

## OF SILVER SWORDS AND SLEEPING GODS

The Hall of Speakers loomed in front of us, a huge edifice of dirty white stone standing seven stories tall. The eaves and cornices were adorned with long curving plates, wide at the base and thinning to a sharp point at the tip as they reached skyward. The thorny white spikes had the effect of making the building look as if it were aflame. This effect was enhanced by the dancing firelight emanating from the great statue that dominated the building's outer courtyard. The work featured the tall figure of an efreet who stood bent as if struggling to bear the crushing weight of the giant glass ball upon its back. Beneath the fire djinn's red skin, powerful muscles rippled with the effort and his demonic face was locked in a strained grimace. The globe contained an ever-burning ball of flame that somehow gave off neither heat nor smoke. This had been a gift from a mighty efreeti pasha from the Elemental Plane of Fire to the city centuries ago and it was a popular rumor around the back alleys that the statue was actually a real efreet, magically frozen into shape by the pasha as punishment for challenging his rule. The statue of the red djinn now held a place of honor in the courtyard of the assembly building in which all of Sigil's laws were proposed and debated by delegations from the factions. Whether the story's true or not, it's hard not to see the significance of such a tale- it's best not to disrespect the Hall of Speakers.

Ash stood cloaked in shadows cast by the gate to the courtyard of the Hall. Drygsil and Stannwycke flanked him and the gnome, Tandy, was visible astride the bariaur. Tandy's wet, glassy eyes, unsteady balance, and angrily furrowed brow told me he was still under the influence of whatever his drink of choice happened to be, but at least he was awake and upright. As Flemyd, Pyr and I approached, we spotted another figure standing behind Ash. It was a girl, slim and stoop-shouldered with a veil of long, unkempt, raven hair hiding her features. She was actively studying the shape of her small feet with downcast eyes.

"Aha! At last we are assembled. Let us hasten to our task while the day is yet young." quoth Drygsil. As his booming voice rang out, the girl behind Ash seemed to shrink even further into the shadow.

"Who's our new mate, Ash?" I asked, craning my neck for a better look at the girl.

"Her name is Siobel, call her Bel. She is known to me and is quite shy, therefore, I shall speak for her." Ash said, meeting my inquisitive gaze with seeming indifference. "She may not look so, but rest assured, she is an exemplary warrior and will be an asset to us, should conflict arise." She surely did not look like the warrior Ash was making her out to be. Siobel, or 'Bel', couldn't have been more than sixteen. Her waifish frame was clothed in a loose-fitted, drab outfit better suited for a small boy. The rough cloth contrasted with her porcelain white skin, and though she shielded her face behind a sheet of black hair, hints of a delicate beauty slipped through. One bashful, almond shaped, green eye was visible and the tip of one perfect elvish ear peeked through her cascading midnight hair. Bel's right hand rested upon the hilt of the naked sword which was lashed to her waist with a length of cord in lieu of a proper belt and scabbard. The sword however was of extremely high quality. It had the look of an elven blade and shone with a faint green light. Archaic runes had been inscribed along the blade and though it was longer than a normal sword of its kind, seemed to cause no great strain to its slight bearer.

"Surely we cannot expose this innocent girl to the perils of the Astral Plane, Ash? Dervan? No, it is unconscionable! We must send her home." Flemyd sputtered. Stannwycke gave Ash a look that seemed to say he'd already tried that tack with the tiefling and been rebuffed.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of your acquaintance, sir. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Ash. " the sorcerer said coldly eyeing the old wizard.

Flemyd seemed completely unaware of any implied threat from Ash's greeting and said "Oh, yes, well, pardon my uncouth outburst, sir, I am Flemyd Floyne, and this is my dear friend Pyraediantyrialus, you may call him Pyr." Flemyd and Pyr each bowed deeply to the assembled crew and the rest of the introductions were made. Pyr made no attempt to introduce himself or even acknowledge anyone except for the lovely Siobel. Forgetting himself and the human manners Flemyd had painstakingly taught him, he openly stared at her with wide, innocent eyes until Flemyd gently elbowed him and gave him a look of disapproval that brought him back in line.

"Now then, Flemyd, know you that young Bel has been on the streets for most of her short life, she knows how to take care of herself. Besides, the dangers of Sigil's streets are no less to a young woman than any to be found in the Astral void. I personally vouch for her abilities." The thin wisps of smoky residue

that seeped from Ash's lips hung lazily in the still air, adding an air of gravity to his words and no more was said on the matter of Bel's joining our troupe. Even Flemyd begrudgingly acquiesced, though he was still obviously concerned for the girl's safety and afterwards took pains to prepare her as best he could for the alien environment we were about to enter.

"Well, that makes *me* feel better." I said sarcastically. Ash shot me a dark glance but refused to take the bait.

*"The girl seems to be of great concern to the tiefling. He seems very protective of her."* my psi-crystal's telepathic voice sounded in my head. *"This bears watching. If he is distracted by her, it could affect the mission."*

This girl was a sore spot for him somehow. I decided to find out the meaning behind this relationship, but that could wait. "Alright everyone, here's how this is going to go down, Ash- see if you can work with Flemyd and give him a description of the place you last scried on Wendicutt so Flemyd's gate will open to the right spot. I don't wanna spend a month wandering around in the void playing hide-and-seek with astral dreadnoughts so let's make sure we get it right. Tandy-stick with Drygsil and stay awake, we're not gonna drag your drunken carcass all over creation so if you pass out again, you get left behind and may the gods be merciful to you!" Tandy struggled to focus his eyes and looked slightly startled, but then relaxed a bit when he saw Flemyd standing behind me shaking his head with his arms raised in front of him in a calming gesture, as if to say *'Don't believe that screeed, we wouldn't really leave you.'*

"We get any trouble, Stannwycke and Drygsil get front line duty to cover the spell casters and myself. Bel, you stay with Pyr and cover the rear." The mercenaries accepted my words without reaction, but Pyr was visibly disappointed with rear guard duty. His normally cheery disposition was momentarily clouded by a sullen frown but he said nothing. We stood in a circle around the wizard and the sorcerer to make sure they weren't interrupted as Ash created a small illusion in the form of a floating earthen mass. Flemyd studied it carefully. It was a dangerous business summoning a portal to a place you'd never actually been to or knew at all. If done incorrectly we could have ended up a hundred miles away, but Flemyd's been wandering the planes since before I was born, and I trusted his work.

After a few minutes, Flemyd announced he was ready and so we moved to a nearby alley to avoid passersby interfering in his delicate spellcasting. Within moments, the now familiar shape of a doorway framed in golden oak appeared in the alley. Beyond the doorway we could see only silvery whiteness.

"It is done," Flemyd said weakly, "but I shan't have the power to open a return gate without rest and lengthy preparations."

"No sense wasting time, let's go. And remember, moving around in the Astral void has nothing to do with physical motion unless you're on a floating island. Pick a spot, think about yourself moving to it, and it'll happen. Now stick together." I said and flung myself through the gate. One by one, everyone else followed until we were all afloat in the nothingness of the Astral Plane. About fifteen feet below us was a roughly humanoid shaped, floating island of rock that seemed to be about one hundred feet long by twenty-five feet wide. The entire mass was made up of the stiff, lifeless form of what appeared to be some sort of strange, elven giant! The body was much too detailed to be a statue. In fact, had the giant opened his eyes then and begun to move around, I don't think I would have been surprised. He lay in state, with his arms crossed over his huge chest. The titan did not look decomposed, rather his flesh, hair, and clothing seemed to have taken on a rock-like consistency. In every other direction, for as far as we could see, the only sight that greeted us was an endless expanse of silvery clouds and open air. A strange stillness came over us and though we seemed to be floating, I felt as if my weight had increased. Much like a sailor afloat in the sea with the dead weight of his soaked clothing pulling at him, only I wasn't sinking.

"Urrrh...aahh...AAAAHH!!!" screamed Drygsil, as Tandy's tiny fingers dug deep into the short-cropped fur of his back. The little fellow was laying face down on the bariaur's back with his arms and legs wrapped as tightly as gnomishly possible around Drygsil's large, ram-like frame. "Unhand me!"

"Not on your life!" replied Tandy, his terrified voice muffled by bariaur fur. The gnome had never before travelled to this plane and so was unfamiliar with the lack of directional gravity. Drygsil's inability to fully control his motion only made matters worse. The terms 'up' and 'down' really have no meaning in the Astral Plane, but in relation to the rest of the group, who were relatively well controlled, Drygsil was upside down. His legs flailed involuntarily and his upper torso wrenched vigorously back and forth as he tried to bring himself about to our perspective. Pyr and I couldn't help but share a discreet chuckle at Drygsil and Tandy's expense as Stannwycke and Flemyd quietly went to right the struggling pair. Ash stood by impatiently as Flemyd spoke in soothing tones, and explained to the frightened gnome that he was in no immediate danger. Once Tandy realized nobody else was falling,

he calmed down and began to listen.

Turning towards Ash and myself, Flemyd said “Now then, gentlemen, I believe we are ready to move on. I am confident that the island below us is our destination. If you will all follow me...” We all turned towards the island and slowly began to float to it, guided by our thoughts. Drygsil’s legs still twitched in a semblance of walking, but he seemed to have grasped enough of this new form of locomotion to get by. Tandy had released his death grip on the bariaur and so Drygsil allowed the gnome to remain astride his back, but the gemologist remained tense and a little frightened.

When we alighted upon the rock, we began to study the features of our ‘host’. High elven cheekbones, almond shaped eyes, and long ears gave the giant a distinctly fey appearance, even though time had eroded the tips of his nose and ears. He looked to be dressed in a gigantic suit of plate armor that was adorned with countless runes, though none of us were able to decipher in what language they had been written. Upon his brow was a circlet that appeared to have once held a massive jewel of some sort, but the setting was now empty. With a sinking feeling, I realised the setting matched the size of the gem we were in search of. Perhaps we were too late to recover the item. I only hoped we could find Wendicutt, and that he had been the one to remove the gem.

“Quite fascinating!” exclaimed Flemyd, over and over again, as we inspected the titan. “I knew that many old gods had come to their final rest in the Astral Plane, and some of their bodies have even become the foundations of gith-yanki fortresses, but this is a unique find indeed!” He strode back and forth across the creature’s body excitedly. “Look, how elven his features are. Have you ever heard tales of elven giants? S’ttruth I’ve never done!”

“Yeah, he’s pretty big, huh?” I said, feigning disinterest. As I knew he would, Flemyd carried right on without even pretending to pay any attention to me. I was never the most devout desciple of the teachings of the elven pantheon, but my elven mother made sure I knew all the popular tales and myths surrounding them. They were called the Seldarine, and were led by Corellon Larathian who defeated the evil orc god Gruumsh in single combat, putting out its left eye with his glittering sword. He had also banished the wicked drow to the depths of the Underdark, though not quite deep enough to prevent them from being a constant looming threat to all surface dwellers and a real thorn in my side. I had never heard any tales of the Seldarine assuming giant form, although I’m sure it was within their power to do so. My own patron deity, the fun loving trickster Erevan Ilesere, was the most likely to have attempted it, as part of some sort of prank, but even his stories of mirthful miscreantism contained no such references.

“Whatever this being was, it lived an extremely long time ago. I wonder if there is time to copy down these runic markings?” the arch wizard murmured to himself absentmindedly.

To the others I said “Maybe we need to get looking for this emerald, yeah?” Stannwycke, Drygsil, Bel, and Tandy began to search the ground closely. Ash had already moved alone to the head of the creature and was scouring it for any sign of the gem we’d been sent to find. Taking advantage of the subjective gravity of the plane, I walked over the edge to the ‘bottom’ side of the god-island to search there. Having been to the Astral many times, I experienced no feelings of vertigo or disorientation as I scanned the opposite side of the island.

As I neared the giant’s shoulder blades, Looker spoke in my head, “*Oh, ho! Watch it! There’s a skulker in the left armpit! He thinks he’s fooled us, he thinks we can’t see him, poor misguided bungler. You’d have to try a lot harder than that.*” I crouched and drew my bow in one fluid motion. Aiming the burning tip of my ectoplasmic arrow towards the crevasse between the giant’s back and his arm, I slowly, and silently began to edge my way towards it.

“*What is it?*” I asked mentally.

“*Don’t know, but it looked sorta like an ugly gnome with lotsa hair.*” I crept closer still, and after pausing a moment on the edge of the small rift, leapt down into it, screaming a (hopefully) bloodcurdling warcry.

“*Aaahhg!! Please, no! Don’t kill me!*” the small creature cringed and grovelled in front of me. “*Kbrdal means no harm, Kbrdal is nice, please, oh, please!*” The filthy humanoid did indeed look like a gnome. A dirty, nasty little gnome with wiry, reddish brown hair sprouting from every angle of its misshapen noggin. It had tried to control this thicket somewhat by tying off handfuls of its hair in thick, oddly placed pony tails making its face a mass of bristling appendages surrounding a large, warty proboscis, and beady black eyes. He was dressed in dirty, plain clothing with a suit of studded leather armor covering his short torso.

“*Don’t move!*” I shouted at the pitiful wreck, causing him to reflexively raise his arms over his face and cringe even more. “*Flemyd! Get over here!*”

A moment later, Flemyd Floyne rose straight up from out of the solid rock beneath my feet. He had traversed through the giant’s rock body as easily and

neatly as if it were made of water and now stood menacingly glaring at the hairy gnome, having instantly assessed the situation. "Your gullet is about to spring a leak, small one. Mayhaps you would wish to tell us who you are and what you are doing here, before my companion's arms get tired of holding back his string, eh?"

"Oh, please, please, no!! Don't let him! I am Kbrdal, stranded, I am!

My mistress has left me, oh, poor Kbrdal! I have no way home. Oh, mercy, mercy!"

"Calm yourself, man! We shan't kill you. Gods what a fuss you make."

Flemyd complained, shaking his head in disgust. Pyr, Drygsil, and Stannwycke appeared from over the edge of the island and we surrounded the unfortunate Kbrdal.

I relaxed my bowstring and the psionic arrow flickered out of existence. Flemyd asked "How came you here?"

"Mistress brings Kbrdal to carry her things, but Kbrdal is clumsy, mistress becomes angry with Kbrdal and strands him here, alone!" Kbrdal reached out and grabbed at the hem of Flemyd's immaculately clean, purple and white robes and mashed it into his grimy face while he pleaded, and cried.

"Dear god, don't...don't... *touch* me!" the wizard exclaimed incredulously as he tore the cloth violently from the grasp of the cowering gnome. Flemyd retreated a few paces and inspected the greasy fingerprints soiling his pristine robes. His outburst was not an angry one, he was merely shocked that such an obviously dirty person would want to soil his clean clothes. Flemyd's always been kind of a stickler about cleanliness. We've been through some of the filthiest pits ever designed by men or gods and he always comes out of them clean as a whistle. He cast a quick spell and as he ran his hand over the dirty cloth the stains disappeared, leaving his robes sparkling clean once more. "What ever possessed him to do such a thing?" Flemyd muttered to himself.

"Gods, what a fuss you make!" I mocked, suppressing a belly laugh.

Pyr and Drygsil chuckled to themselves but Stannwycke seemed unimpressed by my sarcasm, his eyes never leaving Kbrdal.

"We should search him." the aasimar warrior said seriously.

"Be my guest." I nodded towards Kbrdal, who now had an even more wild look in his eyes. I wasn't going to touch that sooty vagabond.

"No! You mustn't!" the gnome sputtered. Kbrdal backed away until he ran out of room in the crook of the titan's arm pit and held his hands out in front of him defensively.

"And what exactly are you afraid we'll find, little man? You hiding something?" Stannwycke advanced steadily upon him and grabbed at him roughly. The gnome struggled but couldn't quite break Stannwycke's strong hold. As they fought I saw something shiny drop from the squealing gnome's pocket. The item bounced and rolled to my feet. It was a green gem, about three inches in diameter, and when I leaned over and picked it up I saw that each facet was carved with tiny symbols.

"What the...?" I began but was cut off by Kbrdal's cry.

"Noooo! I found that! It's mine, give it back!"

Confused, I called for Ash. This gem fit the description of the item we'd been sent to find, but it was much smaller than I had been told it was. In fact, as I held it in my palm, it began to twitch and grow. I watched, mesmerized, as the gem grew to double its original size and then stopped. As the rest of the group came over the crest of the god-island's close horizon in answer to my call, Stannwycke let out an exclamation of surprise. I spun back to see what had happened and was surprised to see the aasimar lifted bodily from the ground and suspended over the head of the creature who had been Kbrdal. Kbrdal looked to be the same scruffy, hairy lout he had been, only now he stood well over eight feet tall! His suddenly muscular arms pistoned down then up and hurled Stannwycke at me.

Nimble dodging the cumbersome projectile that was Stannwycke, I tumbled out of the ditch and rolled to a stop on the giant's arm. Before I could react, the creature leaped at me, screaming madly "The Queen must have the stone! Give it back!" Then I was hit by a wall of muscle. Kbrdal's momentum carried us off the side of the giant's body and out into the silvery ether. We rolled and twisted, vying for position like mismatched wrestlers; his massive eight foot frame versus my slight, five-foot-seven, half-elven body. He maneuvered me into a headlock, and I felt a trickle of blood run down the side of my head as he crushed my face against the sharp, cube shaped, metal talisman that hung from his neck on a thick chain. I must admit to being somewhat averse to pain so I reached back inside my brain and triggered a familiar surge of psionic energy that effervesced across my body, turning myself and all my clothes and equipment incorporeal as I slipped into ethereal form and escaped his bloodthirsty grip with a quick backflip.

Drygsil hefted a spear and readied to skewer my attacker, but Flemyd stayed his hand "I have given my word that we shall not kill him. Dervan will finish this shortly, have no fear." He had said this more for me than for Drygsil.

Seeing that no one else was joining the fray the giant gnome-thing lept at me with renewed savagery, snarling and raising its fists to pummel me senseless.

Confident that his physical attacks would have no effect on my current form, I calmly focused my psionic energy and thrust at his mind with a burst of power. The beast stopped cold, screaming in agony as a spike of pain stabbed at its brain. It clawed at its head with its meaty hands, and as I sent another shock wave of pain through his nervous system, he crumpled, unconscious, into a fetal position. Removing my psionic enchantment, I became solid once more and moved towards the creature to bring it back to the island. By the time I had completed this task, the creature had reverted to its normal size (three foot tall) gnomish frame, but remained unconscious.

Pyr had gone to see to Stannwycke who was only slightly dazed from the ordeal. As they came back to rejoin the rest of our group, the aasimar looked a little embarrassed to have been taken by surprise. "What an unpleasant little fellow!" he said jovially, trying to cover his embarrassment with good humor.

"What sort of creature do you make him to be, master Flemyd?" asked Pyr.

"Spriggan" a new voice uttered. Casting confused glances about us, we eventually realised it was Bel who had spoken. Ash glowered a warning to the waif and she immediately hid her blushing face against our inquiring stares, half turning away from us. "I...I heard of them from my m-mother, is all." The sound of her sweet, lilting voice caused my heart to involuntarily skip a beat. A warm feeling blossomed within me and it seemed that her every word was precious to me. Had anyone interrupted her, I think I might have socked them in the mouth.

Flemyd looked quickly from Siobel to me and stepped in front of her. "Yes, well, you are quite right, my dear. That is exactly what we have here." he said redirecting everyone's attention away from the shy girl. "They are quite unscrupulous fey changelings. I'm sorry I didn't see it before, but they are nearly impossible to distinguish from Tandy's good kin until they reveal themselves." Flemyd seemed to be the only one, besides Ash, who was unaffected by the beauty of Bel's words. The rest of us averted our eyes from the young girl awkwardly, only managing to do so with some effort.

"*What a charming young lady.*" Looker telepathically quipped from his perch upon my shoulder.

"*Shut up.*" I replied. Thereupon he took flight and began sulkily orbiting my head. I turned my attention to the gem we had wrested from the spriggan. It was now six inches in diameter and a rich green in color.

"The artifact appears to change its shape to match its possessor." Ash said over his shoulder as he shepherded Siobel a few steps away from Tandy who was still longingly gazing after the girl. "Let the gnome assay its authenticity."

"Huhn? Er, ah, yeah. lemme see this rock." Tandy said, as he struggled to gather himself and figure out why he suddenly felt such a strong attachment to Bel all of a sudden. I could tell what he was feeling by the look on his face because Drygsil, Stannwycke, and myself all shared the same thoughts. Pyr seemed taken with the girl from the start so he already broke into dopey grins whenever she was near him.

Tandy rooted around in his satchel for a moment, and produced a small magnifying glass and forceps. Next he removed an appraiser's eyeglass and placed it gently in his right eye. I bent low to offer the gem to him on my open palm and he carefully pinched the emerald in the forceps. Tandy spent a few long minutes closely regarding the surface of the gem and muttering to himself. He went back into his satchel and removed a dog-eared sheaf of yellowing paper and an ink bottle. He also found a rather large quill which was so long as to force him to use both hands to remove it from the pouch. The feather sprang to attention at a whopping thirty inches in length when released from its coiled position within the bag. It was nearly as long as Tandy was tall. He laid the paper flat on the ground and then dropped to his belly and began to write. The shaft of his quill wiggled furiously as he took notes and drew sketches on the paper.

"Tandy, where in the Nine Hells did you get a feather like that!" I laughed.

"S'truth, the only bird I know to be capable of producing such large feathers is the fabled roc! Hast thee bested a roc in single combat, friend? They say those birds grow to have wingspans well over one hundred feet! Sing us the tale of your mighty conquest, oh hero!" Drygsil chuckled good-naturedly.

"And here we thought you were unarmed! Why, if we are ever faced with a horde of dragon riding githyanki, you just tickle the dragons under their arms and I'll lop off their riders' heads as they fall from the saddles! Ah, hah,hah,hah!" ribbed Stannwycke, wildly brandishing his sword at invisible invaders.

"Yes, yes. I am small, the feather is large. Ha,ha,ha. Now shut up and let me work, the lot of you!" Tandy griped, only slightly annoyed by our friendly jesting.

"Do they really ride dragons, Stannwycke?" asked Pyr, his beautiful, gold-flecked eyes scanning the warrior's face.

“Well, ahem, yes. That is they are rumored to have made pacts with the evil red dragons on occasion.” the aasimar responded, resuming his composure.

“It’s more than a rumor, kid. Just you pray we don’t run into ‘em.” I said. “They also ride ships that float through the ether guided by their thoughts. The githyanki don’t ken to anyone hangin’ around in the Astral without their say so. Like they own the place or somethin’.”

“Perhaps I’d better stand watch.” Pyr said with some concern in his voice.

“Perhaps we’d all best keep watch.” said Drygsil, now suddenly serious again, as we all were. The rush of adrenaline from Kbrdl’s sudden attack had made us forget our situation for a moment, but it quickly abated at the mention of the evil “Children of Gith”. We spread out across the giant’s lifeless body and scanned the open space on all sides for unwanted visitors, leaving Flemyd, Ash and Bel to watch the unconscious spriggan and the gemologist.

“Well,” said Tandy, standing up at last and carefully folding his papers and tools away in his satchel, “I’ve never seen this kind of workmanship before. It’s rather interesting. There are no tool marks or scratches in any of the grooves. Either this is a masterwork of first rate quality, or it wasn’t etched by hand. Maybe it was formed by magic? At any rate, it’s got to be the artifact you’re looking for. Whoever wants it must have assumed it would be larger because it was in the possession of this giant elf, but see here, it has already changed to suit my own size.” He held out the gem for inspection and it had indeed changed to three inches in diameter.

“Let me have it then, I shall bear it back to Pemil.” said Ash, puffing miniature gray clouds of smoke as his words passed his dark lips. The elf sorcerer took the gem and placed it carefully in a pocket on the inside of his cloak. Just then a bellow cut through the air:

“SHIP!!” It was Pyr calling out from his watch near the giant’s feet.

We all could now see the object of his excited exclamation. There was a shimmer in the air about twenty feet off the giant’s left hand side. As the shimmer subsided a black skiff was revealed to be hanging in the air above us. Strange protrusions jutted out from every angle. Wide, flat shapes, which gave the impression of sails, were extended at regular intervals, though true sails would have been useless in the windless astral void. What their purpose was remains a mystery to me. The alien craft was thirty feet in length and had two parallel decks, one on the top, in the standard position, and one underneath the ship where the keel would be on a sea-going ship. With the selective gravity of the Astral Plane, it was easy to man decks in any juxtaposition one could dream up, and the githyanki took great advantage of this. Both of the flat, angular decks were aswarm with activity. Yellow skinned humanoid manned ballistae and crossbows and boarding hooks on both decks. They all had long dark hair worn tied back in long tails adorned with shiny clasps, and their thin, wiry bodies were dressed in ornate, baroque armor. They obviously had approached under a powerful dweomer of invisibility which had allowed them to come so close without us having seen them.

“Damn it all!” I spat. We should have been more careful! “Why does it always have to be so hard?”

“Githyanki!” Flemyd spoke the dreaded word, identifying the creatures before us. Without a word, the forward ballistae let loose a volley of spears accompanied by a flight of crossbow bolts from the warriors along both decks. The members of our party flew to what cover could be found as the deadly missiles clattered on the rock all around us. Thankfully this volley was mostly ineffectual. I had taken cover in the crook of the giant’s arm with Ash and Bel, while Stannwycke crouched behind his heavy shield, deflecting blow after blow. Tandy managed somehow to dodge and zigzag his way to nestle under the titan’s stoney chin for shelter. Drygsil ducked into the valley created by the giant’s legs and endeavored to keep his head down, but it wasn’t enough to completely cover him as a shaft tore through the flesh of his right shoulder, drawing a grunt of pain from the goat centaur.

Pyr was so close as to be underneath the majority of their arrows and managed to escape injury for the moment. Flemyd strode angrily forward, heedless of the barrage. Any missiles that came his way merely turned aside just before striking home and fell harmlessly to the ground, leaving him unscathed. He walked towards the githyanki ship, muttering arcane words under his breath. Under the cover of the first volley, the githyanki had swung several grappling irons to anchor their craft to the island. Now they came on, hurling themselves through the air in waves towards us. Their warcry was a high-pitched, nasal fluting that sent a chill down my spine. The unsettling call was oddly musical, presumably due to their alien physiology. Their noses were flush with their faces, giving them an eerie, skeletal appearance. I grimly estimated thirty githyanki warriors or more in the patrol as they stormed over the sides of their misshapen vessel. The first of them to step foot on the island did so only to be met by the gleaming head of Drygsil’s flying spear, hurled with such strength that it drove through the raider’s torso, ending its life and sending a spray of

black blood gushing onto the next row of warriors. The bariaur roared in triumph and reared back on his hind legs to reach for another spear. The githyanki rushed ahead to attack his exposed torso, but were too slow. Drygsil brought his horned head down hard against the skull of the next warrior in line. The jarring pop of the githyanki's ruined skull echoed across the void.

Pyr was instantly surrounded by sallow warriors, some bearing the singular githyanki "Silver Swords", which marked them as elite warriors. These dreaded weapons were fashioned by the githyanki in a jealously guarded process. Each blade was unique to its owner. The unknown element used to make the blades of these curving, barbed swords evoked an image of twisted and tortured souls, screaming in pain and terror, railing against their cruel masters who had forced them into unending servitude. The blades nearly vibrated with hatred and bloodlust. Unarmed, Pyr was swarmed and borne down under the weight of four or five snarling warriors.

Stannwycke rose to his feet and with a loud warcry, "For god and glory!" echoing from inside his grim, canine faceplate, surged forward to battle. He held his battered shield in front of him and his trailing right arm bore his mighty broadsword, point down, behind him. I too rose and padded softly towards the fight, raining dozens of silvery ectoplasmic shafts upon the raiders faster than the eye could follow. Not all my shots struck flesh, but many an exposed neck, eye, or chest suffered as the arrows fell like a deadly firestorm amongst the attackers, slashing, gouging, and burning. Looker flew above me to a good height to survey the entire battle and relay tactical information to me. Siobel fell into step beside me, but remembering her rear guard assignment, stopped on the giant's stomach and drew her sword while looking back towards Ash who crawled out onto the titan's chest and began the casting of a spell behind the low barricade provided by the titan's folded arms. Seeing Ash was safe for the time being, Bel began an incantation of her own, her arms held open wide in what I was soon to learn was only the dark mockery of a welcoming embrace. Her elven longsword, gripped in her delicate left hand, began to flash a vibrant green, pulsing in anticipation of a promised bloodletting. Bel silently rose above the ground until her feet dangled loosely about two feet from the rock. Her hair began to whirl and undulate, as if blown by some phantasmal wind and her eyes rolled back in her head as she awaited the enemy in this position.

A group of seven githyanki warriors had broken off from the main force and were now charging Flemyd. As they neared to within twenty feet of him, the wizard's right arm rose and he tossed a small pebble into their midst. The fiery explosion that followed tore through their formation, scattering githyanki bodies and weapons in every direction and when the blast subsided, six of the seven warriors were dead or dying. The seventh rolled away from the fireball and leapt to his feet. He charged away from Flemyd towards Siobel at a dead run, his sword raised menacingly above his head. Before he had the chance to bring the girl under his blade, Bel's left arm shot out, seemingly dragged by the force of the sword's thrust. It was all she could do to retain her grip on the lightning fast sword as it thrust down and completely through the githyanki's body, pinning him horribly to the rock beneath his feet. The motion had been so swift that the githyanki's arm was still raised above his head, though the creature had been brought to his knees by the power of Siobel's strike. Bel twisted the sword jarringly, evoking a "Ghurrk!" from her victim, and then pulled her blade out, resuming her previous position.

From the skiff came a low braying sound, possibly from some sort of horn instrument. Concerned that the raiders were calling upon reinforcements in the immediate area, I took a moment to don my Goggles of True Sight. Although the mystical properties of my goggles do not allow me to see the invisible, they can penetrate even the most sophisticated illusions. As soon as the goggles were in place an amazing sight was revealed to me. A hundred yards away from the island, opposite the attackers' ship, a thin, whirling, vortex of air writhed from horizon to horizon as far as I could see. I recognized this anomaly from my previous travels across the planes and knew that it was a passageway, of sorts, to another planar dimension. This funnel was invisible to the naked eye. Writhing noiselessly only a short distance away, I never would have noticed it without magical aid, and as no other githyanki vessels could be seen, I allowed myself a moment's hesitation to wonder what plane it connected to.

*"Are we through taking in the sights? Maybe we wanna help out Stannwycke now? He is outnumbered eleven to one."* Looker urged mentally.

*"Cool it, he's doin' alright."* And he was, too. Facing the brunt of the attack, Stannwycke stood tall in his gleaming armor, working his powerful shoulders in circular motions to block a blow here, then slash with his sword there. Two githyanki had already fallen to his broadsword by the time I rejoined the fight.

**BIIZZHHAKK!!** A loud crackle sounded in the air as a white bolt of lightning arced across the island from Ash's outstretched hands. It struck one of the raiders in the chest, then arced again to his nearest comrade, then again to another, before it stopped. All three warriors were propelled backwards by the mystical

force and fell to the ground with black, smoking holes burned into their armor.

"See?" I said telepathically.

"*Maybe we better see to Pyr instead.*" Looker replied demurely.

Pyr was still wrestling with three warriors, a fourth lay unconscious on the ground nearby, when I ran towards the giant's right leg shouting "Pyr, why don't you change? Take these guys out!"

"Oh, that hardly seems fair. They're so much smaller than me." said Pyr as he twisted the arm of one githyanki, flipping him onto his back as easily as turning a doorknob.

Drygsil was in much worse shape over on the left leg. He was still surrounded by five raiders though he'd more than held his own. Three bodies littered the ground at the bariaur's cloven feet, though whether they were dead or wounded, I couldn't tell. Drygsil had sustained several deep gashes along his shoulders and torso. He was in real trouble and loosing blood fast. The githyanki grinned wickedly, savoring their prey's waning struggle as they searched for a hole in Drygsil's defense. Soon his deadly spear point would droop too low and leave an opening they could take advantage of. Thinking quickly, I decided to take a risk to get him out of immediate danger. I reached out with my mind and made contact with Drygsil. The goat-man's subconscious mind opened to me, welcomingly, and with a surge of psionic energy, I effected a tactical retreat for my wounded companion by instantly swapping our respective positions. The alien skirmishers surrounding me were taken aback at my sudden appearance before them, so they paused momentarily to reassess the situation. As I prepared to defend myself from the githyankis' sword thrusts, a loud "Whumpp!" sounded and the island trembled as if struck by a heavy blow. Upon hearing the strange noise and feeling the island shiver, all five warriors smiled thinly and began to back away towards the grappling hooks that moored their craft to the giant's body.

"*They're all backing off. What'd we do?*" asked Looker. The githyanki were indeed executing a well ordered withdrawal back to their ship. We let them go, more concerned with what was coming next.

"*Wait for it...*" I said, attempting to regain my psionic focus.

"Look!" cried Ash, pointing towards the head of the titan. All our heads swivelled around, searching the field for a new combatant. I saw Tandy huddled under the giant's chin. Rising behind his hiding spot came a thick, metallic red appendage of some kind. It rose to tower over the gnome by about five feet and twitched curiously. Tandy had not yet seen it but was watching our faces gaping at him in suspended horror.

"What? What is it?" As if cued by the gnome's timid words, the tentacle came crashing down upon him with brutal force. Luckily, Tandy was far enough under the giant's prominent chin to be shielded from the strike, which sent shock waves rumbling through the ground under us and broke off a large chunk of the titan's face. At the same instant on the opposite side of the island a huge reptilian head rose up behind Stannwycke's position on the giant's left arm.

"It's a red!" Looker blurted aloud the thought we all shared in that frozen moment. A red dragon, and a big one from the look of it. Its entire body was covered in smooth, blood red scales, except for its belly which was armored with pale yellow bands of dragon scale. Its yellow eyes fixed upon Flemyd and Stannwycke who were directly in front of the beast's snout. The dragon reared its head back, opening its huge maw to reveal row upon row of dagger-like teeth and a fat purple tongue. As it rose up to this position, we all could see the grisly pendant which the wicked creature had hung about its neck: the head of Elias Wendicutt, wizard, fortune hunter, and, apparently, wyrm food, was attached to a thick chain. Reading the dragon's movement, Flemyd sped forward, reaching out towards Stannwycke, who'd only had time to brace for whatever was coming behind his shield, there was no time run and nowhere to run to. I performed a backflip and, gripping the edge of the giant's arm, swung myself onto the backside of our host, upon which the red dragon's impressive bulk rested. The dragon's head jutted forward again, blasting a jet of white hot flame directly at Stannwycke and Flemyd. I heard Bel's and Drygsil's screams of horror but quickly realized they were unnecessary as of yet, for Flemyd and Stannwycke now rose up from the ground before me, unscathed, having passed through the giant's body once more by the swift application of Flemyd's powers.

"Raaaaaugh! Cowards! You cannot run forever! Folgrymslagh's talons will soon rend you limb from limb, you will all die screaming!" Bellowed the huge red dragon.

"You are boastful, Folgrymslagh, yet it is battle, not empty words, that shall reveal whose lifepath has come to an end this day. So come and embrace me, foul stain, for Pyradiantyrialus will breathe his last ere I should allow you to harm these good people!" Pyr's beautiful voice thundered, filled with a hatred I had never sensed in him before now. The enmity between the benevolent gold dragons and the

cruel red dragons is well documented by sages throughout history, and is passed from generation to generation amongst the dragonkin. These two were no exception.

Flemyd, Stannwycke, and I ran topside to see the dragons facing each other. Pyr had relinquished his human guise. Now he stood before us, more than fifteen feet in length, his sinuous, reptilian body covered in iridescent scales that had nearly finished turning from the bright yellow of youth to the true golden color of adulthood. Long whiskers descended from his wise countenance and his gold-flecked eyes shone brightly with anger. Pyr's wings unfolded and flapped once, stretching his back muscles as he prepared to hurl his almost four thousand pounds at Folgrymslagh. As for the red dragon, he was twice the size of Pyr. An adult red, thirty feet long, or more perhaps. His shaggy head sprouted stiff, black hairs by his ear holes, and his wings were folded tightly against his heavily muscled body.

"Heh, heh, heh. As you wish. I will end you, whelp, then I will take my time burning the flesh from your pets." Flames licked at the evil dragon's teeth as he taunted Pyr.

"Pyr, don't! I will deal with him!" called Flemyd, but it was too late. His cry was drowned out by Pyraediantyrialus' earsplitting roar as the gold dragon surged through the air at his adversary. The sound of the dragons' collision was loud as a thunderclap, and the two draconic enemies became one roiling mass of claws, fangs, and flame as they tore into each other. Pyr was by far the swifter of the two combatants, his lithe evasions keeping him from bearing the brunt of Folgrymslagh's more powerful blows. The red dragon's huge tail slashed back and forth in an attempt to trip up his nimble opponent.

The initial shock of seeing first the red dragon, then Pyr's transformation, was hard for the others to shake off. Stannwycke reacted the quickest, running to aid Pyr as best he could. The mighty dragons thrashed so violently, though, that it wasn't possible for him to close with the enemy. Bel and Ash were surrounded by an opaque dome of magical energy, a spell of protection summoned up by Ash. The sorcerer held Bel's hand firmly, holding her back from the fray. He seemed to be casting another spell as I glanced their way, though to what effect I never knew. Drygsil still lay where he had fallen when he and I had swapped places. He was drinking a pinkish liquid from a barkskin flask. I recognized it as a healing potion, the kind provided by Pemil on previous jobs I'd had the pleasure to perform for our benefactor. Flemyd's brow was knit with concern for his young friend. He snapped his gloved fingers and instantly a long shimmering staff appeared in his hands. The shaft of the staff was straight and smooth. It had been carved from an ivory colored material and was topped with a large purple gem.

"Sammak-kho!" Flemyd bellowed as he hefted the staff and pointed it at the battling dragons. A five foot wide bolt of lightning shot out from the purple gem at the end of the staff and struck Folgrymslagh in the ribs, momentarily knocking him down. The evil dragon screamed in pain and surprise, tumbling backwards off the island and into the open air of the Astral Plane. I sent several shots from my bow trailing after him, but to little effect as the dragon's thick hide deflected my arrows. Pyr leaped up and flew in pursuit, hitting the red dragon with all his might just as Folgrymslagh was regaining his balance. As he struck, he also exhaled a billowing cloud of gas from his throat, encompassing his enemy in shimmering golden mist. Being a gold dragon meant that Pyr had two different breath weapons at his disposal. One was flame, useless versus this foe as both dragons were resistant to fire. The other was gas, which weakened those who were exposed to it. There didn't seem to be any immediate effect, however, because Folgrymslagh slapped at Pyr with his mighty tail and swatted the young dragon away.

Momentarily stunned, Pyr rolled into a backflip, using his momentum to fly backwards in a long loop over the island, intending to swoop around the underside of the floating rock and pick up speed to resume his attack. Folgrymslagh was faster than he appeared, however, and immediately raced after the gold dragon. As he cruised in low over the titan's body, he changed tactics. The githyanki had reappeared out of thin air, on the chest of the titan between Stannwyck and Drygsil, who were on the left and right arms, respectively. We had been negligent in following up on the githyanki after the dragon's appearance, and they used this to their advantage. Githyanki possess psionic abilities somewhat akin to my own, though generally less powerful, and they are able to teleport over short distances. There were still a dozen or more of the wicked humanoids and they lunged out at us in four directions: two each at Drygsil and Stannwycke, four at Bel and Ash, and four at Flemyd whom I found myself a few paces behind. In the space of a breath, I placed an arrow in each of the four warriors approaching Flemyd's position, downing two. Flemyd once again raised his enchanted staff, this time whispering "Megrei-kho" and five glowing darts fired from the staff trailing blue comet tails of light behind them. The darts struck the remaining two githyanki in front of the wizard, finishing both neatly.

Drygsil saw the enemy appear in time to brace for their attack, and was defending himself adroitly, using his spear to keep distance between himself and the

yellow skinned raiders' flashing Silver Swords. Ash released Siobel and she resumed her floating stance just as the first of four warriors made a vicious thrust at her throat. The elfin girl gracefully glided to the side, avoiding the deadly blow, and brought her sword up with the same motion. The blade rang against the githyanki's armor but rattled off, harmlessly. Siobel brought her weapon down in an arc at the head of the next warrior, never slowing the momentum of her arm, splitting it cleanly in two. This left her open on her right side, a fact which was not overlooked by the third githyanki swordsman, who opened a gash along Bel's stomach with a quick slash. The first githyanki had passed Siobel and continued on towards Ash. The sorcerer attempted a quick spell, but it produced no effect other than a puff of green smoke, obviously not the desired result, as it slowed the warrior not a bit. Nor did the opaque dome protect Ash from physical attacks, as the githyanki swung his Silver Sword at the sorcerer's neck. Ash backed away hurriedly and stumbled over some rocks, falling hard on his backside. The raider's sword point cleaved the air mere inches from Ash's nose as he fell.

Stannwycke had been watching for an opportunity to strike at the low flying red dragon's belly when the githyanki appeared behind him. He spun around but was not quick enough to properly defend against their attack. The first warrior drove the tip of his sword into Stannwycke's breastplate, slicing into it as easily as if it were paper, and sending a spray of hot blood splashing up to the hilt of the magical blade. The second landed a heavy blow against Stannwycke's left hip, again slicing through the armor to raise a gout of blood. As the red dragon soared above him chasing Pyr, Stannwycke slammed his shield arm into one opponent and swung his sword in a brutal plunge that took the other's arm off at the shoulder. Folgrymslagh's right claw descended on the aasimar, plucking him up like a child's toy. The shock of this unexpected action, caused Stannwycke to lose his grip on his broadsword, which clattered to the earth as he was swept into the air.

Meanwhile, the astral raider looming over the fallen Ash, raised his sword above his head for the killing stroke, curling the corners of his lipless mouth up in a twisted grin. He was savoring this moment, the sorcerer begging for mercy that the githyanki knew was not forthcoming. Ash held his hands up and cringed, hiding his face. However, the clever githyanki had misjudged his victim this time. Ash's grovelling was a ruse to allow him time to cast one more spell. As the tiefling's dark hands fanned out towards the githyanki, a surge of bright blue flame flashed out, engulfing the hapless warrior.

Drygsil feinted left with his spear and countered his enemies' shift to the right with a deft spin move. Both the bariaur's rear hooves leapt off the ground to catch one githyanki full in the chest. The raider landed hard, claspings at his collapsed chest cavity. Ducking under a deadly sword stroke, Drygsil swung his spear behind his back and thrust with all his might at the second githyanki, skewering him through the bowels, killing him instantly. The proud bariaur snorted in grim triumph as he wrenched his broad leaf spear point from the githyanki's corpse. The remaining githyanki warriors had finally had enough. They disappeared as quickly as they had come, retreating by the use of their innate psionic teleportation ability.

Folgrymslagh circled up away from the island with his aasimar prize clutched firmly in his huge claws. Stannwycke could be seen struggling violently, using the only weapon left to him, his shield. Again and again the knight slammed his bulwark against the dragon's armored leg, yet the evil reptilian beast held fast. Pyr saw the red dragon's new heading and followed quickly.

Suddenly, Folgrymslagh stopped short and turned to look back upon the gold dragon, saying "As you see, youngling, no good can come from relying on these weak humanoids. My allies have abandoned me just as yours will surely leave you, one day soon. They are less than worthless to such greater beings as us." With that, the wicked dragon wrenched his claws, twisting Stannwycke's body cruelly. A scream of pain escaped the aasimar's lips as his armor bent and cracked under the pressure. Pyr rose rapidly but he was still too far away to stop the beast. With a gleeful roar, Folgrymslagh gave one last twist, and Stannwycke's spine splintered like kindling. The knight's limp body was tossed aside as Pyr slammed heavily into the red dragon with a loud crash. Once again, the two tumbled through the void, clawing and biting each other. Flames and clouds of gas billowed forth as the mighty lizards battled, giving no quarter and sparing no expense of energy. Pyr's quickness allowed him to snatch the larger drake's tail, as they spun. The young dragon pulled with all his strength, surprising Folgrymslagh who was hurtled back towards the island. The red dragon tumbled end over end, until he finally managed to regain control a mere four feet above the rock island. Our disappointment at his avoidance of the crash was fleeting, however, as Pyraediantyrialus slammed into Folgrymslagh once again. Pyr's weight bore the red down to earth so hard the whole island rocked with the concussive force. A long crack appeared snaking across the titan's waist. The red dragon was not unconscious, but he was stunned. Pyr wasted no time. The gold dragon clamped his powerful jaws down, tearing a chunk of flesh from the red's

shoulder and raking its chest with his talons. The red dragon was terribly hurt, but far from finished. Folgrymslagh blasted a gout of fire directly into Pyr's face, which did no real damage due to Pyr's fire resistant hide, but did temporarily blind him. The evil dragon now had Pyr off balance and used his massive bulk to kick Pyraedian-tyrialus high into the air. Folgrymslagh righted himself and coiled his muscles to spring after the gold dragon, but then he became aware of Flemyd Floyne, hovering above him and blocking his path.

"Enough!" the arch wizard hollered, hefting his staff above his head. "You cannot win this day, beast! Retreat now, while you are afforded the chance." Flemyd's purple and white robes, and long braided beard fluttered as if blown by a strong breeze, though the air was still. His eyes were set in a steely glare beneath his bushy grey brows. The metal shoulder guards Flemyd wore glinted a sparkling violet hue, reflecting the light cast by his staff's radiant purple gem. As he spoke, Drygsil, Siobel, Ash, and I moved slowly into positions surrounding the great lizard.

Glancing about himself to note our encirclement, the red dragon laughed and without saying another word, spun swiftly around to sweep his mighty tail at Bel and Ash. While doing so his head faced Drygsil and myself and another gout of flaming breath issued forth from his reptilian lips, baking the rock around us. Moving with a speed which I dare say few could have achieved, I reacted before the dragon's mouth was fully open, spinning and tumbling away in the nick of time to avoid being cooked in the flames. Drygsil fared less well and though he dodged well, could not fully escape the blast. Drygsil fell, his body smoking and partially blackened, and began to roll back and forth upon the ground to extinguish the fire.

As the wicked beast's tail swung towards Siobel, Ash's hands flew up above his head in a demonstrative gesture. As they did so a thick wall of solid earth sprung upwards in front of the girl. The dragon's tail smashed into the barrier and shattered the rock protrusion, but at great cost. Folgrymslagh's tail now hung limp, several bones in his prehensile appendage were also broken in the collision.

Flemyd pointed his staff at the dragon's head and called out "Fregid-kho!" At this command word a cone of freezing cold ice crystals showered forth from the staff, engulfing the red dragon. Folgrymslagh recoiled from the frosty chill but his head and neck were now glossy with a thin coat of ice. I drew back my bow-string and fired off three shots at the creature. The first two struck but did little damage. The third flaming arrow was a truly lucky shot. Every now and then, with a particularly well charged ectoplasmic arrow, the arrow explodes with psionic energy upon contact with its target. This is what happened with my last arrow. The missile struck with a heavy thud, which was followed by a dull 'whumph' and a bright flash of light. The explosion shattered the dragon's icy coating, also removing frozen flesh and scales with it. Folgrymslagh bellowed in pain and leaped over the edge of the island to plummet down below, out of sight.

Pyr had regained his footing and made to give chase but was halted by Flemyd. "The dragon is a threat to us no more. Leave him. We must collect our friends and quit this place, for there are more dangers at hand. Look!" At this the wizard pointed into the distance where three odd shaped vessels could be seen approaching us.

"The githyanki have summoned reinforcements!" yelled Drygsil in surprise.

"I know you can't cast another gate spell yet, Flemyd, but there is another way we can escape. There is a vortex a hundred yards or so in that direction that will take us out of the Astral Plane."

"But where will it dump us?" asked Ash, doubtfully.

"Anywhere is more amenable than this place, I dare say." said Tandy, crawling out from his hiding spot to rejoin the group.

"Very well, Pyr, gather up brave Stannwycke. We shall have to see to him later." Flemyd decided.

"Where's the ugly little guy?" Looker asked me. I looked at the spot where we had left the unconscious spriggan and, with no surprise, found him absent.

"Uh-oh. Where's hairy?" I asked aloud.

"Hairy? Oh, the spriggan, I'd quite forgotten. I've not seen him." said Flemyd "But we've no time to search for him."

"We don't need to, he's right over there!" said Ash. The sorcerer pointed towards the feet of the titan, where stood Kbrdl and a thin, dark skinned man with long black hair who seemed to be cloaked in shadows that moved and swirled about him. Behind them was a small rift, a portal of some sort that lead to deep blackness beyond. As we watched, helpless to intervene, they stepped through the portal. As they disappeared into another unknown dimension, Kbrdl turned and waved a clenched fist at us. In his fist was the green gem we had been sent for.

"Damn it!" Ash began furiously rifling through his cloak pockets, of course finding them empty. "Blasted thief!"

"Great, just great. Well we can't do anything about it now. Right now

we'd better give these githyanki the laugh and deal with the gem's loss later." I said. Ash sulkily fell in with the rest of us as we floated across the void towards the whirling, invisible vortex I had seen when donning my Goggles of True Sight.

"Have a caution, fellows. There is no way to know where this will lead us. I have some ability to protect us from the dangers of unsafe planar features, but any extra protections you have should be useful at this time." Flemyd warned. He then cast a couple of quick spells of warding upon us and we entered the vortex, just as the githyanki reinforcements pulled up to the titan-island. They did not follow.