

Root of Evil

Cover Sheet

(Duration 54 days - 1st Meadow to 24 Heat)

Player Characters

Father Rowan	Wiccan	Male	Human	Leader
Flash	Celestial Shadow	Male	Human	
Starflower	Mind	Female	Elf	Mil Sci
Basalic	Earth	Male	Human	Scribe
Eidolon	Celestial Solar	Male	Human	
Axy	Namer	Male	Human	

Plane

Alusia

Places Visited

A strange forest in East Carzala near the Sea of Grass
Meg's Cave in Southern Ranke

Employers

Representatives from Brasta, Carzala, and Ranke

Important NPCs

Lady Lydia Morandavas
Meg
The Storm King Giant
Legos
Mary - a trainee wiccan

Mission

To investigate disappearances in a large area encompassing Eastern Carzala, Brasta, and Southern Ranke.

The Root of Evil

Adventure Summary

1st Meadow

Met our employers who told us of mysterious disappearances in a large area encompassing Brasta, East Carzala and Ranke. No witnesses left and no unusual tracks and disturbances. Last case was a group of workmen in a forest on East Carzala near the Sea of Grass.

2nd Meadow

Flew east to the south end of the forest and walked in. Found the place where the workmen were. No signs of a struggle and tools undisturbed. Looked like they had been taken during the night. Tarot reading 'Beware the earth that moves'.

We slept in trees. That night a large pack of wolves went by.

3rd Meadow.

Thinking those wolves might know something we chased them on Wings. Eidolon met up with us with an astrology reading.

If you find a lost friend
He may save you in the end
Storm clouds muster and bellow
So it's down to earth you go, or below
They say lightning never strikes twice
Do not listen to this advice
If deception is the work of the devil
Then the bloody tree is the root of evil
As round and round you goes
Where you come out nobody knows
You may find allies in the strangest places
They come in many colours and races.

Suddenly found ourselves surrounded by a storm which appeared out of nowhere. Plummeted to the ground. Attacked by lightning bolt wielding gargoyles. According to a nearby tree we were still on Alusia. After beating the gargoyles we were attacked by oversized wolves.

Walked west for a few hours then turned north. At dusk we made a campsite. That night we were attacked by more gargoyles, wolves and large gorillas. After a vicious fight we bugged out and went west. Encountered more wolves and dispatched them. We were being chased by the storm.

Found ourselves going uphill then reached a large hedge wall with a gate as well as several stone statues. Statues were the results of medusae petrification. Banged on the door and were admitted. There was a garden on the other side.

Met the Lady Lydia and sons. Stayed the night in a guest house.

4 Meadow '98

The Lady told us of a village somewhere in the forest that was populated by Druidic Earth Mages.

Two years ago a Wiccan, Legos, had arrived and banished their leader, Thomas. He then took over and formed a coven with twelve of the local young ladies. The forest itself had enchantments to confuse people's perceptions and direction senses. There was a portal located in the nearby Caverns of Despair that would take us to any nominated place of power.

Also in the village was an evil Blood Tree that the villagers had been making sacrifices to. Recently they were sacrificing more often and indiscriminately. The Tree can be destroyed by severing the tap root that was in a cavern underneath.

Decided we were going to need time to prepare so while Lady Lydia made potions for us we trained for a while. Also Lady Lydia did rituals on us that changed our base attributes.

19 Meadow '98

Fifteen days of training later we were ready. Decided to use the Caverns of Despair to leave the forest. Lydia laid an invisible trail for us to follow. Encountered more wolves, an Earth Elemental and an Earth Mage. The elemental was banished and the Earth Mage captured.

Entered the caverns which were full of mist. Attacked by undead, followed by spectral warriors then Intellect Devourers.

Finally reached the Nexus Pool in the middle of the cave. Went in it and found ourselves on top of a cliff inside a stone circle. Followed a path downwards and reached a cave where we met Meg, a rather powerful wiccan. She knew of a Storm Giant King who could help us deal to the storm. Would take a few days for a message to be sent so went back to the Guild in the meantime. Meg also made up more potions for us.

At the Guild, enlisted the aid of Axy. Started some more training while we waited.

24 Meadow

A reply had arrived from the Storm Giant King and he wanted to meet us. Portalled to his area via Meg. He believed he could bend the storm to his will. Would also provide us with Air College Investments.

22 Heat.

Four weeks since we had arrived at Megs and we were ready to go. The new investments and potions were also ready. Powered up then zapped through the portal.

Found ourselves submerged in a river of blood, fortunately breathable. Could hear a throbbing sound. Surrounded by one foot wide, red, biconcavial jellyfish that DAed as 'carriers'. Attacked by small white translucent shapeless objects called 'destroyers - easy to kill but there were quite a few of them. Beat them off just as we approached the end of the stream. A tricuspal valve opened and we were dumped through into a cavern.

The cavern contained an exposed portion of the tree root, an altar, and twelve humanoid shaped troughs, six of which were blackened and burnt. The floor was covered in blood. Just then we were attacked by six blood golems. Magic was required to defeat them permanently which was what we finally managed to do. Also we were taking opportunities to damage the tree root and the altar as well.

An Earth Elemental and a giant anaconda were the next opponents to shuffle in to the cavern. At the same time we could smell ozone and hear rumbling which implied that the Storm Giant King was attacking the tree from above. Starflower was nearly squeezed to death by the snake before it expired. The elemental was successfully banished.

The tree again, took our attention until two more elementals thundered in. Also there were two Earth mages lurking beyond the far side of the cavern as DTJs flew into us and magma pools started appearing around the cavern. We had to take refuge on the top of the altar. One elemental ended up under the lava while the other was banished.

Suddenly there was a large rush of blood from the tree as we finally crippled it. It's Plane of Origin was shown to be Hell.

There was a tunnel at the other end of the cavern so knock out gas was thrown inside then we followed. Two Earth mages were discovered there. They were dealt to along with the devil-creature that flew out of the tree's wound.

We went up the tunnel, and found a spot where we could punch our own tunnel to the surface and fly out. As we ascended we were shot at by DTJs from the earth mages clustered below. Lightning bolts thudded into the tree from the storm clouds above. The wiccan had arranged his coven around the tree and was in the process of ritually sacrificing them one by one.

Reached the Storm King's cloud and flew back over the village. Tried stopping the sacrifices but only managed to save one of the victims. Legos was also captured. During this, I ended up being shot up badly by DTJs and 'died'. Because of a special item I was instantly teleported to the Guild.

The cloud left the vicinity of the village and, while the wiccan was interrogated, headed for the Caverns of Despair. Once there they went through the caverns and ended up at Megs. The coven trainee was left in her care while Legos agreed to renounce his cult and take up with a Power of Light. He would be under the Storm Giant King's protection in case there are recriminations. Legos was from off-plane.

The party returned to the Guild and reported to the Duke. Agreed there wasn't much more we could do for now but the area was going to be watched as the 'confusing' effect was still active. We assumed it was going to take a while to fade as the tree died.

Root of Evil

Basalic

Guild meeting time again, and after the last two debacles I decided to go out on another mission, this time without Flamis. Besides, the funds needed a boost.

The adventure I decided to go on had to do with mysterious disappearances in a large area encompassing Brasta, East Carzala and Ranke. Representatives from all three areas had banded together to have it sorted out. They couldn't tell us much about the disappearances themselves as there had been no witnesses left and no unusual tracks or disturbances had been found at the sites. The people disappearing were mostly peasant labourers, farm workers, and traveling merchants. It just seemed completely random. Most of the people disappearing had been alone at the time or in groups of two or three but, in one case, a group of eight road workers had vanished. This had occurred 15 days ago in a forest on East Carzala near the Sea of Grass. The Duke's Ranger, an elf, had gone out to investigate but he too had disappeared but they believed he wasn't dead.

The party that finally assembled to investigate this were:

Father Rowan - wiccan and outspoken Priest of Chantris

Flash - a beginning shadow celestial and self-proclaimed scourge of evil.

Starflower - an elven were-drake Mind Mage

Basalic - that's me, an Earth Mage

There was a possibility that Lath and/or Turf could be joining us but it was unclear at this time.

Father Rowan was confirmed as the leader, Starflower as the Military Scientist, and myself as the scribe. While Flash was busy with a ritual the rest of us prepared. I gave the others Lesser Enchantments (a spell that needs practicing, along with Strength of Stone) then used much of the last of my funds to get 3 20pt Healing potions and a Lesser for myself from the Guild Earth mage. Father Rowan handed out some Holy Water to those of us that had a reasonable chance of throwing it at the opposition (Hmmm.. Maybe I should learn Rock as a weapon).

2 Meadow '98 WK

The next day (still unknown whether or not there were going to be any other party members) we flew eastwards. It took a couple of hours to reach the south end of the forest and, once there, we landed and walked in.

After lunch we managed to locate where the workmen had been. As with the other sites there were no signs of a struggle and their tools had been undisturbed. I DAed the ground but there was no sign of any residual magic. From what we had been told it appeared they had been taken in the night. I tried questioning a tree but gained not much in the way of useful information. It did seem to think I had talked to it before which seemed to indicate that another Earth Mage had been by. Can't have been the Duke's ranger as he was a Namer. Trouble with talking to plants is that it is rather difficult to think in their mindset.

Starflower had managed to attract a thrush so Father Rowan spoke to that referring to us as 'thrushgods'. It said that it had seen other 'thrushgods' but they went away. It did say that it heard a strange noise one night.

The next creature to be questioned was a stoat. It mentioned that there had been a vibration in the ground. Since the ground was undisturbed we theorised that there was an Earth Elemental in the vicinity. This seemed to be vindicated by Father Rowan's tarot reading that read 'Beware the earth that moves'. It was unanimously agreed that we were going to sleep in trees that night. Nothing unusual happened that night except a large bunch of wolves went by underneath.

3 Meadow '98 WK

Next morning, thinking those wolves may know something, one was summoned. However the wolf we got said that it wasn't his lot but a new pack that had arrived in the area sometime midwinter. So we followed the wolf a bit until Father Rowan's familiar was able to fly ahead and locate the new pack. Once we knew where they were we powered up with Armours of Earth and Strength of Stones (now I know how Adam felt last adventure) and went straight for them. Starflower had come up with the theory was that Earth Elementals were being used to deliver skinchanges to their victims and that these wolves might be shapechanged people. If that's the case, staying in one place on the ground would be an extremely bad move.

.2.

We continued chasing after the wolves. While flying, Starflower under her own power and the rest of us on the battlethrone, we suddenly saw a flash of light nearby. It proved to be a figure surrounded by bright shimmering lights and being transported on Star Wings. Either we were getting a visitation from an emissary of the Powers of Light, or it was a flamboyant Solar Mage. He wanted us to land - now. Unfortunately, we were currently cruising over forest and there were no gaps large enough in the canopy to comply. That didn't worry whoever it was though. Up ahead of us a patch of the canopy started glowing brightly. Then there was a bright flash of light, vapourising all the plants in that area. This happened twice more until the area was big enough to land in.

There was only one Guild Solar Mage who tossed around Solar Flares as readily as Flamis uses Dragonflames and that was Eidolon. I hadn't met him but knew of his reputation. So we landed in the indicated area (thank goodness no fires had started) and, at the first opportunity, I tossed a Strength of Stone at him.

The Guild had sent him to help us and he was bearing an astrology reading which read:

If you find a lost friend
He may save you in the end
Storm clouds muster and bellow
So it's down to earth you go, or below
They say lightning never strikes twice
Do not listen to this advice
If deception is the work of the devil
Then the bloody tree is the root of evil
As round and round you goes
Where you come out nobody knows
You may find allies in the strangest places
They come in many colours and races.

Once Eidolon was brought up to speed we took off again - or tried to. Father Rowan managed to clip a tree on the way up and I was forced to jump off or get crushed. The next attempt was

more successful and soon we were airborne again.

A short while later there was a flash of light and suddenly we were in a storm which had somehow sprung up all around the area instantaneously. It seemed more reasonable to me that we had somehow been translocated. The winds were gusting at over 30mph and Father Rowan was having difficulty maneuvering the battlethrone. Just then we got caught in a downdraft and began to plummet to the forest below. All we could do was hang on. Visibility was very poor and it wasn't long before we lost sight of Starflower and Eidolon.

They had their own problems. Some dark human-sized winged creatures flew down upon them from above and attacked them. Starflower later reported they were gargoyles. Their initial target was Starflower and as they closed with her (in dragonkin form) Eidolon dive-bombed them and zapped one with a Solar Flare. Somehow it survived that, and stayed in the air. Eidolon then attacked it and was stunned from an electrical discharge from its horn, which caused him to start falling. Meanwhile Starflower had caused another to drop from the sky, stunned, but ended up with two others grappling her. All three of them started plummeting.

Starflower managed to beat them off and regain control. Eidolon also managed to recover. Meanwhile Father Rowan had succeeded in pulling up the battlethrone but we were now being blown at high speed sideways. He threw up a Light to mark our position. Then, in the light of another bolt (accompanied by thunder so quickly that the storm was nearly on top of us) we saw a small gap in the canopy. It was decided to make for that.

The landings were reasonably successful except that the battlethrone was badly damaged. Well, at least any landing you can walk away from is a good one. Father Rowan ordered everyone up trees just in case something else showed up.

I checked the tree I was in, and according to its aura, we were still on Alusia. However the trees seemed darker and more sinister and Flash noted that the mosses and lichens looked abnormal. I then tossed Trollskins at everyone and discovered that it wasn't so tiring to cast here. Which wasn't true for the others. That seemed to indicate we were in some sort of Earth Place of Power.

After a short while Father Rowan gave the all clear so we clambered down again. I examined the battlethrone and was just in the process of asking Flash to find some branches and vines so we could try patching it up when Starflower suddenly realised she had lost her backpack, containing all her gear including her special armour and swords. It must have been torn off during the fight. So, while we discreetly looked away, she transformed to elf form, cast a spell of Finding, then shifted back to dragon-kin form. Fortunately it had landed not too far away so we went off to retrieve it. Just before we left Father Rowan Blessed us all.

We found it, just as a pack of at least a dozen oversized wolves came across us. They charged. Starflower and Flash moved to keep them off the rest of us. They took three each. I was itching to draw my broadsword and wade in as well but was told by Father Rowan that casting spells would be a better option. He was right too. My first attempt at a Wall of Stone barrier failed but the next one was up. By now the rest of the party were fending off wolves. Only I was unoccupied thanks to Father Rowan taking two meant for me. He had Hellfired a number before being overwhelmed. I was about to toss a Trollskin on Flash, who was looking a bit worse for wear, but concluded that Father Rowan was in more danger so he got it instead. Just then Eidolon succeeded in putting up some Walls of Starlight. A couple of the wolves were forced against it

and they fled in fear.

The last two charged me before I was able to get the next Trollskin up on Flash and I was forced to try to keep them off. I got in a good strike at one, but the other got through and I was forced to drop the sword. By now Flash had fallen, even though one of the wolves attacking him had had its pelvis broken as Starflower's tail slammed into it.

Things were looking grim for a while, but then Starflower was able to finish off the ones on her using the rip, rend, tear method; so she charged at the ones on me and roared mightily. I'm very glad she's on my side as a charging dragon-kin is a fearsome sight to behold. The wolves thought so too, and fled whimpering.

There wasn't many left by then and soon they were all dispatched - one way or another. We discovered that as soon they were killed they would shrink to normal size. Turned out someone had thrown a Rank 20 Animal Growth spell on them. Must be an Earth Mage lurking somewhere in these woods.

Finally we were able to retrieve Starflower's equipment, and then recuperate.

.3.

A wolf howled nearby so both Father Rowan and I put up Speak with Animal spells so we could listen in. Basically the wolf was saying "I've found the intruders". It was then I discovered it suddenly got harder to use magic. There's only so much druidic magic a pacifistic Earth mage can absorb.

Flying away was still out of the question because (a) the battlethrone needed lots of work to repair it and (b) the winds were still rather high. So we continued walking. Not having any particular direction to go, we headed west for a few hours then turned north. On the way Eidolon caught a hare and Flash stuffed it in his sack - still alive. I presume he wants it for a pet.

Starflower was keeping an eye out for suitable campsites and, as it was approaching dusk, we found one. The area around was cleared, courtesy of Eidolon's Solar Flares and several protecting Walls were put up. A decoy campsite was also set up. Where we were was protected by a combination of Walls of Stone and Walls of Thorns and surrounded by interlocking Rings of Starlight. I even managed a Wall of Stone overhang roof. An additional touch was a Pillar of Fire. Several Trollskins and Restoratives later, it was done - just as some gargoyles flew over and the lightning storm started.

As it got dark a lightning bolt struck a nearby tree accompanied by a loud thunderclap. A short time later, another bolt struck the same tree. A gargoyle flew over and Eidolon shot it down with a crossbow. It went through one light wall with no apparent effect but the second one caused it to crash to the ground. It just lay there, twitching, until Eidolon ran out, finished it off, and dragged it back into the shelter.

We had taken up a defensive position in front of the shelter and we could hear wolves howling beyond the walls. Quite a few of them, and it appeared they were waiting for an attack signal. Just then a lightning bolt impacted in the middle of our group and we were sent flying in random directions. I impacted hard on the ground and muttered that "if this sort of thing keeps up maybe

I should learn troubadour acrobatics". Eidolon's reply was "Troubadour pratfalls should be sufficient". I had to smile at that.

We had been scattered but it didn't take long to regroup in the shelter. During the confusion, Flash had landed on the hare, crushing it. Starflower, in dragonkin form, took up position in the gap between two Walls of Thorns. The gargoyles were still up there and we figured that they were waiting for the right moment before they, and the wolves, attacked en-mass. Father Rowan decided to force the issue and summon them down, one at a time, so we could strike at them. The technique succeeded with the first but then Father Rowan decided he was going to fly the dead gargoyle up there and 'deal penance to them'. Only Eidolon was actively encouraging this idea while Flash thought that riding corpses was not a good act. Father Rowan's reply was "I've ridden dead bodies before and I'm not ashamed of it".

However Starflower quickly came to the conclusion that Father Rowan was suffering from a reverse-effect backfire and was yelling at the others to help her restrain him so she could cure him. Father Rowan still denied the possibility claiming he was going out to smite the unbelievers. So I checked his aura for 'last backfire to impact, duration, and last magic to impact', and concluded that Starflower was correct. Soon, we had Father Rowan under control and tried to be very discrete while Starflower changed to elf-form and cast her spell. Shortly Father Rowan was back to his senses and Starflower had turned back to dragon-kin form.

A short while later, as the sun dipped beneath the horizon, the gargoyles gave the signal to attack. One gargoyle bounced off the roof. We hit it and it dropped off. Father Rowan used a spell to cause the fire pillar to emit a flash of light which helped kept the wolves at bay. The ones brave enough to attack were bouncing off the Walls of Starlight. The oversized ones were hanging back. Father Rowan was concentrating his Hellfires on them and any incoming gargoyles.

Then, in the light of a lightning bolt, Flash spotted a 12ft tall gorilla pounding its chest while standing on top of the roof. It jumped down and Starflower attacked it. She nearly bit its arm off. Another took its place on the roof. Eidolon threw a shrapnel grenade in an attempt to get the ones behind the shelter, but the grenade fell short and bounced onto the roof. The resulting carnage caused the roof to creak ominously but it held. Meanwhile Flash hit the stunned gorilla and it collapsed, forming partial cover - at least until the next gorilla threw the body out of its way. That one managed to close with Starflower. She retaliated by ripping its arm off while Flash whacked it and Father Rowan Hellfired it. The gorilla fell over.

A lightning bolt lanced down and hit the top of the structure, cracking the roof. I quickly generated some Hands of Earth to help hold it up before resuming the task of throwing Trollskins at people. After a while we were able to drive the remaining gorillas off. Then, while the gargoyles continued circling and the wolves were still being beaten back by the Walls (many had run off in fear), the roof collapsed and three of the Hands failed to hold it. Last thing I clearly remembered was several lumps of stone landing on my head.

.4.

Fortunately it wasn't long until my vision returned to normal. For a while there I was sure Starflower was trying to split into two. But I think I would prefer the blow on the head than the crushed ribs and chest wound that Eidolon got. Even though my head felt like a dwarf was inside, pounding away at an anvil, I tried Counterspelling the broken wall with the intention of replacing it. Didn't work. Meanwhile Flash had taken a look outside and reported that six gargoyles were

still circling around. Fortunately there was no sign of any more gorillas.

Father Rowan wanted another shelter built so, despite the dwarf, I gave it a go. Instead I managed to backfire twice. The first one caused my skin to break out in nasty looking spots while the second caused one of the original shelter walls to disappear, bringing the remainder of the roof crashing down. Finally I constructed a lean-to consisting of a row of Hands of Earth holding up one end of a Wall of Stone. Just as I completed it, a lightning bolt arced down and shattered the newly created Wall. I think I uttered the most vile dwarven curse I could think of. I had just enough strength left to cast a Trollskin before taking yet another of Father Rowan's Restoratives.

We decided to bug out and head west. As we left, on some defiant impulse, I created a solitary Hand of Earth, its index finger pointing defiantly to the sky. Flash called it 'Basalic's Insulting Hand'.

After a short while, we encountered a normal-sized wolf which was under some sort of control. Flash and Eidolon waded into it and soon dispatched it. A bit further on we encountered three wolves. All three were also controlled but I could not detect any communication between them and the controlling entity. So Flash, Eidolon and I took one each.

Finally we cleared the area of wolves and soon found ourselves going uphill. The storm was now several miles behind us and there were no signs of pursuit. Our top priority now was to find a place where we could camp and rest.

We decided to climb along and up the slope in the hope of finding a stream. Fortunately we did and decided to take the opportunity to refill our waterskins and clean up a bit after the previous fight. Father Rowan took the opportunity to relieve me of my skin disease. From what I could tell the storm was five miles behind us.

After a while we resumed climbing by wading upstream. After a while we spotted a structure ahead. It consisted of a large hedge wall with a gate. The stream flowed out from under the hedge. Next to the gate was a large gong. Also near the gate were several detailed statues of naked men.

Naturally everything got the DA once-over. The gong was magical with the nature being noise. The statues were revealed to be humans that had been petrified by a medusa. One statue was 469 years petrified. The door had been a tree 185 years ago. The hedge had a faint magical aura but there were no signs of any wards on the path leading up to the gate.

Father Rowan decided to batter the door down with the remains of the battlethrone. After a short while the gate opened and a human male, non-colleged, stepped through. It looked like he had just woken up. After telling them that we sought shelter from the approaching storm, and we had determined that it was coming this way, he let us in.

Behind the gate the path wandered through a garden. Near the gate was a small cottage. As we progressed other, smaller paths branched off the main one and the garden design got more formal. Another statue was determined to be the result of medusian petrification and this one was only seven years old.

We then reached a branch and our guide conducted us down the left fork. This led to a small

gazebo and we were told to wait there while he went to inform others of our arrival. There were no wards in the gazebo so we did as instructed and settled down on the stone benches inside. A short while later two other men turned up. I just hoped we hadn't just left the frying pan for the fire.

.5.

As the entourage approached we could see that it was a group of five people. The two at the front and back were male, dressed in white tunics, and carrying shields and spears. In the middle was a very beautiful woman, about 40 years old, wearing a simple dress in an old fashion style, and carrying a staff. The guards looked like brothers, age about 20ish. Somewhere with them was a light, but the source was not obvious. A Wizard's Eye was floating above us in the gazebo.

As she greeted us I read her aura and satisfied myself she was human, not medusian. Someone else used the same method to determine that she wasn't colleged. First off she used an unknown language, then Elvish, before switching to Common. She welcomed us then introduced herself as Lydia Morandavas and the guards as her sons.

Father Rowan told her why we were here. She told us that the storm was unlikely to intrude in this garden as there was an 'understanding'. She, and the garden, had been here for several years. By the way she said it implied centuries.

We were all tired so it was agreed that we would go somewhere to rest. One of the sons, Apollo, led us to a two-story building. Inside it was sparsely furnished with beds on the floor as well as the loft upstairs. A golden handbell, which Apollo told us to ring if we wanted anything, rested on the wooden table. On a hunch I checked the aura. As I suspected, it was magical with a similar aura to the gong. A fireplace was on one wall so I got a fire started while Father Rowan divinated the gargyle horns, which Flash had obtained, and the others continued discussing options.

The horns had the power to store a lightning bolt then release it at a target. It may be possible to use them as weapons but we would need to determine how to charge and discharge them safely without getting zapped. Both Eidolon and Flash had ideas about that and took one each. I was also thinking of obtaining one and attaching it to the end of a wooden pole.

I kept watch for a while out the window watching the approaching storm. It reached the garden wall, wandered around a bit then headed north. Maybe that would be a direction to follow.

4 Meadow '98 WK

Next day we woke up to delicious smells. Another son, Charon, had arrived and was in the process of creating breakfast. Before he left, he told us that the Lady would like to see us at our convenience. Starflower had reverted back to elf form during the night and arranged with a son to gather some herbs to help with Eidolon's and my injuries.

About mid morning, we went looking for the Lady. Now that it was light outside we could see that we were halfway up a hill. The garden wall ringed the hill near the bottom and there were quite a few sons acting as gardeners. There was no sign of the Lady or the mansion I expected to see at the top. The mana levels were normal in here, no sign of any taints.

It was decided to go to the top so we could see the whole area but, on the way there, we were

intercepted by one of the sons. He told us that the Lady was waiting to see us and that he would take us to her.

We were taken back to the gazebo where a luncheon was waiting along with Lady Lydia. She gave us the Blessing of Chantris. As we ate, Father Rowan related the story of our adventures.

Lady Lydia told us of a village in the forest that contained mainly Earth Druidic mages. Their leaders were all Earth Mages. Two years ago, they were taken over by a Wiccan by the name of Legos. He was dark haired, had olive complexion, a pointy nose, tall, lanky and in his 30s. The original leader, Thomas, had been deposed and exiled. Legos formed a coven with 12 of the female teenagers of the village. It was suspected that he had something to do with the storm.

The forest itself was enchanted to confuse people's perceptions. A Ranger's direction sense would be completely useless. As for the garden it was a holy place, dedicated to Madira. Legos had tried to take Lady Lydia on but had been beaten back. At the moment he was leaving her alone. Obviously Lady Lydia was more powerful than she let on. When asked about the statues she simply replied 'They annoyed me'. I don't think I wanted to know how she convinced them to pose before they were petrified.

The other thing she mentioned was that there was a portal nearby that would take us to any nominated Place of Power. However it was located in the Caverns of Despair, a very aptly named place as it was very hazardous and contained spirit guardians. She can help us get there by blazing a trail that can be seen with Witchsight.

She also told us that there was a spring in the garden that sped up healing. Also she could create potions for us. We could stay here for up to a fortnight before Legos started getting suspicious. Staying longer could lead to an attack.

So we decided to stay as long as we could in order to prepare ourselves for a conflict with an unknown number of Druidic Earth Mages and an entire coven of witches. And then there was the Evil Blood Tree that they had been making sacrifices to. The Earth mages had done so before the coup, but had restricted the sacrifices to criminals. Now they were sacrificing more often and indiscriminately. The Blood Tree can be destroyed by severing its taproot that was in a cavern underneath the tree. The village was surrounded by Astral Guardians, making scrying very hazardous.

So Eidolon and I bathed in the spring. It didn't take too long before my concussion disappeared but Eidolon was going to take a few days to recover from his wounds. It would have taken a few months otherwise. Eidolon thought he saw something in the spring, but I didn't notice anything. A water sprite maybe?

The days passed. During that time Lady Lydia created the following potions for us: 1 Wizards Eye, 1 Banishment, 5 Quicknesses, 1 Locate, 3 Resist Pains, 3 Mind Cloaks, 18 Rank 10 Waters of Healing and 2 Rank 10 Waters of Strength (that used up all the spinach she had available and it wasn't safe to go beyond the wall to get more).

I was practicing Special Knowledge Earth Counter as we expected to be up against Earth Elementals and other nasty Earth stuff. I also worked on Wall of Stone as well. [Note for Ranking: +1 Perception, Rank 5 Gen Counter, Rank 7 Wall of Stone]. Lady Lydia also did a ritual

on me that would improve my combat abilities at the cost of some of my magical abilities.

19 Meadow '98 WK

On the fifteenth day we were ready. The battlethrone had been repaired and all our equipment checked and rechecked. The plan was to use the portal in the Caverns of Despair to leave the forest then travel to see someone called Meg who could send us straight to the heart of the village. Hopefully that would give us an element of surprise.

.6.

Before we left, we split up the potions among us. I ended up carrying the following: 1 Mind Cloak, 1 Quickness, 1 Resist Pain, 1 Banishment and 3 WoH. Lady Lydia recommended that the strongest willed among us be the first to enter the caverns. Once we were ready she cast the spell that created the path. The path would remain only if one of us was within five feet of it.

The forest looked very dark and sinister as we progressed. The undergrowth thickened, making travel hazardous, and, after an hour or so, we had to avoid the snakes all over the place. Starflower killed an asp that I narrowly avoided treading on.

After about four or so hours we were getting close to our objective. Just then we heard wolves howling ahead. Father Rowan blessed all of us while Starflower cast about with telepathy. Nothing yet but we decided to quicken our pace.

A while later, she detected two stationary wolf packs ahead, all normal wolves, so we stealthed closer. It seemed that they suspected something was about, but they weren't sure what. They were about to find out especially when Eidolon used a Quickness and Wizard's Eye potion to cast multiple Solar Flares at them. Starflower followed up with mental attacks. After a bunch of those the wolves decided to run off.

We kept going. Two wolves charged in. Flash and I went for the rear one while Rowan scared the other off with a well placed Hellfire. The rear one decided to flee as well.

A short time later, as we were just about there, Starflower detected a wolf fifty feet beyond the path. She mental attacked it, and it fell over. Rowan suggested that it be retrieved, so it could be divinated later so she went off to get it. Just then her sense danger talent went off - big time.

She was immediately grabbed by a set of Hands of Earth at the same time that she sensed a low rumble. "Earth Elemental," she screamed aloud. I downed the Banishment potion, just as we were Quickened, while Father Rowan was hit by Diamond Tipped Javelins erupting from the ground nearby. He fell unconscious.

The Earth Elemental erupted from the ground and went for the trapped Starflower. All she could do to protect herself was to shapechange to dragon-kin as that would enable her to survive longer. Meanwhile I was frantically trying to get a Counterspell off to Banish the elemental. It didn't work. Neither did the next one.

Even in dragonform, Starflower was finding it nearly impossible to hurt the elemental. Unfortunately the converse wasn't true. Eidolon and I both spotted the Earth Mage. Fortunately Starflower had previously Mindspeached all of us so the information could be relayed to Flash who was in a better position to attack. Just then a wolf emerged from the nearby bushes and

jumped on Eidolon.

It was looking very grim for Starflower as the elemental laid into her and my third attempt to get rid of the thing failed. Fortunately the fourth worked and the elemental vanished.

Finally it was all over. I helped Eidolon get out from under the wolf and Flash was able to render the Earth Mage unconscious, and we took him captive. He was a Druid, of course. His name was Brian. On him we discovered the following: Amethyst amulet, Luck amulet, a magical axe, 2 vials of blade venom poison, a wand of Rank 20 Wiccan evil eye, and a ring containing Hellfires. We decided to take him with us for interrogation and divination so he was tied up, and put on Rowan's flying throne.

Near the cave the terrain became more broken and soon we were entering a ravine which was surrounded by mist. The storm was real close behind us by now. Father Rowan blessed everyone, and those that had Mindcloak potions drunk them, before we entered the cave.

.7.

Our direction senses were still confused and the mist got thicker as we went in deeper. Visibility dropped to almost zero. We couldn't even see our feet. Also we could hear whispering. Couldn't make out the words but it was enough to be annoying. The ground was rocky and broken which meant we had to be careful where we put our feet. Starflower had linked us with a Mindspeech but even that seemed distant. According to Eidolon these mists were the Mists of Despair.

We were all roped together in single file. After a short while, Father Rowan, who was at the front, bumped into someone. Three or four human-sized undead somethings as it turned out. One of them hit him so he called down the Wrath of Chantris on them. The rest of us advanced. I triggered a Weapon of Flames on my sword and laid in. The first one went up in ashes and collapsed on the first blow. The rest of the ones in front of me didn't last long after that. Then I backed off so I could cast Trollskins on those who needed it. Eidolon bravely held them off. Fortunately the mana was normal in here. The whisperings had resolved into voices going 'Flesh flesh flesh'.

Soon they were all vanquished. While we were sorting ourselves out, Father Rowan hosed us all with fire. An accidental backfire I suspected but it did have the beneficial effect of cleansing us.

A bit later on, a spectral warrior leapt on me. Exclamations all around told me that the others were also under attack. Also there was the sound of chanting. After a few hits with the cold sword it faded away. I could see the others fighting but I couldn't see their opponents. So I started casting Trollskins on the ones still fighting. For some strange reason Starflower ate a vial of Holy Water.

Finally they were dealt to. Eidolon tried casting a Light to see if that would help us see better. Everything went dark. So he counterspelled it and tried a Darkness. Everything still went dark. I tried DAing the mist with the question 'Nemesis or how to remove it'. The answer I got back was 'Divine Intervention'.

Finally we figured out which way we were supposed to be going by studying our tracks. We progressed on, very carefully. Then we felt something scratching at our MindCloaks. The assault

intensified until the mindcloaks collapsed and something whizzed into our minds in an attempt to steal our will. I was so annoyed at this that I managed to summon all my willpower into the image of a large boot, then using it to punt whatever it was into low Alusian orbit.

Those of us that had got rid of ours were using whatever skills we had to help the others. Those that had Healer training were using their empathy to boost the others willpower while us Military Scientists were trying to boost their morale. For some reason Flash seemed to be playing with his. I tried DAing him to find out just what it was that was attacking but didn't get an answer. Father Rowan theorised they were called Intellect Devourers. Finally Flash managed to drain his one dry. It was then Starflower discovered that our captive's mind had been drained.

We continued on. Suddenly Eidolon went berserk and attacked Father Rowan with an axe. I leapt on him intending to subdue him and discovered he was stronger than he looked. Finally he recovered, with no memory of what happened.

A short while later we noticed that Eidolon was bleeding from the wrists. I put a Trollskin on him, just in case. Turned out it was one of the 'souls' inside Eidolon that was responsible.

Finally Father Rowan stepped into a clear area. There was a spring beyond. Suddenly everything around me vanished and I saw a huge earth elemental rise up between me and the spring. This had to be a dream so I tried summoning another to defend me. It worked and soon the elementals were duking it out. After a short while Flash appeared in my dream and between the two of us we turned the elemental into dust.

The mist surrounding us disappeared and we all found ourselves in front of the pool. I DAed it and discovered it was a Nexus Pool. So we waded into the pool, all concentrating on where we wanted to go. It felt like we were dissolved in the pool then there was a blinding flash.

When the darkness lifted we found ourselves standing on a cliff surrounding a stone chair. All the spells that had been on us were gone. Also this place was a Air place of power. As we proceeded down the cliff path we noticed a storm receding rather unnaturally quickly.

On the way down we saw a depression in the cliff face with vines growing out draping down the cliff. A herb garden was laid out at the bottom of the cliff.

The path reached the bottom of the cliff which was covered in vines. As we passed it appeared that the vines tried to reach out to us. According to their aura they were Hungry Groupers.

The path went towards the depression in the cliff. As we approached, the vines parted...

.8.

... and we could see a black shimmering wall behind them. Out of the wall stepped a very tall human woman with long black hair who was simply dressed, carried a staff, and looked to be somewhere in her forties. She introduced herself as Meg and invited us in. Starflower, with frequent interjections from Father Rowan, told Meg of what we had experienced and encountered in our travels. She told us that she may be able to send us direct to the Blood Tree by using her portal. On a Father Rowan also knew of a Storm Giant King, located somewhere up north, who may be able to take over the malevolent storm or to neutralize it. We were already suspecting the

storm of having rudimentary intelligence. Meg knew of the giant and had the means to send a message to him.

Meg told us that it would probably take a few days before a reply would arrive. So she offered to make us some potions to help our quest. Also there was the question of the orphaned soul in Eidolon's body. Meg believed it may be possible to transplant it into the body of the Earth Mage.

While Flash and Eidolon stayed with Meg, the rest of us flew back to the Guild (Meg's cave is located somewhere in South Ranke) to make use of their resources and to see if there were anyone there willing to join the party. We were hoping for Sabrina but she had been unexpectedly called away a few days earlier but we did manage to locate Axy, a keen fighter and trainee Namer.

The Guild was able to provide us with two Banishment potions and Starflower arranged for five Waters of Strength from Aqualina while I arranged for three Dragonflames off Flamis. Also the items we brought back were divinated. The axe proved not to be magical but had been enchanted with a Diamond Weapon. The wand allowed anyone to cast Wiccan Evil Eye at Rank 6 at the usual fatigue cost. The horns were also able to be charged by magical lightning. Corel was able to do that.

As well as the items being divinated, so were we. It turned out I had acquired some sort of vision talent but it hadn't fully developed yet.

24 Meadow '98

Four days later the reply had arrived from the Storm Giant King. He wanted to meet with us. So Meg took us up the cliff and as we formed a circle around the stone chair, she sat in it and summoned up a storm. Then she called down lightning. The next thing I remember was a bright flash of light and a huge shock through my entire body.

When I opened my eyes again we were standing in the middle of a stone circle with a giant staring down at us. It was very misty all around. Again this was an Air Place of Power.

We made appropriate gestures of respect then Father Rowan explained about the storm. The Storm King believed that he should be able to grab the storm and bend it to his will. His reply to Father Rowan's query on whether he could be taught how to do that was 'How many centuries have you got spare?'

As far as payment went, we could owe him, maybe do a mission for him in the future. Father Rowan mentioned that he had a book which contained odd spells and talents, any of which could be used as payments. He would also give us some Invested Windwalks, Lightning Bolts, Cones of Cold and Weapons of Cold. Many of us decided to have their weapons invested.

.9.

Time passed. The Guild was still unable to be more specific about my developing vision talent except to say that it was some sort of night vision. Meanwhile we waited for Axy to learn and practice Banishment. In the meantime we did miscellaneous training ourselves. We figured that would take about four weeks.

Back at Meg's, Eidolon had discovered a curious headband in his backpack. It was glowing in

the dark but when it was brought into the light, the glow stopped and wouldn't restart. Meg had never seen it before. It turned out that the cabin boy soul had picked it up when he was in control of Eidolon's body while we were in the Caverns of Despair. It was conveyed to the Guild but their divinations kept failing as there seemed to be some entity residue in there resisting their efforts.

Speaking of the cabin-boy soul, Meg and Father Rowan co-operated in removing him from Eidolon and putting him in the body of the Earth Mage.

22 Heat '98 WK

It was now four weeks since we had arrived at Megs and it was decided that tonight was the night. The best time to portal to the area of the Tree was midnight. Axy was ready to go and so were we. Flamis had flown up with me this time to put PMFs on the rest of the party. She was to go back to the Guild afterwards to be watched over by Guild Security and the Healers.

That evening the Storm Giant King turned up and we had dinner and discussed plans. He also brought the investeds with him that he had asked for. Finally, an hour before midnight, we began to power up. I put Strength of Stones and Armours of Earth on everyone while the Storm Giant King followed up with Resist Colds, Armours of Ice and Vapour Breathing. Flamis dropped the PMFs on while Meg provided us with a herbalist potion that would increase a chosen attribute. I went for Endurance. Starflower provided some Royal Berries which would also make us tougher. She then did a Limited Precog but all she could ascertain was that we were literally awash with blood. I hoped that not all of it was ours. Finally we drunk the Waters of Strength and I followed that with one of the Banishment potions.

Meg led us up the hill and summoned a storm. The Storm Giant King was the first to use the portal. He was going to the Caverns of Despair to see what could be done about that pesky storm. After he vanished in a lightning bolt it was our turn. We stood around the throne and Meg chanted. Then there was a bright flash of light...

... and after momentary disorientation and blindness, found ourselves suspended in some sort of liquid that had the colour of blood but not as thick. Fortunately it was breathable. There was a current pulling us along and we could 'hear' a slight throbbing sound. All around us, also being borne by the current were what appeared to be red, one foot circular biconcavial jellyfish that lacked tendrils. According to their aura their GTN was 'carriers', they carried travelers and they were magical. But the more immediate threat came from the white shapeless objects, the same size as the carriers that immediately began an attack. These were destroyers. Fortunately one blow with a weapon disrupted them but there were so many of them and we were hard pressed to keep them off as they attempted to attach themselves to us like leeches.

So it was a case of trying to keep them off as they swooped in like a cloud of flies attracted to fresh meat. Eidolon triggered a Cone of Cold at a bunch of them and managed to freeze them in a cone shaped lump of ice. Meanwhile Father Rowan was using Hellfires in order to keep them off. I decided to take a chance and try a Self-Immolate. Starflower was of the firm belief it wouldn't work but I figured I had nothing to lose. So I triggered it and it worked, burning off all the ones on and around me as well as forming an effective shield. A short while later, Eidolon's headband glowed and formed a shield of light around him. The Storm Giant King had previously identified it as being the missing headband from someone called St Cuthberg.

While we were fighting off these destroyers, with varying degrees of success, Starflower noticed

that we were paralleling some sort of dark area. Eidolon tried tossing a light into it but the darkness just absorbed it. Starflower later tried cutting through the boundary with Severer but all that happened was that the sword got very hot as it traveled through.

Finally we had managed to knock back enough of the destroyers to give us some breathing space. By now that thumping sound had got a lot louder. Another precog saw us standing in a cavern, knee deep in blood, and covered in it, while dark entities approached us.

A short while later it appeared that whatever we were in dead-ended. In the wall in front of us was a tri-cuspal valve which was closed. Father Rowan tossed a Hellfire at it. Whether or not that caused it to open, or whether it was going to open anyway we'll never know but we were suddenly swept through it and dumped into some sort of cavern and landed in a pool of blood. As we regained our footing we noticed what could be elementals approaching.

.10.

The half dozen entities in question were about 7ft tall and distinctly humanoid. They looked more like golems than elementals and they appeared to be composed of blood. The room we were in was circular with a door at the far end. Near where we had fallen was a blood covered stone altar. In the middle of the floor was a circular pattern of blood on the floor. Turned out to be 12 humanoid moulds, six of which were blackened and looked burnt. We soon realised that these were where the golems were created. Above the altar, embedded in the wall was the exposed portion of the tree root we had come to destroy.

The Blood Golems, as their aura revealed them to be, shambled towards us. Eidolon hit three of them with a Cone of Cold and those affected got significantly slower. We could feel ourselves being drained, presumably of blood. Someone noticed some movement near the door but couldn't make out what it was. Flash used his shadow-line to zap over to the door and discovered it was blocked by a Wall of Iron which wasn't there before. So he zapped back to attack the three slowed ones.

Meanwhile the rest of us were attacking the other three while they continued to suck the life out of us in ever increasing amounts. Father Rowan was throwing Hellfires at them and the tree root while I tossed Trollskins at those that needed it. Starflower was the first recipient.

At the next sword stroke Flash caused one to fall apart. The other two slowed ones turned on him. Eidolon fired another Cone of Cold and one of the slowed ones crystallised and fell apart. At the same time, Starflower's one exploded and we were all caught in the fallout. Axy lopped a limb of his just as I put a Trollskin on him. Father Rowan cast a Hellfire and all three collapsed, just as one that had been hacked to pieces stood up again. Looks like the only thing that makes these things stay down is magic, specifically magical fire. So Father Rowan blasted it with Hellfire and it collapsed.

While that was happening Starflower detected a mind near the door and Flash went to check it out but couldn't find anything. So our attention turned to the altar and the tree. Already both, plus more of the troughs had been attacked by Father Rowan's Hellfires. So we poured everything we had into it. For a while, Father Rowan was using Monopole (Starflower's other sword) as a spell focus for the Hellfires causing someone to suggest that it was only an excuse for them to hold hands during mortal combat. I discharged a Dragonflames at it while Starflower hacked at it with

Severer. Meanwhile Flash poured holy water on the altar which gave off a rather satisfying sizzle.

Soon blood was pouring from the gaping wound in the tree root. My next DF failed (much to Flamis's astonishment when I told her later) while a Holy Water vial smashed into the wound, Starflower and Flash hacked at it with weapons while Father Rowan Hellfired it again.

Suddenly the Wall of Iron dropped and something appeared near the door. It turned out to be an Earth Elemental and it was accompanied by a very large anaconda snake. We could also hear a low rumbling and smell ozone. That told us that the Storm Giant King was in the process of blasting the tree from above with lightning bolts. Plus two other golems were also getting up.

The snake went for Father Rowan just as the tree's wound exploded showering us with debris. Eidolon had just succeeded in planting a grenade in it. Father Rowan avoided the snake and blasted the golems with a Hellfire which caused them to collapse. At the same time one of the troughs blackened and shattered.

Eidolon tried planting another grenade but grabbed a special shattering one by accident. All of us in the blast radius suffered damage. Most were a broken arm each but one shrapnel piece took off one of Father Rowan's hands.

Fortunately it was my offside arm that was damaged so I could still wield my sword. It was also obvious by now that the tree root was vulnerable to fire so I pushed my fire sword into the wound and triggered one of the Weapons of Flame in it, just as the snake, in attacking Flash, bowled us all over which sent Father Rowan flying. Starflower ended up caught in the middle and was slowly being squeezed to death. I tried a Control Animals but the spell failed. Starflower hit it with Severer and an eye flew off. Flash waded into it while Axy bravely staggered to his feet (he had a broken hip) and also laid in. A few hits later and we had to avoid a wildly thrashing snake until it finally expired.

The fires on the tree were dying down rather rapidly and we suspected that the tree had some sort of Extinguish spell running. So Axy helped Eidolon (who also had a broken arm) to throw a barrel of oil on it. Eidolon then managed to generate a beam of light from the diamond on his amulet (it was a diamond shaped pattern but a diamond momentarily appeared when the pulse appeared) which flashed into the tree.

What of the elemental? It was detected moving in the ground beneath us. While Axy prepared a Banishment I tried sending a Tunnel down towards it in the hope of revealing it but I discovered that the surface, at least, was Bound Earth. So we scattered around the room so that the elemental would only get one of us. Turned out to be me. Starflower's first attempt of Mental Attack failed while Father Rowan managed to backfire himself deaf. The next attempt worked and I fell off the now comatose elemental. Axy Banished it then we detected another one burrowing in.

There wasn't much we could do about it at this time so we concentrated on the tree. It's aura told me it was a non-sentient magical plant. Starflower detected another mind above us just as we heard the sound of a gong. So we prepared for another attack. I put Counter Earth Specials on both Starflower and Flash as well as a Trollskin on Flash. Flash then zipped up a shadow-line to the tunnel. Just as he got there the ground erupted in front of him and several DTJs hit him. At the same time a big explosion of darkness appeared around Eidolon and Father Rowan. A Wall of Iron appeared over the tunnel mouth trapping Flash on this side.

The fire on the tree was dying out again so Eidolon threw more Holy Water at it. Also my flaming sword had fallen out so Starflower pushed it back in again. As she did so, while triggering another charge, a bolt of lightning erupted from the sword and hurled her across the room. Fortunately she had a soft landing on the dead snake.

Once she recovered she reached out with ESP and detected two Earth Elementals and two Earth mages. I was in the process of dropping Special Earth Counters on the floor at this time. Just then a pool of lava appeared around Starflower and Flash accompanied by the elementals erupting from the ground. The first one hit Flash while the second came up under Axy and threw him against the wall. This really looked bad what with the Earth Elemental looming over Axy and Axy not moving. Starflower threw Mental Attacks at them and managed to cause them to fall over. The first one fell on Flash while the second one fell near Axy.

During all of this more lava pools were appearing in the room. One had appeared under Axy so when the second elemental fell Axy was splashed with lava. Fortunately the wave carried him to the edge where I was able to haul him out.

Soon the entire floor was covered in lava and we were taking sanctuary on top of the altar. Father Rowan was in the process of hammering the tree root with Hellfires which was all we could do to it as contacting the tree resulted in a rather nasty electric shock - as Flash found out when he swung his sword at it, got shocked backwards and flung into Starflower.

Starflower was concerned that the tree root was going to explode with all the damage we were pouring into it so I put up a Wall of Stone as a shield. It was just as well I did as Father Rowan's next Hellfire caused a huge rush of blood to flow from the root. Also we noticed that the bottom of the iron wall was glowing from the heat of the lava. As it collapsed Eidolon threw some knockout gas into the tunnel.

I tried putting a Tunnel through the roof but it didn't take. Also we had another look at the tree's aura and discovered that it's Plane of Origin was Hell.

Eidolon, Axy, and Father Rowan were looking into the tunnel and they saw one earth mage helping another one. So Eidolon fired a Cone of Cold into the tunnel while Axy banished the elemental that was lying on the altar. The other one was somewhere under the lava. So was my flame sword. Looks like I'll have to leave it behind which was a bit of a shame as I wanted to mount it on a place of honour at home.

Just then Starflower detected another highly intelligent mind near the tree. Suddenly a devil-like creature flew out of the wound and attacked us with a TK Rage. I flew right across the room, into the tunnel, and crashed into a wall. While I drunk a Healing potion, the demon flew across the room, Flash fired a lightning bolt at it and Starflower walloped it with Severer. It ducked into the tunnel but I was waiting for it and inflicted a blow which caused it to dissipate.

We regrouped in the corridor and healed up for a short time then headed up the corridor. However we didn't want to emerge in the middle of a group of angry Earth mages so I put a Tunnel up though the roof. Fortunately it was just long enough to reach the grass roots so Father Rowan used the battlethrone, with Axy aboard, to fly up and bust through the last bit of topsoil. The rest of us triggered Windwalks and followed. Father Rowan had to avoid a barrage of DTJs on the ascent. Fortunately only one hit.

As we flew off we could see a circle of 12 girls lying around the blood tree. Eight of them had already been ritually murdered and the coven leader was just about to do the ninth. Other people, presumably the Earth mages were scattered about. Above the tree the storm clouds were boiling and lightning bolts were crashing down onto the tree. It was dark and raining heavily. There were no sign of the gargoyles.

Earlier we had Star-wings put on before we went in and, once the Windwalks ran out they were finally allowed to engage. The winds were very vicious and we were being tossed about. Someone saw an area of clear air in the middle of it so we went for that. As we did, the Storm Giant King revealed himself and waved us down. We landed on a cloud that he had parked in a clearing.

Once we were settled on board, the cloud took off again. A wind barrier around the cloud kept a calm area around us and prevented debris, rain, and other missiles from impacting. We came in low over the village and discovered that there was only one virgin left and the guy was standing over her with a sacrificial dagger. I used my last dragonflames charge on him while the others peppered the area with sleep gas. Starflower also tried a Mental Attack but the guy refused to fall over.

Just then earth elementals appeared and tried to grab the cloud. The cloud lurched and Father Rowan fell off. He was caught in the wind barrier. While a rope was tossed to him Starflower tried another Mental Attack and the wiccan fell over just as he was about to kill his victim. Meanwhile the two elementals were stunned by lightning bolts.

Only Axy, Eidolon, and myself had asked to keep our wings so Axy took off to get the girl while Eidolon went for the wiccan. Axy's landing was really bad (the broken hip didn't help) and he fell on her. He bravely staggered upright but couldn't take off so Starflower windwalked him. Meanwhile Eidolon had flown off with the wiccan and was approaching the cloud while dodging DTJs.

I decided to rescue the girl myself so flew down and attempted to get her airborne. A spear wielding earth mage foiled the first takeoff attempt but the second was more successful. I was halfway to the cloud when I was hit by a rather accurate volley of DTJs. The next thing I knew I was lying on the Guild Healer floor next to Flamis. The others told me later that I had disappeared with an audible pop. Fortunately Eidolon was able to catch the girl before she fell too far. Unfortunately he was also shot at but was just able to make it back. Once he was on board the cloud took off while lightning bolts continued to rain down upon the tree.

The cloud headed up north for a while then hovered while the party healed up and rested. Starflower kept the wiccan unconscious while Eidolon questioned the girl. She told them her name was Mary and that, at the beginning of the ritual, she had been told to just lie down and close her eyes. She did what she was told because he was the Warlock and she trusted him implicitly claiming that he was a nice guy and wouldn't hurt her. She was an orphan, her parents having died in a fire. She admitted to being good at cooking and plants but was still learning her College.

She was parked out of sight of Legos while he was revived and questioned. His Generic True Name was High Man and he came from off-plane, called Melbourne. His master was a knightly demon duke called Elegos. His primary goal was power with a side effect of creating a portal to Hell. The method he was using was diplomacy with allies and friends. As far as the girls were

concerned he was intending to 'cleanses' them and send them to a better place.

He was restrained and rendered unconscious again while the party rested for the entire day.

23 Heat '98

The party went through the Caverns of Despair with Legos, Mary, and the Storm King. Fortunately they all made it though. At Megs place the Storm Giant King offered to protect Legos from retributions if he renounced his pact and embraced a Power of Light. Legos agreed to do this. Mary was left in Meg's care and the party returned to Seagate.

.11.

Finally we had a meeting with the Duke and reported what had happened. After some discussion it was decided to adopt a 'wait and see' attitude in the hope that the effects in that area would fade over time. So we left it at that - for now.

For a reward we were given something that the Duke could grant. In my case it meant that my land was now freehold - no more lease.

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