Coermantyr, and we will sally forth into the Gorgon Plane.”

The two-dozen troll mages did not hesitate in their planned course of action and combined their caches of arcane energy to open a planar rift.

“Spiros!” they cried collectively.

A crimson gateway appeared in the center of Sharon’s Council Chamber. The steel-gilt seraphim led the charge into the world of the Arachnoids. Lord Taliesin and his mercenaries were quick to follow.

Hydro’s seraphs, hearkening from the Plane of Order, and Lord Taliesin’s acquaintances emerged through the spatial portal into the Throne Room of Guardon’s Spires. Thoth’s winged Hordes of Chaos and his Drystyx Monks had already rallied at the underside of the clay plug where the Gong Seal had been. The temporary, black barrier shuddered from the booms of the hammering assaults from the legions of gargoyles, firbolgs and Wizards of Chaos.

“Quickly, Gaeans, we must prepare a redoubt to turn these malevolent marauders,” said Listhew.

The red-haired Troll Paladin drew her shimmering broadsword and wielded it aloft with her muscular arms.

The battalion of soldiers from the various regions strode back from the resonating seal, forming a ring on the raised, obsidian proscenium of the Throne Room. The brightly armored seraphim held their ground, close to the edge of the burnished clay. They awaited the invasion of the Drystyx Monks and their Dragon Leader.

“This clay was shoddily hewed at best,” Smithforge observed. “I’m surprised that it resisted the forces of the desperate legions for this long. If we succeed in turning these invaders I will set myself to the task of forging a proper seal in this breach. The observations of Restadicus in Coermantyr Castle were accurate. The neighboring Realms, which occasionally orbit this one, possess resilience against the insertion of alien portals such as that which stands before us today.”

“Alas, tragic this moment is,” moaned The Watcher.

The nervous halfling clutched his face in his white-haired hands.

“The history of Guardon’s spawning and the schemes of his Demigod father long have I studied. Of the ruthlessness of the Drystyx Monks and the legions they command the collected tomes in the library below us tell. The separate energies of the neighboring planes they crave in their endless pursuit of power and influence. To think I falter what tasteless conjuring they conducted over the eons, instilling this insatiable thirst in them.”

An eerie ray of bright, green light pierced the blackened plug, creating a smoldering mark on the ceiling. A final series of blows struck the temporary barrier

that Guardon created in the desperate attempt to thwart his father's intentions. The clay shattered entirely and fell downward into the Plane of Chaos.

Thoth's red, scaled head screeched upward through the large, disk-shaped opening in the floor of the Throne Room. He placed his massive, clawed arms on the edges of the gate and pulled his entire, sulfuric body inside. The dragon spread his wings, the tips of which reached out the windows of the Throne Room.

"Halt, Thoth," yelled Heartsing. "You know as well as we that Hydro and the other great Entities of the Plane of Order do not tolerate hostile invasions between the Layers of the Mandala. Turn back now or face the full force of our wrath."

"I refuse," bellowed the dragon. "The energies of these Realms are ripe for the taking. It is folly of your Leaders that they do no attempt to reap the benefits of their magical resources while they can. Now I claim this Plane and those above it for the purposes of my legions. We have need for the power that resides here and will not be turned as before."

Zolgnath and his fellow Drystyx Monks emerged through the spatial breach along with a number of screeching gargoyles, similar in form to Guardon. They attacked the seraphim immediately with their fangs and claws. The armored Knights of the Plane of Order deflected the assaults with their mirror-like shields and parried with their swords. A handful of the invaders were lanced by the mystic blades and howled from the painful inflictions.

The Drystyx Monks focused their attention on generating a noxious wave of poison gas.

"Smoldent!" they cried.

The black-cloaked sorcerers gestured with their hands as a dark cloud spilled through the air toward the Gaeans.

Gilead, Leif and Alex were prepared for such an attack and uttered a warding spell.

"Aeros!"

A potent gust of wind rushed through Guardon's tower, dissipating the dangerous-looking cloud. A gathering of red firbolgs responded to the failed attempt of their wizards and rushed across the proscenium. The seraphs flailed at the diabolical creatures with their blades but succeeded in winging only a few of them. The rest of the monsters rushed past the four Paladins and engaged the Gaean mercenaries in hand-to-hand combat.

The Maegar Dwarves were the first to intercept the invaders. Oxholm and Drumtone yelled war cries as they swung their heavy battleaxes. The Weapons

Masters deep in the mines of Mount Crow forged their blades. They struck the firbolgs hard with scythe-like motions, maiming a number of their hostile adversaries.

A swarm of bronze and green gargoyles joined the firbolgs in the fray. They met with Gnoll and the wood trolls, along with the Baroness and the Knights of Coermantyr. The daemons attacked the mercenaries with strong blows as Guardon did. Each of the fighters was accustomed to this method of attack and rolled free of the swooping claws.

The Knights of Mystic Down, Nighthawk and his goblins and the Dagonites came to the aid of their friends and assaulted the firbolgs and gargoyles with their various arms. The Minions of Chaos were smitten severely by the prepared warriors of the redoubt. Many gargoyles succumbed to their wounds and fell lifeless to the obsidian cobbles. The group of firbolgs screamed in frustration while a number of their more aggressive kindred fell victim to the keen swordsmanship of Sharon and Taliesin. Bors, Rodnik and Fangoz rendered additional berserk attacks, convincing the sharp-toothed firbolgs that their intentions to defend their Realm were serious.

Thoth sensed that things were not going as he'd planned. He drew in a deep breath to release a shower of caustic flame when Gearzon, Bjorn and The Watcher interrupted him. They pelted the dragon's snout with a volley of stones flung smartly from their slings. The strong dragon wrested his body away from the slashing seraphs. He drove his shoulders through two stone columns bordering one of the windows. The cinder-block supports buckled against the massive pressure and the Demigod flew free of the confining fortress.

Dweeble Dworx and his Arachnoid relatives looked up from their post at the base of Guardon's Spires. They communicated with mind-song among themselves as the dragon circled the mountainous Spires and spewed green flame.

Starfling and Flamerling flew after Thoth but were no match for the adult dragon's wingspan. The thick-scaled creature ignored the stinging fireballs of the wyverns and headed past the habitat of the Hive Builders into the red horizon. Vexed, the young dragons returned to help Jalhi and her anthromorph rangers.

The tigresses were absorbed in a vicious fight with the Drystyx Monks and their soldiers. The voices of additional creatures within the Plane of Chaos echoed upward through the spatial rift. Thorgrym came to the aid of the rangers using an ebony, studded mace. Sigrid entered the melee as she enchanted a martial sorcery.

“Skuldoz!”

The lich-troll's forearms and quarterstaff were covered in azure energy. The arcane spell enhanced the offensive impact of her flurried attack as she battered Zolgnath. The firbolg was taken by surprise by the Sentinel's adept use of her weapon. He gasped in shock and covered his face in his robed arms.

"Retreat, My Legions!" yelled the Leader of the Drystyx Monks. "This harassment is intolerable. Thoth has claimed this Plane and scans it now for sources of energy. We will return and aid him with additional fervor."

The firbolgs and gargoyles that still stood leaped with the black-cloaked wizards through the open gate. They spiraled downward to hold council in their tower.

"You have fought well, Mercenaries," Glasslook said. "It is enough that Thoth was unable to bring his forces into this Plane at the time of his entrance. He will fly now, for some time. Let us make room for Smithforge so that he may begin the arduous task of smelting the ore necessary to hone a permanent seal here."

The fighters moved away from the edge of the rift where they gazed at the retreating legions. The obsidian floor of Guardon's onetime Throne Room was strewn with dead and dying firbolgs and gargoyles.

"Anemone, come here," said Alex. "Bors is injured."

"It's just a scratch, really," declared the hefty Burgomeister. "I will cook many meals for Lord Taliesin and you warriors after this campaign."

The merwoman gazed at the Innkeeper's ample midriff. He had been cut a series of wounds by a daemon. The female Captain laid her webbed hands over the injury.

"I will tap the energy of the ocean. It may help close your injuries."

Anemone's fingertips flared with aquamarine light. The bleeding from Bors' cuts stopped. The Dagonite bound the Innkeeper's torso with burlap.

Bors placed his hand on the amphibious Captain's shoulder and rose to his feet.

"You have my thanks, Anemone. My legs are shaky but I can stand. I'll have to stick to the perimeter if the Drystyx Monks return shortly."

"Watcher, I understand that you have extensive familiarity with the corridors of this stronghold," said Smithforge. "Will you lead me to a place where the earth is raw and unpaved? I must mine ore that bears iron and nickel for smelting."

"To the depths of the Gorgon Plane lead you I will," answered the ancient halfling. "Learned much have I over the decades of my imprisonment. Wise it will be to take an armed escort. We know not what hostile creatures yet prowl the lower caverns."

“That is good advice, Halfling Historian,” offered Lord Taliesin. “I will accompany you downward. Would you care to join us, Leif?”

“Yes,” the ghoulish troll replied. “Sigrid and I will accompany you on your mission. You other seraphs and Gaeian mercenaries should remain here in case the Drystyx Monks or Thoth return sooner than expected.”

“We wish you luck,” said Glasslook. “Our hopes are with you. All of us await your speedy return.”

* * * * *

Taliesin, Smithforge, Sigrid and Leif followed the light of The Watcher’s torch through a series of unfamiliar passageways. The Gaeians heard rivulets of water flowing through the rocks.

“Vigilant the beholders are, and the Lykanthros, too. Waited in these crags for hours I would when the Denizens of the Daemon Lord patrolled the lower tunnels,” The Watcher explained.

The halfling’s eyes glanced from side to side with apprehension. His pale face was a mass of sunken wrinkles due to age and exposure to the elements.

The warriors reached the chamber of the Terranoids. Petra was in the midst of a conversation with another of her species when they turned to face the light of The Watcher’s torch.

“Greetings, Gaeian Fighters. I was just telling my friend, Volcan, about the diminishing movement of the beholders. We both agree that Guardon’s power over them has decreased. I still have the Orb of Paryphax. Would you like me to return it now?”

“No, thank you, Earth Elemental,” answered Lord Taliesin. “We are here in search of earth loose enough to mine iron-laden ore. Do you know of such a place nearby?”

“I think so,” said Petra. “What do you suggest, Volcan?”

The male stone giant was mountainous. His boulder-like body sparkled with crystals and spots of metal. The Terranoid hummed with a bass voice as he thought about a suitable location.

“It has been a long time since I saw anyone from a Plane other than this. All of us detected the disturbance in the Dharmic Equilibrium when the Gong Seal above was ruptured. I take it your elaborately armored companion is a Paladin from the Plane of Order,” Volcan observed.

“Your assumption is correct, Volcan,” Smithforge responded. “I am a metal craftsman and am here to assist in the restoration of harmony within the Mandala of the Planes. Where do you suggest I dig for iron and nickel?”

“Continue along your present course,” said Petra’s companion. “The minerals you seek have collected from the perpetual water deposits among the stalagmites. We wish you the best of luck in your endeavor and will keep Skjold’s Orb safe until such time as it can be restored to its proper place in the tree stronghold of the wood trolls.”

“Our thanks you have,” said The Watcher. “Dangerous these times are for the folk of these Realms. If successful our campaign is, sure we’ll be to return the orb to Arborea.”

The fighters marched beyond the Terranoid Midden. The pillars of stone grew large from their foundations in the ceiling and floor. Smithforge paid close attention to the constitution of the earth.

“This place is sufficient for my needs,” observed the seraphim. “Leif and Sigrid, you can help me to rend the rocks with a telekinetic spell. I will form a crucible and smelt the steel within.”

The Sentinels did as Smithforge suggested and gestured at the ground before them as they uttered a spell.

“Levtos!”

Bulky chunks of earth, several yards across rose from the floor of the cavern. The expeditious Paladin focused his Ethereal Energy at the ore, spinning and heating it much like a potter. The seraph held his hands at the sides of the swirling, glowing mass, causing it to form a great crucible. He then employed the following shipments of mineral-bearing earth to fill the metallic container to the brim with molten material.

“This will take some time to burn away the lesser minerals and leave us with a steel and nickel mixture,” declared Smithforge.

The Gaeans made a small cook fire and ate a spartan meal as they waited for the Paladin to complete his task. At times he folded and hammered the glowing metal with a mallet he carried from his belt.

“At last, it is finished,” cried the seraphim.

He poured water from his canteen over the smelting container, releasing a large cloud of steam. Smithforge then gestured with his arms again, using his Ethereal Magic to raise aloft a circle of steel. It was twice as thick as the original placed in Guardon’s Throne Room.

The mercenaries returned through the network of passages under the guidance of The Watcher. The fighters in the daemon's Throne Room repelled a handful of firbolgs intending to enter the gateway on Thoth's behalf.

"The red dragon has not returned," said Listhew.

The red-haired seraph gazed out the windows of the tower.

"Install the new Gong Seal, Smithforge, while we still hold this Plane with a semblance of kharmic solvency."

"That is a good idea," replied the swarthy Paladin.

As he gestured with his arms to guide the shiny, metal plate into position the Drystyx Monks returned in full force.

"We are ready for you this time, Ethereal Meddlers!" yelled Zolgnath.

A number of the largest monks flew into the chamber with the red-skinned wizard. The black-robed sorcerers were fanged ogres and minotaurs. They hefted massive maces made of banded stone and rusty iron. Glasslook and Heartsing rushed forward to intercept the charged Magicians of Chaos. Each of the four seraphim parried the hammering blows of their opponents' weapons with their shields and broadswords.

The strength of the powerful ogres was too much for them and they were knocked aside before Smithforge could fuse his barrier in its rightful place.

Lord Taliesin and his fellow Gaeans gasped at the subjugation of their Ethereal Allies and ran to their aid. The number of Knights from Arborea, Coermantyr, Mystic Down and the Ghastly Fens swarmed the invading warriors. To their vexation a legion of Chaotic Creatures crowded upward from the Plane below.

The Baroness yelled to her companions in the heat of battle.

"Retreat, My Friends. These foul beasts will prove the death of us if we hold here. Let us fall back while we still can and meet again with the spider creatures at the base of this stronghold. They will keep us informed of the red dragon's return. All is not lost if we conserve our energy."

The garrisons from the various regions of Gaea followed the order of the Baroness and moved away from the ogre wizards. The fighters marched side-by-side through the doorway of the Throne Room and sprinted down the subsequent tunnels.

Gilead heard guttural bellows of victory echoing from above as they retreated to the front courtyard of Guardon's Spires. Dweeble Dworx and his Arachnoid kindred waited patiently among the volcanic rocks outside the ruby-eyed statues.

“Bjorn Roundtree, a red dragon has flown from the top of the fortress. My companions were concerned for the well-being of you and your two-legged friends when we saw the heat of his caustic fire. Are any of you injured?”

“Only one of us, and not severely,” answered the halfling. “We were forced to retreat despite the assistance of these Paladins from the Plane of Order. The Drystyx Monks and their aggressive legions were determined to establish an encampment in this Plane despite the redoubt we prepared. I suggest that you consult with your fellow Hive Builders and warn them that a war has begun between the Planes. They are sure to be confronted by the ogres and minotaurs in a matter of hours. You may be forced to build a new Hive a greater distance from this menacing fortress.”

“That is wise advice,” Dweeble hummed. “In past ages our ancestors left word that they faced troublesome Entities such as the ones you speak of today. I will lead my brethren to our Hive and hold council there with the elders who live at the heart of our labyrinth.”

“Very well, My Eight-legged Friend,” said Bjorn. “We will pass through a spatial portal of our own for now. Be assured that we will meet again with strengthened forces after consulting with Restadicus and Wotan.”

The Arachnoids bowed in farewell and skittered over the red hills to their Hive. Bjorn addressed his taller acquaintances.

“The Hive Builders are strong and resourceful. I expect they’ll last a goodly time despite the harassment of the Legions of Chaos. Gilead and Leif, Join with Alex and Reoren to generate a planar gate. We will only suffer unnecessary military casualties if we remain here.”

“This is the truth,” answered the Key Mage of Coermantyr.

The other wizards focused their arcane energy on a single location as they brought forth a planar rift.

“Spiros!”

A crimson sphere expanded into a doorway and the mass of Gaeon mercenaries marched through it. They found themselves on the mossy hills of the Burial Ruins at the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens.

The warriors did not pause to eat and marched at a fast pace across the marshy fields to the edge of the Forest of Coermantyr. By nightfall the pinnacles of Sharon’s Castle were within sight. A number of villagers and Knights of Coermantyr helped to guide oxen and sheep to the roadside. The residents of the region were aware of the urgency of the situation and did their best to hurry their champions along the way.

Restadicus and Wotan awaited the fighters in the central hall of the stronghold.

“Please, Warriors,” said the Leader of the Lore Masters. “Inform us as to the events that have recently occurred.”

“We were unable to turn Thoth and the Drystyx Monks from the breach,” Listhew declared. “Smithforge succeeded in creating a new Gong Seal but was thwarted from putting it in place by the ambitious Denizens of Chaos.”

“Restadicus, we have a Planar War on our hands,” said Glasslook. “You and the other Lore Masters must travel with us to the breach in the Gorgon Plane. If we do not get the new Gong Seal in place we will be forced to consult again with Hydro and possibly the neighboring planes. The red dragon flies now in the Realm of the Arachnoids and seeks passage into Gaea. It is only a matter of time before he succeeds.”

“Very well,” answered the magenta-cloaked sorcerer. “I regret that we have reached an impasse much like those listed in the ancient tomes. The mages of this Realm combined their resources with you seraphim before. It appears that this is our only option now, as well.”

The villagers of Coermantyr Castle brought fresh horses for the two-dozen wizards and the fighters of various races. They were laden with staples and water. The mercenaries set forth toward the Crossroads that same evening with torches ablaze.

Lord Taliesin and his allies reached the Burial Ruins of the Ghastly Fens under the light of the twin moons. One waxed and the other waned to a crescent.

The Gaeans tethered their steeds to clusters of cattails nearby. The male and female wizards of Coermantyr Castle grouped themselves in a circle within the standing pillars of the aging ruins.

Restadicus and Wotan generated a large spatial portal with hands extended outward.

“Spiros!”

A crimson sphere expanded into a broad gateway. The fighters and sorcerers marched through it and found themselves at the base of Guardon’s Spires.

“Ah!” cried Bjorn. “Dweeble and the other Hive Builders are nowhere to be seen. They have ventured onward prudently. It is not wise to remain near these marauding monks and daemons, let alone Thoth.”

“Very well, Halfling,” said Lord Taliesin. “Your strange acquaintances have demonstrated their willingness to assist us when possible. We wish them the best in this dire situation. Let us travel into Guardon’s stronghold. I’m sure we’ll encounter many creatures who claim it for their own.”

The Gaeans followed the advice of their Leader and entered the central courtyard of the Spires. The two, tall griffon statues yet glared down at the visitors with their eerie, ruby eyes.

“No matter how many times I see those creatures they give me the creeps,” Anemone confessed. “Whoever built them certainly didn’t mean to provide us with a warm welcome.”

The fighters entered the main reception chamber and were surprised to find it redecorated. The tapestries that bore the likenesses of Lykanthros and gorgons now included images of firbolgs, gargoyles and minotaurs with Thoth at their head.

“Magic works fast in these parts, it seems,” observed Wotan.

The blond wizard scratched his beard in contemplation.

“If there is time later it may be wise to consult with Siegemunde and gain his input on the recent events. He has dabbled in more experimental sorcery at his Martial Academy than we in Coermantyr.”

The mercenaries began their ascent of the curving steps to the upper chambers when gorgons and minotaurs accosted them. The spherical, single-eyed creatures descended from their stair-less tunnels in the ceiling and walls. The bull-headed anthromorphs stomped forward from the top of the stairway. Each of the large, cloven-hoofed barbarians wielded a formidable war hammer.

Restadicus and the Lore Masters contended with the levitating beholders.

“Stasis!” they yelled.

The spherical beasts were encapsulated in silver nets of light. The beholders were completely immobilized as they fell victim to the bolts of the Dagonites’ crossbows, the slings of the halflings and the arrows of Sigrid and Sharon. The gorgons dripped green blood from their injuries and collapsed into mounds of pulsating, gray jelly.

Zolgnath’s minotaurs were not as susceptible to the inhibiting magic of the Lore Masters. They shirked the restraining nets with ease and engaged the fighters in a fierce melee.

Fangoz stood eye-to-eye with the tallest and exchanged blows with the snorting, horned bull troll. The other fighters dodged the hammering attacks of the red-eyed anthromorphs by rolling on the ground. Jalhi and her amazon rangers were much faster than the minotaur and slashed at the backs of the creature’s legs with their curved blades. Gnoll and his wood trolls parried the strikes of their attackers with their shields and counter-attacked with their broadswords. A number of the creatures were brought to their knees and vanquished by the Arboreans.

Starfling and Flamerling spat fireballs at the bull trolls, blinding many of them. Reoren and the Knights of Coermantyr moved in with Lady Sharon at the lead. They lunged in at their opponents with their spears and swords. The anthromorphs from the Plane of Chaos were no match for the united barrage of the various races of Gaea. Many of them were defeated and those that lived fled rapidly up the stairway from which they emerged in search of supplemental forces.

“We have done well here,” said Rodnik. “Let us continue upward for the sake of all our regions.”

The burly Sergeant-at-Arms carried his hatchet with one hand and a burning torch with the other.

The Watcher led the Citizens of Coermantyr and the other warriors up the red-carpeted steps to the adjoining level of Guardon’s Spires. They stood before a hallway lit with torches burning brightly.

“Much wealth there lies within these neighboring rooms,” declared the grizened halfling. “Investigate within, if you so wish.”

“We can take a brief look at the goods along this path, Watcher,” offered Lord Taliesin. “Let us keep in mind the impending risk to our regions if we do not succeed. I miss the solitude of my Tower and the company of my troll villagers.”

The Soldiers of Mystic Down and Knights of Coermantyr opened the adjoining doors. Each of the locks was free. Nighthawk and the other goblins took a few moments to open a number of chests and boxes.

The defected Goblin Sergeant found a handsome dagger. Sharon’s Knights acquired a collection of chain mail gauntlets and tough, leather boots.

“Let’s move on,” said Restadicus. “We must do what we can to turn the Drystyx Monks and their legions.”

The mercenaries reached the end of the hall. They beheld the chamber with three portals passed earlier by the Gaeans.

“Traverse through the central door, we should,” declared The Watcher. “It will take us to the main stairway.”

The halfling gestured with his torch for the fighters to follow.

Reoren marveled at the lamps swaying in the mild breeze of the spacious, cylindrical chasm.

“This fortress intrigues me,” said the lich merchant. “It was constructed long ago and speaks of a lasting conflict between contending magics.”

The battalion of warriors traveled upward for a short while when their path was blocked by the shadowy vampire, Claude.

“Do not attack us again,” declared Jalhi Bengal. “You have been warned, Night Feeder.”

“Alas, I give my word that I shall not, Fierce Ranger. In the time that you soldiers were gone I fed on the rats and Lykanthros that meander throughout this stronghold. My hunger has been assuaged for a goodly time. The presence of you travelers of various alignments has piqued my curiosity. I have begun to wonder if I may yet return to the throne of my castle on Mount Crow.”

“That is a possibility, Ancient Vampire,” answered Wotan. “Your race brought a balance in the feud with the goblins and orcs long ago. During the past war with the stone trolls and servants of the Dire Queen your people were forced to escheat their rightful holdings. Now that the great swamp dwellers have returned to their own affairs we can assist you in returning to your lands in the Arkadian Mountain Range. I doubt that the stone trolls will again venture into the wooded regions.”

“That is true,” replied Fangoz. “My grandfather and his kin were bloodthirsty and ambitious. Since their single-minded sieges my race has adopted a contemplative lifestyle. Now that Ankharet has been destroyed the vampires may again partake of the trade routes in the highlands.”

“Very well, Mortals,” said Claude. “I will help you if I can. In turn I ask that you let me enter your magic gateway when the time is right.”

“We have a deal, Night-Feeder,” answered Jalhi. “I don’t trust you but will let you march among us if you behave yourself.”

The motley band of Gaeans continued onward. A consort of firbolgs and gargoyles again attacked them. The winged daemons forewent the stairs and glided downward in the dark shaft with outspread wings. Some of the green and bronze humanoids spat acrid balls of flame. The projectiles left trails of green and red fire between the iron chains.

Sigrid and Leif drew taught longbows and released a volley of arrows up at their attackers. Their shots were accurate. Several of the gargoyles plummeted from their positions with wings and bodies riddled with shafts.

The firbolgs rushed down the stairway. Their glowing, crimson bodies illuminated the central, stone column with an eerie hue. Claude was the first to enter the fray. He sunk his fangs into the closest creature. It howled and clawed at the cloaked vampire but could not break his grip.

Jalhi watched in awe as Claude’s eyes exuded fiery light from the luminescent blood of his prey. Lord Taliesin stepped to the night feeder’s side and dropped a hammering blow upon the nearest firbolg. Sharon and Fangoz were quick to follow

and parried the slashing fangs of the Drystyx Legions. They circled like the anthromorph rangers, landing crushing blows to their adversaries' legs and arms. Restadicus and the Lore Masters arrested many of the daemons with a holding spell.

“Stasis!” they cried.

The humanoids were encapsulated in nets of light. They struggled vehemently and several of them broke loose. Thorgrym, the Lich Town Guard, ran up the steps to meet the gargoyles. He held a short sword in one hand and a dirk in the other. The sturdy ghou-troll unleashed a flurry of pivoting strikes to a green daemon, sending it to the void in a shower of blood.

Jalhi's wyverns clung to her shoulder raiment and fired a series of missiles as she charged forward. The tiger women joined with the Dagonite Captains as they attacked the cluster of firbolgs. Marlin and Anemone fired their crossbows before drawing their curved blades.

Bjorn Roundtree and Gearzon flung sharpened stones from their slings at the farthest creatures. The glowing monsters held up their arms to protect themselves from the attack.

“Good going, Gnome Cousin,” said the halfling. “We may yet lead these fighters to victory.”

The four Paladins of Order strode up the stairs to the battle. They used their long arms to smite their enemies two rows deep.

Gilead, Sharon's Key Mage, and Alex teamed up with Leif and Sigrid to incant a time warp spell.

“Chronos!”

An amber cloud emerged from the outstretched hands of the sorcerers. It was viscous and slowed the Drystyx Invaders as it landed on them from above.

The Lore Masters enchanted a spell of their own.

“Frigidos!”

A huge beam of blue ice flew from the two-dozen wizards. They gestured with their hands, guiding it up the stairs in a sweeping motion. Three out of four firbolgs were frozen solid. Gnoll and his wood trolls marched into the fray, contending with the remaining firbolgs. As they struggled with the remaining creatures the icy beings were shattered into scattered shards.

Bors lingered at the rear, favoring his injured abdomen. The final pair of gargoyles descended in front of him. They swung at Bors with their claws but he sidestepped the assault in time. The rotund Burgomeister dispatched the humanoids with swift blows from his mace. The howling daemons fell into the darkness.

“Desperate, this fight has become,” declared The Watcher. “Careful we must remain lest our number is reduced. Awaiting our return the Drystyx Monks are. Press on we should.”

“That is wise advice, Old Halfling,” Restadicus replied.

The mercenaries continued their journey upward until they came upon the bridge leading to The Watcher’s library.

“Let us carry on with the path demarcated by The Watcher, My Friends,” said Taliesin. “We must attend to the breach to the Plane of Chaos while the opportunity remains.”

The warriors exited the chamber and followed the light of the aged halfling’s torch through the tunnels beyond.

Lord Taliesin noticed the bas-reliefs and facades carved into the stone and cinder-block walls had changed. They portrayed snorting minotaurs and steaming firbolgs. The renderings also depicted Thoth and his wizards in commanding positions over the Hordes of Chaos.

The fighters reached the topmost hall. A number of firbolgs and minotaurs sprinted from the opposite end. The Lore Masters were prepared and incanted a harnessing spell.

“Chronos!”

A beige cloud captured the hostile humanoids and anthromorphs. The united magic of the adept wizards was resilient. Their adversaries were unable to move despite their fierce intentions to attack the Gaeans.

“You visitors exhibit potent magic,” observed Driptwist. “It may yet occur that a separate peace is returned to our respective Realms.”

The Morphozoid eyed the encumbered minotaurs and firbolgs with apprehension.

The fighters and Council of Wizards reached the end of the carpeted hallway leading to Guardon’s escheated Throne Room. The red dragon had returned to his resting place between the broken pillars removed by his hasty exit. Zolgnath and his Drystyx Monks awaited the determined mercenaries with a sizable gathering of the Legions of Chaos regimented beside them.

“Gaeans, the final countdown has begun,” bellowed Thoth.

Noxious, acrid fumes wafted from his reptilian nostrils.

“The bargaining time is past, Thoth,” said Restadicus.

The magenta-cloaked wizard’s bushy eyebrows arched with ire.

“You know the history of the Dharmic Equilibrium as well as any of us. In past ages you and your monstrous kindred resisted the natural quality of the juxtaposition of kharmic energies. The residents of the various Realms and Planes united to oppose your intentions then and will do so again. Return to the Plane of Chaos from whence you were spawned or be obliterated by the full force of our wrath!”

“Never, Wizard. Now is the time of our victory for all battles thwarted!”

The red dragon’s ribcage expanded as he inhaled a great breath of air. Thoth opened his sharp-toothed maw and released a bolt of green flame. The Lore Masters were prepared for such a contingency and uttered a spell of shielding.

“Sentiex!” they cried.

A billowing, Ethereal Barrier covered the battalion of Gaeon warriors. The acrid, green and yellow fire curved around the bubble, searing the obsidian and cinderblock surfaces of Guardon’s Throne Room with sizzling scorch marks. The red dragon howled at the mitigation of his attack. The great lizard’s crimson scales glistened in the light of The Watcher’s torch as he pumped his muscular wings to glide toward the Gaeans. Enraged, Thoth swung at the Paladins of Order with all four limbs as he hovered in the air of the Gorgon Plane.

Glasslook and Heartsing absorbed the brunt of the powerful strikes with their reflective shields. They parried the slashing claws and fangs of the dragon and countered with their broadswords. Simultaneous with the Chaotic Dragon’s assault the firbolgs and minotaurs rushed at the fighters.

Jalhi and the Bengal Clan met the legions with their curved daggers at the ready. The lumbering Denizens of Fire grabbed at the tiger-women awkwardly. The feline anthomorphs brought the heavy humanoids down with hooking kicks to their legs. The rangers finished them off with their razor sharp blades.

The minotaurs and Drystyx Monks were not as susceptible to the spry swamp dwellers. They sidestepped the whirling attack pattern of the anthromorph rangers and engaged Reoren, the merchant lich-troll, and the Knights of Coermantyr and Mystic Down. The strong bull-trolls and women wielded war hammers and axes in circular blows. A number of the troll soldiers were smitten by the swooping barrages of the horn-headed anthromorphs. Their chain and plate mail armor was finely crafted but became dented from the great weapons. A handful of Lord Taliesin’s Soldiers and Baroness Sharon’s Knights fell to their knees, gasping for breath.

Reoren parried the flurry of strikes from the minotaurs and counter-attacked with a studded mace, similar to the one Bors used. The cunning ghoulish-troll used both

ends of his mace to jab and bludgeon the taller invaders. He succeeded in vanquishing five of the Warriors of Chaos.

Driptwist employed its amorphous nature to trip several of the scrambling firbolgs with outstretched tentacles extended from its stumpy arms and legs. The merfolk Captains, Anemone and Marlin, skewered a pair of the minotaurs with high velocity bolts fired from their respective crossbows. Sigrid and Leif employed a frost spell of their own device that they directed at Zolgnath and the Drystyx Monks.

“Frigidos!”

Three of the cowed monks were taken off guard and were frozen entirely by the ray of ice unleashed by the adept Sentinels. The halflings were quick to monopolize on the vulnerability of their adversaries and fired a barrage of stones at the crystallized sorcerers, causing them to detonate in a shower of pulpy shards.

Livid from the deaths of their kindred, the Drystyx Monks enchanted an arcane sorcery.

“Tauros!”

The minotaurs flared with coverings of green magic. The black-cloaked mages directed the raging anthromorphs toward Gearzon and Bjorn. Listhew and Smithforge stepped in their path and contended with the surging bull-trolls with their broadswords. The gnome and halfling flung sharpened stones from their slings at the minotaurs, striking several of them between the eyes. The invaders in question fell to the cobbled floor, unconscious from the impact of the whirling missiles.

Reoren and Bors attempted to intercept the attackers again with their blunt force weapons. The green magic surrounding them rendered the anthromorphs impervious to the attack.

Alex interceded on the behalf of the dejected fighters. He enchanted a sorcery of binding.

“Captros!”

An orange cloud emanating from the young wizard’s outstretched hands hindered the charging male and female minotaurs. Their green armor remained and they were unaffected by the blows of the lich merchant and the Innkeeper.

Glasslook and Heartsing turned their attention to the efforts of the fighters at their flank. They utilized their resilient, sharpened swords to breach the arcane shields of the minotaurs. A handful of the firbolgs and Drystyx Monks contended with Starfling and Flamering. The fearless wyverns assailed the Denizens of Chaos with a volley of fireballs.

Despite the adamant intentions of the young dragons the Chaotic Wizards and their cohorts were unaffected. Zolgnath beckoned to the portal in the floor of the Throne Room. The legions of firbolgs and minotaurs levitating below surged upward. Thoth screeched with frustration at the resistance to his comeuppance. The immense, red dragon again released a spray of intense fire upon the Gaeian mercenaries.

“Ah! We must harness the Demigod while the opportunity remains, My Brethren,” said Restadicus.

The aged, adept wizard addressed the Council of Lore Masters as their shield blocked the acid flame.

“Wotan and the rest of you, help me to contain this Demigod. The karmic balance must be restored to the Dharmic Equilibrium as it is meant to be.”

“I am ready, Restadicus,” answered the subordinate Wizard of Coermantyr.

The entirety of the Gaeian magic users, including the Sentinels, supported the supreme effort of their teacher to control the renegade lizard.

“Baniscent!” they enchanted.

The protective barrier around the mercenaries expanded outward toward the Legions of Chaos, then contracted upon Thoth and the Drystyx Monks. Claude rushed forward at a blinding pace, draining the life juices of a variety of the invaders before they knew what struck them. Fangoz, Rodnik, Nighthawk and the Maegar Dwarves pummeled the usurpers that broke loose of their arcane snare, rendering them lifeless.

The floor of the Throne Room in Guardon’s Spires was covered with dead and dying firbolgs and minotaurs, strewn among the lingering remains of the earlier waves of gorgons and Lykanthros.

The energy field of the Gaeians thickened and condensed. It folded Thoth’s flexing wings to his glistening torso and rear. Zolgnath and his fellow monks gasped in dismay as the spell binding them became plastic and viscous. They wrestled with it to no avail as the Paladins of Order helped Restadicus to mold the jelly into a rotating funnel. The energy field emitted a golden light as it spiraled downward through the planar breach, taking the Demigod and his intrusive legions in a single package.

Smithforge acted quickly to bring his freshly hewed Gong from the hall outside. He gestured with his muscular arms to hurl the seal in place. The tall troll’s eyes flared with crimson radiance as he drew a huge coil of solder from his travel pack. With his left hand he tossed the binding metal into the air where it hovered

under magical influence. With his right hand he guided steaming beams of red light from his eyes to the locus where his coil unraveled onto the edge of the nickel and steel piece. The Legions of Chaos already pounded on the fresh seal from below. Their efforts to return to the Gorgon Plane were in vain. The firbolgs' blows only caused a series of reverberating crashes to rise from the Gong.

The adept engineer completed his soldering task and addressed his allies who still gasped from the exertion of the battle.

“This Seal will hold, My Friends. Always maintain your research of the magical schools for even Hydro and his kin have no idea when renegade Summoners may try again to contact the malevolent Entities below.”

“That is wise advice,” said Wotan. “The Watcher has collected a goodly store of information during his imprisonment here. We will spend many months reviewing the histories and techniques he observed from the nooks and crannies of this mountain stronghold.”

Anemone spoke to the group of mercenaries.

“My Friends, I think it wise to revisit the stone giants in the bowels of this stronghold. Now that the spatial breach is reasonably secured it will be just as well to retrieve the Orb of Paryphax from Petra's Midden. We were all saddened to learn of Skjold's untimely assassination by Themistokles. The Wood Mage of Arborea corresponded with Lord Dagon in our ocean region on many occasions.”

“That is prudent, Dagonite Captain,” Gnoll said. “Let us travel into the lower levels of The Spires while our strength remains.”

The expression of optimism in the faces of the wood trolls revealed their hope for a better future for Arborea and the neighboring regions.

The Watcher lumbered energetically from the Throne Room and led the sizable battalion of warriors down the central, cylindrical stairway to the network of caverns below. They soon reached the place where the stalagmites and stalactites grew strangely large. Petra and Volcan detected the approach of the various races via the vibrations of their myriad footfalls. The immense stone giants shirked a layer of shale and rubble from their shoulders as they rose from their slumber in the hollowed Midden under the floor of the sparkling cavern. Petra yawned a musical tone that caused pebbles to fall from the ceiling.

“Well, it's good to see all of you brave fighters together in functioning health. We were concerned for your welfare during the struggle above. Volcan was just commenting that he hadn't heard such a cacophony shake through the mountain in eons. The activities of the beholders and Lykanthros along with the marauding

firbolgs, daemons and gargoyles were silenced in the last hour. The presence of your Paladin acquaintances must have something to do with this, I'm sure."

Petra and Volcan smiled.

"You speak the truth, Stone Lady," replied Restadicus. "My fellow wizards and I succeeded in contacting the Plane of Order in our time of need. One of the larger Entities therein, answering to the name of Hydro, sent these four, unique troll soldiers to assist us. They proved quite resourceful. We return to you now to ask for the Orb of Paryphax once more. A strengthened Gong Seal has been placed in the breach opened by the Ephemeral Specters, Flotsam and Jetsam. There is time to restore the powerful talisman to the Tower of the Wood Trolls in Arborea. They will employ it to revive and replenish the natural cycles of growth emanating from the deep forest."

"Very well, White-bearded Mage," declared Volcan. "Your proposition is reasonable. Take the orb from Petra. Like the rest of you we hope for a return of balance to the flaring Dharmic Equilibrium."

Petra once again lowered her massive hand to the floor of the spacious cavern. She opened her fist, revealing the glinting orb at the center of her palm. Anemone quickly strode to the stone giant and donned the glass ball and its chain necklace.

"Our work here is done, Restadicus," stated Glasslook. "We long for the open spaces and colonnades of our Plane. The Lore Masters have the knowledge to contact us if the need should arise."

"Very well, Seraphim," answered the Leader of the Wizards. "May you find good fortune and the peace we all seek."

The four Knights of Order generated a spatial rift and strode through it. The gateway closed, leaving the Gaeans and their acquaintances in the Gorgon Plane.

"The beholders and wolf-beasts are bound to emerge from their hiding places now that the Denizens of Chaos have absconded their holding here," Driptwist said. "The Principle Amoebids are familiar with the lurking tendencies of the predatorial creatures and will act to keep the lower caverns safe from their hunting patterns."

"We Terranoids will also remain on the lookout, Shape-shifter," Petra opined. "Things are bound to get wily for a time as the old balance returns between the residents within and without The Spires."

"So be it," said Restadicus. "Wotan, help me to establish a spatial portal to the Crossroads in the Ghastly Fens. From there, each of our brave warriors will be able to return to their families and friends."

The magenta-cloaked wizard addressed the gathering of mercenaries from throughout the regions.

“All of you have our thanks. None of the battles won today would have been possible without your intrepid vigilance and cunning. You are welcome in the chambers of Coermantyr Castle anytime.”

The warriors cheered their approval as Wotan and Restadicus opened a portal to the Burial Ruins in the Ghastly Fens. All of them were glad to return to Gaea and marched through the red-limned gate expeditiously.

Chapter Four: Near Horizons

Rauros sat wearily on the Dais in the Abyssal Cairn. Word had passed for several days of an eerie serenity in the woods and highlands. Dakros approached the Leader of the Harad Ghul through the torch-lit columns of the spacious castle.

“Rauros, our scouts have reported similar situations all along the picket line with Mystic Down. The guards and patrols have diminished their size and number of reconnaissance missions. There is a greater conflict taking place beyond our Plane. If we act now we can solidify our encampments in Mount Crow and take the greater

portions of the Ghastly Fens and Mystic Down for the goblins and orcs. Let me lead a garrison of Harad Ghul and Stalactite Orcs into Mystic Down. Rumors tell us that a meager corps of soldiers protects Wood's End and Lord Taliesin's Tower. The majority of the troll folk have returned to the forest in search of lumber for building and fertile soil for planting. They will be taken by surprise if we act quickly."

"Your counsel is sound, Dakros," Rauros answered.

The sun-creased assassin gazed beyond the lines of torches as he contemplated the impending course of action.

"Let us ask Loki what he thinks about the state of affairs beyond our region. There is always merit in an additional opinion."

The dark, green member of the Harad Ghul approached his two companions at the heart of the Abyssal Cairn.

"I have been monitoring Mystic Down, My Friends. The greater mercenaries have departed from the region for some days. The machinations of the Dire Queen and her daemon companion have demanded the full focus of their attention. Breaches have formed amid the Latticework of the Planes. My bones sense the conflict from the forces outside Gaea. All of us are better off now that Ankharet has been extricated from her reign over the goblin and orc tribes."

Loki continued to address Rauros and Dakros with a tangible vehemence.

"Only the Innkeeper's son, Torvald, remains in the tavern in Wood's End. If the Harad Ghul acts quickly we will succeed in claiming the stronghold in Mystic Down on the behalf of the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs. Let us assemble our Guild of Assassins and venture through the woods this night. We can yet seize the fortress of the warriors and employ the resources of their settlement and hunting grounds for our own tribes."

"Your plan has merit, Loki," replied Rauros.

The visage of the experienced goblin continued to manifest an expression of contemplation and ambition.

"Let us journey forth this night and put the training and regimentation of our forces to the test. It will do us good to reestablish the goblin power base as a force to be reckoned with among the scurrilous races of this Realm. It has long grieved me that our numbers have not returned to what they were in the age before the war with the stone trolls and Feudal Knights."

"Very well, Leader," said Dakros. "I will assemble the greater sum of our armies here tonight. We will disperse the scouts and hunters shortly with the Harad Ghul permeating the woods ahead of them."

The red-painted elder goblins ran their separate ways through the shadowy colonnades of the Abyssal Cairn. The Harad Ghul harnessed what few Lykanthros remained as steeds. They banded with the Stalactite Orcs and enthusiastic Goblins of Mount Crow as they infiltrated the woods beyond the looming castle. The invaders would soon reach the picket line bordering their region with Mystic Down.

* * * * *

Torvald awaited the return of his father and the other mercenaries as he turned sides of mutton and beef on a large grill. The townsfolk and visiting farmers chatted cautiously among themselves.

The lithe son of the hearty Burgomeister spoke to his friends in a booming voice.

“The wolf-creatures and goblin marauders have fled us now, My Friends. We are fortunate to have such ambitious Lieges here and in Coermantyr, as well. Let us salute the new-found peace here and apply ourselves to a prosperous future!”

The patrons of the tavern cheered their approval and sloshed their mugs as they crashed them together.

A stable hand ran into the warm room. His face was creased with urgency.

“The goblins have returned! Again they ride the Lykanthros like warhorses. They have already mauled a number of gardens and destroyed our vegetables.”

“To arms, My Friends!” cried Torvald.

The swarthy troll drew a rune-etched longsword from under the countertop. The other patrons of Bard’s Inn wielded weapons from their burlap and leather cloaks. They rushed out of the tavern and stood at the ready in the main street of the modest village.

Rauros and his Harad Ghul had surged ahead of their marching kindred and slashed at hedgerows and cabbages with their scimitars. They recognized the silhouettes of the trolls as they stood before the rays of light piercing the fog from the inn.

The fierce assassins did not hesitate and engaged the standing villagers with their burnished blades. The Lykanthros remaining in Gaea were experienced with the dextrous tactics of the villagers. They dodged their weapons while issuing counterattacks with their claws and fangs.

Torvald stepped to the front of the gathering of his battling companions and lunged forward, bringing down one of the Lykanthros and its rider. Two more of the Harad Ghul were tripped by the rolling creature and also lost their feral mounts as they stumbled. They rose holding their scimitars aloft and engaged the inexperienced

trolls in hand-to-hand combat. A few of them were defeated before Torvald pulled his longsword free and compromised the position of the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs.

Blueblood rode into the scene and was about to render a serious infliction to Torvald's flank when he parried the attack just in time.

The Stalactite Orc agent of the Harad Ghul was a fierce soldier and grappled with Torvald in a forceful grip. The two warriors spun over the street of Wood's End, toppling a bound-stick fence. They parted again and their swords clashed, emitting a shower of sparks. The other residents and visitors to the chief settlement of Mystic Down came to the aid of the Burgomeister's son. The Harad Ghul and trolls entered a serious battle.

Torvald was cut a shallow wound on his left forearm. He addressed the large orc assassin assailing him.

"Turn from this region, Red Assassin. The troll folk seek a peaceful existence with the tribes of the Arkadian Mountains. Do not sacrifice all forwards won on this venture."

"That is not possible," answered Blueblood. "Our numbers have grown since the past war. We need the fertile soil here for our people. Refrain from resisting us."

"Liege Lord Taliesin would not consent. You have a feud on your hands, Orc Leader. En garde!"

Torvald swung a series of blows with his longsword, compromising Blueblood's defenses. The member of the Harad Ghul was gashed on the thigh. The Lykanthros and villagers continued to fight. The red-painted orc stumbled away from the Innkeeper's son, clutching his leg.

"Arrgh!" he yelled. "This is foolishness, My Kindred. Let us return with the echelons of goblins. The trolls here are a greater hindrance to our agenda than we predicted."

The swarthy orc grabbed the reins of a riderless Lykanthros and pulled himself into the saddle. The horde of goblins and orcs fled from the streets of Wood's End, leaving the trolls with their weapons drawn. They cheered their victory.

"We must prepare, My Friends," Torvald said. "The goblins are sure to return, and in greater numbers."

* * * * *

At last I am free, Claude thought.

The ancient vampire ran through the moonlit oaks and pines of the Arkadian Forest. He sensed the beating hearts and warm blood of a variety of creatures throughout the wilderness. Some slept while others prowled the brambles in search

of prey. The dethroned Lord moved through the windswept trees with an uncanny silence. Raccoons and badgers dozed under bushes at his feet as his toes grazed the surface of the earth.

I long for the sanctuary of my castle, Stammberg. The goblins assuredly lurk therein, Claude contemplated.

The experienced night-feeder was careful to avoid random encampments of goblin and orc soldiers. Since the return of the Gaeian mercenaries to their home regions the Arkadian Forces dispersed into the deep woods.

Ah, the remains of my ancestors beckon. Ages have passed since I strode the halls of my domain free of harassment from the goblins and their cousins. The other vampires fled under the duress of the invading hordes and destructive stone trolls. I wonder if any of them yet remain, thought Claude.

The returning Lord's eyes reflected the bright, silver light of the twin moons. His visual faculties, which were keen in near total darkness, perceived the smallest details of the swaying boughs and scurrying rodents. Owls and lynxes cried from the reaches of the spruce and elm groves.

The vampire ran to a clearing at the base of the Arkadian Mountain Range. He had traveled dozens of miles since emerging from the portal generated by Restadicus at the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens. A tall fortress protruded from the slanting mountain, whose foot met the hilly prairie where Claude stood. A scattering of lights shone from windows in the high towers. Trails and extinguished campfires pockmarked the bending grass around the banished Lord.

Claude ascended the foothills of the Arkadian Mountains. The eerily-lit towers of Castle Stammberg grew tall as the vampire lurched through the reeds and oaks. His keen hearing detected the movements of goblin patrols. The aged Lord was experienced with evasion tactics and did well in avoiding the attention of the aggressive humanoids. Their snarls and grumbles caused the troll's ears to tingle.

These fellows aren't nearly as bad as the gorgons and Lykanthros, he thought. *They don't hunt on scent and kharmic energy like the others did.*

Claude observed sporadic encampments of goblins that muttered around cookfires and drank fermented grog. They were unaware of the presence of the elusive night-feeder as they tore at rancid meat with their jagged fangs.

I long to again sit on the Throne of my tribe, the undead troll considered. *Much has gone awry in this region since the clans of vampires were expunged by the brutal stone trolls and orcs. The time has come to return this area to the Denizens of the Night, its rightful custodians.*

The once-banished Lord reached the portcullis of the aged castle. The systems of cranks and levers that lifted the gate were in an advanced state of disrepair. The marauders that drove Claude's kindred away had either abandoned the structure or relied on an alternate entrance. The powerful Leader of the Vampires grasped the base of the interlocking grid of rusted, iron strips. He ascended the fallen gate, exercising his preternatural strength, and continued up the brick wall of the southernmost tower. His ragged cloak billowed in the chill mountain breeze as he climbed. A number of bats were attracted to his predatory aura. The carnivorous, winged mammals flew near his brow before zooming past the large, circular moons and spiraling toward the uppermost towers.

The Vampire Lord spied a variety of auburn and green goblins dancing a macabre minuet through the iron-framed windows. The tapestries hung by his cousins and their friends were tattered and faded.

"I've had enough of this!" Claude yelled, exasperated.

The troll hurled his body through the plate-glass window, causing it to shatter in a shower of pieces. The goblins in the dining hall gasped in alarm at the dark figure plummeting through the air from above. They wielded short swords and maces in an attempt to protect themselves but their efforts were in vain. The enraged night-feeder subjugated each of the screeching invaders with his vice-like grip and needle-sharp fangs. The vampire feasted on goblin blood and his irises dilated with the addition to his reserves of energy.

Claude marched across the central chamber of Castle Stammberg and flung open the double doors at the front. The auburn goblins in the antechamber howled in fear at the sight of the panting troll. They realized the gristly fate of their companions and fled from the Arkadian Stronghold driven wild with fear.

"Away with you, Foul Goblins," said the Escheated Lord. "Your stone troll comrades have parted ways with your invasive agenda and have left you to your own resources. I imagine it will be some time before they help you to unearth more coffins containing members of my tribe. Stammberg belongs to the creatures of the night. It is not meant to be usurped by mortal whimsy."

Claude trotted back through the dining hall and journeyed up the spiral staircase to his reception chamber. His marble Throne remained where it had been but the standing candelabras had fallen against it, making a home for a number of spiders. The troll put the lamps in their proper places and swept the black marble free of webs. He sat in the massive chair and tossed his white hair back. The Vampire Lord considered the events that transpired since his expulsion.

He rested for but a few hours in silent meditation. The night-feeder made a tour of his family's castle. He straightened what furniture remained in a useful condition. The detritus he collected in a pile in the central courtyard and set it ablaze. He included the broken coffins of his subordinate aids, rent by the past invasion of the stone trolls. Claude cried crimson-stained tears in remembrance of his lost friends and kindred. Although he'd spent many years perched in the dark reaches of the Gorgon Plane the memories of his youth were fresh.

The Arkadian Lord gazed at the crimson and orange flames for some time when he heard a mysterious scratching from the ramparts above the quadrant. He looked for the source of the sound but caught only the blurred shape of a black cloak as it dove over the outer wall.

Claude's curiosity was piqued and he ran with superhuman velocity to the foot of the same wall. He used his glossy claws to scale the edifice quickly. At the edge of the woods a tall, humanoid figure ran into the standing trees. The night-feeder hurled himself from the edge of Castle Stammberg and let his form shift into that of a winged gargoyle.

He glided over the forest canopy, like an eagle, staring down at the athletic person running through the untamed wilderness below. Focused on his target, Claude let his wings of shadow dissolve and plummeted from the moonlit sky. He landed hard on the soil before the obscure Entity and grabbed its shoulders. The person struggled with uncanny strength and the cowl fell back, revealing the features of a female vampire. She was younger than Claude and had not been present at the time of the destruction of the mountain Tribe of Stammberg.

"Let me go! You're energy has created echoes throughout these mountains. I don't know from whence you emerged but I detected your presence from miles away. There were vampires here once, but they disappeared long ago. My name is Gabrielle."

"It's nice to meet you, Gabrielle," Claude answered. "The marauding stone trolls and goblins destroyed my companions. Since the close of that campaign the great warriors from the Ghastly Fens have dispersed from their battle Middens and adopted a tranquil existence. The goblins, in turn, have claimed Castle Stammberg and the neighboring vampire strongholds for their own use. If we rebuild the population of the people of the night the Mountains of Arkadia will be returned to a moderating position in the network of regions."

"Your words ring true, Claude," said Gabrielle. "I have long wondered about my origins. I was initiated as a vampire some years ago but my creator was weak and

did not live long thereafter. He spoke of others of our kind but did not know if any remained in the Realm of the Living. I saw many artifacts and remnants of vampire activity in these castles but could not devise where they had gone or how they met their fate.”

“That was the past,” Claude replied. “The aggression of the stone trolls and goblin hordes brought about a dark time for the vampire tribes. If we remain vigilant and enterprising we can return this region to the structured habitat it once was. The predation of the night-feeders is but an element of the cycle of life. We must limit our hunts to individuals who have killed unjustly. Thus the vampires will promote the greater harmony of Gaea.”

“Long have we perceived the memories and traits of the mortals. If they have done wrong to each other we will know of it and act accordingly.”

“Your words bear wisdom, Claude,” Gabrielle responded. “I have hunted smaller creatures in the attempt to preserve the social balance of the neighboring races.”

The pair of vampires relied on the darkness of the nighttime forest to conduct reconnaissance on the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs. The wiry humanoids camped in sporadic groups throughout the forested foothills of the Arkadian Mountains. Gabrielle and Claude realized that the patrols issued from the Abyssal Cairn had forgotten the influence of the night-feeders over the years since their alliance with the stone trolls.

They approached one of the larger encampments before the silhouette of Castle Stammberg. Gaea’s twin moons were full and formed bright, shimmering circles behind the narrow towers of the ancient fortress. The night-feeders allowed the goblins to see them in the light of their fire. The humanoids gasped in alarm and wielded their various weapons.

“You are not natural beings of this region,” said a one-eyed Sergeant.

His brass-ringed epaulets indicated his office delegated by the higher goblin and orc officials of the Abyssal Cairn.

“The Harad Ghul has reformed under goblin administration. Our Guild of Assassins controls Arkadia and will not relinquish these holdings to anyone, no matter how pale or emaciated they appear,” declared the muscular goblin.

His companions growled their support of his declaration.

“My name is Darktooth. Flee from this place or face our wrath.”

“I will not, Darktooth,” Gabrielle vowed. “For years I have lived in the margins of the foothills, scavenging for prey amid your chaotic fires and destructive patrols.”

Mount Crow was once the home of a clan of vampires, as the presence of my companion demonstrates. He has already reclaimed Castle Stammberg. If you wish to partake of a peaceful coexistence with us, return to your subterranean tunnels.”

“We will not,” said Darktooth.

The hearty goblin wielded a war mace and charged Gabrielle. The fledgling vampire utilized her sharp reflexes to evade the attack of the Goblin Leader. She pivoted on the heels of her leather boots and seized Darktooth by the shoulders. The Leader of the Goblin Patrol was an adept fighter and shirked the hold of the female vampire. He flailed his left arm in a swimming motion while raising his war mace with his right.

Claude joined the fray, gripping Darktooth from behind. The aged night-feeder drove his fangs into the goblin’s neck, tapping the central artery. The other members of the patrol swarmed around the pair of vampires. They bludgeoned at the pale figures but failed to hinder their attack. The Goblin Leader fell lifeless to the ground. Claude growled and stepped toward the other humanoids. They fled into the trees, screeching with fear.

“Let’s return to the castle, Claude,” said Gabrielle. “Since your return to Mount Crow, the Dharmic Vibrations have changed. The magical experiments generated in the Abyssal Cairn have ceased.”

“The Dire Queen has been destroyed and her daemon courtesan returned to the Plane of Chaos,” explained the male vampire. “If we take the time to rebuild and refurbish Castle Stammberg to its original splendor we are sure to attract rogues and misfits interested in joining the Clan of the Night.”

The pair of undead carnivores held hands as they scrambled through the waist-high grass to the castle gate.

* * * * *

Marlin and Anemone swam through the warm shallows off the coast of Mystic Down. They had bade farewell to their land-faring Comrades-in-Arms and dove eagerly into the turbulent depths. The sea trolls were adept swimmers and took full advantage of their webbed hands and feet to propel themselves against the current.

“The feeling of the water has changed since our entrapment by Ankharet’s sorcery,” hummed Anemone.

“I agree,” said Marlin. “The environmental cycles of the ocean region are in perpetual flux. I hope things are going well with my father, Lord Dagon.”

The pair of amphibious Captains observed that the ocean was in a placid state. Green and yellow rays of light descended in oscillating columns from the surface two

hundred yards above. The sandy bottom of the sea was lined with interlaced patterns of light passing through the clear water. Silver and red schools of fish billowed and writhed in bizarre formations above Anemone and Marlin.

“The crystal sharks and giant mantas are strangely absent,” said Marlin’s girlfriend. “I wonder if other aquatic predators have been deposited in the water through the random portals generated by the Dire Queen.”

“That is an imminent possibility, My Love,” responded the mertroll. “Let us remain on our guard in the event that an unexpected species appears in these depths.”

The Dagonites swam onward into the dark blue of the open ocean. The lights of the phosphorous lamps in the City of the Sea Trolls wavered at the base of a wide, submarine valley. Teams of fish hunters hauled great, seaweed nets filled with bass and carp. The lively fish flopped about in their snares as their captors left trails of air bubbles rising from the gills in their necks. A band of the hunters noticed the approach of their missing companions and swam over the edge of the alabaster city to meet them.

“Greetings, Marlin, we’ve missed you since your disappearance.”

A husky, purple mertroll embraced the returning Captains.

“It’s me, Trilobite. The regents of the coliseum were quick to enter your names into the roster of entrapped citizens. The sea was turbulent during the permeation of the spatial rifts. Dagon was vigilant in his observation of the regions above through his scrying glass. He kept us all informed as to the activities of the Lore Masters in Coermantyr Castle and the magic-users hearkening from the Ghastly Fens. He marveled at the experimental sorceries employed by the young Lieges to subvert the offensive tactics of the Arkadian Summoners. It’s good that you’re back. A new tranquility has returned to our region. Rumors have spread of strange predators afoot. The movement of the traditional schools of fish has been disturbed by some large carnivores yet unseen by our hunting patrols. I don’t believe you’ve met my companions. Allow me to introduce them to you. Their names are Nautilus and Barracuda.”

The large fish hunter indicated the male and female merfolk treading water nearby. Nautilus had red skin and bore vestigial tentacles manifesting a spectrum of colors ranging from orange to aquamarine. Barracuda was a slender merwoman whose complexion was a mottled bronze. She wore a series of ornate rings and bands on the tentacles extending from her head and back.

“We are glad to meet you, Courageous Captains,” declared Nautilus. “The regions beyond the sea are notoriously perilous.”

The Dagonites swam in a group as they neared the coral and marble city of their people. The metropolis of the sea trolls was a bustling network of activity. Amid the ornate towers and pillared temples hunters and craftsmen hurried to barter their wares. Young merfolk swam in queues to attend classes at the local schools. A variety of colored streams of heated gas rose from the phosphorescent lamps that limned the homes and streets of the Dagonite Colony.

“I look forward to conferring with my father,” said Marlin. “Much has occurred since I last spoke with him.”

The sea trolls swam over their great settlement and entered the courtyard of Lord Dagon’s columned stronghold. A number of Captains approached the returning warriors and heartily embraced them. All of the merfolk were anxious to seek counsel with Dagon and inform him of his son’s return. They swam through the elaborately carved arches at the entrance to the principle stronghold. Rows of incendiary sconces emitted rings of light as they hung from brass chains at the top of each marble column. Squidge, Dagon’s main adviser, swam from the opposite end of the long hallway and addressed the gathering of young warriors.

“Greetings, Marlin and Anemone! I am glad that you have returned safely from the invasive portals created by Ankharet in the attempt to dominate Gaea. I can only speculate as to what alien creatures and environments you encountered during your hiatus from the ocean region. Let us venture to the inner sanctum and speak with the Ruler of the Dagonites.”

Squidge beckoned for the merfolk to follow and swam through the final set of columns into Lord Dagon’s Throne Room. The warriors accompanied the adviser of the Lord and beheld Dagon, sitting on his marble and coral Dais. The large mertroll appeared to be dozing and expelled a staggered stream of bubbles from his neck. Squidge side-stroked over to his Lord and gently shook his left shoulder.

“Dagon, wake up, your son has returned!”

The middle-aged mertroll was startled. He snorted and opened his eyes. His face grinned with relief at the sight of his son and girlfriend.

“Marlin, thank goodness! I’m glad you’ve returned to us. I watched the activities of Restadicus and Siegemunde through my scrying glass. They did well to concert their arcane resources to halt the invasion of the Lykanthros, gorgons and minotaurs. Our historical tablets speak of invasions driven by Thoth and the Drystyx Monks in ancient times. They were turned then with the assistance of the seraphim from the Plane of Order. It was beneficial for the regions of Gaea that Restadicus and his companions were able to contact the Plane of Order and once again seal the

breach created by the magical experimentation of the Dire Queen of Arkadia and the foul, Ephemeral Specters.”

“I’m glad to be back, Father,” answered Marlin. “The Lieges of the various regions of Gaea were disciplined in their campaign to bring a stop to the rifts reaching to the Gorgon Plane and Plane of Chaos. Lord Taliesin of Mystic Down, Baroness Sharon Redthorne of Coermantyr and the Sentinel mages from the Ghastly Fens were especially helpful to us. We are indebted to them for their valor and perseverance. Tell us, how fare things for we Dagonites now that the rampant spatial rifts have been eradicated from our waters?”

“As good as can be expected, My Son,” said Dagon. “The portals that permeated the seas brought with them strange monsters. The traditional schools of fish have been disturbed by predators yet unseen by our hunting patrols. If you get some rest and feel up to the challenge take the opportunity to survey the workings of the fish-hunting patrols and the movement of the great schools of albacore and yellow-tail. Word tells us that something is amiss.”

“Very well, Lord Dagon,” Marlin answered. “I am in good health and will do as you ask. Anemone and my companions will conduct reconnaissance around the area and report back about the changes to the ecosystem.”

“Good luck, My Captains,” replied the middle-aged Leader.

The entourage of merfolk departed from the central stronghold and swam out and above the city until they reached the outskirts of the alabaster buildings.

“The gatherings of tuna previously drifted close to our city,” observed Trilobite. “Recently they’ve migrated to the deeper ocean, requiring greater effort on our part to stock our markets. Surely a new species of carnivore is competing with us for the food resources that exist in this region.”

The stocky mertroll’s face reflected his concern for the welfare of the Dagonites. The band of new-found friends swam for a while when they spied a cluster of yellow-tail feeding on plankton below the surface of the deep sea.

The large fish swam in a tight spiral as a number of dark shapes moved in around them.

“I think we’ve found our mysterious predators, My Friends,” said Anemone. “They appear to have arrived here from the spatial portals established by the Dire Queen during her assertion of power from her Abyssal Cairn. Let us approach our usual quarry and see what the response of these dark predators shall be.”

“That is sound advice,” offered Marlin. “Perhaps we can convince them of the possibility of a harmonious relationship within these waters.”

The Dagonites moved closer to the yellow-tail as the entire school of fish drifted with the current into a column of light descending through the clouds and the surface above. The shadowy aliens at last swam into the light, revealing the full extent of their features to the merfolk. They were large humanoids, covered with green and purple scales. They wore tight-fitting garments fabricated from sharkskin. Each of the creatures wielded a strange weapon, similar to a crossbow, but glowing with a bolt of yellow energy held in the place where the dart would be. Their faces were fish-like with sharp fangs protruding from their mandibles. One of the unusual predators swam over to Marlin and his companions.

“We are the Nozroth. I am Ichthos. The fish here are plentiful. We take them for our clans below. Do not interrupt our hunt.”

“Salutations, Nozroth Hunter,” said Marlin. “We Dagonites also hunt the yellow-tail and other fish of this ocean. Is it possible for our people to come to a partnership of sorts? There are plenty of fish to share.”

“No, Dagonite. We hearken from the Seas of Chaos. These waters are ours, now. We take these fish for the prosperity of Thoth’s Clans and no others. Flee from this zone or contend with our stun bolts!”

Ichthos pointed his weapon at Marlin and growled in a menacing manner.

“Be on guard, My Friends!” yelled Marlin.

He gestured for his Dagonite companions to prepare themselves for battle. The large Nozroth Hunter fired his stun bolt at Marlin, but the agile mertroll spun quickly in the water, evading the electric missile. Nautilus and Barracuda fired their crossbows at the attacker and struck their target. The bulky Denizen of Chaos howled in vexation and clawed at the short bolts lodged in his shoulder and thigh. The green and purple-scaled humanoid used his webbed arms to retreat from the sea trolls and address his companions who continued to collect stunned fish in their travel nets.

“Nozroth, let us move downward from this school. There are others who insist on partaking from the prey that swim here. We shall return with strengthened numbers and renewed organization.”

The carnivores followed the advice of their Leader and descended into the murky depths of the ocean. The wounded hunter gave Marlin and his acquaintances a final, vengeful glare as he dove.

“Alas, I feared that we would be forced to deal with the consequences of the Dire Queen’s portals,” said Marlin. “Let us return to the Dagonite City and inform Squidge and Dagon about the events that have transpired here, today.”

The group of merfolk swam toward the shallows. They would soon reach the outskirts of the City of the Dagonites.

* * * * *

Reoren, Thorgrym, Sigrid and Leif marched over the grassy hills and sudoriferous swamp beyond the Burial Ruins at the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens. Jalhi Bengal and her battalion of feline, anthromorph rangers accompanied the lich-trolls. Fangoz, the stone troll, followed the group from the rear.

“Arrgh! The air has changed since our exit from this Plane,” observed Fangoz. “I hope that Cara fares well in this alien mist. I fear that more than Guardon’s Lykanthros have been released into this region during our absence. Let us traverse the Fens with caution.”

The fog floated in thick fingers over the cattails and reeds. In places the mist flashed with static electricity. The strange atmosphere visibly perturbed the tiger-women. Their spotted and striped fur stood on end as they looked around in apprehension.

“State your business!” growled a wily voice.

“I recognize that call,” declared Jalhi. “It seems our companions have finally returned from their journey to the farthest reaches of the Ghastly Fens. Satvinder, is that you?”

“Yes, it is I, Jalhi. We have returned at last from our quest for richer hunting grounds. Alas, our search proved unsuccessful. How fare things in this corner of the Fens?”

“Much has happened since you tiger-trolls left our camps,” said Jalhi. “The maverick Summoner, Ankharet unleashed a horde of wolf-creatures upon this Plane. They were taken from the Plane of the Gorgons. We succeeded in infiltrating the Gorgon Plane and destroying the Dire Queen. Her daemon courtesan, Guardon, was forced to return to the Plane of Chaos through a breach in the gorgon-protected fortress. Four seraph trolls from the Plane of Order helped us to seal the breach to the Plane of Chaos. Guardon and Thoth, his father, were sealed in their Plane of Origin. Restadicus and the Lore Masters from Coermantyr Castle, along with Siegemunde in the Martial Academy proved to be a great assistance in securing the Dharmic Harmony of Gaea. We are glad you have returned, Brave Warrior.”

“I’m reassured to see you in good health after your risky adventures,” answered Satvinder.

A dozen tiger-trolls emerged from the thick mist. They were dressed in similar attire to the female rangers and hefted bows and blades of their own. Many of them gaped in surprise at the sight of Fangoz, the stone troll.

“Greetings, Large Warrior,” said Satvinder. “It is unusual that one such as yourself has become aligned with our race. I take it the haranguing Lykanthros Jalhi spoke of drove you to join our cause?”

“That is correct, Tiger Ranger,” replied Fangoz. “My wife and I were finding it difficult to rest at night with both the wolf-beasts and the wily Bengal Warriors scratching at our windows. We convinced you anthromorphs of our peaceful intentions and set aside our dispute over the resources of the swamp. The lich-troll mages proved to be an additional source of offensive assertion in our exploration of the spatial rift leading to Guardon’s Spires in the Gorgon Plane.”

“Satvinder, I suggest you accompany us to the Martial Academy. The events that are transpiring of late in Gaea concern all of us and merit your audience. We should consult with Siegemunde and inform him that the Orb of Paryphax has been returned to this Realm. If we maintain our composure it is possible that a new era of peaceful cohabitation can be achieved in this expansive region,” said Sigrid.

“Very well, Sigrid. Our clan will follow your lead through the Fens. It will do us well to meet with the Administrator of your Martial Academy.”

The group of swamp-dwellers of various sizes began their journey to Lich Town. The light of the two moons rose as twin rings above the horizon as dusk fell. The familiar sound of owls on the prowl and a myriad of crickets and toads permeated the atmosphere.

Leif’s magic halo continued to illuminate the safest path through the quick mud and cumbersome foliage. The adept Sentinel’s peripheral awareness caused the hair on the back of his neck to rise and his pallid skin to acquire gooseflesh.

“Be on the alert, My Friends. I sense the proximity of a pack of Lykanthros. If they remain in this area the goblins are sure to be near, as well.”

In accordance with the lich-troll’s prediction a united garrison of goblins and orcs appeared at the ridge of one of the distant hilltops. Their Leader was Blueblood, the recently indoctrinated orc recruit to Rauros’ Guild of Assassins, the Harad Ghul. The feline anthromorphs, lich folk and Fangoz were prepared for the invasion of the survivors of the Dire Queen’s campaign. They had learned much during the confrontations they faced in the Gorgon Plane. Each of the warriors, including Satvinder’s returned tiger-trolls wielded their respective weapons of choice.

The snarling, slavering wolf-beasts charged down the soggy hill with their goblin and orc mounts saddled to their furry backs. Blueblood addressed the Gaeon warriors as he led the charge.

“Rauros has reunited the Harad Ghul under his own guidance. The Abyssal Cairn and lairs in Mount Crow are now under the jurisdiction of the goblins and orcs. We claim the Ghastly Fens and Mystic Down for our own. The tyranny of the Summoner troll woman and her daemon consort were a harrowing time for our tribes. Evacuate these premises while you yet live, Troll Folk. Surely you have learned of the devastating abilities of we Denizens of the Dark by now.”

The sharp-toothed Lykanthros grew close to the fighters. The waiting warriors stood their ground in defensive postures.

“We have not met before, Orc Assassin,” declared Satvinder. “We rangers will not flee the region of our creation. If you seek a fight then you will find it here.”

The tiger-trolls notched arrows in their longbows and fired a volley at the invaders. A number of the missiles struck their marks and impeded the movement of the large Lykanthros. The male rangers then drew short swords designed in a curved fashion similar to the blades used by Jalhi and her companions but with longer blades and handles. These swords required the use of two hands for a single weapon. Blueblood’s forces were in melee range and engaged the warriors in hand-to-hand combat.

Jalhi and her rangers contended with the goblins. They rendered slashing attacks to the Lykanthros. The wolf-beasts countered with glancing blows with their teeth and claws. The goblins and orcs employed flurrying maneuvers with their curved blades to baffle the anthromorphs. Leif, Sigrid and Reoren combined their magical abilities to release a barrage of blue bolts.

“Vectrox!”

Blueblood and his comrades deflected a number of the arcane projectiles with their cast-iron shields. A handful of the missiles hit their intended targets, knocking their riders from their saddles. Fangoz moved in and crushed the struggling humanoids with his great club.

The agent of the Harad Ghul was frustrated at the casualties incurred by the warriors and addressed his soldiers.

“Retreat, My Brethren. We must confer with Rauros and return with additional forces. You have not seen the last of the Stalactite Orcs. We will return in greater numbers.”

The goblins and orcs guided their Lykanthros away from the resistant militia and crested the hill from whence they came. Thorgrym looked at his companions with concern.

“We have fought valiantly, My Friends,” he said. “We are obliged to inform Siegemunde of the growing rancor of the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins. The lich folk are bound to respond to these continuing invasions.”

The gathering of warriors marched on until they reached the outskirts of Lich Town. Several of Thorgrym’s Guards waited on the lookout from the surrounding hills. They hailed the return of their Chief and Sentinel Mages.

“Its good that you have returned to us, Thorgrym,” said one of the soldiers. “The air has changed since you ventured through the spatial portal Siegemunde generated in the Martial Academy. Word has spread that Guardon and Ankharet have been brought down from their reign of terror. Continue within and consult with the Director of our modest Academy.”

“You have our thanks, Einar. I look forward to returning to my post among you valiant Guards,” replied Thorgrym.

The travelers marched through the bound, post gates and entered the marketplace of the lich folk. Jalhi observed that the ghoul-trolls acted in a more sociable manner compared to their reticence during her first visit.

“Your kindred are more watchful of us, Leif,” observed the Leader of the Anthromorph Rangers. “They were remarkably shy the first time my amazons were here.”

“It is to be expected, Tiger-Woman. Our races have warred with one another for many generations. It has only been until recently that external stresses brought our resources together. The lich folk have always been a reclusive people. We are a race created as a response to war.”

“In many ways that has been the case for we stone trolls, too, My Friend,” said Fangoz. “It has been a benefit to the various peoples of the Ghastly Fens that we have achieved a modicum of truce in recent years. I admire the work it took to construct this battle-haven. You lich-trolls are industrious and organized, more than Cara and I were aware in past seasons.”

The warriors strode beyond the marketplace and assorted homes, built on stilts above the soggy earth. They stood before the great elevator at the foot of the Martial Academy. It took several trips to lift all of the fighters to the network of platforms above. The horses brought by the Gaeans during their first visit ate grain and hay in a collection of stables.

Sigrid guided the visitors up the stairs and flexible bridges to the Conference Chamber of the Academy. Siegemunde waited impatiently at his desk at the base of the multiple-leveled classroom.

“Greetings, My Friends. I am overjoyed that you have returned to the Academy safely. You have showed up just in time. I was making the final preparations for an Integration Ritual. You have the opportunity to witness firsthand the creation of a new group of lich-trolls. It is a process like no other in all of Gaea.”

“We are intrigued,” declared Satvinder. “The events that have recently occurred beckon the consideration of we rangers in regard to our traditional approach to the neighboring races to our hunting grounds. At times the tiger-people have been hostile to the other groups living in the swamp for fear of losing game and territory. Now that continued invasions issuing from the Abyssal Cairn are imminent, it will be beneficial for us to observe your Integration Ritual.”

“Very well, Satvinder of the Bengal Clan,” answered Siegemunde. “You are welcome to accompany us to the center of Lich Town. The compounds necessary are already in place.”

The warriors joined the Director of the Martial Academy as he marched to the elevator. They descended to the ground floor. The lich folk had assembled in the expectation of the seasonal process. The farmers and workers from the marketplace gathered around a wide, circular molding pool.

Siegemunde addressed the gathering of lich-trolls as he straightened his Sentinel raiment.

“Greetings, Lich Acolytes. I return to this place again to act on the behalf of Restadicus and the Lore Masters of Coermantyr Castle. The time has come to again combine the elemental substances of earth to create a new batch of ghoulish-trolls.”

The Administrator of the Martial Academy raised his hands over the pool and uttered a molding spell.

“Forgex!”

The broad pool glowed red with arcane energy. Two primordial, humanoid forms rose from the bubbling meniscus.

“Let two become one!”

The shapes merged into a small being. A lich-troll couple stepped forward and took the young member of their clan into a blanket. Siegemunde repeated the process three more times, designating a set of waiting parents to raise and educate the child.

Satvinder met with the Director of the Academy as he withdrew from the molding pool before the stilted buildings.

“Good going, Sentinel Mage. I have never before witnessed such a process in the Fens. The war with the goblins and stone trolls brought about this sequence, it is clear to me now. The times are changing for all of us. An Era of Peace is tangible for the Realm of Gaea if we remain vigilant and steadfast in our defense of our respective races.”

“Thank you, Tiger Ranger. I appreciate your participation in our affairs. We yet need the help of you anthromorphs and our new-found ally, Fangoz. Word has spread quickly of the returning agents of the Harad Ghul. All of us are now Guardians of the Realm.”

* * * * *

Gnoll and Alex traveled through the deep woods of Coermantyr. They were accompanied by a number of wood trolls who had joined the fray in the Throne Room of Guardon’s Spires. The old-growth forest was thick with oak, spruce, ash and pine trees. Juniper and elm groves also stood sporadically among the tall canopy. The Bodyguard of the Wood Mage of Arborea addressed his mage friend.

“I’m glad that you opted to join us on our mission to return the Orb of Paryphax to Skjold’s Tower, Alex. My fellow wood trolls fought valiantly against the destructive magic of Themistokles, Ankharet’s Vizier. We were unable to stop him from assassinating Skjold and stealing his orb. Now that the spatial breach in the Gorgon Plane has been sealed by the seraphim, Smithforge, the opportunity is ripe to deliver the orb from its stone giant caretakers to its original location at the top of the Central Tower of the Arboreans.”

“It is a wise decision, Gnoll. Restadicus has granted me his permission to study your region and the social workings therein. If at all possible I will help you wood trolls to restore order to your State and quell the movements of the goblins and Lykanthros who remain.”

“Very well, Wizard of Coermantyr,” answered Gnoll. “I expect that we have walked beyond the south-western border of your region and into the edge of Arborea. We should near the Chief City of Arborea by nightfall. My people await the latest news of the events that have occurred between the Planes.”

The warriors strode at a brisk pace through the brambles and underbrush. Only one of the two moons shone above the dusk forest. The cries of ospreys and owls echoed over the rolling hills and scattered boulders. Alex’s perception of opposing forces within the trees came to his attention.

“Beware, My Friends,” he said. “I sense the same aura that passed by us the last time we contended with the Lykanthros and their goblin cohorts.”

“Very well, Alex,” Gnoll replied.

The wood trolls drew their swords and prepared for battle. A dozen Lykanthros rushed through the trees with Stalactite Goblins and Orcs at their saddles. Loki led the charge and did not stop to parlay with the fighters. He swung his scimitar at Gnoll who parried the attack with his longsword. The other Arborean Soldiers met the clawing Lykanthros with their double-edged weapons. The goblins fought with aggression and sparks flew from the clashing steel. Loki struck a glancing blow to Gnoll’s shoulder armor. The sharp edge of the curved blade tore through the leather covering of his plate mail and left a shiny gash in the hardened metal. The melee continued for several moments until the wood trolls formed a ring with Alex at the center. The adept mage enchanted an attack spell.

“Trentak!”

The red-haired sorcerer directed his outstretched hands at the mounted wolf-creatures and their riders. He unleashed a volley of electric bolts at a high velocity. Three of the goblins were knocked unconscious from their saddles and two more guided their steeds erratically as their entire bodies became awash in a pattern of electric sparks. The wood trolls were heartened by the impressive attack of their ally from Coermantyr. They charged outward from their tightly-locked ring and skewered six more of the goblins, causing the riderless Lykanthros to scamper to the deep woods in confusion.

Loki’s face exuded frustration from within his boar-toothed helm. He spoke in a booming voice to the surviving goblins and orcs.

“Move away, My Soldiers. Rauros is aware of the movement of these trolls. Let us return to the Abyssal Cairn and enter these woods again with our numbers in full effect.”

The Stalactite Orcs and their kindred turned the reins of their mounts away from the clustered Arboreans and galloped into the eastern horizon.

Alex spoke to his Arborean companions.

“We have fought valiantly here this night. I still possess the Orb of Paryphax. We must hasten to your main settlement before any other potential foes are given the chance to accost us.”

“That is sound advice, Alex,” Gnoll replied.

The warriors marched quickly through the underbrush. Gnoll was cheered to see the torches of the City of Arborea through the trees. The multiple-leveled buildings were constructed of sealed wood. A handful of lookouts standing at their posts on the city walls cried out at the sight of the approaching adventurers.

The city gates were flung wide and an entourage of mounted soldiers rode out to the nearing fighters.

“Good evening, Fellow Wood Trolls! The movement of the goblins through these parts changed in the last week. No doubt it is in response to the success of our united forces in the Eastern Region. My name is Charles. Has Ankharet been destroyed?”

“Yes, Charles. I am Gnoll, one of Skjold’s Bodyguards. We hurried from Arborea in pursuit of the assassins of our Leader and ultimately avenged him in a neighboring Plane. The maverick Summoners have been defeated and the detrimental breach to the Plane of Chaos sealed. The Lore Masters from Coermantyr and a team of seraph trolls from the Plane of Order proved to be of great benefit to the harmony of Gaea. My mage friend here is Alex. He carries the Orb of Paryphax that was taken from Skjold’s Tower. Inform the residents of the city that we will hold counsel tonight so that all may know of the dispersion of the invading Lykanthros and hostile goblins. We still have our work cut out for us, I’m afraid.”

Charles nodded to the red-haired wizard.

“Welcome, Alex. We are overjoyed that the orb of our late Wood Mage has been returned to us. You are welcome to enter our city and partake of our humble fare.”

“Thank you, Wood Guard,” replied Alex.

The travelers strode within the brightly-lit reception area of the City of Arborea. The settlement was constructed out of lumber assembled via traditional carpentry. Other buildings were lofted in giant oaks, whose branches alone were large enough to support plank roads and walkways. Alex marveled at the ingenious architecture of the neighbors to his Home Region.

“This place fascinates me. I had no idea that so many people lived here.”

“Yes, Sorcerer. The wood trolls have thrived in this environment for countless generations. Our city was built in this fashion as a measure of protection during the past war with the stone trolls and marauding goblins. Alas, it was not enough to thwart the magical subterfuge of Themistokles and his Guild of Assassins.”

Charles spoke briefly with a group of pages.

“If you please, City Pages, have the residents that are able meet at the Council Hall. We will hold a meeting shortly so that the latest events that have transpired abroad can be disclosed to as many people as is possible at one time.”

The guards led Gnoll and his wood troll assistants to the hall in question. They stepped into a hoisted carriage attached to a system of pulleys. Charles turned a pair

of handles connected to a crank, causing the vehicle to ascend into the branches of the massive oaks. The carriage approached an expansive deck built at the center of one of the trees. The vehicle bumped against the landing and the passengers stepped onto the hewed, wood floor.

Charles guided his companions around the deck to the far side of the tree where a series of ladders and walkways linked with a bowl-shaped Council Hall covered by a pillared gazebo. A sizable gathering of male and female wood trolls sat on the carved benches. At the bottom of the hall was a podium and table, both carved with the Arborean symbol, an osprey with wings stretched.

Gnoll walked to the base of the hall and addressed the audience in a booming voice.

“Salutations, Arboreans. My trolls and I have returned from our mission to retrieve Skjold’s Orb successfully. Ankharet and Themistokles have been destroyed and their portal to the Gorgon Plane obliterated.”

The wood trolls cheered and applauded.

“Alas, we are not magicians by trade and are hard-put to replace our fallen Leader. If I have your consent I will issue a petition to Restadicus in Coermantyr Castle requesting he send someone to fill the position.”

“That will not be necessary, Gnoll,” said Alex. “I offer my experience as a mage. The settlement here gives me a good impression. It is worth my while to study the Orb of Paryphax and assist in the monitoring of the forests.”

“Very well, Alex. You have our thanks. Do you Arboreans accept this proposal? Raise your hands.”

The vast majority of the wood trolls present lifted their hands.

“That solves it. Alex of Coermantyr shall be our new Wood Mage.”

The Arboreans clapped and cheered.

“Thank you all very much for giving me the opportunity to participate in the workings of your social infrastructure,” declared Alex. “The recent events that have taken place in the various regions of Gaea merit all of our concern. Now the opportunity stands before us to view the phenomena transpiring between the Planes with an increased degree of vigilance.”

The aspiring Mage of Coermantyr extended his hands in a gesture of acceptance.

“I will begin a sincere study of your tree civilization and follow the intentions of Skjold. The Orb of Paryphax is a powerful source of magical energy. The previous Wood Mage employed its cache of Ethereal Dynamism to monitor and encourage the

growth of the trees of the deep forest, both old and young. The future stands bright on the horizon for Arborea. With the involvement of you wood trolls the settlements here can thrive in a manner yet more prosperous than that known in past ages. I will employ the fullest extent of my training under the guidance of Restadicus and the Lore Masters in Coermantyr Castle to enhance the quality of living in these forests. Thank you all again for your support.”

The wood trolls in the meeting hall clapped and hollered their approval of the establishment of Alex as their new Wood Mage.

A page returned and addressed the group.

“The Lykanthros are below! Stalactite Orcs and Goblins ride them. We must hasten to the defense of the settlement!”

Charles and Gnoll drew their weapons and sprinted from the Council Chamber. They used emergency rappel lines to quickly lower themselves to the ground level. Alex closed the Orb of Paryphax in a chest for safekeeping and secured the key to a chain around his neck. He hurried to the nearest rappel line.

The wolf-creatures and their orc riders breached the city gates and engaged the wood trolls in the streets. Gnoll and Charles rushed into the fray, as did the other trolls who had attended the meeting.

Alex tapped the power of the Orb of Paryphax from above and enchanted a potent sorcery.

“Levtos!”

The Wood Mage of Arborea gestured with his hands, causing the group of attackers to levitate in the air. He moved his arms in a turning motion, forcing the Lykanthros to make an about face. Alex then guided the floating attackers through the gates where they fled in bewilderment.

“Well done, Alex!” said Charles. “The Denizens of Arkadia continue to move against us. I think it wise for you and Gnoll to travel east and seek the counsel of Lord Taliesin. He will surely want to investigate the source of these ongoing invasions.”

“Very well, Charles. Thank you all for your support. That includes you, Gnoll,” declared Alex. “We should ride for Wood’s End.”

The red-haired sorcerer and Gnoll set forth to the east with an escort of wood trolls.

* * * * *

Bjorn Roundtree, Gearzon and The Watcher hiked through the hilled woodlands of Mystic Down. Each of the short humanoids was impressed by their recent adventure and they talked excitedly among themselves.

“Glad I am to be back once again in Mystic Down. Weary I grew of the isolated halls of Guardon’s Spires,” said The Watcher.

“A burden the aggressive gorgons and Lykanthros were to my research and penmanship. Changed the oaks have since I was imprisoned by the rampant spatial portals of the Dire Queen. It is refreshing to breath the air of the wold once again. Long yearned have I for the scent of the pines and flowers that prosper in this Plane.”

The aged halfling walked with an added spring in his step. His posture was less stooped and he gazed about at the green foliage with interest.

“Watcher, it will do us good to visit Tinkerburg, the Home City of our gnome cousins. Before we do so I suggest we meet with my relative, Ben Frostberry, who lives in secrecy within these woods. He is an excellent baker. His pies are renowned within the halfling community. His food will provide us with added strength for the journey that lies ahead.”

“A good idea that is, Bjorn,” replied The Watcher. “How do you feel, Gearzon, about guiding us through your circuitous city?”

“It’s fine by me, My Friends. There’s always plenty of work to be done in Tinkerburg. The gnomes are perpetually industrious by nature.”

Gearzon and the halflings continued along their present course until they reached the straw-thatched home of Ben Frostberry. The aroma of strawberry and apple pies drifted from the chimney.

“A fine place, this is,” The Watcher observed.

The gray-haired halfling gazed with interest at the small house. It was completely surrounded by the thickest trees of the Forest of Mystic Down.

“Hello, Bjorn! I thought I heard someone approaching from inside. I just finished cooking and was about to take a stroll. Who are your companions?”

The bearded halfling shook hands cheerfully with the trio of visitors.

“The Watcher I am and glad to have returned to Mystic Down.”

“My name is Gearzon. I also have returned to Gaea after a stay in the Gorgon Plane. I was caught up in the agenda of Ankharet and Guardon but was convinced by Bjorn here to support his cause. I have offered to guide these halflings on a visit to Tinkerburg. You are welcome to accompany us, Ben.”

“Thanks, Gearzon. I’ll take you up on your invitation. It’s been a while since I’ve ventured out of this area of the forest and wouldn’t mind to visit the main city of

our gnome cousins. There are always fascinating contraptions to behold in your workshops.”

“Before we depart take a moment to come inside and sample some of my baking. My pies are fresh today, coincidentally.”

The bearded halfling guided his nephew and friends into his home. They sat at the table in the central room and ate steaming slices of apple and strawberry pie.

“I’ll just collect a few items for the journey south. You fellows help yourselves, there’s plenty of food to spare in this neck of the woods.”

Ben rummaged through a trunk in the adjoining room.

“Thanks again, Uncle,” said Bjorn. “We should meet with the Mayor of Tinkerburg and inform him of the events that have taken place recently. The different races and magical persuasions of the regions of Gaea have increased their conflict of late. The movements of the orcs and Lykanthros concern the gnomes as much as the rest of us.”

“That is sound advice, Bjorn,” Gearzon commented. “The gnomes have deterred many of the invading wolf creatures with their battlemechs and catapults. They and their goblin riders have continued to assail our city in increasing numbers over the past months.”

“Forward we look to disclosing the events that have taken place with your kindred, Gearzon,” said The Watcher. “Much have I revived since returning to these woods. Glad I will be to help you organize a defensive position among the gnomes. Ben Frostberry, are you ready to travel with us?”

“Yes, My Friends, my travel pack is filled. Let us embark on our journey to Tinkerburg. The south woods of Mystic Down are yet untamed and hold many surprises for unwary souls.”

The short humanoids marched from the clearing that contained Ben Frostberry’s house. The dense underbrush closed around them and the light of the afternoon sun shone through the overlying canopy in a series of broken rays.

The Watcher perceived the chattering of weasels and badgers in the dark reaches of the wood. The calls of falcons and pigeons emanated from the boughs of the oaks and pines. The quartet of explorers moved with precision through the unmarked thickets. They relied solely on animal trails and rows of polished stone demarcating seasonal brooks.

Gearzon observed that the distance between the trees became wider and the brambles grew scarce. The woods opened upon a hilly glen. A labyrinth of burrows pockmarked the grass-covered soil.

“Be careful, My Friends,” whispered Ben Frostberry. “These woods are proliferated by giant centipedes and nymphs. They are magical beings and do not enjoy the presence of humanoids or foreign creatures.”

A number of the serpentine creatures emerged from the gaping tunnels in the hills. They probed the ground and air with sensitive antennae. Gearzon, Bjorn and The Watcher remained out of the sight of the giant centipedes by crouching behind a stand of bushes.

“Look to the trees on those mounds,” hissed Ben Frostberry.

The others raised their gazes and watched the dextrous centipedes climb the rough trunks of the pines to the branches above. The shiny, segmented beings varied in color from maroon to green. They fed on smaller insects and rodents as they foraged throughout the clearing.

“We should travel along the perimeter of this opening. It will be for the best if we avoid detection by these giant centipedes entirely,” Ben whispered.

The grizzly halfling glanced at the menacing creatures with an expression of apprehension.

“Wise advice, you speak, Sturdy Kin,” murmured The Watcher. “Continue a roundabout course we should for indeed slaving these centipedes appear.”

“Halt, Short Humanoids. This is hallowed land and will not tolerate defilement by thieves and rogues.”

A luminescent wood nymph hovered over the four travelers. Her body was humanoid, much like a petite troll woman. She bore a pair of broad wings from her back that resembled those of a moth or butterfly. Her ears were pointed and she had red hair. The female nymph carried a short lance in one hand and a round shield in the other.

“I am Deirdre. The nymphs and dryads of the wold have sensed heavy disturbances in the Dharmic Equilibrium. No doubt it is due to the reckless, magical tampering of you, City Dwellers. What business have you this far into the wilderness?”

“We are going to Tinkerburg, the city of my people,” Gearzon answered. “We mean you no ill intentions, Deirdre. There has been a growing conflict with sorcerers and orcs from Arkadia. We journey to bring word of the preternatural portals that they created between the Planes.”

“That is to be expected, Gnome Engineer,” said the nymph. “My people have long been accustomed to the conflicts that arise from the various races of this and

other Planes. The Dharmic Equilibrium is frequently beset by challenges and disturbances by those who manifest these Realms in their dreams.”

“Manifest these Realms in dreams...that is strange. Explain your meaning to us, Lady Nymph, if you please,” responded Ben Frostberry.

“It has been known to a few of us in Gaea that we are simply an embodiment of challenges and wishes faced by a race of people called humans.”

“Humans? Deirdre, who are these people? More importantly where are they?” asked Ben Frostberry.

“They are residents of the spherical Plane of Earth. They live in cities, villages and wild lands. Humans are industrious. They range in social inclination from the athletic to the administrative, from the scientific to the romantic. In fact they are just as diverse in temperament as the various creatures that reside in the more proximal Planes known to many wizards.”

“Is there any way they can help us in our struggle with the remaining Harad Ghul and Lykanthros?” Gearzon asked.

“I’m not sure,” answered the female nymph. “Some humans care more for the events that transpire in the dream world than others. It is clear that if we remain dedicated to our cause the opportunity for the humans’ concern for our fate will grow.”

“No other choice we have than but to continue on our quest and their support petition,” said The Watcher.

“Be careful, Humanoids,” declared Deirdre. “The centipedes have become wise to your presence and have rallied their kin from their tunnels in the soil. Prepare yourselves for battle. I’ll intercede when I can.”

The luminescent nymph gazed at the clearing in the forest with concern. The waves of silver and gold light surrounding her intensified. She flew to the canopy of the pines to get a better view.

The Watcher and Bjorn drew their slings and armed them with rounded stones. Gearzon forewent the option of a sling altogether and wielded a slingshot of his own fabrication. Ben drew a shiny dagger that functioned as a short sword for the halfling.

The giant centipedes had indeed become alerted to the presence of the travelers from the sound of their conversation with the nymph. They squirmed turbulently on the grassy hills in an angry conglomeration. As a unit they dropped from the trees and charged across the clearing. Several of them spat globs of green acid that burned the foliage before them.

From above Deirdre called out, “Nymphs and dryads, help us! We are in danger here.”

A number of forms that The Watcher had taken to be tree stumps and branches moved eerily and rolled along the forest floor. They stood erect and assumed humanoid forms. They were dryads born from the enchanted trees of Mystic Down.

From the distant forest, blue and silver lights shone amid the trees. A battalion of male and female nymphs flew to the clearing at a rapid pace. They wore flowing robes similar to those worn by Deirdre.

Before the centipedes reached Bjorn and his friends the forest dwellers met with the perturbed centipedes. The cylindrical creatures twisted and snapped at the flying nymphs but were no match for their piercing lances and resilient shields.

From the perimeter of the clearing the dryads moved in, glaring at the beasts with angry expressions in their bark faces. Over a dozen of the centipedes latched themselves to the log-like arms and legs of the dryads. The woody humanoids howled loudly as they dragged their attackers in earthy gashes across the topsoil. Many of the tubular beings were squashed under the gnarled feet and fists of the dryads. More of them fell to the lances of Deirdre and her people.

Gearzon fired a volley of stones from his slingshot as did Bjorn and The Watcher from their slings. Their missiles hit their intended targets, breaking three maroon centipedes into two pieces that shivered and then lay still.

Ben Frostberry uttered a war cry and rushed into the clearing, hacking and slashing with his steel blade. The vexed centipedes turned their attention from the dryads and spat a barrage of green acid at the middle-aged baker. He evaded the attack deftly, tumbling across the hilly ground, but was hit in the calf by a glob of searing acid. He yelled in pain and wiped the chemical clean with a handful of grass.

The lithe halfling rolled forward and drove his weapon downward in a series of strikes, destroying three more of the farsighted centipedes. The dryads and nymphs attacked again as did Ben and his acquaintances. They finished off the remaining creatures and stood from their hiding place. Each of the travelers gave a cheer of victory.

“Hooray!”

“To our rescue you came, Wood Dwellers. Our thanks you have,” said The Watcher.

“I never realized that the south woods were so populated with Entities,” observed Ben Frostberry. “We are indebted to you tree folk and nymphs for your aid. Alas, my friends and I would love to stay and visit but we must be on our way.”

“That is fine by us, Brave Halfling,” answered a tall dryad. “Call me Woodfist. We dryads sleep much of the time but are willing to act to preserve the harmony of the forest.”

The dryad shifted his focus to the leader of the nymphs.

“Deirdre, we are tired. With your permission we will return to our slumber until such time as you need us.”

“That is fine, Woodfist,” said Deirdre. “We nymphs will fly to our Hive and regenerate our natural energy there. Goodbye, Short Humanoids. We may meet again.”

“Goodbye, Deirdre,” replied Ben Frostberry.

The dryads marched from the clearing and merged within the shadows of the forest. The nymphs left trails of light through the trees as they sped into the deep woods.

“Let’s be on our way, My Companions,” said Gearzon. “Tinkerburg can’t be much farther through these thickets. If we keep a steady pace we may reach my home city by tomorrow morning.”

The halflings and gnome had keen vision and traveled through the moonlit forest through the night. They took care to march in silence and were not again accosted by hostile creatures.

As dawn broke The Watcher sniffed the air.

“Ah, close the sea is. From long ago I remember that smell.”

“Yes, Aged Friend, the gnomes are near,” Gearzon replied.

The travelers reached the southern edge of the forest of Mystic Down. They beheld a stretch of windswept coastline and the white-capped sea of Lord Dagon beyond.

“Let us pause for some breakfast,” Ben Frostberry said. “I’m hungry.”

“That’s a good idea, Gray-bearded Friend,” the gnome engineer agreed. “Tinkerburg is a bustling metropolis and it can be hard to find succor in a convenient fashion.”

The journeyers sat down in the billowing field to a modest meal of pie and jerky. They drank water from their travel flasks.

In the midst of their breakfast, Gearzon and his allies were shaken by a tattoo of rumbling through the ground.

“Uh-oh,” said Bjorn. “This doesn’t sound good.”

An entourage of battlemechs and ground-hoppers rose over the crest of a nearby hill. The sun was briefly blocked by a group of aircraft, carrying pairs of male

and female gnomes. The fliers used oil-burning engines that transferred power to a spinning blade at the nose of each vehicle.

Gearzon was the first to get to his feet and he trotted toward the land-faring machines as the fliers turned for another pass. The ground-hoppers stopped a few yards before the engineer. Gnomes wearing gloves and goggles like Gearzon's drove the biped creations.

"Hi, Gearz! Long time no see. What've you been up to that kept you from Tinkerburg so long?"

A female gnome addressed the engineer from her seat atop a ground hopper.

"Greetings, Galatia. The spatial rifts created by the Summoners in Arkadia captured me. These are my friends."

Gearzon introduced The Watcher, Ben and Bjorn.

"Quite a bit of turmoil has taken place throughout Gaea in recent months, Galatia. A Planar War has come to a head. I think it wise that we travel to Tinkerburg and meet with the Mayor. I'm glad to see that your machines are operational."

"Yes, we've come a long way since the war with the stone trolls," the female gnome said. "Their invasions left many of our enterprises in ruins. The gnomes have remained diligent and rebuilt much of what there once was."

"I have an idea, Gearzon. Allow me to signal Axel and his fleet of fliers. They will land on this beach and let their copilots disembark. That way you four can fly to the city ahead of us."

"Sounds great, Galatia. It will benefit the gnomes if we deliver our message as soon as possible."

"In one of those contraptions you wish us to ride? Not sure I am of their safety," declared The Watcher.

"Trust me, Aged Friend," said Gearz. "My kindred are superb technicians and will convey us to the city with care."

"Whatever you say, Gearz. We might as well give your friends a try," offered Bjorn.

Galatia drew a long, white scarf from her tool vest and unfurled it in the wind. She waved it in a signal pattern until she caught the attention of the fliers. The pilots turned their vehicles from the sea and brought them down to a halt on the grassy field.

A stocky gnome leapt from a flier and strode over to the place where the ground hoppers and battlemechs had stopped.

"Galatia, I see you've met some visitors on the beach. Gearzon, how are you?"

The robust gnome grabbed Gearz in a hearty embrace.

“I’m fine, Axel. I was trapped by some wizards for a while.”

“Well, its great that you made it back to us. We were wondering what happened to you. The wolf creatures and goblins have been making a nuisance of themselves in the outlying villages.”

“The Lykanthros have also appeared at Wood’s End in Mystic Down,” Bjorn replied.

“You have much to discuss with the Mayor, Gearz. Let’s be on our way,” Galatia said.

The copilots riding in the rear seats of four of the fliers jumped to the ground and climbed aboard a group of waiting battlemechs. The rumbling, three-legged vehicles belched steam as their engines thrust into forward gear.

The four travelers followed the lead of Axel. Each took a seat in the rear spaces in the fliers. Gearzon’s burly friend pulled his goggles over his eyes and signaled his fleet to take off. The propellers of the aircraft whirled at a fast rate as their oil-burning engines whined into lift off.

The Watcher moaned with apprehension as his female pilot pulled her flyer sharply upward. The winged machine turned over the sea and continued to climb.

“An unnatural state this is,” said the halfling historian. “If meant to fly we were, born with wings we would have been.”

The waves of the sea crashed on the shore below and the trees of the forest whipped by at a dazzling speed.

Gearzon hooted with glee.

“This is wonderful. I always wanted to ride in one of your inventions, Axel.”

“I love it,” said the pilot. “We got these craft going earlier this year and they’ve been running like a charm ever since. I have plans to set up a network of message carriers to all the regions of Gaea someday. That will have to wait until we’ve dealt with the marauding orcs, however.”

The clock tower and minarets of Tinkerburg rose on the horizon. Axel thrust his flier to the head of the formation and brought his craft to landing altitude. A crude airstrip was leveled out of a field outside of the city. A gathering of gnome children cheered at the approach of the vehicles.

The Watcher sighed with relief as the fliers landed smoothly, leaving trails of dust in the air behind them. The passengers jumped to the ground. A number of ground-hoppers harvested apples from a nearby orchard.

“Let’s hurry into the city, My Friends,” declared Axel. “There is always plenty of business taking place in the market. We’d be wise to be on our way while the sun is still with us.”

A pair of battlamechs guarded the gates of the city. The travelers passed within and were immersed in a crowd of gnomes. The streets were zigzagged and intersected at random points. Merchants and shoppers mashed together under an army of multicolored tents and booths. They sold everything from melons and smoked meats to clocks and ground-hoppers. Instead of horses the short-statured gnomes preferred llamas as their beasts of burden.

The air was replete with the smells of cooking food and curing leather. Ben Frostberry and Bjorn moved in and out of the crowd, making sure to sample unwanted morsels.

Axel and Galatia led the group of humanoids past the marketplace to the bureaucratic district. The Watcher beheld rows of brick and wood buildings, most of which were in a state of remodeling. Scaffolding surrounded the majority of the structures. Gnome workers dismantled walls in some places and constructed fresh ones in others.

“At last, we are here, Halflings,” said Galatia. “Across this square is our City Hall. It is the crowning achievement of gnome architecture.”

Bjorn observed a large, bronze fountain, portraying what must have been the Founders of Tinkerburg. The statues each worked on some device. One held a sundial and another a telescope. They all stood with expressions of vision and diligence.

At the opposite end of the square stood a wide building. It was three stories tall and had dozens of windows on each floor. The corners of the roof held towers that were topped with colorful minarets. Over the center of the building arched a bronze dome with an arched window at each of the four points of the compass. The travelers marched up the staircase at the entrance and spoke to the guards at the front desk.

“Hello,” said Axel, “my friends and I are here to speak with the Mayor. Is he available? Their message is important. I’ll vouch for that.”

“Very well, Axel,” replied a guard. “You have done well in your research of flying machines. The Mayor has stated his appreciation of your endeavor. You and your companions may proceed within.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Axel replied.

The capable gnome engineer directed his friends to follow him into the central Council Chamber. Bjorn helped the pilot to open a pair of large, wooden doors so that the humanoids could march inside.

The council floor was covered with polished, wood seats. A well-dressed gnome wearing spectacles was finishing a speech to the room, which was about two-thirds full with representatives. When he finished the audience applauded, some more vigorously than others.

Axel approached the podium and spoke in hushed tones with the Mayor. The gray-haired Leader glanced over the engineer's shoulder and gazed at the group of travelers. His bushy eyebrows lifted with recognition when he saw Galatia and Gearzon. The outgoing gnome hurried over to the group as the delegates filed out of the spacious chamber.

"Galatia! Gearzon! It's been a long time since I've seen you two. You've been keeping yourselves busy I suppose. I haven't met your halfling acquaintances before. Allow me to introduce myself to them. My name is Miles Davenport."

The gnome shook hands with each of the travelers and they said their names in turn.

"Miles, there is growing conflict with the orcs and goblins in the Arkadian Mountains," said Gearzon. "At first they worked at the behest of the Dire Queen, Ankharet and the daemon, Guardon. Now they follow what remains of the Guild of Assassins known as the Harad Ghul. For some time I was trapped in Guardon's Plane and aided residents of the other regions of Gaea in sending him and his father to the Plane of Chaos."

"Ankharet and her assistant Summoner, Themistokles have been destroyed. The Lykanthros and orcs are sure to be reorganizing their forces and are bound to turn south to Tinkerburg. You should order the battlemechs and ground-hoppers to the perimeter of the city in the event of a full-scale attack."

"Your words confirm the information conveyed by farmers and other travelers," replied Miles. "There are growing movements of the wolf-creatures. They have already destroyed some of our crops and ranches. I will issue a request to you, Axel, with copies delivered to all of the Gnome Council Delegates. We are in need of more battlemechs and flyers. They will better protect our citizens and capitol."

"Very well, Miles," answered Axel. "With additional hands I'm sure we will better defend Tinkerburg."

"Now, before we attend to any further business, let us partake of a state dinner in commemoration of your return, Gearz."

“Sounds great,” said Bjorn. “I could use a solid meal.”

“You are all welcome to stay in the inn across the square. Get some rest and return here this evening.”

The visitors shook hands with the Mayor and strode from the large room. Axel led The Watcher and the others to a sturdy, brick building across from the clock tower. The concierge took their names down in his book and they went to their separate lodgings. The travelers reclined on the stuffed quilts and got a few hours of sleep. They were roused that evening by porters and donned their best clothes for the state dinner.

The guards in the lobby of the City Hall again let Gearzon and his friends proceed inside. They were directed to a neighboring reception room with wood floors and walls. A group of gnome musicians played unique music from a dulcimer, harpsichord and oboes.

Miles Davenport recognized his friends when they arrived and excused himself from the group of gnomes with whom he was chatting.

“Ah, I’m glad you’ve joined us, Gearzon and Halflings. I hope you enjoy our bustling City in the South.”

“Yes, active and industrious this population is,” The Watcher said.

Miles directed his companions to sit at his side at the head of the main table. They were served a savory repast of roast doves and squash. Everyone dug into the food with relish. As dessert was served the Mayor stood and addressed the crowd.

“Fellow Gnomes, I have asked that you assemble here today due to the arrival of Gearzon and his halfling acquaintances. Their report confirms our suspicions. The goblins and orcs are continuing to build their forces against us. We must prepare for I fear that their attacks are bound to increase over the coming months...”

A bass rumbling shook the building. The candle lamps and chandeliers swung from the force of the shock. Several guards ran into the room and addressed the Mayor.

“Mayor, the orcs are here, and in greater numbers than before,” said a guard. “The battlemechs have withdrawn into the city and continue to fight. You must prepare yourselves for combat.”

The gnomes rose from their seats and hastened to the various exits. The travelers grouped together and ran out the main entrance of the City Hall. A battlemech and some gnomes fought with a battalion of orcs against the large building. The steam-powered machine was pushed back against the wall of the hall.

It had broken the wood panels on the outside and was the source of the rumbling within.

Volley of incendiary missiles flew over the walls of the city, igniting booths in the marketplace and spraying fire over the streets.

“The goblins are using catapults,” said Gearzon. “We also have such war machines but will take time to prepare them.”

Bjorn watched a gathering of gnomes open the doors of what he had taken to be a livery stable. They wheeled out a trio of catapults and armed them with packages of spiked steel balls. The industrious gnomes turned the cranks on the machines in pairs, pulling back the large arms. A gnome Sergeant did not hesitate and ordered his soldiers.

“Fire at will!”

The gnome catapults unleashed their burdens of steel and the balls dispersed in the air as they flew over the city wall. The Watcher heard guttural cries as many of the missiles struck their intended targets.

Axel was anxious and addressed his companions.

“Galatia and I must get in the air and survey the resources of the enemy. I must depart, My Friends. We thank you for your information.”

The male and female gnome engineers ran from the group and headed toward the makeshift airstrip.

Gearzon and the three halflings made their way through the ruckus on the streets of Tinkerburg. Brigades of gnomes passed buckets of water from wells to extinguish the random fires.

Ben observed that one of the two gates to the city had been opened and a group of ground-hoppers and battlemechs joined with citizens to fight the invading orcs in hand-to-hand combat.

Gearzon addressed his friends.

“I must help my people. You halflings should march to Mystic Down and give word to Lord Taliesin that the agents of the Harad Ghul are still on the move. We will hold and await reinforcement from the trolls at Wood’s End.”

The stout gnome drew his wrenches from his tool belt and hurried into the melee.

“Don’t worry, Gearz!” yelled Bjorn. “We’ll be back with Lord Taliesin as soon as we can.”

The halflings drew their dark cloaks about their faces in order to avoid detection by the aggressive attackers. They sprinted alongside the grappling warriors

and ran into the fields beyond. Ben noticed Loki among the Lykanthros and Stalactite Orcs that slashed and growled at the gnomes.

Once out of the line of sight behind a cluster of bushes Ben spoke to The Watcher and Bjorn.

“We must retrace our steps and deliver the news of this attack on Tinkerburg. The gnomes are resourceful and will hold their own for a while. Let us go as fast as we can. Taliesin and Bors will know what to do.”

The halflings traveled through the night and drew near to Wood’s End by the afternoon of the following day.

* * * * *

Oxholm and Drumtone patrolled the tunnels beyond the settlement of the Maegar Dwarves.

“Alas, a challenge this Plane has become since our arrival here from Gaea, Brother,” said Oxholm.

“I agree,” Drumtone answered. “I regret the absence of the warriors of the neighboring races. They fought valiantly and did well to turn the red dragon and his servants. Despite their absence we should remain on the lookout for lingering wolf-creatures and beholders that assuredly prowl these passages.”

The dwarves continued their march along the outside perimeter of the tunnels and caverns mined by their clan. They entered a large cave and saw a gathering of Stalactite Orcs, Goblins, two beholders and a minotaur.

They feasted on mysterious meat that they tore at as it turned on a spit over a roaring fire. The goblins snarled when they saw the dwarves and drew their scimitars. The minotaur held a giant war-hammer and the two beholders screeched with alarm and rose into the air. The eyes of the spherical beasts fluctuated a variety of colors.

“Flee from us, Persistent Dwarves!” said an orc. “These caves yet belong to the Harad Ghul and those for whom they fight.”

“We will not, Hobgoblin,” replied Drumtone. “The dwarves have already fled from your invasions in our Realm of Origin. If you insist on delivering our fight here then you will have it.”

The dwarf brothers charged. Oxholm whirled his ax and Drumtone swung his hammer. They obliterated four of the goblins immediately with flurried strikes. The minotaur brought his large hammer down to crush the fighters but was too slow. The agile dwarves rolled to the left and right, evading the bull troll’s attack.

The pair of beholders emitted scalding rays from their antennae. The dwarves were quick on their feet and again dodged the attack. The Maegar Dwarves rolled under the beholders and thrust their weapons upward into their rock-like flesh. Their steel broke deep into the gorgons, showering the dwarves in green blood. The beholders moaned in agony and slumped on top of the warriors like squeezed fruit.

Drumtone and Oxholm pulled themselves free of the gore and contended with the minotaur. The horn-headed anthromorph was not fast enough and was dealt powerful strikes to the legs and torso. He fell to his knees and was finished off by Oxholm's axe.

The goblins and orcs gasped at the deaths of the larger creatures and fled from the cavern.

"We shall return," one of them cried.

"Ah, we are victorious, My Brother," declared Oxholm. "Let us return to the settlement and inform King Grumbold of this growing activity. It seems that our clan has its work cut out for it despite our moving to the Gorgon Plane."

The brothers embraced and returned from whence they came.

* * * * *

Lord Taliesin sat uneasily on his gargoyle-etched Throne. The wind blew eerily past the windows of his Tower, at times sounding like ghostly voices.

I am concerned for Gaea, he thought.

The troll found respite in patrolling the kennels in the cellar of his Tower. The wolves were energetic and howled when he entered the hall adjoining their cages.

The trolls and troll women that resided within his fortress were appreciative of Taliesin's reticence. He seldom chatted with the citizens of Mystic Down. They understood his silence and were cognizant of his support of their tasks.

The Liege Lord also found solace in updating his journal. Since the passing of his parents he took it upon himself to document the events that occurred throughout the region with diligence.

The spatial portals generated by Ankharet and Guardon were dangerous, Taliesin thought. *It remains to be seen what ill will arise from their maverick sorcery. I fear for Dagon and Tinkerburg as well.*

Someone rapped on the door outside the Throne Room.

"Enter, please," said the Lord.

Bors, Torvald and Rodnik entered Taliesin's Chamber and shook hands.

"Greetings, Rodnik, Bors and son. What news do you bring from Wood's End?"

“The goblins and orcs continue to attack us, Taliesin,” Torvald declared. “We have no choice but to assemble a garrison of warriors to quell the invaders. Before you arrived I was forced to fight the humanoids in the streets of Wood’s End.”

“Alas, I feared the goblins would return again,” said the Liege Lord. “They were not appreciative of the tyranny of the Dire Queen any more than we. Since her downfall they have reunited and are now moving aggressively once more. Let us ride to Coermantyr and advise the Baroness of these events. The invasions concern her region, too.”

The fighters trod down the stairs of Taliesin’s Tower and acquired fresh mounts from the stable. Their saddlebags were laden with supplies and they set forth to Coermantyr.

By evening they approached The Wolf’s Fang and the Gothic spires of Coermantyr Castle. Lord Taliesin and his companions tethered their horses to the post at the front porch of the inn and walked inside. The tavern was filled with gossiping citizens and soldiers loyal to the Baroness. Bors leaned against the counter and spoke to Gilead, the Innkeeper.

“Greetings, Gilead. Bring some ale for us, if you please. We are the bearers of bad news, unfortunately.”

“I feared as much, Sturdy Bors,” replied the Key Mage.

He placed a pitcher of ale with three mugs on the counter.

The visitors sipped their drinks. Torvald next spoke with Gilead.

“Before you fighters returned from the Nether Planes Wood’s End was accosted by goblins and orcs. They are on the move once again. You must inform the Baroness that we should return to Arkadia and convince the invaders to leave our regions free of harassment.”

At that moment Ben Frostberry, Bjorn and The Watcher entered the inn.

“Thank goodness. We’re glad to see you all,” Ben said. “We sought you at Bard’s Inn but the patrons told us you had ridden here.”

“There is trouble in Tinkerburg,” continued the halfling. “We hiked there with Gearzon. Loki and the Stalactite Orcs are laying siege to the city as I speak. The Harad Ghul separated themselves over Gaea and are mobilizing against us at multiple locations.”

“This is ominous news,” said Gilead. “You warriors wait here. I will speak with Sharon directly and return. I’m sure that she’ll agree that we should ride this night and take our feud directly to the source at the Abyssal Cairn in Arkadia.”

The visitors to the Wolf's Fang rested for a while and tasted the simple fare that was served in the establishment. The Baroness of Coermantyr entered the tavern, dressed in full armor. Gilead, her Key Mage, stood at her side.

"I have heard of the recent events in Mystic Down and the region of the gnomes. These attacks concern all of us and demand a quick response. Let us ride tonight toward Arkadia and prepare to settle the score with the Harad Ghul directly."

The troll folk in the inn cheered their support.

The fighters mounted their horses and set off into the moonlit forest.

* * * * *

Raven awoke from her sleep. She'd had many dreams of late. The college student thought about Sharon Redthorne, the woman in her memories.

The Baroness is a strong person, thought Raven. She has dilemmas of her own to face. I guess the world would be pretty boring without the challenges and trials set before us.

The young woman ate a quick breakfast and prepared a fresh ensemble of clothes for the bus ride to Jefferson Community College.

I have to be careful not to fall too far behind in chemistry class, Raven considered. I'll review chapter seven on the bus.

* * * * *

The environment in the Gorgon Plane had gone from bad to worse. Dweeble Dworx did everything in his power to hurry the Arachnoids to a new Hive a safe distance from the menacing Spires.

The elders are slow to move, embedded in their chitinous nests, he thought.

The eight-legged spider-creature hummed a rallying call, signaling his kindred to pick up their pace.

Dozens of the Arachnoids carried giant, volcanic boulders over the ferrous hills of their world. The Lykanthros continued to harass them despite the absence of their daemon controller. The fangs and claws of the wolf-beasts did little damage to the resistant flesh of the Hive Builders. Their intrusion was a nuisance, though, and only emphasized the need of the group to construct a habitat elsewhere.

Dweeble skittered into the original Hive and followed a complex network of tunnels to the Central Chamber where the elders thrived. A series of vents brought fresh air down to the floor from the ceiling several hundred yards above.

The ambitious spider-creature addressed his seniors who still gnawed and tore at the foundation they'd been fused with for several generations.

Dweeble used mind-song to communicate with them.

Please, Elders, this place is no longer secure. Hurry so that we may flee to a new Hive away from these diabolic intruders. The young will not be able to grow in this Hive any longer.

The elders hummed a bass-like tone indicating their understanding. They hastened their work to free themselves but it was evident that it would take several hours for them to become completely dislodged.

I will go out and check on the foundation of the new Hive. Thank you for your understanding.

The Arachnoid hummed farewell to the older creatures and exited through the passages to the surface. He scaled a number of steep hills, following the caravan of boulder carriers. Dweeble Dworx came to the edge of a steep valley. At its center the Arachnoids had placed the volcanic rocks in a wide circle and dug a pit within.

Before he was able to descend into the valley the spider-creature was attacked by a trio of Lykanthros. The feral beings fought more viciously than before. The friend of the Gaeans extended his forelegs outward to push his enemies away.

The Arachnoid realized that the Lykanthros had organized an offensive and had broken the chain of the caravan. Each of the spider creatures was caught in a perilous fight. They parried and evaded the swinging claws of the wolf creatures.

Dweeble hummed a note in mind-song.

To the Hive, My Kin. We must protect the elders for they are not ready to move.

The Arachnoids followed the advice and skittered a hasty retreat over the red hills. They clambered into the entrances of the glossy structure. The aggressive Lykanthros did not follow. Dweeble was heartened to find the elders had nearly completed the task of extricating themselves from their ensconcement. A few of them walked weakly to the exit portals and gazed at the swarming wolf pack outside.

We Hive Builders should move. Don't worry about us. The important thing is for the Arachnoids to reside in a safe place, hummed an elder.

The last of the aged spider-creatures pulled free of their chitinous base. They ambled carefully to the tunnels and began the trek to the new habitat.

Younger Arachnoids banded together and surrounded the marching elders. They risked life and limb to repel the occasional Lykanthros that dared to attack. The Lykanthros continued to move in on the eight-legged creatures but were unable to stop the elders from reaching the new Hive. The builders hurried their pace to finish the structure.

This is getting bad, thought Dweeble. *We could use the help of the Gaeans once more.*

* * * * *

Guardon wailed with anguish into the air of the Plane of Chaos.

I miss Ankharet and the company of the Lykanthros, he thought.

His father's Realm was a desolate place, devoid of companionship. He flew back from the empty valleys and mountaintops he'd covered.

I wish to avoid Thoth as much as possible. His endless ambition tires me. I want only to sit on my Throne again and manage the wolf-creatures.

The daemon passed over the Drystyx Temple and climbed until he reached the Gong Seal to his Throne Room. He raised his arms and pressed upward, straining with preternatural force. It took time and effort but eventually a creaking noise emanated from the edge of the seal.

Guardon flapped his wings at a fervent pace and thrust his shoulder into the metal barrier. It loosened and pivoted as on an axis. This gave the daemon space to climb inside. Once within The Spires he pushed the seal down again, blocking whoever may follow from entering his domain. Guardon surveyed his Throne Room.

The bodies of firbolgs, orcs, beholders and Lykanthros were strewn randomly on the floor. The daemon moved through the carnage and found Ankharet's corpse. He knelt and held her in his arms. Guardon sobbed in grief and released a chaotic wail.

"Ankharet, I thought you would be safe here. Our enemies were determined to destroy us. I will have you back and make my life blood yours."

The daemon bit his wrist, driving his fangs into the tissue. Green blood dripped from the opening and he held it to her mouth. For some time the fluid oozed down her throat. Then, Ankharet's eyes opened. Her white within white eyes changed to a luminescent green. The Dire Queen gasped and grabbed Guardon's arm, pressing his cut wrist to her mouth. The daemon moaned and allowed Ankharet to drink then pushed her away.

"Ah, that is enough, Dire Queen. You live again. Miserable I was without your company."

"Ankharet is no more," said the undead troll woman. "My life blood flows with that of you, Guardon, and your father, Thoth. I choose a name befitting this transformation. I am Iskendra."

"Very well, Iskendra. I am happy that you live no matter which name you select."

"How fare the Goblins of Arkadia?" asked the Dire Queen.

“I don’t know. I was trapped for some time in the Plane of Chaos. My father breached the Gong Seal and it was only until recently that I was able to return to this Plane without risking detection by him or his attending monks.”

“Very well,” said Iskendra. “I shall generate a spatial portal to the Abyssal Cairn and seek the audience of Rauros. I’m sure he’ll be able to bring us up to date as to the state of the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs.”

“Spiros!”

A rift formed in the fabric of space, creating a gateway to the Throne Room in the Abyssal Cairn. Rauros sat on the Dais on the other side. He gazed through the portal at Iskendra and Guardon.

“Hello, Summoners. It has been some time since we last spoke. I assume that the warriors of the various regions have proven to be as much of a nuisance to you as they have to us.”

“Yes, we have battled with other races of Gaea, Rauros,” said Guardon. “We wish to return to the Cairn. Do we have your consent?”

“No, Guardon. The Dire Queen was inconsiderate to we goblins and deserved to die. I have taken command here and have no need for her or your participation in our campaign.”

“I am not the person I once was, Rauros,” replied the troll woman. “I have returned from death. Now I am Iskendra. I give my word that if allowed into your Throne Room I will not act as harshly as I did in the past.”

“Very well, Iskendra. But remember that the Harad Ghul will be watching you and will gladly remove you from the world of the living once more if you misbehave.”

The pair of Summoners passed through the portal and entered the Audience Chamber of the Abyssal Cairn.

The Dire Queen addressed Rauros.

“Goblin Master, if you please, allow me to summon assistants to aid our surveillance of the other regions. The warriors of Mystic Down and Coermantyr are sure to be on the lookout for us. Extra pairs of watchful eyes will help us in the motions we take to secure the neighboring regions on the behalf of the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins.”

“Very well, Iskendra and Guardon,” said Rauros. “Just don’t let your familiars interfere with the goblin patrols. They follow their own chain-of-command and have no need of outside direction.”

“Conjelex!” cried the Dire Queen.

Green points of light formed in the air throughout the Audience Chamber of the Abyssal Cairn. They coalesced and formed a dark, green cloud. This split into two shapes that assumed legless, humanoid forms. Guardon named the taller of the specters.

“I call you Zalkos.”

Iskendrea named the broader of the two specters.

“I dub you Athros.”

“Venture to Mystic Down and give us intelligence as to the doings of Lord Taliesin and his acquaintances,” ordered Guardon. “They are sure to have encountered the reformed Harad Ghul and their assistants by now. If you perform your tasks for us satisfactorily you will be rewarded with your freedom. Fly, now.”

“As you wish, Masters,” replied Athros. “We will return with the information you seek.”

The pair of green specters flew out of the Abyssal Cairn and into the moonlit night of the Arkadian Forest.

* * * * *

The Driptwist-Morphozoid Entity sensed the presence of Guardon and Iskendra. The school of nuclei shuddered with the ramifications of the return of the malevolent Summoners.

This bodes poorly for the peace within the Gorgon Plane, thought the Morphozoids. The beholders and wolf-creatures will return to their past fervor. We must contact the Gaeans and ask for their assistance.

Driptwist began the preparations necessary to assume a humanoid form. It planned to emerge and discuss the growing turbulence among the untamed creatures in The Spires with the stone giants.

* * * * *

“The scrying glass beckons,” said Siegemunde.

The Director of the Martial Academy excused himself from the Integration Ceremony. He gestured for Jalhi, Sigrid and their friends to follow him. The group returned to Siegemunde’s study on the uppermost platform of the Martial Academy. There the scrying glass, brought by the warriors in a previous visit, glowed with blue light.

“Siegemunde, can you hear me? It is I, Lord Dagon, Ruler of the Dagonites.”

“Yes, I can hear you,” said the teacher. “How fare things in your ocean region?”

“We’ve experienced some conflict with a new race of fish hunters. They call themselves Nozroth. Several of my merfolk were turned away when they asked to share the yields from the schools of fish. We plan to contact Restadicus in Coermantyr Castle but wanted to consult with you, first. Is there anything you can do to help us, Siegemunde?”

“It is possible. I know of spells that can allow troll folk to traverse the depths of the sea. This is done by generating a layer of Ethereal Armor that functions as gills.”

“I suggest that you send some of your Captains to Coermantyr to consult with the Lore Masters. Their numbers are large and can harness greater reserves of arcane energy than I am able to here. If they so choose they can send a battalion of amphibious land trolls to the ocean. They will better help to equate the loss of staples you speak of.”

“Very well, Siegemunde, thank you for your advice. I will send five merfolk to the Ghastly Fens. Their names are Marlin, Anemone, Trilobite, Barracuda and Nautilus. They will escort what warriors you have available to the Lore Masters. You have my thanks, Teacher. The spatial rifts created by the Dire Queen have yet delivered unexpected challenges to us.”

“We will await the arrival of your Captains and depart thereafter.”

The light faded from the scrying glass in Siegemunde’s study.

* * * * *

Liege Lord Taliesin of Mystic Down and his friends rode their horses at a steady march through the forest. The warrior’s eyes scanned the perimeter of the road. He was on the lookout for any surprise attacks by the goblins or Lykanthros.

“Taliesin, I detect the presence of maverick magic-users in the direction of Arkadia,” said Gilead. “I wonder if Guardon and some other sorcerer have somehow returned to the Abyssal Cairn. We should make haste to that location for I fear what this new vibration in the Dharmic Equilibrium may signify.”

A Lykanthros horde rushed the group of fighters. The eyes of the feral beings emanated green light. They were again under the guidance of the Dire Queen in her reanimated form.

The warhorses responded to the charge by rearing back on their hind legs and striking at the wolf-creatures with their hooves. The fighters drew their weapons and swung down at the Lykanthros, destroying three of them.

Gilead enchanted a harnessing sorcery.

“Captros!”

The Lykanthros were encapsulated in a bright, red net of arcane energy. A few of them broke loose but the majority was trapped by Gilead's spell. The wolf-creatures that were free charged toward the warriors and engaged them in a fierce melee. Torvald slew the remaining Lykanthros with his sword.

"There is definitely a driving force behind these energized wolf-creatures," observed Bors' eldest son.

"I agree, Torvald," said Bors. "I regret to consider that the new Gong Seal has somehow been breached from the Plane of Chaos. If that is the case we may face the wrath of Guardon and Thoth once more. We should ride on to Deep Tree and the picket line that separates Arkadia from Mystic Down. It will do us good to learn who is in charge in that region."

The band of fighters agreed with the Burgomeister's recommendations. They guided their horses east to Deep Tree.

* * * * *

Trilobite, Marlin, Anemone, Nautilus and Barracuda marched on the dry sand of the beach north to Tinkerburg. They followed the order of Lord Dagon and sought the Ghastly Fens. The merfolk walked for a short while when they saw smoke on the horizon.

"Hello, Dagonites!" a sprite-like voice called. "What brings you from your aquatic region?"

A trio of halflings appeared at the crest of a nearby dune. Marlin recognized Bjorn Roundtree and The Watcher from their imprisonment in the Gorgon Plane.

"Greetings, Halflings," said Marlin.

He shook hands with the three travelers.

"I don't believe I've met your bearded friend before. Allow me to introduce my acquaintances and I. My name is Marlin. These stout fellows are Trilobite and Nautilus. These two merwomen are Anemone and Barracuda."

"It's nice to meet all of you," answered Ben.

"I am Ben Frostberry, Bjorn Roundtree's uncle. The Stalactite Orcs and Goblins are conducting a siege on the home city of our gnome friend, Gearzon. We are traveling on the behalf of the Mayor there to seek military reinforcement in Wood's End."

"What brings you fish hunters to dry land?" asked Ben.

"There is trouble in the deep," answered Anemone. "A new race of hunters has arrived in the ocean through the random portals generated by Guardon and the Dire

Queen. They are aggressive and do not wish to share the yields of the schools of fish that move with the current.”

“It’s a good thing that we met here, today,” said Ben. “We should travel north and west into Mystic Down so that we may inform Lord Taliesin of the invasions that are taking place in these regions.”

“I agree,” said Marlin. “We have greater strength in numbers.”

The warriors marched until twilight. They stopped to set a modest camp and conserve their strength for the hike ahead.

“Hello!” a voice growled. “Is anyone there? We are searching for Mystic Down.”

Satvinder and Jalhi Bengal emerged from the forest. Alex, Gnoll, Leif, Sigrid and Fangoz accompanied them.

“We met this aspiring magic-user from Arborea on our way here.”

Satvinder hugged Alex around the shoulders.

“Each of the regions of Gaea is beset by continuing attacks by the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins,” the tiger-troll declared. “My name is Satvinder. I am a longtime associate of Jalhi’s. We tiger-trolls regrettably were unable to help you in earlier battles. For many weeks we’ve prowled the open swamp in search of game for our people. It seems that the struggle for the liberation of the regions unfolds before us. Each of us is an adept warrior with unique style. Let us move to Arkadia and determine whether or not we can stop Guardon and whoever else may have returned there.”

“That is sound advice, Brave Ranger,” said Lord Taliesin. “All of us share an interest in the harmony and tranquility of our respective regions. Let us ride into the Forest of Arkadia now and bring an end to this war.”

The fighters did as Taliesin suggested and razed their camp. Each of them was motivated by Satvinder’s words to carry on the fight. They followed the illumination spells of Sigrid and Leif through the trees.

* * * * *

Rauros addressed Iskendra and Guardon.

“The specters search for intelligence as we speak, My Allies. We must remain cautious for the Lieges of the regions of Gaea do not take the movements of our forces lightly. I am loath to consider it but if the battle becomes fierce we may be forced to ask you, Guardon, to again bring the involvement of the red dragon, Thoth.”

“I would not do that willingly, Goblin Master,” answered the Daemon Lord. “My father is uncontrollable and follows naught but his own wiles. Let us contend with those who would stop us directly. I doubt if things will go so far as for us to need the Denizens of Chaos.”

“Very well, Guardon,” said Rauros. “I will set a rotating watch of the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins in the forest beyond the Cairn. If any one approaches us we will know of it.”

* * * * *

The band of warriors marched into the deeper woods of Arkadia. The howls of the Lykanthros permeated the trees but the wolf-creatures did not attack the large group of warriors. They rode at a steady pace. At last they approached the outer edge of the tangled rose garden of the Abyssal Cairn.

Bjorn fingered the anklet he’d taken from Guardon. The mysterious jewels still refracted the light strangely.

“This anklet grows cold,” said the halfling. “It’s almost as if it senses the presence of its previous owner. That’s strange because the last time I saw Guardon he was sent to the Plane of Chaos far from here.”

“My amulet also feels chilled,” said Sharon Redthorne. “I took it from a cave where goblin marauders stayed. Like your anklet, Bjorn, I suspect it was made in an alien Plane.”

“Speaking of strange items, I’m still learning about the magical facets of the Orb of Paryphax,” declared Alex. “Although I’ve been appointed as the new Wood Mage in Arborea there is magical power that I’ve yet to deduce how to tap.”

The fighters passed through the clinging gardens and entered the main gate of the Abyssal Cairn. The Harad Ghul waited at the opposite end.

“Turn from this place, Taliesin,” Dakros growled. “You should have realized that the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs are unstoppable. We will conquer your regions for ourselves whether you consent to it or not.”

“That is unfortunate, Adept Assassin,” replied Taliesin. “My parents fought against you to the best of their ability, as did Sharon’s. Now we will finish what they intended to complete a generation ago. En guard!”

The warriors wielded their weapons as they drove their warhorses into a battle charge. The Harad Ghul directed their wolf-beast mounts at the fighters. The opposing forces clashed on the black cobbles of the Cairn. The fight was intense with neither side offering quarter.

Alex, Leif, Sigrid, Reoren and Gilead united their abilities to generate an attack spell.

“Trentak!” they cried.

Powerful blasts of golden plasma struck dozens of goblins and orcs. Some of the malevolent humanoids were knocked from their saddles while their foot soldiers were obliterated.

Lord Taliesin, Rodnik, Sharon, Bors, Torvald, Fangoz, the Bengal Clan and Thorgrym grouped together. The warriors laid into their opponents with full force. Bjorn and The Watcher used their slings and Ben used his sword. The merfolk also joined the fight.

The Harad Ghul fought valiantly with their scimitars but were no match for the aggression of the warriors. They were destroyed.

Iskendrea and Guardon levitated with green magic as they entered the courtyard of the Abyssal Cairn.

“Know not do I how these two returned to this place. Alas, they must be challenged once more.”

The Watcher flung a rounded stone at Guardon. The large daemon batted it away.

The warriors did not hesitate and strode over the fallen goblins to attack the Summoners. They hewed at them with their sharpened steel.

Enraged, Iskendra uttered a projectile spell.

“Nechros!”

A dozen, spiraling, green blades flew at the fighters. They used their agile reflexes to deflect the enchanted blades with their weapons and shields.

Frustrated at the failure of her attack, the Dire Queen enchanted another sorcery.

“Drisenta!”

A battalion of transparent skeletons and zombie knights contended with the warriors. Gnoll and Reoren were baffled by the illusion, but only briefly. The other fighters were accustomed to this device and ignored the animated images altogether.

Nighthawk and the defected goblins struck at the Illusionaries with their weapons. The maverick mages evaded their attack.

Bors and Fangoz swung their clubs in vain against the telekinetic gestures of Iskendra.

Rodnik and Gnoll struck at Guardon with their axes but did no significant injury to the daemon.

The merfolk fired their crossbows but did not strike their targets.

The Watcher and Bjorn unleashed their rounded stones at Guardon, distracting him. Ben Frostberry parried around the Dire Queen with his dagger.

Before Iskendrea was able to utter another incantation the mercenaries rushed her, skewering her to the floor in numerous locations. Guardon fought valiantly with the Gaeans. Taliesin yelled a battle cry and ran the daemon through with his longsword. The bronze-skinned humanoid spewed a shower of green blood and died.

“Hooray! Victorious we are,” exclaimed The Watcher. “Return we should to Coermantyr Castle to inform Restadicus. Done well we all have. Proud your parents would be, Sharon and Taliesin.”

The fighters guided their horses out of the gateway of the Abyssal Cairn and began the journey home.

* * * * *

Raven sat on the bus on the way to Jefferson College. She was still concerned about Mrs. Egnog. Her trigonometry teacher was ambitious.

I don't know if I'm going to make the cut-off point with Mrs. Egnog this semester, thought Raven. I need a math class in order to transfer to a university. If things go as they have been I'll take a 'W' for withdraw and try again next semester with a different professor.

Maybe that's why I've had such strange dreams lately.

* * * * *

Thoth moaned within the Drystyx Temple.

“Guardon, my son, is dead. Drystyx Monks, join with me in seeking vengeance for his untimely demise. Let us push above to the seal once more. If we concert our efforts we will surely gain entrance.”

The black-cloaked Drystyx Monks did as the red dragon suggested and flew with him to the Gong Seal in the sky. The dragon asserted the full brunt of his strength against the seal and broke through. The Drystyx Monks again flew into the Gorgon Plane. A battalion of firbolgs and minotaurs accompanied them. The humanoid warriors levitated into the Plane through the guidance of the Monks of Chaos.

Zolgnath was pleased.

“Good. I am glad that we have returned to this place. The opportunity exists for us to expand our holdings within the Dharmic Equilibrium. Let us disperse our troops, Thoth, and secure this mountain stronghold for the Servants of Chaos!”

“Very well, Zolgnath,” said the red dragon. “Take command of this structure. I will fly above and survey the area.”

The dragon flew from the Throne Room of The Spires and flapped his wings over the red horizon. The Lykanthros that swarmed below raised their heads at the arcane aura of the dragon. Dweeble Dworx and the Hive Builders hurried inside their newly constructed Hive to avoid detection.

Thoth spotted the last of the Arachnoids scramble into the habitat and dove low to the earth. He released a bolt of green acid at the Hive. The volcanic rocks from which the building was constructed were resilient and did not give way to the noxious chemical.

The dragon circled around and headed back to The Spires.

Chapter Five: Planar War

Oxholm and Drumtone traversed the zigzagging tunnels of The Spires.

“Brother, I’ve begun to have second thoughts about the wisdom of moving the Maegar Clan to this Plane,” said Oxholm. “In place of the omnipresent goblins we are now forced to contend with minotaurs and firbolgs, let alone the beholders and Lykanthros. This is hardly a bargain.”

“I concur, Oxholm,” replied Drumtone. “Our people are resilient warriors, though. If we remain courageous I’m sure our people will soon know peace.”

“Very well, Brother,” Oxholm answered. “Let us continue our surveillance of these passages before we report back to King Grumbold.”

The brothers had keen vision in the flickering light of their torches. Feral cries and guttural rumbles echoed from adjoining passages in the labyrinthine stronghold. The passages and tunnels of the subterranean fortress were twisting and circuitous. The dwarves relied on their mining experience to remain oriented to their path. They marched in silence for some time when they came upon a previously unexplored cavern. Stalagmites and stalactites protruded at precipitous angles from the earth and ceiling.

A group of gorgons floated down from hidden tunnels in the top and sides of the chamber. They were on the prowl and charged at the dwarf warriors with gnashing fangs. The spherical creatures spoke as they slashed at the humanoids with their needle-like teeth.

“Do not resist. We claim this stronghold on the behalf of the red dragon that now resides above. The time of the dwarves is past. Now is the Age of Chaos!”

Drumtone and Oxholm evaded the teeth of the beholders. They unbuckled their weapons as they rolled apart on the rocky floor. The gorgons were confused by this rapid movement and spun around to stay focused on their prey. The Maegar Warriors swung their weapons upward in a flurry of powerful strikes. Two of the creatures were severely wounded and slumped to the ground.

The other gorgons moaned at the deaths of their kin and chose to retreat.

“We will return, Foolish Dwarves,” said a beholder. “Your obstinacy is noted and will be dealt with by the Drystyx Monks accordingly.”

The spherical creatures fled through the routes from which they emerged.

“Drumtone, I’m concerned,” declared Oxholm. “Let us meet with Grumbold and inform him of this increasing activity. The Maegar must reach a decision.”

“I agree, Brother,” said Drumtone.

The dwarves headed to their settlement in The Spires.

* * * * *

Grumbold’s face was creased with worry.

Things aren’t going well for the Maegar Clan in this place, he thought. If the events that transpire in the next few days don’t take a turn for the better I may be forced to move the dwarves back to Gaea. It is bad karma to tangle with the goblins but it may prove to be the lesser of two evils.

A dwarf addressed the King seated on his stone Throne.

“Your Majesty, Oxholm and Drumtone are here.”

The dwarf brothers approached Grumbold and genuflected.

“Grumbold, as you are surely aware the activity of the Denizens of Chaos has increased,” said Oxholm. “We have battled with beholders in growing numbers and suspect that the seal that was put in place by the seraph trolls has been breached.”

“Thank you for your information, Brave Fighters,” said the King. “Let us bide our time and see how the creatures behave. If necessary I will contact Lord Taliesin in Gaea and inform him of our possible return to that Realm. Go now and speak with the other humanoids of the Gorgon Plane that may aid our cause. I understand that the stone giants are friendly as well as the shape-shifters.”

“This is true, King Grumbold,” Drumtone replied. “They have assisted us in establishing a seal to keep the Creatures of Chaos out of this Plane. We will approach them on your behalf and return with their answer. I propose that we assemble the dwarves and humanoids aligned with our interests in the Midden of the stone giants. If the Gorgon Plane can yet be saved we should demonstrate our martial force at that point.”

“That is a good idea, Drumtone,” said the King. “Do as you suggest. The entire population of Maegar Dwarves will meet you there at the end of this day.”

“Drummers, begin the gathering rhythm!” Grumbold declared.

A group of male and female dwarves wheeled in a dozen barrel-shaped drums. The instruments were wide, nearly two yards in diameter. The dwarves complied with Grumbold’s request and began a steady tattoo by striking the drumheads with leather-bound mallets.

“Very well, Warriors. You have my blessing. Go now and aid the Maegar in manifesting a peaceful future.”

The dwarves knelt briefly and exited from the Throne Room. They took a tunnel that rolled downward into the damp air of the subterranean network. Oxholm and Drumtone marched for a while until they came to the chamber where the stalactites and stalagmites assumed massive proportions.

The dwarves approached the location of the Midden of the stone giants and tapped the rocky earth with their weapons. In a matter of moments the earth moved nearby and Petra and Volcan emerged from the soil.

“Greetings, Dwarves,” said Volcan. “We are glad to see you. The Lykanthros have passed this way several times, as have the beholders and minotaurs. I regret that

the seal separating the Plane of Chaos from us has been breached. The movements of the red dragon, Thoth, have vibrated to us from above.”

The great, stone humanoids bore worried expressions.

“Please, Drumtone and Oxholm, speak with the Morphozoids. They are courageous. Perhaps Driptwist will consent to assist your cause.”

“That is our intention, Stone Giants,” said Oxholm. “Our people, with your permission, plan to form a base camp here. If the residents of the Gorgon Plane concert their efforts they may yet turn the Denizens of Chaos.”

“That’s fine by us, Brave Dwarves. Meet with us here and we shall see if this stronghold can yet be defended,” declared Petra.

“Both of you have our thanks,” said Oxholm. “We will speak with the Morphozoids and return here. Expect the arrival of the Maegar Clan in a matter of hours.”

The brothers continued their march through the vast cave until they came to the radiant pools in the floor and ceiling. Drumtone touched the edge of the lake on the ground with his foot. Ripples moved outward in expanding circles from the point of contact. The waves increased in size and were mirrored by waves on the lake above. Two cylinders emerged from above and below and became one. This formed into the waiting Driptwist, who slid across the surface until it stood on the shore by the dwarves.

“Hello, Dwarves, we meet again,” the Morphozoid said. “There has been trouble brewing. The Creatures of Chaos have swept by us many times recently. It seems there will be another fight. I offer my services on the behalf of the Principal Amoebids who live here.”

“We are indebted to you, Shape-Shifter,” Drumtone answered. “You are welcome to accompany us to the Midden of the Terranoids. The Maegar Clan is gathering there to engage in a pivotal battle with the Creatures of Chaos.”

“I hope you’re ready for a fight, Driptwist,” said Oxholm. “The minotaurs and such have proven quite a nuisance.”

The friends began the trek to the giants’ Midden. They were prepared for the worst.

* * * * *

King Grumbold and the Maegar Dwarves gathered before the Terranoids, Volcan and Petra. The other giants also emerged from below the surface, filling that section of the cavern with humanoids. Oxholm, Drumtone and Driptwist were ready for battle.

Zolgnath and the Drystyx Monks appeared at the entrance to the cave. Firbolgs, minotaurs, Lykanthros and beholders accompanied them.

“We’ve been looking for you dwarves,” said Zolgnath. “Thoth has taken command of this Plane. He is willing to allow you to live, for a price. We will take half of your precious stones and livestock.”

“That is unreasonable, Firbolg Mage,” replied Grumbold. “And what’s more, we don’t believe you. Return to the Plane of Chaos from whence you came or face the full ire of the Maegar Clan and their allies.”

“Very well, Dwarf Leader. We shall see,” Zolgnath responded.

The Denizens of Chaos charged. The stone giants instantaneously pummeled many of them into pulp. Those that made it through their line contended with the axes and hammers of the dwarves. Driptwist extended its limbs into lengthy tendrils that knocked over a dozen of the minotaurs.

Zolgnath and the Drystyx Monks enchanted a spell of subterfuge.

“Fensores!”

The black-cloaked sorcerers, minotaurs and firbolgs were individually covered with opaque spheres. The beholders attempted a charm person spell but the dwarves’ resistance to the magic was strong. None of them fell victim to the anesthetizing spell.

King Grumbold led the charge into the fray. Every able-bodied dwarf dealt flurries of strikes to the Lykanthros. More of them were destroyed and those that were not turned and fled, exasperated.

The Denizens of Chaos were another matter, however. The shields surrounding them prevented any more of their number from being injured by the devastating attacks of the stone giants. When Volcan and Petra brought their massive fists down upon the opaque spheres they cracked the rocky floor, forming smoking craters. This was the case for the other Terranoids as well.

The aged Leader of the Dwarves had compared notes with The Watcher. Unbeknownst to the Drystyx Monks he had learned the arcane art of magic. Grumbold uttered an attack spell.

“Carvex!”

Large spheres formed around half of the shielded invaders. They thrust deadly spikes through the smaller barriers, killing those within. Zolgnath and the Drystyx Monks were outraged at the dwarf’s use of magic. They uttered a spell of their own.

“Electros!”

The wizards aimed their hands at the dwarves and stone giants and released a barrage of sparkling spikes. The charged bolts wedged into the rock flesh of Petra and her kin but they remained unencumbered. A few of the dwarves were struck by the missiles and fell to the floor, shuddering with electric arcs.

The firbolgs and minotaurs that lived moved in on the Terranoids with a renewed fervor. They hewed at the legs of the hulking humanoids, shearing masses of rock from their bodies. This was not enough to stop them and many more were pounded into the ground within their shields.

Oxholm and Drumtone rallied their kindred and rolled diagonally toward their opponents. They leaped up from their crouching positions and rendered devastating attacks to the minotaurs. The gross sound of cracking bones and torn sinew filled the air. The last of the bull trolls fell to the ground in pools of green blood.

The beholders forewent their previous strategy to charm the dwarves. They enchanted a different spell.

“Tractos!”

A mesh of scalding, blue ribbons was released from the antennae of the gorgons. The arcane waves drifted into the fighting Maegar. Several of them were burned around the arms and legs but were not significantly injured.

The dwarf brothers dodged the fiery claws of the firbolgs to eliminate the beholders one by one. Those that remained fled through dark tunnels in the walls and ceiling. Zolgnath was furious at the flight of the single-eyed creatures. He unleashed another attack spell.

“Mortis!”

A green mist struck Grumbold. He was overtaken and fell to the ground, covered with festering sores. The dwarves were angered over the assault of their King and entered the fray with added vehemence. The axes and hammers of the Maegar Clan destroyed six of the Drystyx Monks.

Zolgnath addressed his cohorts.

“Retreat, Firbolgs. Pull back, Drystyx Monks. These humanoids are berserk. We shall re-enter this cavern and secure it for the red dragon at a later time. Now is the moment for us to regroup.”

In compliance with the command of their Leader the black-robed monks and firbolgs withdrew from the spacious, earthen chamber.

The dwarves and stone giants cheered their victory. They moved quickly around the wounded King. Petra gazed at the aged dwarf with her sparkling, amethyst eyes.

“Alas, I am dying, My Warriors,” said Grumbold. “There is nothing you can do for me.”

Oxholm held the King’s head and gave him a drink from his water flask.

“Thank you, Oxholm,” stated the Maegar King. “Please, if the battle with the Denizens of Chaos gets worse contact Lord Taliesin in Mystic Down. They will help the dwarves to move back to the mountains in Arkadia. May the Fates be with you all.”

Grumbold closed his eyes and died.

“Alas, our King is gone,” said Oxholm. “We will survive without him but it will not be the same. Grumbold didn’t have an heir so we will be on our own. Perhaps, when times are more peaceful, we can establish a Council of the Clan.”

“Maegar Dwarves, let us tend to our wounded,” said Drumtone. “We will construct a funeral pyre for Grumbold in a matter of hours. Our smiths will assemble steel plates to close the injuries on the bodies of the stone giants.”

“Thank you, Drumtone,” replied Volcan. “With your help we will soon be back to our whole selves.”

The dwarves and Terranoids set themselves to the tasks at hand. They kept watchful eyes for the return of the Drystyx Monks and firbolgs.

* * * * *

Claude, the vampire, sat on his Throne.

Gabrielle and I were successful, he thought. The Gypsies we met were willing recruits. They had grown weary of the perpetual destruction of their homes by the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins. Now they are part of the Tribe of Castle Stammberg. The world of the vampires has begun to return to its previous glory.

Claude established a rapport with one of the Gypsy trolls named Raphael. He acted as a go-between for the Undead Lord. Raphael updated Claude in regard to the movements of Lykanthros and goblins from Mount Crow. He was a trustworthy apprentice. As a token of his appreciation Claude delegated Raphael to use the great telescope at the top of the tallest tower in the castle. The lenses within the device were in working condition despite the years of control by the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs.

Raphael, the dark-haired vampire, entered Claude’s Throne Room.

“Hello, Raphael,” said Claude. “What news do you bring from the observation tower?”

“There is trouble abroad, Vampire Lord,” Raphael answered. “As the conflict with the goblins and wolf-creatures continues here I have seen battle to the south, in

the foothills. The Troll Liege, Taliesin, has met an encampment with some Dagonites and halflings. They contended with the Dire Queen and Daemon King at the Abyssal Cairn. I move you to fly, Claude. The Harad Ghul continues to be active and we are at risk to face a frontal assault as the dwarves were some months ago.”

“Thank you for the reconnaissance, Raphael,” replied Claude. “You are a capable apprentice. I will fly this night and survey Taliesin personally. Keep watch over Castle Stammberg in my absence. Gabrielle will assist you if necessary.”

“Very well, Claude,” said Raphael. “I bid you farewell.”

The Vampire Lord sprang from his Dais and leaped from the open window. He used his telekinetic power to soar with the wind. The light of the twin moons of Gaea shone brightly over the forest below. Numerous campfires of the goblins and orcs pockmarked the foothills. Claude passed them by and moved with the wind to the south.

He flew high. The lights of the campfires gave way to rolling hills covered with old-growth forest. The Vampire Lord’s silvery hair billowed in the gusts created by his passage. Claude swooped down again and sensed the proximity of Taliesin’s entourage.

The night-feeder landed before the warriors and addressed them.

“Hello, Taliesin. I see you have battled Guardon and the Dire Queen again. I compliment your persistence in defending Gaea from those who would dominate it unjustly.”

“Well met, Claude. I take it that you’ve reclaimed your castle once lost to the marauding goblins.”

“That is correct, Taliesin. I succeeded in ousting the goblins from Castle Stammberg. The vampires have returned to Arkadia and our numbers are growing. Taliesin, it appears that the Gong Seal in the Gorgon Plane has been breached. If this is the case then we have a full-scale Planar War on our hands. Allow me to assist you. It is only a matter of time before Thoth and the Drystyx Monks arrive here.”

“Alas, that is the case, Claude. We warriors were about to return to Coermantyr Castle to consult with Restadicus and the Lore Masters. You are welcome to join us and add your input.”

“Very well, Liege of Mystic Down,” replied the vampire. “Let us be on our way. I have no need for a horse. My recharged power allows me to fly with the wind.”

The united warriors from the various regions of Gaea set off on the trek to the west. They wished to meet with Restadicus as soon as possible.

* * * * *

Thoth howled with fury at the death of his son, the daemon.

I vow to avenge Guardon on the behalf of the Titans of Chaos. My monks and I will move while we can and demonstrate the full power of our Plane to the resistant residents of Gaea.

The red dragon circled around The Spires once more and landed in the tallest tower. Zolgnath waited on the Throne in the Audience Chamber therein. The firbolg mage was exasperated over his defeat against the stone giants and Maegar Dwarves.

“Thoth, the dwarves here are stubborn. Allow me to generate a spatial portal so that we may better contend with the humanoids in Gaea. They are due a lesson. Perhaps they will learn to resist us no longer.”

“Very well, Zolgnath,” said the red dragon. “Let us leave this Plane to the beholders and Lykanthros for a time. We have bigger fish to fry now that the accursed seal has fallen. Order the remaining monks to this room and generate a rift large enough for all of us to pass. We shall contend with the troublesome Lieges, Taliesin, Sharon Redthorne and her Key Mage, Gilead, sooner than they expect.”

Zolgnath called out.

“Drystyx Monks, come here. It is time for us to move on Gaea. We shall travel with the red dragon into the heart of the Realm and contend with those who oppose us.”

The dozen-and-a-half, black-robed monks appeared from teleportation rings of their own device. These small portals vanished upon their entrance.

Zolgnath enchanted a spell to generate a portal.

“Levrond!”

A wide, oval-shaped rift appeared in the air, limned with red light. The Burial Ruins in the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens stood on the other side. The Denizens of Chaos did not hesitate and levitated through the arcane gate. Thoth glided through thereafter.

Once in Gaea the Drystyx Monks established a headquarters with sod bricks, stacked into walls and an observation tower by magical means. The red dragon flew to the south to contend with Lord Taliesin and his allies.

* * * * *

The band of fighters rode with haste into the courtyard of Coermantyr Castle. They dismounted and strode within the Gothic, pinnacled structure. Restadicus waited in the Council Chamber.

“Quickly, Taliesin, tell me what has happened. I sensed the presence of the daemon and the Dire Queen again in this Plane. They are clearly desperate to usurp these regions.”

“The Gong Seal is a thing of the past, Restadicus,” said Jalhi Bengal. “Too much magic courses through the Fens to be contained in separate Planes. Our ancestors were wise to attempt such a division but their plan is no longer feasible. Since Guardon and the Dire Queen were here we succeeded in defeating them with the help of Satvinder, Alex and the others. His father is sure to arrive, though. The dragon is bound to be upon us at any moment.”

The tiger-woman’s eyes flared with a tangible urgency.

A deep, bass rumbling shook the foundations of Coermantyr Castle. The red dragon circled the fortress from outside. The screams of the citizens below echoed upward from the city streets. The odor of sulfur and smoke filled the air.

“This is a terrible day for all of us,” said Restadicus. “I must contact Hydro and ask if there is any means to combat this Colossal Beast of Chaos. Give me a moment to use my scrying glass.”

Wotan and the other Lore Masters hurried into the Council Chamber. Their faces were etched with fear for the safety of their region.

“Restadicus, we must do something. The red dragon outside is setting fire to the rooftops of the village. No one is safe with this monster flying about.”

“I agree, Wotan,” answered Restadicus. “I am contacting Hydro in the Plane of Order as we speak. I fear that we will need more than the seraph trolls he sent this time around.”

Restadicus bowed his head and focused on the magical glass on the wooden stand before him. He uttered a spell of divination.

“Bindu!”

The magenta-cloaked wizard tossed his head back. His eyes rolled white as he focused on the inner visions of the scrying glass. He kept his fingertips in contact with the device.

“Hydro, can you hear me? It is I, Restadicus. We have need of your aid. This time more than before.”

“Yes, Restadicus, I can hear you. I understand that Thoth, the Demigod, has invaded Gaea after centuries of banishment. It seems that you need a dragon of your own, one who will defend the harmony of your Plane as vehemently as the red dragon intends to usurp it. Let me see if there is a silver dragon that is willing to help. One moment...”

“Hurry please, Hydro. Thoth is upon us and is destroying our village,” said the Leader of the Lore Masters.

“Yes, there is a female dragon here who is willing to visit Gaea. She is experienced with conflicts of this nature and has interceded on my behalf in Planes similar to yours. Her name is Mara. I will send her through a portal now. I hope you succeed in turning Thoth, Restadicus. Feel welcome to contact the Plane of Order at any time.”

A large, oval portal opened in the Council Chamber of the Lore Masters. A massive, silver dragon crept through it and crouched on the tiled floor. The portal closed behind her.

“Greetings, Gaeans. I reckon I’ll be on my way since Grumpy is making a mess of things out there.”

The silver dragon pushed out a pillar connecting two of the many arches surrounding the tower. She dove and then flapped upward, chasing after Thoth.

The two dragons snarled at each other and grappled in mid-air. The Demigod of Chaos was enraged at the presence of the silver dragon and clawed at her to no avail. They twisted and spiraled in a massive dance, spewing green and orange flames haphazardly.

At last Thoth disengaged his hold and scoffed.

“This Plane suits only one dragon. I will return and claim what is mine at a later time. Be on your guard, Silver Dragon, for I am not a fellow to be toyed with.”

The red dragon turned and flew north to Zolgnath in the Ghastly Fens.

Mara circled the tower and perched at the edge of the Council Chamber of Coermantyr Castle.

“It looks like I showed up just in time,” the silver dragon observed. “I can help protect your regions from the tyranny of Thoth and his Drystyx Monks. You warriors must wage a campaign to defeat them. My efforts alone will not be enough to destroy the red dragon or banish the black-robed sorcerers. The arcane technique employed to banish Thoth and his cohorts from the Gorgon Plane will not be successful if attempted again. The Gong Seal repaired by Smithforge is no longer strong enough to detain their malevolent intentions.”

“Restadicus,” continued Mara, “it is wise to contact Hydro again and request the return of the four, seraph trolls. They fought well in previous battles here in Gaea. The magic of the Drystyx Monks is potent and will require the additional support that they possess.”

“Very well, Mara,” said Restadicus. “We are indebted to you for your help and will be additionally thankful for your protection. The events that have transpired here of late are unlike anything documented in our historical scrolls. I will contact Hydro on your advice and ask for the four seraphim.”

Restadicus laid his hands over the scrying glass and again uttered the divining spell.

“Bindu!”

The white-bearded wizard addressed Hydro in the Plane of Order.

“Hydro, It’s Restadicus again. We have repelled Thoth from his assault on Coermantyr Castle. He and his Drystyx Monks remain in Gaea, however. Mara suggests that you have the four, seraph trolls who helped us before visit the Council Chamber here. We have a tough campaign ahead of us and can surely benefit from their resilience and expertise.”

“That is a fine idea, Restadicus,” replied Hydro. “Tell Mara I’m proud of her. The four seraphim are here and are ready and willing to visit your Plane. Keep in touch.”

Four portals appeared in the Council Chamber. Through them emerged Smithforge, Listhew, Glasslook and Heartsing. They embraced the warriors and Lore Masters.

“We are glad to see all of you,” declared Glasslook. “It seems we have our work cut out for us. The red dragon is a persistent Demigod and will not be easily banished from this Plane now that he is here.”

“Let us journey to the Ghastly Fens,” said Sharon. “We must confront the Drystyx Monks and Thoth while our strength is at its peak.”

“I agree,” stated Alex. “This invasion from the Plane of Chaos concerns all of the regions of Gaea. Siegemunde is stuck on the far side of the Fens. It will be prudent for us to reach him and proposition his aid.”

“I will do as you suggest, Alex,” said Restadicus. “Siegemunde is a capable magic-user and deserves to be informed of the recent events.”

The Leader of the Lore Masters pressed his hands to his scrying glass.

“Siegemunde, this is Restadicus. Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Restadicus. The Daemon Lord and Dire Queen have battled in Arkadia. This has happened because the Gong Seal has been broken. Is everything alright over there?”

“I’m sorry, Siegemunde. Taliesin defeated Guardon and his companion. Thoth and the Drystyx Monks have attacked us here in Coermantyr as an act of vengeance.

They are based at the Crossroads in the Ghastly Fens. We will try to reach you if possible. Hold the fort there until we get through. We have a Planar War on our hands, Able Wizard.”

“Thanks for the information, Lore Master,” answered Siegemunde. “The lich folk and I will hold our own on this end. Don’t worry about us. Deal with the Denizens of Chaos on the behalf of Gaea. I will contact you if they come this way.”

“May the Fates be with you, Siegemunde,” answered Restadicus.

“Its time for us to head north, My Friends,” said the Leader of the Lore Masters. “Representatives of every known region are here. Wotan will accompany us and Mara will fly above. With the assistance of the staunch seraph trolls we have an opportunity to turn these foul invaders before they do any more damage. Let us be on our way.”

The warriors took fresh mounts from Coermantyr Castle and set forth on the trail to the Crossroads. They saw groups of goblins and orcs riding Lykanthros but they steered clear of the sizable group. Lord Taliesin and his mercenaries had established a reputation among the scurrilous humanoids as fearsome fighters.

The warriors traveled through the twilight hours and came to the Burial Ruins at nightfall. Gaea’s twin moons formed parallel crescents behind the tower of the Sod Stronghold. Eerie torches burned along the ramparts. Mara circled above the structure but Thoth was nowhere to be seen.

Zolgnath and a handful of his assistants appeared on the ramparts and issued a warning to the Lieges and their friends.

“Do not tarry here, Gaeans. The Demigod, Thoth, claims this land. If you choose to resist us you shall be destroyed.”

“That is not an option, Zolgnath,” replied Restadicus. “We are here to send you back to the Plane of Chaos. You do not belong here. You have enough power and influence in your own Realm. Go now or face our wrath.”

“I refuse. This Plane is ours,” said Zolgnath.

The Leader of the Drystyx Monks enchanted an attack spell.

“Smoldent!”

A green, poison cloud appeared over the stronghold of the monks and rushed down at the Gaeans. Wotan uttered a counter-spell.

“Aeros!”

A gust of wind carried the noxious mist out of range of the fighters.

Sigrid and Jalhi Bengal fired a volley of arrows at the monks above, striking two of them. Alex, Reoren and Leif cried out their missile sorcery.

“Trentak!”

The caustic, electric bolts overtook two more of the black-robed monks.

The portcullis of the stronghold lifted and a gathering of Stalactite Orcs and Goblins emerged from within. They engaged the warriors in a bitter melee.

Gilead, the Key Mage of Coermantyr issued forth a ring of warding to push them back.

“Protex!”

A half-dozen of the charging wolf-creatures were successfully pushed away but the others were already too close to be affected.

Taliesin and Sharon Redthorne drew their long-swords and contended with their opponents. Gnoll also unsheathed his sword and entered the fray. The five merfolk fired a barrage of bolts from their crossbows, dropping three of the orc riders. Smithforge and Heartsing exchanged blows with the circling goblins. Glasslook and Listhew opted for longbows and felled three Lykanthros with their high-velocity arrows.

Bjorn, The Watcher and Ben Frostberry joined the battle with their companions. Ben used his dagger while the other two halflings employed their slings. Satvinder and the other tiger folk joined with Fangoz, the stone troll, to initiate an all-out assault on the wolf-creatures. They braved their slashing claws and fangs to bludgeon and hack at riders and mounts alike.

Nighthawk and his goblins tumbled around the Lykanthros and their mounts to drop a dozen of them.

Gilead issued an attack spell of his own.

“Tractos!”

A blue energy ribbon flew upward at the Drystyx Monks but overshot its mark.

Restadicus and Wotan used an experimental spell.

“Frigidos!”

A wide, blue beam of ice issued forth from the hands of the two, adept mages and merged into a single, wide beam. This they guided up the wall and across the rampart where the Drystyx Monks stood. Three of them were frozen solid and subsequently shattered by the hurled stones of The Watcher and Bjorn Roundtree.

Thoth flew over an outcropping of stones on a nearby hilltop. Mara responded quickly and tackled the red dragon in mid-air. The two, great lizards struggled for some time, exchanging blows and bites. Green dragon blood fell to the Fens below and sizzled on the damp soil. Mara was enraged at the bullying of Thoth and struck

him a powerful blow to the jaw. The red dragon lost consciousness and fell to the ground with a sickening thud.

Restadicus spoke over the din of battle and issued Zolgnath an ultimatum.

“Drystyx Monks, this is your last chance. Leave this Plane or be destroyed.”

“Alas,” Zolgnath cried, “we yield for now, Restadicus. Do not think we will not return for what is ours. We will meet again at another time.”

The Leader of the Lore Masters joined with Wotan to bind the dragon and his black-robed cohorts.

“Baniscent!”

The Drystyx Monks and comatose Thoth were lifted in an Ethereal Funnel guided by the hands of the Gaeian sorcerers. Gilead and Leif generated a spatial portal to the Plane of Chaos at the base of the whirlwind. The denizens were forced through it and vanished from the Burial Ruins. The goblins and Lykanthros that remained fled in apprehension.

“Excellent!” cheered The Watcher. “Done well this day all of us have. The goblins and orcs remain but a new-found grasp of our resources we gained. Ready we’ll be for coming challenges we face.”

“I agree, Aged Halfling,” said Restadicus. “Each of you brave warriors have honored your respective regions. Let us venture north to meet with Siegemunde in Lich Town. I’m sure you, Sigrid and Reoren will be glad to see your homes free of the red dragon for a time, Leif.”

“Yes, Restadicus,” replied the Sentinel. “I will speak with Siegemunde. We have much to research in the Academy. Our magical abilities are sure to be challenged again. Let us go, My Friends, while our strength is with us.”

The warriors mounted their horses and followed the magical halo of Leif through the marshes of the Ghastly Fens. They would reach Lich Town in a matter of hours.

* * * * *

Raven awoke from a full night’s sleep.

I feel surprisingly rested, she thought. I’ve been concerned for Sharon Redthorne. Something tells me that she’s doing alright. Well, I’d better be off to college. I’ve got my work cut out for me, that’s for sure.

Raven conducted her ablutions and donned a fresh set of clothes. She ate a quick breakfast and rushed to the nearest bus stop.

* * * * *

Rauros witnessed the demise of the Dire Queen and her suitor. He was surprised that Lord Taliesin and his companions did not attempt to enter the Abyssal Cairn.

They must have other concerns on their minds, he thought. So be it. I have my own affairs to attend to.

The Leader of the Harad Ghul had sat on his Throne for a few hours when the other agents of the Guild of Assassins returned to the Council Chamber of the Abyssal Cairn.

“Greetings, Dakros, Loki and Blueblood. It is good to see the Harad Ghul gathered together. Have any of you seen the specters, Athros and Zalkos?”

“They approach as we speak, Rauros,” replied Blueblood.

The green specters flew through the torch-lit colonnades of the Arkadian stronghold. They hovered over the proscenium of the Council Chamber.

“The Gaeon warriors have returned to Coermantyr Castle, Rauros,” said Zalkos. “They have banished the red dragon, Thoth and the Drystyx Monks that remained. This was accomplished by the sorcery of the Lore Masters of Coermantyr and a silver dragon. It is evident that the Plane of Order has taken an active stance in thwarting the movements of the Plane of Chaos in this Realm as in others. It has been ages since direct war was waged between the Titans of the distant Planes. This may occur again with the imbalance of power employed by Restadicus.”

“Thank you for the information, Specters. I regret that those who summoned you are no more. You are welcome to stay in this Plane. Conduct additional reconnaissance on those who oppose us and you shall be duly rewarded. I shall consult the scrolls in the library here. The Titans that you speak of intrigue me. Perhaps I shall find a means to contact them.”

“Such a thing is simple, Master Assassin,” said Athros. “You need a scrying glass to channel your energies of perception.”

“A scrying glass?” replied Rauros. “That is what the Dire Queen, Iskendra, used during her arcane experimentation. Her tool was taken from this place, however. I wouldn’t be surprised if it is in the possession of Siegemunde in the Ghastly Fens. He is a dabbler in magic and would be intrigued by such an object when the more traditional mages of Coermantyr would set it aside.”

“Rauros, let us hasten to the Ghastly Fens,” declared Blueblood. “The orcs are ready to prove themselves in their service to you. Allow us to journey north and we shall surely find the scrying glass you seek.”

“Very well, Blueblood,” said Rauros. “We will act on the intelligence of these Ephemeral Specters. It seems we have need of this magical tool once used by Iskendra to contact Guardon. I have grown weary of the confines of this cairn for a time. It will do me good to travel through the open wilderness once more.”

The goblins and orcs rushed from the Abyssal Cairn and mounted their Lykanthros steeds. They charged through the moonlit forest in the direction of the Ghastly Fens.

* * * * *

Lord Taliesin and his companions approached the edge of Lich Town. Leif and Reoren rode up to confer with Einar, who had taken charge of the village guards during their absence.

“I’m glad you’re back,” declared the sturdy guard. “There are rumors of a dragon afoot and the lich folk have kept indoors for safety. I understand there was a Gong Seal separating the Plane of Chaos from the Gorgon Plane. It appears that this barrier has been breached. Fishermen and hunters in the southern Fens have reported fiery wizards and a Stronghold of Sod at the Crossroads.”

“Regretfully your intelligence describes the situation accurately, Einar,” Reoren answered. “I spent some time trapped with other Gaeans in the Gorgon Plane and have been saddened to witness the appearance of the Denizens of Chaos in Gaea around the same time that I returned with the other warriors.”

“Thoth, the red dragon, has been sent back to the Plane of Chaos with the Drystyx Monks,” said Leif. “We must meet with Siegemunde and encourage him to delve into his tomes of experimental magic. There is a Planar War upon us. Every outlet of arcane energy that may defend our Realm will prove beneficial to us in our time of need. The other warriors are waiting, Einar. Allow us entrance into Lich Town so that we may meet with Siegemunde and discuss possible future defenses for the various regions.”

“Very well, Leif,” answered the guard. “Do as you must. Siegemunde has informed us that he awaits the latest word. Travel within and discuss these matters with him personally.”

The travelers thanked Einar and gestured for the other riders to move forward to the town gates. Other lich folk hastily turned cranks to open the broad, wicker doors to their settlement.

A few lich-trolls remained out of doors despite the warnings of the presence of the red dragon. They went about their business in hushed tones. Taliesin and his allies passed through the marketplace and tethered their horses to the elevator leading

to the Martial Academy. A stable-hand took their spent steeds and prepared fresh mounts for their eventual exit.

The warriors marched across the network of bridges and platforms constructed over the soggy earth. They entered Siegemunde's study. The Director of the Martial Academy was immersed in a small mountain of scrolls. He looked up from his project and smiled.

“Greetings, Taliesin and Friends. It is good to see all of you. I understand there is a red dragon flying the skies of Gaea.”

“This is true, Siegemunde,” Taliesin said. “The Gong Seal in the Gorgon Plane has been breached. The Summoners, Guardon and the Dire Queen of Arkadia, returned to the Abyssal Cairn. They were destroyed but the Denizens of Chaos yet plot against us. Restadicus petitioned the Ethereal Entity, Hydro, in the Plane of Order to send a silver dragon named Mara to help us. The four, seraph trolls that aided us before have also returned and stand before you here.”

Taliesin gestured toward Listhew, Heartsing, Smithforge and Glasslook. The seraphim nodded to Siegemunde in greeting.

“With the invaluable assistance of Mara Restadicus succeeded in banishing Thoth and the Drystyx Monks to the Plane of Chaos,” said the Liege of Mystic Down. “We do not know if or when they may again attempt to invade us here. For this reason we ask that you go over your experimental records and search for new magic that may help us better defend Gaea in this desperate time.”

“That is wise advice, Taliesin,” responded the Director of the Martial Academy. “I have already undertaken a holistic perusal of the arcane materials I have collected. I will inform you if I come across any lasting method of again separating the menacing Denizens of the Plane of Chaos from us. Unfortunately, this task will take time. I have many unorganized and undated scrolls of mysterious authorship. They speak of sorcery that can prove risky at best and cataclysmic at worst. Let me look on these documents for another day and meet with me here. All of you appear tired and have ridden hard on the trail to get here. Get some food in your stomachs and a full night's rest. We shall discuss this business again, tomorrow.”

“Very well, Siegemunde,” replied Taliesin. “I admit that all of us could use some rest. The invasion of the red dragon and the Drystyx Monks has been foremost on all of our minds. All of us shall retire this night and return here at the morn. May your research prove rewarding, Bald Mage.”

The warriors departed from the Martial Academy and stayed at a town house on stilts across from the marketplace of the lich folk. Sigrid, Leif and Reoren met with

other guards and lich-trolls, informing them of the latest events. The fighters of Gaea were treated to a fine dinner of rabbit stew in the dining hall of the town house. They ate their supper heartily and retired to their rooms early in the evening.

It was later that night when the alarm horns blew. Lord Taliesin and his companions awoke and assembled in the reception room of the town house. Einar rushed in and addressed the group.

“The Harad Ghul is attacking Lich Town! They are led by Rauros and his red-armored assassins.”

The band of fighters hastened outside and saw the wicker gates at the front of the marketplace forced open. The goblins and orcs had taken one of the stone pillars from the Burial Ruins and placed it atop a set of wheels to function as a battering ram. Dozens of Stalactite Orcs, Goblins and Lykanthros ran into the marketplace of Lich Town. They grappled with enraged merchants and guards who raced from their dwellings to the front line. Lord Taliesin and his friends drew their weapons and entered the battle as well.

The mages, Alex, Gilead, Leif, Reoren and Sigrid combined their magical resources to generate a ring of warding around the defenders of the town.

“Protex!”

A broad ring of magical energy surrounded the villagers and warriors. It repelled some of the attacking humanoids but many more braved the scorching heat of the enchantment to leap into the melee. The merfolk fired their crossbows. Each of the Dagonites hit their marks and five of the goblins fell to the damp soil. Bors and his son, Torvald, united with Fangoz to execute a whirling attack pattern with their weapons. The large stone troll bludgeoned two of the goblins into pulp, while Torvald ran another through and Bors flattened a fourth.

Siegemunde appeared on the ramparts of the stilted Academy and uttered a bolt spell.

“Trentak!”

He guided his hands over the battling humanoids, releasing a barrage of electric missiles. Five more of the goblins and orcs fell to his attack.

Jalhi Bengal and Satvinder enchanted a shielding spell for the tiger rangers.

“Pranath!”

Each of the feline anthromorphs was covered in aquamarine armor. Boosted by their Ethereal Shields the rangers spun into the center of the battle, attacking their opponents with both their curved daggers and longbows.

Rodnik, Thorgrym, and Claude strode with vehemence into the fray, slashing with their weapons and claws. They released torrents of green blood that sprayed over the crowd.

The halflings, Bjorn Roundtree, Ben Frostberry and The Watcher fired their slings at their enemies from a distance.

Nighthawk, the defected goblin, and his assistants forewent parlaying with their maverick kindred and engaged in battle with full force.

Flamering and Starfling, Jalhi's wyvern familiars, fought with Athros and Zalkos in the air over the mob. The young dragons spat fireballs at the clawing specters to no avail.

Gnoll, the wood troll, and the four seraph trolls fought directly with the Harad Ghul. They defeated five of them by evading their scimitars and parrying with their long-swords.

Rauros and Loki left Dakros in charge of the goblins and orcs. They scrambled to the side of the marketplace and scaled the ramparts of the Martial Academy with a pair of grappling hooks. The red-armored assassins rushed to Siegemunde's study and took the scrying glass ensconced there. Rauros put it in his travel pack and the two goblins rappelled down to the battle. Siegemunde saw the escaping Harad Ghul from the opposite end of the ramparts. He unleashed a series of electric bolts at them. The bald-headed wizard's shots missed their targets. Rauros and Loki returned to their garrison of invaders.

"Retreat, Goblins and Orcs," cried Rauros. "We have tested these fighters enough this night. Let us regroup in Arkadia and return again."

The humanoids followed the command of their Leader and moved back out of the marketplace of Lich Town. Lord Taliesin and Sharon Redthorne were confused by the sudden lack of interest of their opponents. They checked their companions for injuries.

"Let us hold, My Friends," said Taliesin. "Although I wish to pursue our enemies as much as you it is prudent that we tend to the welfare of the lich folk, here. They have suffered substantial destruction to their homes and have need of our assistance."

"Thank you, Taliesin," stated Leif. "We will rebuild what was lost soon enough."

"Taliesin, the scrying glass has been taken," yelled Siegemunde. "It is missing from my study."

The Liege Lord ran to the base of the Martial Academy.

“I understand, Siegemunde,” replied Taliesin. “I wish to retrieve it as we speak but cannot. This night’s battle was fierce. The fighters here need rest. Let us hold a meeting in the morning and determine the next course of action. The Harad Ghul move on us like never before.”

“Very well, Taliesin,” responded the Director of the Academy. “I’m simply concerned over the detrimental possibilities of such a powerful item falling into the wrong hands. We are both familiar with the result of the Dire Queen’s contact with Guardon in the Gorgon Plane.”

“Yes, Siegemunde, your concern is valid,” said Sharon.

The Baroness of Coermantyr strode up to the base of the Martial Academy next to Taliesin.

“We shall journey south to Arkadia tomorrow. For the time being allow us to help the lich folk rebuild their tents and booths. The silver dragon, Mara, remains in Gaea. We will inform her as to what has happened here. She will keep a watchful eye for Thoth’s possible return along with the movements of the marauding Stalactite Goblins.”

“Thank you both for your input,” said Siegemunde. “I will return to my study and burn the midnight oil. There is yet sorcery to be learned that may prove successful in keeping the Denizens of Chaos from Gaea permanently.”

The warriors retired for the second time that night to their lodgings in the town house. They took some time to clean their weapons then went to sleep.

* * * * *

Rauros steered his Lykanthros mount south. The hordes of goblins and orcs marched behind him. They traveled through the night and reached the Abyssal Cairn by morning. Athros and Zalkos flew over the red-painted shoulders of the Leader of the Harad Ghul.

“Quickly, Rauros, the scrying glass,” hissed Athros. “Tap its power before the warriors of the other regions arrive here.”

“Very well, Ephemeral Specters. I will do as you suggest for I also fear the entrance of Lord Taliesin and his numerous allies.”

“Tiamat awaits,” rasped Zalkos.

“Tiamat? Who is that?” asked Rauros.

“She is a five-headed dragon,” answered Zalkos. “Each head is of a different, Chaotic Color. These are red, white, green, blue and black. The red head throws sulfur, the white ice, the green acid, the blue steam and the black ash.”

“A formidable asset this dragon would be if convinced to join our cause,” said the Leader of the Harad Ghul. “I will use this scrying glass, once employed by the Dire Queen, to contact this Titan of Chaos.”

The wrinkled goblin assassin extended his hands over the scrying glass, mounted on a swaying frame before his throne. His eyes rolled white from the strain of the invocation.

“Tiamat, this is Rauros. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” replied a deep voice. “Release me from these bonds so that I may fly free.”

“I will consent to this on one condition,” Rauros said.

“Yes,” replied Tiamat. “What is it?”

“Lead the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs to victory against Lord Taliesin of Mystic Down.”

“As you wish, Rauros. I shall do this as soon as I enter your Plane.”

An Ephemeral Oval appeared over the proscenium of the Abyssal Cairn. It widened as it grew and the giant, five-headed dragon stepped through it.

“Join with me now, Goblin and Orc Assassins,” declared Tiamat. “We shall claim this Plane on the behalf of Chaos.”

“Very well, Tiamat,” answered Rauros. “We shall march to Mystic Down and deal with the trolls there directly.”

The Leader of the Harad Ghul addressed the hordes of goblins and orcs crowded around the colonnades of the Council Chamber of the Abyssal Cairn.

“Stalactite Goblins and Orcs, our time is at hand. Let us enter Mystic Down without trepidation. The great dragon is with us. In honor of her agreement to assist us we will mark our shields with the insignia of the five-headed dragon. Now we shall be known as the Stalactite Forces of Tiamat!”

The dragon flew through the many pillars of the stronghold and the humanoids charged after her. They were ready for a pivotal conflict.

* * * * *

Taliesin and his comrades rose at the dawn after a few hours of sleep. They helped the lich folk reassemble their booths and tents in the marketplace. Afterwards they visited Siegemunde in his study in the Martial Academy.

“Taliesin, you and your friends should leave this place,” declared the Director of the Academy. “Go with Leif, Sigrid, Reoren and Thorgrym. They will better help you find the lost scrying glass from the central location of your Tower in Mystic Down.”

“I agree, Siegemunde,” Taliesin replied. “The goblins are sure to have prepared a serious fight for us by now. They are likely to move on Wood’s End and my stronghold soon. We will journey there and prepare our defenses. If Lich Town is assailed send a message to us directly and we will come to your aid. Einar will remain here and is a competent guard. He organizes the defensive garrisons of the lich-trolls with order and efficiency.”

“We bid you farewell, Siegemunde,” said the Baroness. “You are an adept magic user and researcher as well. The sorcery you find will yet prove to be a great asset to our cause.”

The warriors departed from the settlement of the ghoul-trolls and headed south. They passed the abandoned Sod Stronghold of the Drystyx Monks in a matter of hours and soon met the standing trees of Mystic Down. All of them urged their steeds to move quickly for they shared a common concern for the harmony of their Realm. Mara, the silver dragon, flew above the group, passing back and forth over the horizon.

The mercenaries reached Taliesin’s Tower by nightfall.

* * * * *

The Stalactite Goblins, Orcs and Lykanthros hordes charged on Wood’s End. They were surprised to find the village abandoned of residents and livestock.

“The troll folk have been expecting you, Rauros,” said Loki. “They have surely learned of the missing scrying glass from Lich Town by now.”

“I agree,” replied Rauros. “We should move on to Taliesin’s stronghold. He assuredly awaits us there with his bothersome companions.”

The humanoids followed the lead of the Harad Ghul and headed directly for the gates of Taliesin’s fortress. The howls of his wolves rose from the kennels in the dungeons below the Gothic structure.

* * * * *

The Watcher marveled at the anklet worn by Bjorn Roundtree.

“Bjorn, a strange accessory that is. Find it did you in this Plane?”

“Yes, Watcher,” answered Bjorn. “I borrowed it from Guardon, the Daemon Lord. I don’t believe it was fabricated here, however. It vibrates sometimes with mysterious force.”

“I also have an unusual amulet,” offered Sharon.

The Baroness showed the ruby necklace she’d found to The Watcher.

“An uncanny item this also is,” observed the aged halfling. “Clear it is that trade of some kind has existed between the Planes in previous ages. More than what

they appear these trinkets are. Suspect I do that these are talismans that are able to harness your kharmic energies into enhanced abilities in combat and what projects you may undertake. With you keep them and their effects inform me so that record the information in my continuing historical scrolls I may.”

“We will do as you suggest, Watcher,” said Sharon. “This Realm is filled with archaic items yet to be discovered, I’m sure.”

* * * * *

The warriors of the various regions of Gaea stepped outside of the gothic fortress of Lord Taliesin. Tiamat was waiting and emitted fire from all five of her heads.

Gilead, the Key Mage of Coermantyr, was prepared for such a devious attack and uttered a spell of shielding.

“Sentiex!”

A sphere of golden light formed around the warriors, deflecting the acrid blast from the behemoth.

Jalhi and Satvinder of the Bengal Tribe uttered an armor spell for their clan of tiger rangers.

“Pranath!”

The entirety of the feline anthromorphs was covered in Ethereal Armor of an aquamarine color. They fired their longbows and charged headlong into the Stalactite Orcs at the front.

Tiamat’s heads writhed in confusion over the deflection of her multiple-chemical attack.

She flew over the battling crowd and strafed the group of fighters with flaming sulfur. Gilead’s shield held, however, and the heat of the blast dispersed in a sphere around the fighters. The Watcher and Bjorn fired their slings at the flying dragon but did no significant injury. Ben Frostberry entered the battle with his dagger and slashed down two of the growling orcs.

The seraph trolls each strode into the fray, hewing in semicircles with their steel swords. Their weapons cut through the rough, iron shields and blades of the goblins and orcs. Together they felled a dozen of their opponents.

Starfling and Flamering flew into the night air and contended with Tiamat. The heads of the dragon spat balls of flame at the wyverns. They were agile fighters and evaded the many attacks with ease.

Nighthawk and the other defected goblins did not hesitate and engaged their chaotic kindred in a fierce melee. They were familiar with the battle tactics of the

Stalactite Goblins and used their knowledge to the disadvantage of the hordes of the Harad Ghul.

The vampire, Claude, slipped within the crowd of orcs, taking many of them with his fangs. The night-feeder's face bore a wild expression.

Gnoll, Fangoz and Bors again united their efforts against Dakros and a gathering of the red-painted assassins. They parried and dodged the whirling scimitars of the goblins and orcs before they brought down their heavy clubs. Dakros fell to their attack, as did two more of the Goblin Masters.

Trilobite, Nautilus, Barracuda, Marlin and Anemone fired their crossbows at the horde of Stalactite Goblins. They then contended with them using their curved blades.

Leif, Sigrid, Alex and Reoren uttered a missile spell.

“Trentak!”

They guided their barrage of electric bolts at Tiamat. The thick, scaled hide of the Titan was strong and deflected the attack of the adept mages.

Mara circled from around Taliesin's Tower and grappled with Tiamat. She evaded the multiple sets of teeth to claw at the beast. The silver dragon succeeded in pummeling the green and white heads into unconsciousness.

Rodnik and Thorgrym fought with battleaxes against the intruders. They brought down a pair of the Lykanthros mounts.

At last the mages of various races united their abilities to bind the dragon and invaders.

“Baniscent!”

An Ethereal Whirlwind overtook Tiamat, the orcs and goblins. Against their will they were pulled into a portal to the Plane of Chaos.

The battle was over. The warriors panted for air.

“You have my and Sharon's gratitude,” said Taliesin. “The rifts to the Neighboring Planes yet exist but we have made a fearsome start to bring peace to the Realm of Gaea. Now we must rest and consult again with the scrolls that are kept by The Watcher, Restadicus and Siegemunde, too. They are adept Lore Masters, all of them.

“With time and endurance,” continued the Liege, “we can yet secure this area for future generations. The Titan, Hydro, is also familiar with the ambitious wiles of the Denizens of Chaos and can advise us to create a means to guard our regions. This may require assistance from additional Planes in the Dharmic Equilibrium. Gaea

alone is a vast wilderness. It yet remains for us, with your help, Watcher, to compose a map that will contain documentation of the distant mountains, valleys and seas.”

* * * * *

Raven turned in her sleep. Her dreams were intense and she was sure there was more to come.

* * * * *

Rauros and the Harad Ghul met with Thoth and the Drystyx Monks in the tallest chamber of the stronghold of the Chaotic Wizards. Tiamat was enraged by her banishment from Gaea and circled the tower while breathing a variety of fiery streams from her five heads.

“Thoth, bring us back to Gaea,” demanded the behemoth dragon.

“We are obliged to wait, Titan,” replied the red dragon. “If we attempt to enter Gaea again we will be banished to this Plane by the same sorcery used by the mages there. The guardians of that Realm are keen now to our intention to usurp their regions. Let us consult with the Monks of Chaos and determine whether they can devise a means for us to travel the planes free of interruption.”

“It is possible, Strong Dragons,” said Zolgnath, the firbolg. “But it will take time for us to generate a shielding spell that will countermand the forceful incantations of the Lore Masters and their adept apprentices.”

“We must return to Gaea while our campaign is fresh,” declared Zalkos. “We offer our Ephemeral Powers to aid you, Drystyx Monks. Initiate a shielding ward and we will ensure that it is honed of Chaotic Energy. This will ensure you of safe passage to Gaea.”

“Very well, Specters,” said Tiamat. “Do as you speak. The minotaur and firbolg legions await your protection.”

Athros and Zalkos united with the black-robed monks to incant a new sorcery of shielding.

“Vengex!”

The legions of humanoids hollered throughout the spiraling levels of the tower. Chaotic Energy encapsulated them in red magic. The spell hardened around each invader, forming crystalline, Ephemeral Armor.

“We are ready,” stated the five-headed dragon. “Let us be on our way.”

The Drystyx Monks again generated a spatial portal.

“Levrond!”

A gateway formed in the fabric of space and the Chaotic Forces ran through it to the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens. They returned to their Stronghold of Sod by the ancient Burial Ruins.

* * * * *

The warriors of Gaea assembled before the Lore Masters in the Council Chamber of Coermantyr Castle.

Wotan addressed the group of fighters.

“Guardians, the seraphim trolls remain with us, along with Mara, the dragon. Unfortunately we are unable to prevent the eventual return of Tiamat and Thoth. Lord Taliesin, approach.”

The Troll Lord did as the wizard asked.

“Allow me to take your weapon. Smithforge will aid me. We will create a dragon sword from it.”

“Very well, Wotan,” answered Taliesin.

He unsheathed his weapon and laid it on the table before the blond-bearded wizard.

Smithforge and Wotan combined their Ethereal Energy.

“Forgex!” they cried.

A green mist flowed around the Liege Lord’s longsword. It was lifted into the air and turned magically. Archaic runes became etched on both sides of the blade. It gleamed with a metallic, green hue and rested again on the table.

“You may sheath your weapon, Taliesin,” Wotan said.

“Thank you, Weapons Craftsmen,” said Lord Taliesin. “I will use this dragon sword to continue the efforts of my parents, Lord Raymond and Lady Elwen, to defend Gaea. They intended to defend the trolls and other races from the ongoing disturbances to the harmony of our lands. I will fight with all my strength on your behalf.”

“Very well, Taliesin,” declared Wotan. “We are confident in you. Take a night’s rest, all of you. There is sure to be battle soon. You are welcome to stay in the castle lodgings.”

“We will stay here, Wotan,” replied Sharon Redthorne. “My parents also would be heartened by our efforts. I’m sure that we haven’t seen the last of the Chaotic Dragons.”

The fighters retired for the evening in Castle Coermantyr. They awoke early the next morning and acquired fresh horses from the stables.

“Let us venture north to the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens,” said Gilead. “If the Forces of Chaos return to this Plane, they are likely to take up residence in the Sod Fortress they constructed.”

The warriors did as the Key Mage suggested and guided their steeds north. They passed through the Forest of Coermantyr and entered the marshes of the Fens. Mara, the silver dragon, flew overhead and spoke to the group below.

“My Friends, I sense the dragons, Thoth and Tiamat nearby.” Mara said. “They are relentless. The Stalactite Goblin, firbolg and minotaur legions have also entered Gaea. We must prepare for a bitter struggle.”

The fighters approached the Stronghold of Sod and were dismayed to find the Drystyx Monks had returned. Tiamat and Thoth circled the sky above and Mara engaged them in a fiery battle.

The black-robed wizards had built a series of arbalests and catapults along the ramparts of their fortress. They released a barrage of magical fire that spewed across the marsh when it struck the ground. The warhorses of the Gaeans were nimble and maneuvered successfully to avoid the aerial attack.

Taliesin, the Liege Lord of Mystic Down, beckoned to his companions.

“Let us move to the gates, My Friends. All of Gaea is counting on us. The courage we muster will be noted in the annals of the Lore Masters. Let us breach this Sod Stronghold and contend with the Denizens of Chaos within.”

The warriors of various races surged into a valiant charge. They hewed at the sod barrier blocking the entrance with their steel weapons. The door was ripped open and the guardians clashed with the legion of firbolgs and minotaurs within. A group of beholders attempted to charm the group but their sorcery was ineffective. The Harad Ghul guided their Lykanthros mounts with agility inside the Stronghold and attempted to drive Taliesin and his allies outside.

The Chaotic Dragons grappled with Mara. They pushed the silver dragon away and dove down a pair of cylindrical shafts in the base of the Sod Stronghold. Bjorn Roundtree and the halflings were the first to reach the edge of the rifts in the earth. They were thrown back by a series of fiery blasts from below. The incendiary gusts caused the pits to collapse.

“Thoth and Tiamat have sealed themselves in a network of tunnels beneath this structure,” Mara declared. “I cannot reach them. You Gaeans must join with the seraphim to permeate the lower dungeons and destroy the Chaotic Dragons.”

The Harad Ghul and Denizens of Chaos fell back from their line of resistance. They retreated to the inner halls of the Stronghold of Sod. Taliesin watched them sprint down sets of spiraling stairs into the Under Earth.

“I am loath to pursue our opponents there,” confessed the Liege Lord. “But we have no choice. If we leave the invaders will only return to our populated areas and harass us.”

“Light the torches, My Friends,” Taliesin announced. “Our quest leads us into the Under Earth.”

“We must divide ourselves into separate parties,” said Sharon. “That way we will be sure to prevent ourselves from being flanked.”

“I will travel with Gnoll, Leif and Glasslook, the Dagonites, Claude and Nighthawk’s band,” declared Alex.

“I will go with Torvald, Fangoz, Heartsing, the anthromorph rangers, Thorgrym, Reoren and Sigrid,” said Bors.

“I will journey with you, Sharon, Gilead, Smithforge, Listhew, Rodnik and the halflings,” said Taliesin. “Let each of us follow a stairway downward and contend with the Denizens of Chaos below. May the Fates be with us.”

The Gaean mercenaries parted ways and lit their torches. The sodden walls of the curling tunnels flickered mysteriously. Each of the fighters steeled himself for the conflict ahead.

Alex’s group was the first to enter an open chamber in the Under Earth. Additional torches glowed eerily on the walls. A gathering of minotaurs and beholders rushed at the fighters from the opposite end of the room. The Wood Mage enchanted a missile spell.

“Trentak!”

Alex directed his hands across the charging line of bull trolls while releasing a volley of electric bolts. A number of them were struck but were phased only temporarily.

The minotaurs continued forward after Alex’s electric missile spell. Claude and Nighthawk’s entourage contended with the menacing bull-trolls. The Denizens of Chaos clashed with the warriors in a noisy battle.

The vampire and defected goblins wove themselves among their larger opponents. The defected goblins grappled with the horned minotaurs. Claude evaded the hammers and axes of the hostile anthromorphs and used his heightened speed to bring two of them down.

Anemone, Marlin and the other Dagonites discharged their crossbows at the beholders, wounding three of them. They wielded their daggers and swords and entered the melee.

The beholders combined their caches of arcane energy to attempt a multiple charm person spell on the Gaeans.

“Trozos!”

Two of Nighthawk’s goblins and Nautilus fell asleep in the middle of the fight. Alex uttered a protection spell.

“Protex!”

A red ring appeared around the fighters. The warding incantation pushed many of the minotaurs back. The warriors engaged the anthromorphs and beholders, striking at them through the Ethereal Shield. Six more of the bull-trolls fell to the strategic attack.

One of the beholders addressed the Denizens of Chaos.

“Pull back, Minotaurs. We shall regroup in the deeper dungeons. These Gaeans are a determined lot.”

The anthromorphs and gorgons followed the advice of the beholder and withdrew from Alex’s warding ring. They fled through a group of tunnels leading downward.

“We have done well here, My Friends,” said Alex. “Let us continue into this stronghold on the behalf of our regions.”

* * * * *

Liege Lord Taliesin and his acquaintances followed a curving passage into the depths of the Under Earth. Murky rivulets and streams trickled through the compacted soil at their feet.

“Taliesin, I am concerned about the existence of this structure,” said Listhew. “It has been ages since the Entities from the Plane of Chaos have ventured to this Plane in this manner.”

“I understand,” replied the Liege of Mystic Down. “The opposing forces that ebb and surge within the Dharmic Equilibrium are reaching critical mass. The Ghastly Fens have seen conflicts of this nature in eons past. If we remain vigilant I’m sure we’ll get to the bottom of this War of the Planes.”

“We will try our best, Taliesin,” answered Gilead. “My knowledge of the workings of magic has increased on this campaign as I’m sure it has for the other mages in our group. Let us continue along our present course and see if we can convince Tiamat and Thoth that they are not welcome in this Realm.”

The mercenaries did as the Key Mage of Coermantyr suggested and followed the spiraling tunnel downward for some time. They came upon a chamber with a small lake and cataract.

“This is strange,” observed Rodnik. “There doesn’t appear to be anyone else here.”

“Deceiving appearances can be,” The Watcher said.

Smithforge wielded his hammer. His face was wrinkled with apprehension.

“We are not alone, My Friends. Prepare yourselves.”

A group of gryphons arose from the lake. Each of the creatures had the body of a lion, the head and wings of an eagle and the tail of a scorpion. They shook the water off their fur and flapped their wings. The manticores flew toward the mercenaries in an attack formation. Their avian screeching reverberated off the sod walls of the cavern.

Lord Taliesin swung his longsword upward in a powerful maneuver. He skewered one of the gryphons from below, taking care not to be stung by the lashing tail.

Gilead enchanted a sorcery he’d learned.

“Acentus!”

Seven of the manticores were encapsulated in mid-flight. The aggressive beasts were trapped in cocoons of green energy. This gave Bjorn and The Watcher time to utilize their slings. Ben Frostberry unsheathed his dagger and entered the fray.

Sharon Redthorne and Taliesin united with Rodnik, Smithforge and Listhew to contend with the gryphons. They parried against the sharp beaks and claws of their opponents. The warriors counter-attacked with their edged weapons, destroying eight of the creatures.

The halflings maintained their barrage of round stones. At last the fighters succeeded in defeating the gryphons.

“We are victorious!” declared Rodnik. “Our battle experience has grown since our outset on this campaign. I have learned much from you, Lieges.”

The mercenaries took time only to clean their weapons before they set forth again on the trail to the deeper dungeons of the Drystyx Stronghold.

* * * * *

Bors and his allies traveled for some time when they reached a dense, wooden door. Torvald, Bors’ son, knelt before the lock. He pulled a set of tools from his travel pack.

“I’ve locked myself out of the inn several times. That’s how I got pretty handy with these tools.”

The Innkeeper’s son twisted and turned a slender, metal tool in the steel lock. The travelers heard a faint click and the portal opened.

“We should proceed with caution, My Friends,” said Sigrid. “I have a shielding spell ready if the need arises.”

The group of travelers entered a mysterious library. All manners of books and scrolls filled the walls. The shelves reached from floor to ceiling. Everything was constructed from dry, sod bricks.

The Sentinel lich-woman perused the tomes briefly.

“Bah! These texts are Chaotic. They speak only of malevolent magic, intending to wreak havoc in the Dharmic Equilibrium. The Drystyx Monks have yet to learn the benefits of balance.”

“Very well, Sigrid,” said Reoren. “We will take your advice and leave these books here. It is unfortunate that the Entities of the Plane of Chaos have chosen such a turbulent path against us. This is also the case for the Harad Ghul. Trolls and other humanoids have free will. It is the individual decision of each of us to determine the course of action we deem fit.”

The warriors marched onward and came upon a widespread cavern. Rauros and the Harad Ghul waited therein with a pair of large beholders. They did not hesitate when seeing the Gaeans and guided their Lykanthros mounts into full charge.

Sigrid activated the shielding spell she’d prepared.

“Sentiex!”

A sphere of golden light appeared around the warriors. The aggressive Lykanthros attempted to breach the barrier. Tiny motes of light formed at the contact points and drove the wolf-beasts back.

Satvinder, Jalhi and the tiger-trolls entered the battle. First they fired bolts from their bows then drew their curved blades. These weapons they thrust through Sigrid’s energy matrix, destroying five of the goblins.

The gorgons were angered by the persistence of the Gaeans and generated a scorching, blue energy ribbon.

“Tractos!” cried the single-eyed creatures.

Their eyes changed colors as the ribbon floated in the direction of the mercenaries. The incantation passed through Sigrid’s shield and scorched Fangoz on the leg. The stone troll only increased the fervor of his attack and squished two more goblins with his massive club.

Jalhi's wyvern familiars, Flamering and Starfling, spat a volley of fireballs at the beholders. Their attention was diverted to the scalding missiles and their energy ribbon dissolved. The anthromorph rangers charged through the compromised shield and engaged the Lykanthros and goblins with full force. They deflected the slashing scimitars of the Forces of Tiamat and countered with their own, curved blades. The melee was fierce and Jalhi shielded the amazons and tiger-trolls.

“Pranath!”

Each of the feline anthromorphs was covered in an aquamarine shield. They charged through the Stalactite Goblins and Orcs, hacking at all sides. Torvald relied on his rune-etched weapon. He joined with Satvinder, Thorgrym and Reoren to attack first one gorgon, then the other. They defeated the single-eyed creatures and focused their attention on the red-armored goblin assassins.

The battle was fierce and intense. Rauros contended with Heartsing, the seraphim. The warrior from the Plane of Order relied on his height and strength to keep the leader of the goblins and his slaving Lykanthros mount at a distance. Other Stalactite Orcs and Goblins came to the aid of their Leader. Heartsing dealt with them deftly and Rauros found himself unprotected once more. The Goblin Master swung his scimitar in a whirling maneuver. This confused the seraph troll briefly but it was enough to allow the Leader of the Harad Ghul to move back.

Many goblins died in combat with the experienced warriors. Others strode forward to fill the places of those who had fallen. The Forces of Tiamat were driven berserk and leaped in the fray without hesitation.

Starfling and Flamering continued their barrage of incendiary missiles. Jalhi glanced at the small dragons as she parried against an orc.

“Good work, My Wyverns. We are bound to succeed with your aid.”

The other tiger rangers kept up the pace of their attack and defeated over a dozen of the forces from the Arkadian Mountains.

Rauros gave the order to retreat.

“Fall back, My Goblins. These warriors are relentless. We must hasten to the dragons' lair.”

The Stalactite Orcs and Goblins followed the command of their Leader and exited from the cavern at the end opposite to the mercenaries.

“I must catch my breath,” said Fangoz. “Those humanoids are a tough lot.”

“I agree, Stone Troll,” replied Bors. “We have faced their numbers before and succeeded. If we conserve our strength and battle with care we will yet bring peace to Gaea.”

“Let us be on our way,” offered Heartsing. “Once we meet with the other warriors our forces will be better prepared to contend with the dragons below.”

The fighters marched at a steady pace along the trail of their opponents. They exited the cavern and continued their precarious hike downward.

* * * * *

“The deeper we go the more treacherous the terrain becomes,” declared Trilobite. “Let us take extra care to avoid potential snares and traps.”

“That is good advice, Mertroll,” said Leif. “We should never underestimate the cunning of the Denizens of Chaos.”

Alex’s battle group reached a cave.

At the opposite end a group of kobolds charged. The humanoids had spiked hair. Each was armed and ready for battle.

The kobolds were fierce and used their spears well. The merfolk were forced to parry the strikes of the longer weapons with their curved daggers.

Leif and Alex cast an attack spell.

“Frigidos!” they cried.

Five of the kobolds were frozen solid. The bolts of the Dagonites shattered them.

Gnoll joined with Nighthawk and the defected goblins to contend with the remaining eight kobolds. The spiky-haired humanoids turned their spears and used them like quarter-staffs. Claude moved in on the kobolds and brought two of them down with his fangs. Those that continued to fight were no match for the tactics of the merfolk.

“We are successful,” said Barracuda.

The merwoman was heartened by their victory.

“We should move on, Friends,” Anemone declared. “There are sure to be more Denizens of Chaos on the prowl. The deep dungeons are an ideal location to conduct an ambush.”

The mercenaries followed the advice of the merwoman and continued along the path. At times there were no candles or lamps ensconced on the walls. The warriors were forced to follow the light of Alex’s staff and their own torches.

After some time the travelers reached a spacious chamber. Two other passages descended into the cavern. A fourth continued downward from the room.

“We should wait for the other warriors,” stated Alex. “The dragons must be lodged beyond the lower path. We’ll need their help to confront them.”

The warriors did as the Wood Mage of Arborea suggested and sat on the rocky floor of the cavern. They drank water from their flasks and ate dried food. The members of Alex's group began the wait for the appearance of their friends from the other two tunnels.

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“Cautious we must remain,” said The Watcher. “In many ways remind me this place does of The Spires in the Gorgon Plane. Similar architects the Drystyx Monks and Guardon are.”

“I agree, Aged Halfling,” replied Rodnik. “I'd trade settings for the Wolf's Fang Inn anytime.”

“Alas, all of us could use a respite from the task at hand,” Gilead declared. “Unfortunately it will take some doing to convince Thoth and Tiamat to leave Gaea. The Chaotic Dragons are stubborn and ambitious. Whatever Entities of the Ephemium brought them here were determined to initiate a Planar War.”

The mercenaries continued along their chosen path. Their trail continued to spiral downward. Many places were devoid of lamps or braziers. The fighters were obliged to use their torches and Gilead's halo of light to find their way once more.

Taliesin's battle group entered a crevasse within the sod. The warriors were unable to determine whether the Drystyx Monks or the erosion of the variegated water table in the Ghastly Fens formed the ravine. A cluster of hydras crawled along the walls in search of food. The giant mollusks probed the sod before them with numerous antennae. The hydras detected the presence of the mercenaries and turned as a group toward them. Three of the predators spat globs of acid at Taliesin's group. Gilead was ready for such a contingency and uttered a shielding spell.

“Sentiex!”

A sphere of golden light appeared around the Gaeans and intercepted the acid missiles of the hydras. The mollusks did not hesitate and charged the trolls with gnashing beaks.

Smithforge and Listhew drew their long-swords. They thrust their weapons through Gilead's protective barrier and skewered two of the hydras. The slimy predators oozed green blood as they fled from the seraph trolls.

Bjorn and The Watcher flung stones from their slings at their opponents. When the projectiles struck their marks the eyeless creatures wheeled about, unsure of the source of the attack. Ben Frostberry opted to use his dagger. The middle-aged halfling rendered a sizable gash to the side of the nearest hydra.

Rodnik joined with Sharon and Taliesin to finish off the remaining attackers. Each of them had accrued heightened experience with edged weapons during their campaign.

“Let us move on,” stated Taliesin. “We must attempt to rendezvous with our friends somewhere below us. I’m sure that our chosen tunnels will converge.”

“Very well, Taliesin,” replied Sharon. “Gilead’s magic kept us free from injury. Let us set forth on this descending path.”

The warriors followed the advice of the Lieges and continued their exploratory journey.

* * * * *

Bors, Heartsing and the other mercenaries continued along their path. The tunnel in which they marched was devoid of light sources. Thorgrym and Reoren lit a number of torches and handed them to the other members of the battle group. The sod walls flickered in the firelight. Sigrid saw the ends of roots and semi-precious stones imbedded in the soil.

The female Sentinel said, “These halls were constructed with speed and efficiency. They tell us of the ambition of the Dragon Titans and their black-robed attendants. If we complete our task here we should speak with Siegemunde. He researches experimental sorcery as we speak.”

“That is sound advice, Lich Woman,” replied Fangoz. “Before joining with you other people I had no idea as to the sophistication of your settlement and Martial Academy.”

“Nor did I,” added Satvinder. “The Ghastly Fens are more populated than I previously thought.”

The warriors continued along their chosen route. They again came to a chamber, hewed by magic in the depths of the Under Earth.

A group of minotaurs and firbolgs waited at the center of the room. Both species from the Plane of Chaos were covered in the Ephemeral Armor produced by the Drystyx Monks.

“Ah, someone has enchanted these humanoids with a blocking spell,” said Sigrid. “The black-robed monks are attempting to prevent their being banished to their Plane of origin. If such is the case then we must vanquish them here.”

Starfling and Flamering unleashed a barrage of fireballs at the armored invaders. The armor of the minotaurs and firbolgs was resilient and deflected the attack. The tiger rangers fired a volley of bolts from their crossbows and drew their weapons. They strode at the core of the firbolgs and contended with their fiery claws.

Bors and Heartsing led the attack. Torvald, Thorgrym and Reoren were close behind. They grappled with the axes and hammers of the minotaurs. The bull-trolls were strong and issued forth a series of hammering strikes with their weapons. The Gaeans were experienced with this tactic and sidestepped the blows of the massive anthromorphs.

Torvald was the first to breach the magic armor of a minotaur with his longsword. The blade of Bors' son cut through the leather raiment of the bull-troll and rendered a deep gash. The large humanoid buckled at the knees and fell to the floor, unconscious.

The other mercenaries were quick to imitate Torvald's method of attack. They succeeded in wounding five more of the minotaurs and two of the firbolgs.

Reoren and Sigrid enchanted a harnessing spell.

“Captros!”

Half of the surviving bull-trolls and firbolgs were encapsulated in an orange, magic field. The invaders struggled against their magical bonds to no avail. Fangoz seized the opportunity to move in on the trapped humanoids. He squashed several of them with his rusty mace. The floor of the cave was awash in green blood.

The surviving firbolgs and minotaurs were enraged at the destruction of their kindred and initiated a berserk attack against the warriors.

Torvald and Satvinder parried the rapid strikes of their adversaries and the other fighters in the group followed suit. At last the Denizens of Chaos acquiesced to the Gaeans. The firbolgs and minotaurs retreated to the lower dungeons.

“We have fought well,” declared Sigrid. “The junction of the tunnels can't be far from us. Let us continue our course downward and meet with the other battle parties.”

The warriors followed the advice of the female lich-troll and embarked down the descending path.

* * * * *

Trilobite whispered to the others in his battle group.

“Be alert, My Friends. Someone approaches.”

The Gaeans wielded their weapons as the light of several torches shone down the upper tunnel. Gilead and Smithforge appeared. Listhew, Taliesin, Sharon, Rodnik and the halflings soon followed them.

“We are glad to see you fighters,” said Claude. “We've been waiting for you in this cave.”

“Relieved we are that here we got in one piece,” offered The Watcher. “Yet to arrive remains another group. Wonder I do how Bors and Fangoz are faring.”

“I’m sure they’re fine, Watcher,” replied the Baroness of Coermantyr. “They too are experienced fighters and can handle themselves in battle as well as any of us.”

“Hello! Is anyone down there?”

Bors’ voice boomed down the third tunnel from above.

“Yes, Bors,” Taliesin answered. “We are waiting for your group so that we may continue to the dragons’ lair.”

The Burgomeister of Wood’s End, Torvald, Heartsing, Reoren, Sigrid and the anthromorph rangers entered the room. They rested on the floor and ate a meal of hearth bread and dried meat. Once they were finished Bors’ group joined with the rest of the Gaeian mercenaries to explore the single, descending tunnel. The smell of sulphur and near volcanic heat wafted on the air current as the fighters marched.

“Be courageous, Warriors,” said Sharon. “The fate of Gaea lies on our ability to banish or destroy the Chaotic Dragons. Our success will bring harmony to our war-swept regions.”

The warriors entered a vast chamber. A hundred yards above, the ceiling sparkled with semi-precious stones. In the middle of the Dragon Midden sat Thoth and Tiamat.

“Flee from us,” screeched Thoth. “The Legions of Chaos have taken Gaea for their own uses.”

“We will not, Chaotic Dragon,” answered Taliesin. “We’ve come here ready for battle and will not leave this Plane before you.”

The red dragon was angered further by the seriousness of the words of the Liege Lord of Mystic Down. Thoth drew in a deep breath, as did Tiamat. The two, large dragons released a massive stream of incendiary chemicals at the mercenaries. Leif and Gilead enchanted a shielding spell.

“Tractos!”

A blue energy ribbon surrounded the warriors and captured the destructive energy of the blasts from the dragons. The four seraph trolls spread out and waited for the breath of the dragons to subside. When it did they charged to the giant creatures and laid into them with their reflective long-swords. Their blades, sharpened in the Plane of Order, left scalding gashes on their scaled hide. It was not enough to stop the dragons.

Thoth and Tiamat began a struggle with the surrounding Gaeans. The tiger anthromorphs from the Ghastly Fens and the Dagonites from Lord Dagon's ocean region attempted to inflict damage to the dragons. Their curved blades were not sharp enough, however. Fangoz and Bors pounded at Tiamat's legs but their clubs were not massive enough to compromise their sizable limbs.

Jalhi Bengal's wyvern familiars spat fireballs from the air but did little more than distract Tiamat's five dragon heads. Claude, the vampire, was the fastest and moved around the stomping feet of the dragons. The Arkadian Lord leapt onto the back of Tiamat and drained the blood from the neck of the white dragon head. It fell limp to the floor beside the four seraphim.

Taliesin stepped into the fray. The Liege drove his dragon sword into Thoth. The red dragon gave a final breath of fire and expired.

Tiamat's green and red heads focused on Taliesin and unleashed a stream of acid and sulfur. The Liege was ready and raised his shield, blocking the attack. Before the other heads of the behemoth responded to his closeness Taliesin moved in. The enchanted dragon sword thrust into the chest of the demigod, stopping her heart.

The troll warrior turned to face his friends, panting for air. He was covered from the waist down with bubbling, green dragon blood. This he washed off with water from his flask.

"We are victorious!" said Taliesin.

The Troll Liege smiled for the first time in many weeks.

"Look, Taliesin! Behind you," cried Bjorn.

The Liege Lord turned with his sword ready, expecting that one of the dragon heads was still alive. The still bodies of the dragons faded and shrank. In a matter of moments they disappeared entirely.

"The dragons are no more, Taliesin," observed Gilead. "But the forces that they embody yet plan against us in the Plane of Chaos. We have time to prepare for what manifestations these foul Titans may assume. They will not risk entering Gaea in dragon form again. Too much energy is lost and the resources they tap in their Plane are extensive, but not infinite."

"All of you have our thanks," said Sharon. "You are welcome at Coermantyr Castle anytime. I'm sure that you wish to return home and confer with your kindred."

"That is correct," added Marlin. "We Dagonites have business to attend to."

"I should return to Arborea with Gnoll," declared Alex. "I must fill my office as the new Wood Mage now that these dragons have been destroyed. I advise you

warriors to let the four seraph trolls and the silver dragon above to return to the Plane of Order.”

“That is wise, Alex,” replied Taliesin. “You are free to go with our thanks, Seraphim.”

The four, armored trolls nodded their farewell and stepped through a spatial portal to the Plane of Order. The mercenaries made their way to the surface of the Ghastly Fens. Firbolgs and minotaurs did not accost them during their exit. The goblins and orcs were also strangely absent.

Sharon Redthorne addressed Mara, the silver dragon, where she rested on a grassy hill.

“You may return to your Home Plane, Mara. Taliesin vanquished Thoth and Tiamat in the dungeon below.”

“I sensed as much while I rested,” said Mara. “Dragons have a keen awareness of the Dharmic Equilibrium. I felt it when the two dragons were defeated. If you have need of assistance in the future, contact Hydro once more. I am glad to help when I can.”

The silver dragon passed through a large, spatial portal that closed behind her.

“You mercenaries can join us at Coermantyr Castle,” said Sharon.

“Thanks, Baroness,” Jalhi replied. “We rangers must hold council in the Deep Fens.”

“We Dagonites must also return home,” stated Marlin.

The merfolk bowed farewell and headed to the southeast.

Twilight was falling when Taliesin, Gilead and Sharon guided their mounts to the north and Lich Town. Leif, Claude, Nighthawk’s goblins, Bors, Torvald, Thorgrym, Reoren, Sigrid, Rodnik and the halflings accompanied them.

The travelers rode along the trail for several hours. As night fell over the Ghastly Fens, the air became chill and damp. Leif heard the rhythmic hoots of owls and the cries of badgers throughout the mossy hills.

“Siegemunde is bound to be concerned for the welfare of the lich folk and his Martial Academy now that the Harad Ghul has stolen the scrying glass of the Dire Queen,” observed Sigrid. “We are to find the Director of our Academy immersed in tomes and spell books. He takes his work seriously and is perpetually trying new incantations.”

“I agree, Sigrid,” replied Leif. “The Sentinel Order of Mages would not be at its best without the endless research conducted by Siegemunde and the rest of us.”

The mercenaries rode onward into the night. Their warhorses were accustomed to negotiating their passage through the murky swamps and hills by torchlight.

At last the group of travelers met with Einar and the guards of Lich Town.

“Welcome, Brave Warriors,” Einar said. “Siegemunde has given us word of the destruction of the Chaotic Entities manifested as Thoth and Tiamat. He says that they will take some time before attempting to enter Gaea once more. Unfortunately we are obligated to contend with the continuing movements of the goblins, orcs and their Commanders, the Harad Ghul. Let us venture within the City of the Ghoul Trolls. Our bald Director insisted that you be escorted to his study as soon as you arrive.”

Einar guided the fighters through the marketplace. Taliesin and his companions rode the crank-driven elevator to the linked platforms of the Martial Academy. Siegemunde sat at his desk with a pair of glowing candelabras illuminating the stacks of parchment and scrolls before him.

“Welcome, Friends,” Siegemunde intoned. “I understand that you have destroyed the intruding dragons. Restadicus and Wotan were wise to issue a dragon sword to you, Taliesin. You have demonstrated your persistence as a guardian of the Realm. The marauding Stalactite Goblins and Orcs yet stand before us. Are you willing to continue your campaign to secure harmony in Gaea?”

“Yes, Siegemunde,” answered the Liege. “I will do all that I can to uphold the sovereignty of the Regions.”

“Very well, Warriors. Leif, come here, if you please,” the bald wizard asked.

The Sentinel lich mage approached the Director’s desk. Siegemunde handed him a freshly-penned scroll.

“I have collected a number of spells from the archives. They will enhance your ability to deal with the goblins of Mount Crow. Use the incantations as you see fit. These are changing times and they require new approaches to the use of magic. I have confidence in both you and Sigrid.”

Taliesin addressed Siegemunde.

“You have my thanks, Sorcerer,” said the Liege Lord. “The Harad Ghul move with aggression through the regions of Gaea. All of us must remain on guard for none of us know when or where the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins will strike next. My group will take its leave of the Ghastly Fens and station itself in my Tower. Mystic Down is strategically at the center of the regions that are targeted by the Lykanthros riders.

The mercenaries shook hands with Siegemunde and his attendants. They returned to the elevator and disembarked after their horses. The warriors mounted

their steeds and headed south. Some of the lich folk waved at the fighters as they departed the marketplace.

“You have gained an honorable reputation among the lich-trolls, Taliesin,” said Sigrid. “It is quite an honor considering our reclusive nature.”

“I appreciate the gesture,” the Liege Lord replied. “You Sentinels are powerful magic users and have filled places within the Dharmic Equilibrium that the Lore Masters in Coermantyr have yet to research. Alex, the new Wood Mage of Arborea, benefited greatly from your experience and expertise.”

“Let us hope that our spell-casting proves to remain effective against the cunning goblins,” offered Leif.

The travelers continued along the trail demarcated by the lich-troll mages. The humidity of the swamp was palpable. They passed the Stronghold of Sod, now abandoned by Zolgnath and his Drystyx Monks. The structure was an unusual addition to the scattered stones and burial mounds of the Crossroads. The ramparts cast an eerie, jagged shadow across the rolling hills.

Lord Taliesin’s group traveled through the night until they came to Wood’s End and Bard’s Inn. Bors and Torvald hastened to the hearth behind the counter and emerged with platters of beef and pitchers of ale.

“Eat and be merry, My Friends,” stated Bors. “The Lykanthros and goblins may venture to Mystic Down at any moment.”

The Burgomeister downed a hearty swig from his mug and smiled. The mercenaries dined with relish. Many of the farmers and villagers spoke with the returned warriors for several hours. By the time the residents retired the dawning sun sent rays of light through the iron and glass windows.

The warriors slept for a few hours when over a dozen villagers rushed into Bard’s Inn bearing faces livid with worry.

“The Lykanthros have returned!” declared a farmer. “They are in greater numbers than the last time and many attack us without riders.”

“Lord Taliesin, we petition you for arms. We are willing to fight the invaders as much as you,” said a tall farmer.

“Give them swords, Taliesin,” added Sharon. “They have a right to protect their families, crops and livestock as much as we.”

“Very well, Baroness,” answered the Liege of Mystic Down. “Now that the Chaotic Dragons are gone, the Stalactite Hordes are sure to increase their efforts to spread into our regions. We can use every able set of hands at this hour.”

Taliesin addressed Bors and Rodnik.

“My good friends, Burgomeister and Sergeant-at-Arms of Coermantyr, I have a sizable cache of weapons in store. Please take this signet key and open the armory of Mystic Down on my behalf. I will move to the front line immediately and see if I can turn these invaders while the day is young.”

The Liege Lord exited from the inn and called for the stable hand to bring his warhorse. The other warriors followed suit and mounted their steeds. Bors and Rodnik hastened to unlock the armory in Taliesin’s Tower. The mercenaries clashed with the invaders in the streets of Wood’s End.

The noise of the Lykanthros in melee with the fighters was tumultuous. The howls of the wolf-beasts melded with the slashing steel of the trolls. Many of the Lykanthros were slain. Forces from the rear moved forward to replace those who had fallen. The battle continued with no end in sight when Bors and Rodnik returned from the armory with two-dozen farmers and villagers bearing swords and spears. The citizens of Mystic Down gave a chilling war cry as they leaped into the fray along with the vampire and lich-trolls.

The Lykanthros clawed at the chain mail of their opponents but failed to inflict any serious damage. Sharon, Thorgrym and Reoren used their experience with swordplay to destroy six of the wolf-beasts. The other Lykanthros were relentless and continued their undirected attack on the villagers.

Claude flew through the crowding Lykanthros to drain five of the goblins of their vital juices. The pale, ghostly face of the Vampire Lord was enough to frighten five more of the attacking Lykanthros.

Sigrid and Leif enchanted a battle spell.

“Mortis!”

The rot spell smote two-dozen of the wolf-beast horde and their riders. Their limbs decayed rapidly and the last of the Lykanthros fled in fear.

The residents of Wood’s End cheered. Taliesin spoke to the villagers.

“My People, you have our thanks. All of Gaea has faced daunting challenges of late. I ask that you organize yourselves into a watchful militia. This will better insure the safety of the homes and ranches along with the surrounding countryside.”

One of the residents introduced himself to the Liege Lord.

“My name is Rex. The people of Wood’s End have nominated me to speak on their behalf. I offer my organizational abilities to direct a garrison of trolls to monitor Mystic Down.”

“I appreciate your offer, Rex,” said Taliesin. “If you trolls police the area it will better enable us to move offensively against the Harad Ghul and their cohorts.”

“Very well, Taliesin,” replied Rex. “Your parents would be proud of your diligence to protect us. Ride your steeds at the morn. We will cover you from this end of the conflict.”

The Liege of Mystic Down shook hands with Rex.

“You have my thanks, Brave Citizen. I entrust you with the safety of this town. Guard it well for I fear how long my warriors and I will traverse the open roads of Gaea. Once the Stalactite Forces have been quashed I will return.”

The mercenaries exited from Bard’s Inn with Bors and Torvald in tow. They set forth toward the picket line separating Arkadia from Mystic Down. The trees grew shorter beyond Deep Tree. The fighters approached the foothills of the Arkadian Mountain Range.

Taliesin heard the movements of humanoid troops beyond the thicket. Before he issued a warning to the others of his group Claude vanished into the moonlit trees.

Prepare yourselves for battle,” said the Liege of Mystic Down.

A sizable group of Stalactite Orcs and Goblins ran in skirmish formation through the dense underbrush of the Arkadian Forest. The humanoids used their scimitars to rend a path through the clinging brambles. Taliesin, Sharon and Nighthawk’s entourage were the first to engage the attackers. Sparks flew through the night when their blades met with those of the orcs. Random Lykanthros moved in the fray along with more than a dozen of the wolf-creatures that carried goblin and orc riders.

The magic-users, Gilead, Leif, Reoren and Sigrid combined their Ethereal Resources to issue a counterattack spell.

“Acentus!” cried the mages of different races.

Cocoons of green energy encapsulated six of the mounted Lykanthros, rendering them immobile.

Bjorn Roundtree and The Watcher flung stones at high velocity at the trapped humanoids. Their missiles whizzed through the magic barrier and knocked them unconscious.

Bors and Torvald united with Thorgrym and Rodnik to attack the hostile goblins in a conventional manner. Such was the case for Ben Frostberry, who tumbled through the horde of slashing Lykanthros to lance a pair of them from underneath.

The resilient opposition of Taliesin’s group confused the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins. They turned their mounts eastward and fled from the fighters before more of them were felled.

“The Fates are with us,” declared Rodnik. “Let us venture onward while we have our opponents on the run.”

“Verily, Rodnik,” Taliesin replied. “The goblins and orcs are sure to return if we don’t pursue them.”

The band of warriors followed the recommendation of the Liege Lord and pushed deeper into Arkadia. In a matter of hours they reached the wild rose hedges before the Abyssal Cairn.

“I am still allured by these haphazard blooms,” declared Sharon. “It is a shame that they are not kept in a more orderly fashion.”

“I concur, Milady,” Gilead replied. “Since we came here to confront Guardon and the Dire Queen I too have marveled at the unkempt beauty of these blooms.”

The mercenaries rode until they reached the main gate of the ominous Abyssal Cairn. The twin moons orbiting Gaea silhouetted the spindly, Gothic towers of the structure.

The warriors tethered their warhorses outside the main entrance to the stronghold and marched within. Each of the fighters held his respective weapon at the ready. Deep within darkened passages Gilead heard goblin and orc voices.

“The humanoid who have caused us so much trouble are exhibiting an ironic lack of interest in who may set foot in their principle stronghold.”

“I agree, Key Mage of Coermantyr,” replied Reoren. “The Stalactite Forces push their nonchalance to the limit. I offer that we follow one of these side-passages and see if we can acquire the attention of the Denizens of Arkadia in the dungeons.”

“That is a good idea, Reoren,” Taliesin added. “It will not bode well for the future of our regions if we turn back from this structure unopposed.”

The warriors marched in a queue down a flight of stairs spiraling downward. The condition of the torchlight was scanty at best. Leif enchanted a light spell.

“Lumus, luminares!”

The Sentinel donned a bright halo of light. The other members of the group followed the guiding light of the lich mage. The mercenaries descended the stairs for some time when the path opened into a large room covered in cobblestones.

The chamber was occupied with a gathering of draconians and gryphons. The lizard-trolls turned from their cook fire and snarled at the warriors at the opposite end of the room. The gryphons screeched with annoyance at the sight of the armed travelers.

“Alas, the Drystyx Monks have aided the goblins,” said Leif. “They strengthened the resources of the Harad Ghul during their brief stay in this Plane.

Now we must contend with the Stalactite Hordes along with whatever Denizens of Chaos Zolgnath and his cohorts left in their wake.”

The gryphons flapped their wings and flew in an attack formation at the warriors. The draconians wielded their spears and swords. They charged across the chamber at Taliesin’s group.

Bjorn and The Watcher flung their stones at a handful of the gliding creatures. They did no significant damage to the beasts but succeeded in distracting them momentarily. Ben Frostberry joined with Thorgrym and Rodnik to waylay the gryphons with his sword.

Claude, the vampire, leapt onto the back of a gryphon and drank its blood from its neck. Bors observed that the Vampire Lord’s physical resources had increased since his return from the Gorgon Plane. The vampire moved the focus of his attention to the draconian humanoids. Their skin was a leathery green and brown. They stood on two legs and held swords and spears in their clawed hands. The lizard-trolls clashed with Bors and Torvald. The father and son parried the strikes of the foot soldiers with club and sword, respectively.

Gilead, Leif and Sigrid uttered an offensive spell.

“Nechros!”

A half-dozen, spiraling, blue blades flew under the direction of the three wizards. They guided the aerial weapons into the gathering of gryphons. The scythe-like blades destroyed half of the creatures’ number. The gryphons were perturbed by the persistent Gaeans and rallied against their opponents. Torvald was cut a glancing blow on his left shoulder. The beaks of the hawk-headed creatures were razor sharp.

Ben Frostberry strode forward to fill the space of Bors’ son. He lanced the lion-creatures in the chest and was covered in a deluge of green blood.

The other mercenaries organized themselves into a triangular formation to prevent them from being flanked. The melee continued for several minutes as the Denizens of Chaos grappled for position against the brave warriors. The quantity of active gryphons dwindled until less than a dozen of them remained.

The dragon-trolls spoke in a cryptic language to one another and formed a line between the surviving manticores. Claude, the vampire, did his best to impede the green and brown humanoids from harming the wizards in his group. He was cut several times on the arms and shoulders. The night-feeder did not bleed for his metabolism was a veritable blood-conserving machine.

Nighthawk and his entourage of defected goblins came to the aid of Taliesin and Sharon. The gaunt humanoids parried and lunged with their steel weapons. The goblins succeeded in reducing the amount of attacking humanoids to fifteen.

The draconians gave no indication of retreating. The adversaries of the fighters continued to conduct attack patterns despite the casualties they suffered.

Taliesin, Sharon and Thorgrym, the Lich Town guard, commenced a herculean effort and swung their swords with renewed strength. Lord Taliesin brought down three more of the goblins single-handed and the lich-troll another three.

The battle raged on and the last of the gryphons and draconians gave their all. Bjorn and The Watcher maintained their barrage of flung stones and struck the remainder of the humanoids with growing accuracy.

At last the invaders were vanquished. All of the members of the group of warriors panted for breath. Their faces exuded fatigue from the exertion of the battle.

“We have done well, My Friends,” said Sharon. “Let us pause for a moment before continuing on. Our weapons demand cleaning. Gilead, help me to attend to Torvald’s injury.”

The Key Mage of Coermantyr did as his fiance asked and tore strips of burlap from his travel pack. Torvald helped his comrade to tie the bandage to his arm and shoulder with pieces of twine.

The fighters drank water from their travel flasks. They ate dry, salted bread and smoked meat. Grumbling voices in the depths of the network of tunnels echoed over the resting warriors. Bjorn turned his ear to the sounds and estimated the distance to the unseen creatures.

“There are goblins and orcs about a thousand yards from here,” declared Bjorn. “Their numbers have increased since the disposal of the Dire Queen. I will remain on the lookout for us all and will notify you trolls of the enemy’s proximity.”

“Thank you, Courageous Halfling,” replied Taliesin. “Your hearing is keener than ours. If the Harad Ghul draw near we will be ready.”

The perception of Bjorn Roundtree proved to be accurate. The group of mercenaries marched about a half of a mile beneath the foundation of the Abyssal Cairn when they entered an immense cavern.

“This is the largest cave I’ve seen,” Bjorn observed.

“Yes, without equal this place is,” agreed The Watcher.

Sigrid fired an arrow swabbed in oil from her longbow. The projectile was alight and left a trail of flame as it ascended into the darkness above. The shot lofted

and turned as it passed through invisible drafts of air. At last the arrow arched at its zenith and began its long return to the earth below.

“The ceiling is beyond our sight,” said the female Sentinel. “This place must have held a subterranean lake ages ago. The mineral water has long since evaporated, leaving this sandy soil and eroded stone as the only indication of its presence.”

Bjorn addressed the group.

“My Friends, the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins are grouped in a larger population than previously observed by trolls. I fear that we have gotten ourselves in a terrible bind. Let us group together and face our adversaries as a single unit.”

“That is wise advice, Observant Halfling,” replied Gilead. “We wizards will stick to the center of the gathering so as to better secure time to incant spells, defensive and otherwise.”

“Good idea,” Taliesin added. “We are going to need the help of you mages now more than ever.”

A colossal horde of screeching orcs and goblins rushed at the warriors from all sides. Their wrinkled and fanged faces reflected the light of Gilead’s halo and the torches of the fighters.

Lord Taliesin and his companions drew their weapons. The cluster of goblins and orcs were pushed from the rear. Rauros and several other members of the Harad Ghul emerged, brandishing their scimitars in an intimidating pose.

“Greetings, Taliesin and Company,” Rauros said. “We meet again and under much different circumstances as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Yes, Rauros, if that’s whom you appear to be,” answered the Liege Lord. “We are here to convince you to leave our regions in peace. The farmers and villagers of Mystic Down and Coermantyr have lost a goodly yield of crops and livestock to your insatiable forces.”

“I’m afraid I can’t consent to that, Taliesin. The regions you speak of are just as much a possession of the Stalactite Forces of Tiamat as Mount Crow in Arkadia. We caused the Maegar Dwarves to flee their mountain kingdom and are soon to do the same to you.”

“If there is no chance for us to work out some kind of mutually beneficial trade agreement then I have no choice but to fight, Rauros,” replied the Liege Lord.

The Leader of the Harad Ghul did not hesitate and led the charge against the warriors.

Gilead and the lich-troll Sentinels had a spell ready and enchanted it as the goblins and orcs moved in to strike.

“Sentiex!”

A translucent sphere of golden light surrounded the group and drove away a majority of the humanoids that attempted to draw near. The pressure within the horde of goblins was stronger and many still made it through to engage the fighters in hand-to-hand combat.

The struggle was fierce and the mercenaries did well enough to battle the chaotic horde two at a time. The warriors combined their abilities to form a defensive triangle with the magic-users in the center. Rauros’ Guild of Assassins attempted to breach the lines of defense by attacking with their scimitars in a whirling fashion.

Rodnik and Thorgrym were cut shallow wounds about the arms but maintained their position within the triangle. Bors and Nighthawk pushed closer to the side of their injured comrades and aided their counterattack.

“We are in trouble here, My Friends,” bellowed Lord Taliesin. “Let us form a retreat from this dungeon while we yet have the strength.”

“A wise decision this is,” The Watcher added. “Return to fight another day we must.”

The halflings fought to the best of their ability but were no match for the greater strength and number of their adversaries.

The warriors did as The Watcher suggested and exited from the vast hollow in the Under Earth. They marched with caution as they journeyed to the ground level of the Abyssal Cairn. The Baroness of Coermantyr noticed that the bas-reliefs and tapestries ornamenting the walls of the network of tunnels contained images that were recently updated. The pictures included renderings of draconian soldiers, beholders, firbolgs, griffons and packs of Lykanthros mounted by familiar portraits of the Harad Ghul.

“The Drystyx Monks have inspired Rauros,” observed Bjorn. “The Guild of Assassins thinks highly of themselves.”

“That much is obvious, My Halfling Friend,” said Lord Taliesin. “The goblins and orcs are resourceful and scrupulous adversaries. I feign to imagine what surprises they may hold in store for us.”

“Worry not about future battles,” replied The Watcher. “Time enough have you to rebuild your forces from the farmers and villagers in Wood’s End and Coermantyr Castle.”

Taliesin and his friends backtracked through the mesh of tunnels they’d used to reach the deeper dungeons. The sounds of orc and goblin garrisons reverberated through adjoining passageways. The mercenaries took care to move in near silence.

After an hour the fighters emerged in the spacious courtyard of the Abyssal Cairn. Their warhorses waited at their tethers outside the main gate. Each of the warriors climbed into their saddles and departed the labyrinthine structure.

Lord Taliesin gestured for his companions to head west toward the picket line and Mystic Down.

“We must give Torvald, Rodnik and Thorgrym time to nurse their injuries,” said Sharon.

“I agree, Sharon,” declared Taliesin. “These trolls will be of no use to anyone in their battered condition.”

Taliesin’s group arrived at Wood’s End.

The villagers and farmers who petitioned the Liege Lord earlier now patrolled the streets with vehemence.

Rex saw the approaching warriors and trotted over to greet them.

“Salutations, Lord Taliesin and Company! How fare things with the wily forces from the east?”

“Not so well, Sturdy Rex,” replied Taliesin. “The hordes of Stalactite Orcs and Goblins from Mount Crow have grown exponentially. Our group intended to sway the maverick humanoids and their chaotic cohorts to accept the proposal of a peaceful coexistence one way or another. They chose to fight and we were greatly outnumbered. We decided to arm you citizens none too soon. In addition we shall petition the Maegar Dwarves in turn. They are stationed in the mountain stronghold of the Gorgon Plane. The Hive Builders there may be convinced to align with us in these desperate times. Every peaceful race will prove to be an asset to our campaign.”

“That is wise, Liege Lord,” declared Rex. “We are yet discovering the significance of the Dharmic Equilibrium and the Helix of the Planes. If the forces you speak of prove willing and able to assist us, I’m all for it. First you all can use a good night’s rest. Let us deal with the details of your mission at the morn.”

The warriors slept well. At dawn they gathered their belongings and followed Sharon, Gilead and Rodnik to Coermantyr Castle. That afternoon they met with the Lore Masters.

Restadicus perused the scroll given to the mercenaries by Siegemunde.

“Ah, our friend in the Martial Academy has continued his research,” observed the Leader of the Lore Masters. “Now that the hostile dragons and mages have been sent beyond this Plane the Harad Ghul is bound to lead their Stalactite Orc and Goblin population against us.”

“Restadicus, I suggest that we take some time to observe the next move of the Harad Ghul. We should build our defensive forces while we can,” said the Baroness. “The farmers and villagers of Mystic Down have taken up arms with the intention of defending their families, crops and livestock. They have already engaged in combat with the Stalactite Forces and demonstrated their resiliency. I wish to assemble a similar militia here in Coermantyr. To deal with the increasing movements of the hordes from Mount Crow and the Abyssal Cairn we must educate our citizens in the aspects of self defense. In the event that the orcs and goblins initiate a full-scale assault against this region our chance for survival relies on adequate preparation.”

“That is a wise plan,” answered the Leader of the Lore Masters. “Magic can only do so much to protect a population. Do as you have said and perhaps we will be successful in turning the Guild of Assassins and their army from the regions of the trolls.”

“Once your militia is established, Sharon, send word to me at my Tower in Mystic Down,” asked Lord Taliesin. “The security of the regions of Gaea lies foremost on my mind.”

“Taliesin is in greater need of our help at this time,” said Leif. “We Sentinels and lich-trolls will take up temporary residence in Mystic Down. It is there that our knowledge of magic will prove most useful.”

“Nighthawk, Claude and the halflings will journey to Taliesin’s Tower with me,” said Bors. “Torvald and I have been away from Bard’s Inn too long. I hope we haven’t lost our patronage.”

“Very well, My Friends,” replied Sharon. “Gilead and Rodnik will stay here with me. We will study the tomes that the Lore Masters have collected. My hope is to find information in the history books that report of similar conflicts to the one we face.”

“That is a shrewd plan,” said Taliesin. “The saying, *There is no knowledge that is not power*. holds truth for all of us.”

“If you please, Baroness, to stay here I wish,” The Watcher said. “Many books there are in your library. Contribute I can to your histories for many things I observed during my imprisonment in the Gorgon Plane.”

“Of course you are welcome to stay with us, Watcher. The Lore Masters will benefit from your notes. Lord Taliesin will be fine without you. Your memoirs will be a welcome addition to our collection,” declared Lady Redthorne.

“I will take my leave of Coermantyr for now,” said the Liege of Mystic Down. “I will keep in touch with you and return if necessary.”

The hazel-eyed Liege Lord bowed his farewell and departed from the Council Chamber of the Lore Masters. The travelers acquired their warhorses from the courtyard in the castle and began the ride to the tower to the east.

* * * * *

Oxholm and Drumtone were concerned for the welfare of the Maegar Clan. Sadness swept through the dwarves' settlement after the death of King Grumbold. The King's subjects gave him a proper funeral. They laid the deceased on a wooden pyre in a distant cave. The dwarf brothers placed Grumbold's finest sword over him and ignited the pile. Many of the Maegar Dwarves shed tears that sparkled in the firelight.

"Alas, our King is gone. The Council of Dwarves decided against appointing a new King," said Drumtone. "No one was able to get a majority vote from the council. Our clan faces hard times due to the presence of the chaotic creatures. Oxholm, I move that we return the Maegar to the Arkadian Mountains. I'd rather face the servants of the Harad Ghul than the firbolgs, minotaurs, beholders and Lykanthros that perpetually prowl this Plane. Do you agree, My Brother?"

"Yes," replied Oxholm. "Let us meet with the Dwarf Council. It may be difficult to convince them to initiate another exodus. I don't see any other choice, however."

Oxholm's brow wrinkled with worry.

"It will take much doing for us to gather our supplies and people for such a trip. Let us return to the Council Chamber and address the Clan Leaders while this objective is still fresh in our heads."

Drumtone retrieved his timpani from a storage alcove and rolled it into the Council Chamber. He beat a gathering tattoo. Over the course of the next hour the Council Members of the Maegar Clan convened in the large cave.

"Brother, the Council is here," declared Drumtone. "Make your speech so that all may know our opinion."

"Very well, Drumtone," said Oxholm. "Thank you for maintaining the rhythm of meeting."

Oxholm addressed the gathering of dwarves with a booming voice.

"Maegar Dwarves, as you are aware our clan has suffered a great loss of late. The invaders to this place from the Plane of Chaos killed King Grumbold. He will be remembered in all of our hearts. Another significant happening for us was the decision to forego the office of the King altogether.

“Since the Council is now the highest governing body I ask you to make a decision. Things have gone from bad to worse since we abandoned our settlements in the Arkadian Mountains for this Plane of the Gorgons. Our children need the opportunity to thrive in safety. The dwarves are able fighters and do not mind the occasional battle. The number of adversaries of varying species that have set foot here as a stepping-stone to Gaea has reached an overwhelming point.

I ask you, Maegar Council Members, to allow us to return to the mountains in Arkadia. The warriors from the neighboring regions there yet conduct an active campaign against the Harad Ghul and their wolf-like steeds. We can help Lord Taliesin of Mystic Down and Lady Sharon Redthorne of Coermantyr. The Vampire Lord, Claude, has also returned to Arkadia after spending several years trapped in this mountain stronghold. Think on this request. I will be here again at this time tomorrow and will await your decision.”

Oxholm bowed to the Council Members and exited the chamber with Drumtone. The Council Members applauded their support. The middle-aged male and female dwarves who sat at the crescent-shaped table looked at each other with expressions of concern. They distributed paper and ink around the table and began the process of taking a vote. Assistants to the Council entered the room and ignited oil-burning lamps so the representatives could deliberate through the night.

* * * * *

The following day Drumtone again beat the cadence of gathering in the Central Hall of the settlement of the Maegar Dwarves. The majority of the population of the clan filled the Council Chamber. Oxholm again stood before the Council.

“Dwarf Leaders, have you reached a decision?” asked the burly warrior.

“Yes, we have,” answered a gray-haired dwarf. “I am Cooper. The other Members of this Council have nominated me to speak on their behalf. The Maegar Council has decided to leave the Gorgon Plane and return to the Arkadian Mountains in Gaea. This was a weighty issue for us because the goblin Guild of Assassins and the voracious Lykanthros continue to wreak havoc in the various regions of that Plane. We Maegar Dwarves return to Arkadia under duress. Our clan is prepared to defend itself regardless of location.”

“Very well, Cooper,” answered Oxholm. “The dwarves will prepare themselves for the journey ahead. We are bound to encounter resistance from the Stalactite Forces that moved into our mines and farmland. It will prove challenging to secure peace but it is not an unreachable goal. My brother, Drumtone, and I volunteer our skills to help the clan move and defend it upon our arrival.”

“I will send word through the tunnels the Maegar dug. By this time tomorrow we will be ready to pass through a spatial portal,” said Drumtone.

The dwarf families were quick to abandon their mushroom farms and dwelling places. It was clear that the invasions of the Denizens of Chaos were burdensome to their subterranean lifestyle. The following day Drumtone again beat the gathering rhythm in the Council Chamber. Dwarf families had tied up their belongings in makeshift wagons. The Council Members were not adept mages. They had saved, however, the research notes of King Grumbold. Cooper used the memoirs of the deceased King to generate a portal in the Council Chamber.

“Spiros!”

A wavering gateway appeared in the fabric of space before the waiting dwarves. The humanoids pulled their wagons through the portal, carrying axes and hammers in their belts. Oxholm observed that the members of his clan bore anxious expressions. The dwarves emerged at the foothills of the Arkadian Mountain Range. Twilight had fallen.

“We should move into the mountains quietly,” declared Cooper. “The orcs and goblins lurk everywhere. Our age-old nemeses are sure to be on the alert for Lord Taliesin has waged a campaign against them on multiple fronts.”

Drumtone observed several cook-fires near the horizon.

“Let us steer clear of those lights. The less contact with goblins in this open wilderness the safer I’ll feel.”

The dwarf brothers guided the Maegar Clan upward to their clandestine farmland. The night air was chill. It carried a brisk breeze down from the mountaintops. Despite the harrowing environment the dwarves understood the necessity for moving on. They pushed into the road-less hills for a few hours.

At last the Maegar reached a meadow enclosed by a group of peaks. Fresh water poured from a cascade. Pale flowers reflected the light of Gaea’s moons over the rolling hills.

“This is a good location to settle the clan, Brother,” said Oxholm. “King Grumbold would have approved of this place.”

“I agree, Oxholm,” replied Drumtone. “Alas, I fear that it will be but a matter of time before the Stalactite Forces of the Abyssal Cairn discover our presence and ride their wolf-beasts in this direction. Our chances have improved for the Legions of Chaos were present in greater numbers than our adversaries in Arkadia.”

“That is true, Drumtone,” answered Oxholm. “I have confidence in our clan’s ability to protect this settlement. The Maegar have more battle experience than when they departed for the Gorgon Plane. When the time comes to fight, we’ll be ready.”

“Come with me, Brother,” beckoned Oxholm. “Let us help our people set up camp for the night. We can use some rest before we face tomorrow’s tasks.”

Drumtone followed his brother to the circle of wagons and began the task of setting up a modest camp.

* * * * *

Taliesin met with Rex in the Throne Room of his Tower. The fighters gathered there to decide their next course of action.

“Lord Taliesin, you have our thanks for giving us the arms to defend ourselves,” said Rex. “The Harad Ghul continues to run haphazard through the regions of Gaea. I suggest that you let the villagers and farmers take care of the defense of Wood’s End and this Tower. There are rumors among the patrons at Bard’s Inn. Word tells that a different race of humanoids fights the goblins and orcs on the opposite side of the Arkadian Mountain Range.

“A group of Gypsies that spent the night in town said the mysterious warriors call themselves Qualinesti. They are taller and more lithe of stature than the trolls. The Qualinesti have angular faces that bear high cheekbones. Their ears are pointed, giving them a devilish appearance. This combination of features resembles that of the elves of the past. Storytellers, as you may recall, describe the existence of elves, as have traveling minstrels returned from the east.

“The Gypsies were surrounded by the Stalactite Forces when the entirety of the marauders was defeated by a shower of enchanted arrows,” Rex continued. “Ricardo, the Leader of the Band of Gypsies, was unable to give me many details about these Qualinesti for when he approached them they were cool and distant.

“Despite the reticence of these humanoids I recommend that you approach them, Lord Taliesin. They could prove to be a powerful asset in the defense of these regions against the hordes under the Harad Ghul.”

“You have piqued my curiosity, Rex,” said the Liege of Mystic Down. “The information you have delivered, as sparse as it may be, is helpful to our cause nonetheless. Please do as you suggest and remain on guard here. I will travel east with the Baroness of Coermantyr and my other acquaintances. If these Qualinesti Elves share a common cause with us then I should have little difficulty in convincing them to send a delegation of their kin to aid us in quelling the Guild of Assassins.”

“Do not worry about us, Lord Taliesin,” declared Rex. “The residents of Wood’s End have already trained extensively with the weapons you gave us. If the Lykanthros and goblins reappear in Mystic Down we will be ready for them.”

“You have my thanks in advance, Rex. We will be on the road to the Mountains of Arkadia by nightfall.”

Taliesin kept his word and departed through the gates of his Tower by twilight. The halflings, Gilead and Sharon, the lich-trolls, Bors, Torvald, Rodnik, Claude and Nighthawk’s entourage accompanied him.

The battle group was assailed by three wolf-beasts soon after exiting from the populated area. The mercenaries were prepared and vanquished the trio of Lykanthros with ease.

Several bands of Stalactite Forces patrolled the picket line along the border of Mystic Down and Arkadia. As the fighters passed Deep Tree they encountered a larger group of orcs and goblins. Gilead, Leif, Sigrid and Reoren combined their caches of arcane energy to intercept the charging wolf-beasts and their riders.

“Grondos!” they cried.

An aggressive, green mist surrounded the attackers, causing them to gasp for breath. The humanoids fell from their slaving mounts and rolled on the ground. The warriors moved in on their adversaries and finished them off with their hardened, steel blades.

“We should continue along our present course,” said Taliesin. “The more we hesitate, the likelihood of the goblins finding us increases. I am anxious to meet these Qualinesti Elves. Based on the story of the Gypsies they sound like a force to be reckoned with.”

“I agree, Taliesin,” replied Sharon. “We face an imbalance that demands correction. If we traverse a pass between the Arkadian Mountains we will be in a position to locate the mysterious elves. We can only hope that the information given to us by the visitor to Bard’s Inn contained accurate orientation.”

The mercenaries urged their horses onward. Claude flew ahead of the land-faring group as makeshift reconnaissance. As the grade of the foothills steepened the trees grew shorter. Granite boulders were abundant along with rugged shrubbery and moss.

“The air grows cold,” said Sigrid. “I expect the snow falls here on a staggered basis.”

“That is correct, Sentinel,” answered Gilead. “When I gaze to the east from Coermantyr Castle I frequently see the tops of these mountains covered with snow.”

“Nevermind the cold. We are here on business. We’ll be over this pass before we know it.”

The vigilant mercenaries pushed their warhorses to the crest of the chosen pass. The wind gusted forcefully between the two mountains harboring the path. The riders pulled their cloaks on tightly and began their descent into a broad, wooded valley. Several miles away smoke rose from the trees.

“Those fires must belong to the Qualinesti Elves,” observed Leif. “I can make out some architecture at that place, but it is too far away to discern any detail.”

Claude appeared at the summit of the trail.

“I carry a retractable spyglass, if you warriors care to use it. It is a compact version of the one in the principle tower of Castle Stammberg.”

“Thanks, Night-Feeder,” Leif replied. “I read of such devices in the tomes of the Martial Academy but never before saw one firsthand.”

“Be my guest, Sentinel,” offered the Vampire Lord.

He handed the small telescope to the lich-troll. Leif extended the interlocking brass tubes and removed the lens cap. He pointed the device at the columns of smoke in the valley below.

“Ah, I can see much of the elven structures,” marveled Leif. “Their settlement is built into the oaks like the architecture in Arborea. The visitor in Bard’s Inn gave us accurate directions. The buildings are complex. More than a generation of elves must have worked on this stronghold. Let us be on our way. The sooner these enigmatic elves are informed of our legitimate business, the safer I’ll feel.”

“Legitimate business?” a voice asked. “We will be the judges of that.”

A group of tall humanoids with pointed ears and thin faces stepped out from behind a cluster of pine trees. They aimed their longbows at the mercenaries. The head of the group was a muscular elf. He signaled for his companions to lower their weapons.

“Greetings, I am Llewellyn. It has been many years since trolls or lich folk ventured this way. I suppose you’re here because of the increased movement of the goblins and their kin.”

“Your guess is correct, Llewellyn,” answered Taliesin.

The Troll Lord strode over to the elf and shook his hand.

“I am Taliesin, Liege Lord of Mystic Down.”

The Troll Lord introduced the other members of his group to the band of elves. Bjorn Roundtree was intrigued by the stealthy humanoids.

“Are you the Qualinesti Elves?” asked the halfling.

“Yes, we are, Friend Halfling. Our tribe chose this name centuries ago. As we did then we favor the safety and tranquility of the deep forest,” answered the Elf Captain.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you,” said Bjorn. “Hostile humanoids have invaded Gaea on multiple fronts.”

“We are aware of that,” replied Llewellyn. “The Leader of the Qualinesti Elves in our woodland city, Fangorien, wishes to meet with all of you. The opportunity exists for us to create an agreement of mutual protection.”

“That is a good idea,” replied Bjorn. “Our gnome cousins in Tinkerburg are battling Loki and the Harad Ghul as we speak. With your assistance we may yet bring peace to that area.”

“I agree,” stated Llewellyn. “We should meet with Valinor. He is the oldest living elf in our humble community. Valinor will meet with us and determine the appropriate course of action. Please follow us into the Valley of the Qualinesti.”

Llewellyn gestured for Taliesin’s entourage to accompany him down the foothills. The warriors from the various regions of Gaea followed the tall elves who brought out their own horses from where they were tethered in the thicket. As the mercenaries rode downward and east one of the elves played an eerie tune on an ocarina. Other elves who were hidden in the lofty branches of the oak trees sprang to the earth and allowed the trolls and others to pass.

Lord Taliesin chuckled at the sight of the elves.

“Your kin are adept users of subterfuge. I’m glad that we are welcome visitors for I would fear to venture here without permission.”

“Yes, Taliesin,” answered Llewellyn. “We take our territory seriously and have ambushed many a wayward orc and goblin who have accidentally set foot on our land.”

The fighters rode a few miles more when they reached the outer wall of the City of the Qualinesti Elves. Llewellyn spoke briefly with the guards at the tall, wicker gate. They chatted in Elvish. The guard subsequently signaled the elves on the ramparts above to open the massive, wooden doors.

As Taliesin and his friends passed into Fangorien they were taken aback at the sophistication and development of the tree-bound architecture. The buildings were lodged in the trees. A network of suspension bridges connected the giant oaks. The city was more elaborate than the structures Alex reported on in the settlement of the wood trolls.

“This place is wondrous,” said Sharon. “I had no idea there was such a developed elven population east of the Arkadian Mountains. My heart is strengthened to see that we may yet arrange an alliance strong enough to cordon the Stalactite Forces from their ongoing invasions.”

“Please, My Friends,” declared Llewellyn, “tether your horses to this tree. My kindred will water and groom them while we meet with Valinor above.”

The warriors did as the Elf Captain suggested and dismounted. They strode to a large, crank-driven elevator and stepped aboard.

Over a dozen Qualinesti Elves waited for the visitors. They escorted Taliesin and his companions to a vast study at the city’s center. Valinor was a gray-haired elf. The shelves of his office were replete with books and tomes of various shapes. The Elf Leader looked up from his documents and took off his spectacles.

“Welcome, Lord Taliesin and Baroness Sharon Redthorne. Your reputation precedes you. I congratulate you on your defeat of the Dragons of Chaos, Thoth and Tiamat. There is a risk that the power-hungry Demigod and Behemoth Titan may return. The Qualinesti were allies of the trolls in the ancient war. I knew your parents, Taliesin and Sharon. They would want for we elves to join your campaign and aid you in quashing the recent uprising of the Stalactite Orcs and Goblins.

“The elves have been swayed into a state of melancholy by the turbulence that has smitten the Dharmic Equilibrium. An attempt to return to the previous state of order to the Helix of the Planes will incite a serious power struggle with the Harad Ghul and the devious specters who assist them.”

“I agree with your assessment of the current situation,” said the Key Mage of Coermantyr. “I am Gilead and also fear the possible return of the Dragons of Chaos. The magic of we mages and that of the Lore Masters in Coermantyr Castle is not enough to banish the forces of evil permanently. A rotating watch, representing the various Regions of Gaea, is what is needed. Join with us, Valinor, and with the help of Siegemunde in the Ghastly Fens we may better understand the juxtaposition of the proclivities that are manifested in the different Planes. Clearly it is unwise to tamper with the natural separations that exist between the Planes.”

“Those are thought-provoking observations, Gilead,” replied Valinor. “It is clear that despite the challenges that face us we must remain optimistic and dedicated to our cause. I will delegate Llewellyn and a dozen elves with battle experience to aid you in turning Loki and his hordes from Tinkerburg. I wish we could move directly on the Abyssal Cairn but, based on your statement describing the tactical difficulties you faced, would fore-go attempting to quell the activities of the Guild of Assassins

at its core. Take each day as it comes. We will deal with the scurrilous dragons in the event that they return.

“Go now, Brave Warriors,” declared Valinor. “Llewellyn and his battle group will show you the quickest path through the Arkadian Mountain Range. From what you tell me the gnomes are in serious need of tactical reinforcement.”

“You have our thanks, Valinor,” said Taliesin. “If our endeavors are fruitful we may meet again.”

Llewellyn guided the mercenaries from Valinor’s study. The entourage of warriors descended to the ground in the elevator. The fighters mounted their warhorses and headed west, out of the forested valley. Taliesin noticed that they were traveling to a different section of the Arkadian Mountain Range than the one they passed on the way in.

The Elf Captain led the group through a lower pass.

“This route is not as grueling as the one we took before,” said Rodnik.

“I believe you, Sergeant-at-Arms,” stated Llewellyn. “Over the ages we wood elves have become quite familiar with the contours of the mountains. Look beyond the foothills.”

Rodnik did as the tall elf asked and gazed to the south. Pillars of smoke rose from a city by the sea.

“Ah, that is Tinkerburg,” Rodnik observed. “They remain under siege. I hope we are not too late.”

“There is still time,” said Ben Frostberry. “We must hurry to assist the gnome engineers. The upper hand in the battle before us is not yet determined.”

Claude flew to the edge of the gnomes’ city. Ground-hoppers and battlemechs clashed with mounted Lykanthros. The Stalactite Forces were aggressive and used a number of battering rams to punch holes in the walls of Tinkerburg. The vampire swept down through the twilight air and grabbed an orc from his ride. The growling humanoid was no match for the preternatural strength of the Undead Lord.

Llewellyn, the Qualinesti and Taliesin’s group were hot on the trail of their vampire companion. The warriors drew their various weapons and engaged Loki’s forces from the rear.

Ben Frostberry and Bjorn Roundtree used their slings to pelt the goblins before them. Bors and Torvald entered the battle simultaneously, hewing to the left and right with their sturdy weapons. The lich-trolls incanted a sorcery as a single unit.

“Chronos!”

A barrage of sticky clouds entrapped a third of the Stalactite Forces. As the goblins and orcs fell over one another the Qualinesti Elves loosed their arrows into the battalion. Several goblins were slain by the shots of the wood elves. Llewellyn signaled his kindred to draw their swords. A few of the elves wielded enchanted blades that glowed various colors in response to the proximity of their opponents.

The gnomes had successfully deployed their ground-hoppers and battlemechs into a line across the breached entrance to Tinkerburg. The large machines conducted the arduous task of pushing Loki's forces out of the city.

Axel and Galatia led a squadron of fliers in a circling pattern over the battle. They flung makeshift bombs from their aircraft. The resulting craters sent confusion throughout the ranks of the Stalactite Horde.

The din of war surrounded the mercenaries of the various regions. Nighthawk teamed up with Bors, Torvald and Thorgrym. They followed Rodnik's lead into the middle of the clashing steel. The warriors tangled with the disoriented goblins. They overpowered the greater numbers of the Stalactite Horde.

Loki scanned the scene from atop his Lykanthros mount.

"Retreat, My Goblins. These others have pressed us back far enough. Let us convene at the Abyssal Cairn. We shall return to Tinkerburg and claim it as our own."

The Stalactite Horde sprinted from the opening in the outer wall of Tinkerburg. The Lykanthros gave a final howl and hastened for the Abyssal Cairn in the northeast.

The gnomes used their ground-hoppers to assemble and bury the deceased that lay strewn about the battlefield.

Axel and Galatia signaled the other fliers to land on the airstrip next to the city. The squadron of fliers drifted in and rolled to a stop on the dusty ground. The two gnomes disembarked from their vehicles and ran to meet with the returned warriors.

A ground-hopper bounced toward Taliesin and his companions. The steam engine slipped out of gear. Gearzon leapt to the earth and shook hands with each member of the group.

"It's great to see all of you again," Gearzon said. "We were getting worried. I didn't know whether you trolls intended to arrive."

"Of course we did," replied Taliesin. "We attempted to neutralize the Forces of Tiamat at the Abyssal Cairn but were unsuccessful. My fighters hence chose to assist in terminating the siege of Tinkerburg."

“You got here none too soon, I’ll say,” Galatia added. “We were nearing the last of our oil and coal reserves when you arrived.”

The female gnome noticed Llewellyn and his entourage of elf warriors. Llewellyn returned the gaze of the engineer and smiled.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” offered the Elf Captain. “I am Llewellyn of the Qualinost Valley. These are my aides. We have traveled over the Arkadian Mountains upon the request of Lord Taliesin and Baroness Sharon. This city is developed and possesses unique architecture. I will leave four of my elves here to keep watch in case the Harad Ghul return.”

“That is a good idea, Llewellyn,” observed Gearzon. “We gnomes will take you up on your offer. Extra pairs of hands are welcome in these desperate times. Our orchards and gardens yet need protection. We can only do so much with our ground-hoppers and battlemechs.”

“Very well, Gearzon,” said Sharon Redthorne. “We will depart from Tinkerburg. We yet seek a working means of preventing the return of the Dragons of Chaos, Thoth and Tiamat.”

“That is a wise decision, Lady Sharon,” offered Gearzon. “The gnomes will hold their own for a goodly time. Seek the advice of Siegemunde in the Ghastly Fens. He is known to enact sorcery that the Lore Masters avoid. If you find yourselves in need of armored support, contact us again. We have updated battlemechs rolling off the assembly line on a daily basis.”

Lord Taliesin and his companions bade farewell to the gnome engineers gathered before the gate to Tinkerburg. They rode their warhorses hard into the night. Claude continued to conduct surveillance for the mercenaries by flying in search patterns.

The mercenaries passed through the hills and woods of Mystic Down. By dawn they reached the Burial Ruins at the Crossroads. The Stronghold of Sod left by the Drystyx Monks made a looming outline on the horizon. There was no one on the ramparts and the warriors continued along their chosen trail.

“I wonder how the Bengal Clan fares,” said Bjorn.

“I’m sure they’re on the hunt somewhere,” Ben replied. “We will issue a search party for them if the dragons return. The feline anthromorphs are bound to be stocking up their staples as we speak. I understand they are adept hunters.”

The fighters continued to follow the iridescent halo worn by Leif. The fog was thick and the marshes numerous.

“I continue to be amazed at the navigating faculties of you lich-trolls,” said Rodnik. “I would not desire to traverse these swamps alone.”

“I agree, Sergeant-at-Arms,” added Torvald. “I’d much prefer the warmth and comfort of Bard’s Inn.”

“Alas, there is yet much work to be done, My Son,” said Bors. “We must apply ourselves to securing the regions of Gaea from future invasions from the Plane of Chaos. We are obliged to carry on until we consult with Siegemunde once more. He is an adept wizard who I’m sure has been researching experimental magic day and night.”

At last the warriors rode over a tall hill and beheld Lich Town. Einar and a group of guards approached Taliesin and his acquaintances.

“Welcome back, My Friends,” declared the sturdy lich-troll. “I gather that Restadicus was reluctant to enact our experimental magic.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” answered the Baroness. “I am yet concerned for the merfolk. Before we assist another region we wish to have Siegemunde bestow us with amphibious armor. Thus we will be able to visit Lord Dagon in his ocean region. We want to help control the invasions of the Nozroth who have been hoarding the schools of fish.”

“That is a fine idea, Sharon,” replied Einar. “It is good diplomacy to come to the aid of the regions of our allies. They have helped we land-faring trolls to win decisive battles on the land. It is just to help the Dagonites with their challenges under the ocean. Venture within and consult with Siegemunde. I’m sure he has the ability to cast the spell you speak of.”

“Thank you, Loyal Guard,” said Taliesin.

Each of the members of the group nodded their heads to Einar and his fellow guards as they passed once more through the great, wicker doors. The lich-trolls within were accustomed to the presence of the outsiders. They no longer hid their wares or closed their booths when the gathering of mercenaries rode through the marketplace.

The fighters again hoisted their warhorses four at a time into the elevated stable of the Martial Academy. Once the members of Taliesin’s group were on the pylon-supported platforms they walked to Siegemunde’s study.

“Welcome, Friends,” declared the bald-headed wizard. “I understand that you helped the gnomes push the Stalactite Hordes out of Tinkerburg. You have my appreciation.

“Alas, there continues to be conflict in the ocean. The Dagonites, Marlin and Anemone, left word that the Chaotic Nozroth continue to close-off the access to the large schools of fish that feed the mertrolls in the City of Dagon.”

“We are willing to help, if we can,” said Lord Taliesin. “I understand that a sorcery exists that can render us as the amphibians. Is this a spell that you are willing to attempt, Siegemunde?”

“Gladly, Lord Taliesin. I have researched the process of transformation for some days now. Let me know when you are ready for me to begin the procedure.”

“We are ready, Siegemunde,” declared the Baroness. “Our elf friends are willing to accompany us to the region of the Dagonites.”

“Very well. Steady yourselves, My Fellow Gaeans,” said the Director of the Academy.”

“Aguas!”

A yellow mist congealed around each of the mercenaries. The surface of the magic armor hardened until it reflected the candlelight of Siegemunde’s study. A preternatural breathing mechanism formed at the back of each watertight suit of armor. This allowed the wearers to respirate in air and water.

“Thanks, Siegemunde,” said Llewellyn. “We will make haste to the sea so that we may help our mertroll cousins.”

“Very good, Llewellyn,” answered Siegemunde. “May the Fates be with you all.”

The Gaean Fighters exited from the wizard’s office. They left their warhorses at the stable. The warriors set forth at once for the beach. Claude, the vampire, flew overhead and surveyed the coastline. He didn’t see any goblins or orcs during the journey.

Once on the shore the warriors dove in and swam downward until they moved just a few yards over the ocean floor. Leif again donned his magic halo, which created dancing ribbons of light as the Gaeans swam through clusters of sea plants and beds of coral.

In a matter of minutes a group of Dagonites, who patrolled the shallows, noticed them.

“Welcome, Warriors. We’ve been expecting you,” declared a mertroll. “We are glad to see that Siegemunde’s gill suits are effective.

“Do you recognize us? It’s Marlin. There is Anemone, Trilobite, Nautilus and Barracuda. We are unfamiliar with your pointy-eared companions.”

Llewellyn swam to Marlin and shook his hand.

“I am Llewellyn of the Qualinost Valley. These seven elves are here to help bring tranquility to the regions of Gaea. I understand that you helped these land-faring trolls defeat the Summoners and Chaotic Dragons.”

“That is correct,” answered Marlin. “The invasions of late are the concern of all the races of Gaea. We Dagonites are as concerned for the trolls on the land as we are for those in the sea. Follow us to the City of Dagon, my father. He will be heartened to see you visitors to our region.”

The warriors followed Marlin into the greater depths. They swam over the alabaster walls and towers of the City of Dagon. Taliesin and his friends were able to keep up with the brisk pace of the web-footed mer-trolls. Their amphibious armor possessed artificial flippers that extended several inches beyond their feet. Thus the mercenaries propelled themselves at the same pace as the fish hunters.

Marlin led the visitors to the central colonnades. The guards allowed their entrance. In the Audience Chamber Lord Dagon sat on his alabaster and marble Throne.

“Welcome, Gaeans. The Denizens of Chaos are yet abounding. A group of aquatic hunters, calling themselves the Nozroth, has infiltrated the major schools of fish. These we depend on for food. My son and Captain, Marlin, reports that the Nozroth have refused to share the existing caches of fish in a peaceful agreement. Please, Elves and Trolls, help me to keep the major currents in the sea open to those who would seek food there.”

“We are glad to offer our assistance, Lord Dagon,” replied Lord Taliesin. “With your permission our group will seek out these Nozroth and convince them that the ocean is not a place to hoard or dominate the food supply.”

“Very well, Taliesin,” Dagon responded. “You have the thanks of the Dagonites in advance.”

The battle group, with Marlin’s fellow merfolk in tow, bade Lord Dagon goodbye. They followed Marlin’s lead out of the City of the Dagonites. The warriors equipped crossbows and bolt-throwers from the merfolk’s armory. They swam in the open ocean for some time. After several miles they came upon a school of yellowtail. The scales of the fish reflected the light of the sun descending in rolling waves from the surface.

Nozroth hunters had the school surrounded. Marlin advanced toward them and caught the attention of the Leader, Ichthos.

“Leave us, Mertrolls,” cried the large Nozroth. “We have already claimed these waters for the Denizens of Chaos. Thoth is the authority to be reckoned with in this Plane, as in others.”

“I understand that is your belief, Nozroth. The Dagonites require sustenance as much as anyone. Allow us to share these fish or face us in battle.”

The Nozroth was angered beyond words and discharged his crossbow at Marlin. The Dagonite Captain was prepared for such an attack and evaded the dart. A fearsome battle commenced. Both sides fired their projectile weapons but did minimal damage. Taliesin’s group attached their bolt-throwers to their belts and drew their steel weapons. The Nozroth, in turn, wielded curved swords, similar to those used by the Harad Ghul. A fervent melee ensued.

Llewellyn and his Qualinesti Elves were experienced fighters and parried the blows of the Nozroth. The relentless elves ran through a pair of the humanoids.

The magic-users of Taliesin’s group cast a warding spell.

“Sentiex!”

A spherical shield of golden light surrounded the battle party. The Nozroth were powerful swimmers but were unable to force their way through the Ethereal Shield.

Taliesin, Sharon, Bors and the other mercenaries trod water within the magical barrier until they were face to face with their opponents. They thrust their fire-burnished blades through the energy matrix, wounding six more of their adversaries.

The Leader of the Chaotic Invaders was taken in awe of the united warriors. He addressed his cohorts in a gurgling voice.

“Withdraw, Nozroth. These are bizarre fighters. Let us regroup and return with the leviathans. It is time for our familiars to awaken.”

The jagged-toothed, Chaotic Hunters turned from the Gaeans and swam deep into the purple haze of the ocean.

“We have arisen victorious, My Friends,” declared Marlin. “These fish are available to us once more. Before we return to the City of the Dagonites let we merfolk catch some of these yellow-tail.”

“By all means proceed, Aquatic Friend,” said Lord Taliesin. “We could use a solid meal as well.”

The mercenaries watched the mertrolls appreciatively as they linked segments of net from their travel packs. This formed a larger net that they passed over the school of fish. As an organized unit the Dagonites pulled the ends of their weighted net together, catching a large portion of yellow-tail.

“Thank you for bearing with us, Land-farers,” offered Trilobite. “We much needed this fresh catch. Follow us now to the City of our Lord where we will make a hearty feast.”

The warriors swam with the Dagonites back to the alabaster city. Other merfolk cheered at the sight of the fresh fish. Marlin and his kindred lowered the trapped yellow-tail down to the marketplace of the settlement. The citizens fired phosphorous braziers and placed the quickly cleaned fillets on the grills. Dagon himself swam to the gathering with his vestigial tentacles billowing behind him. He eyed the cooking meat with pride.

“You have done well, My Son,” the Lord said. “I take it that you and our visitors convinced the hostile invaders that we needed a share of the school.”

“Yes, Father,” answered Marlin. “We wouldn’t have been successful without the aid of these land-dwellers. They have earned a portion of these yellow-tail.”

Dagon turned to Taliesin’s battle group with a complimentary grin. He shook hands with each of the warriors.

“You have our thanks, Fellow Gaeans,” he stated. “We’ve had quite a struggle with the results of the rifts created by the Dire Queen and her cohorts. Join with us in partaking of the fruits of your labor.”

“Thank you, Lord Dagon,” said Lady Sharon. “We are glad to help when we are able.”

The warriors from the different regions of Gaea sat at a row of marble benches and dug heartily into the roasted fillets. Claude, the vampire, tasted the cooked fish but it was not to his liking. He swam over to the net of live fish and drained the juice out of three of them.

“Ah, I feel much better,” the vampire declared. “I am interested in the architecture of this city, Dagon. How long have you mertrolls lived here?”

“Three hundred years, Night-Feeder,” Dagon rumbled.

“That is impressive,” Claude replied. “In many ways your longevity resembles that of these elves.”

“That is true, Claude,” said Nautilus. “I sometimes wonder if we share common ancestors with the Qualinesti.”

“It is possible that we are distantly related to the mertrolls,” offered Llewellyn. “We have not always been referred to as the Qualinesti. There was a time that the elves outnumbered the trolls, dwarves and halflings. Many of our number moved far to the east after a great war. In past ages the goblins and stone trolls were also more populous. Our forefathers lost a generation of elf warriors in the fight to control the

regions of Gaea. Since that time we regrouped as the Qualinesti and have kept our distance from the lands of the troll folk.”

“It is fortunate, then, that our regions have come together once more,” answered Lord Taliesin. “In the future let us maintain routes of communication between our respective races. There is always strength in numbers.”

“I agree with your observation, Taliesin,” said Lord Dagon. “If Siegemunde reclaims the scrying glass taken from the Ghastly Fens we will be able to communicate with you land-faring trolls with greater ease and efficiency.”

“That is a good idea, Dagon,” responded Leif. “The Stalactite Forces run wild through the woods of Gaea. I have sensed recent movement in the Helix of the Planes. I suspect that the Maegar Dwarves in the Gorgon Plane have chosen to return to Gaea and confront the Stalactite Forces that took their land. When our battle group is able I suggest that we trek to the Arkadian Mountains and welcome the courageous Maegar Clan formally.”

“As I think about it,” said Sharon Redthorne. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the hive-building Arachnoids also decide to construct a habitat in Gaea. They have contended long and hard with the gorgons and firbolgs that run rampant through their Home Plane.”

“I agree with your assessment, Sharon,” replied Leif. “The conflicting energies within the Dharmic Equilibrium have reached a state of critical mass. It is therefore no surprise that sentient groups are on the move to calmer Realms.”

Before the warriors were able to discuss the issue further a female Captain of the fish-hunters swam hurriedly into Lord Dagon’s Throne Room.

“Greetings, Lord Dagon,” said the merwoman. “I am Calliope. I regret to report that our city is under attack by the Nozroth. They ride giant, crystal sharks and are firing their crossbows at our citizens. We must move against them before anyone is seriously hurt.”

“Thank you for the report, Calliope,” answered Dagon. “Join the other Captains. We will follow you shortly.”

The female Captain did as the amphibious Lord suggested and exited from the room with her crossbow held at the ready.

Dagon addressed the Gaeans gathered in his Throne Room.

“We will move at once to deal with these invaders. My Friends, I regret to inform you that the city is under attack. I am loath to ask you to battle for us again.”

“Nevermind that,” replied the Baroness. “We are glad to help when we are able. Let us swim to the city’s edge and convince the riders of the crystal sharks to turn around.”

The gathering of trolls and elves swam from Dagon’s Throne Room with the Lord of the Merfolk in tow. Taliesin saw the giant, crystal sharks as they circled around the alabaster and marble city.

The massive fish were called “crystal” because of the translucent nature of their bodies. Like other sharks they were one of the oldest species living in the ocean. Their anatomy contained cartilage without bones. Many merfolk rose from the streets to contend with the Nozroth and their mounts.

Marlin and Anemone fired their projectile weapons at the Riders of Chaos. They succeeded in stopping only a few of them. The Dagonite Captains hummed the tone of attack.

Every able-bodied mertroll swam up from his or her watching place throughout the city. They unleashed a barrage of missiles from their projectile weapons and drew their curved blades. Lord Taliesin gave a rallying cry from the helmet of his gill suit.

The Dagonites stabbed at Nozroth and mount alike but their blades were too small to impede their opponents significantly. The warriors did well, however, in avoiding the knife-like teeth of the crystal sharks.

Llewellyn and his entourage wielded their long-swords and entered the fray with Taliesin’s group. They drove their lengthy blades into the massive, crystal sharks, destroying them. The Nozroth that stood atop the oceanic predators were forced to abandon their positions or sink to the ocean floor.

Gilead and the Sentinels uttered a binding spell.

“Captros!”

A large percentage of the dismounted Nozroth were trapped by a sorcery that resembled the coiled net of a giant spider. The sticky cords wrapped themselves around more than half of the jagged-toothed humanoids. They were unable to fire their electric bolt-throwers or use their swords. The spell of Gilead and the Sentinels also restrained the Leader of the Chaotic Hunters.

“Curses, you have us trapped,” declared the Nozroth Leader. “I, Ichthos, will take your offer to share the fish seriously. If you release me from this infernal contraption I vow to partake of simple pieces of the schools and leave the remainder to you Dagonites. Thoht would not be pleased, but there is nothing I can do about that now.”

“Very well, Ichthos of the Nozroth,” replied Dagon. “I will take your word at this time. Do not doubt that if your hunters hedge on this agreement our friends from the land will assist us in this manner again.”

Gilead and the Sentinels gestured with their hands and the Ethereal Cords dissolved. Ichthos bowed to Lord Dagon and called to his cohorts to leave the City of the Merfolk.

“We have done what we can to help here, Dagon,” said Lord Taliesin. “We will depart to the beach. If you have need of our help again you are welcome to send your Captains to us. These Nozroth are sinister-looking. Keep a steady watch and let us know if they hoard the fish again.”

“Very well, Lord Taliesin and Company. You have our thanks,” answered the Lord of the Dagonites.

The land-faring mercenaries swam west of the City of the Mertrolls. They reached the beach near Tinkerburg in a matter of hours. Once the fighters were on the shore Gilead deactivated their amphibious armor.

Chapter Six: Into the Maelstrom

Leif spoke to the group of warriors.

“My Friends, I have sensed the return of the Maegar Dwarves to the Mountains in Arkadia. I suggest we seek them out and welcome their return. They have an historical reputation of being formidable fighters. There is great potential for them to help us in our campaign to secure the regions of Gaea.

“I agree with your assessment, Friend Sentinel,” said Lord Taliesin. “We can yet use additional support in our defensive campaign.”

“I also am interested in speaking with the Maegar Dwarves,” stated Claude. “Their presence puts the Arkadian Mountains into a fuller state of transition.”

“I too concur with your observation, Night-Feeder,” added Sharon Redthorne. “The time has come to balance the disparity of alignment in Arkadia. The presence of dwarves and vampires will keep the Stalactite Forces in check. Let us travel with Taliesin to Mount Crow and see if we can meet with the dwarves.”

“We haven’t always agreed with the Maegar,” said Llewellyn. “I acknowledge, however, that communication is essential to any sort of peaceful coexistence. We Qualinesti will accompany you and secure a larger peace with the mountain dwarves.”

The group of warriors traveled north and west from the beach near Tinkerburg. They ascended the foothills by midnight and found themselves face to face with Oxholm and a band of dwarf soldiers.

“Welcome, Fellow Gaeans,” declared the dwarf. “We expected that you would detect our arrival to this Plane. Alas, our King, Grumbold, was slain by the Denizens of Chaos.

“The Council of the Maegar Dwarves forewent the process of electing a new King. Grumbold had no heir or heiress. We have thus adopted a form of democracy for our modest clan. By a sweeping majority the Maegar chose to depart from its settlement in the Gorgon Plane. We dwarves have a reputation as resilient fighters. Nevertheless the ongoing harassment of the beholders, firbolgs and minotaurs was getting out of hand. We have returned to our original dwelling places in the high valley on Mount Crow. If you are here to help us, which you appear to be, you are welcome to visit our town, Umbria.”

“We are gladdened to do so, Brave Dwarf,” replied Lord Taliesin. “Lead us, if you please, and we’ll follow.”

Oxholm led his friends up the steep side of Mount Crow.

“The goblins are traditionally lodged in the southern face of the great mountain. We dwarves have claimed the mines in the north face. Our network of mines and farms is what the Maegar have called Umbria.”

Taliesin observed shallow tracks in the grass hewn by the recent passage of wagons.

“We Maegar are able travelers,” said Oxholm. “We returned to Gaea faster than we left it. The Denizens of Chaos in the Gorgon Plane motivated us to depart from The Spires as quickly as possible.”

“Your settlement will be more practical to guard now that it is located in Gaea,” said Lady Sharon. “We will help you Maegar Dwarves if we are able.”

Oxholm continued to lead the mercenaries up the steep incline. Their warhorses were well-trained and did not falter on the grade. The warriors reached the high, mountain valley that stood before Mount Crow. Several waterfalls descended from the rocks above to form ponds laden with fish and swans.

Dwarf children surrounded Taliesin's group as they rode into the settlement. The Maegar were busy constructing homes and barns to house their livestock and grain. The sounds of chickens and cattle wafted through the cool, mountain air.

Drumtone approached the group from a stack of lumber he was splitting.

"Greetings, Taliesin, Gilead, Sharon and Friends. We meet again and under much different circumstances," Drumtone said.

He laid his handiwork aside, strode over to the group and shook hands.

Drumtone addressed the gathering of Maegar Children.

"Run and play, Kids. I have business with these strange-looking visitors."

The children did as the dwarf warrior suggested and romped to the fields of the valley.

"Rumor has it that you allowed the townsfolk of Mystic Down to bear arms on your behalf, Taliesin. Is this so?"

"Yes," answered the hazel-eyed Lord. "The Denizens of the Harad Ghul continue to maraud the settlements in Mystic Down, Coermantyr, Arborea and Tinkerburg. It is impossible for we Lieges to police the expansive regions as a single unit. The villagers and farmers are quick learners and have patrolled the regions with a modicum of success. Their efforts have given my group the time to meet with you, Maegar Dwarves. We've come from Tinkerburg where we helped the gnomes to secure their city from the Arkadian Guild of Assassins."

"So I see, Taliesin. As you know we dwarves have not always gotten along with elves. We are united in a common cause now, however, and welcome you Qualinesti to our humble, mountain village. Let us meet with the Dwarf Council. The goblins and orcs are sure to detect our return soon. And there will be a fight."

"Very well, Drumtone," replied the Baroness. "Let us confer with the dwarves while the time is ripe."

The pair of dwarf brothers led the warriors to the largest building of the settlement. It was a circular, wooden edifice with a curved roof and a watchtower. The guards at the entrance recognized Drumtone and Oxholm. They allowed Taliesin and his companions to enter the central structure of Umbria.

Inside the eldest male and female dwarves sat at a round table. The floor of the room was illuminated with beams of light descending from the watchtower in the roof. The stained glass windows created streaks of blue, red, green and yellow within the circular meeting table.

Cooper addressed the others as the Unofficial Leader of the Delegation.

“My Fellow Dwarves, thank you for assembling here on such short notice. The Maegar Clan has done a good job of moving here from the Gorgon Plane in a timely fashion.”

Cooper spoke to the mercenaries and the dwarf brothers.

“Oxholm and Drumtone, you have the appreciation of this Council for your aid in defending and moving our clan to Gaea. You visitors from the other regions of the Realm are here to help us. The Council agrees that it is only a matter of time before the Stalactite Forces of Tiamat intrude upon us. We are better off, however, for the firbolgs, minotaurs and beholders in the Gorgon Plane were exponentially more difficult to repel.

“It is this Council’s request,” continued Cooper, “that you warriors who arrived stay here for the battle to come. We see wood elves within your number and encourage them to stay with us as well. The dwarves will ready their weapons of warfare and sleep with a double watch. If any movement or intrusion occurs during the night the Vampire Lord in our midst will surely awaken us. Their kind has also suffered under the marauding waves of orcs and goblins in the last decade. Partake of our humble fare and get some sleep. I cannot say for how long for the orcs may barge through the mountain at any hour.”

“Thank you for your welcome and information, Cooper,” replied Lord Taliesin. “We will sleep if we are able. My group shall also prepare their weapons and incantations of choice in the event of sudden battle.”

The warriors and Maegar Dwarves slept for a few hours when Claude awoke the mortals with a screeching voice.

“Rise, Friends. The Hordes of Stalactite Orcs are on the move like never before. They pour from the mines within the mountain.”

“You have our thanks, Claude,” answered Cooper. “Maegar Dwarves, our time is at hand. We fled from the Chaotic Denizens of the Gorgon Plane. Now we must assert our belonging to our mines. The goblins and their kin move through the center of Mount Crow.”

“We will catch up on sleep at a later time, My Comrades,” said Gilead.

The mercenaries strode to the Council Chamber of the dwarves. Over a dozen tunnels leading upward and downward into the mines of Mount Crow gaped in the cavern. Every able-bodied, adult dwarf wielded a weapon in the chamber. Lord Taliesin and his companions also prepared themselves for battle. The goblin and orc voices grew louder until they rushed en masse through the many tunnels. Rauros and

Loki led them. A few of the humanoids fired arrows from compound bows and bolt-throwers. The rest of them clambered into the fray in a heated charge.

Llewellyn and his wood elves were familiar with the tactics of the Stalactite Forces. They deflected the arrows with their steel shields and counterattacked with their swords. Ben Frostberry employed his dagger and Bjorn Roundtree his sling. Claude, the Vampire Lord, sunk his fangs into several of the goblins and their Lykanthros mounts, rendering them comatose. Nighthawk and his band were also familiar with the techniques of the goblins and parried their scimitars with ease.

The mages, Reoren, Gilead, Sigrid and Leif enchanted an experimental spell.

“Mortis!”

Several of the goblins were thrown from the backs of their steeds as they tumbled with lesions on their limbs. The Lykanthros howled in fear and fled through one of the lower tunnels. The dismounted goblin and orc horde continued their assault on foot.

Lord Taliesin, Bors, Torvald, Lady Sharon, Rodnik and Thorgrym formed a tight circle. Their opponents pressed at them from every side. The casualties of wounded and slain goblins piled up at the striking range of the fighters.

Llewellyn’s Qualinesti Elves were especially driven to repel the orcs. They remembered numerous conflicts with the humanoids in the past and yet sought vengeance for their fallen kindred.

At last the line of attacking goblins subsided. They were desperate to defeat the Maegar Dwarves but could not summon the strength to parry their berserker attacks. The male and female dwarves stepped into the open spaces of the circle, dealing powerful strikes with their hammers and axes.

Oxholm and Drumtone rolled apart and dealt with the goblins two at a time. The Stalactite Hordes continued to lose forces. Despite the crush of screeching humanoids they did not retreat and continued their press into the carnage. The other dwarves were inspired by the heroic efforts of the trolls and elves. Each of the bearded warriors gave a chilling war cry and engaged their opponents with full force.

The goblins continued to fight but their number was significantly reduced. Hundreds of the humanoids from the far side of Mount Crow were slain. And those that lingered did not survive much longer. The bodies of Rauros and Loki were nowhere to be seen.

The dwarf brothers embraced the trolls and elves.

“We are victorious! The Maegar have successfully asserted their claim of Mount Crow. Our move to Gaea has proven wise,” Oxholm declared.

“I salute all of you and commend your bravery,” said Lord Taliesin. “This marks the beginning of a new era of peace for our regions. We now know that there are no challenges to face that are not achievable. You dwarves have our thanks for your support and diligence. We welcome you to contact us at our respective strongholds if the Forces of Tiamat return once more. I am sure I speak for all of us when I say we can use a good night’s rest.”

“Thank you, Mercenaries,” replied Drumtone. “The Maegar Clan is indebted to you for your help. We may indeed take you up on the offer of military support for none of us know how many goblins remain in the deep mines of the Under Earth.”

“Very well, Dwarf Leader,” said Lady Sharon. “We will take the time to clean and oil our weapons. We must attend to the activities of the residents of our respective regions.”

The Baroness of Coermantyr gave a chivalric embrace to each of the fighters. The elves bowed and exited from the Council Chamber. The lich-trolls were soon to follow.

* * * * *

Raven sat with Michelle on the bus to Jefferson Community College. She gazed at the small businesses and cafes as they whizzed by the bus. Despite her best efforts Raven struggled to keep up with the pace of Mrs. Egnog’s trigonometry class.

“I’m worried, Michelle,” said Raven. “I’ve been trying my best to keep up with the permutations of sine, cosine and tangent in my trig class. I regret that I may not cut the mustard this semester.”

“Don’t sweat it, Rave,” replied Michelle. “I’ve got a staggered list of ‘W’s’ and ‘C’s’ on my transcript. Transfer to a four-year university is worth the patience and effort. Don’t let Mrs. Egnog’s approach to mathematics bring you down. If you don’t mind my saying so, you’ve looked tired in the last few days. How many exams must you take before the drop deadline?”

“Two, I’m afraid,” Raven responded. “I’m going to ask Mrs. Egnog today whether I still have a chance for a ‘C’ or should withdraw from the class.”

“Whatever happens I wish you the best,” Michelle said.

The bus reached the college parking lot and rumbled to a stop.

* * * * *

Lord Taliesin of Mystic Down sat impatiently on his Dais. The farmers and merchants of his region initiated an underground correspondence organization. The villagers and hunters kept a network of homing pigeons in cages throughout the

region. They let them fly to Taliesin's Tower with numbers reporting the movements of the Stalactite Forces from the picket line along the Arkadian Border.

The Liege Lord had assembled a table in his Audience Chamber. It bore a large map of Gaea stretched before him. It was marked with miniature figures representing reports received from pigeons and trolls.

This doesn't bode well, thought the Liege Lord. I must contact Baroness Sharon and Gilead. They should see the gathering forces that oppose we trolls.

Taliesin lit a candelabrum that stood next to his table. He placed the iron container of his sealing wax on the grill over his hearth fire. He opened his jar of ink and scratched a letter to Restadicus.

To the Chief of the Lore Masters, on the 28th day of the Fall Equinox of the Year of the Wolf.

Restadicus, the invasions to the region of Mystic Down continue. My perception of the fluctuations of the Dharmic Equilibrium has made my sleep turbulent and restless. My bond with the preternatural energies of the wold forces me to attend to the ongoing disturbances to our regions.

You are a wise troll and knew the parents of the Baroness and I. My father and mother, Lord Raymond and Lady Elwen would commend you for your recent support of the campaign to bring peace to the totality of Gaea. It troubles me to think what ancient evils have come to a head in the last few months.

None of us can surmise how long the forces of the Demigod, Thoth and Titan, Tiamat have waited for this moment to strike at the residents of the Higher Planes. I appreciate the efforts of you Lore Masters and Siegemunde in the Martial Academy of the Ghastly Fens to research the histories and memoirs kept in Coermantyr Castle and Lich Town.

I will be so bold as to consider that the imbalance of the Mandala of the Planes is the same one that caused the war with the goblins and stone trolls a generation ago. The size of the populations of troll folk, dwarves, elves and vampires has dwindled since the internecine destruction of the past conflict. I regret that I was but

a babe in arms at the time and had no understanding of the dangers my parents faced.

Leif, the half-ghoul Sentinel, and mutual friend of ours, has also theorized that the establishment of his race of trolls was due to the absence of sufficient forces to repel the masses of orcs that poured from the mines in Mount Crow. I agree with his idea and wonder if the time is ripe for the organized regions of Gaea to assemble an official militia such as the one described in the historic tomes.

I volunteer my services before Sharon Redthorne, Baroness of Coermantyr, and the Lore Masters to assemble what farmers, hunters and villagers who reside within the settled regions in an alliance with the existing Lieges of Gaea. Please send me word of your thoughts in this matter. The goblin Guild of Assassins remains and their allegiance with the Stalactite Orcs from the depths of the Under Earth holds strong.

Reports remain of Denizens of Chaos lingering in the wilderness beyond the picket line bordering my region with Arkadia. They include enumerations of Lykanthros, firbolgs and beholders that ran astray from the regimented Forces of Tiamat and yet predate my outlying farms and trade houses.

I am sending duplicates of this request to Lady Sharon, Alex in Arborea, Siegemunde in the Ghastly Fens, Miles Davenport in Tinkerburg, Valinor in the Qualinost Valley and Lord Dagon in his ocean region.

You have my thanks, Restadicus. I shall await your word from Coermantyr Castle.

Sincerely,

Lord Taliesin of Mystic Down

Taliesin quickly penned copies of his request for the Leaders of the regions of Gaea. The sealing wax was hot and the Troll Lord secured each scroll with the impression of his signet ring. He attached the folded notes to the legs of carefully selected homing pigeons from the aviary of his Tower. Each bird he chose from a cage labeled with a different region.

The Liege Lord stood at the open window of his Audience Chamber and loosed the birds to the various directions of their homes. The fowl circled his stronghold momentarily then divided their flock as they sought their respective targets over the oak forest.

The troll set himself to a dinner of roast mutton and cauliflower. He attempted to sleep soundly that night but the wavering emanations of Chaotic Magic would not let him rest.

The next morning Taliesin awoke with the dawn and hastened to his aviary once more. Returned birds pecked at seed on the floor of the aviary. The Troll Lord hurried to scatter additional grain before the homing pigeons alighted from his aviary in search of food. All of the regions were successfully contacted and sent their responses to the buttressed Tower of Mystic Down.

The other Lieges and Leaders unanimously approved Taliesin's idea of a concerted militia. Restadicus' letter in turn asked for the Liege of Mystic Down to meet with him in the Council Chamber of the Lore Masters. Taliesin was heartened by the responses of his friends and sometime mercenaries.

He sent word to Rex to prepare a pair of warhorses for the journey to Coermantyr. The warriors left the Tower before noon and hastened their steeds to the west. In a matter of hours they reached the city gates of Coermantyr and negotiated their mounts through the rows of booths and narrow streets of the bustling city.

The armored trolls passed the cries of the merchants, lauding their wares for sale. The beasts of burden were another matter. The horses, camels, alpacas and llamas massed in the haphazard boulevards, paying no mind to the desire of the visitors to pass. After an hour of waiting for the herds to clear the way the Liege Lord and his acquaintance reached the preliminary gate of Coermantyr Castle.

A pair of Knights recognized the neighboring Liege and his Sergeant-at-Arms. They gestured for them to venture within and went so far as to use the wooden ends of their lances to push clusters of goats and sheep to the side of the street.

At last the mercenaries arrived at the main gate of Coermantyr Castle. Restadicus was anxious to confer with Lord Taliesin and met him in the courtyard of the stronghold. The grizened, magenta-cloaked wizard shook the visiting Liege's hand upon his dismount from his warhorse.

"Welcome, Taliesin and Rex. The reports of the homing pigeons throughout the Realm of Gaea speak the same news. The Harad Ghul and hordes of goblins and orcs are abounding once more. We must concert our efforts again to repel them."

"I agree, Adept Wizard," replied Lord Taliesin. "I'm sure that Baroness Sharon will support our efforts to restore peace to our regions. Let us venture upward and speak with her at once."

Castle pages took the reins of the warhorses of the Liege Lord and his Sergeant-at-Arms. The warriors followed the lead of the Chief Wizard into the castle

proper. The Baroness of Coermantyr sat on her ivory Dais in the center of the circle of the Lore Masters. Gilead, the Key Mage, sat on a similar Throne at his Lady's right side. They both rose upon the approach of the traveling residents of Mystic Down.

"Welcome, Taliesin and Rodnik," Sharon said. "Our network of communication has proven effective I see. Gilead and I have waited to speak with you before leaving on our campaign to confront the Guild of Assassins in Arkadia."

"Thank you for holding here for us, Sharon," replied Taliesin. "We would be loath to be left behind. The forces we confronted in the Abyssal Cairn were strong enough to turn us. Our hope is to succeed with greater spells and incantations issued by both the Lore Masters and Siegemunde from the Ghastly Fens. The vampires have secured their grasp of Castle Stammberg in the Arkadian Mountains. Their aid will be welcome along with that of the anthromorphs and Sentinels from the Martial Academy."

"That is a wise observation, Liege of Mystic Down," observed Wotan.

He and the two-dozen other magic-users filled the circular table in the Council Chamber of Coermantyr Castle.

"We shall accompany you warriors on your quest. If we are set to receive future invasions from the Chaotic Planes it will bode well for us to diminish the ability of the Harad Ghul to assail our cities and villages."

"A shrewd observation that is, Blond Wizard," declared The Watcher. "Record your endeavor in my journal I will. Safe now the Orb of Paryphax is, within its rightful place in the fortress of the wood trolls."

The aged halfling scratched the minutes of the meeting upon a standing easel at a far corner of the room. He recorded the statements of the speakers in runes to better secure their dispersion to unwanted eyes. The halfling's scroll glowed with additional security measures cast upon it by Restadicus.

"Accompany you I would, but alas my age will not permit me. Venture to the east with my blessing you must. Stay here I will and hold the fort for the return of the Lore Masters to these hallowed halls."

"Thank you, Watcher," answered Sharon. "We would be heartened to have you travel with us but you must conserve your strength. The lich-trolls from the Ghastly Fens and the anthromorph rangers will accompany us in your stead. None of us know the limits of the strength of the dwarves and vampires beyond the picket line of Arkadia. They will prove ready to defend the settlements they have so recently acquired."

“Don’t forget the Qualinesti Elves who have watched the conflicts in your western regions for some time.”

The mercenaries and sorcerers turned their heads as Llewellyn and a handful of elves entered the Council Chamber. Gearzon and Galatia, the gnome engineers, accompanied them.

“We are ready to fight the forces that oppose us,” declared Gearzon. “The Mayor of Tinkerburg has issued a proclamation that every able-bodied gnome prepare for the defense of our City and the greater regions beyond our borders.”

“You have our thanks and appreciation,” said Restadicus. “I will send letters to Miles Davenport and Valinor, thanking them for sending you, Sturdy Fighters. All of us shall set forth on the road to the Burial Ruins at the Crossroads of the Ghastly Fens. The stone trolls, Fangoz and Cara, remain there and have increased their correspondence with the feline anthromorphs of the Bengal Clan. I have received fresh reports of skirmishes between the Bengal Clan and the carnivorous Lykanthros Hordes.”

“I adjourn this meeting and encourage all of you to get some rest this night. You and we Lore Masters shall hit the road at the dawn. Much effort will be necessary to convince Rauros, Dakros and Loki to leave us be.”

The warriors of various races departed from the Council Chamber of the Lore Masters and took up lodging for the night in separate quarters. They all slept well and awoke refreshed before the dawn.

The mercenaries guided their warhorses to the north and soon reached the edge of the Forest of Coermantyr. They continued east and came upon the Crossroads and Burial Ruins.

The Sod Stronghold built by the Drystyx Monks broke a dark, jagged outline in the hazy sky. The edifice remained unoccupied and the fighters continued on through the marshes of the Ghastly Fens. After a few hours they reached the home of Cara and Fangoz, the stone trolls. Bjorn Roundtree was surprised to find Satvinder and Jalhi Bengal’s Clan encamped outside of the modest structure. A feline anthromorph pushed aside the beaded curtain of the massive trolls’ home and told them of the arrival of the Lieges and Council of Mages.

“Welcome, My Friends,” said Fangoz as he stuck his head out the door. “It is good to see you all once again. I just finished helping Cara prepare a batch of cinnamon muffins for the anthromorphs here. There is food to spare if you’re hungry.”

The fanged troll stepped inside his abode and emerged with several trays of muffins, still steaming from the hearth.

“This is a favorite recipe of My Love and I. It took us several years to get the seasoning just right. Have a taste and tell me what you think.”

Bjorn Roundtree was the first to reach the home of Cara and Fangoz. He took a muffin from the outstretched hand of the male stone troll. The giant muffin appeared even larger in the pudgy hands of the spry halfling.

“This looks good, Fangoz,” replied the halfling. “It will last me for several days, I’m sure.”

The energetic halfling used a small knife to cut himself a wedge of the heavy loaf. He wrapped the rest of it in a scarf and stored it in his travel pack. The other travelers partook of the baked goods and complimented the baker as he lumbered through the group.

The wild-looking Bengal Rangers introduced themselves to the Qualinesti Elves. Both races preferred longbows and bolt-throwers as a principle means of hunting and defense.

Cara emerged from the house and laughed as she saw the motley crew of fighters as they chatted among themselves.

“What a serious lot you all are,” she scoffed. “I’ll bet that such a group of warriors cannot be found anywhere else in Gaea. I take it you are here to repel the Stalactite Forces who yet harangue us.”

“That is correct, Gentle Lady,” Satvinder replied. “We have our work cut out for us and are grateful for your generous foodstuffs.”

“I’m afraid we must ask to take your husband with us on our campaign once more, My Lady,” said Sharon. “His mace is too large for any of us to wield. Fangoz will prove a securing force in combating the Stalactite Goblin and Orc Hordes that swarm in Mount Crow.”

“I thought as much would happen today when I saw the tiger-trolls setting camp here at the edge of the Fens. Take him, if you must. Just remember that I expect him to return in one piece after your adventure.”

“You have my word, Lady Stone Troll,” Restadicus vowed. “Your beloved will not be harmed. If the going gets tough the warriors and mages you see before you will retreat as has been the case for them before. Can you give us the direction to the Martial Academy in the north? We also need the help of Siegemunde and his Sentinel Mages.”

“That won’t be necessary, Restadicus,” bellowed Fangoz. “I have a keen memory and can retrace our steps through the dangerous bogs and quagmires.”

“Very well, Stone Troll,” said Lord Taliesin. “Let us be on our way before more of the goblins and Lykanthros create havoc in our regions.”

“I concur with your sentiments, Taliesin,” offered Fangoz. “Cara, I’ll be leaving once more. I’ll return as soon as our mission is completed. Thanks again for helping me with the muffins. They will give us energy on the road ahead.”

“Off you go, then,” said Cara. “I can handle myself quite well and will cherish the time we are apart.”

The stone troll woman hugged her husband and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

The mercenaries and rangers mounted their respective warhorses and followed the long strides of the male stone troll. Restadicus and several of the other Lore Masters incanted a spell of illumination.

“Lumus, luminares!”

The heads of the wizards became surrounded with preternatural halos of golden light. The light created eerie rings in the thick fog of the Fens.

Bjorn Roundtree’s ears prickled as he heard the cries of owls and salamanders in the stagnant pools of the swamp. A number of dragonflies hummed around the pony of the halfling. Bjorn waved the insects off with his cap. The swamp-dwelling dragonflies zoomed away from the traveling party.

Lord Taliesin spoke to Jalhi as he pulled his warhorse alongside hers.

“Is it just me, Jalhi, or have your wyvern familiars grown since I last saw them?”

“I believe they have, Taliesin.”

The ranger addressed her young dragons as they flapped their wings alongside their handler.

“Starfling, Flamering, you eat more than I do now. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to feed the three of us.”

The small dragons growled in reply and pressed at Jalhi’s shoulders, urging her deeper into the Fens.

After several miles on the jagged trail to Lich Town the journeyers reached the grassy hill before the settlement of the ghoulish-trolls.

Taliesin recognized Leif, Thorgrym and Einar among the Guards of the City. He addressed them from the base of the hill.

“Greetings, My Half-Ghoul Friends. We are here to petition you and Siegemunde to join us on a mission to secure the hordes of goblins and orcs that run rampant from the Under Earth of Mount Crow. Will you grant us passage?”

“Certainly, My Friends,” Leif answered.

The dark-cloaked Sentinel approached the warriors and shook Taliesin’s hand.

“I’m glad to see you in good health, Liege Lord. There are yet numerous forces that oppose us despite the banishment of the Chaotic Demigod and Titan. I will join your gathering as before. I’m sure that Sigrid can be convinced to lend her aid to our cause as well. Follow Einar and I and we shall march within to Siegemunde’s study.”

The garrison of lich-trolls descended from their position atop the hill and guided the visitors through the wicker gates to Lich Town. Bjorn Roundtree waved in greeting to the traders and food vendors of the marketplace. A few of them waved back with unsure smiles half-curved on their faces.

“It seems that we are developing a positive reputation among these lich folk, Taliesin,” said the enterprising halfling.

“I agree, Bjorn,” replied the Liege Lord. “If we remain dedicated to our mission we may yet win the confidence and friendship of these reticent people.”

The mercenaries continued their movement through the settlement. They halted their warhorses at the base of the Martial Academy and elevated them to the scaffolding above. Assistant lich-trolls took the reins of the steeds and guided them to the stable where they would be fed, watered and groomed. Siegemunde awaited the arrival of the warriors and strode from a nearby platform to greet his friends.

“Taliesin and all, it is good to see you once again. There is yet trouble brewing in the Ghastly Fens as in the other regions of Gaea. I have received word in advance of your intention to establish a roving militia. This will especially enhance the state of affairs here in the vast marshes. Species of humanoids that have warred between themselves will be encouraged to unite to repel the ongoing threat of the Harad Ghul.”

“Such will be the case for the vampires, dwarves, elves and gnomes,” said Claude. “In ages past our various races united under a common cause. This time it will be up to our generation to fill the roles left vacant by our ancestors.”

“We Maegar Dwarves agree with your assessment, Night-Feeder,” declared Oxholm. “The settlement of Mount Crow and the other Mountains of Arkadia is up to us. We must find a way to convince the goblin and orc hordes to leave us in peace. It troubles us that the scrying glass, once used by the Dire Queen, is now in the possession of Rauros, the Leader of the Guild of Assassins.”

“Alas, I regret not seeing the ambitious invaders sooner during their recent infiltration of this place,” said Siegemunde. “Now the risk remains that the Chaotic Humanoids will delve once more into the Nether Realms from whence the two dragons and the Drystyx Monks emerged. The Ephemeral Specters who aided them in previous efforts are evil and must be stopped from coercing the Stalactite Forces to bring back manifestations of the Titan, Tiamat and Demigod, Thoth.”

“That is a concern shared by all of us, Bald Wizard,” offered Sharon. “Don’t despair for the Lore Masters are with us today and I’m sure bear strategic ideas more adaptive than their earlier approaches to magic.”

“That is true, Baroness,” added Restadicus. “We Wizards of Coermantyr have had a change of mind since our conflict with the ruthless dragons. Wotan has volunteered to contribute a rotating escort of ten mages of our region. They will participate in the roving militia that the recent letters from Taliesin have requested. I volunteer myself to direct the first group.”

“We will join you on your mission, Restadicus,” said Sigrid, the Sentinel. “I speak for Leif and Reoren. Thorgrym from the City Guards will travel with us as well.”

“We anthromorphs are ready for a fight,” growled a feline voice.

Satvinder and Jalhi Bengal arose from the elevator of the Martial Academy.

“My brothers and I regret missing the earlier round of battle with the Forces of Chaos. We are here, now, and ready to contribute our share of defense from the orcs and goblins.”

“You have our thanks in advance, Satvinder,” said Sigrid. “It warms us that you are willing to accompany us with Fangoz, the stone troll, in our midst.”

“Our disagreements are long gone, Sentinel Woman. We look to the future now and have foregone the feuding of our past generations.”

“I agree,” Fangoz said.

“Let us be on our way, then,” said Siegemunde. “I take personal responsibility for the loss of the Arkadian scrying glass. I will accompany this group of warriors and mages and apply my research to a real purpose at last.”

The Director of the Martial Academy gestured for his friends to accompany him to the ground level of the city of the lich-trolls. The Gaeans followed the bald mage and the Sentinels to the waterlogged soil below. Handfuls of the ghoulish-trolls went so far as to approach the passing warriors and shake their hands in support.

As the fighters and magic-users passed out of the wicker gate lich-troll fishermen and farmers waved their support from their boats and wagons. The group

headed south and east to the Arkadian Mountain Range, which formed a line of jagged shadows on the horizon. The nearly omnipresent mist and fog of the northern region dissipated briefly under the warmth of the setting sun. Kingfishers and hawks swept to the surface of a nearby lake to arise with shiny fish in their beaks and talons.

The warhorses ambled swiftly along the vague trail before them. Once twilight fell the travelers relied on the light of the two crescent moons orbiting their planet. The numerous mages ignited Ethereal Halos of Light for supplemental illumination.

“I am yet concerned for the welfare of my gnome cousins in Tinkerburg,” said Bjorn Roundtree.

“As are we all, Brave Halfling,” replied Restadicus. “We will move on the main body of the Stalactite Forces. If the need arises we will be quick to bring support to your enterprising relatives.”

“Thank you, Lore Master,” answered Bjorn. “Your words give me hope for the state of affairs in the south.”

The adventurers rode through the night without interception. At dawn the massive foothills of the Arkadian Mountains loomed close to the makeshift road. Claude, the vampire, continued his reconnaissance from the skies above.

Rex, Taliesin’s Sergeant-at-Arms, marveled at the vigor of the Vampire Lord.

“Siegemunde, I thought vampires need to sleep during the day. Is Claude not affected by the sun’s light?”

“Strangely this does not appear to be the case for our carnivorous friend,” the Director answered. “Many of my scrolls reported of hostile vampires destroyed in their sleep in the dungeons of their castles. Perhaps Claude has transcended this physical limitation due to his experience and preternatural strength.”

“Clearly this must be the case,” Rex replied. “Whatever forces drive our night-feeding friend He is a valuable scout to our cause.”

* * * * *

The situation in the Gorgon Plane had gone from bad to worse. The Morphozoid Entity was aware of the exodus of the Maegar Dwarves. The conglomeration of life forms also detected the movement of the Hive Builders to a distant location. The disturbance within the lakes above and below sent tendrils of neuron-laden tissue parallel with the stalagmites and stalactites of the vast cavern. The rate of communication reached critical mass.

Something must be done to secure the future of the Morphozoids.

This was a recurring theme that echoed through the radiant pools. The surfaces of the viscous lakes on the ground and ceiling merged at several locations until two

figures separated from the group of googly nuclei that served as the eyes of the amorphous creatures.

Two individual Morphozoids set foot on the shore of the lake. Their names were Formshift and Swirlmass. The creatures set forth in search of Driptwist and a safe haven for the Morphozoids of The Spires.

The arbitrarily amorphous creatures had not traveled far through the Under Earth when they detected the presence of Driptwist. The gelatinous life form was engaged in a lengthy conversation with Petra, the Terranoid. The jewels and precious metals within the cavern and the body of the female stone giant continued to sparkle and emit eerie rays of multicolored light.

The two newcomers to the vast cave introduced themselves to the stone giant.

“Greetings, My Kindred,” said Driptwist. “I was just speaking with Petra here about the need to secure a greater peace for all of us stationed in The Spires.”

“Hello, Shape-Shifters,” Petra declared. “The Terranoids and Morphozoids have come to an agreement of sorts. I have relayed the details of our dialogue to the dormant stone giants in the Midden below. They concur that the Gorgon Plane is no longer a safe haven for our posterity.

“We have chosen to follow the exit of Claude, the once banished Vampire Lord,” Petra continued. “The Maegar Dwarves also have left this Plane in the pursuit of a more feasible abode. The stone giants have magical resources yet untested. If you are willing we extend an offer to your Morphozoid Colony to accompany us to Gaea. Once combined, the magical resources of we stone giants will generate a spatial rift large enough for us to escape from this hostile, mountain stronghold.”

“Your plan has solvency, Petra and Driptwist,” hummed Swirlmass. “We will convey the message to the Principle Amoebids of our Colony. Formshift and I agree that the time has come for us to pursue a more secure location for our life pools.”

“Very well, Swirlmass,” answered Petra. “We Terranoids wish to depart from The Spires as soon as possible. We will create the spatial portals as soon as your Colony returns to the cave of our Midden.”

“You have our thanks, Petra,” replied Driptwist. “Our Colony will assume humanoid forms and return on the hour. We appreciate your offer to open a temporary spatial rift to Gaea. I’m sure our troll friends will be glad to see us.”

The shape-shifters departed from the broad cavern and returned to the location of the radiant pools. The menisci of the upper and lower lakes roiled and bubbled with activity.

“It seems our Elders already have knowledge of the decision of the Terranoids to move from this Plane,” said Driptwist.

“That is clear, Brother,” replied Formshift. “Word travels faster than lightning in these parts.”

The Morphozoids watched in amazement as the entirety of their species dropped from the lake on the ceiling and rose from the lake on the floor. In a matter of moments the quivering masses of amorphous beings divided repeatedly until they created a small army of translucent humanoids.

The humming voices of the entourage carried a combined interest to move on.

Driptwist, Formshift and Swirlmass led their kindred to the Midden of the Terranoids. Petra, Volcan and the other stone giants were awake and awaited the arrival of the shape-shifters. Upon the entrance of Driptwist and his acquaintances the Terranoids established a spatial rift.

“Spiros!” cried the stone giants.

The residents of The Spires marched through the enchanted gateway. They found themselves at the Burial Ruins in the Ghastly Fens.

“Wary we are of this flat land, Morphozoids,” Volcan intoned. “Let us venture east to the mountains on the horizon. We should seek sanctuary in the Under Earth a fair distance from the Maegar Dwarves and the strong vampires.”

“My kindred agree with your suggestion, Volcan,” declared Driptwist. “They too are uncomfortable in the open spaces of this marsh land.”

The humanoids set forth on their journey to the Arkadian Mountains. They remained on their guard for none of them knew when the Stalactite Forces of Tiamat might attack.

* * * * *

Raphael, Claude’s assistant focused the large telescope to the west from the topmost tower in Castle Stammberg. The crimson light of the rift formed by the Terranoids was a shimmering point of incandescence in the dusk. He hastened to the Throne Room of the fortress and addressed his Leader.

“Claude, a large portal has been generated in the Ghastly Fens. The stone giants and shape-shifters have arrived in our Plane and are moving toward the foothills of this mountain range. I suspect that they will prove to be formidable allies, like the Maegar Clan.”

“I concur with your assessment, Raphael,” answered Claude. “I shall fly to Lord Taliesin’s band of mercenaries and inform his gathering of warriors and mages of the presence of these much-needed reinforcements to our defensive campaign.”

“Very well, Lord Claude,” Raphael responded. “I will maintain the watch of the castle in your absence. May your mission of peace prove fruitful.”

The Vampire Lord embraced Raphael and Gabrielle farewell. He leapt from the open window and assumed his leathery, bat-like wings. His silvery hair billowed in the twilight air as he flew toward the militia of Taliesin and Sharon’s allies. A number of the Lore Masters bore Ethereal Halos, making them easy to spot by the keen night vision of the vampire.

“Ah, our vampire friend returns again from his visit to Castle Stammberg,” Siegemunde said. “I have detected magical movements from the Crossroads of the Fens. I’m sure that Claude will provide us with intelligence on this matter.”

True to the word of the Director of the Martial Academy, Claude’s eyes flared with excitement over the news he bore.

“Taliesin and Sharon, you will be heartened to know that the Terranoids and Morphozoids from the Gorgon Plane have opted to move to Gaea. This must have been a decision reached by the staunch warriors after lengthy deliberation.”

“That is surely the truth, Claude,” replied Gilead. “No lawful race is glad to leave the Plane of their Creation. I move that we set camp and allow these new arrivals to Gaea time to join with us and enforce our respective causes in one fell swoop.”

“That is a prudent suggestion, Key Mage of Coermantyr,” said Restadicus. “The stone giants and shape-shifters have proven themselves to be formidable fighters when the situation beckons. They may bear the strength that will turn the tide of battle in our favor.”

Rodnik, the Sergeant-at-Arms of Coermantyr, watered the numerous warhorses of the group of mercenaries. Wotan assisted Sharon’s energetic aid by using his magic to ignite a modest campfire for the band. After a few hours the Morphozoids and Terranoids cried out as they approached the gathering of Gaeans.

“Hello there,” declared a booming voice. “It is I, Volcan of the Terranoids. Our Morphozoid friends chose to migrate with us to your Plane. We were swayed by the descriptions of this vast Realm by the halfling, Bjorn Roundtree.”

“A wise decision you have made, Sturdy Terranoid,” answered Restadicus. “That is with all due respect for your Native Plane, of course.”

Volcan and the other stone giants chuckled.

“Don’t worry, Lore Master,” Petra rumbled. “We will not propose that we stay at the settlements of Mystic Down or Coermantyr. We are too big. Our objective, along with helping your cause, is to move deep into the Under Earth of the Arkadian

Mountain Range. The Maegar Dwarves spoke many times of the tactical merits of living in caves and mines. This has been a tradition for the shape-shifters and we stone giants since eons beyond memory.”

“We seek to renew our alliance with Cooper and the Dwarf Council,” Volcan said. “They joined with us to turn the firbolgs, gargoyles and minotaurs in previous engagements. Their detailed knowledge of the naturally occurring and hand-made caves will enhance our plan to avoid disturbance by the Forces of Tiamat.”

“Let us be on our way,” Gilead offered. “We must remain expeditious if we wish to take the Guild of Assassins and their cohorts unawares.”

“You speak sound advice, Key Mage of Coermantyr,” answered Petra. “All of us should move on and test the full mettle of the Harad Ghul and their kin.”

The fighters and magic-users followed the recommendation of the female stone giant and set forth on the ambling trail east. There was no paved road but the warhorses of the Gaeans had become familiar with the rocky path over the past weeks.

Lord Taliesin and his Comrades-in-Arms rode for a few hours when they ran headlong into the chill wind of the Arkadian Mountains. The tops of the mountains held patches of snow all year long and the warriors were quick to pull their cloaks and jackets tightly about themselves.

The trolls and humanoids began their trek through the clinging brambles and nettles at the picket line of Arkadia. A gathering of dwarves and elves stepped out from behind the pines. Bjorn Roundtree recognized Llewellyn and Drumtone among their number. Many of the residents of the eastern regions wore formidable-looking battle masks. These they unstrapped upon recognizing the Lieges and Lore Masters in their midst.

Taliesin shook hands with the appearing warriors.

“We are honored by your presence. We welcome you sturdy fighters to join us on our mission to quell the uprisings of the goblin hordes and retrieve the scrying glass taken from Lich Town.”

“That is a wise plan, Troll Lord,” Llewellyn answered. “The Qualinesti Elves look forward to helping the members of this campaign in bringing tranquility to the regions west of our valley.”

The elves and dwarves joined with the sizable group of adventurers. Their warhorses were also well-trained and did not falter on the cumbersome grade. They rode through the untamed wilderness of Arkadia and soon stood before the outer gate of the Abyssal Cairn.

“We will not be turned by the greater number of the Stalactite Forces of Tiamat this time, My Friends,” declared Taliesin.

“I agree, Liege Lord,” said Fangoz. “I am ready for the fight and will do my best to aid your intentions on this mission.”

“A victory here will assuredly decrease the pressure of the invaders upon Torvald’s militia in Wood’s End,” Bors grumbled. “Let us be on our way, Taliesin.”

“Your advice is sound, Burly Burgomeister,” the Liege replied. “We are all heartened by your enthusiasm.”

Baroness Sharon saw that the increased size of the Stalactite Forces remained. They had hardly neared the cast-iron gate when an organized troop of goblins formed a semicircle before them. The determined humanoids bore a variety of weapons ranging from lances and pikes to crossbows and short swords.

“Be steady, My Comrades,” Restadicus said. “The Lore Masters will generate a shield.”

In unison the robed Wizards of Coermantyr uttered a powerful, Ethereal Spell.

“Protex!”

A red ring of warding formed around the sizable group of Gaean mercenaries.

The greater caches of energy of the two-dozen Lore Masters, although used by the Sentinels earlier, enhanced the enchantment. The magical barrier hummed and shook with turbulent energy. The goblins charged on foot with a scattering of riderless Lykanthros.

Siegemunde and the Sentinels waited for the few goblins that managed to wrestle themselves through the shield spell of the adept mages. They issued an offensive incantation within the roiling barrier.

“Nechros!”

A whirling cone of spinning, blue blades flew under the guidance of the Sentinels and their teacher. These Ethereal Glaives slashed and gouged the ruthless goblins, obliterating those that ventured so far.

Lord Taliesin, the dwarves and elves hewed into the energy matrix of the Lore Masters from the lee side. Their polished blades brought their opponents down two and three at a time.

The initial Stalactite Forces were no match for the combined spells and experience of the fighters. They fell quickly and left the entrance to the Abyssal Cairn unattended.

“Let us move on, My Friends,” said Bjorn Roundtree. “The scrying glass taken from the Martial Academy awaits us.”

“I agree, Brave Halfling,” Gilead responded. “We must continue on our quest despite the conflict that lies within.”

“Very well, Key Mage,” replied Bjorn. “Ben, the anthromorphs and I will cover your approach with our projectile weapons.”

“Aye, I’m getting the hang of this dagger as well, Nephew,” offered Ben Frostberry. “Let us go while the getting is good.”

The various races from territories within and without the maps of the Liege Lords marched past the looming statues in the central courtyard of the castle. They tried their best to ignore the ominous and intimidating expressions of the carvings resembling titanic gryphons. They dismounted from their warhorses and Restadicus surrounded the steeds with an impenetrable magic shield.

“Protex!”

The Harad Ghul did not favor advancing large groups of Stalactite Forces into battle before them. Rauros, Dakros and Loki headed a second wave of goblin and orc soldiers mounted upon growling Lykanthros.

Blueblood and his orc assassins moved in on the Gaeans at their flanks. They employed both single and double-edged swords to follow up a preliminary volley of crossbow bolts. The ring of steel upon steel echoed through the colonnades of the Gothic structure. Neither side expected defeat.

The conflict that ensued was intense. Taliesin recognized a number of the Harad Ghul in his midst. He hewed at the Stalactite Forces on his left and right. The other warriors were inspired by the valiance of the Lord of Mystic Down. The Terranoids employed their steel-covered limbs to destroy several of the screeching orcs. Blueblood witnessed the carnage and opted to steer clear of the valiant giants.

The goblins and their kin adopted the whirling stratagem of their Leaders. They scrambled and twisted in a massive circle of armed bodies around the Gaean mercenaries. Their scimitars reached inward at the warriors. The eyes of the lingering Lykanthros rolled white with the intensity of the ensuing melee.

Continuous waves of goblins and orcs pressed in from the sides of the spacious Throne Room of the Abyssal Cairn. Battalions encamped in tunnels within the Under Earth rose from their hiding places to provide reinforcement to the battle at hand. Other groups of goblins and orcs lowered themselves from gaping tunnels in the ceiling and walls. The Qualinesti Elves quickly capitalized upon these aerial movements. Llewellyn and his companions fired successive volleys of arrows from their enchanted bows. Several of the aggressive humanoids were shot as they

descended from the higher levels of the Chaotic Fortress via crampons and rappel lines.

The Lore Masters also seized the moment and uttered a powerful binding spell. “Chronos!”

Sticky clouds emanated from the hands of the adept Wizards of Coermantyr. Dozens of goblins and orcs were captivated by the dense mist and struggled to move against their opponents.

The halflings and Maegar Dwarves moved in a united, parallel attack. Driptwist, Formshift and Swirlmass followed suit. They punched holes in the surrounding forces, giving the wizards and fighters of their party time to regroup.

Lord Taliesin and the other fighters of Gaea hewed into the melee. The dragon sword of the Liege of Mystic Down flared with green light as it compromised the plate and chain mail of the orcs. Blueblood rushed close to his battling kindred. The strength of the trolls of Gaea was too great and the orc conscript of the Harad Ghul fell to Taliesin’s magic weapon. The struggle went on, however, as the seemingly limitless crush of Stalactite Forces formed a surreal spiral with the Lieges and their friends at the center.

A number of the Lore Masters loosed independent incantations into the gibbering horde. Their arcane spells created bursts of multicolored vapor when they collided with the Denizens of the Harad Ghul and the lingering Lykanthros.

“Quickly, My Friends,” said Rodnik. “Let us contend with the red-painted Leaders of this Stalactite Army!”

“Verily, Rodnik,” replied Gilead.

The Key Mage of Coermantyr uttered a harnessing spell.

“Captros!”

A half-dozen of the nearby Harad Ghul and their cohorts were captured in a binding ring of variegated color. The goblins and orcs struggled valiantly against their Ethereal Bonds to no avail. The Warriors of Gaea destroyed them expeditiously. The outer spiral of whirling attackers continued nonetheless.

The Baroness fought alongside her male companions. Her armor was splattered with green blood from her opponents. In the light of the halos of the Sentinels Sharon spotted the scrying glass once owned by the Dire Queen of Arkadia as it swayed from a chain around the neck of Rauros.

“The glass taken from the Martial Academy in the Ghastly Fens is here, My Friends. The Leader on the wolf-beast yon carries it!”

Restadicus and Wotan, along with the other Lore Masters focused their attention on the object in question. They responded quickly and enchanted another sorcery.

“Zonex!”

Bolts of lightning extended from the fingertips of the adept wizards. The various electric charges snaked over and through the echelons of Stalactite Forces to lick and twine around the highly charged magical artifact.

Enraged Lykanthros devoid of saddles gnawed and slashed at the invasive bolts only to be thrown back by the explosive power of the Lore Masters.

Above all the Maegar Dwarves fought in a berserker state.

“We have nothing to lose, My Dwarves,” bellowed Oxholm. “This is the hour of our final stand! For the sake of the future of the Maegar Clan and its holdings let us end this conflict once and for all!”

The fierce dwarves were familiar with the battle strategies of the Stalactite Forces of Tiamat. The male and female warriors tumbled and writhed their bodies in a twisting technique that took both sides of the engagement by surprise. The burly, bearded fighters swung their war hammers and swords to the left and right, slashing and hewing goblins two and three at a time.

Bjorn Roundtree and his halfling comrades were inspired by the selfless charge of the dwarves and loaded their slings with two shots at a time. They had become excellent marksmen over the journeys of recent months and created a wave of turbulence within the circling Denizens of the Under Earth.

Ben Frostberry wielded his glinting short sword and entered the fray. The other warriors, including the Morphozoids, Qualinesti Elves and members of the Bengal Clan contended with their adversaries wholeheartedly.

Dakros, Loki and other members of the Harad Ghul recognized the desire of the Gaeans to reclaim the scrying glass on Rauros’ chest.

Fangoz, Bors and the Terranoids followed the guiding light of the encantation of the Lore Masters. They used their superior girth and drive to push through the inner rings of the crowd and contend with the Leaders of the Stalactite Horde. Loki and Dakros also identified the targeting of their Leader and drove their Lykanthros steeds directly at the large stone troll and sometime Burgomeister. The skirmish that ensued was intense and relentless on both sides.

At last Dakros and Loki were batted down by Fangoz’ massive club and Bors’ mace. They were struck directly by the bludgeoning weapons of the united mercenaries and were trampled beneath the swarming mass of lesser goblins.

Bors managed to squeeze himself through the crush of Chaotic Warriors and ripped the dangling shard from Rauros' blood-stained neck. The experienced Leader of the Harad Ghul counterattacked the rotund warrior with a sharp dagger hidden in his armor. Bors was cut a glancing wound to his abdomen once more. He stumbled and attempted to regain his balance unsuccessfully. As he was about to fall the lich-troll Sentinels, Leif, Sigrid and Siegemunde rushed to his aid and formed a protective triangle around their fallen friend.

“Protex!”

A wavering, red ring of energy formed a shielding nucleus around the separated group.

“Here, take this bauble from me, Friend Ghoul-Troll,” Bors grunted.

The Burgomeister handed the chained shard to Leif.

“I take it unwillingly, Bors. We must return to the center of this maelstrom if we hope to yet emerge victorious with our companions in this undertaking. You will set foot in Bard's Inn and tend to us all.”

Fangoz lumbered from his position against Rauros to help his friend to his feet.

The Sentinels enchanted a protective spell as they strove to push their way through the Stalactite Mob and join their companions at the front line.

Nighthawk and his band of defected goblins moved in a manner similar to the Maegar Dwarves. They too knew the battle tactics of their Chaotic Kindred and contended with them tactfully.

The battle continued without end in sight. The Sentinels succeeded in bringing their wounded comrade into the main group of fighters.

The anthromorph rangers and Qualinesti Elves united with the two dragon-lings under Jalhi's direction. They destroyed several of the Harad Ghul with their enchanted bows and fireballs.

Claude, the vampire, was unfettered by the draining isolation of the Gorgon Plane. He flew at full power over the raucous melee. He drank the blood of many goblins and orcs.

“At last my fallen vampires are avenged.”

The irises of the Undead Lord dilated with preternatural strength.

The Stalactite Forces began to doubt the outcome of the battle. They shied away from the clinging magic of the Lore Masters and turned from the bursts of arcane light.

Restadicus addressed the war group.

“My Friends, let us exit from this cairn. We will not terminate every Chaotic Humanoid that stands before us this night. Leif has given me the scrying glass of the deceased Dire Queen. We have what we came here for and must withdraw lest more of us are injured.”

“I concur, Restadicus,” said Taliesin. “We have convinced the Harad Ghul of the seriousness of our intentions to protect our respective regions. They will think twice the next time they consider intruding upon our humble domiciles.”

The Gaeans followed the lead of the Liege of Mystic Down and ran to the gates of the Abyssal Cairn. They entered the outer courtyard and mounted their warhorses who had remained safe within the Ethereal Shield generated by the various mages of the contingent.

The enraged Forces of Tiamat pursued the group of trolls and humanoids from their circling position. Their efforts proved insufficient to hinder the determined mercenaries. Those goblins that leaped before the steeds of the united allies were trampled by the steel-shod hooves of the warhorses.

Lord Taliesin, the Lore Masters and the rest continued on to their predetermined rendezvous point at the dwarven stronghold of Umbria. There they met with Cooper and the Maegar Chieftains.

Numbers of armed guards surrounded the warriors as they entered the newly-built settlement of the mountain dwarves. They eyed the Qualinesti Elves in the group with suspicion but allowed them to enter under the clearance of Oxholm and Drumtone.

The Maegar Villagers cheered upon the arrival of their protectors and embraced the trolls and others as they dismounted.

“You have our utmost gratitude, Tall Fighters,” said Cooper. “My people report that you successfully retrieved the scrying glass once used by Ankharet, the Dire Queen of Arkadia.”

“That is the truth, Brave Dwarf,” said Restadicus. “I have taken the scrying glass for safekeeping and to allow it to ‘cool off,’ as it were, in Coermantyr Castle. The Stalactite Forces will be less likely to take it from our number of adept wizards. We are on the lookout now for the alien invasions prompted by the maverick Summoners and Demigods of Chaos. Thoth and Tiamat themselves will think twice before attempting to breach the Gong Seal in Mount Crow. They now know that we have a renewed alliance with Hydro and the lawful dragons of that Plane.”

“Very well, Hoary Mage,” Cooper replied. “As our amorphous friends and stone giant visitors reveal there are bound to be additional races and types of

creatures anxious to exit the tyranny manifested in the Nether Planes. I won't be surprised if the aforementioned Hive Builders soon appear in search of safer residence in the expanses of Gaea. You are welcome to stay with us here in Umbria. I expect that most of you sturdy warriors are desirous of returning to your native regions."

"Alas, such is the case for us, Cooper," said Satvinder. "Jalhi and the other anthromorph rangers have much catching up to do in the Ghastly Fens. If you need our aid contact us with the homing pigeons. Their network of communication has proven remarkably reliable in recent weeks. Siegemunde too must recuperate and return to his duties as the Director of the Martial Academy in the City of the Lich-Trolls."

"We must rest, also," declared Volcan. "We were glad to help you hold the ground in the recent fight but must construct a new Midden where we can regenerate for a time."

"Thank you all," offered Restadicus. "It seems the Arkadian Mountains are set to become populated by a motley group of residents. This will yet impinge on the imbalance of power that existed under the invasive goblins and orcs of the Under Earth."

"We will return to our mines," stated Drumtone. "If the Stalactite Hordes again venture into our territory within the Under Earth we will inform you immediately."

"The Qualinesti Elves will continue their patrols of the woods of Fangorien. The Qualinost Valley will remain prepared to assist you as we did your ancestors during the past wars," promised Llewellyn.

"And I will intensify my training of the dragonlings, Flamerling and Starfling," said Jalhi. "The wyverns are practically fire drakes now. With the guidance of Siegemunde we will create a ranch appropriate for the education of lawful dragons."

"That is a splendid idea, Tiger-Woman," said Wotan. "Let us know how their education progresses."

The warriors of the various regions gave the dwarves a final embrace and headed their separate ways.

* * * * *

Raven sat with Michelle once more on the bus to Jefferson Community College.

"I ended up taking a 'W' in Mrs. Egnog's trigonometry class, Michelle. I wouldn't have lasted as long as I did without your help."

“That’s all right, Rave,” replied Michelle. “Math and science courses are reputedly the most challenging curricula in this country and abroad. Give it another shot next semester with a different professor. Each teacher has his or her own approach to the prerequisites for transfer. I could go on about the difficulties I faced in statistics. My advice is to take each day as it comes and hope for the best.”

The bus shook as the driver shifted the vehicle into high gear. The two friends were the last stop before the return to the campus parking lot.

Raven thought about the troll woman, Sharon Redthorne, in her dreams. She identified with the Baroness the more she thought about the recent adventures the Liege Lady faced in the imaginary Realm of Gaea.

“Alas, ours is an Age of Perseverance,” Raven observed out loud. “My parents wish for me to be resilient, like the Baroness of Coermantyr. My best plan is to assert myself continually. I’m sure that I’ll get a hand of the formulas and theorems of trigonometry as time goes by.”

THE END