

Saving Stone

(Beta Version)

By Jonny Nexus

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happy to be delayed.

Chapter One

The inn was old, its ancient timbers reeking of adventure, intrigue, and a touch of dry rot. The five weary adventurers tied their horses to the rails outside, tossed a few copper pieces to a loitering group of village youths as a bribe to not steal them, and then entered the inn's smoke filled interior.

Behind the bar stood a fat and happy landlord, determined to fulfil every duty, obligation and cliché of his noble calling. His was not the oldest of professions – his wife took care of that with the girls she ran upstairs – but it was an ancient occupation nonetheless, and one he took seriously.

He finished polishing a glass and then greeted the new arrivals. They were three men, a woman, a halfling, and a dog. “Good afternoon to you gentlemen and gentelady, and welcome to my fine establishment. You look as though you've had a long journey, and are in need of some drinks for your dry throats, some food for your empty bellies, and then some beds for your weary bones.” He smiled a big broad grin.

One of the adventurers was clad in the costume and body paint of a Northlander barbarian, born to ride beneath cloudless skies across the endless northern plains. He stepped forward and began to speak. “I greet you, chief of this place. I am Yann, son of Yonna, who was daughter of-”

“Whatever,” said another of the adventurers, interrupting. Black plate armour covered him from head to toe; the runes inscribed upon the gleaming metal reeked of evil. He brushed past his barbarian comrade and planted himself before the landlord. The landlord's grin became a little less broad, and a little less genuine.

“Some ale? Or stew?” he ventured.

The OverRealm, home of the gods, their help, an inconveniently large number of ex-denizens of the mortal realm who now claim residence rights on account of battle honours or exceptionally worthy lived lives, and the ex-denizen's hangers on.

Six robed figures sit around a marble table. They are not hangers on, ex-denizens, or help. They are gods, and when they dream, they create reality on the mortal realm below.

It's not always a terribly good reality. And the best that can often be said of it is that it's generally entertaining, if a little lacking in logic or creativity. But it's all that passes for reality down below and the residents of that realm are just having to live with it.

One of the figures stares hard at the other. He is the Dealer, Lord of Man's Contentment, and the fellow god he is staring hard at is the Warrior, Lord of Man's Ambition.

“I hadn't finished describing what my mortal was saying!” he protests.

The Warrior smiles a superficial smile. Immortal part-personification of the universe he might be, but timeless eternity has thus far not been long enough for him to get the hang of facial expressions. He has, however, learned that a smile is to an insult as salt is to a wound, and so makes sure to paste one on whenever he is about to send forth an insult.

Which is often, and which is now.

"I know you were yet to finish Lord Dealer, but you had been speaking long enough for it to become clear that what you were about to have your mortal say would be long, boring, and ultimately pointless to the progress of our quest."

"Well I'm sorry if you find mortals who aren't psychopathic two-dimensional caricatures boring, but I refuse to compromise my mortal's integrity and realism to accommodate your pitiful attention span!"

The Warrior draws himself up into a patronising pose. "If you've quite finished, perhaps you'll allow me to demonstrate that my mortal is neither psychopathic nor two-dimensional."

"He is psychopathic!" says a third member of the group. He is the Jester, the Lord of Man's Uncertainty. "He's a paladin of darkness. Being a total psychopathic bastard is practically a job requirement."

The Warrior reacts with fury, speaking hard at the figure who sits opposite him at the far end of the table, jabbing his finger at the Jester all the while. "That is an unacceptable accusation for him to make about my mortal. You should not allow him to behave in such a fashion!"

The figure who is the target of the Warrior's anger is the AllFather, Lord of all Creation. He is old, his appearance that of a kindly old man. People have expectations of how a supreme being should look, and he feels no need to disappoint them.

It is he who created all of existence, starting with randomly scattered dust, and sculpting it into a creation that, whilst not the most impressive of all creations, is in his opinion an indisputable improvement on randomly scattered dust. It is an achievement that he feels is largely unappreciated, by his fellow gods most of all.

He is tired. That time does not exist in the penthouse portions of his realm might prevent this from being an evening, but it has nonetheless failed to prevent it from being a long one. A very, long one.

"Look, can we please get back to what we were doing. Your mortals have entered an inn, and Lord Dealer's mortal was addressing the inn-keeper."

"This is not fair," says the Warrior. "The integrity of the way in which I guide my mortal has been bought into question. I demand the right to disprove the accusation."

He becomes aware that the figure who sits to the left of the AllFather has her attention fixed fully upon him. She is the Lady, Mistress of Man's Despair, and she is giving the Warrior a glare that would cause mortal men to soil themselves and run screaming back to their women-folk.

"Since when has integrity been a concern of yours?"

The Warrior is not a mortal man and he does not soil himself, although deep down inside him, something that passes for his soul, whimpers. He ignores this and draws himself up, projecting righteous hurt.

"That is not fair. I demand the right to disprove the allegations that have been made against me."

The AllFather snaps. "Fine! Right! Lord Warrior please enlighten us as to how mortals should be guided."

"But I was speaking!" protests the Dealer, rising out of his chair, hands waving in protest. He settles back when it becomes clear that none of his fellow gods is planning on supporting him.

The black-clad adventurer leaned forward, and spoke slowly, in a voice that sounded like hard-trodden gravel. "Two ales, one cider, a whisky, a white wine, five rooms, five bowls of stew, a bowl of water and some meat for the dog, stabling for three horses and a mule, two of your finest whores, and no pseudo-conversational bullshit." He didn't say please, and it was clear from his tone that this was not an accidental omission. The landlord gulped, and reached for the glasses, but paused when the adventurer tapped on the bar.

"Oh, and if you can just tell us where the adventure hook is, it'll save us all a load of wasted time."

"That's it?" asks the AllFather.

The Warrior shrugs in apparent confusion. "I have informed the landlord of our needs, and begun the task of finding the beginning of the next scenario. I fail to see what the problem is."

"You always do," says the Jester. "I'd say it's your biggest failing, were you not in possession of so many of them."

The AllFather clears his throat. He is not happy.

"What's the point of me filling the mortal realm with detail, flavour, and description, only for you to have your mortal stomp on in and ask where the adventure hook is?" He shuffles the slates that lie before him. "I mean really, what's the point?"

"The point of our mortals entering the inn is to find a hook to the next adventure," says the Warrior. "Everything else is wasted time."

The Dealer lets out an exasperated sigh.

The Warrior nods. "You disagree Lord Dealer?"

"How could I not?" the Dealer replies. He begins to count off objections on his fingers. "One, the adventure hook is a concept that has meaning only for us here. It has no meaning for our mortals or the mortal realm itself. Two, by seeking to ignore the detail and underlying meaning of the mortal realm you reduce its reality to a mere artefact upon which we play- "

"I'm just going to grab my cider," says the Jester.

"And I'll grab my white wine," says the Lady.

"I really think we ought to resolve this issue," says the Dealer. The Lady glares at him, hard. He throws up his hands and settles back

into his chair.

"And I'll look around for an old man sitting by the fire who's looking at us in a deep and enigmatic way," says the Jester.

"There's no old man sitting by the fire looking at you in a deep and enigmatic way," snaps the AllFather. He looks at the notes on the slates that lie before him. "All right, there is actually an old man by the fire looking at you, but can you please take this seriously!"

"I am taking it seriously!" protests the Jester. "I was telling you what my mortal was doing."

"You know I sometimes wonder why I bother," mutters the AllFather.

The Lady touches his hand. "Just ignore them."

The AllFather nods, then speaks to the Jester. "Right. Your mortal goes up to the table beside the fire where the old man is sitting and—"

"No he doesn't!"

"But you said that was what you wanted to do," says the AllFather wearily.

"No it wasn't. I said that I was looking to see if there was an enigmatic old man sitting by the fire."

"Which there is."

"And having established that, I'm going to sit at the opposite side of the room with my back to him."

"If you present your back to him, you allow him to attack first," says the Warrior.

"He's the adventure hook," says the Jester. "He's not going to attack."

"But if he is the adventure hook, why ignore him?" asks the Lady.

"The old fart can come to us, if he's that desperate. That way we start with an advantage in negotiations."

"Have it your way then. I'll have Tallenna go and sit next to Hill."

"And I suppose I'll have Yann sit with them," says the Dealer.

"You don't want to go and talk to the old man by the fire?" asks the AllFather.

"Why would Yann go and talk to him?" asks the Dealer. "As far as Yann knows he's just an old man sitting by the fire."

The AllFather sighs, and considers the possibility that he could simply give up now. He files that thought under things to consider later, and then turns his attention to the Warrior.

"Is Draag going to follow the others, or is he going to stay and harass the landlord?"

The Warrior shakes his head. "Now that the adventure hook has been identified I have no further need to interact with him." He thinks for a moment. "Draag's sword has not been lubricated with the blood of the fallen for some days now. Does the inn have any patrons whose demeanour indicates they might be willing to defend their honour?"

"No. It's a nice friendly place. People are just drinking."

"I'll try knocking into someone and spilling their beer."

"Fine. You knock into someone and spill his beer. He looks at you,

but says nothing when he sees what you look like, and then looks away."

The Warrior tuts. "Have it your way. I'll go and sit down with the others."

The sixth figure at the table has not yet spoken. He is the Sleeper, the Lord of Man's Inactivity. The AllFather looks at him now. "Lord Sleeper?"

"Yes?"

"Your mortal?"

"Oh, sorry." The Sleeper points across the table. "I'll follow them."

The stew was hot, meaty, and quite skilfully flavoured with a variety of herbs. Personally, Hill would have gone with a touch more pepper and a touch less salt but that was a pedantic detail. It was still a damn good stew. He scooped up the last mouthful, and then signalled the halfling serving girl for another bowlful.

"That'll be your fourth," said Tallenna, disapprovingly. She was still on her first bowl, picking delicately at it in her usual precise manner.

"Hey, I'm hungry. And I don't know when we'll get to eat properly again." The halfling serving girl took his bowl away and returned thirty seconds later with it full of gently steaming stew. He gave her a hopeful smile and she smiled a polite smile back. He shrugged a mental shrug. You can't win them all. Perhaps he'd examine the professional options available upstairs before turning in for the night.

"Would you mind sparing us the precise details of your mortal's sexual plans?" asks the Lady, coldly.

The Jester shakes himself back to awareness. "Sorry, did I say that out loud?"

"Yes!"

"Just running through options. I could try it on with the landlord's daughter?"

"Your mortal is three feet four tall with equipment to match. I fail to see what might induce her into such an encounter."

"Charm?" suggests the Jester. "And speaking of which, shouldn't I have got to make a charm test to see how the serving girl reacted to me?"

The AllFather is too bored and depressed to speak. He instead shrugs a resigned shrug, and nods a resigned nod.

The knucklebones dance across the table. "And that would be five successes," says the Jester, brightly.

From across the table the Lady tuts.

The serving girl paused in her journey back to the kitchen, turned her head, and sent a dazzling smile Hill's way.

Hill winked, and got an even more dazzling smile back.

"My friend," said Yann. "I sometimes find myself puzzled by your success with the women-folk."

"Charm and confidence mate," said Hill through a slurpful of soup. He paused for a moment, and then put his spoon down. "See, you start okay. The chicks really dig the body paint and the furs and all that."

"The body paint is intended to show respect for the ancestors whose bones I inherited."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Well whatever. The chicks see it and think wild man of the plains, but then—"

He paused, searching for the words.

"You start reciting your family tree at them," said Draag.

Hill looked down at the table, pained. "You have no idea how much it hurts me to agree with him, but that's pretty much nailed the axe head onto its handle."

Yann looked pained. "But what's wrong with me showing a girl I have pride in my heritage?"

"Because when you're after a casual roll in the hay, the last thing you want to be making her think about is reproduction."

Yann nodded, thoughtfully. Tallenna touched his arm. "Ignore them. I'm a woman and it baffles me how either of them attract company." She pointed at Draag. "Him especially!"

Draag took a slow sip from his whisky, and then spoke. "A warrior has no need of attraction. What a warrior wants, he takes!"

"Shall we just not go there?" says the Jester.

"Seconded," says the Lady.

The Warrior waves his hands in confused protest, but says nothing.

"Perhaps we could actually get back to the story?" suggests the AllFather sarcastically.

The Jester shrugs. "Hey, if you're getting bored, send the adventure hook over to talk to us."

The AllFather looks down at slate before him. He has rumours and clues, merchants and troubadours, intrigue, adventure and plot. He allows himself a quiet moment of desperation, then sighs. He puts that slate aside and grabs the next one from the pile. He begins to read.

"An old man who has been sitting by the fire approaches you..."

Age sat upon the old man like mountains sit upon the world. Deep furrows scored his face and wrinkles lined his hands, and when he began his account with the words "Long I have lived and much have I seen..." Yann was

inclined to believe him.

"We here on the uplands are a proud and decent people," said the old man. "Poor but worthy."

The Jester pricks up his ears. "Poor? I don't like the sound of that!"

"Can you at least wait until he's finished talking?" snaps the AllFather.

"Sorry," mouths the Jester, before miming an apologetic mouth-zipping gesture.

The AllFather looks doubtful for a moment, then resumes speaking.

"But below us in the canyon downlands are beasts who are neither proud nor worthy."

"How about poor? Sorry. Forgot. Carry on."

"Goblins they are, green of skin and black of heart. They climb up the cliffs of the canyons and attack us in our homes. They steal our food, our weapons, and..." The old man paused here, as though unable to force the words out. "Our children."

He stopped again. Tallenna laid a hand on his arm. "Go on."

He nodded a thanks and continued. "We are a peaceful people who know not how to defend ourselves against these vicious attacks. My wife is skilled in the reading of the clouds in a man's ale; she read mine, and prophesied that I would meet five adventurers here, in this tavern, who I would ask to travel down into the downlands and stop the attacks."

"Did she say if we'd say yes?" laughs the Jester. "Maybe she just wanted to get him out from under her feet each evening?"

"I am trying to get a bit of atmosphere going here!"

"Sorry!"

"And how would we do that?" asked Yann.

"Do what?" asked the old man.

"Stop the attacks."

"I don't know. My wife didn't say."

"We could slaughter every last goblin!" exclaimed Draag. "Male, female, old and young! And their animals!"

"Well that would do it," said the old man, shrugging.

"I am uneasy about this," says the Dealer. "This whole story strikes me as rumour and prejudice born out of an unequal economic situation."

From either side of him, the Warrior and the Jester stare at him with questioning expressions on their faces.

"Okaay," says the Jester. "Personally I'm not happy about the whole prophecy thing. Mark my words, nothing good ever comes of following prophecies."

"And I too am troubled," says the Warrior. "Goblins are inferior opponents who will not provide the experience and challenge my mortal requires to improve his skills." He looks at the AllFather. "Could you not have provided us with something more challenging? Ogres perhaps? Or a dragon?"

"This is not rumour," shouted the old man. The dam that had held his emotions in check was breaking now. Tears of frustration welled in his eyes and distress rippled across his face like a wind-blown pond. "Nor prejudice. I have seen the results of their attacks with my own eyes. I am sorry if you feel that goblins are not worthy opponents for you, but we are desperate. Truly desperate."

Hill settled back in his chair, an angry expression on his face. "We weren't talking to him. We were just making general points amongst ourselves."

The old man touched him on the arm, confused. "Who are you talking to?"

The AllFather holds up a hand to quell the resulting outcry. "Look! The old man is there, and it isn't possible for you to communicate between yourselves without him hearing – unless any of you have telepathic abilities?"

He looks around the table. The Sleeper stirs as the AllFather's gaze settles upon him. "Do I have what?"

"Does your mortal have telepathic abilities?"

"I don't know. Does he?"

"No."

"Oh. Okay."

The AllFather shakes his head, then resumes. "The point is that if you discuss the situation between yourselves then the old man will be aware of it. If you don't want him to hear what you're saying, then you'll have to send him away."

Yann leaned forward, and touched the old man on the arm. "Could you give us a few moments to discuss things?"

"Certainly," said the old man, not moving.

"Without you!" boomed Draag. A few of the patrons looked up, startled, but looked back down again when they met his fierce and frankly psychotic glare.

"Of course," said the old man. He hauled himself painfully to his feet, and shuffled off slowly, joints audibly creaking.

They gave him a few seconds to get clear, and then leaned in for a hunched

whispering session.

“I’ll not agree to any mass slaughter,” said Yann. “I can have no part of this.”

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be mass slaughter,” said Tallenna. “We can work out what needs to be done when we get there.”

“And then slaughter them!” declared Draag.

Yann sat back, shaking his head.

“Personally, I’m okay with the mass slaughter as long as I’m being well paid,” said Hill. “How much are we being paid, anyway?”

“He did not say,” said Draag.

Hill poked his head out of the huddle and shouted across the tavern. “Oy?”

The old man turned, slowly.

“Can we ask you a quick question?”

The old man shuffled back. It took several seconds. “Yes?” he asked.

“How much can you pay us for this?”

“You must understand that while my people are rich in spirit and generous in heart they are poor in wealth. This is a barren place we live in and—”

“Yeah, yeah. Look cut the crap and give us a rough figure.”

The Jester becomes aware that he is being fixed by the AllFather’s unhappy gaze. “What?” he exclaims, throwing his hands up by his sides. “Tell me you haven’t got a figure scribed there on your slate?”

“We can offer you two thousand gold crowns each,” said the old man. “That will leave us living on bare bones for several years, but it will be worth it if you can rid us of this curse.”

“How about three thousand?” suggested Hill.

The Jester becomes aware that his last statement appears to have generated some dissatisfaction among the other participants at the table.

“What?” he says. “You’re telling me you’re not allowed to haggle?”

The Lady stares hard at him. “These people are desperate beyond measure and you want to exploit them without mercy?”

“Yes. When people are desperate beyond measure is precisely when you should exploit them without mercy.”

The old man was gasping like he’d been punched hard in the gut. “We have no more money. All that we can spare we have offered you. To offer any more would be to condemn the children of future years to starvation.”

Hill shrugged, slurped the last of his soup, and signalled the serving girl for another bowl, making sure to give her the full thousand-candle smile.

She returned with a full, steaming bowl.

A very awkward silence settled over the rough, wooden table, broken only by the slurping of soup.

"Anyone else?" asks the AllFather hopefully. He gets no response, save an apologetic shrug from the Lady. "One of your mortals must have something to say?"

Draag leaned over the table. "Do you know where there are any dragons?"

The AllFather slaps the slate back onto the table. "Right. Fine. Have it your way. The old man realises that you are not the adventurers he was looking for but just five random wasters that happened to walk in through the door. He goes back to his place by the fire and drinks to forget his pain and disappointment."

Silence settles.

And stays.

Finally, the Jester speaks. "So, is anything else happening in the inn?"

"Not really."

"Well something must be happening?"

"There are people drinking. There are people eating."

"Are there any games of cards going?"

"Yes. There are five men playing over by the window."

"Cool! I'll go and join in."

The Jester grabs his knucklebones.

"You join in, you play a few hands, you lose. Take one hundred gold off your mortal's wealth total."

"Are you annoyed?"

"No, no, not at all! All I've done is create an entire universe and fill it with wondrous things for you to spend your time ignoring. Why would I be annoyed?"

"Just asking."

"Well then don't. In fact, don't speak at all."

Silence resumes.

"My mortal will not be a party to genocide," says the Dealer.

"Yes, I think you've made your position plain," snaps the AllFather.

The Lady lays a hand on his arm. "Perhaps we should just say that our mortals go to their beds, sleep thought the night, and then wake up the next morning to see what the new day brings?"

The AllFather sighs. "Fine. You all go to bed."

The Jester coughs.

"What?"

"Wasn't I on a promise with the serving girl?"

The halfling serving girl was young, barely into her mid-thirties, and the fur on her feet still had the velvety quality that would later fade with age. Hill gave them a last stroke, then started up her legs. Diddin was two feet ten of pure loveliness and he aimed to take his time enjoying her.

It was just a shame she wanted to talk.

"So what brought you here, so far from the County?" she asked him.

"This and that," he replied. "Wanted to see a bit of the world. And I had a bit of a situation back home I wanted to get away from."

She looked up at him, serious now. "Was it a woman?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, sort of. It was complicated." That wasn't a complete lie; parts of that statement did venture into territory that might be described as truthful. Henna Blackroot had been a woman, but she was a hundred and thirty years old and it had actually all been very simple. Hill had taken a barrelful of cash from her burrow, and she was, as a result, angry enough to spend some of her remaining cash on high-class, professional debt collectors with a reputation for skilfully applied violence.

It was something Hill generally avoided talking about as it invariably caused listeners to worry he might steal from them. This often had a damaging effect on the relationship as well as making them guard their property much more efficiently – which obviously had a damaging effect on his future earnings. "What brought you here?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I came here when I was a little girl. My father was a travelling chef. After he died, the inn-keeper adopted me."

"You mean, he's like your father?"

"Yes."

Hill thought for a moment. "Does he know you're here with me?"

"No, silly!" She punched him on the arm. "Why, are you worried he'll burst in here to defend my honour?"

Hill laughed. "Of course not!" He took a quick look sideways to make sure that his crossbow was safely to hand, and loaded. It was. He turned his attention back to the girl. "Now where were we?"

"I think we can leave it at that," says the AllFather. He might be the architect of all of creation but frankly he finds some of it a little icky.

"Please do," says the Lady, ignoring the Jester's poked out tongue.

"It's two o'clock in the morning," says the AllFather. "And your mortals are all asleep—"

"I'm not asleep!" interrupts the Jester. "I'm still doing the serving girl!"

"Doing?" asks the Lady, a disapproving eyebrow raised.

"Whatever. The point is I wouldn't be asleep."

"After two and a half hours? I wouldn't give your mortal two and a half minutes!"

"Yeah, well the first two hours of it was her talking, thanks to him" – he nods at the AllFather – "wanting to use her to force feed exposition at me."

The AllFather glares at him.

"Fine. Make a stamina test."

The Jester's knucklebones dance across the table. The AllFather glances at them.

"Your mortal's asleep and has been for some time."

The Warrior half-stifles a giggle.

The AllFather thinks for a moment, and remembers a phrase he once heard at an inter-disciplinary conference of supreme beings. If my players won't go to the mountain, he thinks, I'll just have to dump the mountain on top of them.

Chapter Two

Crotchknot had dreamed of the upabove world as long as he'd been dreaming. His mother had told him tales of the lands that lay at the top of the cliffs and he, goblin youngling that he was, had lapped them up.

When the sun dipped below the canyon walls she would put him to bed in their cave, tuck his furs around him, and then tell him stories. She talked of fabulous riches, of knives of cold, hard shiny stone, and of the giants that made them. Why, she would say, lowering her voice, some of those giants stand nearly twice as tall as goblins such as we!

Crotchknot had dreamed. But now he was going to see. Each year of his childhood he'd watched his father and uncles climb the cliffs that led to the upabove world, returning with food and weapons and items of wonder. He'd practised on the cliff, climbing up its lower reaches. Once he made it up so high that his father had beaten him when he'd finally came down.

For three summers he'd begged to go raiding with them, and been refused. But now finally, they'd relented. Son, his father had said, you're a goblin now, and ready to do a goblin's work.

Crotchknot climbed quickly, and skilfully. They had been climbing three days already, camping each night on ledges found generations ago by their raiding forefathers. Now they were on the final night-time climb to the top of the cliff. His father had wanted him to stay back, but he was eager to see the magical world of the upabove giants. Handhold followed handhold, and foothold followed foothold. And then he was there, hauling himself onto the flat land at the top of the cliff. A couple of other goblins followed him. He nodded at them, and then looked around.

A building stood before him, implausibly wide and impossibly high. One of the goblins whispered in his ear. "That's what they call an inn. The giants sleep in the high rooms, and they have riches." The other goblin ran silently over to the building and began to scale its ivy-clad surface, heading for an opening set high on the wall. Crotchknot followed him, heading for an adjacent opening.

He reached the opening – which he saw had wooden shutters that could be closed to cover it – and peered in. Two figures were visible in the gloom, huddled together in a bed. But the view he was seeing didn't make sense. The bed was indeed built for giants, but its inhabitants were no bigger than himself. Had his mother, and his father, and his uncles and cousins lied to him? Had the stories of giants been just that – stories?

Not thinking, mind whirring, but training and tradition taking over, he reached behind him to take his crossbow from his back and bring it forward

to the window sill. He pulled the string back, placed a bolt, and then – ready now – prepared to haul himself into the room.

Then a shout came from the adjacent opening his goblin comrade had climbed through. A loud shout. A shout of a giant. A deep noise that echoed through the still night air. A booming exhortation that proclaimed: “Oy! That’s my bloody stuff!”

He looked towards the shout for a moment.

And then pain, exquisite pain. He thought of his mother. And then it all went black.

Hill wasn’t much of a morning person at the best of times, but waking up to find a goblin pointing the business end of a crossbow at you wasn’t how he’d choose to start a day. He was just thankful that the goblin had been distracted long enough by the racket next door for him to grab his crossbow and put a bolt between the little sod’s eyes.

He jumped out of bed, dashed over to the window, and looked out. The goblin lay on the ground several feet below. He pulled the crossbow’s string back, dropped another bolt into place, and shot it into the still twitching corpse.

“Just making sure,” he told Diddin, who looked like she was trying not to vomit the breakfast she hadn’t yet had.

The Jester picks up the slate that lies on the table before him. It is his mortal’s life-slate, and upon it is described the totality of his mortal’s being and essence. Well, a summary of the bits that matter, at least.

He needs no chalk or cutter. He is a god, and can inscribe the slate by thought alone. He does so now, adding a tally to a column.

“Just marking the kill down for experience,” he explains. “Mind you, it’s hardly worth it with goblins.”

“It is as I said,” says the Warrior. “Our mortals have advanced beyond the point where goblins offer a worthwhile quarry. Why should we bother to fight them?”

“Because there’s one of them in your room trying to kill you?” suggests the AllFather.

The Warrior tuts, then casts his knucklebones across the table. “Four successes,” he announces, looking questioningly at the AllFather. “I believe that means there is no longer a goblin in my room trying to kill me.”

The AllFather nods, and makes a mark on his notes. “Lord Dealer. You look out of the window of your room, but all the goblins appear to have left the beer garden. Then you all hear shouts from outside.”

“What are they saying?” asks the Dealer.

“They’re saying: they’re going for the church!”

“I’ll grab my equipment, and head on out towards the church.

That's at the far end of the town, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll follow him," says the Lady.

"And I suppose I will as well," says the Warrior, grumpily. "If nothing else, it will keep the sword lubricated."

"Hang on a minute!" asks the Jester. "How did they get into our rooms so easily? Wouldn't the windows have been closed by shutters?"

"You left the shutters open."

"No I didn't!"

"You never said you were closing them."

"I never said I was leaving them open, either! Why on earth would anyone leave the shutters wide open at night?"

"Because it's summer and very hot."

"Right..." says the Jester in a dubious tone. "But even if we accept that, and I'm not saying I am, how did the goblins manage to climb up to the second floor?"

"They climbed up the ivy."

"The ivy?"

"Yes."

"You're telling me that the inn's covered in ivy?"

"Yes."

"And it was covered in ivy when we arrived yesterday evening?"

"Well of course it was! Are you suggesting that it grew overnight?"

"No, I'm suggesting that someone went back and re-edited reality!"

"I resent that," snaps the AllFather, a little quickly. Gods don't have consciences. Consciences are for mortal men and dogs and are managed for the gods by the Mother, Mistress of Man's Guilt. Nonetheless, the AllFather feels a nagging creeping sensation in the hairs at the back of his neck. He ignores it. He is the lord of all creation, and if he says the inn had ivy then ivy it had. "The inn had ivy yesterday," he tells the Jester.

"You never mentioned it," says the Jester, dubiously.

"You never asked!"

"Why would I ask?"

"Does it matter?" asks the Lady.

"It's all right for you," the Jester tells her. "You didn't have a little love-making session interrupted!"

"I thought we'd established that you'd finished."

"I was just taking a break."

The Warrior leans forward, the expression on his face suggesting that he is thinking, hard. "Lord Jester has a good point though. These people are supposedly under siege by regular goblin attacks, and yet they leave their buildings covered in ivy. That makes no tactical sense whatsoever!"

"They might as well put up ladders," suggests the Jester.

"Look! The two of you have dispatched the goblins attempting to break into your rooms. Now you can hear the sounds of battle from the other end of the town. Mistress Lady and Lord Dealer have

decided that their mortals will head on in that direction. If you carry on debating the architectural and fortificational merits of this community's building styles then I'll have no option but to rule that you didn't accompany them."

"Fine, I'll follow them," says the Jester. "But I still think it's all very dodgy."

The AllFather ignores him. "Lord Warrior?"

"I will go. But I too wish to register a formal protest about the presence of the ivy."

"Fine. Noted. Anyway, you find yourselves at the end of town, on a plateau that juts out over the canyon. Cliffs surround it on three sides. A thin line of villagers is holding back the goblins, but they seem to be weakening. Perhaps we should cast the knucklebones to determine the order in which your mortals react?"

They hurtled into the battle, bolstering the thin line of men as it was just about to break. Yann had his quarterstaff out, its ends whirring fast enough to slice the air, taking down first one goblin, and then its companion. Tallenna was behind him, firing short bolts of magic over his head and spreading death and confusion in the goblin rear. And to either side of him were Draag and Hill, swords flashing, dipped green now in goblin blood. He spun his quarterstaff once more—

"Don't I get a turn?" asks the Sleeper.

"Ah," says the AllFather. "Well you didn't actually say your mortal was leaving the inn."

"You didn't ask me. But I wouldn't have stayed there. I would have followed them."

"Well your mortal was actually asleep. You failed the cast to wake up."

"Oh." He looks down, upset.

The Dealer, tries and fails to speak, embarrassed. Eventually he shrugs, apologetically. "I think we would have banged on his door and woken him up."

The AllFather thinks for a moment. "Fine. We'll say that Stone accompanied your mortals to the battle. Lord Sleeper, what would you have your mortal do?"

The Sleeper points in the vague direction of the Warrior, the Dealer and the Jester. "I'll do what they're doing."

For several minutes the outcome of the battle had been unknown to any save fate and perhaps the gods. The goblins were weak, but they were many, and the men of the village were not skilled in combat as Yann and his companions were. Now though, the tide appeared to be turning. Yann clubbed another of the green-skinned beings down with his quarterstaff, then risked a quick glance around him to check on the progress of his comrades. Draag was

surrounded by bodies and screaming for more, beckoning the goblins towards him with a mixture of shouts, gestures, insults and pleas. Tallenna was behind them, still firing her short bolts of magic over their heads. And Hill. Hill appeared to be winding up, drawing his sword back, and back, and back...

"For a moment there I wasn't sure which way it was going to go," says the Jester, picking up his knucklebones.

"Victory was never in doubt as long as he played it fair," says the Warrior, staring hard at the AllFather. The AllFather gives him a black look in return, then turns back to the Jester.

"Well now that you feel victory is in sight, Lord Jester, what would you have your mortal do?"

"You could suggest that they surrender?" says the Lady.

"I agree," says the Dealer. "The battle has been won. Any bloodshed beyond this is meaningless."

"I disagree," says the Warrior. "The situation is the opposite. With the battle now won, the risk to experience ratio has never been better!"

The Dealer sighs theatrically, and turns away from the Warrior.

"Lord Jester?" asks the AllFather. "Your mortal's action?"

The Jester thinks for a moment, considers his options, and then decides. "I'll go for a decapitation slice on the next goblin in line."

"A decapitation attempt?"

"Yes."

"Why?" asks the Lady.

"Because I can?" He points down at his mortal's life-slate. "I have the skill. It's written down there."

"Fine. Make your cast."

The knucklebones skitter and bounce across the table. The Jester spends a moment counting. "Three successes."

"Your sword neatly removes the goblin's head," says the AllFather, flatly. "It bounces away, a look of surprise upon its face."

"Cool!"

"Lord Sleeper?"

"I'll do what he's doing."

The AllFather waves a hand at the knucklebones that sit in front of the Sleeper. "Oh," says the Sleeper. He picks them up, throws them across the table, and then proceeds to stare at them in some puzzlement.

"No successes?" he finally ventures.

"Your mortal has failed in his attempt to decapitate the goblin before him."

Time slowed, stilled, and froze, became a mere canvas upon which images could play across Yann's mind. They displayed slowly, trance-like, with the inexorability of a flat stone skimming across a calm pond. Skip, skip, skip.

He saw Stone, clad in heavy plate and wielding a great-sword, turning,

spinning, swinging the blade upward – a desperate swipe that fully missed its target, and then, incredibly, horribly...

The Warrior clears his throat. "I believe Lord Sleeper's mortal does not possess the specific skill of decapitation."

"Well that hardly matters now, does it?" says the AllFather wearily.

"It doesn't?" asks the Warrior.

"No," says the AllFather. He pauses for a moment. "Does it?"

The Warrior draws himself up, wearing an expression of concerned innocence. "Well it's my understanding that if the knucklebones revealed no success at all during an action in which the mortal had no skill, as I believe is the case with Lord Sleeper's mortal, then the result is more than mere failure?"

The AllFather considers this for a moment, and consults the slate he holds before him. A stack of similar slates lie on the table beside it. "Well I don't think we need worry about that. Anyway--"

"But surely the sanctity of the mortal realm requires us to consult the knucklebones however they fall!"

The Jester leans forward, an impish smile on his face. "And what would be the result of such a full and complete failure?"

"I really think--"

The Warrior cuts in. "The action that the mortal was attempting to perform on another is instead performed upon himself."

Yann saw the blade sweep past the exposed neck of the goblin raider and continue, turning, glinting in the sun as it paused at the top of its arc, and then fell back towards the soil.

And its wielder.

The gods pause, and consider this.

The Lady is the first to speak. "You are asking us to believe that Lord Sleeper's mortal has decapitated himself?"

"I am merely pointing out the rules by which we ensure the sanctity of the mortal realm," declares the Warrior. "A botch has been cast, and Lord Sleeper's mortal must face the consequences!"

"Exactly!" says the Jester. "It's times like this you see whether a man can keep his head – although I think that going to be a big ask now for Lord Sleeper's mortal."

The Lady transfers her glare to him.

The Dealer leans forward and extends a pedantic finger. "Actually, Lord Warrior, I believe the knucklebones merely indicate that there is now a risk that Lord Sleeper's attack may strike his mortal. He has to cast them again to see if that actually happens."

"Yes," says the AllFather quickly.

"I stand corrected," says the Warrior through gritted teeth.

Five gods stare at the Sleeper, who blinks and looks back.

"Sorry, did you want me to make another cast?"

He gathers up his knucklebones, casts them across the table, and counts, slowly. "Four successes!" he announces brightly. "What was it for?"

"How many successes did he need to perform a decapitation?" asks the Lady.

"With his armour, three," replies the Jester.
Silence settles.

The blade cleaved into the plate-mail's neck joint and through Stone's neck. His head, an expression of stunned surprise frozen upon it, sailed away, bounced, and rolled. Its former body stood for a moment, a jet of blood frothing from its neck stump, then fell to its knees before crumpling to the floor.

The images cleared, and time renewed.

This was no time to grieve, faced as they were by a dozen angry goblins, but Yann's thoughts could not be stilled. Why had Stone chosen such a risky and out of character attack? In the name of all, why?

The Dealer leans forward, and speaks slowly. "Surely Lord Sleeper's mortal would not have acted so, would not have performed an action that he knew not how to do?"

"You would have to ask Lord Sleeper that," says the AllFather. He looks at the Sleeper, who looks back.

"Sorry? What?"

"Why did he do it, anyway?" asks the Jester.

It is the Lady who supplies the Jester with an answer. "Because you had your mortal perform a decapitation and then when Lord AllFather asked Lord Sleeper what he would wish his mortal do, he pointed it at you and said, I'll do what he's doing."

"You say that like it's all my fault."

"Isn't it?"

"No. My mortal can do decapitations. And speaking of which, whose turn is it?"

Yann clubbed another goblin down with his quarterstaff, then looked across at Hill. Three goblin heads surrounded the halfling; his sword flashed in at the exposed neck of a fourth goblin, and missed.

The halfling shouted what was presumably a halfling curse, shrugged, pointed to one side, waited until the goblin's eyes followed his outstretched hand, then kicked the creature hard in the nether regions.

The Lady looks across the table at the Jester. "Classy."

The Jester waves a hand at the knucklebones that lay before him. "The knucklebones say that my mortal's bluff worked. Who am I to argue with them?"

"You argued with them when they said your last decapitation

attempt failed!"

"Well that's when they're wrong. And anyway, I don't see your mortal doing much!"

"Wait and see," she tells him. "You might even learn something."

Tallenna's voice spoke from behind Yann, speaking words unknown and yet familiar; a language of magic that unleashed forces locked into the universe since the time of its creation. The book-learned magic the sorceress wielded was not that which Yann's shaman-father had taught him, but it had saved their lives more times than there are clouds in a winter sky, and he trusted her now.

She stepped forward to stand beside him, raised her arms, and chanted the final words of her spell. Ten thin streams of cold, white fog jetted out from ten outstretched fingers, merging into a billowing, expanding cloud. An impenetrable blanket settled upon the rocky plateau on which they fought.

An angry voice shouted, muffled by the fog, but clearly identifiable.

Draag.

It is clear from the expression he wears on his face that the Warrior is not happy with the way events have proceeded. "I fail to see the logic behind the actions you have had your mortal take. How are we to kill the goblins if we cannot see them?"

"We need not kill the goblins," the Lady tells him. "We can simply retreat outside the cloud, and wait. They are surrounded on three sides by sheer drops, and on the fourth side by us. They can wander around in the fog and fall to their deaths, or walk forward towards us, and either surrender, or die at the hands of my lightning bolts and Yann's bow."

"That is unacceptable! You are depriving my mortal of the experience he would have gained from killing the goblins whilst ensuring that your mortal will not be so affected."

"How far is your mortal off gaining a new set of abilities?" asks the Jester.

"That is immaterial," says the Warrior, too quickly. "I demand that Mistress Lady take her action back. It is unfair!"

"No," says the Lady. "And besides, I can't take back what I've already done."

"We could just say it never happened."

"What about the sanctity of the mortal realm?" asks the Dealer.

The Warrior gives him a long, hard stare, then slumps back into his chair, sighing theatrically.

"So what would you have your mortals do?" asks the AllFather.

"I'll retreat back alongside Tallenna," says the Dealer. "Covering her in case any of the goblins catch up with us."

The Lady nods.

"I'll do the same," says the Jester.

"Your mortal doesn't actually know they're retreating," the

AllFather points out. "Hill only knows that a fog has enveloped him. He can't see anything."

"Well in which case he'd go backwards, wouldn't he?"

The AllFather nods confirmation of a point fairly made.

The Sleeper points across the table at the Dealer and the Jester.

"I'll follow them."

An abomination loomed out of the fog, a thing terrible beyond words, a sight that would shake the strongest of men and leave his sanity tattered and frayed. A headless body, clad in rusted armour and holding a plain and unadorned sword, but with merely a ragged stump where a head, a face, a person should be.

And yet, it moved, walked.

Yann hefted his staff, feeling a scream rising in his throat, and-

"You can't," the AllFather tells the Sleeper. "You're dead."

"Oh sorry." The Sleeper settles back in his chair. His eyes flick back and forth, but the expression of puzzled confusion does not leave his face. "I'll just stay where I am then."

The AllFather looks at the Warrior. "Lord Dealer, Mistress Lady and Lord Jester are having Yann, Tallenna and Hill retreat away from the goblins and out of the fog. What would you have Draag do?"

"I shall attack!"

"Attack what?"

"The goblins!"

"And where are they? Your mortal cannot see his hand in front of his face."

"I shall stay in the fog and search!"

"You are aware that your mortal is on a small plateau that is surrounded on three sides by sheer drops."

"Draag fears nothing!"

The AllFather sighs. "We shall consult the knucklebones..."

Chapter Three

The granite slab was cold; the corpse that lay upon it colder. Bitter is the biting wind of an unchained storm of grief. Several hours had elapsed since Stone's bizarre and untimely death, and still Yann struggled to draw meaning or solace from it. The nomadic people of his tribe considered life to be a journey, a voyage of discovery across both steppe and season. Stone's life journey had ended early, at this time, and at this place, and Yann knew not why. Where he sought understanding he found only questions.

Why do the fates choose one man to die and another to live?

Why was it Stone whose body lay cold upon the slab while his soul walked to eternity, and not he?

He cleared the memories away with a shake of his head and returned to the moment, standing before Stone's cold and lifeless body. Hill stepped up beside him, and sighed.

"It's a real shame," said the halfling.

"It is a tragedy," replied Yann. "Stone was a young man who had only just begun his journey in life. And now that journey is finished."

Hill looked at him quizzically. "What? I meant it was a shame we're going to have to stump up some hard cash in possibly quite serious amounts to have him bought back!"

"You mean, resurrection?"

"Why else did you think we dragged him five miles to the nearest temple?"

"Respect for a fallen comrade?" spluttered Yann. "A desire to aid his soul's journey to the next stage of its existence?"

The halfling laughed, "Right!" and then dropped down into a low mutter. "If it was up to me I'd have left him there, but you know what Tallenna's like."

The argument pauses for a moment, as the Dealer thinks of an answer, then fluidly resumes when it arrives.

"Yann would never accept this! Stone's soul has begun its journey to a better state of existence. What possible motive could Yann have for collaborating in an attempt to call that soul back?"

"Letting Lord Sleeper continue to play his character?" asks the Lady.

The Sleeper stirs at the mention of his name. "Sorry, did you need me to..." he says, reaching for his knucklebones.

"No," the Lady tells him icily. "You're still dead."

"Yeah. Because it would be such a shame for him to miss out on the game, wouldn't it?" says the Jester, ignoring her furious glare.

"We are wasting time!" says the Warrior. "We should either perform the resurrection, or leave and have Lord Sleeper create a

new mortal.”

“Oh, don't say that,” says the Jester. “That'll take him forever. You know what he's like.”

“Then we are agreed. Resurrection it is, yes?”

The Lady and the Jester nod followed, a moment later, by a clearly upset and reluctant Dealer.

The head-priest bustled in, accompanied by a couple of flunkys. Tallenna had seen his like many times. It was always the busy-body bean-counters that made their way to the top of the tree, and never the genuinely devout.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, but I was just finishing off the temple accounts with the Almoner.” He caught sight of the shrouded body laying upon the altar, and switched seamlessly into bedside mode, all empathic voice and concerned expression.

“Welcome, welcome.” He sized them up with a couple of quick glances, then resumed. “Adventurers I see. And you have a fallen comrade?”

“Clearly,” said Draag. He sighed theatrically, and motioned the man to get on with it.

The head-priest ignored him, and continued on in the same tone. “Would you like a standard blessing to send him on his way? That's a free service, but for a small fee we can add a choir and a selection of seasonal flowers?”

Tallenna leaned forward and spoke softly, aware of the magnitude of what she was asking. “No. We want him back.”

“Ah. Resurrection?”

“Yes.”

“Well I'm afraid there is an extra charge for that.” He laughed nervously, which was probably understandable given that he was attempting to extract money from four heavily armed and at least partially grief-stricken individuals.

“How much?” asked Hill.

The head-priest pasted on a hopeful smile. “Twelve thousand gold crowns?”

“Bollocks to that, that's daylight robbery!” said Hill. He looked at the others. “Come on, we're going. Let's leave the stiff and find a tavern. We could hire a dozen men at arms for that.”

“What?” says the Jester as he finds himself the target of the Lady's now incandescent glare.

“We are not leaving Stone behind,” she says slowly.

“Look, I've got no objection to having Stone raised. But the price they're charging is ridiculous.”

The Dealer sits forward, uneasy. “I must admit that I find it difficult to understand the rationale by which religious orders universally charge such high sums of money for resurrection. Surely

altruistic organisations such as themselves should be performing the action for free, rather than so cruelly taking advantage of desperate and grieving people."

The AllFather shrugs awkwardly. "Well there have to be some limiting factors," he says. "If you could have your mortals resurrected for little or no penalty then you would not fear their deaths, would you?"

"But what about the sanctity of the mortal realm? Surely it is not right for us to warp and pervert the ways in which it works, merely to provide us with appropriate challenges?"

The AllFather shifts in his chair. "Well, it's all a case of balance, isn't it?"

"I'll try haggling," says the Jester, picking up his knuckebones.

"You're actually going to haggle over the cost of Stone's soul?" asks the Lady.

"Yes. Because frankly, it isn't worth as much as that sky-rider's asking." He casts the knuckebones over the table. "Three successes. I figure that should be good for a discount."

"Well, we could perhaps offer a special rate," said the head-priest, wringing his hands. "For ones as obviously devout as yourselves."

"How special?" asked Hill.

"Ten thousand gold crowns?"

Tallenna spoke quickly to cut across whatever it was Hill was about to say. "We'll take it."

He threw up his hands in horror and annoyance, but she ignored him. "Can you do the service now?" she asked.

"It'll take a short while to gather up the required number of acolytes," he replied. "Also we need to get some oils and balms. And of course," he added, bending down and dropping his voice low. "You might need some time to get the payment together. We do require cash in advance, I'm afraid." He straightened back up again. "But if you have it with you, I feel confident that we can have your comrade back with you in half an hour or so. Will that be acceptable?"

"Of course," said Tallenna, ignoring Hill's exaggerated sigh.

"Good, good. I'll have the novices bring you some tea while you wait. But first, let's just have a quick look at your temporarily late friend."

He slowly pulled the shroud away and studied Stone's body. He looked, looked again, and then took a long, third and final look. Finally, he turned and faced Tallenna.

"Where's the head?" he asked.

"Is it not there?" asks the Lady.

"Well, no," says the AllFather. "You only bought the body."

"That's ridiculous," says the Jester. "Of course we bought the

head. Why would we not have bought the head?"

"I don't know. But you didn't. Lord Dealer and Lord Warrior announced that they were taking hold of a foot each, and dragging the body to the temple. Mistress Lady announced that she was carrying Stone's sword. I seem to recall that you were attempting to use the body as a sleigh. At no point whatsoever did anyone say that they were going to pick up the head. Which as you all knew, was no longer attached to the body."

"But just because we forgot to say it, doesn't mean our mortals would have left it there."

"Well they did."

"Do you really think my mortal would have just dragged off a headless body without thinking about the head?"

"Yes."

The Jester thinks for a moment. "All right, fair point. But do you really think his mortal" – he points at the Dealer – "would have left it?"

"Yann would not have left the head," says the Dealer. "Stone was his brother both in arms and in travel and he would have wanted to keep his body whole while his soul travelled to the next realm." He pauses for a moment. "Although admittedly, that was before he realised the sacrilegious process we were about to initiate."

"Whatever. The point is that he wouldn't have left the head behind."

"Well he did," snaps the AllFather. "You all did. Stone's body is lying on the altar minus its head."

"Do we actually need the damned head?" asks the Warrior, bored. "Surely resurrection heals the body as well as recalling the soul?"

"Well the head-priest appeared to see it as an issue," says the Jester.

"Maybe he's just shocked at people dragging in the headless body of their comrade and not bothering to bring the head," suggests the Lady.

"True. But anyway, do we need it?"

The Lady shrugs, then looks at the AllFather.

"You'll have to ask him," he tells her.

"Well of course you need the bloody head!" snapped the head-priest. "We might by the graces of the gods be miracle workers but I'm afraid that the obviously bloody impossible is sadly beyond us!" He made a visible effort to calm down. "It doesn't need to be attached, but it does need to be there. Unless you want me to give you a headless, soulless, unthinking automaton!"

"How would we notice the difference?" asks the Jester, cackling.

"We'll have to go back and get it," Tallenna declared, in a tone intended to forestall any arguments Yann might have.

He nodded, unhappy, but accepting. "Whatever misgivings I might have

about this process, Stone's body should be made whole."

"We'll be back," she told the head-priest.

She left, followed by her three comrades. Hill paused in the doorway, and turned back. "Just hang on to the stiff until we're back, okay?"

"The plateau is bare and featureless," says the AllFather. "You cannot see any heads."

"You're saying that someone has come in and taken it?" asks the Jester.

"I'm not saying anything," says the AllFather. "Just that you can't see any heads."

"This is both stupid and boring," says the Warrior, his arms angrily folded. "We should tell Lord Sleeper to create a new mortal."

"Well where was the head when last we saw it?" asks the Lady.

"You don't remember seeing any heads."

"Can we make a cast to see if we noticed it when we were collecting Stone's body?"

He nods. "Certainly."

Four sets of knucklebones bounce across the table, followed by four announcements of results.

"One success."

"Four successes."

"Two successes."

"One success."

"You don't recall seeing any heads," says the AllFather.

"Not even me with four successes?" asks the Jester.

"No. You didn't see any heads."

"Could someone from the village have stolen it?" asks the Dealer. "I find the thought most troubling, but nonetheless it is perhaps one we should entertain."

The Warrior perks up. "I could grab some passing village urchins and moderately assault them? They might know something."

"Let's just leave the villagers out of this for the moment, shall we?" says the Lady.

The Warrior shrugs theatrically, and resumes his bored pose.

The Jester thinks, hard. "Hang on, we're missing something here. He keeps on saying heads. Not head."

"Your point?" asks the Dealer.

"He's referring to the goblin heads that I cut off during the battle."

"Well of course you can't see them," says the Dealer, looking disapprovingly at the Warrior. "That's because Lord Warrior drop-kicked them over the edge."

A realisation starts to settle over the table, an unpleasant realisation whose unpleasantness is largely directed at the Warrior.

"I never said I was drop-kicking Stone's head over the edge," he insists loudly. "I said I was drop-kicking all the goblin heads over the edge!"

The AllFather shuffles his tablets, finds a particular section in his notes, and then reads from it. "You were searching for goblins in

Tallenna's fog spell's cloud. You tripped over something and found it was a goblin head. Somewhat annoyed, you announced that you were going to drop-kick it over the edge, an action for which you made a successful cast, and which seemed to greatly satisfy you. In answer to my question about what you wished your mortal to do next, you announced that you were going to search for the, quote, other heads, end quote, and drop-kick them over the edge too. You then proceeded to make twelve successful casts and find and dispatch six heads. After which, you failed to find any more heads."

The Warrior stands up. "I meant goblin heads, and you know it!" he shouts.

"How many successful decapitations did you make?" the Lady asks the Jester.

"Five," he answers.

"I intended only to dispatch goblin heads! I would not have dispatched a human head."

"You didn't say that," snaps the AllFather. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a small annoying voice is telling him that he is perhaps being a bit unfair. He tells the voice that his players have given him the perfect hook into the next adventure and when that fails to shut it up, he resolves to ignore it.

"Draag would have realised it was a human head. You should have told me that. Then I would have put it back down."

"You couldn't see a thing because of the fog. You were acting by touch alone."

"A human head is heavier than a goblin head. I would have noticed the difference!"

"Well you didn't."

"You're being stupid and unfair!"

"I'm being stupid? I'm not the one who's commanding mortals to drop-kick severed heads off a plateau!"

"I notice you're not denying the charges of unfairness," says the Warrior grumpily.

The Jester taps his fingers on the table. "So basically, you're telling us that if we want to bring Stone back, we have to climb down into a great big hole full of goblins and find what's left of his head?"

"Yes."

"You really want us to follow the plot you've written, don't you?"

"Might I remind you that I wasn't the one who kicked Stone's head into the big hole."

The Jester gives him an evil look. "No, but you've certainly taken advantage of it."

The AllFather picks up his slates and makes to stand up. "Fine, if that's the way you all feel. I was just trying to present you with a thought provoking and entertaining challenge, but if it's really not what you want to do..."

The Lady lays a hand upon his arm. "No-one's saying that, are they? We'll go down the cliff after the head. It's what our mortals would do."

"We must climb down the cliff and retrieve Stone's head," declared Tallenna, loudly.

Hill wandered over to where she stood, at the edge of the cliff. He looked down. Far, far below, so far as to have fluffy white clouds between them and it, was a continuous expanse of lush green jungle. It looked a very long way down.

"Do we have to?" he asked. "There were a couple of useful looking blokes in the inn. Couldn't we just recruit one of them?"

"No," she told him. She looked back at Yann, who was pacing around the plateau with a look of confused bewilderment on his face. "Do you not agree Yann?"

"I'm not sure."

"What?"

The Dealer coughs, awkwardly. "It's not actually what Yann would do."

"It isn't?" asks the Lady. "I would have thought he would go to the ends of the world for a fallen comrade?"

"Yes. But he doesn't know that the head has gone over the cliff does he? He didn't see Draag kicking the heads away because the entire area was covered in fog at the time."

Yann walked over to them. "How do we know that Stone's head is down there?"

Hill shrugged.

Tallenna looked over to where Draag stood, some twenty yards away, kicking at random pebbles and studiously ignoring eye-contact.

"What do you think Draag?"

He ignored her, and continued kicking pebbles.

"You are asking my mortal to humiliate himself by some form of confession," says the Warrior. "Merely to satisfy Lord Dealer's pedantic views about the sanctity of the mortal realm. It is not fair."

"You cannot expect me to have my mortal act upon information that he is not in possession of!"

The Jester sighs, and then speaks.

Hill motioned Yann to bend down, and then whispered in his ear. "Draag kicked the head off the plateau when he was in the fog."

"You cannot have your mortal say that," exclaims the Dealer. "He doesn't know that."

Hill motioned Yann to bend down, and then whispered in his ear. "Draag

probably kicked the head off the plateau when he was in the fog. He's an idiot. It's the sort of stupid thing he would do. Look at the way he's kicking pebbles and refusing to discuss it with us.”

The Dealer taps angry fingers upon the marble table.

“What's the problem?” asks the Jester. “I haven't had Hill say anything that he doesn't know. He knows Draag's an idiot, and he knows it's the sort of thing he would do.”

“You are keeping within the rules by technicality only, whilst totally violating the spirit.”

The Lady sighs. “Can we just say that Yann agrees there is a high possibility that the head went over the cliff somehow, and agrees to go down there after it on that basis?”

The Dealer pauses for a long while, then finally emits a reluctant reply. “We can.”

“Good,” says the Lady. She turns to the AllFather. “We will go down the cliff in search of the head.”

“Not yet,” says the Warrior. “There is one further matter to be taken care of first.”

“And what's that?” asks the AllFather, wearily.

“Draag will kill Hill for calling him an idiot!”

“He can't,” says the Jester.

“Why? What is there that can stop him?”

“Nothing,” says the Jester, smiling a big, beaming, intensely annoying smile at the Warrior. “Except the fact that he doesn't know that Hill said it.”

Chapter Four

Day came suddenly in the jungles of the below-lands. One moment Tallenna was sitting in the shadow cast by the two mile high canyon wall; the next she was bathed in the bright light of a day-time sun.

She extinguished the light-globe cantrip she'd been using to illuminate her spell book and continued with the task of memorising the day's spells. The familiar words and patterns comforted her. She'd been born a sorceress, one of those few so attuned to the pulse of the universe that they could feel its heart beating. But it was the words she'd been taught that turned awareness into action. Those words were keys to the universe and she knew just how to turn them. She'd always been able to feel the universe as though it were a clock. Now she could set it, turning tick into tock and tock into tick.

Across the clearing, Yann was conducting a ritual apparently intended to fortify his soul against the trials the day would surely bring. Personally, she thought he'd be better off just taking a half hour's extra sleep, but this was an opinion she would never voice. Yann was proud of the crude, nature-based magic his people had taught him. When compared to the raw power that Tallenna wielded it was not much more than the shadow cast by the possibilities of what could be – but it was his magic, and it bought him peace.

She returned her attention to the book.

The AllFather consults his notes, considers the set of knucklebones that lie in front of the Dealer, and then speaks. "Your mortal regains five tranquility points."

The Dealer picks up the slate that lies before him and makes a mark on its surface.

"I don't know why you bothered to take the nature magic option," says the Jester. "Complete waste of points if you ask me."

"It is part of what makes Yann who he is," protests the Dealer. "The magic of the wild is fundamental to how he frames his relationship with the world."

"Yeah, but what does it actually do that's actually useful?" asks the Jester.

"Nothing!" booms the Warrior. "It is a selfish and pretentious waste of points that could have been better spent making Yann more useful to the group."

The Dealer tuts, but says nothing.

"What about your two mortals?" asks the AllFather, switching his attention between the Warrior and the Jester. "Can we assume that they will be awakening?"

"Depends if someone wakes us up," says the Jester.

The Lady sighs. "I'll wake them up."

It seemed to Tallenna as though hours had passed since she had awoken to take the last watch, but finally, thankfully, they were ready to move. Draag had miniaturised the trans-dimensional coffin he claimed to have looted from a lich's tomb and replaced it in his backpack. Hill had packed up his tent and finished cooking what he claimed would be the last breakfast of the day. And Yann had finished the various rituals and stretching exercises (sometimes, it was difficult to tell which was which) with which he had begun the day.

They moved off into the jungle, following a barely perceptible track. Hill was leading, followed by Draag and herself, with a watchful Yann guarding the rear. For several minutes they crept through the trees, the rocky cliff wall occasionally visible through gaps in the foliage, heading always-

"Which way are we actually going?" asks the Jester.

"Well given that your mortal is in the lead," replies the Lady. "I was rather hoping you'd know the answer to that question."

"I just said that we'd set off. I never said which way we were going."

The AllFather looks perturbed. "Well I assumed you were following along the cliff wall."

"Why would we do that?" asks the Warrior. "Surely we would go to the centre of the area?"

"Well, you could," says the AllFather.

"Isn't the bottom of this giant sinkhole canyon thing shaped like a bowl?" asks the Jester.

"A bit."

"So the head would have bounced down to the centre, then?"

"Not really. It's not much of a slope, and there are many dips and depressions, and obstacles. And trees."

"So it would have stayed at the point where it dropped then?"

"Perhaps."

"But didn't our mortals thoroughly explore that area the previous day?"

"Yes."

"And they didn't find anything?"

"Well no."

"So centre it is then? Everyone agreed?"

The other three gods shrug in resigned agreement.

For several minutes more they wandered through the forest, the cliff wall now not occasionally visible through gaps in the foliage. It was almost hypnotic, so much so that Tallenna almost walked straight into Draag's armoured back when he stopped suddenly.

He knelt down. In front of him, Hill was signalling movement and noise ahead. She waited.

Coming down the track towards them was a goblin, whistling, and

kicking at stones. He stopped when he saw them. His eyes bulged, and he raised a hand and he turned to run. A cry was still rising in his throat and he'd barely made it two steps down the track when a heavy throwing axe thudded into his back and sent him crashing to the ground. He breathed a shuddering last sigh, and died.

"Did you have to kill him?" asks the Dealer, looking hard at the Warrior.

"Would you have had me allow him to escape, to raise an alarm about our presence?"

"We are not an invading force! Our task here is to retrieve our comrade. We have no conflict with the inhabitants and we are not waging war against them. This might have been an opportunity to establish meaningful contact with them."

"To be fair," says the Jester. "I'd have shot the little sod too if the knucklebones had ruled that I was going first."

"How tall is the goblin?" asks the Lady.

"Quite a bit shorter than the raiders you previously fought."

"Congratulations," she hisses at the Warrior. "You just killed a child."

The Warrior thinks for a moment. "Does that mean my mortal gains less experience from the kill?" he asks, worried.

After a bitter post-slaughter discussion that in its twenty minutes covered matters of recrimination, questions of burial customs, and discussions of native-contact issues, and which ended only when Draag tossed the body into the jungle, they resumed their journey.

The track twisted and turned, never less than a few inches in width, never more than a few feet. Then, with neither suggestion nor warning, they found it reaching a gravel road that ran winding into the jungle to both their left and their right.

Hill turned back to face them. "Left? Right?"

Silence has reigned over the table for some time now, and seems set to continue. The AllFather starts to tap his fingers upon the desk, in the hope that the noise might be annoying enough to prompt a response.

"Did you guys get an invitation to Lord Pervert's party?" asks the Jester. The Dealer and the Lady nod. The AllFather does not. This is partly because he does not wish to grant approval of the Jester's irrelevant chatter, but mainly because he himself has not received no such invite.

"There is a road before your mortals," he says. "It has two directions. Perhaps you could pick one?"

"I suggest we head back towards the cliff!" declares the Warrior.

"If he says that, then I'm for heading away from the cliff," says

the Jester.

The AllFather sighs as the argument erupts.

They had been waiting beside the road for more than twenty minutes, for what seemed – to Tallenna – no purpose whatsoever. Hill was sat moodily against a tree staring in one direction down the road, while Draag stood sulkily some feet away from him staring down the other. And Yann, Yann merely sat cross-legged, lost in dreams, or perhaps meditating.

Then she heard sounds: a faint clip-clop, and the rhythmic scrape of greased wood upon greased wood. They were coming from the direction in which Hill had wished to go. Her companions roused themselves, and joined her in the cover of the trees.

Around the bend came an old and tired looking horse, pulling an equally old and tired looking cart, laden with straw. A goblin man sat atop the cart, the reins held lightly and confidently in his hands.

“Transport,” breathed Draag.

“My thoughts entirely,” agreed Hill. He carefully took his crossbow from where it hung across his back, pulled back the string, dropped a quarrel into the groove, lifted the weapon up, looked, one-eyed and squinting, through its sights, and then shot.

The quarrel punched through the goblin's right eye and buried itself in his brain. He slumped forward, tumbled from his perch, and was run over by both the front and rear wheels of his cart.

“Gentlemen and lady,” said Hill. “We now have wheels.”

“Do we have to kill everyone?” asks the Lady.

The Jester points at the AllFather. “He sent us a cart, and now we've grabbed it.”

“It might have been the cart's driver he was sending. We could have talked to him.”

“When we get where we're going they'll be plenty of goblins to talk to. This whole place is infested with them. And we'll get there quicker now we've got a cart.”

The argument continues for some time, until the Jester waves a halt. “I'm climbing up on the cart,” he tells the AllFather.

“What cart?”

Hill walked out into the empty road, then turned, puzzled. “Where the hell did the cart go?”

“The horse didn't stop when you killed the driver,” explains the AllFather. “And you were all too busy arguing to notice.”

“That is not fair,” says the Warrior. “Our mortals would have noticed.”

The Dealer sighs. "I'll run after it and stop it."

"You catch up with it, grab the reins, and stop it."

"I'll turn it around."

"You can't. The road's too narrow."

The Lady snorts. "Brilliant. You've captured a cart that can only go in the opposite direction to the one you wanted to go."

"Hey, I'm easy. Better a comfortable ride in the wrong direction than a hard walk in the right one."

For half an hour the old horse pulled the cart slowly along the road, turning at each junction as though he knew the way. Then, unprompted, the animal pricked up his ears and picked up his pace. Through a gap in the trees Tallenna saw a cluster of homes set into the cliff face, wisps of smoke emerging from several holes in the rock.

She touched Yann on the arm, and motioned him to stop the horse. He did so, with a flick. "I think we've reached a settlement," she said. "Perhaps we'd better leave the cart here for now and go in on foot."

"You're going to just walk in there?" asked Draag, incredulously.

"Yes," she told him.

He thought for a moment. "I will stay here. When the goblin scum capture you and feed you to the stew pot, I will come in and rescue you."

She shrugged. "Fine. Who else is coming?"

Hill watched Tallenna walk slowly out of the forest, heading for the settlement. Beside her strode Yann, eager to meet with such an alien people. Hill shrugged his shoulders and followed, equally eager to not be left alone with Draag. Their approach was noticed; a cry went out, and within seconds a score or more of goblins – men, women, children – had emerged from the doors of the cave homes to warily face them.

"We come in peace," Tallenna called out in the common tongue. "We wish to talk. Do any of you understand me?"

One of the goblins – smaller, female? It was difficult to tell she (it?) was so ugly – stepped forward from the waiting group and spoke in a voice that sounded vaguely feminine. "I know what you say. My father merchant. He teach me big people tongue." She looked at Tallenna and bowed deeply. "I greet you big person." She looked at Yann, and again entered into a long, low bow. "I greet you also big person."

Hill stepped forward, and flashed her the grin.

The goblin woman looked at Tallenna, and waited expectantly.

"What am I?" asks the Jester, bitterly. "The sauce on the edge of the plate?"

"Well they seem to be making a distinction between Tallenna and

Yann, and Hill," says the Lady. "Apparently based on the difference in size."

"Nice," says the Jester, looking at the AllFather. "Casual racism."

"No, no, it's not racism," says the Dealer, animated. He catches sight of the Jester's scornful glare. "All right, it is racism. But it is also a clue as to how they view the humans above. They do not view the humans as inferior beasts to be killed, but as some kind of superior race, perhaps even a venerated one. It could be argued that this puts them on a higher moral plane than that which we occupy."

"What?"

The Dealer sighs, exasperated. "We, that is our mortals, do see them as inferior beasts to be killed."

"We don't!"

"We've killed two already this morning in totally cold blood," points out the Lady.

"Okay, true, but they are inferior beasts. They kill, they steal, and in the name of all that's holy, did you not listen to Lord AllFather's description of the smells coming out of the settlement?"

A sudden and worrying thought occurs to the Jester. He gives the AllFather a stern and watchful look. "You're not going to try and argue that our mortals are having this conversation in front of them, are you?"

The AllFather smiles a resigned smile. "No, although I am sorely tempted. But perhaps we could get back to the mortal realm. Mistress Lady? I believe the female goblin was waiting for you to speak."

The cave home to which the female goblin had taken them was small, cosy, and smelt like a giant's breath the morning after an epic drinking session chased down with a deep sniff at his armpits.

Hill breathed through his mouth and tried not to gag.

"If the smell's that bad, shouldn't we be having to make a cast for it?"

The AllFather looks at him, annoyed. "I'm just trying to put a little flavour into my descriptions. There's no need to be disruptive about it!"

"I'm not being disruptive, just making a point!"

"Fine. You can all make tests of your mortal's constitution."

Knucklebones dance across the table.

"Two successes," says the Dealer.

"One success," says the Lady.

"Four successes!" says the Warrior.

"You don't need to cast Lord Warrior. You are not in the cave, remember?"

"Then I will bank that result."

The AllFather sighs. "You cannot bank results. Fate does not work that way."

"Well it should!"

"You wouldn't be saying that if you'd achieved no successes," points out the Jester.

"Perhaps you should make your own cast!" snaps the Warrior.

"Oh yeah." The Jester's knucklebones bounce across the table. He glances across them. "Bugger!" He thinks for a moment. "Now wait just one bit!"

It was no good. Something deep within Hill's stomach rebelled. It convulsed, once, twice, and then pumped forth the acid-tainted and semi-digested remains of his two breakfasts. The stream of vomit streamed out of Hill's mouth and splashed down onto his lap.

The female goblin – Cottontop she'd said her name was – looked at Hill with concern. "You is okay?" she asked.

"Something I ate," said Hill, with a weak smile.

"He has not the stomach of a warrior," said Draag with a smirk. Cottontop smiled a wan smile in return.

"He's not there!" protests the Jester.

"Ah yes," says the AllFather. "Well remembered." He gives the Warrior a stern look. "Your mortal chose to stay behind. Please leave the conversation to those who are there."

The Warrior waves a vaguely placatory hand. "Of course. But the point regarding Lord Jester's mortal is still made."

"I'll remember that," warns the Jester, jabbing a finger.

The Warrior smirks back.

Tallenna leaned forward and touched the goblin woman on the arm. "You have a lovely home." Typical female stuff, thought Hill. If it hadn't been for the puddle of vomit in his lap he'd have gone for a mocking, condescending, and yet sophisticated smile. As it was, he just stayed silent.

Yann gave him a curious look.

"What?" asks the Jester.

"Is your mortal not going to make any attempt to clean the vomit off himself?" asks the Dealer.

"Well I assumed it was taken as read that he'd done that. He's hardly just going to sit there in a puddle of his own vomit, is he?" He looks at the AllFather. "Right?"

"Well you didn't actually declare that your mortal would be performing any actions after you failed the cast of constitution," says the AllFather, somewhat embarrassed.

"No," says the Lady. "I seem to recall you chose to first dispute the result and then suck when that also failed."

"This is ridiculous!"

"Is your mortal going to clean himself up?" asks the AllFather.

"All right, yes."

Hill suddenly experienced a crushing and humiliating revelation: he was sitting cross-legged with a pool of vomit in his lap and further vomit splashes down the front of his leather jerkin.

"Do you have some sort of towel?" he asked Cottontop.

She rummaged in a trunk that lay at the back of the cave and extracted a dirty piece of cloth that might once have been a towel. Hill grabbed it, retreated to the cave's doorway, shot a fierce, "What? You never seen a bloke puke over himself expression?" at the thirty or forty goblins he found waiting expectantly outside, took a deep breath, and then launched into a furious flurry of wiping.

Finished, he dropped the towel by the doorway, nodded at the watching throng, took a step back, breathed in, and then returned to sit by the others. "You might want to throw that towel away love," he told Cottontop. "Anyway, where were we?"

"I was telling Cottontop that she had a lovely home," said Tallenna.

The goblin smiled a sad smile. "It is sad home." She paused for a moment and then began to tell her story.

"All well 'til three nights ago," says the AllFather, reading from a tablet he's pulled from his pile of notes. "Then my man, Snottlefoot, and our boy, Crotchknot, climbed cliffs to men's world above. It first time for Crotchknot." The AllFather looks up. "She stops talking, clearly upset, and pulls a dirty looking handkerchief from her pocket. She blows her nose, and then resumes speaking." He looks back down at the tablet. "Snottlefoot, he come back. But Crotchnot no did."

"I hope she's not trying to imply we had anything to do with that," says the Jester. The AllFather ignores the interruption and continues.

"Our other little one, Crotchknot's brother Thumbknuckle, he take it very hard. He love Crotchknot like father. They never apart 'til now. When he hear Crotchknot dead he cry and not stop for two days and a night."

"I'll ask her if he is here," says the Lady.

"She tells you no," says the AllFather. "She says that a few hours ago, he roused himself and headed out into the forest. She says that he seemed to have shaken off the depression and was whistling to himself and kicking stones." The last few words are said somewhat pointedly.

"Nice," says the Jester. "Let's make up an outrageous coincidence just to make a point."

"I'm sorry?" asks the AllFather.

"Well from the description, and the way you read it, it's obviously going to turn out that he's the goblin boy that Lord Warrior killed--"

"He could have been a threat!" interjects the Warrior.

"Whatever. The point is you've only decided to make him her son because we killed him, to make some sort of statement. Until then, he was just a random goblin boy wondering around. Right?"

"Actually, before you killed him, he was a potential plot element who could lead you to one of the few goblins in the entire district who can speak the common tongue. His mother."

"Ah," says the Jester. "That does make sense. Oh well. No harm done. We got here eventually."

"Do you have no conscience or morality whatsoever?" asks the Lady.

"My domain is chance Mistress Lady. I leave morality and its consequences to you." The Jester looks at the AllFather. "Anyway, she was talking?"

Cottontop took out the handkerchief and gave her nose a long blow. "He's been away some hours now, but I'm sure he will be fine. It is good for him to get out of the cave. And his father will be home soon."

"Where is he?" asked Yann.

"He took our cart to town to pick up load of straw. He should be back any moment now."

The Jester becomes aware that he is the target of the Lady and the Dealer's twin glares. He points at the AllFather.

"I thought he was sending us transport. How was I supposed to know that the driver was part of the deal?"

"We have wiped out the remainder of her family," says the Dealer. "We have a duty to inform her."

The Jester leans forward, his hands held before him as though he will be using them to shape the words he is about to speak. "Let's put that issue to one side, shall we, and address it after we've found out what she might know about the head?"

The Lady nods. "I agree." She holds up a hand to forestall the Dealer's attempted argument. "There is no way we can rectify what we have done. No words we can say." She pauses. "Unfortunately."

Yann appeared to have taken the goblin woman's revelation about the driver of the cart very badly. His face was tight, anger, grief and guilt bubbling beneath the surface, and his coiled-spring body spoke of a barely restrained urge to act.

Hill moved over to sit beside him, just far enough away to be a companionable presence in his grief, just near enough to be able to gag him if he tried to say anything.

Tallenna gave Cottontop a chance to blow her nose once more, and then spoke. "We have come here from the upabove world in search of our friend."

"You friend? Big person like you?"

"Well strictly speaking he's not so big anymore," said Hill. He held his

hands about a foot apart. "He's about yea big right now."

Tallenna shot him a quick but fiery glare, and then turned her attention back to the goblin woman. "We are looking for part of our friend. His head. It fell of the cliff and down to somewhere around here."

Cottontop looked puzzled. "How just his head fall down here? Where rest of him?"

Tallenna shrugged, embarrassed. "It's a long story. But we are in search of his head."

"You want bury him whole?"

"Something like that."

The goblin woman said nothing for several moments. It was clear from the frown on her face that she had something to say but was wondering whether to say it. Finally she took a deep breath.

"Big person head did fall down here. With many goblin folk heads too. We bury goblin heads. We take big person head to..." She stopped speaking.

"Go on," said Tallenna.

"We take big person head to the gods."

Chapter Five

The goblin village slumbered under the gaze of a watchful moon. Yann signalled his following companions to pause, then moved slowly forward to the village's edge.

It was quiet. Still.

He motioned the others forward. They ran silently past him, moving from shadow to shadow. They leapfrogged forward through the village, always alert, always wary.

Yann dropped to a halt beside a watching Tallenna and pointed. "The sacred site should be just past the building on the right."

She nodded, and moved forward, guarded by his half-drawn-

"This is not right," proclaims the Warrior. "She is a spellcaster. The assault should be led by a man of arms such as Draag."

"Yann is a man of arms also," says the Dealer.

"He hides behind a bow facing his foes from afar," snorts the Warrior. "Missile weapons are for women and children."

"Hill's got a missile weapon," the Jester points out. "A crossbow."

"And halflings."

"Have you finished insulting the rest of the table?" asks the Lady.

"I merely point out that my mortal is better placed to lead the assault on the town."

She sighs, and waves a despairing hand. "If you want to go first that much, then go first."

"There is no need to be insulting, Mistress Lady," says the Warrior.

"Could someone please just decide to have their mortal move?" asks the AllFather.

"Fine. Draag will advance into the main square."

"Good. You see a large open area, broken only by a plain square altar and a well."

"Is the well the standard type with a cylindrical hand-crank connected to a bucket and rope?"

The AllFather is somewhat confused by the Warrior's line of reasoning. "Erm, yes. Why?"

"I will cut the rope with my sword."

"Why?"

"To deny the use of the well to the enemy."

"Fine. Your blade slices easily through the aged fibres. The cut rope falls back down into the darkness of the well with a loud splash."

"I did not say I was letting go of the rope! I was cutting with one hand and keeping hold of the rope with the other."

"Fine. You're now holding the severed end of the rope. It stretches down into the darkness below. What do you want to do?"

"Haul the bucket up, of course!"

The AllFather nods at the Warrior's set of knucklebones. The Warrior picks them up and sends them bouncing across the table. "Two successes!" he announces.

The AllFather shakes his head.

The Warrior reacts with anger and confusion. "What? How many successes do I need to lift up a bucket?"

"More than two?" suggests the Jester.

"You are still holding your sword," the AllFather points out.

Yann ran over to the well to stand beside Draag. The dark paladin stood beside the rough stone structure holding the end of a severed piece of rope. The rope dropped down into the pool of darkness that lay at the well's bottom.

The paladin appeared to be straining to lift the hand that grasped the rope. He grunted, groaned, and then gave up. He saw Yann, nodded a nod almost imperceptible behind his full-face helm, and then handed over his sword.

"Here. Hold this."

The AllFather consults one of his slates. "Okay. Now that you're trying to lift the rope and the bucket with both hands, you'll only need two successes."

"But I already have two successes!"

"That was for the previous test."

"Really. And I still consider two successes to be an absurdly high level of difficulty."

The AllFather counts off his reasoning on his fingers. "Firstly, the bucket is large and full of water. Water is heavy."

"How heavy?" asks the Jester.

The AllFather has never been too good on weights and measures. He isn't that kind of supreme being and his universe, as a result, isn't that kind of universe.

"Quite heavy!" he snaps. He takes a deep breath, and then continues. "Two, the rope is thin and hard to get a grip on. Three, it is smooth with age and slippery with moisture. Four, you are wearing armoured gauntlets not made for gripping."

"If the weight of a water-filled bucket is so great that it requires the strength of a titan to lift it," says the Warrior. "How do the women of the village manage it?"

He ignores the Lady's angry glare and concentrates his gaze on the AllFather.

"Because they have a crank handle, and a spindle that acts as a gearing mechanism," the AllFather tells him. "Now are you going to cast your knucklebones or can we take it that your mortal has given up?"

The Warrior angrily scoops up his knucklebones and sends them bouncing across the table. "One success," he announces coldly.

A metaphorically ticking silence settles upon the table.

Draag was straining so hard that it seemed as though the joints of his armour might pop. His metal-clad limbs quivered, so great were forces the dark paladin was attempting to transmit through them. But still the rope would not move.

Finally, he ceased his attempt. He stood, motionless, but it was clear from his body language that he was in deep emotional turmoil. His head turned first this way and that, an inner war clearly raging. Yann could see that he was a man in turmoil, struggling, suffering.

Finally, he turned his armoured face toward Yann, and slowly spat words laced with such pain and humiliation that Yann knew their very saying must have seared his soul.

“Can you give me a hand?”

The AllFather peers at the two sets of knucklebones lying on the table, consults his notes, and then speaks. “With Yann’s help, you are able to lift the bucket up to the top of the well.”

“We’ll place it on the ground beside the well,” says the Dealer.

The Warrior is thinking, and it is clear from his demeanour that he is a long way from contentment. “The purpose of cutting the rope was to sabotage the well. My only desire in lifting the bucket free was to avoid the splash.” He thinks for a moment more. “I will break the bucket’s bottom and cut the rope into small lengths.”

The AllFather sighs. “Fine. What do the rest of you want your mortals to do?”

“Well Cottontop said that the sacred spot where the common folk leave their offerings is six feet directly in front of the altar,” says the Dealer. “Perhaps that might be a good place to start looking?”

“I’ll scout on over and have a look,” says the Jester. “What can I find?”

“Are you searching?” asks the AllFather.

“Yes.”

The AllFather nods at the knucklebones that lie in front of the Jester. The Jester scoops them up and sends them dancing across the table.

“Three successes.”

The AllFather picks up a blank slate, inscribes words upon it by sheer force of will, and then hands it over to the Jester. The Jester reads it, inscribes a reply, and then hands it back. The AllFather reads it and nods.

“He is trying to keep something secret for himself,” says the Warrior, angrily. “I am walking over to where he is!”

“What have you found?” demanded Draag, in a stage whisper so loud shouting would probably have been stealthier.

“A trapdoor,” Hill told him.

The dark paladin was only a few feet away now. “Can you open it?” he

asked. He drew himself to a halt in front of the halfling, then rapidly disappeared downward as the ground beneath him opened. There was a rush of air, a short stifled scream, then something that wasn't quite a splat but was probably a good way towards one.

"I have opened it," Hill told the empty air in front of him. "It was only the counterbalanced weights keeping it up."

The AllFather counts the knucklebones that lie before him, and then consults his notes, before making an announcement. "Your mortal is now wounded, Lord Warrior."

"This is not fair!"

"It certainly isn't," says the Jester. "Fall that far I had my money on maimed."

The Warrior glares hard at him, then returns his attention to the AllFather. "I said I was going over to talk to him. I didn't say I was standing in front of him."

"Well neither did you say that you were not," says the AllFather.

"It is as I always say. You should create a model of the world upon the table and allow us to use miniature representations of our mortals to show clearly where they are going. Such a scheme would remove—" he coughs, and grinds out the next word, "—misunderstandings, such as these."

A collective sigh arises from those around the table. It is an old-argument, worn and tired and yet refusing to die.

The Dealer leans forward in his chair, his forefinger stabbing an invisible opponent. "To do as you say would be to reduce the mortal realm to the status of a chessboard and our activities here to that of a mere game."

"It is a game," says the Warrior, puzzled.

"Well that about says it all," says the Dealer.

The Warrior throws up his hands in confusion.

The AllFather clears his throat. "We're not having figures or a map. You did fall down through the trapdoor. What are the rest of you planning to do?"

"Climb down, I guess," says the Jester. "Only question is how?"

"Some rope would be handy," says the Dealer. "But I don't have any. Anyone else?" The other gods shrug in reply.

"Wasn't there a length of rope attached to the bucket?" asks the Lady sarcastically. The Warrior glares at her, but says nothing.

"How far down is it?" asks the Jester. "If it's not too far we could drop down."

"You can't see. The trapdoor has closed up again."

"Well I'll push it open then."

"You see only blackness."

"I will light a torch," says the Warrior.

"I don't recall you saying that you were bringing torches," says the AllFather.

The Warrior holds up his mortal's life-slate. "It is on my

equipment list.”

“Yes, but you didn't bring all your equipment down here with you, did you? You left some of it back at the village.”

“I did not. I never said that. You never suggested that. I have all my equipment with me.”

“You climbed down a two-mile cliff while carrying all your equipment?”

“I have a backpack. And its weight is within my mortal's carrying capacity. He does have legendary strength.”

The AllFather sighs. “Fine. You have some torches.”

“I have ten torches!”

The AllFather hands up a placatory hand. “Fine. You have ten torches. Do you have a flint and steel to light them with?”

There is an embarrassed silence as the Warrior first consults his equipment list and then goes back for second, third and fourth opinions. “It appears I neglected to mark that down. But obviously I would have, so perhaps we can just say—”

“If you haven't marked it down, then you haven't got it.”

“I've got a set,” the Jester says. “I'll drop it down.”

The Lady raises a questioning eyebrow.

“Hill likes to smoke a pipe now and again,” he tells her.

Sparks flared in the darkness below, followed by a tiny flickering flame, and then a fire. The flaming torch illuminated a large shadowy room, with plain granite flagstones and a pissed off looking paladin.

“Looks to be about ten feet down,” Hill told the waiting Yann and Tallenna. “We should be able to drop that. But maybe you guys should go down first.”

“I will my brother,” said Yann. He gripped the edge of the trapdoor, swung himself down, hung for a moment, then dropped smoothly to the floor below, landing with cat-like elegance. Tallenna followed. Hill took a last look at the starry sky, then swung his own frame through the opening.

The drop was further for him than the others, and the impact as his knees hit his chest was hard enough to wind. But he was able to get back up, and nothing seemed broken. He fired a hopeful grin at Draag and got a psychotically angry glare in return.

Now that he was down, he could get a proper view of the room. Moonlight shone down from a circular hole in the far corner of the ceiling; a dark circle marked a hole in the floor immediately under it. The well, he realised. Other than that, the room was empty, which was something of a disappointment.

“It's empty,” he said.

“There are a pair of holes over in the far corner,” announced Draag.

“That's the well.”

“Oh.”

Draag wandered over to the well and dropped a few copper pieces into it. Each produced a sharp splash. "Maybe there is a way through the well, if we drop down and swim."

"Maybe you should jump in," suggested Hill.

Draag took a step towards him, gauntlets flexing.

"Perhaps you should search for hidden doors?" suggests the Lady.

"Oh yeah," says the Jester. "I'll search for hidden doors." He casts his knucklebones across the table. "Two successes."

"You find a hidden door on the north wall," says the AllFather.

"Pretty obvious really," says the Jester. "What with it being an empty room with no exits."

"Well it wasn't obvious enough for you to think of looking for it," says the Lady.

"I was hoping I could talk Lord Warrior into jumping into the well."

She raises a doubtful eyebrow, and he makes a face in return.

"Do you want to try opening the door?" asks the AllFather.

"I'll check for traps first," says the Jester, throwing his knucklebones across the table. "Three successes," he announces.

"None that you can find. Do you want to try and open it?"

The Jester casts his knucklebones in response. "Two successes."

"You open the door."

The heavy door swung open, revealing a long and dusty corridor. Hill launched into an elaborate, hand-waving bow. "Lady and Gentlemen..."

Draag stepped forward and entered the corridor, closely followed by Yann. Tallenna shrugged, and followed them. If asked, she'd have suggested she send a detection spell down the corridor, but as no one had, she didn't. Hill was bent down as she passed him, hammering a small iron spike into a crack in the paving to hold the door open. She waited until he was satisfied, and then they headed on after the distant light that marked Draag and Yann's progress.

They caught up with them a minute or so later. The two warriors had paused. Tallenna looked past them, and in the light of Draag's torch saw what had halted them. For a good eight feet, there was no floor to the corridor, only an inky blackness with no bottom. There was no ledge around either side. There was nothing, save sheer bottomless walls, until the floor resumed some eight feet in front of them.

Hill pulled a copper piece from his belt pouch and tossed it forward into the void. A good three to four seconds elapsed before they heard the tiny clink of it hitting a solid surface.

The halfling whistled, quietly. "Long way down."

"I might be able to jump across," suggested Yann.

"Might's not a terribly decisive word when it's separating living from a

very terminal end,” said Hill.

“We do not need to jump,” declared Draag, removing his backpack as he spoke. “I have a number of ten-foot long poles. We can use them to bridge the gap.”

The AllFather peers quizzically at the Warrior. It is at times like this that he wishes he had a pair of the eyeglasses some of the cleverer inhabitants of his mortal realm have endeavoured to fashion. He feels that peering over them might lend him some of the gravitas that his position as supreme being has somehow failed to grant him.

“Could you repeat that, Lord Warrior?” he says.

“I said that I have a number of ten-foot poles,” says the Warrior. He picks up his mortal's life-slate, and consults it for a moment. “Eight to be precise.”

“Your mortal is carrying eight ten-foot poles?” asks the Lady.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“In his backpack.”

“His backpack?”

“Yes.”

The Jester leans forward, an insincere smile upon his face. “Do they not poke out the top just a little bit?” he asks, in a tone a mortal would use for talking to a child.

The Warrior sighs. “We have had this discussion before. All the equipment on my mortal's life slate has been paid for, and its total weight is below the amount he is able to carry.”

“Yes, but the poles are ten feet long,” says the AllFather.

“Yes. They're ten-foot poles.”

“In the name of all my Lord,” explodes the Dealer. “How does your mortal walk through doorways? How is he walking down this corridor?”

The Warrior considers this for several long moments. Several hard-thought thoughts appear on his face, only to die before being uttered. Finally, one lingers long enough to be transformed into a beaming smile, a stabbed finger, and a triumphant exclamation.

“He bends over!”

“You're telling us that your mortal has walked the entire length of this corridor bent over, with the eight poles poked out ahead of him?”

“Yes!”

“Not able to see where he is going?”

“The poles would alert him of anything he might be about to walk into.”

“Without their weight toppling him over?”

The Warrior spends several further moments thinking hard, but is unable to think of an answer.

“Your mortal is not carrying eight ten-foot poles around,” the AllFather tells him.

“That is not fair!”

"I am only stating what is feasible."

The Warrior thinks some more, then angrily folds his arms. "You have never made such a decision before. And besides, what is it we are supposedly exploring here, heroism? Or book-keeping?" He sulks a bit more. "Fine. Have Lord Dealer send his mortal leaping to his death. See if I care."

Silence settles. It occurs to the AllFather that when creating the challenges that the god's mortals are currently facing, he had rather assumed that they'd have salvaged the rope from the well. He thinks for a moment more.

"Well perhaps we can say that your mortal has two ten-foot poles hinged to fold into a length of five feet?"

He tries to ignore the Lady's resultant furious glare.

The traverse across the two poles had been a long one, a rich and noisy tapestry of slips, shouts, recriminations, and a number of near death experiences. But finally, the four adventurers stood on the opposite side of the drop, and resumed their stealthy advance along the corridor, leaving (after a short but intense argument) the poles behind for any speedy retreats that might prove necessary.

The long passage twisted first this way and then that, and then opened up into a large room. The four adventurers paused in its centre, looking around, taking it all in.

"Your mortals have found themselves in a large room," says the AllFather, reading from one of his slates. "The walls are lined with tapestries--"

"Do they look expensive?" asks the Jester.

"-- and thick and plush rugs cover the floor. A number of chests sit along the left-hand wall, and shelves on the right-hand wall contain a variety of items."

"I'll go to the first of the chests and see if I can lever it open," says the Warrior.

"In the centre of the room is a table, upon which sit several bowls of soup and a plate of bread loaves."

He pauses.

"I'll head on over to the table and try some of the soup," says the Jester. "Is it any good?"

"Why would someone leave the table set for dinner?" asks the Lady.

Her comment sparks a worried thought on the part of the AllFather. He quickly re-reads his notes and finds a line he missed in the description. "Oh yes. And there are four goblin guards sitting at the table."

Hill already had the spoon most of the way to his lips when he became aware that he currently had his body extended between two heavily armed goblins,

both of whom looked pretty unfriendly, and one of whom who appeared to want his spoon back.

He gave them a hopeful smile and carefully replaced the spoon in the bowl. "Carry on. Don't mind me."

"Perhaps that was something you could have told us when we first entered the room?" the Jester asks.

The AllFather looks down into his lap, mutters an apology, then turns his attention back to his fellow gods. "Well now that's sorted out, what are you going to have your mortals do?"

"I shall kill the goblins!" proclaims the Warrior.

"Perhaps we should talk to them?" suggests the Dealer.

"You can talk if you want, but I'll be killing them while you do it."

"Will you just wait?"

"No!"

The AllFather waves at the table. "Then cast your knucklebones to see in which order your mortals react."

Four sets of knucklebones skip across the table.

"Two successes!" announces the Jester.

"One success," says the Lady.

"Three successes," adds the Dealer.

"Twelve successes!" declares the Warrior.

Four pairs of divine eyeballs swivel suspiciously in his direction.

"That is what the knucklebones say," he protests, pointing at the knucklebones that lie before him. "Check them yourselves if you don't believe me!"

The Jester looks at them and points. "They don't say twelve successes!"

"I have drawn upon Draag's inner resources."

"You've been doing that a lot lately."

"He has a lot of inner resources."

The Jester turns his attention back to the AllFather. "Have you ever actually checked his mortal's life-slate to make sure it's all correct?"

The AllFather buries his head in his notes.

"Are you accusing me of cheating?" the Warrior asks the Jester.

"Just pointing out that your mortal appears to have abilities of a truly extraordinary nature."

The AllFather cuts in. "Perhaps we should continue. Lord Warrior, I believe your mortal is reacting first. What is he going to do?"

"I'm going to kill the goblins!"

The battle was over before it had begun, literally so in the case of every participant other than Draag. One moment, all in the room were busily engaged in that socially awkward moment that occurs just before a battle to the death – all embarrassed smiles and apologetic shrugs – the next, Draag was wiping his blood-and-soup-stained blade on a fallen goblin's tunic and

returning it to its scabbard.

Hill still hadn't managed to get his shortsword out of its scabbard, and from the looks on the faces of Yann and Tallenna, their preparations weren't much more advanced either.

"Well that was quick," he said, sarcastically. "Perhaps you could let us have a go next time?"

"I have eliminated the threat!" announced a posing Draag to a room that largely ignored him.

"This looks like a holding area where they keep items just recently donated," said Tallenna. She scanned the shelves. "But I don't see Stone's head."

At the left-hand side of the room, Yann had opened the chests and was rummaging through their contents. "I can't see a head in here. They must have taken it away."

"Perhaps the guards will know," said Hill. He sat down beside a corpse that lay slumped across the table, its face buried in a bowl of soup, and lifted it up. "Do you know where they took the head?" He bent down to put his ear next to its mouth. "What's that? You can't tell me what happened to the head on account of some psychopath just having killed you?"

He let it flop back down into the soup with a splash.

Draag was standing in a sulky pose, his arms folded. "Have you finished?"

"I didn't get a chance to start."

Tallenna walked into the space between them. "Perhaps we should further examine the contents of the chests and the shelves. There might be something useful."

Somewhere in the narrow slit of Draag's faceplate a gleam appeared. "There might be weapons!"

Hill got up with a groan and began to examine the cluttered shelves.

Chapter Six

The floor of the room was covered with items: weapons, food, knick-knacks, and some stuff that frankly looked like junk.

Tallenna had instructed the others to line it up in neat rows and columns; now she cast the spell that had impelled such a layout. The magic flowed within her, shaped by the words she spoke, and sent on its way by a final urgent thought. Reveal.

In the centre of a grid, an evil-looking black sword in a black scabbard inscribed with runes, glowed green. A bright green. A very, very bright green.

For an instant she saw Hill and Draag looking at each other.
And then they dived.

"Five successes," announces a hopeful Jester.

"Six successes," says a smugly smiling Warrior.

"Bugger."

From the instant they'd started searching the room, one item had caught Tallenna's eye: a ceramic egg that shone a thousand different colours, painted with genius and fired with both skill and craft.

She watched now as it exploded into a thousand fragments under Draag's armoured shoulder. The dark paladin continued his roll, crushing a bowl of grapes, a homemade cake, and something that looked like a device for low-level torture (but presumably wasn't), before reaching out to grab the still glowing sword with both hands, an instant before Hill's despairing dive reached the now empty space. The two of them bounced off each other, although strictly speaking most of the bouncing occurred on the halfling's side of the equation, and ended up lying on their backs amid the scattered remains of the goblins' treasure.

"I have it!" Draag shouted. "I have it!"

"I seem to recall that when Yann found the sword it had a scroll with it?" says the Dealer.

Two sets of knucklebones immediately bounce across the table.

For several moments the dark paladin and the halfling lay motionless amid the devastation their twin lunges had caused. Then, as one, and for no reason Tallenna could see, they exploded into action again. More items were crushed and scattered, and then Draag was standing, sword now in one hand, a scroll in the other.

He smiled at the halfling, who shot him an evil look in return.

"What does the scroll say?" asks the Warrior.

"You don't know," says an unsmiling AllFather.

"Why not?"

"Because your mortal is illiterate, remember?"

"I do not recall that."

"You made him illiterate in order to optimise his abilities in other areas. I did question you about it, but your reply was that a warrior has no need of words, only a strong sword arm and the will to use it."

"Oh dear," says the Jester. "That is awfully unfortunate."

The Warrior gives the AllFather an accusing look. "You have put this in there purely to exploit my mortal's weaknesses!"

The Warrior thinks for a moment. "I have a magic sword. I have no need of any accompanying documents."

Draag strode around the room, giving the sword a few practice swings. "I shall call it DeathSinger!"

"Nice," said Hill. "So what does the magic bit do?"

The dark paladin thought for a moment. "It makes it balanced, and sharp, and more penetrating."

"That's good." He ended the sentence in a manner that hung heavy and obvious in the quiet of the room.

The silence built, until eventually Draag could apparently stand it no longer. "And? You have a point to make?"

"No, no, no point really. Only..."

"What?"

"It was glowing very, very strongly when the reveal spell was cast upon it. Was it not, Tallenna?" The halfling walked over to stand beside her.

This wasn't really an argument Tallenna wanted to get involved in, but what Hill was saying was true, so she nodded a reluctant nod.

"So?" snapped Draag, still engaged in his practice swings.

"Just that I would have thought that a sword that's that magical would do something a bit more impressive than just being, well, quite good?"

The practice swings stopped, and the armoured helm swung round to face them. Tallenna could practically see the cogs whirring through its narrow vision slit. Draag put the sword back into its scabbard and walked over to them, holding the scroll before him.

He stopped, in what he presumably intended to be a conciliatory pose. "Tallenna, perhaps you could read it for me? You being the expert with things magical."

Tallenna looked at the scattered and broken wreckage that lay across the floor. "No," she told him.

The blank armoured face stared at her for several tense seconds, and then turned away toward Yann, inclined hopefully.

"I understand not the scribble words of civilised men," said the barbarian, before Draag even had a chance to speak.

The Warrior mutters a mortal curse under his breath.

"Yann has no need of literacy," protests the Dealer. "His people pass their history and legends from generation to generation in oral form."

From across the table, in the direction of the Jester, there is a cough.

"I could read it," said Hill. He pasted on a smile that in other contexts might appear friendly.

There was no reaction from Draag.

Hill upped the stakes by adding an outstretched hand to match the annoying smile.

Finally, with a shrug and a tut, the dark paladin slapped the scroll down into Hill's hand.

The AllFather flips through his stack of slates, selects one, and then hands it over to the Jester. The Jester quickly skims the first few lines, and then begins to read.

"I, Karim of Kannaq, sword-maker to the great Visiar of Kannaq, humbly greet you, the recipient of this sword."

Draag waved an impatient hand. "Yes, yes. Get on with it."

Hill shrugged, and began to speed-read. "Users of this sword should insure they are properly trained... no liability shall be assumed..."

"Yes, yes, and?"

"The item should be cared for as described in Appendix A..."

"I think we can skip that bit!"

"Has been thrice-fired... guaranteed not to warp or bend for at least one thousand years..." Hill looked up from the scroll. "I wonder how old it is," he muttered, apparently thinking aloud.

Draag held the blade up and examined it. "Does it look straight to you?" he asked Yann. The barbarian shrugged. "I don't know. Have a look at it."

"Appropriate materials... Cleaning after use..."

The dark paladin carefully grasped the long blade at first its centre and then its pointed end, and then lifted it high into the light, looking straight along the blade's length.

The tilt of its head indicated a closing of one eye and a squint of the other. "It looks straight."

“Ah!” said Hill, pausing for a moment in his reading. “That’s interesting. There’s something here about ‘flames of oblivion.’”

“Flames of oblivion?” asked Draag, still looking along the blade.

A jet of fire erupted from the sword’s tip, completely engulfing the dark paladin. A scream of pure agony emerged from within the rippling pillar of flame.

“Yeah,” said Hill, still looking at the scroll. “Apparently that’s the command activation phrase.” He looked up, seeing the screaming figure engulfed by the flame that still streamed from the sword. “You might want to have it replaced with a push-stud.”

“Draag did not actually say that!” shouts the Warrior. “That was just me replying to you.

“No, it you you replying to something I’d had Hill say, so it was Draag saying it.” The Jester looks pointedly at the AllFather. “I seem to recall this was an issue we resolved earlier?”

“Well, yes,” says the AllFather awkwardly.

“Then you tricked me!” shouts the Warrior.

“Maybe,” says the Jester. “But you still said it while holding the sword, didn’t you?”

“I’m going to kill him!”

The burning figure raised an accusing arm. “You are dead, halfling!” He began to move toward Hill.

“You are still burning,” points out the AllFather.

“Has the sword not stopped firing flame?”

The AllFather considers this for a moment. “Yes, the flame did cut out after a few seconds.”

The angry Warrior sits back with his arms folded. “Then I care not. Draag’s armour will have protected him from any significant damage and any fires upon it will soon go out. So I will now go and kill the halfling.”

A worried Jester leans forward. “What about his backpack?”

“What about it?” the Warrior asks suspiciously.

The AllFather thinks for a moment, and then nods. “Yes, good point.” He turns his attention back to the Warrior. “It isn’t protected by your armour, so both it, and any items in it, will suffer damage from the fire. Perhaps I could examine your mortal’s life-slate to see what he is carrying?”

The Warrior grudgingly sends it sliding across the table to the AllFather, who only just manages to catch it before it slides off the table and onto the floor. He lifts it up, flips it over to the rear surface, and begins to read.

“Your flint and steel will be unaffected, as will your whetstone.”

“Good.”

“Your quill and ink will survive, but I’m afraid your parchment will

be totally burned."

"Why would an illiterate be carrying writing materials?" asks the Jester. The AllFather and the Warrior ignore him.

The AllFather continues down the list and pauses. "Your mortal is carrying twenty flasks of oil?"

"They are made of glass! Glass does not burn!"

The AllFather considers this for a moment, delivers a doubtful nod, then continues. "Ten thundersticks?"

The Warrior rubs his chin nervously. "Well I don't think I would have bought everything that's written on the equipment list."

"I seem to recall it was only just a moment ago that you were arguing precisely the opposite," says the Dealer.

"And I seem to recall Lord Dealer, that it was concluded that I was wrong!" shouts the Warrior.

"Yes," says the Jester. "But only in those cases where it was physically not possible for the items to fit in your backpack, or indeed in the spaces you were currently occupying."

"What happens when ten thundersticks ignite simultaneously?" asks the Lady.

"That is a good question," says the AllFather. He shuffles through his slates and picks one out. Brow furrowed, he begins to read.

For an instant there was just a pillar of flame and a scream that echoed through the soul. Then there was more; rippling claps of thunder louder than any Tallenna had ever heard – as though the Gods were applauding – followed by a flash of white so painfully bright that for several moments she'd thought she was blind.

"The ten thundersticks ignite simultaneously, hurling your mortal forward," says the AllFather. "He slams into the far wall, and is wounded."

"He was already wounded," the Jester reminds him.

"Ah, yes. He is significantly wounded then."

"Was my mortal not facing Lord Jester's mortal?" says the Warrior, fixing the Jester with an evil glare.

"Ah, yes. That is true." He looks at the Jester. "Perhaps you should have your mortal make a test of his agility, Lord Jester?" he asks. "To determine if he can dodge out of the way."

The knucklebones bounce across the table. "Four successes enough?" asks the Jester.

"Yes. Your mortal dodges out of the way in the nick of time."

The Jester leans back, arms folded and smiling, then leans forward again as he remembers something. "Didn't he have twenty flasks of oil in his backpack? Twenty glass flasks of oil?"

The chorus of thunderclaps launched the still burning Draag across the room. He sailed through the spot that the quickly diving Hill had occupied only an instant earlier, smashed hard into the stone wall, dropped down to

the paved floor, bounced, and rolled. A chorus of tinkling smashes played, like a stack of glasses dropped in a bar, and the backpack burst into flame.

"The glass vials shatter due to the force of the impact."

"The glass would not have shattered! It is tough!"

"Does your mortal have a lantern, Lord Warrior?" asks the Jester.

"No. You know that. Why?"

"Because if he does not have a lantern then why was he carrying flasks of oil?"

The Warrior looks down and shakes his head. "I do not recall."

"Would it have been to throw at opponents during combat?"

"Possibly."

"Wouldn't have been much use if the glass was so strong they just bounced off, would it?"

The Warrior glares evilly at the Jester, but says nothing.

Rivulets of burning oil ran from the burning leather and between the plates of his black armour.

He screamed again, long, and hard.

"The burning oil runs through the joints of your armour and covers your mortal. He is now completely on fire. What do you want to do?"

"This is not fair!"

"You could try rolling on the ground to put yourself out?" suggests the Dealer.

"He's covered in hot oil," says the Lady. "And it's gone into the joints. He wouldn't be able to get it all out and the rest would just re-light when exposed to the air again."

"How long will twenty flasks of oil burn for, anyway?" asks the Jester.

"Long enough to end the life of Lord Warrior's mortal if he doesn't do anything," says the AllFather. He gives the Warrior a stern gaze.

"Lord Warrior?"

"What?"

"Your mortal is currently on fire. What is he going to do?"

"This is not fair."

"Is he going to do anything?"

The Warrior thinks for a moment. "Is he currently standing up?"

"No. He's lying on the floor."

The Warrior strikes a defiant pose. "Then he will stand up."

"Good."

Sheathed in flame and radiating such heat that it made Yann's skin tingle, Draag pushed himself onto shaking, stepping feet. He stood motionless, a living spire of flame, and then spoke hard words through pain-gritted teeth.

"This. Is. Not. Fair."

Then he stood. And burned.

Yann whipped off his cloak and tried to beat at the fire. The tip caught, lit, and flared up. He dropped the cloak, and watched it burn with a bright, crackling flame.

And still Draag stood before him, burning.

"I am still going to kill the halfling!" announces the Warrior.

"But you are on fire!" protests the AllFather.

"I do not care. I wish to have revenge."

"You have dropped the sword."

"I do not require the sword."

"Well how are you going to kill him then?"

Draag, burning, screaming, turned to face Hill, then opened his arms wide in a gruesome approximation of an invitation to hug. "Come. Here. Brother. Halfling."

"Bollocks to that!" shouted Hill. He set off around the room, with the burning Draag in hot pursuit. Yann turned and watched, and turned and watched, and turned and watched.

Two sets of knucklebones lie upon the table. The AllFather considers them both and then makes his announcement. "For the moment, Lord Jester, your mortal is able to stay ahead of Lord Warrior's mortal."

"But my mortal has a higher movement rate!" protests the Warrior. "He should easily be able to catch a halfling!"

"Hey, I might only have little legs," says the Jester. "But I'm running damned fast!"

The AllFather ignores him and addresses his reply to the Warrior. "Your mortal is significantly wounded. He has fallen down a hole, been set on fire, and been slammed into a wall at high speed. All of these have conspired to reduce his movement rate."

"If he's still on fire, then shouldn't he be maimed by now?" asks the Jester.

"That is a good point," says the AllFather nodding. He moves to make a mark on one of his slates.

"Who's running this universe?" shouts the Warrior. "You or him?"

"Ah. Yes." The AllFather puts the slate down. "But your mortal will soon be maimed if he continues burning."

"That is not fair."

The AllFather sighs. "Your mortal, who is currently on fire, is running around and around the room in circles, pursuing, but never quite catching, Lord Jester's mortal. What do you want to do?"

"I'll reverse direction!"

"So will I!" says the Jester quickly.

"This is getting farcical!" says the Dealer, unhappy. He turns to the Warrior. "Will you please address the issue of your mortal's current state of inferno!"

"What would you have me do? I cannot roll the fire out because the burning oil has soaked into the joints of my armour. I cannot take the armour off because it is on fire. I see no option but to stand here and burn."

The gods around the table consider this.

The AllFather coughs. "There is a well full of water."

"Isn't that a little way back?" asks the Lady.

"It's not very far. It could easily be reached."

"Fine," says the Warrior, grumpily. "I will set off towards the well."

"Good. You run down the corridor and cross the chasm using the two ten foot poles."

The Warrior interrupts his next statement with an upheld hand. "There is something we are not considering here. Even if I extinguish the flame, my mortal is still badly wounded and thus of limited use to the group. The climb back up the cliff will be arduous, and he might require weeks of recuperation before he can resume the ongoing quest."

"Your point?" asks the AllFather.

"It would be better to allow him to burn here, return his body to the temple along with Stone's head, and then resurrect him, whole, and fit to continue the journey."

"How will we know to do that?" asks the Jester. "Last our mortals saw Draag, he was sprinting off down the corridor on fire."

"I will sprint back."

Twenty seconds ago, Draag had sprinted off out of the room and down the corridor, sheathed in flame and screaming to the gods. No-one had said anything in the long moments since then. What was there to say?

Then Draag came sprinting back. Still burning. Still screaming. He planted himself in front of Yann, tilted his head as though to speak-

"If you think we're hauling your body back up the cliff you've got another thing coming!" said Hill.

The even darker than normal paladin considered this for a moment, then turned on his heels and sprinted back out of the room.

Yann watched him go. Sometimes this was a very strange world.

"Is he still not maimed?" protests the Jester. "He seems to have been on fire for a very long time."

The AllFather squirms awkwardly in his seat. "Well I think that as long as he now runs straight to the well, the flames will be extinguished just before his mortal reaches the point of actual maiming."

"Very convenient."

"Well I don't think that it is fair for Lord Warrior to have his mortal rendered too incapable of action."

"Since when does fair come into it?" asks the Dealer. "Surely we should be concerned with what is realistic and plausible?"

"Well I think there has to be a balance."

"Between plausible reality and letting Lord Warrior do what he wants?"

"I did not choose to be on fire!" thunders the Warrior. He looks at the AllFather. "Have I reached the well yet?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Am I still on fire?"

"Yes."

"The water has not put out the flames?"

"You haven't jumped in yet. You're standing on the edge. Do you want to jump in?"

"Yes!"

"Fine. You jump in."

Draag was not a stranger to pain. No follower of his dark and twisted religion was. To them, pain was the great revealer, a lubricant that loosened lies and revealed the truth that lay beneath. Pain bought an understanding of the universe and of one's place within it. It stripped away the comforting beliefs that men held close and in its fiery embrace, forged a deeper awareness of existence's true nature. To be subjected to pain was to have one's soul revealed.

Thing was though, it was usually the poor bastards they were ritually torturing that were experiencing the pain, and not them. Draag might have been no stranger to pain, but it had until now been more of an acquaintance than a close, personal friend. The flame-sword's ignition had transported Draag into a new realm of understanding, and in the the seconds since then – seconds that had seemingly stretched to minutes – that understanding had only deepened.

As he splashed down into the cool, welcoming water and sank deep into its welcoming arms, he knew that it was an understanding that would stay with him from now until the day he died, how ever far away that might be. The pain had gone, but the knowledge it had bought him had not.

"So how deep is the well?" asks the Jester, an innocent look on his face.

The Dealer begins speaking while the AllFather is still considering the question. "Well the well would have been dug deep enough to produce water in all but the most severe of droughts. And we know from Cottontop that they've had a wet summer and a very wet winter before it, so the water table will be high. I would say that there would have to be at least eight to ten feet of water in the well."

Draag sank ever deeper into the water's wonderful coolness. It eased through every armoured joint, and reached every wounded place, and where it reached the pain receded, leaving only relief in its wake.

He sank deeper. And deeper.

Before, he'd had only one threat and one thought. The threat was fire and the thought was water. Now, though, with the threat gone and the thought achieved, he could turn his attention to other matters. He thought, and considered, and reached a new level of understanding.

He started to flail, and scabble, and panic.

The AllFather sighs, and once again attempts to explain what he would have thought is a relatively simple point. "Your mortal is wearing heavy plate-mail armour and a backpack full of items. It is simply not possible for him to swim while so laden. He will have to try and take them both off."

"It's a shame there isn't some kind of rope hanging down, with something he could stand on attached to the end, isn't it?" says the Lady.

The Warrior ignores her sarcasm.

"My mortal's plate is sacred. It was washed in the blood of innocents and then entrusted to him at his initiation ceremony. If he takes it off it will sink to the bottom of the well and be lost."

"And besides being sacred, would it also give your mortal some kind of magical aid to his defence?" asks the Dealer.

The Warrior ignores that bit of sarcasm too.

"Draag shall not remove his armour," he tells the AllFather. "You shall have to think of another way in which he can escape from his current predicament."

"Draag is your mortal," says the AllFather, wearily. "Figuring out how to escape from a predicament that you yourself created is, I would have thought, your task."

"This is not fair!"

"How long has he been down there?" asks the Jester. "Shouldn't he have to start consulting the knucklebones to determine how long he can hold his breath?"

"You don't know how long he's been down there, because you don't actually know that he is down there. The last your mortal saw him, he was running out of the treasure room on fire."

"So it's a treasure room, is it?" says the Jester, eyebrows raised in fraudulent innocence.

"That's just a figure of speech. It's what I call it in my notes."

"But you wouldn't call it a treasure room unless there was treasure there, would you?"

"There was treasure there. There was a magical sword."

"Yeah, but the rest was all junk."

"How would you know?" says the AllFather bitterly. "You and Lord Warrior spent most of your time using it as a wrestling mat."

"So some of it is valuable then?"

"You don't know. Some of it might be. Some of it might not."

The Jester gives him a dubious look. "Right."

"Lord Warrior's mortal?" suggests the Dealer.

"Oh yeah. So how long has he been down there then?"

"You still don't know that he is down there," says the AllFather.

"Fine. I'll wonder on down the corridor after him, across the chasm thing and look down the well."

"Why would you look down the well?" asks the Dealer. "Your mortal doesn't know that he has jumped down the well."

"Well let me see. I'm looking for a man on fire, but find only an empty room with a well shaft, with a lot of thrashing and screaming coming from the well. It's just possible that I might be able to figure out where the burning man might have gone."

"Yes," says the AllFather. "You find Draag drowning in the well."

"But the well would be dark," says the Dealer. "Actually, we would all be in darkness. Lord Warrior was carrying the torch."

"I think he might have dropped it when he caught fire," suggests the Lady. "It would have been somewhat superfluous at that point."

The Dealer nods.

"Actually, he would have dropped it before then," says the Jester. "He was holding the sword in two hands."

The AllFather cuts in. "I was rather assuming that he was no longer holding it when you and he dived headlong for the sword. Unless you want to cast the knucklebones to see if your mortal was hit by the torch in the process?"

"No, no, that's fine." The Jester thinks for a moment. "Well who was holding it then?"

"For pity's sake, let's just say Tallenna was holding it then!" snaps the Lady. "She can go with Hill."

The Jester nods, then looks at the AllFather. "The two of us will wander on over to the well."

"Good," says the AllFather. "You find Draag drowning in it."

"So how long's he been down there then?"

Chapter Seven

There are times in a man's life when fate calls him to trial and asks him to prove his worth. Draag had now reached such a time. His lungs burned, gripped hard by death's tight embrace, and the tired muscles of his arms and legs flared agony each time he kicked against the well's rocky bottom and tried to claw his way to the surface.

Some men might fall at such a hurdle, open their mouths and breathe the cool water deep into their lungs.

Was Draag such a man?

The knucklebones tumble across the table. The Warrior counts them. "Including the inner resources I'd said I was spending – two successes." He looks quizzically at the AllFather.

The AllFather nods. "That is sufficient. For the moment, Draag is holding his breath. But you will have to test again, and the tests will get harder."

"And he will eventually run out of inner resources," says the Jester gleefully. "How much has he got left?"

"Enough," growls the Warrior.

He pushed for the surface once more, gauntleted hands tearing desperately at the slippery moss-covered rock of the well's wall; but his hands found no grip, and he slid down to the well's floor once more.

"Look, it's just not possible for your mortal to climb up the rock-wall of the well whilst wearing armour and a backpack. There's no grip!"

"I'll take the backpack off then."

"You're still far too heavy!"

"How wide is the well-shaft?"

"About three feet."

The Warrior thinks for a moment. "Then I shall place my back against one side and my feet against the other, and walk my way up the shaft."

"That will be very difficult."

"I will use half of my mortal's remaining inner resources."

The AllFather nods towards the knucklebones. "You will still need three successes."

The knucklebones dance. "Two successes," growls an angry warrior. "Why was it three successes even after my spending of inner resources? That figure is absurdly high!"

"The rock is slippery and you're wearing metal gauntlets and armoured shoes," protests the AllFather. "And you're very, very heavy."

"Can I try again?"

The AllFather shifts awkwardly. "Well strictly speaking the knucklebones have ruled that your mortal is not capable of performing this particular task."

"That is absurd and without logic. They could just have easily ruled the other way."

"Does he not have to make another test for holding his breath?" asks the Jester.

"No," says the AllFather. He turns his attention back to the Warrior. "The result of the knucklebones is not mere random chance. They are..." he searches for words, "...an integral part of the workings of my creation."

"What?"

"They are the mechanism by which chance occurs in the mortal realm."

"You're just making that up!" says the Jester, accusingly.

"I resent that!" snaps the AllFather.

The Jester shrugs in a way that falls somewhere between apologetic and non-committal.

"So can I try again?" asks the Warrior.

The AllFather sighs. "Yes."

"With the same level of difficulty?"

"Yes. But only if you spend the same degree of inner resources."

The Warrior pauses for a moment, then nods reluctantly. He picks up the knucklebones and casts them across the table.

"Two successes!" shouts a laughing Jester.

"I'm afraid your mortal really isn't capable of climbing out of the well," says the AllFather.

"This is not fair!"

"Life rarely is," laughs the Jester. "Has it taken your mortal this long to realise that?"

The Warrior glowers at him. "Fine. I will begin to take off my armour!"

"That will involve quite some exertion and take some time," says the AllFather.

"Now does he have to take another test to hold his breath?" asks the Jester.

"Er. Yes. One success."

"Just one success? Even with him making all that effort?"

"Yes."

The Jester raises a doubtful eyebrow, but says nothing.

"I will spend inner resources."

"You've spent them all."

For several moments there is an uneasy stand-off, but finally the Warrior hurls his knucklebones angrily across the table.

There is silence.

Finally, the AllFather speaks. "Well it appears that your mortal is now drowning."

A greyness was pressing in on Draag now, his world shrinking to a dim

awareness of existence and an understanding that this might be the end. And yet above him, barely visible through the murky water, was something. A flicker of light; a reminder that he was not alone.

There were others.

He was not alone.

"Are you going to have your mortals do nothing," shouts the Warrior, gesticulating angrily. "Or are the three of you merely going to watch while I die?"

"That's pretty much my plan," says the Jester.

"That's a little cold, isn't it?" asks the Lady, icily.

"Why should I help him out when he's pledged to kill me on sight?" He lets her consider this for a moment, and then continues. "Anyway, it's not the three of us, it's the two of us." He points at the Dealer sitting beside him. "He stayed back in the treasure room."

"No, I didn't," protests the Dealer.

"Well you didn't say that Yann was going with Hill and Tallenna."

"You took the only torch. Yann wouldn't just watch you two walk off with it leaving him in pitch darkness." The Dealer looks at the AllFather. "Can we agree that Yann went with them?"

The AllFather has reached the point of being almost too depressed to speak. He isn't sure quite what he thought would be the result of creating an entire universe, but he seems to recall that it was something considerably more enjoyable than this.

"Yes," he says wearily. "We can agree that Yann went with them. The three of you are now clustered around a torch, looking down a well-shaft at your drowning comrade. I think Lord Warrior's question was a good one. Just what do you intend your mortals to do?"

"That question presupposes that we intend to do something," says the Jester. "And let's be honest, none of our mortals actually like him." He looks around for dissent, and receives none. He gesticulates at the Sleeper. "We're trying to save his mortal because our mortals actually like his mortal."

"What? Sorry?" says the Sleeper, picking up his knucklebones. "Do you need me to make a cast."

The Jester shakes his head, blinking. "Erm, no. Go back to sleep."

"Okay."

"The point is that while like might be a bit of a strong word, they don't actually hate Stone."

The Warrior leans as far towards him as the table will allow. "Is this about Hill's feelings for Draag or your feelings for me?"

"Look my Lords, please!" shouts the AllFather. "Can we please restrict ourselves to the matters at hand. Lord Warrior's mortal is now in the final stages of drowning. Do you intend your mortals to do anything?"

"What can we do?" asks the Jester.

"You could jump down, help him remove his armour, and then pull him to the surface," suggests the AllFather.

"He is drowning," points out the Dealer. "A drowning man clings to

anyone who tries to rescue him. In such a confined space, and with a task as difficult as removing his armour, such an attempt would only result in the drowning of those who attempted to rescue him."

"And besides, how would we then get out?" asks the Jester. "It would be a difficult climb without any rope."

"Does Tallenna have any spells that might be of use," the AllFather asks the Lady.

She shakes her head. "I've already gone through her entire spell list. There are perhaps a couple that might help them climb out of the well once they got Draag to the surface, but nothing that could help someone who was under the water trying to remove his armour."

"Well there you go," says the Jester. "It's hopeless."

The Warrior pushes back his chair, angry. "It is clear they will not help. Make your final decision."

The AllFather squirms. "Well then I think that your mortal has, perhaps, run out of time."

And with that, Draag died.

The silence that has settled around the table is broken by the sound of the Warrior's chair being shoved violently back.

"I see no purpose staying here," he says.

"You could create a new mortal?" suggests the AllFather.

"Why? So that you can just kill him again?"

"I think that's a bit unfair," says the Dealer.

"Yes. I think you'll find it was Lord Jester who killed your mortal," says the Lady.

"How is it my fault?" protests the Jester.

"Because you tricked my mortal into setting himself on fire with the sword!" shouts the Warrior.

"Sorry," smirks the Jester. "I managed to forget about that. It all seems so long ago."

It is a statement that, time having no meaning here notwithstanding, is undeniably true in the opinion of all around the table. The AllFather considers considering what the point of it all is, but quickly concludes that some questions are best left unanswered and that this is most probably one of them.

The Warrior's face settles into an expression that suggests he is engaged in a bout of thinking that is deep, long, and hard, and while it may be neither deep nor hard, it is certainly long – long enough to reach a point where his fellow gods are considering the etiquette of continuing the conversation without him.

"Draag is a warrior," he finally announces. "Who takes what he wants and will have left many sons. I could take one of them as my new mortal."

"Son of Draag?" wails the Jester, looking slightly sick.

The Lady looks equally unhappy. She waves a hand, asking for time while she considers the problem. "I think it is perhaps true that

what happened to the Warrior's mortal was a little unfair, and perhaps not even sensible or logical, according to the workings of our mortal realm."

"We're not trying to argue that he's not dead, are we?" asks the Jester. "Only, I seem to recall that he was pledged to kill me."

The Lady ignores him and continues. "Would the sword's flame power really have activated like that? When it was pointing straight at the one who held it?"

The Dealer snaps his fingers. "He wasn't actually grasping the hilt! The blade is so long that for him to be looking along it from the pointed end, both hands must have been holding the blade!"

The Lady nods emphatically. "Logically, the flame should only activate when someone is holding the sword by the hilt. Otherwise, it could go off when it's in the scabbard, or lying across the legs being cleaned and pointing in a random direction."

The Jester laughs. "You can just imagine grief that could cause."

Karim of Kannaq, sword-maker to the great Visiar of Kannaq, paused before his monarch, and bowed low. When it came to his profession, there was none who could best him. His swords were the finest, and frankly so was he.

But the sword he held now in his hands was the finest of the fine, and the culmination of a lifetime's quest for excellence. Of all the wondrous blades he'd crafted for the Visiar, this was the first that he knew without doubt was worthy of its recipient. This was a blade fit for the gods.

He laid the carved, black case within which the sword rested on the low table that sat before the Visiar's mighty throne, flipped the catches up, and slowly opened the lid. A gasp went up from the assembled flunkies, as it should have – for the sword was a wonder to consider. Karim carefully lifted it from the case's velvet embrace and placed it onto the table's polished surface.

The Visiar leaned forward, looked over the sword with approval, and then spoke in the loud booming voice that only those raised as kings or highly spoiled children could ever truly master.

"Bring the sword to me sword-master, that I might examine it further."

The Visiar waved, and the guards that stood to either side of him lifted their crossed pikes. Karim stepped up onto the plinth, and walked on quivering legs over to the huge throne. He held the sword out, the dark and brooding blade resting across his hands. The Visiar took it from him, rested it across his lap, and admired it, stroking his fingers along the mirror smooth metal.

Karim took a polite step back, and then waited for the Visiar to speak.

"You told me earlier that this sword had a mighty power that could be activated by voice alone," said the Visiar. "What is it?"

"The phrase should be kept secret, your highness, for the sword is for you

and you alone. My I approach, your wonderfulness?"

The Visiar again waved him forward.

From his belt – slowly, for he could see the still watchful expressions on the faces of the guards – he took out a scroll. "Majesty. This scroll explains all that is needed to know to care and operate the sword. But the relevant activation phrase is..." He dropped down into a low whisper. "Flames of Oblivion."

"Flames of Oblivion!" boomed the Visiar.

A jet of flame billowed out from the sword's tip, totally engulfing the Lord High Chancellor, who'd been sitting to one side fiddling with his abacus. He ran, screaming and afire, across the throne room and collided with a minor diplomat from a luckily unimportant sultanate.

The Visiar nodded approvingly. "Most impressive, sword-maker. Most impressive. But..." He put on a conciliatory expression and lowered his voice. "Perhaps you ought to think about putting in some kind of safety feature?"

The Lady nods. "You could." She looks at the AllFather. "Do you not agree?"

"Well, yes," he says, unhappily. "But events have already happened in the mortal realm. I do not like the idea of simply waving them away as though they were merely ripples in the wind."

"You are the supreme creator," the Lady points out. "If you say it, then it has happened. Or in this case, not happened."

"So we would go back to the point at which Hill was reading out the instructions?" asks the Warrior.

The Lady nods.

"I find that acceptable."

"I don't," says the Jester. "His mortal's pledged to kill mine!"

"But that won't happen," says the Lady. "Because the events that caused that pledge will not be happening." She looks at both the Jester and the Warrior. "Will they?"

They each nod, reluctantly.

She looks at the AllFather. "So we'll rewind back to then, yes?"

The AllFather sighs, nods, then looks at Hill. "We will rewind time back to the point at which you were reading out the instructions."

The Jester picks up the slate that AllFather previously gave him. "So I'll just start reading from the top, shall I?"

"Please."

Chapter Eight

"I, Karim of Kannaq, sword-maker to the great Visiar of Kannaq, humbly greet you, the purchaser of this sword."

Draag waved an impatient hand. "Yes, yes. Get on with it."

Hill shrugged, and began to speed-read. "Users of this sword should insure they are properly trained... no liability shall be assumed..."

"Yes, yes, and?"

"The item should be cared for as described in Appendix A..."

"I think we can skip that bit!"

"Has been thrice-fired... guaranteed not to warp or bend for at least one thousand years..." Hill looked up from the scroll. "I wonder how old it is," he muttered, apparently thinking aloud.

Draag held the blade up and examined it. "Does it look straight to you?" he asked Yann. The barbarian shrugged. "I don't know. Have a look at it."

"Appropriate materials... Cleaning after use..."

The dark paladin carefully grasped the long blade at first its centre and then its pointed end, and then lifted it high into the light, looking straight along the blade's length.

The tilt of its head indicated a closing of one eye and a squint of the other. "It looks straight."

"Ah!" said Hill, pausing for a moment in his reading. "That's interesting." He paused for another moment, then quickly scrunched the scroll up and stuffed the resulting ball of paper into his mouth. He began to chew, vigourously.

"You're eating the scroll?" asks the AllFather.

"Yes."

"Why?"

The Warrior breaks in before the Jester has time to consider an answer. "He is breaking the bargain! He is cheating! This is not acceptable!"

It was clear to Tallenna from the slow and deliberate way with which Draag reacted to the eating of the scroll that he was actually burning white-hot with fury.

He carefully turned the sword back round, allowing the hilt to slip easily into his hand, and then pointed its tip straight at the still munching halfling.

"Flames of oblivion!" he screamed.

An incendiary jet of flame streamed out of the sword's tip and totally engulfed Hill. The halfling screamed a long wail of pure agony as his leather

armour melted into his flesh. He took one stagger, and-

"You can't do that!" protests the Jester.

The Warrior points at the set of knucklebones that lie before him. "I can and I have. My mortal has said the required activation phrase and the knucklebones have confirmed the trueness of his aim."

The Jester leans forward, angry. "You can rip what a mortal would call his bollocks off and roll them across the table, but your mortal can't say a phrase he's never heard!"

"Why not? Are you saying he's not capable of saying those words?"

The AllFather bangs a slate on the table. "He would not have said those words because he didn't know they had any significance."

"If you wish to conclude that it was unlikely for him to say them, then that is your prerogative. But it is I who decide what my mortal might say, and I have decided that those were the words he chose to speak at that precise time."

"Whilst pointing the sword at me?" says the Jester.

"Yes."

The AllFather sighs. "Well nothing happens when he says them."

It was clear to Tallenna from the slow and deliberate way with which Draag reacted to the eating of the scroll that he was actually burning white-hot with fury.

He carefully turned the sword back round, allowing the hilt to slip easily into his hand, and then pointed its tip straight at the still munching halfling.

"Flames of oblivion!" he screamed.

Nothing happened.

The dark paladin's head rocked backward in confusion. He brought the sword back up, examined it for a few seconds, then pointed it again at the halfling.

"Flames of oblivion!"

"That's not the command activation phrase anymore," says the AllFather. "I've changed it to something different." He nods at the slate which the Jester still holds in his hand.

The Jester peers at it. "Oh yeah." He smiles.

"You have changed it?" asks the Warrior.

"Yes."

"To something different?"

"Yes."

"Very different?"

"I'm not giving clues!"

Draag paused for a moment, then began shouting again.

"Fires of fury!"

“Flames of the apocalypse!”

“Burning of death!”

Yann wandered over to Tallenna as the dark paladin continued to shout random fire-related phrases. “Do you think he is all right?” he asked her. “I think perhaps the sword has possessed his mind.”

She shrugged. The entire room – this entire moment – felt like it had the scent of death over it, and she didn't know why.

“You can't guess it!” says the AllFather angrily. “So don't try.”

The Warrior slouches grumpily down in his chair. “This is not fair.”

The Jester smirks. “Still. It's a pretty sword.”

The Lady gives him a stern glare, and he smirks back. She thinks for a moment. “Why did Hill decide to eat the scroll?”

The Jester gives her a look of contemptuous puzzlement before he answers. “Because he didn't want a psycho like Draag to have access to such a powerful weapon?”

“But when he reached the section of the scroll that mentioned the activation phrase, Draag was holding the sword in such a way that it was pointing straight at him. Hill is malicious and a trickster. Surely he would have tried to trick Draag into uttering the command phrase?”

“Yeah, but there was no point because Draag wasn't holding-bugger!”

The AllFather shakes his head. “Sorry? What?”

The Lady explains. “When we rewound time back, we should have gone only back to the point where Draag uttered the phrase. Hill would still have tried to trick him into activating the sword. The only difference would have been that this time it wouldn't have worked.”

“Ah, yes. Well I don't really want to make yet another significant change to the workings of the mortal realm, but...”

“It is fairer.”

He nods.

“Ah!” said Hill, pausing for a moment in his reading. “That's interesting. There's something here about 'flames of oblivion'.”

“Flames of oblivion?” asked Draag, still looking along the blade.

Silence. Stillness.

Draag looked questioningly over at Hill. As he did so, he flipped the blade back end over end, the hilt slipping easily into his hand. He began to resume his practice strokes.

“Erm... Yeah. It's erm...” Hill paused for a moment, wearing the expression that Tallenna had long learned to associate with scheming. “The activation word for a healing power. You just point it at the person you want to heal and then say it.” He paused, as though thinking, then resumed speaking in an innocent voice. “Yann? Didn't you hurt yourself when you dropped down

through the hole? Draag, why don't you try it on Yann?"

"Do you take me for an imbecile?"

Draag lifted the sword, pointed it at Yann, and then turned, slowly, until it was facing Hill.

"It was a joke! There's no need to get stupid about it!"

"Flames of oblivion!" he screamed.

An incendiary jet of flame streamed out of the sword's tip and totally engulfed Hill. The halfling screamed a long wail of pure agony as his leather armour melted into his flesh. He took one stagger, and-

"Well if we're officially in a sense of humour zone, can I point out that Draag might have been stupid enough to fall for it."

"My mortal has a legendary intellect. I doubt he would fall for such a transparent trick."

The Jester things for a moment. "Yeah, except my mortal's got an equally legendary ability to deceive and con." He looks at the AllFather. "I should have made a test of my mortal's bluffing ability, shouldn't I?"

The AllFather nods wearily without speaking, and waves a vague hand in the direction of the Jester's knucklebones.

The Jester throws them across the table. "Seven successes!" he announces brightly.

It is clear from the Warrior's expression that he doubts both the validity of the cast and the truthfulness of the result, but he says nothing, and casts his own knucklebones across the table. "Six successes," he growls.

Draag lifted the sword, pointed it at Yann, paused, and then screamed. "Flames of oblivion!"

An incendiary jet of flame streamed out of the sword's tip and totally engulfed the barbarian. He screamed a long wail of pure agony as his leather and furs melted into his flesh. He took one stagger, and-

"This is sociopathic!" declares the Lady.

"Yeah, but it's funny," says the Jester.

The Dealer leans forward, controlled. "I believe Lord Warrior should receive a bonus to reflect the knowledge Draag has gained of Hill during the long period in which they have known each other. This is not a city guard whom Hill has only just encountered."

"Ah yes," says the AllFather. "Good point."

The Jester looks at the Dealer. "Since when have you let the rules get in the way of storytelling?" he asks bitterly.

"Since the moment my totally innocent mortal got incinerated due to your stupid feud," replies the Dealer.

Draag lifted the sword, pointed it at Yann, and then turned, slowly, until it was facing Hill.

"Maybe we should just agree to stop incinerating each other," says the Jester, a hopeful smile on his face.

"Flames of oblivion!" he screamed.

An incendiary jet of flame streamed out of the sword's tip and totally engulfed Hill. The halfling screamed a long wail of pure agony as his leather armour melted into his flesh. He took one stagger, and-

"Shouldn't I have had a chance to dodge out of the way?" asks the Jester.

The AllFather considers this. "Well you can't usually dodge out of the way of a magical projectile..."

The Warrior pricks up his ears, suspicious.

"The sword is magical," says the Lady. "But the flame is not."

"True."

"You are attempting to degrade the abilities of my sword!" barks the Warrior. "This is not fair!"

"And my mortal getting toasted is?" asks the Jester.

"I wish I'd never given you the damned sword," says the AllFather sadly. He drops his stack of tablets onto the table and slumps down in his chair. "All I'm trying to do is create a tale of legend, adventure and myth, and every time you two reduce it to a farce. I don't know why I bother."

He folds his arms, and stares sulkily forward at nothing in particular.

The Lady touches him on the arm. "The Jester's dodge?"

The AllFather waves a hand. "Fine. Attempt your dodge."

The knucklebones bounce. "Three successes?"

"Your mortal dodges clear of the jet of flame."

An incendiary jet of flame streamed out of the sword's tip straight towards the spot where Hill currently stood. The halfling threw himself sideways in a desperate dive that carried him just clear of the bubbling flame. Slightly singed and gently smoking he landed in a roll on the paved floor and sprang up into a kneeling posture. Behind him a tapestry burned.

The sword tracked his movements to face him once more.

"You can run halfling," the dark paladin growled. "But you cannot hide from my flame's purifying embrace."

The Warrior has picked up his knucklebones and is about to cast

them across the table.

"Can we not just say that the joke's over?" asks the Jester.

"The joke will be over when the half-thing that made it lies smoking and dead on the treasure room's floor."

The Lady interrupts. "Lord Warrior? Do you expect our mortals to stand back while your mortal attempts to kill Hill?" She looks at the AllFather. "Perhaps we should cast to see in which order our mortals react?"

The implied threat hangs in the air.

Finally, the Warrior puts down his knucklebones. "I am happy to end the dispute now, providing I get to keep the sword."

"Do you promise not to use it on me?" asks the Jester.

"Of course. Unless I have good cause."

"Good," says the Lady. "Perhaps we should continue?"

"Where," says a dejected Jester. "This is a dead end."

"There is a door on the far wall," says the AllFather.

"You never mentioned that!"

"It was behind the tapestry that Lord Warrior just set on fire."

The gods trade glances.

"I suppose we may as well go through the door then?" says the Jester, looking around the table for agreement.

"I will lead," announces the Warrior. "I have DeathSinger at the ready!"

Behind the door was a long and winding stone passageway, with roughly hewn flagstones on the floor and sharp and jagged walls. It was clearly an environment that demanded carefully placed footsteps; the occasional patches of green blood in particularly tricky sections were a testament to that.

Yann kept close behind Draag as the dark paladin navigated his way down the corridor, his flickering torch casting strobing shadows around them. Behind him was Tallenna, and behind her Hill.

For several minutes they continued down the passageway, until Draag stopped suddenly, and extinguished his torch. "I see light, ahead," he whispered to Yann. "Pass it back."

The first Hill knew they'd stopped was when he cannoned into Tallenna's actually rather shapely backside, and got a sharp kick in return for his trouble. With three oversized hulks between him and a rather unreliable light source, he hadn't been able to see a damn thing.

"Icy light," hissed a still pissed off Tallenna. "A head."

Icy light? thought Hill. A head? What the hell was that supposed to mean? He shrugged. No-one ever told him anything.

The Jester waves an animated hand at the knucklebones that lie before him. "So let me get this straight. You're now making us cast

the knucklebones to see if we can whisper to each other?"

"When you're trying to whisper very quietly, yes," says the AllFather.

"And so my lack of successes means what? That Hill just didn't hear Tallenna? Has he suddenly gone deaf?"

"No, he heard her. He just didn't understand what she said."

"How? Has he forgotten how to speak the common tongue?"

"Look! He just didn't understand it, and that's that."

The Jester raises a doubtful eyebrow, but says nothing.

The Warrior interjects. "We are wasting time. I will advance towards the light."

"The floor is rough, and you now have no illumination."

"I will advance very slowly."

For several minutes they edged their way towards the icy light, whatever the hell that was, and each time Hill cannoned into Tallenna's rear end she kicked him. Finally, however, the passageway opened out onto a broad ledge overlooking a moderately large chamber. They spread out, side by side, and looked out over the edge.

Below them were goblins, lots of them, perhaps a hundred or more, all dressed in garish robes decorated with animal skins and feathers. They were dancing and screaming, their every attention focussed on the elaborately bedecked goblin who stood on a raised platform at the far end of the chamber, and the thing to which he was speaking.

It was a head, stuck on a pole.

Stone's head.

Beside Hill, Yann breathed a sigh of understanding. "I think this is a religious ceremony," he whispered. "With Stone's head being worshipped as some kind of gift from the gods that fell from the sky. Perhaps even an aspect of a god that fell from the sky."

"You think they worship men?" Hill whispered.

"From the way Cottontop greeted us, perhaps."

"But they kill men when they raid up above?"

"Some cultures express their beliefs in ways that appear strange to us."

A thought occurred to Hill. "Do you think they worship halflings as well?" Yann shrugged, embarrassed, and looked away.

"And so," says the Dealer, reaching the end of what has been a rather long monologue, "It is clear that the conundrum we have to resolve is one not of strategy, or tactics, but of religion."

The AllFather nods, carefully. It's not often that the gods around the table manage to actually grasp the point of the legends he is creating for them, and when they do, he's usually so grateful he has to guard against appearing overly-enthusiastic.

"So let me get this straight," says the Jester. "You're proposing

that we wander on down there, and start some kind of religious reformation that will change the way in which they see the people up above, thus causing them to have no further desire or interest in Stone's head?"

"Yes."

The AllFather pretends to consult his slates. Such an action would also break the theological hold the goblin priesthood has over its people, prevent them seizing so many of their people's goods as tributes for the gods, bring prosperity to the goblin lands, and end the need for the goblins to launch raids on the lands of men up above. But he says nothing. The story is clearly on the right track and he merely has to watch it journey to its destination.

"There is a simpler way," says the Warrior, after some deliberation.

"What?" says the Jester. "Wade down there with swords out and try and hack our way through a hundred armed and angry goblins?"

"No." The Warrior looks at the Lady. "The resurrection spell requires all the various bits of Stone's body, correct?"

She nods. "Apparently. That's why we've come down here to retrieve the head."

"But it doesn't matter if any of those various bits are damaged, yes? After all, bodies to be resurrected are usually damaged in some way. That's why they need resurrecting. Any damage will be repaired by the spell. Am I correct?"

"Yes," she says. "I think so. But I'm not sure I understand your reasoning."

Draag carefully levered himself up into a kneeling position, drew his new sword from its scabbard, and pointed it at the assembled goblins below.

"Watch, and learn," he told them. "This is how a warrior solves such a problem."

Chapter Nine

The headless body had lain on the slab for four nights and five days, but now its erstwhile comrades had returned. The head-priest quickly pulled on his various vestments and strode out to greet the returning adventurers.

“Do you have the missing” – cough – “item?” he asked them.

The Northlander barbarian nodded, and held up a sack in which something obviously heavy weightily nestled.

The head-priest waved a command at a couple of waiting novices; they bustled over to the altar and drew the covering cloth back. The stump at the corpse's neck jutted out like a broken stem.

“Perhaps you could place it in the appropriate place,” the head-priest told the barbarian, pointing at the body. The barbarian nodded, walked the few steps that separated him from the slab, reached carefully into the sack, and drew forth a blackened, burnt and gristly lump of something.

The head-priest took a long hard look at it, just in case his eyes were deceiving him. They weren't. “Is that it?” he hissed.

The barbarian nodded, awkwardly.

“Are you sure it's a head?”

The barbarian nodded, again.

The head-priest thought for a moment. “Are you sure it's his head?”

Again, an awkward nod. The barbarian paused for a moment, then placed the grapefruit sized lump against the stump of the neck. The head-priest was fully aware of the absurdity of the world, having seen many strange and illogical things in his three score years and counting. But quite frankly, this took the biscuit.

He shrugged. His role was to serve, not to question, and however damaged, as long as the head was present the gods could grant a resurrection, providing it was the right-

“Are you totally sure it's the right head?” he snapped.

It was the woman wizard who answered him. “Yes. We identified it when it was still recognisable.”

“Well how in seven hells did it get like that?” spluttered the head-priest. Serve not question be damned – he just couldn't help himself.

He got only a defiant pose from the black-clad knight and three awkward shrugs from the others; although when he thought about it, those shrugs did seem to be aimed at the knight. He caught sight of the runes upon that black armour, shuddered, and bought his attention back to the matter at hand.

“Perhaps we should just continue,” he said.

They nodded, relieved.

"Do you have the necessary... donation?" he asked.

The halfling slapped a money purse into his hand. "There," he said, in a tone so blunt it bordered on rudeness.

The head-priest didn't open the purse to check the contents, but instead simply handed it to a waiting novice, who placed it on a gold collection plate that sat on a side table. He never checked such donations in front of worshippers; to do so would be crass, and unnecessary too – most people recognised the stupidity of an attempt to short-change the gods.

"If you could take up your places around the altar," he told the adventurers. He waved a hand, and the novices guided them into place. At the same time, the temple choir launched into a chorus so pure and uplifting it could have bought forth tears from a stone.

Strictly speaking, none of this was necessary. But when you're charging ten thousand gold crowns for a supposedly altruistic service, it's a good idea to throw in a few frills to make the punters feel like they've got their money's worth. He launched into the ceremony, his voice projected so far he liked to think it would carry beyond the temple's dome and all the way to the heavens.

"Forces above, you who guide our lives, listen now to we your servants!"

The AllFather finishes consulting his tablets. "Now since a regional priest such as this is only able to perform a lesser resurrection, Lord Sleeper's mortal will have to lose an ability as a penalty for being resurrected."

"That's stupid," says the Jester.

"It's just the way it is," snaps the AllFather. He is still rather bitter about the abrupt and violent end the gods around the table have wrought upon his carefully created adventure.

"Fine. Whatever." The Jester looks across the table at the Sleeper. "What abilities has Stone got?"

The Sleeper picks up the life-slate that lies before him and stares at it in puzzlement, looking for all the world like someone who has never seen any life-slate before, let alone this one.

"Erm," he says. "Abilities?"

The Lady leans across to him and points at the slate. "Here they are," she says. "He's got cat's reactions, charm, jack-of-everything–"

"What does jack-of-everything do?" asks the Dealer.

The Jester answers him in a slightly cold voice. "It means you can attempt to perform actions that you don't have the skill to perform without suffering a mishap if you fail."

Appalled silence settles upon the table, broken only – and metaphorically – by the sound of the Sleeper thinking. Finally, his thinking bears fruit, and a broad smile appears on his usually confused face.

"So that means I didn't cut my head off?" he exclaims. "That's good!"

The head-priest chanted through a last exhortation to the gods and segued nicely into a verse on the fickle nature of life. He paused on a high note, hands raised, ready to punch down into the next line—

The body sat up, looked around, got off the slab, gave the head-priest a nod and a cheery grin, and then walked out the temple's open doors and into the sunshine.

“It's a miracle!” chanted the blissfully unaware minions.

It certainly is, the head-priest thought. That was just the preamble. I hadn't actually started yet. He blinked, and shook his head, and looked back at the marble slab where just moments ago a corpse had lain, broken, decapitated, burned and dead as dead can be – and then some.

The black-clad knight placed a hand on the pommel of his sword. “I'm not giving my sword back,” he announced to no-one in particular, before turning on his heels and following the now-apparently-not-corpse out through the temple doors.

The remaining three adventurers traded a series of resigned shrugs and pulled faces, before themselves turning and walking through the doorway. Silence resumed its reign within the hallowed space. The head-priest, arms still wound like clockwork to fire the next line of the prayer, wasn't quite sure what to do. Quickly finish? Or just stop and walk away? He looked skywards, hoping to find inspiration in the temple's elaborately painted ceiling.

A figure walked back in through the doors. It was the halfling adventurer. He walked straight up to the side table and grabbed the money-purse from the golden plate upon which it still sat. “I don't think you'll be needing that now,” he told the head-priest, before turning and marching back out.

The head-priest returned his gaze to the painted ceiling. Sometimes this was a very strange and confusing world. Gods, he thought. You do sometimes move in mysterious ways.

THE END

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