

Rings of Deception

Adventurers:

Shizane, a Fire Mage, Healer, Herbalist and Cook among other things

Faith, a short Elven E&E

Rowen, an Elven Binder and our Military Scientist, with her staff Eyelor,
and golems Titch, Dolly, Ralf and Eeyor.

Saurus, a Necromancer and Party Leader

Hamish, a Wiccan

Theдона, a Namer and party spokesperson
and me, Tanis, an Air mage and scribe

1st Frost

After the Guild meeting, we all gather at the designated room, to find Marvin the jester waiting for us. I know him from a previous Guild contract, and he says that he is now a Guild member, and is in training to be an illusionist. He is also still the aide of Duke Argent who is the party employer. Several quarters ago another Guild party were responsible for escorting the then Baron to meet the King to gain his title of Duke, then another party, including me and Rowan, rescued a missing young lady from the wilds north of his lands. Marvin explains that the current problem stems from that second trip to his plane. We had a bard in our party by the name of Brigetta who was sending back magical bardic messages, and bards are rather common there. The King's bards intercepted these messages, and the King subsequently accused Duke Argent of treason, and plans to burn his lands and seed the land with salt. The Duke doesn't know exactly where he got the idea that he was planning treason – he is not, and the messages were very innocuous. Anyway, he wants us to make discrete inquiries as to the reason for the declaration of treason, and hopefully sort things out.

After this briefing, we send Marvin off for a while, sort out the party leader, scribe, Military Scientist roles, and discuss our options. Turns out Faith and Hamish are good at 'gentle persuasion', and Theдона can get us into places that we aren't supposed to get into, but we need to find out what we can get away with. Shizane, who is currently sitting in the fireplace, adds that he is not the least bit subtle, so we might have to keep an eye on him. Going on past experience, we are going to need horses, and courtly clothes so that we fit in if we have to mingle with the King's court. Shizane offers the females in the party free use of his wardrobe – apparently he has a good collection of female clothing, although I have no idea why. However we will have to get horses on the other side of the portal, as it opens into a basement with the only access being a ladder.

We get Marvin back in, and ask him more questions. It should be OK to borrow horses again, but he does mention that they would like them back in one piece (there was an incident with an explosive vial and a bonfire – most of the horses didn't survive that on our last trip). Apart from that, we can't think of anything else, so we head off to pick up supplies. Theдона and I go with Shizane to his residence, and pick out some appropriate clothing, and some supplies from Shizane's farm. All of us get lesser enchantments cast on us, and Faith says she can now cast Greater Enchantments, and will cast them on the party once we get off-plane. We also get some healing potions.

By now it's evening, and we all meet back at the Guild. Shizane suggests a drink and a good night's sleep. I agree, but the rest of the party is eager to get going, so we head down to the portal. It is a fairly standard rune portal. Marvin walks through, and the rest of us follow. We step through into a small underground room, with a rune portal on the wall behind us, and the other walls covered in runes, feeling like we have been walking for a day. We climb up the ladder and emerge into a small alley. Marvin leads the way to a small manor house. Shizane and Faith drop behind a bit, and later report that there were invisible guards watching the entrance to the portal room, and they did see us. However they appear to be the Duke's guards.

The manor house is small and empty. Given that it appears to be the small hours of the morning, we set watches and settle in for some sleep.

2nd Frost

We wake up at sunrise, and Shizane prepares us breakfast. While we are getting organised for the day, there is a knock at the door. Marvin answers, and it is a messenger from the Duke – he would like to see us after breakfast. So we finish eating, make ourselves vaguely presentable, and follow Marvin to the Duke's residence. We have a short wait while Marvin talks to the Duke, then they come into the room. After a quick discussion on payment, and what we can and can't get away with, we ask about how we can solve the current problem. He suggests we speak to his 'spychief' for more information. Apart from that he does not know why the King would accuse him of treason and confirms that he has no aspirations to the throne. Considering what the party did last visit, we ask if the King would have felt threatened by the Duke negotiating with the orc tribes to the north. He is surprised by this question, but says he doesn't think so. We also ask what would happen to the lands if he were to die, and he says they would go to the current highest Baron in the Empire – and adds that this is how he came to be Duke of this area. We ask who highest Baron is at the moment, and he gives us a name, adding that he is a good friend of his. We also query if his current problems might be related to the earlier issue of someone unknown hiring assassins to kill him before he became Duke, and he says it's possible. That Guild party never found out who had hired them.

By this time, the Duke appears to have had enough of our questions, and politely but firmly ends the conversation. Marvin brings in the 'spychief', and we quiz him for more information. Turns out it's all a bit out of date. They used to use bardic messages a lot, but given the current situation, they have had to stop, and so he is out of touch with all his contacts, and has been for some time. There are still a few people around who he trusts, but he has no idea if they are still around. We get names, locations just in case we need them. Not even written messages have been getting through, but this may be due to the fact that the borders of the Dukedom have been closed, and there are frequent raids across it. The most recent information he has says there had been disturbances in the Western Baronies, leading to a number of changes in fortune for a number of the Barons down there, but he doesn't know if that is related to the current problems. Again, we get the names just in case. We ask about traveling in the Empire, and he says we should be fine once we clear the Duke's borders, and if we are not associated with the Duke in any way.

He also adds that border feuds between the Barons are quite common, but they have all been put aside for now as they band together for the planned assault on Duke

Argent's lands. We check if he knows of any one Baron who might have the King's ear, but he doesn't know of anyone – the King was generally fairly careful not to show favour.

After a quick consideration of all this, we decide our best option is to get out of the Duchy, disguise ourselves as a merchant with a group of guards, and head south to try resolve the current problems. As part of this, Thedona volunteers to carry a lance, and ride a warhorse – Faith does as well, but hers will have to be a cut down version. Shizane and a few others in the party use the time while they are getting some basic lance training to do some reading in the Duke's library. We get details of a few raiding parties that will cross the border near the main road north in a few days time, and we hope to use one of them to cover our tracks as we slip out – and to hopefully conceal that we are associated with the Duke.

Just before dark, we slip out of town, riding on palfreys supplied by the Dukes' stablemaster, except for Thedona on a warhorse and Faith on a mustang. We head south into a small forest, and after a few hours riding we settle down for some rest, once Faith cast has cast greater enchantments on us. All is quiet until third watch, when we hear a group of horses nearby, heading to the west. Hamish and I wake the rest of the party. Faith disappears, while the rest of us try to keep the horses quiet. After about 10 minutes the group moves on, and suddenly we notice that Faith is back with us. We manage to get some information from her – they were a raiding party wearing the badge of the Baron of Partridge, who is one of the Duke's barons.

3rd Frost

Looking at the sky, it's overcast and lightly drizzling, and is probably going to rain. Over breakfast we consider our possible tactics, nothing immediately springs to mind. We do our standard morning spellcasting, but after 6 failures, I decide we are not going to have feather falling this morning, and go and sulk for a while. Meanwhile Thedona and Faith practice with their lances, stopping when Thedona takes a spectacular but luckily not too damaging fall.

We then head out, riding through light farmlands all morning. We stop for some lunch, Faith and Thedona practice again, with the same result. However they also spot a burned out cottage, farmhouse and fields behind a nearby stand of trees. We head over to check it out, and Shizane finds multiple tracks – 1 raiding party came through 2 weeks ago, 2 more came through 1 week ago, and 1 was last night. The cottage was a storehouse – nothing of value survived the fire, however Saurus detects a death occurred there, and casts a spell to question it. We determine that the person was a soldier in the employ of the Baron of Gamlin – an enemy of Duke Argent. There were 10 or so in the raiding party and they attacked at dawn – he was killed in the combat, and this happened a week ago.

We also check out the farmhouse, and find signs of a struggle and looting before the building was burned, but nothing else besides a dead dog. Thedona and Faith go back to practicing, with the same result again, however after Shizane checks her over, he says that Thedona has a concussion from the latest fall. They decide to hold off on the practice for a little while, and we head off again. Part way through the afternoon, we find a small village. On seeing us coming, they set up some basic defenses, however we manage to convince them we are friendly and just want to purchase some

supplies. We pick up some grain for the horses and some fresh vegetables for tonight's dinner. We then ride on, after a slight detour to conceal our direction of travel from the villagers.

At dusk, we camp. On 2nd watch, Faith hears horses moving quietly along the road. After alerting Saurus, she heads off to investigate. Saurus wakes the rest of the party, and we concentrate on keeping us and the horses quiet.

Suddenly I hear an obviously fake owl hoot from somewhere between us and the riders – Faith is up to something. However the riders decide to investigate, and combat ensues. Faith gets cornered by two of them, Shizane takes a few of them out with fire magics, and some of them cast at us – they have a namer and a celestial at the least. Hamish takes a painful leg wound, then the remaining riders decide to split up and leave after we kill a couple of them – 2 going one way, and 3 followed by a horse with a dead rider going another. Shizane casts a fast movement on us, and Rowan and I follow the first group, and Faith and Thedona follow the second. I am scouting around looking for the tracks of my group when I am ambushed – I take an arrow, then everything goes black.

I wake up over the saddlebow of a horse to see Faith finishing off the rider. Turns out she had found the tracks of her group, and they had suddenly disappeared – she believed they had taken to the air in some way. Fearing an ambush she had headed back to camp, then out after me and Rowan. Between the two of them they had managed to catch up with the two riders, and take out the one carrying me. The other got away. They untie me and we head back to camp with the horse and the rider.

When we reach the camp Saurus has animated the 2 dead riders to guard the camp, then has some sort of backfire and starts screaming in pain. Hamish and Faith take turns knocking him out until we realise that it's not going to go away quickly, and Faith uses something to make him sleep for longer. We settle back down, and the rest of the night is quiet except for Saurus' nightmares.

4th Frost

In the morning, we are preparing for breakfast when we hear more riders, this time they are heading directly for the camp. We prepare for a fight, but they stop when they see us, and we can see they are wearing the badges of one of Duke Argent's Barons. With them they have one of the warhorses from the raiding party. We have a polite chat about what had happened, and mention that we have a prisoner. They say they would like to take him with them, preferably dead, and if we could bring him over to their camp at some point. They then set up their camp about 100 feet away from ours. Faith questions our captive, but doesn't get any useful information, so kills him. Hamish casts question the dead, and he is now more informative. Apparently Duke Argent has been declared a traitor because he is consorting with orcs and something to do with the blight they have to the north. Rumours also say that he is a demon or consorts with demons – standard rumour mill stuff. Also the King's mages include dark celestials, namers and shamen among others. After exhausting our questions we hand the bodies of all the dead raiders over to the Duke's troops, after sorting through the loot. We have assorted weapons and armour, all are masterwork items of some form or another, and some warhorses. Shizane and Hamish decide to take one of the warhorses each, then we load the rest of the loot on to the remaining

warhorses and leave them with the troops to keep safe for us. Meanwhile Shizane is dealing with the various wounds we picked up from the skirmish.

About mid morning we head off to the south. More light farmlands, more burnt out buildings. By mid afternoon we can see a forest ahead of us marking the border of the duchy. The main road is to the west, and to the south-west we can see the haze of something burning. Shizane and Rowan say there are people down there with using shadow-wings. Feeling that discretion is the better part of valor, we stealthily move past leaving as much distance as possible between us and them, and enter the forest. We ride until after midnight, eventually reaching the far side of the forest. We camp just inside the forest, and settle in for some much needed rest. Shizane spots a village off in the distance, and uses the campfire to check it out – and finds that the village is burning, and combat is in progress. We decide that this is not a safe place to camp after all, and quietly move out, heading west across the main road. After a few more hours we settle in to camp in a small copse of trees.

5th Frost

We move on about mid morning, and travel for about half a day before finding an unburned barn to rest in – the horses are too tired for extended travel, and so are we. We settle in for some decent rest. That night we see some spectacular magical fireworks to the north-east – fire, celestial, air and illusionists at least in combat. We think that this is the diversion arranged to cover our tracks, but Marvin appears to have gone over the top a bit. We take advantage of it, and travel for a few hours further to the south, camping eventually in another copse of trees.

6th Frost

We rest. The area around is still light farmland, and there are less burned buildings around. Nearby is a small village – Shizane and Faith acquire some extra horse feed for us. We can see the main road from here, and there is now some civilian traffic visible, unlike closer to the border.

7th Frost

We're all feeling a lot better after some decent rest, so we sit down to consider our plans. Saurus suddenly looks around, then casts a spell, then says there is something undead right behind him. We look, and Rowan says she can see a little girl, and it has walked up to Saurus and appears to be talking to him. However he must have said something wrong, because he suddenly yelps in pain, and the girl walks off. By this time Faith has also spotted it, and shoots it with a magical arrow and it disappears – and Saurus adds that he can't sense it any more. Turns out that Saurus is wearing something that protects him from being drained by incorporeal beings, but also tends to attract them. Shizane is very upset at this – telling Saurus to remove the item at once, and when he doesn't, Shizane starts preparing a spell. Faith intervenes, and Saurus backs down, removing his gloves which we assume is the offending item.

After everyone has calmed down a bit, we discuss our options. We agree to stick to our original plan – that Shizane is a merchant specialising in magical herbs and unguents, Rowan is his wife/mistress, and Faith is her daughter. The rest of us will be the party guards. However Rowan and Hamish will have to keep their heads down, as they were in the party that escorted Duke Argent through this area a few quarters ago, and would be recognised in noble circles, particularly with Hamish's monkey and

Rowan's staff. Hamish makes the mistake of suggesting we cover the staff with a paper bag, and the staff casts a spell on him, causing Hamish to run in fear. Faith manages to catch him with a sleep spell before he gets too far, and we tie him up until the fear wears off (I thought he would have learned not to make such comments by now). Going back to planning, Rowan says she can stay hidden while in towns, and use her golems to help us while we scout around. Shizane suggests we get a cart – she can travel in that, and it will add to the merchant disguise.

Faith is working on her hair – doing the little girl disguise, when she suddenly finds that one of her hair combs is actually a message scroll – there was probably an illusion on it until now. After checking it for traps, we open it, and the message reads 'You are cordially invited to attend a showing of Grand Wizard Octa and his entourage in the Grand Play 'An Orc's Mother' in the Hog's Hoof Tavern in the town of Pircha'. Consulting the map, Pircha is about a weeks travel away at a good pace, and a little bit off the route to the capital. But we decide to head there anyway. Faith is now dressed as a little girl, and Hamish's monkey has a sleep spell on it and is curled up in the bottom of a pack. By mid afternoon we reach a small town just short of the Barony capital Gamlin. Rowan and I stay outside the town with the horses and the rest head back. After a few hours, they return with a cart with two horses, and Faith is muttering something about Hamish and his hypnotism spells – that idiot is heading for trouble again, I can just see it. Anyway, we make camp for the night. During second watch, Saurus and Faith spot what looks like small bats flying overhead, and Rowan recognises it as blight creatures from the northern swamp, so they are a long way from home.

8th - 11th Frost

We travel. Shizane trades at each town, to establish our merchant disguise, and to try to get information. The major rumour is that a town on the Gamlin side of the border was completely destroyed – there is a swamp there now. However neither side seems to be responsible as both took heavy losses.

11th Frost

Having looked at the reports of the previous Guild parties who visited this plane before us before we came here, we discuss the problem of the blight – it seems to be involved in the whole problem somehow, and has possibly caused it. Shizane decides to head back to the new swamp with Thedona using efreet, while the rest of us continue on. After several hours, they return – it is indeed a blight swamp, complete absence of normal swamp life, and all the plants in it DA as non-sentient animates, GTN 'swamp plant', and all have been affected by blight.

12th-14th Frost

More travel. Not happy with these reports of the blight. They were created by a very old necromancer called Wuffa – possibly he's manipulating the situation somehow? Hopefully we will find out more at Pircha.

14th Frost

That night on 3rd watch, Hamish spots more blight circling above us. He wakes Faith, who casts locate on a few of them. After a little while, they fly off to the south. Possibly there is another blight swamp that way, as they need a place to hide during the day as they are light sensitive. This is not good news, neither is the fact that they

appear to be tracking us. We have seen them regularly since we arrived. Question is how are they tracking us?

15th Frost

We could reach Pircha today but decide to stop early and investigate how the blight are tracking us. We set two camps – an obvious one with Rowan, me and Hamish as we have all encountered the blight before, and the rest in a hidden camp. During the night we again see the blight – they circle the obvious camp, then circle through the area – they appear to be looking for the rest of the party. Faith uses locate again, and this time gets that one of them lands somewhere in the next Barony – called Ashe. So they are looking for the party as a whole. Very not good. But there's nothing we can do about it at the moment.

16th Frost

We head into Pircha. Unlike the previous towns, this has trained gate guards who question us about who we are and what we are doing here. We use the merchant story and are let in – they appear to be questioning anyone who isn't a local. As we head into the town, Faith spots a messenger leaving the guard post and follows. A little while later she returns, asks Hamish to help her out with something and they head off, while the rest of us find an inn. Faith returns, but Hamish doesn't. Turns out that Faith had caught up with the messenger, knocked him out and found the message, which said that an odd party with a merchant and an elf had entered town. That was when she had come back for Hamish, she wanted to make it look like a mugging. She had hidden while Hamish woke the guy up, said that he had found him and it looked like he had been mugged, and the messenger took off. Faith had then headed back and had expected Hamish to follow shortly. However after an hour, we decide we had better find out what had happened. Faith, Thedona and Saurus head off, and after about half an hour Faith returns alone. Turns out Hamish had hung around the alley and had been picked up by the local guard as a mugger (he was carrying a sap), and was in a cell in the guard headquarters. When they had gone to talk to the guard about it, Thedona and Saurus had been arrested as well as accomplices, but they had let Faith go as she was still in little girl disguise.

My view is that we should leave Hamish there, except it would be hard to justify that as we have to get Thedona and Saurus out. However now is not a good time. Rowan and I stay at the Rose Blossom Inn – I guard while Rowan petrifies and shrinks some of the horses and we load them on the cart. Meanwhile Faith and Shizane head over to visit the Hog's Hoof's Inn which was the place named in the mysterious note we got. Shizane returns first, then Faith a bit later. The Grand Wizard Octa is indeed in town, and there is a performance this evening at sundown. Faith had managed to sneak in and talk to one of the performers, but hadn't got any information, except that she was being followed. So we rest, make sure we have packed all the important things, and just before sundown, Rowan, Shizane, Faith and I head over to see the play.

The Inn is very busy – we claim seats at a table near a door. There is a group of nobles over in a corner, and Faith spots three men sitting at different tables, communicating in silent tongue. She wanders over to one and tries to talk to him in silent tongue as well, but he clams up. Meanwhile, the play starts. A bard and an illusionist do a very pretty intro display, then an old man, four women and a dwarf

come on to the stage. The play is done in Orcish – one of the performers translates – and involves a lot of illusions and bardic magic. At intermission, there is another display from the bard and illusionist, with the dwarf, who is throwing sweets into the crowd – Faith gets one. Shortly after the main play restarts, all the lights suddenly go out, and the three men rush on to the stage. The crowd panics and rushes to the doors. Faith is ahead of us, and gets up on the stage, and disappears out the back while Shizane and I are still getting there. Suddenly Titch the golem sprints past us in the same direction – Rowan has been busy. Shizane can see something, and heads off down a passage and I follow. Suddenly we hear the guard arriving – that was fast. A quick exit is needed, which is why I have stuck close to Shizane. He fire-arcs both of us out of the building, and we sneak away, heading back to the Rose Blossom Inn.

We are nearly there when Faith rejoins us. Turns out the sweet the dwarf had tossed her during the intermission had a candy in the shape of Duke Argent's crest in it, so when the trouble started, she had gone for him. She had managed to get to him, and knocked him out, then tried to get outside with the unconscious and invisible dwarf, however the guard had caught her. She had put quickness on herself so she was able to get away, but had to leave the dwarf behind. She'd headed to our Inn and found Rowan already there – she had flown out of an upstairs window – and had come out looking for us. We decide to head back to try again. However the invisibility has worn off by the time we get there, and the guard has him, as well as Titch. When we approach they barricade themselves in to the Inn, so we abandon the attempt and head back to join up with Rowan.

Time to assault the jail we think – while the guards are still distracted. After a quick discussion, we decide that Faith will sneak in with support from another of Rowan's golems, Dolly, and Shizane and I will be back-up/distractions with fireballs etc. Emergency back-up is that we burn the town to the ground with Shizane's pet salamanders. (I know – we are supposed to have been discrete, but we are a Guild party – what do they expect?) Faith does a locate on the magic items that Hamish, Saurus and Thedona had nominated as important to them, and finds that two are still at the jail, and the other is moving – possibly to the main keep.

So we head off. Faith casts quickness on herself and Dolly, and invisibility and insubstantial mist on herself, and they sneak around to the back of the jail and in the small grate window to one of the cells. Meanwhile Shizane and I make ourselves comfortable on a roof overlooking the front of the jail. After a short wait, we see the guards on patrol quickly return to the front entrance and head inside. Figuring that Faith was in trouble, Shizane casts a fireball, and I do as well. The guards run towards our building, so Shizane firearcs us on to the prison, and we continue fireballing and generally annoying the guards. After a while one of them gets a lucky shot off, and hits Shizane, then after another round of fireballs, they have all had enough and run away. Shizane decides enough is enough, and we firearc away to another building, then to the ground, and walk around to the front of the jail. All is quiet so after a short wait, we head back towards the cart.

On the way, we meet Ralf – another golem, riding on Eeyor, her wooden donkey. Apparently Dolly had been destroyed. Shortly after that Faith, and then Saurus join us, Faith is carrying an unconscious Thedona. Thedona is loaded on to Eeyor, while Faith dashes back to get Hamish, who is also unconscious, and we all make it back to

the cart in one piece. While Shizane is treating the released prisoners, Faith tells us what happened. She had scouted around the prison, finding Hamish and Thedona unconscious in separate cells, and Saurus being tortured in the lower basement. She had managed to get Thedona and Hamish out of the cells, with some help from Dolly, then been interrupted by two guards. She managed to take them both out, however Thedona took some damage – Faith was carrying her at the time, and she got hit rather than Faith. With Faith, Hamish and Thedona invisible, Faith had carried them up to the top floor and pushed them out an open window. After a side trip to a storeroom to retrieve Hamish and Saurus' stuff (Thedona's staff and dagger were missing), she and Dolly had headed to the lower basement to get Saurus. After a short battle with the torturer and guard, in which Dolly was destroyed, she managed to free Saurus, cast invisibility on both of them, and then exit via the same window, and catch up with the rest of us.

Once they are feeling a bit better, Hamish and Thedona confirm that they were tortured for several hours each, and also both were divinated by a namer – probably the current holder of Thedona's staff. They have a number of nasty wounds, and will need several days of rest to recover completely. In the meantime, we decide that now is the best time to leave town, and head to the north-west gate. Rowan gets Ralf to drive, and Faith scouts ahead.

17th Frost

It's morning some time. We are in a barn outside of Pircha, and I hurt – probably the crossbow bolt. However Hamish and his monkey are dead, and so was Rowan, however Saurus had some special acorns that resurrected her. After talking with everyone I work out what happened last night. Faith had gone ahead, first trying and failing to bluff the guards, then using insubstantial mist to head outside and opening the gate. However she had misjudged where we were, and we were too far away to do anything about it. Given that she was in an open fire area, she had then retreated out of crossbow range. Meanwhile we had approached the gate, using fireballs and such other things to try to keep the guards down, however Rowan was unlucky and took a bolt to the head which killed her instantly. We managed to discourage the guards from firing at us, and Shizane turned his attention to the gate, hitting it several times. As we approached the gate, we realised that most of the guards had been illusions – there were no bodies. We found it had magical defenses as well – some sort of web which caught me, Hamish, Saurus, Thedona and Eyelor (Rowan's staff) and dumped us out of the cart. It also hurt. Wanting to free us quickly, I did a low level fireball to burn the web away, but it worked a little too well – we were free, but Hamish and Thedona were unconscious and bleeding again. Meanwhile Shizane and the cart had reached the gate, and found there was a second magical defense – one carthorse panicked, the other went catatonic. The panicked one managed to break free, kick down what little remained of the gate and headed out of town. Shizane jumped out, helped me and Saurus to get the others back on the cart while tipping healing potions down their throats. Thedona is OK, but Hamish is dead – not too sure why, he should have made it. Anyway, we kicked the remaining carthorse into movement, and got through the gate. The second defense was some sort of fear effect – my hair turned white (again – and I had only just finished growing it out from last time), but we got through. A few crossbow bolts followed us, but they were half-hearted. Faith rejoined us, and had the missing carthorse. After getting some distance down the road, we had turned off, found this barn, resurrected Rowan, and collapsed.

Anyway, we assess everything. We didn't get any information, Rowan is being berated by Eyelor for dying again and Hamish and his monkey familiar are dead – we figure out that the death of the monkey is probably the reason why Hamish died. Also we are nearly out of restoratives and healing potions, and Saurus and Thedona need several days rest to recover completely from the torture. Not bad for a night's work.

Quote of the night from Faith “Do I have to kill every party member myself?”

Anyway – Faith and I managed to keep some watches while we slept, but we don't feel safe staying in one place, so Rowan revives some of the horses, and we move on, cross-country, towards Ashe. We travel for some hours, then find another barn, and collapse again.

18th-19th Frost

More of the same. Area is poor farmland – lots of abandoned farms, and farm buildings for us to rest in. Saurus and Thedona are recovering, and Rowan has revived all the horses, so we burn the cart.

20th Frost

At some point we cross the border – it's not marked, however by mid-afternoon we notice that the farmland is much richer, and there are farms more often. As evening approaches we decide to appear respectable again, change back in to more normal clothes, and stop at a waystation. We have a good meal, and listen to the local gossip. Nothing about our escapade in Pircha, but interestingly there is talk about a new advisor to the King, and that she has started a new fashion trend – long flowing gowns in grey or black.

21st Frost

We continue towards Ashe, stopping at waystations for lunch and for the night.

22nd Frost

Before we set out, Faith goes shopping, and manages to get enough gray fabric for a gown for herself. Then we continue on, and reach Ashe by early afternoon. It's a walled city – DA's show multiple wards. The guards stop us briefly, but we are let in. After a few enquiries, we head towards the upmarket part of town, which is on an island in a river. There are several bridges, and more DA's show huge numbers of magical wards covering the bridges, the walls, and the area all around them. We find a good inn, then Faith, Thedona and I go shopping to a local seamstress who was recommended to us. Faith is measured up, and the gray fabric will be made into a gown for her in the current style, and she purchases a second. After seeing this, I decide the gowns Shizane has lent us will stand out a bit, so I arrange to purchase a new gown in blue, and Thedona does the same – in green. They cost a bit – 1000sp each, but all accessories are included. Saurus also picks up some appropriate clothes. While all the fittings are going on, we catch up on the local gossip. Despite the gowns, the seamstress appears unsure as to whether the new adviser is male or female, but apart from that we don't get anything useful.

Back to the inn for a good dinner. After dinner, Rowan heads out with Shizane to try to find a contact with the local assassins guild that she met last time she was up this

way. They head to the brothel that she frequents, and after dropping the code phrase, are directed to her. On seeing them, the contact promptly faints. However she quickly recovers, and Rowan is able to arrange a meeting. Business done, the two of them decide to avail themselves of the services on offer for a few hours.

Meanwhile, about an hour after they had left, we get a visitor – he says that he is from the assassin's guild, and that Rowan had arranged for him to head over to see us. He seems legitimate, so we discuss a deal. We settle for them arranging the resurrection of Hamish in return for the wiping of the debt owed by the guild to Hamish, and also look at having another meeting for some information exchange. We give him the Hamish statue, and he heads out the window. Faith waits a minute, and then follows, but he's well gone. A few hours later, Rowan and Shizane return.

23rd Frost

Hamish is escorted back to the inn after breakfast, looking a little worse for wear. We send him off to bed to recover. The rest of us decide to mingle with the townspeople and try to get a few contacts and invites to the Duke's court. We also have an information sharing meeting with the assassin's guild. They can't tell us much about the adviser except that they had already been hired to remove it – and they are not sure exactly what it is – and the team they sent in was never heard from again. Also they suspect the clothing that it wears is something more – from the description Saurus thinks it could be a wraithcloak (whatever that is). We give them all the information we have on the blight – they are very interested in this, and agree to check out the local area for any sightings. Faith mentions the magical circle she saw in the jail at Pircha, and our contact seems to pale a bit. Apparently it could be a summoning circle, and the guild has a policy of killing summoners as a public service due to the general dislike of summoners. Faith also describes the namer that has Thedona's staff, and they give us a name – Carl – and that he is in the service of the king.

Anyway, we mingle. Local gossip confirms that no-one is sure if the adviser is a he, she or it, but we are not able to get any invites to the court, however we did get one to a dinner on the 26th Frost.

24th Frost

More chasing invites and information, without much luck.

25th Frost

Our new clothes are ready. They look really good, and we make discreet enquiries about appropriate weaponry. Looks like us women will be limited to a dagger at most, but the men can also carry a light dress weapon. The assassins get back to us – no sign of blight swamp in the area, however flying blight has been spotted, heading towards the capital, Biltadox.

26th Frost

That evening, we attend a dinner. Hamish decides to decline, and heads out of town to spend some time making restoratives. Meanwhile the rest of us are in for an evening of polite chit-chat. Hamish's absence is openly noted, and also one woman openly recognises Rowan, however no mention is made of the business they were on last time they were up this way. Apart from that we don't achieve anything. A few

people from the Duke's court are present, but Thedona says they don't seem to be out of the ordinary.

27th Frost

We decide to leave and head for the capital, hoping for better luck. Faith says she'll stay behind and catch up later – something tells me not to ask why.

28th-30th Frost

An uneventful trip with occasional snow flurries.

1st Snow

Faith catches up with us in the morning. That evening we reach the capital. It's built on the bank of a river, with gates to the north, east and south-west, the latter a bridge across the river. Thedona reports multiple wards on the gates and walls again – all sound painful – TK Rage is mentioned. Faith suggests we try a vague contact she made in Ashe – Lady Cynwise, so we go there first, but no luck. However she does refer us to a high class inn nearby.

2nd Snow

After a quiet night, it's time to make contacts. Hamish and Rowan stay at the inn to avoid being recognised, and the rest of us split up and try the noble areas, and the merchants. We meet back at the inn for lunch. Neither group have had much luck, but we have found out there is the weekly dance on 5th Snow, the Solstice Feast on 8th Snow, and then the festival of the Days of Chaos on 12th Snow. We aim to get invites. That afternoon we continue trying to get information, again without luck. However Shizane and I are approached by a messenger for Lady Cynwise. She invites us all to lunch the following day. We accept. After dinner at the inn, we go to the theatre. Faith spots the woman who recognised Rowan back in Ashe. We try for a DA on her, but it fails.

3rd Snow

After a long sleep-in and leisurely breakfast, we head over to Lady Cynwise' house for lunch. Apparently she had queried with the person in Ashe who was our contact, and confirmed that we had met her. She politely questions us as to who we are – we stick to the lesser nobility story, but I suspect she doesn't believe us. As we leave, she asks us if we will be at the dance, and Faith says we are waiting on invites – suggesting that they just haven't arrived yet. That evening we go to a different theatre – a comedy rather than a love story, and spot the same woman from Ashe again. Coincidence? Faith is suspicious, and she and Dolly follow her while the rest head back to the inn. Faith returns with Dolly a bit later, and says she's either very good or innocent.

4th Snow

After another lazy morning, a messenger wearing imperial colours shows up with invites for all to the dance tomorrow. However this is followed by the realisation that most of us can't dance. Shizane says he'll teach us, and asks the innkeeper to send up a bard. However the bard has a better idea and takes us down the road to an upmarket brothel, where we have dance lessons til midnight, when we collapse.

5th Snow

Woken at dawn for more lessons. They let us go about midday to rest and prepare. Shizane sets up a ward to protect our stuff while we are gone. The carriage eventually arrives and takes us to the dance, where we split up and try to get information/contacts etc. However the men have to leave their dress weapons at the door – this seems a little unusual. I stick with Faith, as she seems to know what she is doing.

“The truth will not free you, it will just show you the bars, so we should head over to the first one we see and get refreshments” to stop Thedona telling us how many wards are on the palace as we walk in unarmed.

Faith seems to be an expert at this I decide, and concentrate on listening and keeping her supplied with drinks. She talks briefly with the lady we met at the theatre amongst other places, but still doesn't get her name. Gossip says there will be an announcement of some sort at the Solstice Ball.

After a few hours, the musicians pack up, and a new set move in – more of a formal orchestra. During the break, we get more gossip – very little is known about the adviser, and this makes everyone curious. The king occasionally attends balls like this if the queen wants to, but not tonight. Also everyone is a little concerned about the war – it is slowly draining the court of money and people. While at the refreshment table, Faith chats with the servants, and finds that the adviser does not use any servants – so they also know nothing about him/her/it.

The music starts up again – much more formal and structured now – beyond my minimal experience. We continue circulating for a couple more hours until Faith says it's time to leave. I round up the others and we meet Faith at the entrance and head back to the inn.

When we get to our room, we discover the protection ward on our gear has been dissipated, but everything is still there, in fact something has been added – a bronze inlaid redwood scrollcase, with some form of hieroglyphics on it – none of us recognise the writing. It is closed but not obviously sealed. A DA fails, so Rowan uses detect enchantment – nothing. She then divinates, which says that a light spell will activate when the case is opened. Rowan then gets Dolly to open the case, and indeed a light spell activates. Inside is a note, and the remains of Titch, one of the golems she lost in Pircha. A DA of the note says it is formally living, GTN human. Wonderful. The message says 'This is your only warning, leave now or this will be your fate also.' - we don't know if it refers to the parchment or the golem. Hamish says he got a shiver down his spine when he read it. Rowan talks to the Dolly and Ralf which she left activated while we were out, and they say that some blight creatures came in and left the scrollcase – one was destroyed by the ward. Hamish claims the scrollcase and puts it in his sporran, then we head off to get some sleep – with watches of course.

6th Snow

Next morning we discuss all we know and don't know, implications, history, possibilities. A quick check with the local bard shows the current empire formed 500 years ago, when the central three baronies banded together to take out the mage Wuffa – which probably annoyed him a bit, and so is relevant to our problem as we

know he is associated with the blight. His keep is apparently nearby – Faith uses a crystal ball to see it – and sees a half melted stone keep on top of a hill, with nothing growing around it. Apparently groups of mages go down there occasionally to suppress the magical effects that keep emanating from it, however sometimes the mages disappear. Sounds like it is still a place of major power, and beyond our abilities to deal with.

Faith decides it is time for some extra help, and summons Sier, who promptly arrives. He says we should talk to Murmur who is a necromantic demon, and apparently Wuffa is associated with this demon. We ask about the battle 500 years ago, and Sier asks if we want to see it. Saurus volunteers, disappears for a moment, then tells of a big battle, with the army driving Wuffa north to what is now the original blight swamp, and then he died and spent the next 500 years until today as a blight creature. Sier then leaves, leaving behind a blank contract for someone's soul – he appears to want Faith to sign up. Just after he leaves, we hear the sound of a pen on paper, and as we look at the contract, we see the words 'The nuts are off' appear. The only supply of nuts that we have is the monkey nuts in Hamish's sporran – which also contains the scrollcase we got last night. Faith takes the sporran, and throws it in a fire several doors down.

Then we agree to split up again. Hamish and I stay at the inn, and arrange for the bard to give us the full history of the area and the empire. Rowan, Shizane and Saurus go to visit the temple of Murmur. Faith and Thedona head to the temple of Uriel to ask about justice regarding any possible future attack on us.

We hear lots of history, but no further interesting information. Faith and Thedona arrive back after an hour, saying that they might be able to get a judgement before the Days of Chaos, and carrying a cat – which apparently followed them back. Hamish decides it will make an excellent replacement familiar, and takes it into the next room. Saurus and Rowan return shortly after, and say that Saurus spoke to Murmur, or at least to something in his temple, and it appears that the adviser is definitely not alive. Saurus seems a bit disturbed about something, but isn't talking about what. Shizane returns last – apparently he made a side trip to a fire demon.

Just then we hear a yowling from the next room, and yelps of pain from Hamish. We head in there to find that the cat did not appreciate being asked to be a familiar, and it attacking – and Hamish is bleeding from several nasty wounds. I watch with great amusement while he struggles with the cat, which eventually escapes out a window. As Shizane treats Hamish's wounds, we notice that the temperature in the room is noticeably dropping. Looking up, we see ice forming on the ceiling. We realise that it is coming from several doors down – where Faith disposed of the sporran. A quick check reveals that room is completely covered in ice, and the sporran is still intact in the fireplace, but it is bulging noticeably. Given that some of the party have heard bad things about what happens when extra-dimensional spaces like the sporran get broken, we grab our gear and head downstairs, getting the innkeeper and the maid as we go. We suggest that he gets in a namer to try and disperse the ice, and after a quick look, he agrees – and seems rather upset. We head out and find another inn to rest in, and watch to see what happens, but all we hear is a 'pop'. While we are watching, a messenger arrives, with an invite to dinner that evening with lady Cynwise. We accept.

So we head off to dinner. It appears that she has had visitors earlier, but none are here now. Faith asks about the theatre lady, and strangely, Lady Cynwise can't remember her name either (we suspect she is a mind mage of some sort). She is a bit more open with us this time, asking if we are here to kill anyone. When we ask why she thinks that, she says we have left a trail of destruction in our wake. She mentions Pircha, and an incident in Ashe in which some elementals did some damage. We downplay the Pircha incident, and truthfully deny all knowledge of the troubles in Ashe – they happened just after we left. She also seems to have some knowledge of the blight creatures when that topic is raised. We ask how difficult it would be to gain an audience with the King, and she says we would have to work through the beurocracy, and it would take several months. We then ask if we could go through the adviser, and she says the new adviser is unapproachable, unlike the previous person, who retired to the countryside – this was not unexpected. However Lady Cynwise seems a bit put out by the new adviser.

After the appropriate time, we make our excuses and leave. We travel round town in the carriage in an attempt to have a private conversation. We believe it is possible that Lady Cynwise is part of the 'establishment', and that we have been sounded out as to our intentions. However we don't know if they will support us or not yet, and anyway there are other groups involved, like the lady from the theatre. Given the attack on us last night, we agree that we will have to act soon. So our best option is to be up front with Lady Cynwise, and see where it leaves us – we will need some help to achieve anything anyway. So Faith delivers a note saying 'We would like to discuss more delicate parts of conversation in discrete surroundings. If interested in furthering involvement, please contact us at your convenience.' We then head to our new inn for the night.

7th Snow

In the morning, a messenger brings a note from Lady Cynwise – 'Lunch in the Hogs Haunch in the bazaar same time as last time we met'. Deliberately confusing, we suspect, as we last met for dinner. Faith had also left a message for the theatre lady, but we don't get a reply. Also, we get a note about Faith's request for a judgement from Uriel against the blight, apparently the blight are accusing us of starting it by attacking first. I don't remember it that way, but we'll sort it out later. After a quiet day, we head to dinner with Lady Cynwise. She is there when we arrive with a bodyguard. No dancing around the point this time – she straight out asks us who we are there to kill. We respond no-one really, but we are here to bring peace to the kingdom, and we suspect that the adviser has to die to help accomplish this. She says she can arrange a storage closet in the palace tomorrow evening, for the Solstice Ball and can get any equipment we might need into it beforehand. Comments made by Lady Cynwise suggest she is associated with the assassins guild in some way. We ask again about the theatre lady, and she confirms that she represents 'an interested third party', and probably won't interfere. After some more talk on some details, we depart, and catch the local theatre – a tragedy this time, then back to the inn.

8th Snow

In the morning, we sort through our gear for what needs to be given to Lady Cynwise to go in the storage closet. We then rest the day, then head to the Solstice Fair. We make contact with the servants who discreetly show us the storage closet. So it's just

a matter of picking the appropriate time. We mingle – the king arrives, and also mingles. Then at 11.50pm, the adviser and the namer from Pircha – Carl – arrive, and the adviser announces that a grand new age for the kingdom at midnight, and everyone should head out to the garden. We head to the storage closet instead, and prepare – fire armour, quickness etc.

After a quick discussion, we decide to attack now and not wait for midnight. We head down on to the main floor, and the adviser, the namer, and several of the guards turn to look at us – they don't seem at all surprised to see us. The adviser says something along the lines of having to move his plans forward, and then the fight starts. Shizane and I use ranged fire attacks, while Faith goes in to melee, with Hamish and Thedona close behind. Saurus is working on doing the same, but he moves a bit slow and Rowan is directing the golems. After a few seconds of fighting, we work out that several of the guards are mages – fire we think, as well as the namer. Also they have some serious fire and armour magic on them. Then to add to the confusion, several groups of blight creatures sweep in to the ballroom from the gardens – and some of them start spellcasting as well. The rest of the guests have wisely fled with the King. The battle then gets messy. Thedona dies first, then Hamish. Shizane is knocked unconscious, just before drinking a potion, but luckily I am right next to him and manage to get enough of it down his throat to get him up again. He continues casting fire spells, while I fireball, and Faith, Rowan and Saurus deal with the blight. Then I am hit by another burst of fire and everything goes black.

I wake up a short time later. Turns out Shizane, Rowan, Faith and Saurus had managed to take everyone out, including the adviser, who had turned into a larger form of the blight. However it was very close. The King hadn't quite decided whether we are the good guys or not, but the sight of the adviser had been enough to get Hamish, Thedona and me resurrected by his healers. However I think they expect us to clean up the mess. Anyway, we all head off for some well earned rest.

9th Snow

We are woken and called before the King mid-morning for a discussion on the adviser and the blight. We tell him that Carl the namer was pacted to Murmur, and that the blight were associated with Wuffa, and he said that explains some things. It appears he has decided to believe us after all, probably because while we were asleep a namer has divinated the adviser – it was an elder blight called Matthias. Anyway, he is going to review all decisions made since the blight adviser started, and to start that, he asked if we could take a message of ceasefire to Duke Argent – as he believed us when we said he really wasn't consorting with orcs and planning treason. Also, it appears that he will have to spend some time cleaning up – several other mages have gone missing – heading for parts unknown probably. We also get to claim some of the items on the bodies – including Thedona's staff and dagger from the namer. Just as we are about to leave, Saurus asks if there are any condemned prisoners he could have – the King looks a little perturbed at this, and says he'll think about it. We head back to the inn.

While packing we finally get Saurus to tell what's up with him. Turns out the thing he met in Murmur's temple has put a geas on him to bring three live people into the temple by midnight tonight, or serve him for a year and a day. However we don't know the exact details – we need a namer with divinate. We decide to visit Lady

Cynwise – and indeed she does have a namer on staff, who says that there is indeed a geas on Saurus, and he has to pay up somehow. Back at the inn, we publicly disavow all part in the process, but drop hints, and a potion to help him out. He disappears for a while, and a bit later returns – in the distance we can hear screams. It appears the geas has been removed. We decide now is a good time to leave, so having previously arranged for a horse trader to return Duke Argent's horses, we skin change the warhorses, and ride Shizane's efreet's back to the portal, arriving later that evening. After a short stop to see the Duke and hand over the ceasefire agreement, we go back through the portal, arriving in Seagate very tired about lunchtime on 10th Snow.