*Chapter 27: Aliya’s Curse*

They’d passed through the Fishersgate entrance to the city, and were now approaching the Precinct Office around the corner from the Temple of Gond, where they’d begun this investigation. Most vendors were closed up by now, but they’d passed a few taverns and other places of entertainment that were just as spry as they’d been earlier in the evening when they’d left the city.

It was a few minutes to Midnight, and soon they would hear the twelve tolls from the belltower. A flock of bats flew over the heroes and under the starry night, and the scent of the sea was strong, carried by the northward breeze. With the roadside bandits killed or run off, and the dead ones’ goods confiscated and stowed into their haversacks, the crew entered the Precinct Office, and made eye contact with none other than Captain Slatestein.

“Captain!” proclaimed Luran. “You’re *alive*!”

“Heey! There they are,” the dwarf said excitedly, studying the group as they shuffled in, noticing that there was no necromancer with them. “I’d ask what happened, but given the circumstances, I should go first.” Slatestein invited the folks into the back office, leaving the door open as a handful of guards walked in and out, looking over documents. He took a few minutes to explain what little he knew. “The way Lt. Baggarly here tells it, Aliya brought me here atop a *Tenser’s floating disc*.”

The reference to the spell was immediately recalled by Solstice. Slatestein continued.

“She and the officers got me onto that bench out front, and she gave a statement, but said that she couldn’t stay long, and had to see a priest about a *restoration*. By the time I got *raised*, she was long gone.

“Can we see her statement?”

“Go right ahead,” he had it on the table already, and pushed it towards the bard. “Long and short of it is that she got some type of divine inspiration, and was suddenly able to cast the *floating disc* spell and other things she’d always wanted to cast. She apparently also learned the *fly* spell, and exhausted its uses while ferrying me back.”

“You *don’t* say...” Solstice found that peculiar. “And then she took off,” he didn’t so much ask, but rather stated as Dromedar—the gnomish impostor—yelled some obscenity down the hall before being taken to the showers by force.

Saradette was content to let the others talk while she listened and observed. She was tired, and she needed a bath and a soft bed. There would be little time for all of that once they were back on the road again, and she knew that Barkley would be eager to leave once the business here was settled.

Elsabet requested an officer take her statement in private, and asked to then be able to use her orison to make a true copy of the statement for her journal.

“I’m extremely tired, Captain,” she told him, “but very happy to see you alive again, and I would like to just sit down and go over everything with one of your people before it gets too murky in my head. I’ll begin from the encounter where you went down, since you know what occurred up until that point, but if you want corroboration for anything earlier, I’d be happy to oblige.”

“Very well,” the Captain allowed the favored soul to go back up to the front and give her testimony to the notary. She exited.

“And what of our mark?” asked the Captain. “Did you at least find him and slay him?”

“Well, Aliya said she’d be back tomorrow for her share of the bounty, but we can start talking to the coffer man,” Slatestein pointed to one of the officers just outside the back room, who heard his informal title, and poked his head in.

“These folks ready for their compensation?”

“Aye!” Slatestein jovially affirmed. “They’ve done the City a fair solid this day. See if there’s anything in the unclaimed items locker that might benefit them.

Then Barkley snapped out of his delusion, having stayed his beheading hand when the moment to strike at Edwin had come.

“Barkley, please stay your hand, for my sake,” Elsabet had actually asked the archon quietly, as executing prisoners was not, in her opinion, a good act. “We’ve all had a really long day and night,” she’d continued. “Not for his sake, but for the sake of our own peace of mind, let us bring him in to answer for his crimes. I would prefer to bring in at least one enemy alive. Let it be a parting favor from you to me, though there is no doubt he deserves punishment.”

She then had stood out of the way, to allow Barkley to act as he chose—she would not interfere further.

Edwin had sharted himself by this point as Barkley had stood for a moment before lowering his sword. Looking into Edwin’s eyes, his words had been something like, “You are lucky I respect her wisdom and judgement. But should I ever see you loose again after tonight, I will end your miserable life.”

Barkley was now glad that he had stayed his hand and ignored any comments from Edwin, considering them empty words of a dead man. The cleric of Red Knight was now being processed, and would soon be thrown into an isolation chamber. Testimonies were being given by heroes and villains alike, and the case would soon come to a resolute trial.

“Evening, Tore! How goes it?” one of the clerks now greeted a cleric dressed with the holy insignia of Lurue.

A person in a costume

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Coming out of the back room with the others after their mutual debriefing, the archon returned to the moment at hand. Elsabet had finished her testimony, and was fixing to go home, considering walking alone when a gentleman by the name of Tore came in asking about Aliya. Elsabet’s and Barkley’s ears perked up at the sound of the familiar name, while the others were still embroiled in a tangential pleasantry.

Elsabet looked wearily at the cleric. “Tore? Aliya mentioned you. Elsabet, Favored of Mayaheine. Nice to meet you. Excuse me if I don’t make small talk. I feel like I have been up for days. Need sleep.” Elsabet realized she was babbling. “You got a place to stay? We’re at a good clean place. Good people, you’re welcome to join us there. We can talk about Aliya and recent events when we get up. What time is it anyways?”

“It’s two minutes to midnight, ma’am,” the clerk that had greeted Tore answered, pointing at the belltower whose clock was barely in view.

“Thanks. Captain,” she then spoke up, turning towards the dwarf. “Could you have some of your people escort us to our inn? Maybe help lug some of this stuff we collected? We need to rack out and catch some shuteye in a safe place for maybe 100 hours—well, 10 or 12 anyways—and I’d rather not tempt any street thugs into taking chances.”

“Benedetti and Xiang can escort you,” he looked at the two males taking a break and waved them over.

Barkley also nodded, adding, “Well met Tore,” and extended his hand.

Tore nodded in return to the greetings from both Elsabet and Barkley. As he extended his hand to the archon he replied, “It is good to meet you both as well.” He gave them each a slight bow of his head, “I have heard good things about the Fist of Light. I am also glad your last mission was successful.” He then looked directly at Elsabet, “I already have a place to stay, but I could meet you in the morning for breakfast. We can talk then.”

Elsabet paused, reflecting. “And I’d like to donate a couple hundred gold out of my reward as bonuses to the good men and women of this substation, if that isn’t against regs, in appreciation for their good service to the city and people of Mintar in these last few days—you can see that it gets properly distributed.”

“Oh, well, that certainly would be welcome. If I might propose a win-win, though: why not donate the suit or armor that none of you will likely wear?” He looked at the list he’d just written down as they’d recounted the battle with the bandits. “The magical full plate and tower shield combo? One of my women or men would surely appreciate something like that to replace their old masterwork battlefield duds.”

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Armor & Shield** | **AC Mod.** | **Dex** | **Check** | **Arcane** | **Speed** | **Wt.** | **Value** |
| Full Plate +1 | 9 | 1 | -5 | 35% | 20’ | 50.0 | 2,650 |
| Tower Shield +1 | 5 | 2 | -9 | 50% | - | 45.0 | 1,180 |

Solstice had been the first to provide the tally, and considered the donation a sound one. At an estimated price of 3,500 GP, between the six of them, this would have been a donation to the City the equivalent of about 600 gold each... and it saved them the hassle of fencing the two items. They could tell that the economy had shifted somewhat in the last year, and they would not be able to rely on the assumption that they could easily recover their costs by selling something back to a naïve buyer.

Benedetti and Xiang made their way over and introduced themselves. “Ah, the Missing Minotaur!” Xiang nodded. “Right by the Baron’s Keep. Good lodging.”

Hearing the needs of the soldiers, Barkley spoke up, “I will add the battleaxe +1 to the items as well as 100 gold pieces. I have no need for another axe when the good soldiers of Mintar can put it to good use.”

~\*~

**Notes on next 10 days**

**Saradette worked on her new fusil, and continued work on the methane digester. She was using the compressed gas for a torch, and to better regulate the heat in her forge. If we’re rolling for success, maybe her mastery of this technology is worth a DC bonus? Having a controllable heat source is a huge help in fabrication operations. She’s also available to produce silvered weapons, and to produce small/simple items the PCs might want.**

**Tip Benedetti and Xiang for their escort service, enough for each to buy a good meal someplace nice.**

**If Luran is amenable I would enjoy it if he can spend time with Elsabet, he is welcome to share our room and my bed a while longer.**

~\*~

Morning, 23 Ghes

Elsabet, Saradette, and Tore met up the next day, discussed a few details about Aliya’s usual hangouts, notable contacts, and likely whereabouts, then went to inquire at a few of her most frequented pubs where sorcerers and other innate spellcasters boasted about their prowess. Elsabet had been invited to the Scoffer’s Coronary once before by a favored soul of Mystra, though she’d never gone, and now that they stepped inside, they realized that this was no ordinary tavern. Instead of the garden variety drinks that most taverns had—beer, ale, mead, and wine—the sign above the barista boasted a variety of far snobbier, esoteric spirits, and even psychoactive potions.

Led by Tore, who knew about a quarter of the patrons through Aliya, they asked around and got a few leads. Saradette noted all of the potions, salves, raw ingredients, and prepared substances that she could get here, and thought to come back another time.

It took them about another hour, and stops at a handful of other places, until they could collate the narrative from each source at each node of their crisscrossing of the city. Word was: Aliya had been seen tugging a *Tenser’s floating disc* along with a Baronial Guard atop it; this much they could corroborate with their portion of what they knew had happened. But later—allegedly—she’d gone into a weapon shop known for selling poisons and necromantic items, and had not been seen by any of these sources since she’d exited the shop, heading towards the Fishersgate.

They’d now walked over to this weapon shop—the Xorn’s Claw—and approached it with caution, wrapping up their conversation.

“I wonder if she’s planning on doing something with Urmeena’s head,” Elsabet said quietly as they approached the shop. She also wondered to herself whether the poison, grave dirt and bag of bones she had not yet cleaned out of her haversack might be the sort of thing these folks dealt in....

Tore wondered aloud, “This behavior is a bit odd for Aliya. I hope that she was not possessed or that the encounter has changed her in some way. I would like to find her and make sure she is OK.” As they stepped up to the door, Tore turned to Elsabet and Saradette, “I will let the two of you do most of the talking here. I am not fond of necromancers, nor those that deal with them. My tongue might do more harm than good here.”

Saradette shuddered. “Brrr. These people are creepy. Let’s get this over with.”

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| **Elsabet, Diplomacy** | 9 | **Cha (+2)** | 4 | 15 | Middling | ?? |
| **Elsabet, Gather Information** | 0 | **Cha (+2)** | 0 | 2 | Middling | ?? |

*See below.*

~\*~

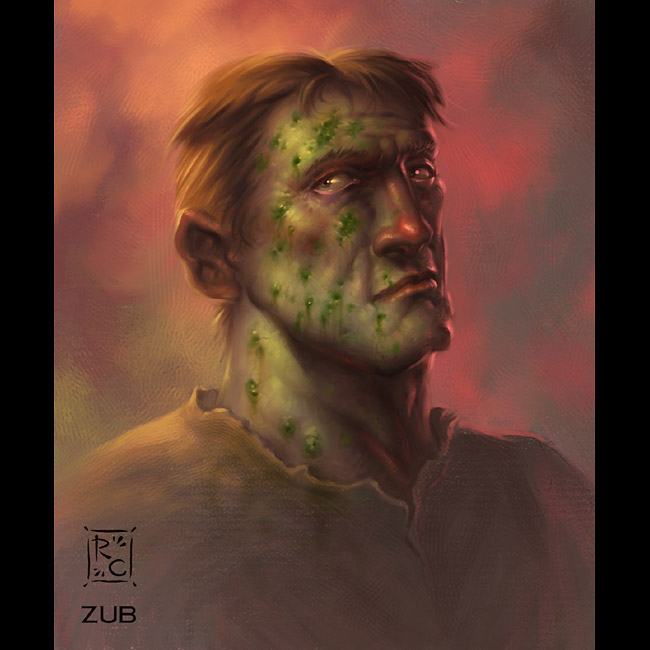
They’d left the weapon shop with yet another lead, and later got yet another one, and by the time they pieced together what had happened, they had an alleged account of the woman’s purchases, which included a variety of arcane scrolls, a sickle, and a scythe. She’d also traded in almost all of her previous possessions, which were now for sale, and had purchased a far sexier dress, a replica of which was shown to them from the sales floor. The vendors weren’t necromancers themselves, but were all former convicts of one type of another, branded on their foreheads with the Baron’s chastisement.

Elsabet had even recognized one of them. He’d been a non-lycanthropic accomplice of the wereserpents that tried to overthrow the Baron a year earlier, and this place offered him a sanctuary from crime, and a second chance. He had also recognized her, and nodded humbly as he passed her with a broom, headed towards the front entrance.

As the heroes got to the last place to which leads and allegations had led them, they spotted the meimer vendor that had been described to them by the previous fool to whom they’d spoken. “You slim?” asked Tore as they passed an addict who had just made a score.



“Fuck’re *you*?” asked the presumed Slim as they got closer and realized that he wasn’t just the CEO of his firm; he was also a client.



The pleasantries didn’t last long. The reticent drug dealer did take kindly to the trio, and the warlock had to step up her insistence.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability**  **& Mod.** | **Misc.**  **Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| **Elsabet, Intimidate** | 5 | **Cha (+2)** | 2 | 9 | ?? | ?? |

*See below.*

In the end, they’d been told that she did in fact come by the night before with a few younger lads in tow. She’d bought fifteen hits of meimer from Slim, and headed towards the Fishersgate. “Said she was going fishing,” Slim had added.

~\*~

“Luran!” the bard heard his name and turned to his left to find Solstice.

“Oh, fancy meeting *you* here,” Luran commented, about to walk into a music shop in the Chatterstreet Market quarter. They caught up on the last few days’ events. Now that Solstice and Luran had left the Fist of Light to each pursue their respective callings, the two were a little bit rutted by the void left behind in the wake of their parting.

“Have you seen the others?” asked the musteval, admiring the half-elf’s upgraded armor and sword.

“No, I meant to drop in at one point,” Luran shook his head, not finishing his thought.

“So what will you do now? Any prospects?” asked Solstice.

“There’s plenty to do here in town. I’m about to go in there and talk to a guy about a traveling troupe that needs a string strummer.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah, it beats confronting wereserpents and shadow dragons. And you?”

“I’m off tonight on an errand for Mayaheine’s clergy: message delivery mostly, but some reconnaissance work as well,” Solstice reported.

They talked a bit longer, and though they had fond recollections of their time with the Fist of Light, they both concluded that their footsteps must diverge from those of the group, at least for the time being.

“Well, if you’re ever headed to Saradush, let me know,” Solstice urged the bard. “I promised Barkley I’d go see him every now and then, and the road does the spirit well when duty isn’t calling.”

“Will do,” Luran said before parting ways. “It’s great to see you. Look me up at the Dragoon’s Detuned Bassoon on 5th and C in the Southspur.”

“You bet.”

~\*~

Saradette did her best to remain inconspicuous while she watched Elsabet’s back. Nevertheless, there had been no need for violence, for the purveyor of illicit substances knew full well that even with all his muscle on this block, he would not be able to overcome these well equipped champions. He’d likely heard of them by now.

By the time they’d gotten to the Fishersgate, there was no one around who claimed to have seen Aliya the night before. Whether she went back to Who’s picnic area, took a boat to the South, or went for a leisurely stroll with some young man she’d recently met was anybody’s guess.

Tore was frustrated at the seeming end of the trail. He asked how many ships had left since Aliya was last seen, and found that it was around twenty or so that would have had the capacity to take non-crew passengers. Perhaps she had booked passage on one of those ships, he thought, but there was not enough recordkeeping rigor for that information to exist here at the port. He also inquired if, when Aliya was last seen, if there was anyone with her, but didn’t get any yesses.

“You think she went back up the hill for whatever reason?” one of the heroes asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” someone replied.

“Tore, I am glad Aliya brought the Captain back, but trying to find her at this point seems futile. Apparently, she allows chaos to guide her, she left no note, just took off, which hey, given she was alone and gained divine inspiration, I don’t blame her, but her actions after delivering the Captain mystify me and she isn’t someone I feel a burning need to pursue. I get that she was your friend, but the power of a competent sorcerer combined with the lack of impulse control of a teenager... that isn’t someone I want to have to rely on in the future. She has made her choices, and hasn’t left a message for you—I think it is time to let her go.”

Tore nodded. “She was my friend and not yours, so I don’t expect you to care. If you do not want to go, I shall go to the bridge myself.” Tore held up his Rod of Defiance, “I can deal with that haunt if need be. I shall return soon.” Tore headed out to the bridge alone to see if Aliya went there. As he left the gate from town, he advised the guards there where he was going.

By Highsun, the cleric had run into an expeditionary force from Bartergoldustshire, and in addition to having been briefly detained by this contingent, was subsequently cautioned that a necromancer had been harassing the hamlets peripheral to the walled gnome city to the north of the haunted bridge. The description of the necromancer was not of a man bearing the likeness of Who, or a woman bearing the likeness of Urmeena, but rather a spitting reflection of Aliya. He pledged to aid the gnomes in their pursuit of the woman, and with two competent trackers, found the young girl by late Afternoon.

Aliya had somehow amassed the power of a capable necromancer in the span of a single day, and her three-dozen-strong force of undead minions nearly cut down the entire group of gnomes, leaving Tore for dead before a cleric of Garl Glittergold healed him back to consciousness... barely.

By the time the sun was nearing the horizon, they had managed to slay Aliya beyond the ability to resurrect her. A diviner in the group discerned that she’d been possessed by a powerful dread necromancer who had likely made a pact with an Abyssal or Infernal agent, and from what Tore had heard from the Fist of Light, this was likely Urmeena, whose head had gone missing the night before shortly after she was decapitated.

They brought the body back to Bartergoldustshire, and made a public spectacle of burning it before the family members of those who had been turned into necro-fodder by the vile woman, or rather her possessor. Tore was commended, and given an honorary badge of merit, as well as offered free lodging at the mayor’s guesthouse.

~\*~

24 Ghes

The next Morning, after breaking fast with the gnomes, Tore took his leave and hitched a ride with a horse-drawn wagon, arriving back in Mintar by Highsun and rendezvousing with Elsabet and Saradette in the Afternoon to convey the woeful news of his friend’s untimely demise.

“And what of Barkley, and Luran, and Solstice?” he asked.

“Barkley has left, and Solstice has a side quest going on,” Elsabet said.

Saradette added, “Luran’s teaching music and doing house calls tuning larger instruments.”

“A far less perilous prospect than hunting necromancers,” Tore shook his head at the experience he’d just been through.

~\*~

30 Ghes

Elsabet had spent several days trying to make sure that her gear was as she wanted, while also ensuring that the shrine of Mayaheine, the temple of Tyr, and the various Mintari guard units all benefited from the excess of riches they had recovered from the necromancers and the brigands, with a portion of the wealth going to a fund for helping the poorer citizens of the city, to be administered by her friends at the shrine.

She wanted to be sure that her name and those of her comrades would be remembered fondly in Mintar for many years to come—although Mintari customs were quite different than those of the Dale, she thought she might find a permanent home here when she got tired of wandering. Being thought well of by common folk, the constabulary, and the Baron’s inner circle of advisors, made her feel truly a part of the city, despite her origins elsewhere. And in any case, she hoped to be able to pass through the city now and again, perhaps reconnecting with Luran. She smiled at the thought.

But for now, all her worldly belongings in place on her person and in her haversack, she looked forward to Saradette displaying her latest mechanism. And if they should get sucked into another plane—hey, it had happened before—she was ready!

~\*~

1 Tarsakh

Saradette labored in her new workshop, constructing a weapon using what her strange friend Maja had called a “rifling bench”. The cutter was a single blade, guided through the welded barrel she’d made using the methane-boosted forge. A painstakingly-twisted iron rod served as a guide for the adamantine cutter she’d fabricated. The barrel had started as a flat steel bar, which Saradette had heated and welded around an iron mandrel. When the four spiral grooves were cut, the artificer used a cylindrical polishing stone and light oil to smooth and finish the bore.

The gnome had conferred with several alchemists in the city to concoct a stable powder for her to use in her cartridges. Maja had described the process in detail, and she’d also warned Saradette of the dangers inherent in letting the secrets loose. So, the artificer had given each of the alchemists a specific task, without letting any of them see the whole process. When that was done, she drew some brass bars into thin tubes and inserted pin-type primers that used a tiny lump of fulminated mercury to ignite the powder. She cast fifty lead balls, and took them to be enchanted. It took a tenday in all to make the barrel, the lock mechanism, and the stock and receiver to hold it all together. The process was simplified with the methane torch, which allowed her to quickly make small parts with great accuracy.

When she was done, she went to find Elsabet. “I need to test this thing outside the city. Do you want to come along?”

“I’d be happy to observe,” Elsabet replied, “and provide muscle in case something random shows up and gets frisky.” She turned lightly in a circle, showing off how well the mithral breastplate armor fit her, and even tumbled a bit in it, having recently gotten reasonably proficient at it.

The gnome had wanted to lead the way to an isolated patch of woods just outside of town. “I don’t want to see anyone hurt if this doesn’t work,” she explained, thinking to take out her new weapon, which had a steel barrel, a wooden stock, and steel and brass mechanisms to make it work. She had shown Elsabet the device’s firing cartridge earlier, and how it was loaded into the device, and now produced it to show it to Tore. Saradette lashed the weapon to a tree trunk, aimed it at a dirt bank about fifty yards away, tied a string to the trigger, and stepped back about twenty feet. “Here we go,” she announced, and pulled the string sharply. A loud boom sounded, and a puff of dust rose where the lead ball smacked into the bank. She went to check the weapon, and smiled broadly as she extracted the now-empty brass casing. “It works!”

Elsabet examined the weapon and the results, and said, “It looks like you have found a way to propel a sling bullet of sorts with the power of at least a heavy crossbow, perhaps more. Interesting.” She grinned. “Pretty noisy though! Some sort of alchemical mix that ignites and expands a lot faster than your compressed air thing?”

Examining the weapon more closely, she commented further. “It looks like the metal barrel isn’t stressed, so repeated uses should be viable—but look here, in the barrel, there are some bits of, not dirt but some grainy substance. I think you’re going to want a way to quickly clean that out. But the impact of the ball on the dirt bank is truly impressive! That’ll break bones and be decent at punching through armor, I’m thinking.”

“The propellant is called nitrocellulose,” Saradette explained. “It burns cleanly enough; that residue is something like paper, so I don’t think it will hurt anything. The problem I face is the wear in the rifling.” She showed Elsabet the tiny spiral grooves in the barrel. “My steel is really good, but the heat and wear from the lead passing through will wear it out pretty quickly. I’d need a much better forge, along with some other things, to do better.”

~\*~

2 Tarsakh

Tore spent a good portion of the day working with the local militia, using a few of his area effect spells. One that seemed to work well in aiding the archers and ballista operators was *guiding light*. It helped with their accuracy and turned out to be devastating to the dummies stationed in the fields as targets. He also got some good practice using his Aid and Bless spells along with his *nimbus of light* and *luminous armor* spells. That last one he had recently learned from one of the priests in Mintar and found it very useful.

When the training for the day was done, Tore joined the militia for a meal. As they broke bread and talked, they focused on what had gone well during the training and what they still needed to work on. The rumors of the approaching hordes adding urgency to the situation. A concern that did come up was the need for food and drink. Tore was glad he had his own personal items that could maintain him, He was also willing to use some of his spells to create water and purify food and drink as needed. Fortunately, this would not put a dent in his offensive and defensive spells. One advantage that Mintar did have was the sea. Unless the horde also came with a navy, they would always have the sea as a means of escape, should it be needed.

~\*~

3 Tarsakh

They’d frequented the Rampant Tankard since Barkley had left for Saradush, and had gotten to know a few of the servers in the last few days. Now, with their spirits high and their stories embellished, they shared the highlights of the last tenday with one another and with the barkeeps.

They’d also attended a communal gathering in Aliya’s honor at the temple of Lurue. Tore officiated the majority of the service, deferring to his superiors for the closing, wherein a more general sermon about love and kindness was delivered.

They’d looked in on Quillogh, the lad with the new set of masterwork darts, and on his folks, who were recovering from a cold, so they just said hello from within the house as the heroes talked to the kid in the doorway. “Maybe soon I’ll be good enough to try out for the Fist of Light,” he supposed, the moniker now becoming a household name in Mintar.

They’d seen Priestess Uma on a number of occasions, and learned that Solstice was operating closely with Laryssa, and would not be returning to Mintar anytime soon. Elsabet and Saradette had talked more than Tore, who spent his time looking over a leatherbound tome entitled The Shieldmaiden’s Voyage. Word from the east had come of an impending incursion from an army of orcs and goblinoids, and Uma conveyed that the Baron was recruiting able-bodied combatants, spellcasters, and strategists to the cause. Apparently, Saradush had been petitioned for reinforcements under the premise of stopping the orcish advance *before* it reached Saradush.

Now, contemplating the Priestess’ plea, the armored and armed heroes sat at a small, round table just outside the Tremolous Rampart, a family restaurant. Sipping on sugary drinks and partaking of fried yuca in a local wasabi sauce, they discussed the prospect of signing up to defend the city from its would-be besiegers in a matter of days.

Map

Description automatically generated

Then they heard a woman’s scream of fear from around the corner, just west of them, followed by a number of other mostly unintelligible voices remarking with much less panic at some phenomenon.

Hearing a woman’s scream, Elsabet stood quickly. “Let’s go see what’s happening,” she said to her friends old and new, while reaching onto her pouch to grab a few coins to pay the tab and leave a decent tip. Then she led the way towards whatever excitement had caused the hubbub, swiftly slipping into her *leading the charge* stance.

Tore stood and followed Elsabet, and drew his Rod of Defiance (not Despair) as they ran over to determine the source of the scream.

Saradette followed Elsabet out the door. When she stepped outside, she operated the lever on her fusil to open the breech, slipped a cartridge into the weapon, and closed the breech. She then followed the favored soul’s lead.

They then stopped their speech as the floating Sky Tree of the cloud giants floated northeastward and came into view between the two nearest buildings. Riding atop rocs, they also now spotted a handful of the giants flying down and northward towards the Baron’s Keep.

Tore looked at the giants as they approached. “We are under attack by giants.” His tone held no fear and sounded more like a statement of fact.

Saradette immediately opened her fusil’s breech and removed the cartridge. She closed the lever and slung the weapon on her back. “They are not attacking us,” Saradette said with excitement in her voice. “At least, I hope not! Maybe Stratus is with them!” She ran toward the incoming giants, aiming for their most likely landing point.

Elsabet spoke up quickly. “I don’t think so; I believe those cloud giants are friends of ours, that cloud island was our home for a while!” She grinned at the look Tore gave her. “Long story, you can read about some of it in my journal later if you like. Let’s hustle on over to the Keep! I hope the Queen is still healthy!”

Saradette had gotten a slight lead on Elsabet, but with a little extra boost of speed she caught up with the gnome, and sang out “hey la, hey la, your boyfriend’s back!”

She thought to herself, ‘I wonder if she could invent something to help her move more rapidly, maybe spring-loaded boots or something.’ She made a mental note to suggest that to her later...

~\*~

They hustled from the Chatterstreet Market area all the way to the northern part of the city, and upon displaying their badges to the guards, they entered the grounds and keep, seeing already a trio of rocs being minded by one of the giants whose name only Elsabet could recall. He was the one whose late daughter resembled Elsabet in likeness, and he spotted the favored soul and her artificer friend, waving them down as they approached.

Flinder was a stout warrior, and acknowledged the well-dressed heroes with a completely made up salute as they converged.

“Is Stratus with you,” Saradette blurted out as she looked at the cloud giants in attendance.

“Why... yes, he must be up there still,” Flinder pointed up at the Sky Tree.

Unfazed as always, Tore shrugged his shoulders before he followed Elsabet. As he ran along, he hung his mace back on his belt.

“Flinder, great to see you! I hope all is well with the Queen? Things were looking scary when the gnome artificer returned us here!” Elsabet panted, a bit out of breath.

She was glad to see the cloud giants—and if the cloud giants needed aid of some kind, she thought maybe in return they could offer some of their not inconsiderable might to help fight in the upcoming war... all of that was of course up to the leaders, but if she could facilitate matters in some way....

Tore stood back and watched as Elsabet and Saradette spoke to the giants. He smiled, impressed by the friends that the Fist of Light had made.

~\*~

They had gone into the Baron’s Keep, their renown now acting as a figurative door opener for them as guards and bureaucrats alike bowed in deference to the spiffily clad bunch. The Baron was in his chambers preparing to meet with the Queen, who—herself—was up in the Sky Tree preparing a reception for the Baron, but the high-level advisors to both the humanoids and the giants were in the conference room on the third floor.

They greeted Elsabet and Saradette, and there was a brief round of introductions of and for Tore. They then confirmed that they were here in part about participating in the defense effort against the orcs.

“These fine ladies,” Prefect Bratislava explained to the few that didn’t know them, “helped to save the Baron from the forces of the illithid, Ghaerleth, last year. They are among our best deputized sword-arms throughout the city.”

The conversation had indeed been about a possible armistice against the orcish army, and as they hashed out the details and the humanoids presented what intelligence they already had on the incursive force, the Fist of Light took note.

* Their numbers were approximately:
  + 200 orcs and orogs
    - About 10% of the orcs were riding atop dire wolves
  + 100 goblins
    - About 5% of the goblins were riding atop worgs
  + 50 hobgoblins
    - About 5% of the hobgoblins were riding atop dire boars
  + 25 ogres
  + 10 trolls
  + 5 catapults and the siege engineers to man them
* They were two days’ march away, three if they lagged and waited for reinforcements (probably about nine times the strength represented above), which they were known to do
* They were led by a ruthless warlord named Rockhard Spatworst, a (CE) cleric of Gruumsh from Murghôm (southeast of Thay)
* They made their way this far west by raiding smaller villages and eating the humanoids in addition to their livestock and grains

Map

Description automatically generated

Tore stood and listened to the intelligence. However, the numbers were less impressive than he expected if one ignored the boast of reinforcements, which for orcs was always tenuous. The main force was still a decent sized troop, but not a force that he felt could over run Mintar or other larger cities in the area.

Elsabet thanked Prefect Bratislava for the introduction, then listened carefully as the situation was outlined. The force of humanoids and giants seemed pretty powerful...

Saradette listened while the others spoke, and, as was her habit, she watched for reactions from around the room.

Elsabet suggested that some of their talents might be best used for small group strikes against specific targets, possibly teamed with some of the giants they had trained with in the past—although she wasn’t sure that stealth would be a viable option, unless possibly at night, if the sky was covered in clouds so that their foes would have to rely on their short ranged darkvision.

All in all, it looked like they had several preemptive options, including mustering an expeditionary force to deal with the primary horde coming at them, using a hailstorm to weaken and distract the enemy, and trying to reason with Rockhard and see if they could come to some agreement.

Tore had found Elsabet’s suggestion of strikes by small groups. The idea was sound, and Tore was more than willing to join one of those small strike forces.

“What would be important enough for us to destroy?” Saradette asked.

“Their siege engines are likely to do the most damage to us if they’re implemented,” Bratislava replied. “But they’re likely to be well protected while being rolled along the roads.”

~\*~

They’d discussed a bit more strategy, but it was clear that the decisions would be made at the top tier of the Baron’s and Queen’s hierarchies, and recruitments and appointments would be administered in a top-down manner despite the renown and qualifications of the heroes at the table.

They’d walked casually to the Missing Minotaur, and found Nimbus waiting in the courtyard for them.

Having caught up a bit, the heroes were invited to stay up on the Sky Tree in their old quarters while the details of the counteroffensive were being hashed out.

Tore had little to say to Stratus when they returned to the Missing Minotaur having just met him and the other giants. When offered to stay on the Sky Tree, Tore replied, “Thank you for the offer, but I will remain here at the inn. I do not want to impose on the time with your friends.”

Elsabet greeted Stratus warmly, and gladly accepted the invitation to spend the night in her old quarters in the Sky Tree. She was eager to say hello to friends she’d made, and hear more about what had happened—when she’d left, things had been looking grim! Once she got the scoop, she could update her journal accordingly.

Saradette went to spend the evening with Stratus.