

# The Last Will and Testament of Baron Garcia

Dramatis Personae:

Damien - a handsome gentleman dressed in black, with a matching disposition, a mage of darksome kind, and party leader.

Ug-Bash - an orc of most foul habits, a dark celestial mage.

Vila - a weedy-looking human enchanter, known thief and philanderer. I have adventured with him before, and dislike the worm intensely.

Bragen - a human pacifistic earth mage.

Stark - a human fighter, who says that he was raised by goblins. Believes himself to be the eldest of the party.

Kryan - an apprentice illusionist and troubador. Party scribe.

T'ana Starflower - your humble diarist. I am a lady elf of fair appearance, a healer, and an adept of the College of the Sorceries of the Mind.

Beginnings     30 September 1990

The announcement at the guild meeting of a quest involving the rescue, alive or dead, of a certain Baron Garcia took my attention so greatly that I made my way immediately to the meeting room. Finding it to be as yet unoccupied, I cast a spell of telepathy, knowing that I could use this to ascertain the truth of what would be said, both by our prospective employer, and by my companions to be.

Five strangers entered the room, and then one individual only too well known to me. Vila the enchanter. Not again, I thought. Brightflare will be furious! The last two people to join us were a member of guild security, followed by a servile human, who introduced himself as Valden, Baron Garcia's butler. Then he explained our mission. It seemed that people had been disappearing from villages in the Bowcourt region. Goblins who live in the mountains nearby were the likely suspects, although there were some unusual circumstances. Like the fact that there were no goblin tracks within the villages. The people appeared to have left of their own free will. Hum...

Baron Garcia had decided to take a band of soldiers and hunt the goblins down, but had left instructions, in the event that he did not return, that a party of adventurers should be hired to seek him out. The reward for this would be fifty thousand silver pennies. This would be ours if we able to a) set him free, b) return his body, c) kill him should that be the only appropriate course of action, and then return the body. This sounded like an attractive proposition indeed.

The Butler left the room while we selected scribe and party leader. Vila nominated me as party leader, but I was quite aware that he actually voted for Damien, who was eventually selected. Typical, Vila. After that was over, the butler returned, and we signed both the guild contract and

the Baron's. The party dispersed, without setting a time to depart tomorrow. I gathered that most of them were planning on getting drunk. This party is going to NEED a healer, I can tell!

Meanwhile, I went down to the guild stables, and booked my usual equine, a black bay called Balfour. Then I sought out Brightflare, and we sent a pleasant evening together before embarking on our respective adventures.

*Head-Bangings*      1 October 1990

Morning came. I woke at five, performed ritual purification, breakfasted, and made my way to the stables. Not surprisingly, no-one was there, except the butler, who had reserved horses for the remainder of the party, and was now cleaning our saddles. Soon, Stark and Bragen arrived, and after I soothed away their headaches, set about playing a card game. Something called "poker", I believe. I thought it best to attempt to seek out other members of the party at the various public bars around the guild. All I managed to find was something green in an alleyway - and, no, it was not the orc!

Returning to the stables around eleven, I waited with the others. After a while Damien entered, in a black mood, and proclaimed that he preferred to keep his headache rather than have me heal it. He was followed by Ug Bash bearing a large iron pot. I resolved not to think about what might have been in it. Together we left, caught the ferry, and passed through the town of Seagate, heading north.

Some time after leaving the city, I felt something die nearby. I turned, and there was the orc, consuming a rabbit, fur and all. He must have been eating it alive! The pleasant sensation of a nearby death was rapidly overlaid with disgust, and a shudder suppressed the smile that had momentarily crossed my lips. How disgusting!

We rode on until four in the afternoon when we came to a small village. Noting the clouds lowering upon the northern horizon, we sought out an inn. A storm was coming, and we thought it best to have a roof over our heads when it broke. We booked for the night; private rooms with a bath for Bragen and I, and the common room for the rest. I felt the thrill of death once again, and was not surprised when the innkeeper announced freshly slaughtered pork for dinner tonight. Good eating, and there was good wine to go with it. A bard began to play, and seeing Damien wince, Ug Bash tipped the bard to play louder. Then he attempted to teach the bard orcish marching songs. Damien was visibly angered, but seemed inclined to take it out on the unfortunate bard, rather than on Ug Bash whose fault it patently was. I gave up, and after persuading Damien to set an eight o'clock start, took my bath and retired for the night.

I woke early, purified three hours, and breakfasted with the others. Damien seemed a little less unpleasant this morning. Ug Bash remarked that it had something to do with the weather. Maybe Damien is a fire mage. We rode all day, and reached the edge of the forest. Here there was a large inn, called "The Last Resort", and a village which had grown up around it. We entered the main room, where there was already a crowd of people, mainly human, but of other races besides. A large human surveyed the crowd. I was told that he was a "bouncer", and that his job was to enforce the rules, notably the one about "No Inter-racial Fighting Allowed".

I noticed a pair of elves sitting in a corner, and wandered over to join them, hoping for news of Alfheim. It transpired that they had been away almost as long as I, in search of a certain herb,

which grows only in the far south. He was a merchant, and she was a herbalist. I discovered that there were fine herbs to be found at a narrow neck in the forest, north-east of here. I must try to get the party to go by that way. The elves seemed well able to take care of themselves in the wilderness, and I gained the impression that one might be a magic user of some kind.

At this point in the conversation a orcish voice interrupted us, loudly remarking about elves with birth-marks on their left shoulders being "easy meat". The two elves bristled with anger. With difficulty I suppressed my own rage, as I realised that the filthy brute must have spied on me in my bath the night before. The wretched creature then proceeded to challenge all and sundry to a game he called "skulling". This involved imbibing a glass of strong liquor and then banging one's cranium against a pillar. The winner would be the last one standing. The barkeep brought forth a poisonous brew named "hellfire". After that spell that Brightflare was talking about, I wondered. Surely not.

I was appalled to see most of the party, save only Vila and myself, enter into this foolish contest. Who was going to have pick up the pieces of their smashed skulls in the morning, and exhaust herself putting them back together again? I am beginning to see why Brightflare charges for such services. Then the male elf went forward to join them. His companion remarked that the orc might have bitten of more than he could chew this time. Had she seen Ug Bash eat?

The competition produced, with much drinking and laughter. There was many a wager, and many a groan from the pillar, the contestants, and losing gamblers. Finally, by the fourth round, only Ug Bash, Damien, and the elf remained in the contest. Ug Bash tossed back three glasses of the poison, and rammed his head into the pillar. Bang! It was such a mighty blow that the pillar almost broke. The orc's forehead did, and he looked as if he would have been in considerable pain if it wasn't for the liquor, as he slid to the floor. A fitting result. The elf was next. He struck a fine blow, and then also collapsed. Yet he had done so well that I had begun to wonder whether he might also be an adept of the sorceries of the mind, a suspicion reluctantly confirmed by his companion. She went over to him and touched him. After a few minutes he looked much better. So, she had the skills of a healer also, I realised.

The last remaining competitor was Damien, who banged his head into the pillar. It vibrated with the blow. So did Damien, but he remained upright, to be acclaimed as the winner. I knew who the losers would be, in the morning.

Vila said that he would remain a while, playing cards with a group of six rather unpleasant looking humans. He invited me, but I declined, remarking that a mage of my college would find it all too easy to cheat. The look he gave me told me that he had already thought of that, and had probably developed his own less than honourable means to achieve his desired result. I went upstairs, took a bath after ensuring that there were no peepholes in the door, and went to bed.

In the morning, I purified, and went to find the others. First, Bragen. I knocked on his door, and called his name, only to be answered with a groan. I entered, and discovered one of the worst headaches I have ever encountered. After dressing the cut on his forehead, and soothing his pain, I told him to go back to sleep. No way will this party be ready to travel before midday!

In the common room I found Damien, Stark, and Ug Bash in similar state. Pointedly ignoring Ug Bash's groans, I ministered to the other two without waking them. I only hope they will show

some gratitude, though I doubt it somehow.

Then, I began to wonder where Vila was. There was no response to my knock on his door, so I cast an ESP spell, and cast about for his mind. I found him talking to the bouncer, feeling rather pleased with himself. I wonder why? I cast around some more, and found the six humans he had been playing cards with, scheming something. Not again, I thought. Vila's been cheating, they know it, and they're going to get him for it. I hurried downstairs, and found Vila. He suggested I use that "other spell". I found a private spot, and after one miscast, had a telepathy spell running. Fascinating. They weren't after Vila. They were a group of bandits, planning to ambush a caravan, which would be heading south shortly. With magic. One seemed to be an earth mage, and the others had a number of invested items. Fascinating indeed. They had two ambush points in mind, one far north, that they would have to hurry to, and one much closer.

I told Vila of their plans, and he agreed that this would be a wonderful opportunity to rid the world of few undesirable individuals, and obtain some useful items for ourselves. I had to talk him out of going for the caravan. I doubt that Sir Garcia would approve of that course of action. Time to get the party leader's opinion. As I went to the common room it occurred to me that maybe I should try to neutralise poison on him. Tiring, but Damien was much improved, and ready to talk. He was quite keen to ambush the ambushers, and was convinced we had the skills and magic between us to succeed.

Vila came in as I was thinking about waking the others, and asked me if I had the Roff, the bouncer. I knew he meant the bouncer's mind and I replied in the affirmative. It seemed that Vila wanted me to check on the man while he talked to him about the bandits. I agreed. It transpired that the bouncer was an enchanter, and was interested in assisting us with catching them. There might even be a reward.

*Night-games*                      3 October 1990

Turning my attention back to the bandits, I discovered that they had selected the more northerly of the ambush points. They were planning to set the ambush around midday tomorrow. I realised we would have to ride fast and long to catch them - and that Vila's horse was not exactly up to fast. We had better get started. Soon.

I was also able to ascertain more of the nature of the group. I could infer from their conversation that the leader was a military scientist, although he had resisted my telepathy. The earth mage was also a healer, and most of the invested items were of his manufacture. A big hulking fellow was a fighter. The earth mage would be casting spells to make his weapons do more damage. It did appear that the mage is a pacifist, and that their main use of magic would be to walk unseen. The others were a thief and a merchant whose job it would be to sell the stolen items. Shortly afterwards they came downstairs, and went on their way. Our party started on breakfast. Stark was still looking queasy, and couldn't bring himself to eat until Bragen took him out and cast a healing spell on him. Ug Bash insisted on cooking something in that pot of his and then cooling it off in the horse trough. By the time we managed to get away I judged that we were at least half an hour behind the bandits.

After a couple of hours riding we came upon a clearing to the left of the forest road, with a lean-to as shelter for travellers. We did not stop long, just to ascertain that no-one had used the place recently. As we rode on, I felt a momentary sense of unease, which passed as soon as it

came. Paranoia?

Two hours later there was another clearing, with a small hut. Here we stopped for lunch. Again, I felt a certain disquiet shortly after leaving. We passed another clearing after another two hours, and the party began to debate when we would stop. I felt happy about pressing on into the growing darkness, but some of the others demurred. In the end, we rode on.

Night had fallen by the time we approached the next clearing, and those of us who could see in the gathering darkness saw a flickering through the trees. It seemed that the camp ahead was occupied. I dismounted and scouted ahead. Once within range, I cast, and detected three entities, two humans and a dwarf. They were on their guard, having heard something of my approach. I returned to the party, and informed them of the travellers. We passed by without event, though their dwarf waited in ambush by the path lest anything be amiss.

Somewhen around half past seven, as we rode on in the darkness, Vila stopped the party. He told us that he had cast a location spell a while back on one of the bandits. The arrow had pointed due north for some hours, but now was deviating to the east. He desired to scout ahead and determine where the bandits were. I asked to join him, thinking to employ my rangering skills (and to make sure he did nothing foolish). He cast a spell of vanishment upon himself, but I could perceive him still with my elven witchsight. We crept up the path about five minutes walk, and then Vila stopped. He judged that they had camped a mile and a half away and to the right of the path.

We returned, and the party debated our options. After much argument it was decided that we would make camp in the forest in spite of the dense undergrowth. It seemed wise not to get ahead of the bandits, and it was likely that the next campsite would be north of their camp. We considered ambushing them in the night, but judged it better to catch them in the act of attacking the caravan, when they would least expect to be set upon. My concern was that although I knew I would recognise the ambush site should I see it, we still had no idea where exactly it would be.

I found a suitable tree to sleep in, while the others argued about who would do which watches. I heard someone say that I should be excused that duty after all that healing this morning. So, they had noticed.

Good. I fell asleep, exhausted.

Crash! Crash! Crash! Some things thudded into the forest nearby. Startled awake, I could only assume that we were under attack. I cast, and perceived no bandits, no attackers of any kind. Just sleepy party members, and Ug Bash, and Damien. Damien. Gloating! Over something which he had just succeeded in accomplishing. There could be only one logical conclusion.

"Damien, you fool," I called aloud. "What in all the hells do you think you are doing?"

"What's going on?" came Vila's voice.

"It's Damien." I replied. "Playing around with magic."

I saw that below me the forest was unnaturally dark. I supposed that the orc, being a celestial mage, might have been responsible. Not that there was much time for speculation. At least two of the horses were loose, and I had no real idea what Damien was up to. Or why. I decided I'd

better find Vila, and climbed down.

Moving rapidly and silently through a dense forest in darkness so thick that not even an elf could see through it was impossible. I heard others crashing through the undergrowth, and began to hurry. Suddenly I stepped out of the deep darkness into pain. And fear. I could not move, such was the terror. My mind raced. Fear. Celestial magic. Whisper. Wall of darkness! I shook myself, and found I could move. Enough of this! Quickly, quietly I cast telepathy. And there was Damien. Hunting for me. What had I done? He was very tired, but why? And very angry. Not just with me. With Ug Bash. Had they been fighting? Dueling with magic?

There was one way to stop Damien, without hurting him, or being able to see him. Mental attack. I cast, but he resisted. Now he was even more angry. But so tired that he would probably fall asleep if I left alone. Where was Vila? Either resisting, or out of range. But, there was Balgren, with the horses. He was planning on raising a circle of hands of earth around himself so he could sleep in safety. Good idea, I thought, and slowly, carefully, I made my way to him. Behind me, I felt Damien fall into an exhausted slumber. I called out to Balgren, who counter-spelled me so that I could enter the circle. Climbing into a tree, and wrapping myself in my cloak, at last I could sleep in peace.

*Ambushing the Ambushers* 4 October 1990

Before dawn, we woke and purified. Soon after, as I prepared breakfast, Vila and Roff came down the path. They had slept in the hut at the next clearing. The bandits were somewhere in the forest opposite the clearing, but there was no obvious way through. Then the rest of the party emerged from the forest. First Ug Bash, then Kryan, Stark, Damien and Valden. Ug Bash asked Vila why he had hit him with a sap. At bedtime, last night. Why indeed? It transpired that Ug Bash had used his sap on Vila's stolen chicken (so that's what was squawking) sometime yesterday morning, and Vila wanted revenge.

When Damien arrived he went straight for Ug Bash. Something about a wall of light. Roff took out a pair of staves, and took up a bouncer stance, aiming to separate the two. It became evident that Damien had injured half the party with that wall of darkness. Including Roff, who didn't look at all pleased. So, Damien is a Celestial mage. Another one. Are they all this crazy?

In the end Balgren and I convinced the two combatants that they should settle their differences at the next town, after we had dealt with the bandits. Ug Bash proposed a skulling match. Not again! In the meanwhile Ug Bash got his revenge on Vila's chicken, tearing it apart with such ferocity that its head practically flew off. Then Damien turned on me, for casting a spell at him. I pointed out that it would only have knocked him out for a minute or so, and he wouldn't even have been hurt. This mollified him somewhat, but he was still in a foul mood when we started on our way.

We rode all morning, only stopping for lunch. Thinking we must be approaching the bandits, I attempted the telepathy spell. On the second cast I backfired. The forest suddenly went quiet. I was under a curse of deafness. Guess who will have to return to the Guild, hopefully with some magic items to be divinated? On the third try the spell succeeded. I could hear most of the party's thoughts, even if I couldn't hear anything else.

Almost an hour later Vila called a halt, saying that the arrow of location he had on the bandits was

starting to waver markedly with the twistings and turnings of the trail. This, he told us, meant that we must be well nigh upon them. He and Roff turned invisible, and scouted ahead. I recast telepathy and followed them some distance behind. Minutes later I heard them returning. They had found the bandits in ambush a short way ahead, at a bend in the trail, where there was high ground to the right, and a drop-off to the left. The most curious thing was a dog, which seemed to be doing sentry duty. Was it under the earth mage's spell? Certainly the double row of hands of earth across the trail must be his work.

We had rejoined the party, and were discussing what to do next when there was a great noise from up the trail followed by much shouting and screaming. Hearing this in the other's minds, I asked Vila to make me invisible, and after he had done so, ran up the trail, crossbow loaded and cocked at the ready. Seeing the hands of earth, I crashed through the forest, and saw what had happened. A great log had been set to fall upon a large wagon. A number of merchants and guards were in a circle attempting to defend themselves, but many were already fallen. Already I felt exhilarated as their deaths lent me good fortune. To little avail. The big man, in plate armour, stood in the centre laying around him with a huge sword, while a smaller bandit harried the merchants around the edge of the fight. He was my target, but was so agile that I missed. He spotted the crossbow bolt pass, and then I sensed him coming for me. Thinking he would not be able to see me I reloaded, but by the time I was ready the only available target was the dog, which had been tearing at the injured. I shot and stunned it, and then turned my attention to the assassin. I began preparing to cast a mental attack on him, but had to abort the spell and draw my sword. He could see me!

We fought, and although I could resist the pain, he had the better of it. I got in only one good blow before I fell unconscious. It must have been only minutes later, when I woke with the familiar taste of healing potion in my mouth, looking up at Bragen who had apparently dragged me part way down the hill. I swore, and then I saw the bastard who had hurt me, being attacked by Vila's little imp. Carefully I drew a dagger, and lunging up, struck the man from behind, but failed to connect, only succeeding in alerting him to my presence. He hit the two of us, and then Kryan, looking slightly dog-bitten, and Stark came into view. Again I attacked from below and behind, and this time scored a fine blow nearly severing the hamstrings. Kryan then struck. A gut wound, the kind that nearly always kills unless a healer can staunch the flow of blood. But the bandit seemed not to be bleeding. Magic? I cast about for my tulwar, but by the time I found it, realised that I would be better off using my crossbow. A good shot, it was too. The bandit fell unconscious, but did not die until I had hacked his head off with my sword. Magic indeed!

After ascertaining that the other bandits had escaped, I searched the bandit's corpse, and found three invested items, a brooch and two rings. Inspecting his weapons I noticed something sticky on the blade. Poison, and so it proved to be when I tested it. This bastard must have been an assassin. Bound to be a price on his head, I thought, as I wrapped the head in a cloth bag.

Returning to the road I showed the items to Bragen, who seemed mildly surprised that I had not kept them to myself. I pointed out that they needed to be divinated, which meant the guild. Coming upon the hands of earth, I saw that Ug Bash and one of the bandits had been caught. They were busy trading insults. I noted a barbed arrow in the bandit's leg, which I removed expertly with a dagger, further annoying Ug Bash. This bandit had resisted my telepathy, so conversing with him was difficult, until I realised that I could hear through other people's ears, as they thought about what they heard. Most strange. Vila collected some items from this bandit, and then we set about tidying up, and preparing

dinner.

After dinner I talked Kryan into being a set of ears so that I could hypnotise the bandit still trapped in the hands of earth. The bandit, a ranger whose name was Garth, responded well. I learned much about the ways of the bandits. It seemed that they had been extremely successful, and had never come under suspicion. No price on the bastard's head so I might as well bury it (which I did later, away from the pit with the bodies). He had not been with the band long, and knew little about the other members, but he did know a great deal about their lair, a cabin in the hills to the north-east, and about its defenses, many of which he had built. This I took careful note of, thinking it might just come in useful. Finally I left a couple of post-hypnotic commands, one to ensure his co-operation, and the second to implant a command word to send him to sleep.

Bragen and I then investigated the cart, finding two bolts of cloth. One was silk, the other something neither of us could recognise. It was somehow smooth and silky, and yet net-like at the same time. There was also a ball of gold thread, two large and heavy, perfect glass spheres, and two small white chests - which we did not touch, thinking they might be trapped. By then it was growing dark. Stark had stripped the guards' bodies of their armour and weapons, and found a healing potion on one of them.

Bragen alerted me when it was time for the hands of earth spell to wear off, and asked me to put the thief to sleep. This I did. I broke his fall from the hands and then we tied him securely, wrapped him in a blanket and stowed him under the cart.

I found a suitable tree not far from the road, and planned to sleep until half past eleven, so that I could renew the post-hypnotic suggestions on our captive. As it happened I was woken by Bragen shortly after midnight, who indicated to me by sign that it was my watch. He warned me, scratching the message in the dirt, that Stark had been tied up, and that this was for his own good. What in all the hells had been going on?

My first course of action was to check on the captive bandit. But he wasn't there! I followed the marks of boot-heels up the road for some distance. There I found his corpse. It appeared that he had been sapped, but had swallowed his tongue and asphyxiated. Must have been Damien, Ug Bash, or both. What were they up to? I supposed I'd better investigate. I found Ug Bash with Stark. Stark was hanging from a tree, and Ug Bash was carefully shaving off the man's eyebrows with a dagger. Crazy! I told Ug Bash what I thought of him, and cut Stark down with a sword. Stark, threatening to kill Damien, took off down to the cart, which was now shrouded in a darkness blacker than midnight. There was only one way to find out what they thought they were doing. I cast telepathy.

Inside the pool of darkness was Damien. He had created it for good reason for once. So that he could better read the auras of the items found on the cart. Hum... Interesting. The curious cloth was Shantung silk, whatever that meant. The glass spheres had no aura - they were not magical! He concluded that the chests were made of wood. It didn't occur to him to check the locks until I suggested they might be magically trapped. They were. Cursed with a spell that would cause the victim to return them to their owner. Nasty, but very appropriate.

Then things became a little confused. Stark entered the darkness, thrashing around blindly with his broadsword. Ug Bash laid him low with a sap as I simultaneously knocked him out with a



mental attack. Then we tied him up, and left him under the wagon. I took Damien aside and asked him to look over the dagger I had taken from the assassin. It was not magical, but the sheath was. It secreted some kind of acid that coated the blade, causing it to perform additional damage. Damien's mind lit up with avarice. Obviously he desired the item, and it seemed fitting that he have it. So I gave it to him, trying to obtain some consideration in return. Small chance. The man is utterly and entirely self-centred.

I found a tree, and sat on watch, using telepathy to scan the area. Did I mention that I managed to triple the effect of that spell? Suddenly I sensed pain. From Stark. Damien had severed the little finger of his left hand. To teach him a lesson, not to meddle with those more powerful than himself. Sensible point, but... I climbed down from the tree, and went over to Stark. In a matter of minutes I had rejoined the finger to the hand, and splinted it, but I knew that the healing I could achieve was only superficial, and that he would have to see a healer capable of mending the broken joint.

Stark had regained consciousness, and as I returned to sit on watch, my mind was drawn to Damien, who was reaming him out in no uncertain terms. Stark could be in considerable trouble with the guild - but then so could Damien, and Ug Bash. And he meant it. He guessed that I was listening to his thoughts. He really doesn't appreciate mind mages, or elves, or healers. Since I am all three I am right at the bottom of Damien's list of favourite people - which features himself first, second and third. The only reason he belongs to the guild is so that he can go adventuring with a party who are obliged to guard his back whatever he does. That includes Stark, of course. And me.

Threats            5 October 1990

Next morning began uneventfully, until it was noted that Vila and Roff were missing. Not a lot we could do about it, and after all, Vila is the one who is good at locating people. The others talked and talked about what to do, and I was passed the occasional note. Eventually we managed convince even Valden, our employer, that we really need to return to Seagate. I needed a curse removing, Stark needed healing, and something had to be done with this cart-load of unsuccessfully stolen goods. I pointed out that the best thing to do was to leave it with the guild. If it remained unclaimed after a suitable time period we would be able to keep it, and if it was claimed the guild would ensure that we get a suitable reward. All nice and legal. I should not have been so surprised when the rest of the party agreed to this course of action.

They did insist we take the cart, so we could carry all the armour, in spite of the fact that the cart-horses were dead, and our palfreys weren't all that keen on pulling carts. At least, so Bragen said after I suggested he attempt his "speaking to animals" spell. Ug Bash convinced them with a crack of his whip. Sadist. Bragen and I rode beside the cart, to keep the horses in line, and Stark tied branches to the rear of the cart to cover our tracks. Steadily we made our way south, encountering nobody except a couple of humans heading the other way. At lunchtime we reached the hut, and I finally found the way into the forest to the bandit's hide-out. The others seemed rather lacking in curiosity however, and I was instructed not to investigate further. Vila and Roff caught up with us a short while later.

They had apparently slept in a hut further north.

That night we slept in a clearing with a lean-to, that is I slept in a tree, until the branch broke

under me, and I was obliged to find another. Vila and Roff rode on to the next clearing, where there would be a hut. Vila really likes to be comfortable.

We drove all day, and reached the Last Resort Inn not long after night had fallen. A room, a hot bath, and a bed to sleep in. Civilisation! Ug Bash slept in the cart, under a tarp. It stormed all night.

Next day it was suggested that some of the party remain here while those who had to go to Seagate continued on. A sensible suggestion, although as it turned out, a waste of some days. Vila, Kryan, Valden and Roff stayed, while Damien, Ug Bash, Stark, Bragen and I went on. It was a thoroughly nasty, wet and muddy day's travel, and I was glad to reach an inn at the end of it.

We reached Seagate around two in the afternoon of the next day, a day which would have been much nicer if something hadn't prevented me purifying successfully that morning. But it was good to get to the guild, to get rid of that cart; and after six hours of curse removal, and six hundred silver pennies I could hear again. Wonderful! Arrangements had been made with guild security regarding the cart and its contents. They had discovered that it had a false bottom. Underneath was more stuff, a number of vials of fine oil. The chests contained bars of solid true-silver. Strange that they were not under the false bottom. Still, it is evident why the bandits choose to attack this particular caravan. Stark was with the healers for most of the next day so we decided to leave early the following morning, and that we would ride all day into the night. The orc decided on another live rabbit for breakfast. I think he suspects something about me. We arrived at the Last Resort Inn well after dark, stabled our tired horses and went inside. After a late supper, we went upstairs to find the others. Ug Bash almost knocked down Vila's door before Vila woke - loudly enough to attract the attention of half the guests, including the rest of our party.

They had news of considerable import. Vila had found a note under his door, threatening us with becoming the "hunted ones", if we did not meet with the bandits two weeks hence north of the forest, with suitable monetary recompense for "stealing their spoils", and killing some of their number. The expression on the faces of the members our party was such I didn't need telepathy to know what they were thinking. It would be the bandits who would be the hunted ones, and much sooner than two weeks!

The note was signed "Vesper". Vila confirmed that the dastardly assassin was alive again, located somewhere north of us. "Very well", I said, "then I shall kill him again." Bragen had some argument about this, stating that he wanted to dispose of Vesper himself. I thought earth mages were pacifists. We decided that we would attack the bandits in their lair, and I was pleased to discover that I had a most accurate memory of the place. Furthermore, rather than approaching through the forest we would take ship north from Seagate, and ride across the plain. It fell to my lot, as being slightly more prepossessing than the orc to fly south to Seagate next morning, and book passage on a suitable vessel.

I arrived in Seagate, and then the problems began. Not a vessel in port was headed north. One might arrive in two days. And might be taking on passengers. If we were lucky. Nothing for it, but to wait. But I shall make good use of my time, consulting with guild experts as to how we might best approach this problem, how best to attack the bandits, and how to circumvent those traps.

*Stowaway!* 13 October 1990

To my surprise the party arrived a day early, and were waiting for me at dinner last night. I had been busy in the library, looking up a reference which had been given to me by one of the guild astrologers. The business with the bandits had whetted his curiosity, and he had done a reading for us regarding the bandits, a reference to a work on dining etiquette. The quotation indicated that we had bitten off rather more than we could chew, and that success might only be possible through separating the bandits, and tackling them one at a time. Food for thought...

This morning I went straight down to the docks. The harbourmaster pointed out a ship which had just arrived unexpectedly, heading north up the coast. Maybe our luck was in, after all, although I wasn't in a spell-casting mood, and couldn't be certain about the exorbitant fares the Captain demanded for ourselves, and our horses, especially when I said we wanted to disembark south of Sanctuary. I returned to find the others at breakfast. It was soon decided that we would take the ship all the way up to its destination, Kurshin, north of Sanctuary, and almost due west of Bowcourt. Complete our mission, and then go for the bandits. We would be able to hire horses in Kurshin. Vila said he would negotiate for us - but Damien and Ug Bash insisted on making their own arrangements.

A hour later Vila returned. Passage was booked for ourselves, Roff and Valden, a hundred silver pennies, on deck and provide your own food. I had two hours to assemble a week's provisions for seven - flour, grains, salted bacon, fruit and vegetables - and half a dozen live rabbits, as well as packing my own gear (fortunately I hadn't really unpacked) and then get on board. Kryan and I (he offered to carry the potatoes) made it only just in time. There was no sign of Damien, but Ug Bash was there. He had struck a deal with the Captain, which amounted to the orc being paid for the journey - as rat-catcher.

Ug Bash disappeared into the hold, while Vila showed us to an area between crates of cargo, covered with a tarp. Humm... I supposed it would have to do. I spoke to the ship's cook, and found out when the galley would be available, and then started arranging our gear. Bragen had already started on a keg of beer he had purchased, and I surmised that he a) is no more fond of the sea than any other earth mage, and b) intended to spend the entire voyage half-drunk.

Some hours after we left port, about mid-afternoon on a fine spring day, with a fresh breeze behind us, I was chatting to Kryan, leaning over the gunwale, and watching the waves racing by, when suddenly there was the sound of a commotion from the hold, and then everything went dark. Very dark. Magically dark. Damien! It lasted no more than half a minute, as the ship continued sailing north. Everyone headed for the hold. The Captain had sent a group of sailors below to find a stowaway, and then the darkness came. It was still dark below. Kryan and Stark went below, and brought up an unconscious sailor with a nasty wound. Fixing that kept me busy for a while, as the turmoil continued around me.

There was still another sailor missing in the hold. Kryan convinced me that ritually purified or not we needed my telepathy, so I hid under the tarp and cast. Immediately things became much clearer. There was Damien in the hold. He had stowed away, pretending to be a beggar, or some such. Typical.

I headed for the hold, searching for the missing sailor. What confused me was the fact that I couldn't find his mind, and I hadn't felt him die. It didn't occur to me that he might have resisted

the spell, even though unconscious. I started inspecting the crates, having gleaned from Damien's mind the picture of a man, tied up, and gagged, inside a crate, but I found nothing. Until Kryan heard knocking sounds coming from the crate he was inspecting. A pair of sailors helped us get the man out. So much for convincing the Captain that there was nobody there - except maybe Ug Bash.

Still, there was nobody to be seen anywhere in the hold. On deck, we did our best, but the Captain insisted on another search. Everything appeared to have settled down when... "There he is," the shout went up. Damien! Everything went dark. I sensed Damien heading for the Captain's cabin. Stealing the strongbox. Triggering an invested item. It backfired! Damien resisted. Then he triggered it again.

Again the ship drifted out of the darkness, soon enough that all could see a pair of black bat-wings flying off in the distance towards the shore. The party leader deserting the party??

*Hot Water*      15 October 1990

The ship docked at Kurshin in the late afternoon. The Captain seemed very pleased to get rid of us. We hadn't done anything! I wonder if we've seen the last of Damien? I suppose he might be planning on meeting us at Bowcourt.

We found an inn, and when I requested a hot bath, the innkeeper suggested we first enjoy one of the local attractions - natural hot water springs, down by the beach. Sounded pleasant, but only Kryan and Ug Bash decided to join me. Bragen simply didn't like the idea of more salt water, and no doubt Vila would find something slightly more illegal to amuse himself with.

Kryan and I found the pools, although the path was steep, and most humans would have needed a lantern. Ug Bash declined to get wet, and disappeared off by himself. By the time he returned, after an hour or so, we were feeling nicely par-boiled and very relaxed. But the water was rapidly becoming too hot for Kryan, so we went back to the inn, and a quick bath to wash away the salt. We slept well that night.

I had been asked to set a time to be ready to leave next morning, and had suggested nine o'clock. So, we were eating breakfast when, at half past eight, an official looking personage with a pair of guards arrived. He introduced himself as the local warden, and stated that he wished to speak with us regarding the black creature who stole the Captain's strongbox. Apparently, he had been told that someone named Charles could give him a description of a beggar who might be responsible. It transpired that this "Charles" was actually Vila. Bragen went to fetch him, while I excused myself and cast a telepathy spell. To no avail! All three of our interrogators resisted me. At least I tried. If these people find Damien, he's in deep trouble. I dare say the guild won't be exactly pleased with this performance, either. Ug Bash presented the warden with a neat sketch of Damien which probably won't help matters.

After the magistrate left, Bragen and I got directions to the local ostler, and went to hire some horses. He muttered earth mage noises at them, and didn't have to tell me that the horses were much keener on staying put than on going adventuring. We did manage to avoid hiring one rather lame beast, but on the whole it was a fairly mediocre group of palfreys we rode out on that day.

We headed down the south road, by the sea, heading for a village, and a road east. It took the

rest of the day to reach the crossroads at Twidleham-pon-Sea. We spent an uneventful night at the Twidleham Inn, and headed east, across the moors.

Realising we had little chance of reaching the next town in less than three days, we set up camp in a wooded dell, not far from the track. I proposed to hunt for some dinner, and Kryan joined me. Taking him was a mistake. We found a trail leading to a waterhole, climbed a tree each, and waited. Soon, a large boar came down to drink. I shot it with my crossbow, and then the idiot jumped on the boar, and attacked it with a dagger. What could I do? I jumped from the tree and approached with tulwar and buckler. The boar threw Kryan, and I attacked. I kept out its first charge, but on the second it had me on the ground. Slipping a dagger from its sheath I tusselled with the animal, grateful for the good quality armour I had purchased as it tried repeatedly to gore me. Eventually, after Kryan started in from the rear we got the better of the beast, wounding it more than once. To my dismay, it squealed, and then it ran away. But all was not lost. We waited almost a hour until a wild goat came to the water-hole. It too, attempted to charge, but impaled itself on my tulwar. One more slash, and dinner was de-capitated. The thing that really annoyed me was Bragen's refusal to heal my interesting collection of bruises. Seems he doesn't exactly appreciate fresh meat.

*Ghosts*            17 October 1990

After dinner we all found somewhere to sleep, apart from those on watch. The starry night was peaceful and calm. It was half past midnight when the nightmare began. Animals racing through the woods, running away from ...something. Then, it came, swirling and writhing through the trees. I was awoken by cries of alarm, to find myself enshrouded in a deathly cloud so thick I could scarcely see my hands in front of my face. I could barely hear the others, their voices sounding incredibly distant. No natural fog this. I tried to call out to Bragen and Ug Bash to judge its aura, but my voice seemed to be swallowed up by the stifling stuff.

Then, they came. Floating through the engirdling mist they came, gleaming with a cadaverous luminescence. Faces out of the fog, crying for help. Ghostly fragments of bodies, weeping, wailing to us. I knew I should have been afraid, but only the barest tendril of fear crept up my spine. Perhaps it was my elven heritage, perhaps the amulet I wear. Who knows...

I loaded and cranked my cross-bow. Someone cried "Banshee...". There was a scream. Long and drawn out. Almost without thinking I fired. The screaming stopped. The ghostly apparitions continued to swoop and soar at me through the evil fog. I prepared and cast E.S.P. But I perceived nothing. They were mindless, manifestations of who knows what. I slashed at one with my sword. It passed right through me, leaving behind an unpleasant, icy chill. Enough, I thought. Time to get this party together. I got down from the tree and called out. Someone answered. I tripped over someone. Valden, the butler. Oh shit, I thought, as I realised he was very nearly mortally wounded, with one of my cross-bow bolts in him. I don't think I could have done it deliberately if I tried! But I had to heal him, and get that bolt out of him. He woke as I ministered to him, but I was able to hypnotise him, and commanded him not to fear the ghosts, and to sleep. Bragen came upon us shortly after, and finished the healing. The others gathered, Vila and Roff the last. Only Stark did not join us. Slowly we realised that the ghastly phastasms were no longer screaming at us out of the fog, and then that the fog itself was becoming less substantial. It returned the way it came, the last lingering tendrils clutching at the trees as though it was reluctant to leave.

We found a spot further up the road to camp, but nobody slept very well. It wasn't easy to purify, either. Vila cast a locate, and we were on our way, looking for Stark. We followed the road for a while, into the hills, and then Vila stopped us, pointing to a meadow to the north. "That way," he said. We rode through the meadow, rounded a copse of trees, and stopped. Ahead was a human-shaped depression in the grass. Bragen and Ug Bash dismounted and led the way, looking for auras. Ug Bash stooped down and lifted something. A human skull! The whole meadow was full of dry, ancient bones. I joined them, searching for the remains of weapons or armour, but there were none. Strange. Next, Ug Bash found the cloven skull of an orc. He told us that it had died violently, over seven hundred years ago. So why were there only bones...

I cast E.S.P. as Bragen approached Stark. Weird. Stark was there all right, semi-conscious and badly frightened, but so were a great many others. He had stowaways in his brain, presumably the spirits from the night before, looking for a home. Bragen picked Stark up, and found much the same thing with his healer empathy. Physically Stark was fine, but mentally? A strand of fog seeped from his eardrum as we watched. Bragen muttered that his aura was all wrong, long-lived instead of short-lived sentient. Last spell to impact? Malignant fog! An appropriate name for it. Stark began to mumble in a voice, in voices not his own, "Save us, help us..."

As Ug Bash lifted him, we heard Stark cry "Help..." in his own voice, but then the other voices resumed. Looking where Stark had lain, I noticed something. An object, half-buried in the grass. Cautiously, I picked it up. It was some kind of canister, with a horn-shaped thing at one end. There were two buttons next to the horn, one white, one red. The red button was depressed. While neither Ug Bash, nor Bragen could discern any aura about the canister, we reasoned that it might be related to Stark's condition, and took it with us.

We decided to ride on to the next village, a small town called Starct, hoping to find a church of some time, or at least a priest. Cases of possession fit more into their portfolio, than into any of ours. I did try one or two things, though. I tried to hypnotise Stark, and found his willpower now so high that I almost backfired, when I should have succeeded. Oops! So I tried talking to the spirits, asking them how could we help them. "Push..." they replied, after a while. Strange how Stark tumbled off his horse, when Ug Bash had tied him securely. Very strange.

It was eleven o'clock when we got to the town. A drunken yokel led us to the church, muttering about "Ought to go to church on Sunday..." The doors opened before us, revealing a darkened nave, but light streaming from an open doorway down a hall on the left. I knocked on the door of the room, but still surprised the priest from his studies. I explained as much as I dared, and asked the priest what he could do for our unfortunate friend. Could he discern whether the spirits were good or evil? He went to fetch a Brother who knew more of these things. It was a few minutes to midnight. We had calculated that if the fog was coming again, that would be the time. I cast a pre-cog, and saw the church filled with malignant fog. What should we do?

Midnight came. A corpse-white flash of sepulchral light shot through the church, from the room where Stark's body lay straight towards the niche where Vila had placed the canister. Bragen and I rushed to Stark. Our healer empathy was enough to tell us that he was no longer unconscious, but merely deeply sleep. But he would not wake, not even when Ug Bash lifted his head and let it fall onto the table.

A call from the church nave alerted us. Vila stood there, invisible, and pointing at a grey cloud of fog which was seeping slowly from one of the niches along the church wall. What could we

do? I had earlier suggested a Wall of Light to Ug Bash, thinking that might stop the fog. He cast, but it made no difference. The evil miasma continued to spread steadily in a semi-circle. Someone observed that at least consecrated ground had some retarding effect on the vile stuff. I still believed that the solution had to have something to do with pressing the white button on the canister. Repeatedly I cast, trying to obtain some pre-cognitive insight, but failed every time, feeling the mana rebound as I backfired more than once.

Bragen decided it was time for action. He went to the horses and got a length of rope. This he tied around his waist, and giving the other end to Ug Bash and Kyrin, he instructed them to pull him out after five minutes. Then binding his eyes, and stuffing cloth into his ears, he entered the fog, fighting his way through. It appeared to be much denser than before. Five minutes later he had not emerged. The others drew him forth. He was hurt and frightened, and mumbled something about walls of light. It transpired that he is lunar-aspected, which is a dark aspect, and the Wall of Light had injured him. He should have told Ug Bash!

The noxious cloud had meanwhile expanded, so that now it filled half the church. Nothing else for it, I thought to myself, "Starflower, it's your turn". I stuffed cloth into my ears, put the rope around my own waist, and tossed the end to Ug Bash, and strode across to the wall, tightly shut my eyes, and pushed into the thick and clammy fog, using the wall to help me find direction. After missing altogether, and reaching the far corner, I was obliged to work my way back to the niche, where I found the canister. I felt for the button and pressed it. The thing erupted with sound, a hideous deafening noise that would surely blast that malignant fog from here to the realms of the dead. I opened my eyes, just a crack. No such luck, the fog hadn't gone anywhere. Maybe if I took the canister out of the fog?

I reached the far corner of the church before I realised that I wasn't achieving anything. Moreover, I was on my own, the rope loose at my belt. The noise must have frightened the others away. So, what now? Think, Starflower, think. I sank to the floor with the canister clasped in my lap. Suddenly, an inspiration came into my mind. This thing has two buttons. I pressed the red button down further so that it was flush with the surface. Nothing. Then released it. There was a sound like the sudden wailing of many voices. After a minute or two, I opened my eyes. To see my companions returning back into the church. But I could not hear them. Deaf again! But this was no curse, and my healer talent told me that the damage would not be permanent. All I wanted to do was rest.

The priests were not pleased with us, but did allow us the use of a room, for the remainder of that night. Even I didn't feel like purifying the next morning, although I was able to restore my hearing. Stark was awake, and able to tell us what he had experienced. It was like a bad dream, being invaded heart and soul by so many spirits from long ago. He told of the maker of the artifact, an elven necromancer, who in the process of creating a container for the spirits of the dead, had himself died, and been caught up in his own creation. That accounts for the aura - and the willpower.

We left quite late that morning, and reached Bowcourt that same afternoon. What a city! A great walled warren swarming with humans, humans everywhere. It took us until nightfall to ride through the city, across the river, and to the inn where Valden proposed we spend the night. Make that Inn. A truly impressive place, with fine food, superb service, everything one could wish for. Definitely an occasion to dress up for dinner.

Riding out of Bowcourt, I have to admit that I was tempted by the variety and quality of goods displayed in the shops that lined our route, and vowed to return some day. It took us two days to reach our final destination, spending the night on a farm that Valden knew of.

Clues 20 October 1990

The next afternoon we entered a mountain valley, and as we rode along beside a rushing river, Valden pointed out a rocky spire, already visible in the distance, saying that this was called Lookout Spire, a natural outcrop that overlooked the town of Gnarlsville. The sun was setting behind us by the time the town walls came into view, and it was past dusk by the time we rode up to the gates. Valden warned us that a curfew was in effect, and hailed the guards upon the wall. Behind the town the dark spectre of Lookout Spire thrust two hundred feet upward into the night, though many lights adorned its base where Baron Garcia's manor house was built into the solid rock. We were greeted by Derek, Captain of the Militia, and ruler of Gnarlsville in the Baron's absence, and then escorted to the Brass and Copper Inn.

Though the Inn doubled as Town Hall, and was in better times a popular meeting place, we were the only guests that night. Bartholemew the innkeeper, a portly human, was pleased to see us. Curfews are not good for business, but neither are goblin raids, or vanishing villagers. I had ascertained from Derek that there had been a further disappearance since Valden had left for Seagate, to bring the total to four, including the town banker. The Baron had concluded that there was a link between the goblins and the disappearing townspeople, a mountain called Garthang, and taken a well-armed party up the Gnarly river to investigate. He still hadn't returned, though his horses had been sent back, which is  
were we came in. Find the Baron...

We sleep, and I purified next morning, knowing that I would need magic to glean anything useful from the villagers. We met at breakfast, and when I spoke of the investigations we must make, Ug Bash said he'd already started, by talking to one of the missing men's wives. Not quite what I had in mind. We would need to speak to them all right, but I knew from experience that digging into people's memories is an area where telepathy and hypnosis can be most helpful. Also we would need to inspect their homes, to find out more about the Baron's researches, and to find an accurate depiction of the Baron so that Vila can locate him. The statue in front of the manor was not good enough, apparently. First  
things first. Interviews.

Valden was at the manor, and once we found him he made the necessary appointments. First we spoke with the family of the most recent disappearance, a 16-year-old mining lad. They remembered little, even when I took his 12-year-old brother, who had shared his room, aside and hypnotised him. Some facts came out, more negative than positive. The boy had not woken until the morning when he found that his elder brother's bedclothes had thrown back, and that his clothes and boots had gone. He assumed that his brother had risen early, and only when he spoke to his parents did anyone realise that he was missing. Curiously, he had not taken his favourite slingshot that he always carried with him. It was evident that the brother had not be magically transported away, but had walked out, though not under his own volition. Searching the house revealed nothing, and neither I nor Stark were able to spot the boy's tracks, although he had apparently be trailed for some distance. The trackers would be returning on the morrow. As for how he got over the wall... We were told that he used to do militia duty on this very part of the barricade.



Nothing useful was gained from the wife we interrogated next, but from the third came some seriously disquieting information. When I asked her under hypnosis if she had dreamed that night, she remembered her husband coming to her, but he was... strange. It was her husband, and yet not her husband. When I pressed her she told me that "the banker, he's strange, too...". Sounded uncomfortably like what had happened to Stark. Ug Bash muttered something about doppelgangers.

It was late afternoon by then, and there remained time to have a look around Baron Garcia's mansion. Valden was reluctant, and warned us of many traps within, set to defend the town's last bastion in time of trouble. But he relented and led us to the Baron's study and the library next door. I settled into the library and began to look through the books for anything that might be relevant, while Ug Bash and Vila searched the study. Things went quiet, and then there was a commotion. Vila had found that there was another, identical room above the study, but could not find a way in. After rummaging around behind the bookshelves they returned to the study. Ug Bash sat in the Baron's armchair, and Vila stood in front of the desk discussing all sorts of magical means of ingress. Abruptly Vila vanished. With E.S.P. I found him somewhere above us. Ug Bash explained something about thinking "Up" thoughts. And then I found myself with Vila, in a room identical to that below, save there was no door. Vila had the bar open, and was already pouring himself a drink. He vanished, and then I found myself in yet another place, alone on a balcony, half way up the precipice of Lookout Spire. Not a place for looking down. I shared this balcony with a rocking chair, a stone balustrade, and a locked door. After attempting to pick the lock with a hair-pin, and succeeding only in breaking the pin (it looks much easier when Vila does it), I braced myself against the balustrade and pushed. The door gave a fraction, but before I could try again it opened. There was Valden with a blindfold. I felt so embarrassed as I tried to explain. He led me down several flights of stairs, and back to the study.

Vladden suggested we stay for dinner, indeed the night. We started on the books looking for any notes the Baron may have left, but found nothing until Ug Bash thought to ask Valden which books the Baron had left out before he went. There were three; one regarding "Greater Sentients", one on "Formless Beings", and the third containing "Methods of Protecting Oneself against Evil" (most of which sounded distinctly apocryphal). This sounds more and more serious.

After dinner Valden offered to take us to the guardpost at the top of the spire, that we might admire the view. Impressive it was, the more so through the magical spy-glass the guards used to search the countryside for approaching danger. Through it one could see the mine workings, the returning scouts, and one much less pleasant sight. A man riding through the dark from the west. Damien!

*Into the mountains*    22 October 1990

Damien didn't exactly appear at breakfast the next morning, although the identity of the unseen visitor causing the porridge to fly was a little obvious. By that stage I had already ascertained that the scouts had returned and were being de-briefed, and made an appointment to see Derek at 10am. I suggested to Vila that he take a look at the paintings in the hall outside the library with a view to locating the Baron. Bragen wanted to speak with the baron's horses - which sounded like a good idea. In any case, I requested that the party to be ready to leave after lunch today, and they agreed.

There was some time to spare before 10am, so I went to visit the village healer. As I feared she

cannot resurrect, though she can preserve the dead. That will have to be enough, should one of us be killed. I purchased an assortment of herbs and herbal potions from her, my own supply being greatly diminished.

Derek could tell us little that we did not know already. The scouts had tracked the boy into the mountains, along the river, until the trail became too indistinct to follow. But the direction was the same as that that Vila had established as the Baron's location. The Baron had apparently gained his information by consulting with astrologers in Bowcourt. We did not share the results of Damien's consultation. Derek offered some men to assist us, but I declined, sensing his reluctance. Damien disliked Derek for some reason, and had remained outside, but he was most angry when he found out. More people to protect his back? However, when we left we were accompanied by two militiamen, Laari and Curli, and a mercenary named Moe. I joined the rest of the party selecting items from the armory, took some crossbow bolts, and choose a light crossbow for Kryan. Must teach him the uses of missile weapons. Like how to kill game without leaping on it.

We journeyed upriver, and camped. That night we were attacked by wild cats. I woke to find the camp in an uproar, drew my tulwar and lashed at the nearest cat, screaming at it to scat. It choose to attack me instead, but even as I felt another die under Roff's club, my blade whistling past its nose was enough to frighten it away. Stark killed another cat which was interfering with his pack (at the same time ruining most of its contents), as a fourth attacked Kryan. That one ran off as I approached. I slept much more peacefully thereafter.

Following the rushing Gnarly river, along the side of its gorge, we rounded a rocky spur, and found a huge landslide before us. Stark guessed that it was a week or two old, but we had no way to discover if it were natural or not. The river was uncrossable at this point, and the horses could not cross the jumbled pile of loose rock that confronted us. We would have to proceed on foot. Laari would remain here, and watch over the horses. Bragen had the idea of stabilising the rock slide with Hands of Earth. This worked well enough, except that Stark stumbled and fell into one's clutches. When Bragen dispelled the hands Stark fell into the river. Needless to say he was soaked, and he did not find our laughter at all amusing.

Near evening we came upon a place were we could go upriver no further, where the cliff fell shear down to the water. Here the Baron had released his horses. A deep, narrow ravine clove like a dark wound into the mountain on our right. A fine place to be ambushed. Damien filled the ravine with thick darkness, and he and Ug Bash placed the bandits' bear trap that had caught Kryan within. I proposed a trip wire, and Damien and I set this further into the dark so that any goblin which dared come at us that way would fall face first into the bear trap. A fitting end for one of those filthy creatures, perhaps.

*Getting the Goblins* 24 October 1990

The night passed without event. So much for paranoia! After morning purifications, Damien switched off his darkness and then we removed the traps. We climbed down into the ravine, and I led the way into the dark cleft. Soon the rock closed above us, and we were in a tunnel, no more than five feet wide and black as night. Bragen lit a lantern, for even those of us who can see in the dark were finding it difficult to make out the path ahead. That must be why I did not notice when the path opened up to a underground lake inside a great cavern, and stepped straight into the water. The icy cold concerned me not as I dived to find the bottom, which was quite beyond

me. But when I surfaced I found that a number of pearly white fish-like creatures with mouths full of rings of teeth had attached themselves to my flesh under my armour. Not nice, but they didn't like it when I attacked them with a torch. They dropped off! Bragen healed me as the orc sampled one, saying that it was called a "sucker fish".

A narrow path lead along the edge of the lake to the left. Damien produced an astrology reading he had had done in Ranke, with a rather cryptic set of directions. Left it said, and left we had to go. Suddenly the path fell away before my feet. At least I didn't fall in this time. I could see the path continue some ten feet ahead, and looking down realised I could use the near-drowned and very slimy rubble of the broken path to make my way cautiously across. Easy enough for me, but not so easy for Damien, who insisted on casting a dry cantrip on the rocks before crossing.

Then the path around the lake disappeared altogether, as a tunnel opened in the rock. I felt a gentle breeze on my face. A way out! And so it proved. But when I stepped out of the tunnel onto a path along the side of another ravine an arrow shot by my face. Goblins! As we peeped around the corner we saw a rock bridge across the gorge. At its far end was a cairn of rocks, behind which the goblins were hiding. Stark yelled something incomprehensible, and the goblins shouted back. Whatever it was, Stark didn't like the sound of it because next thing he was running up the path, screaming in goblin, and waving his broadsword. Meanwhile the rest of us prepared with invisibility spells and the like. An image of Kryan with crossbow loaded appeared up the path. Stark was shot, and fell, stunned. Then someone turned him invisible. A ribbon of darkness sprang up along the cliff edge, and then Moe, Roff and I were running up the path invisible, and over the bridge. We leaned over the edge of the cairn and shot. To our surprise we sprang back into visibility. We ducked down and drew our swords. I looked at Moe, and he looked at me. Then we leapt together onto the wall and at the goblins. At least he did. A rock turned beneath my foot and I fell, spreadeagled across the top of the wall. Not again, I thought, as a goblin leapt up and stabbed me before I could move.

I came to with the taste of healing potion in my mouth and Bragen bending over me. Again. I looked around and saw the bodies of several goblins and Moe strewn around me. My first thought was, what a waste! All those deaths...

Someone suggested looting Moe's body, forgetting Curli, standing behind us. I insisted that Curli take anything of importance from Moe, before we hid his body under some rocks. Then we went on, following the path into another tunnel. This time it was Ug Bash in the lead, who fell off the edge into an empty pit. Fortunately the pit was not so wide that we could not cross, Vila searching unsuccessfully for the mechanism. Damien lead the way to the next corner. Around it he saw a wooden barricade, with more goblins behind it. We withdrew and discussed our strategy. I cast telepathy and found yet more goblins hiding in a hole in the roof. Interesting. The goblins were more than a little worried. Their numbers had been depleted somewhat. Quite recently. Vila sent out a Wizard's Eye, and found a number of goblins that I had missed, including a goblin in robes, who looked likely to be their leader.

We decided to trap the gobins behind the barrier using an invested Hands of Earth spell, through Vila's Wizard's Eye, and to catch the ones in the ceiling with a Wall of Starlight. Ug Bash started to cast. And stopped. He could not draw on any mana. Yet I could, and so could Vila. Celestial counterspell. The goblin leader's a dark mage. No sooner had we come to this conclusion than Vila announced that the robed goblin was waving his hands in a spell. Quick, Vila, the Hands,

get him!

But the goblin released his spell first. Darkness filled the corridor. The Hands grabbed at the goblins behind the barricade, catching three, but missing their leader. The goblins ran.

Before anyone could enter the darkness, Ug Bash read its aura. No ordinary magical darkness this, but a triple-damage rank-ten Wall of Darkness. Step inside that, any light-aspected entity, and die! Nothing for it but two hours of waiting for it to go away. Ug Bash and Bragen broke down the barricade, and we used it to build a fire. Hot food, a rest, and we all felt better. Except for one thing, as we ate, we heard a distant rumble, somewhere deep inside the mountain. A goblin's thought confirmed our own supposition. Rock fall.

*Time to play?* 22 October 1990

After the darkness fell, we all went through to where three goblins remained, caught in the Hands. None spoke common, to my disgust, so I could not hypnotise them. Stark tried to interrogate them in the goblin tongue, while Ug Bash proceeded to torture the nasty creatures. As the first died, I took the opportunity to cast telepathy. Now I could at least tell when they were telling the truth to Stark. Not that I gleaned anything useful from them, save that there were less than ten goblins left in this entire mountain.

Ug Bash and Damien finished off the last two goblins, and we walked on down the tunnel. Rather slowly since they insisted on reading the aura of each part as we progressed. They found nothing, and then we entered a cavern. With many exits. Which one should we take? The problem was that we couldn't be certain which part of the astrology reading we were up to. Was it "through", or "left"? Roff found human boot-tracks leading to a tunnel opening just left of centre, and Stark and I went to explore this passage. I sensed something down there. A goblin mind, terrified and trapped. The tracks continued until they were covered by a rock-fall. The goblin was deep under a huge pile of broken stone, and there was no way to free him. I felt him die, even as Stark began to make his way over the rocks, having decided that the pile was stable enough to make the attempt. It took him half-an-hour before he reached the far side of the fall, and then the rest of us followed, save Curli, who was reluctant even to try. We left him unseen, guarding the cavern, with instructions to warn the Guild if we did not return.

Vila told us that he had found two dead mercenaries in the goblins' larder, and another passage that lead to what could be another way out. We continued down the passage and came upon a T-junction, and figured that this was the time to go left. I found an odd symbol, something like an eye chalked on the wall. Strange. We walked on, until the tunnel ended high up in the wall of a cavern. "Down" was the next instruction, so down we went, on ropes tied together to the cavern floor, covered with tumbled boulders, then across a ridge which spanned the cave, over more broken rock, only to be confronted by a deep chasm five feet across separating us from the mouth of another tunnel. Vila sent forth a Wizard's Eye and found the tunnel to be riddled with many thoroughly nasty traps. There had to be another way out, and Vila found it. The opposite wall at the right-hand side of the cavern was an illusion. We disbelieved, and saw that it truly was not real. Vila checked, and it seemed clear of traps, so I tied a rope around my waist, gave the other end to Ug Bash, and leapt across the abyss.

Ouch! Something invisible struck me in the chest, and knocked me back across the chasm, only to crash into the hard rocky wall. Ouch! I would have been stunned were I not a Mind Mage,

but the others hauled me to safety, and then Bragen healed me. Vila examined the thing. It seemed to be a bar that swung across to strike unwary adventurers at about four feet above the tunnel floor. Now we knew what the astrology reading meant by "leap", and then "duck". Soon we were all across and into the tunnel. Vila decided to scout ahead, checking for traps, and I followed him.

Suddenly he fell, straight down into and through the floor, before my very eyes. That section of floor was all an illusion I realised as I stared at the place where my companion had stepped a moment before. I ran back to the others, and was about to cast a telepathy spell and try to find Vila, when Ug Bash called out that something was coming towards us through the darkness of the corridor, beyond the range of my witchsight. I decided I'd better finish casting the spell, but could not sense a mind approaching, although Ug Bash assured me that it was there. Either it resisted, or it wasn't real.

It continued to approach, until we could all see it. It appeared to be a tall, well-built human, dressed in chain mail, with broadsword and heavy cross-bow, both sheathed. It called out to us, "Hello there, strangers. You are invited to dinner. Come this way."

I wondered who might be on the menu, as I cast ESP. It couldn't resist that, and it didn't. I could feel its emotions. Primarily curiosity, but there was an undercurrent of hunger. For what, I could imagine, although I felt no ill will in it.

It continued to approach. As it drew closer I cast hypnosis at all. For a moment the spell seemed to work. I sensed its fascination with me, and then it seemed to shrug mentally, and the magic slid away. Undead, muttered Ug Bash, and he and Damien told us that it was a Gyscoras, whatever that was, and an illusionist, which didn't surprise anybody. Suddenly it turned and started to skip backwards and forwards. "Come and play," it called to us. We asked its name, and it said that it was called "Steve". Peculiar name for an undead whatever-it-is. "Come and play," it called again.

"We can't," I answered, "Not without our companion. He fell through the hole in the floor down there."

It danced a moment more, and dived into the hole. Were we rid of it? We started down the passage. We saw its form approach again, this time misty and insubstantial. "Coming to dinner?" it asked, but this was only an illusion and we disbelieved it easily.

Vila came up behind us, and told us what had happened to him. He had fallen down some kind of chute and nearly landed on the cruel spikes that filled the bottom of the chasm, along with a pair of skeletons. But he had saved himself, by loosing Hands of Earth that caught him. Then the gyscorum had come down the shaft, released him from the Hands, slung him on its back and hauled him up the chasm, careless of the damage it was doing to itself. It asked him if he wanted to play, but having suffered a back-fired witchsight, Vila demurred, saying that he couldn't play because he was blind. It had placed one hand on Vila's forehead, and after a few moments he could see. This creature seems to be able to dispel magic like a Namer, but much faster. What are we going to do?

As we walked along the tunnel, Damien and I in the lead, we noticed a line of yellow gold embedded in the wall. Another illusion of course, but "Follow the yellow brick road" said the

astrology reading, and so we followed it, turning left at the next T-junction. What worried me most was that the next line referred to Baron Garcia. "He will be dead ahead of you..."

*A Meeting with Monsters*      22 October 1990

All at once I sensed minds ahead, five of them. I stopped, and concentrated. Strange. No emotions. And no thoughts save one, "Sit and wait." We proceeded even more cautiously than before. Gradually the corridor became less dark. There was a light ahead, and it was getting brighter. It became apparent that the corridor ended in a lighted room, and that someone was adding more lights. As we got closer, we could smell a delightful odour. Dinner! And maybe we wouldn't be on the menu, after all.

When reached the room we saw a table laid with all manner of goodly foods to eat. At the table sat six forms, five of whose minds I had sensed. Dead men in chain mail. Zombies, I guessed, before Ug Bash confirmed my suspicions from their auras. And there was the creature, Steve, lighting candles. "Welcome," he said. "Welcome, take your seats. I must fetch my brother."

Ug Bash decided to put a Wall of Starlight over by the far door, just as Steve was about to leave. Steve argued about where the lights ought to be, and then simply waved at it. And it dissipated. Steve went through the door, and we proceeded to investigate the room. I kept my mind on the far corridor, while Ug Bash, and Damien did something to the zombies with their daggers. Cutting out their nerve centres, I gathered from their thoughts. Stark collected their weapons, and dumped them in a side room, while Vila cast a Wizard's Eye. Oops! I felt Kryan misfire a spell. I went across to him and asked to use my healer empathy on him. It was a backfire, and a bad one. Creeping senility... We'll have to get him back to the Guild before he loses all his spells.

Then I sensed something approaching. Another zombie! Stark and Damien took up position either side of the door. It opened. A zombie entered. Stark struck at it with his dagger, but it bounced off the thing's chain mail. I don't think the zombie even noticed. Behind the zombie came Steve, and another creature. It seemed less dead than the zombies, and Damien's thoughts confirmed mine. Another Gyscoras, like unto Steve. Steve introduced the entity as his brother, Jim, but we had recognised his body by then. Baron Garcia!

They sat at the table, and invited us to join them. Only Damien held back. I poked at the food with my poison-detecting wand. Nothing. Ug Bash was eating with enthusiasm. Reading his thoughts I deduced that the food was not magically cursed, though some was illusory. That way, one could consume more, assured our hosts. Vila pointed at his head. I nodded. He thought, "Drugged?", and mentally suggested I use my healer empathy. I reached over, and touched his arm. Nothing. So I decided I might as well join in, and started to eat. And a tasty repast it was.

Over dinner we conversed with the Gyscorum, and learned much about them. Jim was a Necromancer, and Steve an Illusionist, much as we had inferred from the magical effects we had noted. Jim had learned a ritual by which he could become this unusual type of Greater Undead, and performed it on himself and his brother. Since then they had inhabited many bodies, usually wearing them out after a few months, through being careless of them. Then they would seek out another. They had been doing this for over a thousand years - an appreciable time even to an elf. Yet, they did not seem to me to especially evil, certainly no more so than some of my companions.

We convinced Jim that he would have little difficulty convincing the people of the village that he was the Baron Garcia, especially since he retained the Baron's memories. Someone, Damien I believe, suggested that after establishing himself as the Baron, Jim might like to return with us to the Guild, which after all lacks a Necromancer of his abilities. That idea caused much hilarity. I can just imagine the reaction. "And so you talked the undead monsters into coming home with you?!!!" An original solution to the problem, indeed.

After dinner came the entertainment. Steve concentrated, and a moment later we sat not in a dining carved out of solid rock, but in a marquee set a grassy meadow. Before us knights jousting in tournament. The illusion was so perfect and so wonderful that it seemed an insult to even contemplate disbelieving it. We continued to talk to Jim, and he told us more of his past. Then, a thought struck him. The Baron hired us, and he was the baron. So he had hired us, and he would pay us. Not in silver, but in magical items and potions. He is apparently something of a collector, and also an alchemist of considerable skill. Moreover he knows the Necromantic investment ritual. Goodbye, bandits...

After the entertainment Jim asked us if we would like a tour of their establishment. As he led us down an corridor towards a door, Ug Bash and Damien stopped. "It's warded," they said. With a rank twelve Hellfire. Nasty! Jim explained that the door led to his study and the guestrooms beyond. The ward served to keep out any stray goblins. It would not harm us, as long as he was with us. Quite reasonable. Jim's library distracted us for a moment, and then the tour continued. We passed a door, heavily bolted and barred. Steve told us that we shouldn't go that way. There was something really bad on the other side. He led us to a big empty room. His playroom. He invited us to join him in play, and a various times during the next few days more than one of us accepted, and were treated to marvellous illusions. A truly amazing place.

It had been quite a day, and we were all tired by the time we reached the guest rooms. Jim and Steve left us, and we talked for a while. The idea of using the foghorn on our hosts might work, but why bother? They seemed decent enough if you overlooked their ...undeadness. And avarice was definitely getting the better of us...

The night passed almost uneventfully. At some point Vila's curiosity must have got the better of him. He went spying with a Wizard's Eye through that locked and bolted door. Within he saw two wraiths trapped within a pentacle. And the sight scared him out of his wits. So afeared was he that his hair turned white, down to the roots. He'll have fun sneaking around now.

Sometime that night I felt something heavy causing the mattress to sag beside me. I reached out and touched ...orc. Ug Bash! I chased him from my bed, from my room, and braced a chair against the door. Wait until I tell Brightflare!

*(Librarian's note - Last few pages lost in fire. Below are Starflower's original notes)*

28<sup>th</sup> October

Leave. Interesting items: A cloak made of material blacker than black, a kalidescope with a chance of detecting auras, a certain dagger, a bridle which enhances horsemanship.

Lead us out another way. Take note of exit, not far east of copper mine. Return to Gnarlsville

29<sup>th</sup> October  
Back at Gnarlsville

30<sup>th</sup> October  
Celebration - Orc gets drunk

31<sup>st</sup> October  
My birthday. Party!

1<sup>st</sup> November  
Hungover

2<sup>nd</sup> November  
We leave - stay that night at farm

4 - 5<sup>th</sup> November  
Search for herbs

6 - 7<sup>th</sup> November  
Travel to Vanger - farming town

8<sup>th</sup> November  
Travel across farming plains

11<sup>th</sup> November  
Evening - arrive back at Guild