



BLADE AND FEATHER



BY

RYAN B PARTLOW

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Dedication

Special thanks to my buddy Andy for being a GM that allowed my crazy mind to run wild. Without him I never would have written this book or met Hoots to begin with, so if you hate it, it is all his fault!

Thanks to my wife Lindsey for putting up this idiot uber-geek, and for truly being my best friend!

Chapter 1: Rain and Blood

The rain was coming down hard in the Village, and everyone was idling away in the Inn. The name of the Inn and the Village are of no consequence because they were practically like every other crappy Village and Inn that you would find out in the middle of nowhere. It is as if there is a scroll somewhere that they give to village planners on how to layout podunk mud-holes, and the Adventurer at the bar could undoubtedly navigate them all blindfolded. That and he could smell booze about ten miles away, give or take.

No, there was nothing about the Adventurer that made him stand out either, he wore nicer than most scale mail, and his sword was impressive looking, but then so did most living adventurers. No, what was different about him was the eight foot tall owl standing next to him drinking ale out of a bowl and speaking some sort Northern Giant tongue. Yes, the owl was giving the villagers pause, and the fact the he and the Adventurer were carrying some sort of conversation made the Adventurer really stand out.

Now the villagers had seen many a strange pet: a sorceress with a talking cat, a man with a lizard that did card tricks, and once even a dog with a man on a leash, but this owl was of a different nature. Probably due to the fact it had a definite gleam of hunger in its eye every time it looked at them. It was also unnerving that since none of them spoke Giant that

they could not understand the discussion that he was engaged in.

The conversation that the Adventurer, “Shmee”, and the owl, “Guardian of the Holy Implement” or in his own language “Whowho ... Whowhowhowho ... Who” or in Northern Giant “Bal Dorak Mag Holm”, but as Shmee called him “Hoots”, was having was about the buxom bar maid.

“She is one pretty lass that if for sure” said Shmee elbowing Hoots in the ribs. “She does seem to have all the features that your kind ... who ... find attractive” observed Hoots, adding “but doesn’t have a enough meat on her to provide a satisfying meal for... whowho... me.” “Remember Hoots you only eat the bad ones, or at least the ones that I don’t like anyway!” scorned Shmee. “I understand your command master ... who ... but it has been awhile since we have completed a task that resulted in adequate meat” responded Hoots. To which Shmee sighed and shrugged. He noticed that his drink was unfortunately empty and motioned to the buxom bar maid for another round.

As she approached, Shmee asked with his most ‘I am awesome check me out pose’, “Have you heard of anything that needs doing around here?” The owl tried not to regurgitate a giant pellet. She responded with her best ‘I am only being nice for the tips’ smile “Not that am aware of, since the war ended the guards have been able to deal with most of issues around town. I don’t remember a more peaceful time in all of Capraciss.” As she filled his mug, she

tried not to take too much delight in Shmee's dejected look. Even Hoots had to hold back a bit of a laugh.

The end of the Great Illusion war had been hard on all adventurers. Things had been going their way with the Mad Mages gaining the upper hand by moving the Blue Moon closer to the earth, more than doubling the Mad Mages' power. But during Grand Czar Mage Kwak's great offensive, some jerk hit the Blue Moon with a large bolt of light sending it back to its proper location. The confusion among the Mad Mages to their loss of power gave the Allied Capraciss Army the window they needed to defeat the Mad Mages. Bringing with it a peace and prosperity like which has never been seen before.

Peace and Prosperity aren't strictly speaking words adventurers like to hear. Sure they have to pretend that is what they want so local rubes will trust them with their quests, but those words usually mean trying not to starve while waiting for the next conflict or strange ethereal happening. Famous adventurers can make do hanging out in bars regaling former glories, but lesser known heroes like Shmee, nobody wanted to hear their stories, mostly because they all kind of sounded the same: bandits, rouge mages, goblin uprisings, and giant beasts usually of the rodent persuasion.

Shmee sipped his now wonderfully full pint of ale and started to scout out the exits to see if he and his owl friend could sneak out of one of them undetected, and then hit the next

podunk mud-hole bar to see what work could be done, if any. The owner of the Inn must have picked up on this look, using his very keen “bum” senses, and made his way towards the pair. “That will be eight coppers for the four pints ‘Sir’” the owner said, somehow making the word “Sir” as insulting as possible. He was also doing his best to stay a pace or twelve away from the large carnivorous bird.

The adventurer smiled and grabbed at his money belt and slowly and as genuinely as possible turned his smile in to a frown and with a dismayed voice explained “I seem to be short by exactly eight coppers.” Now Shmee knew this was going to go one of two ways. One, the bar keep would take pity on him and have him work off his debt, doubtful. Two, yell “Guards” at the top of his lungs and Shmee and Hoots would have to do their best to fight their way out without hurting anyone, well without killing them anyway. Hoots understanding the situation quickly slammed his beak in to the bowl and started drinking his ale fast as owllly possible.

“Guards!” was barely out of the Inn Owner’s mouth, and Shmee was already in action with his ale in one hand and his sword, still hilted, in the other. Unfortunately for the pair, there was a group of guards at a corner table, six to be exact, and considering the Inn Owner must have had lungs the size of grain sacks, there were sure to be more coming. Shmee downed his ale in one gulp and then threw his stein at the guards who were now on their feet and trying to make their way towards the duo. He hit one in face and judging by the explosion of blood it must have broken his nose. Hoots,

finished with his brew, grabbed a bar stool with his talons and with a flap of his mighty wings threw it in the guards path, causing them to trip over each other. Luckily it seemed as though guards were several pints in, and basic navigation and tactics seemed to be too much for them.

Not wasting any time Shmee and Hoots were out the side door, and they could see the lights of torches and hear the sound of boots in mud. "At least the rain will slow them down" Shmee sighed. Hoots gave him an unimpressed look. Hoots grabbed Shmee by the shoulders and they were off. Shmee was glad Hoots could see where they were going. Because all Shmee could see was the rain hitting him in the eyes, and he was wishing he would have had time to put on the goggles he had gotten from a tinker dwarf. Shmee's eyes felt like they were being sanded, and Shmee would have closed his eyes if not for the fact that he was dodging tree tops with his lower body. Because Hoots had grown up in a cave, he was not fond of heights, and would rarely fly much higher the forest canopy.

After a couple hours Shmee looked up and said, "That should do it Guardian of the Holy Implement". Hoots found an open area and put Shmee down and landed next to him. "There are not going to be any towns ... whowho ... that will let us back after a while" explained Hoots. Shmee shrugged and nodded, "I am going to see if there is any dry wood around so we don't have to be cold tonight." It was Hoots turn to nod, and then flew off to find something made out of meat.

It took Shmee the better part of an hour but he managed to start a fire, and with a little nursing it was starting to warm up the drenched adventurer. He could hear the wing beats of his friend returning, hopefully with something that wasn't rotting, as disgusting as a goblin, or a human. While Hoots had learned to tell the difference between good and bad guys, mostly, he still could not understand why Shmee refused to eat them. Shmee had tried to explain it once by asking Hoots "Would you eat an owl?", Hoots nodded that he would, and it occurred to Shmee that normal owls were beneath Hoots, so he did not seem to mind the thought. So he then asked "would you eat another owl like yourself?", and then instantly wished he hadn't. Hoots, as far as they could tell was the only giant owl in existence. Sure there were owl bears, but they were still just wild animals, and they could not even fly let alone speak. They had yet to find even a normal sized owl that was as intelligent as Hoots. These facts made the subject of other giant owls a very painful topic for Hoots, and Shmee thought he could see a tear in the eye of the large bird of prey.

Much to Shmee's relief Hoots brought back a deer, a big one in fact, and the thought of eating well for a few days made him as happy as he could be in the rain and on the lamb.

Thanks to Hoots being nocturnal Shmee always slept soundly at night knowing that nobody would be able to approach them without Hoots hearing or seeing them. This luxury also created a problem because Hoots like to sleep during the day, so they had to do most of their traveling during dawn

and dusk, and Hoots slept for about five hours during midday.

This arrangement worked for the most part because dawn and dusk were both the perfect times for their most steady employment: walking up and down bad roads trying to look rich and hoping to be mugged. The look on the dumb thieves faces when all of the sudden they were being hacked to pieces by a flaming sword, named Ember, and then aerially attacked by some sort of flying black-death, was priceless. It made Shmee laugh every time. Now to some this may have made Shmee seem heartless, but if they didn't want to be set on fire by Ember or eaten by a giant owl than they should not have been thieves. Tricking thieves was probably common job for a lot of current hero types these days, so as such there were fewer thieves to slaughter. Thus a lot more dine and dashes from Shmee and Hoots.

While in the middle of a wonderful dream about a land full of free beer and attractive serving girls, he was nudged awake by the forewing of Hoots. "There is a woman screaming ... who ... about a mile from here" said the owl quietly. Shmee sprang up with a smile on his face. A full belly and now a job, things were looking up! Screaming women usually meant bandits, and bandits usually meant idiots. It could also mean a domestic disturbance, and that was always disappointing. Shmee was off and running to get there before the guards. Those jerks tended to be just as bored as heroes during peacetime, and it was always a race to get there first. The great thing about rescues is that the recued tended to be

grateful. Which hopefully meant more food and a warm place to sleep, and sometimes a little extra coin. Which he would of course pretend not to want to accept, but would than take out of the goodness of his heart.

He was about half way there and he could hear the commotion in front of him and he instinctively took a knee when he heard a rustle in the trees above. Hoots had scouted ahead and was returning to deliver the info. Even though Hoots did not like to fly high, his wings against the night sky made him almost impossible to spot, and if he was spotted somehow, the giant black shadow with gleaming eyes was a sight to terrifying to comprehend, so most people just pretended to have imagined it. The thought still sent shivers up the spine of Shmee. “They are not bandits; they are ridding under banners” hooted the owl. Shmee’s heart sank; the woman was a prisoner not a victim, so much for saving the day. “Who banner?” hooted Shmee. Shmee was doing his best to learn Owl so that conversations such as this it sounded like a couple of owls instead of a couple of giants, which he was sure would get peoples’ attention, but his Owl to him still sounded like a crazy person going “who who who”. To the untrained ear it must have been close enough to the real thing since it never seemed to arouse suspicion. “Unknown; the emblem is a skull on a spear, with a viper wrapped around it” responded Hoots. “Well they still bad, good guy no fly under jerk banner” said Shmee as best he could. The owl replied “there are six of them, two archers, three swordsmen, and the leader. The archers and the

leader are on horseback.” “Let go and look and judge from close” explained Shmee. Hoots flew off and Shmee continued his run.

Shmee was fairly certain they these were bad men because their flag was something only evil wankers would ride under. Normal people ride under things like bears and stags, lions perhaps. But only evil people thought it was a good idea to have a skull or a harpy or something gross on a flag. For some reason they liked to advertise their evilness. Shmee often thought they would probably draw more people to their cause if they would simply fly under something simple like a hare or a pig, but he guessed looking like a moron made sense to an evil man.

When Shmee arrived at the scene he could see several bodies strewn about. It looked as though the guards had gotten there first. To find them dead was not much of a surprise considering guards were only slightly better at fighting than bandits. This was fine for the most part because all they fought was bandits, and other than that their entire job was to look menacingly at would-be thieves and make unintelligent villagers feel safe. Two of the swordsmen had a woman by the arms and were dragging her. She was doing her best to not cooperate, yelling, kicking and dragging her feet. She obviously was important because she would have been dead otherwise. Shmee saw a black shadow behind the group, and could see the eyes stare at him in the darkness. He whispered the enchantment that doubled the strength of his armor, and placed the mask of the Mad Mage Gal Bresk

on his face. It made him look just as evil as the jerks he was about to attack, but he wasn't about let the resistance to magic attacks go to waste, and it was nice to know it could stop an arrow or two or the blow of a cheap sword. He cursed the bruises he was about to get, and his flesh itched with the cuts he was about to receive. "Why couldn't they have been bandits" he wondered to himself. He quietly unsheathed his sword and looked back at Hoots and nodded. With that he sprinted towards the swordsmen.

He closed the gap so quickly that the first swordsmen did not have time to react, and by the time he saw Shmee, Ember was buried in his chest up to the hilt. Shmee was spinning his way to the next two men, so they had no choice but to release the prisoner and draw their swords. The archers were drawing their bows, but as the first one took aim he disappeared. The second archer was understandably dismayed, but did his best regain his composure. Then he saw it. It was a dark void with a gleam in his eyes that said one thing: dinner. He tried to scream, but it was too late because his head was inside a beak. Shmee meanwhile was doing his best to turn two men in to cubes of meat and ash, and was by all accounts succeeding until a large hammer hit him in the back and sent him flying through the air. He turned to see the mounted captain with a very displeased look on his face. Whatever protection the armor enchantment had given him had worn off due to that hit, and another would do some serious bodily harm. The horse reared up and then started to charge at Shmee and almost

arrived, but in a flash he was knocked over by Hoots. Shmee jumped to his feet and swung at the now prone captain, who blocked without looking, and was on his feet in an impossibly short amount of time. He was swinging his hammer at Shmee, and Shmee was doing his best to dodge out of the way, but the captain was still landing glancing blows. Hoots swooped in and grabbed the captain's arms with both talons and started to peck at the Captain. Shmee took the opportunity to split the man in half.

With the battle over Shmee turned his attention over to the prisoner. She had chains on her hands and feet, but she had grabbed a sword, and it appeared that she at least knew where to point the sharp end. A slight breeze was blowing through her hair revealing her pointed ears. "Not an Elf!" Shmee thought to himself. This insured that she would not be grateful for the rescue. Elves believed in fate so much that if you did anything to help them, then all you were doing was what you were fated to do anyway, so there was no reason to make fuss. Still she was the reason they were there, so Shmee slowly sheathed this sword and took off his undeniably creepy mask, and gave Hoots a look as to tell him "stop eating that guy!" He then grabbed some keys off the half eaten man then motioned for the woman to lower her sword. She hesitated for a moment and then complied.

Shmee slowly walked towards the elf, and stated to unlock her chains. "She is pretty for an elf, if you are in to tall, slender, a flawless complexion, and amazing curves" thought Shmee. "Are you from around here?" blurted out Shmee.

“No” said the elf. “So that was pretty amazing how we rescued you, huh?” asked Shmee hopefully. “You could have left one alive to interrogate” answered the elf. This was going to be a long rescue. Deciding that talking to the elf was too irritating, Shmee started to gather up the bodies, and strip them of valuables. Weapons and armor had lost a lot of value recently, but were still worth a few steins of ale, and a warm bed for a few nights. As Shmee grabbed the Captain’s hammer it gave off the telltale ethereal vibrations of an enchanted weapon. “Jackpot!” exclaimed Shmee holding it up. “We will eat well for a while when I cash this in Hoots!” said Shmee. Hoots smiled, or whatever passed for a smile with an owl. People not used to owls usually found the expression quite frightening. “We can’t go to a town! They will find me in any of your human villages!” said the elf. Shmee was starting to think he should have “accidentally” killed her out of “self-defense” when she was holding the sword.

“Who are they, and why they are in every ‘human’ town?” asked Shmee continuing to rummage through the bodies. On top of the normal arms and armor he had found 20 silver. This was turning out to be very profitable. “They are The Order of the Coil, and they have Spies everywhere, and if you didn’t appear to be so clueless I wouldn’t even have trusted you with that information” said the woman. “Have you heard of them Hoots?” Shmee said in the common tongue. Hoots replied in Northern Giant, “No, but with a name like that they don’t sound reputable.” Between the banner and

the name it was pretty damning that these were indeed bad folk.

This was important because it meant that Shmee would not be facing criminal charges. Shmee looked up at the elf and said, "Well you can take any arms and armor you wish, except the hammer, and I will give you a fifth of the money to get you on your way." The elf looked shocked and replied, "Don't you wish to know who I am, and for what cause I fight?" Shmee looked at Hoots, who shook his head, and answered "No. No one pays for the extermination of an unknown foe. All that happens is that you get killed for a cause no one has ever heard of or will ever care about. Once they are a little more successful I may wish to join up." Shmee braced himself for what he was sure to follow: bagging for help, being told he didn't understand what was truly happening, and that he was bad as whoever those dead guys were. He was surprised when instead an elf woman leaped forward knocking him down, landing on top of him, and holding a dagger to his throat. "You will take me where I need to go!" she demanded. Shmee decided that he liked her more than before.

"Okay, I will play ball if you get off of me and stow your pig sticker" said Shmee, and added "what should I call you?" "You may address me as Elianna Priestess of Greganor" she said removing herself from Shmee. "Well 'Eli', I am Shmee, and this is my companion The Guardian of the Holy Implement". Her eyes widened "THE Guardian of the Holy Implement!" "Well he was guarding a holy implement when

we met, so the name is apt. As to which one you are referring it is hard to say" said Shmee. "I think she knows which one I was guarding" said Hoots. Elianna added, "There is only one that is guarded by a giant owl." "I see you speak Northern Giant, you wouldn't happen to speak Owl as well would you?" said Shmee, and added, "Hoots can understand more languages than I can count but he can only speak those two." She shook her head said, "I speak most forms of Giant, but I don't believe there is a person alive that speaks Owl". Shmee beamed, "There is at least one!" "Don't flatter yourself, your Owl is insulting" said Hoots. "How did you come to travel with idiot?" asked Elianna looking at Hoots. "This 'idiot' is the best friend that giant owl could hope for. By which I mean he is the only person so far willing to be friends ... who ... with a giant owl, and since the Implement no longer exists in this world, why not travel and see the world ... whowho ... and idiot or not he does know his way around. Plus I owe him a life debt" replied Hoots. Shmee chimed in, "For being such an idiot, I did save you 'Lady', and since you seem to be demanding my help, maybe lay off the insults! Also, if we are going to be spending time together I would suggest heading back to my camp, and we can swap stories there. If you are nice I will tell you how I met Hoots, and you can tell me about these 'Coil' people". Elianna agreed, and they grabbed the horses and the loot and returned to the camp Shmee had setup earlier.

The group gathered around the campfire and started to dine on the now well done buck. Actually Elianna and Shmee

dined on the buck, Hoots brought back some dead bodies to rip in to. "Well, who has to tell their tale first?" asked Shmee with deer grease running down his face. "You" said Elianna. Shmee thought about arguing out of principle, but he did like to tell stories, especially stories about himself so he relented.

"It was about two years ago, just before the end of the Great Mad Mage war and I was with a group of adventures: Giliad a mage, Sivian a rogue, Grogdam a paladin, and Jimmy the bard. I am not sure why we brought Jimmy with us. His only skill seemed to be that he was the only person I have ever met that was completely useless. Even his songs were bad. They somehow made us fight worse, but he was a member of the group, and he did provide a nice butt for all our jokes. Things were going great for us. With the war on we had more jobs then we knew what to do with. Rescuing damsels, fighting bandits, tracking down evil mages, and whatever else you could imagine. We were flush with gold and drunk on ale, truly a wonderful time to be alive." Shmee paused and started to stare wistfully into the night. "Ahem" said Elianna loudly. "Sorry, it is hard not to get lost in the glory of those times" explained Shmee. "But as I was saying, things were awesome. Then we met Riginel, a wizard of The Order, he wanted to enlist our help to find 'The Holy Implement'. He said to could be the key to ending the war, so we agreed. We thought helping end the war would bring us a certain amount of fame, plus these types of quests always seem to produce the best loot.

Our journey took us to a cave in the west, at the foot of Black Butte Mountain. Upon entering the cave, we found that it was full of skaven (non-nerd definition: really ugly rat men). I mean thick with them. I couldn't swing my sword without hitting like three of these guys. Luckily they were horrible fighters, but killing them was becoming exhausting. Jimmy was doing his best to sing us to victory, but his voice eventually gave out. Once Jimmy could no longer sing, we started to fight much better, but we were still running out of energy. Finally Giliad stopped casting and started to meditate. I took a defensive position to keep the 'rats' off of him. It seemed like hours, but at last he jumped up and said 'Ish alc hisam bracknigh' or something, and lightning poured out of him. It filled the cave and extended down the halls in front of us. It was amazing. There were dead rat men as far as the eye could see. We waited for a few minutes but no more skaven. With the skaven exterminated, we took our breath before climbing over their awful rat bodies and continued our search for The Holy Implement.

As we slowly made our way down the corridors of the cave we started to hear someone crying, weeping even, and as we advanced it grew louder. Then we saw 'it'. It was the largest skaven I have ever seen, and it was crying. It perceived our advance and exclaimed 'you animals killed all my children!' To which I responded 'that is kind of what we do'. Then the Skaven Mother attacked. She hit hard but was slow, so we did our best to run between her legs and cut at her. After a while I had hit her so many times with Ember that she caught

on fire. She went up like an un-watered bush. My excitement in turned to horror as she continued to fight. All we could do was do our best to keep away from this very angry towering inferno. At last she succumbed to the fire and died, but not before burning poor Jimmy's lute. It brought a tear to my eye. With her last action she had done this world a favor. Jimmy of course didn't see it this way and vowed to find another, better lute. We all prayed that this terrible fate would not come to pass.

Behind the flaming body we found a passageway and it lead to small cavern. It was so dark that the magic users had to cast light spells. We could see the shining of gold in the middle of the room. It was a massive golden orb. It must have been worth more than the Imperial City. This was very exciting, 'so we sell the orb and then help fund the war effort. Is that the plan?' I asked hopefully. But before Riginel could answer we saw the eyes. Two large glowing eyes in the corner of the room and they started to speak saying 'Galbadoom'. The eyes approached revealing them to be attached to a giant owl." Hoots perked up upon hearing his entrance in to the story. Shmee continued "Jimmy being distraught over the loss of his lute drew his dagger and ran at the owl! Singing some song about victory or some such. Hoots here dispatched him easily. The others ran in to avenge his death, but I stayed back understanding the word 'Galbadoom' was Giant for 'welcome'. So I tried to tell them to lay off the owl saying 'it was just Jimmy after all', but they would not listen.

Hoots put up a great fight, but since there were four of them he fell. 'Quickly we must activate the Implement' said Riginel. The group gathered around the orb: poking it, chanting, kicking it, but none could get it to do whatever it was supposed to do. 'Did you think of asking the owl?' I asked. They gave me a cool look, but none the less I wandered over to the owl and pulled out a stone of resurrection. It was my last one, but I had a good feeling, so I used it and then poured a health potion down its beak. Hoots woke up and stared at me with his large eyes and said in Northern Giant, 'I, The Guardian of the Holy Implement, am forever in your debt.' 'How do you turn it on' I asked. 'You push in on the top and then say 'activate' elvish, but if it is not time you will disintegrate.' Hoots responded. The party quickly jumped away from the orb. 'You must try and activate it or I will be forced to attack you again' said Hoots, so we did what anyone would do, we cast lots, and I lost.

I had Riginel teach me 'activate' in the elven tongue, and I climbed on top of the orb. I found the button, so I cried 'Eclish' and pushed down. The orb opened up, causing me to fall off, and then shot a white light through the top of the mountain. After the light had stopped emitting from the orb, the orb disappeared. I cried like a new born babe. All that gold, just gone, it was awful. 'It is done' said Hoots. After I had finished crying I stood up and started walking out of the cavern, and I heard the clicking of talons behind me. 'Are you going to kill me?' I asked. 'No, I am bound to you' replied Hoots. I nodded and we left the cave.

Once we were outside of the cave there was a large commotion in the tree line. Fifteen men in black cloaks approached us. The apparent leader of the group as denoted by his mask said, 'undo what you have done, or we will be forced to take your lives!' 'I think you are going to have to kill us. Because the device that did whatever it did kinda disappeared after it did it' I said with a shrug. 'You don't even know you moved the Blue Moon back to its original location?' asked the leader exasperatedly. 'I do now, and since I am guessing you are Mad Mages, your odds of killing us just went down,' I mused. With that the mages attacked, but with their reduced power, and us having a feathered killing machine, we had the upper hand, but then the leader started to use every major spell he could muster and was hitting us hard. In desperation I ran at him and lodged my sword in his neck. Flames shot out his eyes and he crumpled to the ground. I quickly looted the mask. It had the name Gal Bresk inscribed on the inside. I then ran to help my friends destroy the remaining mages.

As we stood and admired our handy work we noticed that Riginel had disappeared. We looked for him for a good five minutes before starting for town. In the town there was much rejoicing. Singing, dancing, frolicking, and what have you. We were surprised to know that the news had spread that fast and we were getting ready to live the lives of noted heroes, but instead we found out that 'The Order' was taking credit for the moving of the moon. Apparently the word of five nobodies compared to that of The Order wasn't very

good. With the Blue Moon moved it was only a matter of time before the war was over, and we were out of luck, so we went our separate ways to survive. Now I am here trying to save you.”

Elianna looked at Shmee and then at Hoots and asked him, “Is what this man said true?” “More or less” replied Hoots. “Though I seem to remember ... who ... Shmee sneaking behind Gal Bresk and stabbing him in the back, but I like the way he says it better.” “History is written by the victors” Shmee quipped. “So I told you my story, now it is time for you to explain who these ‘Coil’ jerks are, and what they want with you,” said Shmee. “The Order of the Coil is a group of criminals that wish to limit the use of magic. They think that magic has stunted the growth of technological advancement, and thus given all the power in this world to magic users” replied Elianna. Shmee was dumbfounded. Between the flag and the name he had figured that there was no way that their cause would be reasonable, possibly even righteous.

Elianna mistaking the struck look on his face as dismay continued, “awful I know, and of course the elves are doing their best hinder this force, but their numbers continue to grow, and since I am a High Priestess of Greganor, and a leader of my people, they have targeted me. They wish to use my imprisonment to sway my people to stop their campaign against them.” “You are aware that these people have a point right?” asked Shmee. Looking indignant Elianna responded, “To some yes, but they are imposing their will by force, and we believe now are trying to eliminate all magic.

So you could say goodbye to your evil mask, your flaming sword, and possibly even your giant talking owl friend.” Shmee considered her words and replied, “You know how to appeal to me, the loss of cool stuff, and a friend that rips people from limb to limb. I will at least see you back to your Elven Village. But just so we are clear, I still get to keep the hammer!” Elianna rolled her eyes and agreed.

Chapter 2: Elves and Soldiers

Early in the morning as the group was gathering up camp and getting ready to head out Shmee asked, "Eli, just so I am clear, where is the nearest Elven Village? One, two days ride?" "Three, but we must be careful The Coil will no doubt be looking for me, so we should stay off the roads" responded Elianna. "Of course they will be, so we will be out stomping through the forest for about a week, but perhaps we will get lucky and run in to your people out searching for you" Shmee said hopefully. "No, I doubt it. My guards and I were delivering messages between the villages, so they probably don't know I was taken" said Elianna. "Of course they don't" cursed Shmee under his breath. "You know my elf ears can hear very well" said Elianna with that pompous smug look that only an elf can give. The look that lets you know that they know that they are indeed better than you, and to be fair they are: taller, faster, prettier, smarter, and can live for forever provided that you don't accidentally kill them with the hot sharp end of your sword.

The travel was slow, and it wasn't being helped by the fact the Elianna had to converse with every bird and squirrel that they happened by. She even would try and talk to the trees every once and awhile. She said she was just trying to gather info about the path ahead, but Shmee knew she was just

showing off, and since that was his job it was rather annoying. Plus Shmee didn't see the point considering he was getting regular scouting reports from Hoots. When they stopped for their midday rest for Hoots Shmee looked back and was sure that he could see the old campsite. "How long must we linger here?" asked Elianna? "Hoots needs his five hours of sleep. He gets cranky otherwise" responded Shmee. "I will make do with an hour or two and try and catch up on rest when I can" offered the owl. "That would be most welcome" said Elianna.

With the owl asleep Elianna started to stare at Shmee. It was an uncomfortable probing stare. "Can I help you?" asked Shmee perturbedly. "I am having a hard time believing that 'you' ended the Mad Mage war, but you have that mask and The Guardian to back up your story, so I am forced to believe it for now" responded Elianna. Adding, "You are no doubt forcing The Guardian to awful and evil things for your benefit." "I see you are not a believer in don't judge lest you be judged, but if you must know Hoots doesn't have much of a moral compass. He has less of one than I do anyway. His job was to just pretty much guard The Holly Implement, and with that gone, he does whatever he needs to survive. Mostly eat, and he will eat anything made out of meat. Without me around he would probably be raiding small villages for all the delicious villagers that they contained, and he wouldn't feel bad about it one bit" said Shmee. "How come 'The Order of Wizards' didn't mention your group's efforts to stop the war?" asked Elianna. "Because they are

glory hogs! They feel the need to prove they are worth all the tax money they soak up, so I am pretty sure they take credit for everything good that happens, and then they absolve themselves of guilt for anything bad that happens" explained Shmee. "What if I told you that 'The Order' was leading the charge against The Coil?" asked Elianna. "Then it sounds like I will be doing a lot of work and not getting a lot of credit for it again. Not to mention it sounds like a bunch of wizards would have the most to lose if these 'Coil' people win, so I bet they are defecating in their pants right now" said Shmee, "Which I would enjoy seeing."

"You mentioned you are a Priestess right Eli? So why doesn't your god, 'Greganor' I think you said, help you out in this quest? Seems like a god would be against the end of magic too" asked Shmee. "You dare question Greganor?! His ways are unknowable. He may simply be testing us!" yelled Elianna standing up and glaring at Shmee, nostrils flaring. In her state she did not notice Hoots approaching from behind talons ready to grab her, and to no doubt destroy her. "Hoots wait! She means no harm! I think. I questioned her religion and she did not appreciate it" said Shmee hurriedly. At the last second Hoots pulled up and swooped over their heads and landed in the tree behind Shmee. Glaring back at Elianna. "Watch yourself around my Master ... who ... I will let none harm him!" said the eight foot tall destroyer of men. Elianna quickly sat back down and said, "Sorry about that, but I am passionate about Greganor, and sometimes I overreact when mortals decide to question him." "No

problem, Hoots here can sometimes misread a situation. You should have seen what happened the first time some guards tried to arrest me. There were body parts everywhere; I hadn't seen anything like it since ... well since Hoots killed Jimmy. He is getting better" responded Shmee. Elianna gulped and nodded in understanding.

Suddenly Hoots head turned and he was off. Shmee dropped to a knee and unsheathed his sword, and dawned his mask. Elianna started "What is going ..." Shmee stopped her by putting up his hand and whispering "Hoots heard someone approaching and is scouting them out. Be still and silent." Hoots reappeared and landed on a branch over Shmee. "There are three men, light armor, and a dog. They have similar markings on their clothes to the ones The Coil soldiers had" hooted Hoots. Shmee nodded. They were scouts, and were no doubt looking for the annoying elf. "Let move and take defensive position around camp, and jump them when get here" hooted Shmee, and then he motioned to Elianna to go and hide in a dark area under the trees. Which she did after grabbing the biggest sword in store of arms they had collected from The Coil earlier.

The men approached the camp and the dog spotted Elianna right away, but as they went to grab her they heard a whoosh, and then there were two men. They spun around just in time for one of them to have a sword thrust in his belly up to the hilt, and then engulf him in flames. The other started to swing at Shmee, but a very large sword appeared around his throat. He quickly put his hands up. The dog was

trying to rip Shmee's leg off, but it was finding it hard to bite through the armor. After one more whoosh the dog was no longer a problem, and more of a snack. Eli was holding the scout very firmly and said in his ear "how many more of you are there following us?" "If I tell you that I am as good as dead anyway!" responded the scout defiantly. Shmee shrugged and started to swing Ember toward the man. "Wait!" said the scout, adding "I guess I will take my chances with The Coil." "People always come around in the end" quipped Shmee. "There are around twenty-five of us, well twenty-three now, and they are about five miles back" said the scout. With that Hoots took off in the direction indicated by the scout's head bob. Shmee said nothing and waited for the sound of wings to return. "He ... who ... speaks the truth" said Hoots. Shmee nodded, "Well Eli he is your prisoner. Do what you want with him, and then mount up. We need to get some distance between us and The Coil." Eli grabbed his weapons put them with rest and jumped on her horse. They rode off leaving a very scared ex-Coil member behind.

"So do you usually use the people you are rescuing as bait, or just me?" asked an indignant Eli as they rode through the woods. Shmee smiled to himself and replied, "Well you could be dead, and then my 'rescue' would be over, but alas my plan kept you alive and able to whine about it. But you are right, the next time I am making split second lifesaving plans I will be sure and gather all the input I can from the person whose main skill seems to be getting captured." "Well it would have been nice to at least know your plan

before I was left to think you were using me as a distraction for your escape!" exclaimed Eli. "You're right! Leaving you would have been a much better plan, so I will be sure and talk to you first next time!" retorted Shmee. "Maybe the two annoying meta-humans ... whowho ... would like to stop alerting every living being to our location" offered Hoots as he flew above Shmee and Eli. Shmee looked over at Eli and then up and Hoots and then shrugged in agreement. Eli nodded, but the look on her face let the party know that the discussion was not over.

They rode hard and in silence for the rest of the day, stopping only for quick sanitary and snack brakes, and for coving their trail. Well after the sun had gone down Shmee broke the silence, "Hoots, fly back and scout out the Coil for us. Maybe we can stop and rest the horses and get a proper meal." Hoots disappeared in to the night. Sometime later came the familiar hooting from above, "They don't seem to have found our trail, and they are still where we left them." "That strange, maybe they wait for the scouts return, but surely they smarter than that. Unless they decide Priestess getting costly?" hooted Shmee. Eli whispered "is there anything I should know?" "We have decided to find a clearing and camp for the night" replied Shmee.

As they ate some of the dried buck from before, and shivered in the darkness, since they decided a fire was too risky, Eli finally said "I apologize for my words earlier, you have got us this far, and I trust you will get us the rest of the way." Shmee was uncertain what to do next. His mind was telling

him to gracefully accept the apology, and perhaps offer one himself, but his giant ego was telling him to dig the knife in just a little bit more. Generally, that is the option he would have gone with, but an apology from an elven priestess was sure to be a rare thing, so in his mind he decided to accept the apology. "You don't say! The 'idiot' that saved your life, twice now, was right eh? Go figure! Do you now also think maybe you can stop riding my ass so I can get you safely to your elven kingdom!" replied Shmee. "Your right, you are not an 'idiot'. You are a man whose insolence cannot be measured, and I am longing for the end of our partnership!" said Eli. The group slept in shifts and passed the rest of the night wordlessly.

The next four days passed without incident, and without sighting any of The Coil. As they neared the elven village, large columns of smoke could be seen. Shmee looked up at Hoots, and the bird was off. Shmee and Eli halted their horses and waited. There was an uncomfortable tension between them since their last exchange, and they had not spoken except for the most basic of information, but the smoke had Eli concerned. "Elves do not burn enough to cause that much smoke" she said. Shmee replied, "perhaps they are preparing for war with The Coil and running the smelters and forges at full strength." "I will offer a prayer to Greganor that it is as you say" said Eli. They did not have to wait long for the answer as Hoots returned. "The village is under siege ... whowho ... The Coil has it surrounded, but it has yet to enter the walls" said Hoots. "How many men do

they have? And what siege devices do they have?" asked Shmee. "At least five thousand men, and they are building trebuchets and siege ladders" replied the owl. "Well now we know why they did not come after us. They figured we would just run in to them again at the village" stated Shmee. "What are we going to do?" asked Elianna. With a look of pleading in her eyes. "Get you to a different village, I am pretty good at what I do, but I am no match for an army. I might be able to come up with a plan to get by a hundred or so, but five thousand? Any plan would just be a way to get us killed. I am sorry" said Shmee. "No!" responded Eli. "This is not just any village! This is Wuldinholm! My village and my family. You can leave me here if you like, but this is where I stay!" said Eli. Shmee sighed and looked over at Hoots and said "Do you think you can get two of us over the wall?"

In general Hoots did not like carrying Shmee around, and Shmee did not like being carried, but they both made exceptions from time to time. Generally in quick retreats. "For a short distance, I believe I can ... who ... carry you both, but we will be more visible to the enemy, and I am not sure how high ... whowho ... I will be able to get you" said Hoots. "We will camp here until just past midnight, and then you will try to carry us over the least manned wall. You should try and get some sleep Hoots. You have been up for a long time now, and we don't need you passing out while we are over a bunch of guys with spears" said Shmee. Hoots did not need much convincing and as soon as they made camp he

was fast asleep. Shmee took up watch over, well under, his slumbering friend. "Thank you for doing this" said Eli. Shmee was doing his best to think of something snide to say, but instead he heard: "You're welcome. We will have you inside shortly."

It was around midnight, and Shmee and Eli were waiting for Hoots to return. He was going for quick look to see which wall would be the best for their flight. "Do your best not to move when Hoots has ahold of you. It is hard for him to hold on to just me, but with you as well it will be difficult. And if you have anything to protect your eyes, I would suggest wearing it. All kinds of things get in your eyes while flying" said Shmee, pulling out his goggles and putting them on. "Anything else?" asked Eli. "It hurts your shoulders like hell, so I am guessing it will be doubly painful if he has got us around the waste, and do your best not to look down" replied Shmee. "Should we go one at a time?" asked Eli. "I thought about that, but I think not. There will be too many people to fly by the first time. Let alone twice" said Shmee. Hoots was back after a few more minutes and he grabbed them in his huge talons.

Soon they were above the forest canopy, and Shmee's insight about the pain of being grabbed around the waste proved true. It felt like getting torn in two, but the pair did their best not to struggle. The village and the siege around said village was now in full view. There were hundreds of tents and sentries huddled around fires. The elves on the wall were pacing, no doubt worrying about the eventual attack. The

beating of Hoots' wings was louder than normal due to the added weight, but Hoots was flying very well, and soldiers down below did not seem to think to look up and see what was sure to be the strangest sight in all their lives. But it turns out The Coil soldiers were not the ones to be worried about. The elven guards with their better eyesight soon spotted the group, and one bowman in particular took aim. Elianna saw the guard and exclaimed, "Don't shoot! It is I Priestess Elianna!" It was too late, and Hoots with the pair in his grasp could not maneuver. The arrow shot true and hit Hoots in the chest, and the shout caused all the men below to look up and then fire their own arrows at party. Shmee and Eli were hit with glancing blows. Hoots took more arrows to the wings and flank, but still he struggled on. Every beat of his wings was a made with extreme effort and focus. The elves now recognizing their folly did not fire again, but much damage had already been done. They were close to the wall now and arrows were flying past them. As they barley crossed over the edge of the wall Hoots gave out and Shmee, Eli, and the owl came crashing down. Bouncing off the top of the wall and then down on to the street below.

Shmee was the first to gain his composure, and he was soon by his friend's side. "Hoots, wake up buddy, you are going to have to wake up on your own! I am out of potions and stones! You are going to have to get up by yourself this time! You are my only friend. You can't leave me here with these elves. You know how I am with self-righteous jerks, and the elves are a race of self-righteous jerks!" pleaded Shmee.

Then next to him he heard the sound of singing. He looked over and saw Elianna singing, and she had her hands deep in The Guardian's feathers. Shmee didn't understand the words, but he knew the intent, and he hoped Greganor was listening. Shmee put his head down on Hoots' shoulder, and just when he was thinking about how much he hated the elves, a wing wrapped around him.

Chapter 3: Siege and Vengeance

"I see you and The Guardian are still together," said a voice from behind Shmee. Shmee pulled himself up from his friend and replied, "If it isn't the cowardly, double crossing, fame stealing puss bag of a wizard." "I see you still hold resentments against me and The Order," said Riginel. "Resentments kind of put it lightly. You gave no credit to me or my partners for ending the war, and now you are surprised to find out that I am not happy to see you?!" exclaimed Shmee. "We did not want to create a situation where people lost trust in The Order, or their official protectors, to deal with conflicts, and instead turned to adventures for help. You lot were good, but the profession as a whole employs all kinds of unsavory characters, and we would not want to put people harm's way by employing criminals" explained Riginel the Second Chair in The Order of Wizards. "Uh huh, but if you are The Order of Wizards it is quite alright to not only employ 'unsavory characters', but then not pay them or acknowledge their efforts?" asked Shmee turning a very nice shade of burgundy. "Yes ... well ... I am sorry about the payment bit, but we did not have your forwarding addresses, so we were unable to deliver your payment," replied Riginel. "So the most powerful body of wizards in the world cannot track people down? It relies on

addresses alone. No spells, or balls, or fancy wish granting dinner plates? They just say 'meh', we don't have their location on file, so we will pay them when we see them? And if that is the case, which I doubt, why didn't you stick around and help us with the Made Mages, so we could give you our future locations?" asked Shmee who's red color was now accented by bulging veins running across his forehead. "I was so excited by our success that I rushed to tell the rest of The Order" calmly explained the wizard. Shmee was thinking that he should calm down and except Riginel's excuse: he was thinking that, but what he was doing was drawing his sword and cursing using words that would shock the underworld. No sooner than had he drawn his sword, he was stuck unconscious from behind.

Shmee awoke in the most comfortable bed he had ever laid in, and the sheets were of a kind of silk you could barely feel, but kept you at just the perfect temperature. It was so comfortable it almost made up for the shackles that were binding him to the bed. He started to look around, and he saw Hoots lying in a bed next to him, but they must have decided that The Guardian of the Holy Implement: The Destroyer of Men was less of a threat then Shmee because he was unshackled. He continued to look around the room and soon spotted Elianna leaning up against a wall staring at him. "What did you hit me with?" asked Shmee playing a hunch. "The magic hammer that you keep carrying around" replied Eli. "Well it will be worth it if I ever get a chance to sell it" said Shmee, and added in low whispery voice "thanks

for healing Hoots and stopping me from killing 'The Wizard'." "Is that a 'Thank You' from Shmee: Hater of Elves? It is quite alright. I like Hoots quite a bit, and I am sure due to the amount of people around that you would not have been able to kill Riginel anyway. I was just insuring that they would not kill you" said Eli, "I explained how you saved me and brought me home, so they are allowing me to free you provided that you behave yourself, and apologize to Riginel." "Sounds like I will be locked up here awhile, but thanks for the visit, and if you see 'The Wizard' you can tell him that I hope he falls in a pit of spikes filled with venomous snakes" replied Shmee. Eli walked forward and unlocked the shackles, and said "I will take your wish that he befalls harm versus doing the harm yourself as a proof you have calmed down, and we will work toward the apology, but between you and me I think he had it coming for lying to the world about the end of the war."

Shmee walked over to Hoots and gave him a little nudge, and Hoots' big eyes opened and he gave Shmee one of his signature horrifying smiles. "The gods have seen fit ... who ... to let us live" said the owl. "One of the gods many mistakes I am sure" replied Shmee. "His wounds are healing and he is beyond danger, but we should let him rest. Our warriors are finding him something to eat, but that much meat is hard to come by during a siege" said Eli. "Well if you have some dead bodies from The Coil, he will eat those" said Shmee helpfully. Hoots' eyes widened even more and he nodded. "I will pass that along to the mortician" replied Eli with a thin smile. "Well Buddy I am going to take a walk and see how

screwed we are, and maybe I will see if I can kill a couple of Coil members for you to eat," said Shmee. Hoots nodded and then drifted back to sleep.

As Shmee explored Wuldinholm he was surprised to find that it was such an average town. His whole life he had heard of Elven towns on the edge of cliffs with water falls shooting out from under them, or high on a mountain top in the crater of a dead volcano, but this town was like a nicer the average human town. To be sure everything looked more well made, and despite its age everything looked as though it had just been built with rich wood colors, and paints that were not flaking, but still it was just another town with pole based walls. Shmee thought that perhaps maybe this was the town that all other standard towns were modeled after. Maybe the elves gave the plans to this town to the humans that settled in Capraciss as a sort tool to get them started: the bar was in the same place, the chapel was on the same street corner, and he was pretty sure that he knew exactly where the town hall was. The only thing that was different was the nicely paved streets. They were so smooth and easy to walk on. It made this town just podunk instead of a podunk mud hole, which was a nice upgrade.

Later Shmee noticed that he was getting dirty looks from all elves he passed. Even when he was with the company of Elianna like he now was. They apparently hadn't like being called self-righteous jerks. "The truth always cuts the deepest" thought Shmee, and then sighed and said, "So what is the plan for getting everyone out of here? By the looks of

things, we don't have much time until The Coil attacks". "We would rather die than leave our home!" exclaimed Eli. "Well that is good, because that is what is going to happen. I don't know if you have ever been in a siege, but I have, and soon they will breach the walls. We will kill a lot of them, maybe even most of them, but they will win and all that will be left of this town is burning rubble, blood, and mud" said Shmee. "Then you have never fought along the people of Wuldinholm! We will beat them back, and they will rue the day they dared to meet us in battle!" said Elianna Priestess of Greganor. "Yeah, I have heard that speech before, and at the end of the day I was in an enemy cell with the two other survivors, and to be fair we had made sure that Roith was busier shuttling their dead beyond than ours, but we still had lost, and for what? Is it still your home if everyone is dead, and you and your leader are chained together while you watch the enemy try to build a fire big enough to destroy all the corpses? Leave. Get everyone out, and burn what you leave behind, so their efforts will have been for nothing" said Shmee in an eerily calm voice. Eli looked at Shmee as if she was waiting for the punch line, but there wasn't one coming. "I will have to pray about what you have said" responded Elianna after she had contemplated his words for a while.

The next day after Shmee had checked on Hoots, who was feeling much better, and was happily dining on a Coil scout that had got too close to the wall, he decided to check out the town bar. He was still getting the dirty looks from before, but most of the patrons were just indifferent at this

point, so he sat at the bar and asked, “A pint of ale if you please?” “That will be ten silvers ‘Sir”” said the barman. “Ten silvers! That had better be the best beer I have ever tasted for that price!” exclaimed Shmee. “Actually it may be some of the worst you have ever had. The siege is putting a squeeze on things. The ale is a pretty poor concoction, but it contains alcohol, and it sort of tastes like an ale, so I am pretty proud of it” replied the barman. Shmee considered this for a second. He could actually pay the silver since he had collected some off The Coil earlier, and he was very thirsty, so he responded, “Sure I guess that is fine, but it had better be a large stein.” The beer was awful, but not the worst he had ever had like the barman had warned, and considering the last few days he had been through it was comforting. The elves that had been giving him dirty looks earlier, had now joined the rest and were instead actively ignoring him.

Sometime later Shmee was still nursing his stein of ale when Elianna walked in and found him, and asked, “Do you want to buy me a drink?” “Normally I would love to buy a girl a drink in a bar, but at ten silvers a stein, I am going to have to say no. You can have a sip of mine if you want” replied Shmee hoping she would not take him up on the offer as he eyed his beer jealously. “For the Priestess this is on the house!” said the barman. The rest of the people in the bar then gave a quick shout, “Hurray for the return of the Priestess. She will lead us to victory!” “I should have waited to drink with you” said Shmee as he now looked enviously at Eli’s free and

overflowing stein. She smile and quipped, "Good things come to those who wait!" "Or you die never getting enjoy the things love" responded Shmee with a smile.

Eli took a long pull off her ale, and then started to cough and gag, "This is horrible!" "Siege" shrugged Shmee. Eli regained her composure, and then said, "I wanted to talk to you about what you said last night about how you said we should leave." "I still say that is what you should do, and you should do it soon. Ten silvers an ale is the beginning of what will happen" replied Shmee. "The elders won't like the thought of leaving, but I can feel Greganor's agreement with what you say. You must come with me to the Hall and help me convince them to leave" said Eli. "Convincing people to not get me killed is what I do best!" replied Shmee. They finished their liquid gold without gagging too much, and then headed for the Town Hall.

The Town Hall was pretty much exactly what Shmee expected. The main room was large and full of rows of chairs filled with anxious looking elves. Which Shmee thought was odd considering their belief in fate and whatnot, and in the front there was a long table with a bunch of grave looking elves sitting at it with Riginel in the middle saying things which Shmee was purposefully tuning out. It had something to do with taking a stand, and showing The Coil the power of the Elves. Shmee was smiling because he was envisioning his spike and snake pit scenario.

This went on for a while, but then Eli said something and then everyone was looking at him. "Well?" asked a disgruntled looking Riginel. Shmee panicked for a second but then remembered why he was there, "Oh, yeah. If we stay here, and we are not expecting reinforcements to arrive soon, then we are going to die horrible deaths, and our blood will stain the streets." Shmee let that sink in for a moment, and then continued, "This is not my first siege, and I can tell you that the enemy is never as stupid as you would hope. They will not attack until they have sufficient numbers to defeat us, or at least defeat you. Because if you decided to fight The Guardian of the Holy Implement and I are out of here. Of course your other option is to turn over the person I am sure they are after." The Wizard was about to speak, but he was cut off by what passed for an old looking Elf next to him, "We will not turn over Riginel, and what you so say may all be true, but how will we get out of the city undetected?" "We don't need to leave undetected, we just need to make it hard for them to follow" smiled Shmee. "Gods' help me, but what is your plan?" asked the old elf, whose name it turns out was Ethendael. After Shmee had related his plan there was an absolute silence in the room. Ethendael's face turned hard, but then his lips cracked into a wicked smile, and he said "all those in favor?" It passed unanimously except for Riginel, but Shmee was pretty sure that since he wasn't a resident of Wuldinholm, his vote didn't count anyway.

Shmee and the Elves got to work instantly. There was quite a bit to do. They had to secretly weaken the walls, and then

place all sorts of sharp objects next to them. Meanwhile they were creating any and every form of explosive to pack in with rubble next to the wall. At the same time they were slowly reducing the amount of troops along the wall, so they would appear weak. It took quite a few days, but at last they had completed their task, and now all they had to do was wait for The Coil to attack. It didn't take long because The Coil fell for the reduced troop count tactic, and started to prepare for the assault. The elves started assembling all the people near the west center of the city.

The villagers were understandable antsy. Hoots had finished resting, and Shmee was filling him in on his part of this grand plan, "So when Ethendael gives the word, they are going to light all these fuses they have gathered here, and you are going to grab me and we are going to survey the path forward as they flee from here." "You ... who... came up with this plan didn't you?" replied Hoots. Shmee and Hoots glared at each other, and then they started to laugh. "If we survive the blast ...who... it does significantly increase our chances of survival" Hoots quipped. Shmee donned his goggles and waited for the word.

The Coil started to launch their trebuchets at the village, and grab their siege ladders and form ranks. The rocks and boulders harmlessly broke the empty buildings, but a few got close to the huddle villagers. The mages were working hard to guide the rocks to safe locations. The Order of Coil's drums started to beat, and the men launched forwards. The elves made a show of shooting a couple of them as they drew near

and chanted as though they were about to partake in a great battle, but as The Coil reached the wall the elven soldiers dashed from their posts and took a defensive position around the rest of the villagers. The Coil army was confused by the retreat of the elves because, where would they be running too?

"Today we leave our home, but they will wish that they had never stood at our doorstep! Light the wicks!" exclaimed Ethendael. The fuses sizzled as they ran through the town, and as they neared the wall everyone stiffened and readied themselves for... BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM! There was a white hot light, and smoke.

The elves had crafted the shape of the charges so well that shrapnel shot out from the walls at a high rate of speed, and it had no issue covering the distance between the wall and the now attacking army. The Coil was soon being inundated with debris. It was ripping through shields, man, and beast unlike any force that had been seen before. Those that survived were blind and in a daze not knowing what evil had befallen them. Hoots and Shmee were off like a shot flying in front of the wave of towns-elves. Their warriors were leading the charge and laying waste to any Coil members stumbling around in their path. Riginel was finally pulling his weight and casting an invisibility field behind them to mask their retreat. It seemed that survival was important to The Wizard. One nice thing about elves is that they have no problem running and riding for long distances.

Some of The Coil regrouped and tried to follow the elves, but they had problems following the elves due to not only the magic of Riginel, but the woodsmanship of the elves in covering their tracks. The small groups of men that did find the trail were soon attacked by bears and other woodland beasts, the arrows of the elven warriors, or worse. A man that would drop out of the sky and light them on fire with his sword, and his flying beast that would swallow them whole. The Coil that remained at Wuldinholm grouped up and decided to investigate the village, and unfortunately for them they soon found out that Shmee is vengeful in defeat. As they explored the village some thought they could hear a slight hiss, and when they investigated the homes they found crates of alcohol and animal dung. They didn't get to investigate long as the entire village exploded in liquid fire consuming everything within. The Coil had won, and received a raging inferno as their prize. Shmee's plan had been deceitful, cowardly, possibly a bit evil, and it had saved the people of Wuldinholm.

After a few miles of their trek, the newly homeless elves were on one their secret paths through the forest. These paths were only used in times of great need. Shmee surmised that this was due to the fact that it wasn't so much a path as them convincing the trees to move around them, and in his experience trees were sedentary sort.

At their first camp Ethendael came and sat next to Shmee, and said, "You destroyed my ancient home, and I have never been more grateful." "I once heard the elves are happiest

when they are crafting, so you guys should be pretty happy for a while" responded Shmee. "Indeed we will rebuild while singing songs of the man that saved us" said Ethendael. "And his friend The Owl I hope" quipped Shmee. "Oh yes we could not forget The Guardian of The Holy Implement. He is of legend already, so to have him aid in our rescue will never be forgotten" said Ethendael. "Well legend may be pushing it. He just ate people who tried to touch a giant gold orb" said Shmee. "I should have ... who ... eaten you perhaps?" asked Hoots. Shmee cringed as he looked up at his companion. "I actually wanted to learn more about the past of the man who saved us, and why he would choose the life of a sell sword" said Ethendael. Shmee didn't like to talk about his non heroic past much, but he could feel a pull in his mind. "That old jerk is using a truth enchantment on me!" thought Shmee, but as he looked at Ethendael he longed to tell the old man all his secrets, so he gave in.

"There is not a lot to tell, I grew up on a farm on the northern border. It was a good childhood. I loved the smells, and being rewarded for working with my hands. My Mom and my sister always baked marvelous things to eat, but when I was about fifteen the Kings Duel Conflict erupted, and we were all taken to the village of Brech to be safe. Every able man was added to the guard. I was better at it then my brothers, but I think it was because I was younger and still able to learn. It was good to be better than my brothers at something. When they plowed the fields, they were so straight and crisp it looked like folded paper, but mine always

looked like I had gotten my mule drunk. I did once, so that way when someone said it, I could tell them it was true.

When King Azel attacked from the north we retreated into the town. The siege lasted three months, and when they finally hit us we made sure that they paid their price in blood, but they repaid us in full. They killed almost everyone. I had got lucky because I was trying to pry the Captain of the Guard out from under some rubble, so since I was without my sword, they decided to keep me alive. I found out afterwards it was so they could torture me for my secrets. I wish I would have had secrets to tell them, so they would have stopped or killed me, but I didn't. The Captain did have secrets, and they got him to tell them everything he knew.

Unfortunately it turns out the conflict had ended three days earlier, and Azel's army hadn't got word yet, so we were set free and told to return to our homes. I lost everything because King Ether hadn't paid Azel his due in tariffs or something like that. Still, I had a new skill, and I decided that I couldn't go back to farming. Working for Kings didn't seem appealing anymore, so I adopted my Great Grandfathers name and hit the road looking for fame and fortune. My name was Brend Hillrise."

Ethendael nodded and said, "It is a good lore, and I am glad hear my daughter will marry a man with a strong past."

"Wait! What?! Marry your daughter! Who is she? You know Hoots is always helping me out, so he can marry her!" exclaimed Shmee. "Didn't Elianna tell you that she was my

daughter, and you have saved her life, more than once now, so by right she is betrothed to you" explained Ethendael. "Well your daughter nice enough for an elf, but I am not sure we are a marriageable couple" said Shmee. "She is better than the ... whowho ... average woman you go after" offered Hoots. "Has my father sold me short?" asked Eli from directly behind Shmee. "Well...err...um it is not like that" explained Shmee eloquently. "Anyway, I thought that since Elves believed in fate that things like winning betrothal were not thought of?" asked Shmee. "Well priestesses were always being captured, and generally in harm's way, so we came up with this law to protect them. To insure that someone always thought it was their fate to save them" answered Ethendael. "Thanks for the heads up Eli, I would have let Hoots do even more of the saving" said Shmee. "I don't think ... who ... it is legal for her to marry me ... who ... anyway" added Hoots. "Well luckily for me I am betrothed to you for the rest of your life, and since I am guessing your life will be shorter than the average human it shouldn't be an issue for me" explained Eli. "Thanks!" Said Shmee.

They continued their journey for a few more days, and for the most part the journey was uneventful. They did run into the odd giant spider, or traveling pack of evil trees trying to turn their blood in to juice for their roots. The trees had sucked ten elves dry by the time Shmee and the other elf warriors had come to the poor ex-villagers aid, and five warriors had fallen to the sharp leaves of the trees, but really nothing much happened. Soon they came to a large valley

surrounded by two medium sized mountains. Once they were in the dead center of the valley they stopped. "I am no expert on large traveling packs of elves, but shouldn't we get out of here? There is no cover from those horrifying trees" asked Shmee, but before Eli could answer, Riginel raised his staff, and large stairway lowered beneath him. "Oh, I see that I am to suffer elves and dwarves" said Shmee answering his own question.

They followed the stairs down to a large, huge, massive door, and Riginel knocked. Shmee was certain that he had not knocked hard enough, but before he could whine about it a small hatch opened, and a small bearded face poked out at them. "What brings you lot to Valley Deep?" asked the dwarf. "We seek asylum from The Coil who destroyed Wuldinholm" partially lied the Wizard. "Damn Coil have been raiding our traders as of late. I guess I can let you in to the foyer while I talk to the king. Stand Back!" said the dwarf. Shmee expected shaking, falling debris, a loud creaking noise, and the large door to start to slowly open. What he got was a slightly smaller than normal door opening, and the elves started to duck and walk through it.

Chapter 4: Castles and Caves

In a castle high up in the southern mountains with the banners in the turrets showing a skull on a spear with a viper wrapped around it, a group of angry men discuss battle plans. “They did WHAT?!” screamed a hooded man named Master Iron. “Well it seems they blew up their village and fled, and most of our men were killed in the explosion” replied a man in black suit of scale mail named General Gresh sheepishly. “They seem to have been aided by a man with a larger than average bird” quickly added another man with matching armor named General Thresh. “Shmee! I was wondering if we would run across him. This sounds like his idiocy” said Master Iron while clenching his metal fist, and then asked, “so where do you propose we go from here ‘Gentlemen?’”

A man in a black cloak named Speaker Trench responded, “Well Master, since we are now low on men, and we have had troubles recruiting as of late. I propose we try and change our image a little bit. I have been talking to the boys in marketing, and I think we have come up with a solution. First we will spruce up this castle a little bit: take down the skeletons in shackles from hallways, stop torturing people in the Hall of Echoes, maybe put up some cheerful art, and plant some flowers. It is spring now.” “Flowers?!” grumbled Master Iron. “Yes, so that way when foreign dignitaries and village officials come over they are put at ease and be more

likely to lend their support” said Speaker Trench. A shrill scream of pain was heard in the background while Master Iron thought this over.

“Is there more to this plan?” asked Master Iron? “Yes I am glad you asked Master! I have brought our banner to the art department, and we have come up with something we think is pretty special” replied Speaker Trench. He pulled out a small banner from his inner cloak and had it passed down to his Master. “We have updated the logo a bit. We replaced the spear with a threaded axel, the skull with a gear, and the viper with a coiled spring. It should stop the men from being attacked on sight while keeping the elements from the previous logo” said Speaker Trench. “You think these things are really going to help?” asked Master Iron. Speaker Trench responded, “Well look at the chairs we are sitting in, they look like giant skeletons. They make me antsy just sitting in them, and I sit in them every day. Think how an outsider must feel. The only color other than black we wear is blood red, and half the time it is just actually blood, so yes I think we could branch out a little.” Master Iron thought about this while a few more screams were heard. “Have this man executed, and the rest of you carry out his plan” said Master Iron finally. “Why are you having me killed?!” asked Speaker Trench. “I designed the chairs!” explained Master Iron.

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Shmee was waiting while all the elves made their way through the door. He was still deciding if he wanted to enter.

He had after all saved the maiden, and rescued the village (kind of), so entering Valley Deep would mean that he was going to be in this quest for the long haul. Hoots on the other hand was quite excited to be entering the cave. It was like going home for him, and he was giving Shmee some major “please, please, please” eyes. Shmee relented, “Okay buddy. At least I am sure they will feed us.”

Once all the elves were through, Shmee and Hoots followed after them. Shmee was expecting a dark and dank hallway, but what he got was long well-lit bridge, and the sound of rushing water beneath. Below them was a large river flowing the same direction of the bridge, and all in a massive cavern. The dwarves must have guided the river underground years ago. The foyer had a blue glow as the light from crystal torches reflected off the water. Shmee walked past the elves that were now standing around on the bridge talking and admiring the view. He even saw some of them get out fishing poles and try their fate in the river.

After walking quite some ways down the bridge, he came to an area where the bridge became more of a platform and grew much wider so that buildings and towers could be built on it. At the back of the platform he could barely make out two bridges that shot out of the sides that lead into the mountains. “I was hoping ... who ... for dark” said Hoots who was flying just above his head. “Yeah it is quite a bit different than I was expecting, but it is a sight” said Shmee, and added excitedly, “let’s see if they have an arms dealer!”

They searched the buildings until they found one with a wooden sign. It had a sword and shield on escribed on it along some dwarven letters they couldn't read. "Well it is either an arms shop or a fighter's guild" shrugged Shmee. As usual with Shmee's luck it was neither.

The inside was decorated with some sort of red wood, which was odd because dwarves usually used stone, and the pictures all showed dwarves fighting some sort of large trees. "I see they ... who ... have had problems with those trees too" said Hoots. A rather wide dwarf approached them and asked, "Can I help you two?" "Yeah we are looking for an arms dealer, but we can't read dwarvish" responded Shmee. "It is down the way a bit more. You have entered the hall of Lumberjacks" said the dwarf, "and I must ask you to leave. Only those that have been chosen to slay the Blood Trees or have killed one may enter here." Shmee replied, "Are they about twenty feet tall, and do they use their branches with sharp leaves to smash people to pulp so they can drink their blood? Because, if so then we have killed a couple. They killed like ten elves, but once I caught the first one on fire the other ones fled. We got one more before they got away." "They look like you describe, but they do not burn, so I am forced to call you a liar" said the dwarf. Shmee rummaged around in his bag and then found a chard red stick and handed it to the dwarf. The dwarf cradled it like it was a new born baby, and then looked at Shmee's sheathed sword, "You have one of the Fire Blades! All, but one, were lost!"

Shmee's first instinct was to run, but more dwarves had come to see what was causing the commotion, and the thought of running from a large group of dwarves in a dwarven village seemed like a lost cause, so instead Shmee just reached for his sword and held on to it so that no one would try and grab it. "Don't worry laddie. We will not try to take it from you" said another dwarf, "She only burns for those she chooses, so it would do us little good, but you must be the first non-dwarf she has chosen. Glin get this man a cape! We have a new Captain of The Lumberjacks!" "Captain?" asked Shmee. "Oh aye, any who bears a Fire Blade is a Captain, and you are now one of two. I am Talin and that", Talin pointed at the first dwarf Shmee met, "is Grendon the other Captain." "I am Shmee, and this is The Guardian of the Holy Implement, or Hoots" said Shmee now feeling much better about the situation.

Glin had returned with a red cape, and it had the same logo as the sign embroidered on it. Glin explained, "it has a distracting enchantment, so that it makes you harder to hit." Loot. It was one of the driving forces of Shmee's life, and he smiled widely when he received the cape, but before he put it on he asked, "Am I adding some sort responsibility when I wear this?" "Not a one boy'o. You have already killed more Blood Trees than most of us have seen, so you have fulfilled any duty that would have gone with the cape. It just shows that you are a member of the Lumberjacks, but I can see this isn't your first awarded trinket!" laughed Grendon. "Yeah some people get funny ideas when they give you stuff. Like

that you have to help them, or save them from something” smiled Shmee. Grendon laughed again, “You can just call it a pre-completed quest if you like, but I am sure we would all like how you came by that blade.” Shmee was getting tired of explaining himself everywhere he went, but this story held him in pretty good light, and it was not every day he was inducted in to a dwarven order, so he relented. Hoots on the other hand was now listening to a story he was not in, so he fell asleep.

“I was with my old adventuring group: Giliad the mage, Sivian the rogue, Grogdam the paladin, and Jimmy the bard. We were pretty new to the whole questing game, so we took any job that was offered to us. We even helped rescue a group of cows that had gone off looking for a new existential plane of reality. It turns out that they were just high because they had gotten in to the neighbor hobbit’s leaf weed crop.

We were walking between two towns, when an elderly woman stopped us and frantically asked us to rescue her daughter that had been grabbed and hauled in to a nearby cave. This was just sort of thing that we had been wanting to do. We could leave the cows to the farmers, so without question we ran in to the cave.

We searched deeper and deeper into the cave, but we were not seeing any signs of a kidnapping. We finally got to the end of the cave, and there was nothing there but a large stone chair. Then we heard it.” “It was that cackle of a witch wasn’t it! This sounds like a witch story!” exclaimed Glin.

The dwarves and Shmee all glared at the young dwarf. “Glin you know better than to interrupt a man’s story!” chided Grendon. “I know but I get so excited!” replied Glin. Then Glin looked over and saw Hoots who was staring at him with his terrible eyes that seemed to be saying his very soul looked delicious. Hoots knew that Shmee hated it when people interrupted his talking about himself. “Should I ... whowho ... eat him Master?” asked Hoots, but what the dwarves heard was, “Ba Groam ... whowho ... Do Ma?” This was terrifying since dwarves and giants have had historical difficulties with one another, and that the giant’s language was coming out of a large hungry raptor. Shmee thought about it for a second, and said in the common tongue, “Not this time, I think he is just young and dumb, but if he does it again I will consider it.” Hoots stopped his glaring and returned to his nap. Shmee now had the dwarves’ full attention.

“So like are young friend pointed out, we heard a cackle then she appeared. It was the same woman from the road, but now she was even older looking, and it seemed like her flesh was melting off in slow motion. ‘I will add your souls to my collection’ she screamed. We did what anyone would do in this situation. We tried to kill her, but before we could reach her skeletons started to come up from the ground and out of the walls. Like I said we were new to the hero game, so none of us had silver weapons, so we were struggling to hack the skeletons to pieces. Grogdam was trying to Holy Light as many of them as he could, but he was running out of power. We were losing. In the midst of the skirmish my sword

broke, and I thought all was lost. Then I saw a skeleton with a nice sword, and now that I think about it, he was of dwarven stature. I leapt at him and ripped him apart with my bare hands. When I clasped his sword, I could feel its warmth, and with the sword's enchantment I was finally able to deal a good amount of damage to the skeletons and let Grogdam have a rest.

We turned the tide in our favor, and this allowed Giliad to hit the witch with everything he had. It was all lighting and fireballs all over the place. She fell backwards, so I took my opportunity to stab her in the neck. She exploded in to flames and gooey bits. It was our first real large victory as a group, but beside the sword, which I was not selling, it didn't pay well. Witch bits don't demand a large price, so after that we became more selective of our quests."

Grendon grinned from ear to ear after the story and said, "One of our Captains must have been hunting the Blood Trees and fallen victim to this witch, so not only have you killed Trees, but you have set the soul of a Captain free. We cannot thank you enough laddie." "Well it is what I do, but if you think of a way to thank me let me know, but if you don't mind me asking, why do you hunt the trees? It is not often you hear of dwarves caring about forest creatures" said Shmee.

Grendon sighed and started to explain, "Well you see the Blood Trees are our fault. When our ancestors first came to settle these mountains, we could not defeat the goblins that

infested them, so we had to dig out the river and make the valley. It is very embarrassing for a dwarf not to live in a mountain, so we would try and raid the hills every once and a while, but always to no avail. Then came a magic user that thought he could do as the elves do and use the trees as reinforcements in our ranks. It worked wonderfully, but once the trees mixed with the tainted blood of the goblins it changed them, and they started to thirst for blood, so we founded the Lumberjacks to clean up our mess. We have killed most of them, so they are harder to find these days, but now that you have lowered their numbers even more we may be able to end them in our life time!”

“Mages are always doing stuff like that. They should really do some more testing before they launch unknown forces into the world” said Shmee wisely, and asked, “So I guess the next question is what have you got to drink around here?” Hoots eyes shot open and started to look around expectantly. “You came to the right place for a drink laddie!” responded Grendon. The dwarves ran and rolled out large kegs of ale, and tapped them.

Shmee had just begun to enjoy himself with his new Lumberjack brothers, and the dwarves were warming up to Hoots when Eli burst through the door and exclaimed, “There you are! We were relating our story to the King, and he asked to meet that man that stymied The Order of the Coil, but you were gone. We have been out searching for you! This is the last building we checked because the dwarves said it was members only.” “It is Eli, so you should probably

leave” smiled Shmee. “You have only been here a few hours and you are already drunk, and the member of an exclusive dwarven guild?” asked the exasperated Eli. “Yeah it is pretty great. Killing those two trees, and owning Ember makes me like the second in command” replied Shmee. “It is true lassie; he is our brother for as long as he lives” explained Grendon. “Did you tell them about the five elf fighters that lost their lives to the trees before you woke up and started hacking away at them?” huffed Eli. “Go easy on him lassie. He mentioned that some elves fell to the trees, but we were so excited to hear of the trees’ demise that we got all carried away. I am sorry about your kin” said Grendon. “Well you were incorrigible before, now your head will be so big you will be impossible to reason with” said Eli. “Don’t worry, I will just chalk it up to ‘fate’” said Shmee, and then asked Grendon, “Where did you say the arms dealer was around here?” “Oh aye. It is a good shop, and you can find it down the road and round the corner. The symbol is similar to ours, but its sign is made of stone. Tell the clerk you are a Lumberjack for the good stuff.” “Thank you Grendon. Shall we go Eli?”

Once Shmee was out the door he headed towards the arms dealer, but Elianna grabbed his arm, and said “You were summand by the King! We have to get to the Great Hall. You don’t have time to go shopping.” “I just want to sell my hammer, and provided he isn’t a big haggler I should be out of there in like five minutes” replied Shmee. “We are going to the King now! Personal gain later!” explained Eli. “Fine”

said Shmee then started digging around in his bag. When he found the hammer he handed it to Hoots saying, "Take this and sell it to the arms dealer. I will settle for nothing less than one hundred gold!" "What if he doesn't speak giant?" asked Hoots. "Use your expressive non-verbal communication skills" explained Shmee as he was being drug along by Eli. "Are you sure that is a great idea" asked Eli. "Oh sure, Hoots will be fine" answered Shmee.

Hoots flying with the hammer in his talon soon found the store, and after some difficulty juggling the door handle and the hammer entered the shop. The arms dealer heard the bell and turned around and without thinking and said, "Good afternoon, can I help ya ... ROITH SAVE ME! DON'T EAT ME FOUL BEAST!" "I would like to sell ... who ... this hammer" said Hoots, but what the poor dealer heard was "Glan def er bam ... who ... dan mest." This truly terrified him and he passed out. Hoots calmly waited for the man to come to, who then began to scream again until Hoots calmly put the hammer on the counter. He then used his wing to point to the hammer, then to the store's money bag, and then to himself.

The man had run out of breath and therefore was forced to calm down, and he slowly began to realize this monster was offering a transaction. He pulled out fifty gold and shoved it towards the monster. Hoots just stared at him, and then shook his head. The arms dealer doled out twenty-five more. Hoots' eyes narrowed. The arms dealer turned white and dug out fifty more gold pieces, and put them in the pile.

Hoots nodded, and then motioned towards an empty sack for the man put the money in for him. With coin secured, Hoots was off toward the Great Hall.

When Shmee had arrived at the Great Hall, he surveyed the room full of tables and chairs, and in the back of the room against the wall was a large stone chair. On it was the fattest dwarf he had ever seen. Ethendael was talking to dwarf about something, but Shmee as usual was tuning out matters that weren't about him. "Why is he wearing a Lumberjack's cape?" asked the King, and roused Shmee's interest. Shmee related the fairly recent tale, and the King was flabbergasted. "They accepted a non-dwarf, but they didn't accept my son!" cried King Grent the Stout Hearted. "I hadn't heard about that Your Grace, but if you want I can talk to the fellas and see what is wrong with your son" replied Shmee. "Wrong! There is nothing wrong with him. They just made up some story about how he didn't know how to fight, and that he was unteachable or something!" shouted the King. "Well, better luck next time then, and I will put in a good word for him" said Shmee helpfully. The King was about to yell something else, when the door burst open and a large flying shadow flew towards him. He was going to scream, but instead he clutched his heart and died. Thus ended King Grent the Stout Hearted.

The guards acted quickly by running out and finding the King's son, and then banishing him to the under-mine. There was much rejoicing at the death of the fat tyrant, and Shmee was up a one-hundred and twenty-five gold. It turns out the

Grendon's line was next after that of the King, so he was quickly made King. He made Hoots the honorary Protector of the Realm for his unintentional assistance in overthrowing the previous ruler. Ethendael and Grendon became fast friends.

"Nothing can be done about The Coil until we find out who they are, and where they strike from. We should send out a party to hunt for information" said King Grendon. Ethendael quickly agreed, and said, "Who will go, and root out this evil for us?" Everyone looked over at Shmee. "Will there be some sort of reward for this quest?" asked Shmee. The leaders looked at each other and shrugged. Grendon replied, "I am sure we can come up with something. Mithril boots perhaps. I will check what we have got in the vaults." "Good enough. I will do it provided Hoots wants to go" said Shmee. Hoots nodded in agreement, and he was quite happy that Shmee had asked for his approval for once. "I will go with them. Trust me they will need a healer" said Elianna. "The Lumberjacks cannot send you without backup. I will send Glin with you" said the King. "Sounds like we are a mage away from an adventuring party" quipped Shmee.

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In a castle high up in the southern mountains with the banners in the turrets showing a gear on an axel with a spring wrapped around it, a group of contented men are discussing battle plans. They are joined by a dignitary from Capraciss' southern neighbor Krighten. "It is a lovely place you have

here. The tulips and the primroses give this place such a wonderful fragrance. We have been relying too much on magic users for our protection, so you can count on my men. By the way, where did you get your art it is so whimsical?" asked Criss the Dignitary. "Oh we got it from our own internal art department. I will have them make you some pieces" said Master Iron in his new light gray hood. The Generals in their new shiny silver armor smiled wickedly with the impending influx of new men.

Chapter 5: Mines and Woods

The newly minted questing group got together to discuss their plans. “So what are we going to do?” asked Elianna. “I was thinking we should just walk around and find some Coil members, and then beat the info out of ‘em” replied Shmee. “That is your ... who ... basic plan for everything” said Hoots. “I like to think of myself as more a doer and less of a thinker” said Shmee. “Yes thinking ... who ... has never been a problem for you” quipped Hoots. “Thank you” said Shmee with a wry smile. “This is really the plan from the man that levelled my town to nothing but tinder?!” exclaimed Eli. “I come up with better plans when my life is on the line. Nothing like the thought of dying to get the creative juices flowing” replied Shmee. “Are you saying you are afraid of death?” asked the young dwarf. “Absolutely! When I first started out as an adventurer I wasn’t, but since then I have gotten so near death so many times that it has started to wear on me a bit, and I find I fight better when with a healthy aversion to fear. It keeps me from giving up. Plus there are all those people I have killed, so I am worried about the conversation I am going to have with Roith when I take his hand and he shuttles me to my end” explained Shmee. Glin let this sink in for a bit.

They decided that since no one was coming up with a better plan, that beating info out of The Coil members was going to have to work until someone could think of something else.

They had also decided that going back out the valley entrance would be a bad idea in case some of The Coil troops had followed them, and they would give away the ex-Wuldinholm residents' location; actually that was Riginel's 'suggestion'. Shmee assumed it was because Riginel was worried The Coil might take him and do some very un-magical things to him. Which of course Shmee would have been fine with, but everyone else thought it was a bad idea. They also couldn't decide which mountain was better to travel through, so they decided just to flip a coin. The first time they flipped it they had forgotten to assign mountains to the sides, and the second time the coin fell on its side and rolled off in to the river, so finally Shmee just said, "let's go south it is like walking downhill."

They gathered up all their gear and took the long walk over the southern bridge. The Old Gate Keeper gave them a look over and said, "You guys don't look like you're going to do much mining, and if you're going adventuring then I am sorry to say that the mine's Threat Level is Low so far this week." "Threat Level asked?" asked Shmee. "Oh yes the mines all have Threat Levels, so a Low threat level would be possibility of large rats and some stragglng goblins or something like that; a Medium Threat Level would be packs of goblins or groups of those giant cave bats; a High Threat Level would be cave trolls maybe rock golems, and an Extreme Threat Level would be like balrogs or MHWs. Different combinations of bad guys will also affect the mine's Threat level as well."

“What is a MHW?” asked Shmee. “Oh that would be a Massive Harry Worm. You will just be hanging out in the mine and all the sudden everything will start shaking and a mass of hair and teeth will swallow you whole or eat your leg. They don’t mean you no harm, but they just eat whatever is in their path. Don’t worry though. They are usually pretty deep in the mine, so if you aren’t mining it shouldn’t be a problem” replied the Old Gate Keeper. “Well we are just passing through to the other side” said Shmee. “Well then today is the perfect day for it kid’o, Low Threat Level you know. Have a safe trip!”

The Low Threat Level had the group in high spirits because they were hoping to make good time. Again Shmee and Hoots were amazed by how large the mine was. With high ceilings and wide passage ways, but they could not marvel at the grandeur of the mine for long because as soon as they were out the cave door they were attacked by a large pack of giant rats. They dispatched the rats easily, and it did give Hoots some snacks for the road ahead, but it was discouraging to have a fight fifteen minutes in to their three day mine trek. Not more than an hour later they were attacked by group of cave bats. These took a little more work to deal with, but soon they were all burning on the ground or shoved in Hoots’ mouth. “Maybe that is the end of ...” Shmee started to say as an arrow whizzed by his face. He swung around and started to cut his way through a group of goblins.

The goblins seemed pretty intent on killing the adventures. They were applying techniques that could be confused with battle tactics by keeping the archers in the back, and the close combat troops up front, but they were no match for the swordsmanship of Shmee, the blunt force of Glin's hammer, the hunger of The Guardian of the Holly Implement, or the shockingly effective daggering skills of Elianna.

They soon laid waste to the twenty or so goblins and were resting on some rocks near the pile of bodies, and Shmee exclaimed, "The dwarves need to work on their Threat Levels a bit!" "Well maybe if you weren't wearing a bright red cape we would be able to move more than fifteen feet!" responded Eli. "I have been wondering why you haven't changed the cape's color myself, but I assumed you just wanted to fight all this stuff" said Glin. "No one told me I could change the color! I thought the color signified rank or something, and that is why yours is black" said Shmee exasperatedly. "No, I just leave mine black because it looks good. To change it you just grab ahold of it and think about the color you want it to be. Pretty great huh!" replied Glin. "Yes" said Shmee snidely while grabbing his cape and turning his cape black.

As Shmee continued to rest, the rocks he was leaning against started to shake, "Please not a MHW" screamed Shmee, but instead the rocks behind him stood up and started to swing at him. "Rock golem!" exclaimed Glin. "No Kidding!" yelled Shmee as he started to run from the monster, but since it kept swinging at him, and he kept dodging, he was just going

in circles. “You need to hit him with something solid in his chest rock to uncover his magic heart orb” said Glin helpfully. “You mean like a magic hammer that does extra damage? Oh right, maybe you can throw gold pieces at it” quipped Eli. “Ha, Ha, Ha!” yelled Shmee as he continued to run and dodge in circles. “If you can get him to hold still I can hit him in the back with my hammer. It my crack open his chest rock” said Glin helpfully. “Yes, I will ask him very nicely if he will stand still!” said Shmee with more than a hint of sarcasm, but the golem decided to smash Shmee in the chest instead. Sending him careening into the cave wall and knocking the wind out of him.

As the golem was standing over Shmee about to deliver his final blow, Glin smashed the back of his chest rock as hard as he could with his hammer. This staggered the beast, and it did its best to turn and face the new threat. Hoots grabbed a nearby boulder and hurled it at the golem hitting it square in the chest rock as well, and again caused the monster to stagger. Glin landed another massive blow, this time the golem landed on its back. Hoots grabbed another boulder and flew as high as he could in the cave, and then flew down as fast as he could and dropped the boulder at the last minute. This blow cracked open the chest rock and exposed the magic heart orb with its light casting an orange glow throughout the mine. Hoots reached in with talons and yanked it out. The golem turned from a fearsome creature to a pile of rocks.

Shmee was slowly getting his breath back, and said “So why don’t we camp here for the night?” “I think ... who ... I can still see the gate from here” said Hoots. Indeed, no sooner had Hoots finished speaking when he heard a faint voice echoing off the mine walls, “I have raised the Threat Level to High.”

They lingered just long enough for Shmee to regain his breath, and to stow the heart orb in Hoots’ section of the loot bag. Soon they were heading down though the mine again. Changing Shmee’s cape color had helped, but it was still slow going. They were wading their way through what seemed like endless waves of goblin’s, bats, and rats until at last they walked for a couple of miles without being harassed. Finally, the gate was well out of view. The out of breath and very sore Shmee said, “I think now we should camp.” They huddled around a small fire, and Glin said, “Is it always like this on quests?” “If it was, I would have quit a long time ago” replied Shmee, and added, “Most quests you just have to guard some rich guy to his brother’s house, or find five of a certain type of rock for an alchemist, but you dwarves have serious pest problem here.” “I thought as much” said Glin. Hoots seemed like the only member of the group that was not worn out because he now had what appeared be an endless supply giant rats to eat. Which he placed in very large burlap bag.

The night passed without trouble, and the next day was trouble free as well. This was fine with the group because they were still sore from the battles they day before. Hoots

had already half way emptied his rat bag that he had been dragging behind him as he flew, and Shmee thought he looked noticeably fatter. "I wonder why we haven't had any more random encounters today" asked Glin. Shmee put his hand on his sword and looked around and said, "Don't test our luck boy, we have fought so many rats, goblins, and bats already that I smell like a disgusting tri-breed." "I would be fine ... whowho ... with fighting a few more rats" said Hoots while dipping his talon again in to his rat bag. "I am wondering if they were all running from something and ran in to us?" wondered Eli. Shmee sighed and held the hilt of his sword a little tighter and said, "I have got a bad feeling about this."

The next night and most of the day again passed without incident, and the group was starting to relax when they saw blue glow down the cave in front of them. There was a clanging of rocks. Eli volunteered to quietly scout ahead to see what was going on.

She moved soundlessly toward the light, and found that it came from a narrow offshoot shaft. She leaned in as stealthily as she could, and what she saw was a group of rock golems mining the walls with cloaked dwarf sized man in the middle apparently controlling them all. She turned to try and get back to the group when the man said to her, "Don't be afraid, I have the golems under control. I am just using them for mining this section. They do it with much less work then a dwarf would." Eli straightened up and said, "I think we ran in to one of your golems on the way here. We had to kill it."

“Yes I am sorry about that, he got away while I was finding my lunch, and they move so fast through the rocks you know” said the dwarf mage. The rest of the crew had run up to join her when they heard her start to talk, and Shmee said “well, we will leave to your work then,” and motioned with his head that the group should start to leave. “I must insist that you stay” said the dwarf turning towards them and revealing his Mad Mage mask. “I thought you said to not be afraid!” exclaimed Elianna. “I lied” said the mage.

Shmee rushed in with his sword, and almost hit the mage when he was struck by a lightning bolt that dropped him to his knees. Eli threw one of her daggers at the mage and it caught him in the shoulder. This must have caused the mage to lose his concentration because the golems then turned around and headed toward the mage. “Nooo!” he screamed as the golems began to pummel him. Shmee crawled in behind the golems and searched through the new pile of goo and retrieved the mask, but not without drawing the attention of the golems. Shmee was up like a shot and was running out the offshoot entry way. The rest of the party had already exited the shaft. “You greedy wanker, you have killed us all!” exclaimed Eli. Shmee was going to reply with something witty, but the golems were already gathering at the entryway to the shaft, so he pulled out his sword instead. Not that it was going to do a whole lot of good versus the golems that were going to smash him to pieces, but instead they didn’t. The golems just stared at the group, and then

said in a unified gravelly voice, “Thank You for freeing us.” Then they sunk in to the ground below.

Shmee started to dust himself off from the encounter, when Eli came over and shoved him against the mine wall and said, “Why would risk your life for a piece of armor?!” “I just thought you would want your first piece of loot as an adventurer. Your dagger caused him to get squashed after all, and to the killer goes the spoils” responded Shmee. Then he flipped the mask in her direction. He added “You always remember your first treasure you find, or the first giant pile for monster organs you harvest for that matter.” Eli held the evil looking mask in her hand. She was having a hard time deciding whether to throw it back at him, or to hug it. She instead decided to slip it in to her backpack, but retain her angry expression. “I see you two ... whowho ... are experiencing a tumultuous courtship” laughed Hoots. Shmee and Eli gave him a displeased look.

They journeyed most of the rest of the day and came to mine door. Glin walked up to it and put both hands on it then chanted something, and the door swung open. The sun was setting, and the group exited in to the Rickard Forest. “Well we made it out of that blasted mine, so now we just need to find some Coil soldiers to beat up” said Shmee. “It should be a fun morning” smiled Glin holding his hammer.

They camped and woke up early to start their search for The Order of the Coil. They soon found the main road, and decided to just keep following it south until they hit a town.

Then hope that the town was infested with evil anti-magic troops. They walked along the road for half of a day, and then they heard the sound of boots on dirt heading their way. They hid themselves on the sides of the road and waited, but to their disappointment the troops were marching under some banner with a gear, their armor was nicely polished, and there were so many of them that it must have been some sort of government group.

Glin decided that it was probably a good idea to jump out and ask these fine men a few questions: “Good morning gentlemen! You have not heard of ‘The Order of the Coil’ around these parts by any chance have you?” “Why do you ask dwarf?” asked the apparent commander from his horse. “We just wanted to ask them a few questions is all” said Glin. Shmee slapped his forehead so hard that it pressed the mask in to his face and caused him to bleed. “We?” asked the commander. The dwarf looking around and seeing that he was standing alone realized his mistake and explained, “Oh you know the general ‘we’.” “Well dwarf you have found The Order of The Coil, so what questions did you want to ask?” inquired the commander while flicking his hand to tell a group of his men to start looking around. Glin did what any normal person would do in this situation. He panicked, but his next course of action was a little different. He hit the commander’s horse in the face with his hammer as hard as he could. Dropping the horse and the commander to the ground.

This action stunned everyone. The Coil soldiers just stared at the commander who was now trapped under his dead horse, and Glin's party stared at the stupid dwarf that had single handedly attacked an entire battalion of troops, but in his defense he was now indeed following Shmee's uninspired plan of just hitting Coil soldiers until they talked. Glin thought it was bad form to leave a task half done, so he delivered a similar blow to the commander. While the trigger of this situation was new, Shmee knew exactly what to do next, and he was already running. Eli must have decided his reasoning was sound and was following him as best as possible.

The Coil soldiers had recovered from their dumbfounded paralysis and were running at the dwarf at full speed. Glin readied himself for the honorable death he had been told about his whole life. When all of the sudden the ground, the troops, and the horses all grew smaller and more distant. He had died he thought, and he was in Roith's hands being shuttled to the afterlife. He didn't remember getting hit, but his shoulders hurt badly, so maybe he was stabbed from behind. He decided to look up and see what fate waited for him beyond. It was large owl that was giving him a look that said he was the dumbest dwarf that had ever lived.

Shmee was very jealous of Glin because using Hoots as a means of escape from an impossible situation was kind of his thing, and now the dwarf was monopolizing that avenue of retreat, so he and Eli were doing their best just run as fast as possible through the woods. Eli with her long legs and perfect physical elf condition, was leaving Shmee in the dust.

He was tempted to yell out that his armor was slowing him down, and that in a fair race he would win, but he decided against it because Eli had proven to be kind of an uppity elf that would probably race him if they survived this encounter. He did not want take the chance that he would lose to her in a fair race as well. He was however, quite happy with how the cape was performing. Arrows seemed to be missing him for the most part, and the ones that were landing were hitting him in the hardest parts of his armor. Sure they were going to bruise a bit, but at least he wasn't going to be dead.

The Coil was having a hard time following the group because of their shiny new plate-mail. It made them look like every maiden's hero, but it hurt to run in, and the group was disappearing in to the brush of the forest. Every time they would shoot at the swordsman, his cape would move revealing that he was a couple of feet to the right or left, and it was getting very frustrating. "Stupid, awesome enchanted items! We will show them!" they thought.

Hoots flew ahead and then circled back flying low enough to talk to Shmee, "In two hundred yards there is ... who ... a ravine. "It is about thirty feet deep ... whowho ... and twenty feet wide. I will drop off the dwarf, and then ... who ... come back to take you and Eli over it." Hoots flew off, ramming Glin in to every tree branch he could just thank the dwarf for their current predicament. He didn't bother putting Glin down either he just kind of flung him and let momentum and gravity handle the landing. He knew dwarves 'loved' to be tossed. He got back to the ravine to see Eli already standing

on the other side with Shmee bumbling after. He circled until Shmee got to the edge wheezing and grabbed the two and glided them to the other side quite gently.

Glin had recovered from the beating he had taken, and he started looking around for the best path to take. He found a small trail that headed off in to some thick dark woods, and he knew that was probably the best way to go, but since he was a dwarf, thick dark woods were the worst thing in the entire world. He would just as soon go back to The Coil and get stabbed a few hundred times. He started say that to his group mates that had just landed “I am not sure about ... “, but they had already made the decision for him by picking him up and running him in to the wood. Eli asked very nicely, and a couple of trees blocked the path from behind them.

The dense forest made it so dark that it was impossible to see more than a few feet in front of them, and they did not want to alert The Coil to their whereabouts, so making torches was not an option. Instead they had to rely on Hoots’ great eyesight to guide them. The trees were making odd noises as they moved forward. “What are they saying?” asked Shmee. “They are trying to remember the last time they saw a dwarf” replied Eli, “They seem to think it was only a couple hundred years ago when a dwarf got drunk and entered the forest on a dare. They are laughing now because of the pranks they pulled on him.” “What did they da-da do?” asked Glin. Eli replied, “They are laughing pretty hard, so I am having trouble making it out, but it sounds like they stripped him naked, wrapped him in vines, and then tossed

him in the air for a while. Then they passed him branch to branch and dropped him back where he entered the forest. Don't worry Glin you are with me, so I doubt they will do anything like that." "Do they know of a place to hide while we wait out The Coil?" asked Shmee. The trees parted a bit to show a small cabin.

It didn't take long to reach the cabin. After which the trees moved back to their original locations so that The Coil would not be able to easily follow the adventurers, and because after a couple thousand years they got the dirt just the way they liked it in their old spots.

The cabin was old and dilapidated, and it did not look as if anyone had lived there for quite some time, and the thatch looked like it would leak provided any rain could make it through the thick tree canopy. But it was better than sleeping outside, and it let them light a fire in the fire place. For fun they made Glin go and collect the firewood, and told him to ask the trees before grabbing any logs so as to not offend them. He completed the task, but only after having several mini panic attacks when the trees would make sudden loud noises and cast shadows that looked like ghouls all around him. The trees all agreed that more dwarves should enter the forest so they could have this much fun more often. Well at least once every hundred years or so.

They went about making their cabin hideout as comfortable as possible by stuffing their sleep sacks with leaves and soft brush, and Hoots made a quick nest out of the thatched roof

then poked a hole so he could talk to the other members of the group. "It looks like The Order has upgraded their brand a little" quipped Shmee, "They must have a pretty good marketing department." "Indeed, without the dark armor and evil flag I could have sworn they were the good guys" said Glin. "This could be bad for us if they are able to recruit non-evil people" said Elianna. "Meh, evil people will always do something to ruin everything. Like take the Mad Mage War for instance, the only reason the Wizards knew the Implement would work is because Kwak had some giant monolog about how nothing could stop him except for perhaps the Holy Implement, or to gather a group of good mages large enough to figure out a powerful spell to move the moon back. I mean he gave us two good options on how to stop him, so you got to know that the other Wizards were out recruiting mages while we activated the implement. Without his monolog everyone was just trying to figure the best way to surrender. I love bad guys, they keep me employed and they do all the hard work to thwart themselves ... well themselves." "So what you are saying ... who ... is that we just need to find the bad guy ... whowho ... and let him tell us how to beat him?" asked Hoots. "In most cases, yes" replied Shmee.

"Well just finding that army was important, so I sent back a bird to mines to let them know not trust The New Coil look" said Eli. "Why didn't you send a bird when I was taking you to Wuldinholm?" asked Shmee. "I guess it hadn't occurred to me since we were heading to my village anyway" replied

Elianna. Shmee sighed, but he resisted the urge to be snarky. His eyes did roll pretty far up in his head though. They continued to talk until they grew tired, and their soft beds called to them. At last they would have a warm and safe night's sleep, and there wouldn't be anything that could interrupt them. After all who would purposely run in to this dark forest anyway?

They had not been asleep more than a couple hours when Shmee was awoken by soft whispering. It took him awhile to understand it, but at last he heard: "Tell her I love her. You must, so I can rest ..." Shmee jumped up and started to look for the whisperer, and he soon found him sitting in a chair at the table talking to no one in particular. He was also an odd shade of see through. "Crap! An old house in the middle of a dark wood, of course it would be haunted. Just our luck it is a litch (non-nerd definition: really awesome ghost, and by awesome I do mean terrifying)!" thought Shmee.

Shmee drew his sword knowing that it would take a while to dispel a ghost with Ember, but it was enchanted, so if he kept hitting it, or more accurately swinging through it over and over, it would go away eventually. The ghost didn't see him coming, and soon Shmee was swinging away at it wildly. "Stop that! It kind of hurts but mostly tickles!" exclaimed the ghost. "I need to send you to the other side" said Shmee not stopping from his hacking. "What ... who ... is going on?" asked the ever vigilant Hoots. "Ghost" replied Shmee now panting. "Well, I will be up here ... who ... if your need me" said Hoots knowing this was up to Shmee since he had no

way of injuring the ghost himself. The rest of the group was roused by the commotion and gathered around watching Shmee swing wildly at the apparition.

“I will go away if you promise to tell my wife I love her” explained the ghost. This caused Shmee who was ready to pass out due to the free swinging to take a break. “I died here making this cabin so we could live together. Free of the mocking of people who didn’t understand the love between a human and an elf.” “So your wife is the elf I hope?” asked Shmee. “Well no, I am” said ghost. Shmee went back to swinging his sword through the ghost. “What are you doing?!” asked the ghost, “I just explained a non-violent way to help me pass.” “Your cabin is at least a hundred years old, so unless she is the world’s oldest human, or you married a two-year-old, she is dead. Even then I am going to kill you for marrying a two-year-old. I feel good about it either way” explained Shmee. “WHAT! She can’t be dead. That means she never knew what happened to me!” Yelled the ghost while doubling in size. Meanwhile there was a rustling in the trees. “What is that Eli?” asked Shmee. “The trees are laughing and saying this is their favorite part” she replied.

Shmee was swinging like he had never swung before, “Eli this is a good time to see if Greganor can get his brother Roith over here. Tell him we got a big dead guy on our hands” explained Shmee, and with that the now litch sized ghost smacked Shmee across the room. Without much of a pause Shmee gave orders while still in a pile on the ground, “Glin, I need you to either find a magic weapon, or something silver

to fight this guy with, and Hoots buddy, I need to make a distraction, or just rip some limbs off the trees to show them our displeasure.” Glin was off searching the cabin for something to hinder the now very angry ghost, and Eli was in a corner trying get Greganor to send his brother to grab this guy and take him to his final resting place.

Shmee now back on his feet was now doing his best to dodge the swings of the litch while get a few more stabs in. He had swung quite a bit before, so he was pretty sure that he just needed a few more thrusts. Unfortunately, now that the ghost was angry, so it was hard to get his sword close to it. Glin returned from the kitchen with a small steak knife and was stabbing at the back of the ghost, “I checked it and it is silver!” The litch was going to hit Glin, when a branch came through the roof and landed on, or technically through, the ghost. It didn’t hurt the litch, but it did cause the distraction that Shmee needed, and he got a few more swings in before being smashed across the room again. This time the ghost followed him and was ready to strike a very damaging blow when Glin started stabbing him in the back repeatedly. This was very annoying to the ghost, so he turned around to deal with the dwarf when a large black cloak appeared with light shining out where the feet, hands and head should be. It said to Shmee, “Just a couple more times if you please, and will I take him to his wife.” Shmee obliged him, and swung at the litch as many times as he could. At last the ghost cried out in agony. The cloaked being rose up and grabbed the ghost,

who now once again looked like an elf, by the shoulders and lifted him in to the air. In a flash they were gone.

Shmee collapsed on the floor. His arms ached from all the hacking on the ghost they had done, and Hoots flew through his giant branch hole, and propped his friend up beside him. The trees were rustling even louder now, so Shmee yelled "Eli, tell them to shut up or I am going to start a forest fire!" The trees went silent. "I think they heard you" replied Eli, "I can't believe that Roith himself came to take that ghost. Usually it is an underling, but that was something!" "I am sure that since his underlings ... who ... must have screwed-up before ... who ... that he wanted to get him before he got worse" explained The Guardian of the Holly Implement. "It was good to meet the guy that I am always running from" quipped Shmee. They talked for an hour or so and then went back to bed, but this time Hoots did not leave his friend's side.

The group got up and decided to continue their travels to the south. It had after all landed them in the middle of The Coil before, so now that they knew what they were looking for, they could be a little more careful, and they would surely find a small unsuspecting scouting party that would no doubt have one of the worst days of their lives. The trees moved aside to let them through the quickest path out of the woods. They were still a little worried that Shmee might start that forest fire he had talked about last night due to the trick they had played on the group.

They were soon on the road again, and on the lookout for The Coil. It didn't take long. The area was lousy with Coil. They were everywhere. Finding the small scouting party was going to be hard since pretty much everywhere they looked was a man in shiny armor with The Coil logo. Finally, they came to an old farm that The Coil must have been using as a small base of operations with the 'important people' in the house, and the rest of the troops in the barn. They quickly made a plan to wait until dark, and then they would try and kidnap one of the guys in the house.

When night came Shmee and Glin snuck to the back of the barn and grabbed a couple of sleeping soldiers and their armor so they could skulk about like they belonged. They tied up the men, gagged them, and then shoved them in to a ditch. They covered the terrified men with weeds and grass. After that they crept to the back of the house and started to peer through windows until they found just the right sort of sucker. He was in the main bedroom much like they expected. With his opulent sheets and bed cover, and a great looking spread of food on his little table. His maps were spread out everywhere. He looked quite happy. They waited for the poor man to fall asleep.

Once he was safely in bed, Shmee pulled out Glin's silver steak knife and started to work the latch on the window. Shmee had broken in to more than one bedroom in the middle of the night, so this was easy work. They slowly lifted the window up and did their best to soundlessly approach the bed. The Coil official woke up just as they got to his side,

but Glin had his hammer ready and knocked him out. Shmee was now a little worried that the man would have brain damage, but it was too late for much concern. They carried him to the window and dumped him out on to the ground below. "Hoots your up" Shmee whispered in to the darkness, and soon a dark shadow came and whisked the unfortunate soul away. Shmee and Glin still in their Coil armor just walked off the farm talking as though it was their turn on patrol. This was by far the best working plan of Shmee's life.

Chapter 6: Success and Captivity

When General Thresh woke up he was surrounded by a group of fairly average looking adventurers, and then he saw a pile of Coil armor. The night before started to come back slowly. He was happily dreaming of all the evil things he was going to do with all his new troops when he awoke only to be knocked unconscious again, and now here he was lying on the ground and tied up. Surely his troops could not have been so dumb as to let their commanding general get kidnapped. Then he thought of his troops, and sighed, of course they had.

He started to look at the group individually, and when he glanced at the dwarf his head started to hurt even more. An image of the dwarf smacking him with a hammer flashed through his mind. He was definitely being added to the kill slowly list. The human seemed familiar too. After a moment of reflection, he confirmed that the human was there too. Added to the list. The elf he did not know, so she was being put on the kill quickly list temporarily. He continued to look around, and then he saw them. The eyes he had been dreaming about all night. They glowed orange in the early morning firelight. They were looking in to his soul and finding it very flavorful. He tried to back away, but it turns out he was firmly staked to the ground.

The owl left his perch and landed in front of him, and then leaned in close to his face and uttered, "Groo ba ... who ..

druum.” Thresh then did what any self-respecting evil general would do in this situation. He started pleading for his life, “Please don’t eat me! I haven’t been eating well myself, so I would be far too sugary and fatty!” This of course caused the owl to salivate.

What Hoots had said is, “He is ...who (for those who have been wondering, this word in owlish is roughly translated ‘I wish more people spoke owlish’) ... awake.” This caused the rest of the group to get up, and wander over to the pleading General. “Does this mean that we will not get to punch the information out of him?” asked a now forlorn Glin. “I think we should still punch him a little bit, just so he knows what he is here for” responded Shmee, Just having Hoots scare him doesn’t get the point across. We need to show him that we are after something other than Hoots’ breakfast”

“If you call off the bird I will tell you anything! There is no need to beat me!” pleaded the General. Shmee replied, “I promised my young dwarf friend some punching, and since we get so little fun on trips like these, I will not deprive him of it. Go ahead Glin.” Glin happily started smacking the General around. It was not as satisfying as he had hoped. The General was right that he had gotten fat, so the punches didn’t have the impact he wanted. Sure the General was getting all red and puffy, but without that resounding ‘thwack’ it just wasn’t the same, but Shmee had told him to beat the man, so he continued his work. It is always a shame when you can’t enjoy your tasks.

Shmee let Glin beat the crap out of the General for a while, but when he saw that the lad's heart wasn't in it, and that the General was going to tell them everything anyway he said, "Nice work Glin. I am sure that is more than enough, but get your fists ready in case he starts to clam up, or better yet we could cut off pieces and start feeding them to Hoots" This was mostly for show, and to boost the young dwarf's ego a bit.

"I told you crazy people before that I was going to tell you anything you wanted!" exclaimed General Thresh. "Are you sure? I always though evil men like you were always worried about the 'worse things' their masters would do to them if they were ever caught?" pondered Elianna out loud. "Pish-posh! Dying tomorrow is always better than dying today. Anybody who says otherwise is too young or dumb to know otherwise" explained the General. Shmee nodded approvingly, and then asked, "Well than spill it fatty! We need to know who you work for, where your base is, and who you are? Not necessarily in that order, and as a matter of fact you should probably start with who you are, but I will leave that up to you." "And you swear you will not feed me to the bird?" asked Thresh. "Definitely, well probably not" replied Shmee.

"Well I am General Alberto Thresh, and I was in charge of the Mad Mages' non-magic army. It might surprise you to know that most of the Mad Mage crew had never cast a spell in their life, but when an evil dictator comes along, and he has great care and bonus packages than you sign up." "Did you

get dental?” interrupted Shmee. “Oh yes we did! He was the best leader I had ever committed evil under. I really thought we were going to win that war” responded Thresh, “but as you know we did not win, so I had to freelance for a while. Simple stuff like raiding villages and burning farms. The ‘usual’, but I must have been good at my job because not long after the end of the war a man called Master Iron enlisted my services to help him end all magic. His benefits are not near what we got with the Mages, but he seems to be better with money, so maybe that is the reason.

When Master Iron and I first started our crusade against magic we didn’t have a lot of money, so we did a few bank heists and robbed couple of mines until we could afford to buy Peak Ridge Castle on the southern border.” “I thought Peak Ridge was owned by The Order of Wizards?” interjected Eli. “Yeah, I guess after the war they were having cash flow problems too. Governments pulled back on the taxes earmarked for The Order, and instead put the money in to public works since it was peace time and all, so The Order decided to liquidate some of their superfluous hard assets to get the revenue they needed to ride out the next few financial quarters. I guess now that they are at war again they will be wanting to buy it back, but I don’t think we will be selling.”

“So did you buy the castle under the title ‘The Order of the Coil?’” asked Glin. “Oh of course not son. We created a subsidiary called GreenWuld LLC to buy our land for us. We had our legal team write that up” replied Thresh. “You

weren't always an army general were you?" asked Shmee. "No, I was The Secretary of Business Development for King Ether, but during the Kings Duel Conflict I was captured on my way to small business seminar and tortured. The experience turned my soul dark, and it gave me a healthy blood lust, so here I am!" explained Thresh. "Do you miss being an economist?" asked Eli. "Heavens no! Being an evil general pays much better, and I find the work to be much more rewarding!" replied Thresh.

"So what can you tell us about this Iron Master of yours?" asked Shmee. "Master Iron you mean" corrected Thresh. "Sure that guy. The one we are supposed to get rid of" said Shmee. "Well, like most evil dictators I have worked for he is angry a lot, and he works the staff very hard. He has tried to compensate for that by implementing paid vacation time, so he is trying, but you know most dictators don't come from the business world. It is hard for them to adjust properly to running an organization of this size. Old hands like me do our best to help when we can" replied Thresh. "That is all kind of interesting, and I really like the paid vacation idea, but I was mostly looking for physical attributes and personal background information" explained Shmee.

"Oh sure, he doesn't ever take his hood off, so I have never got a good look at his face. That is not odd for someone in his position, and he has metal arms and legs. I am guessing they are made out of iron, but they very well could be tight fitting armor of some sort. It is hard to say since I have never seen him take them off. He hates magic and do-gooders, so

The Order of Wizards and he are on the outs, and he has heard of you and your owl somewhere before, but hasn't ever talked about his past. One does not simply ask about the past of an evil dictator. Not if they value their lives anyway, but no one had heard of him before the end of the Mad Mage War, so I am guessing he must have turned during the war, and that must have been how he had heard of me" explained Thresh.

"Good, good. One more thing. What is with the new outfits?" asked Shmee. "Yeah that was just a recruitment deal. You killed a lot of guys with the whole 'let's just blow up the whole town' deal, so we changed our look a little bit to appeal to the 'common man'. They are awful. Aren't they?" replied Thresh looking down at his armor, "The skull and the snake were way cooler, but it worked, and we got a lot more people to sign up. It has really been a good thing for us. I do miss our skeleton shaped chairs though. They were comfortable and stylish. Our brand is so generic now, but I guess that is what the kids are in too these days, but still, once we win I plan on switching back to my black armor. I like the look of terror in people's eye when they see you. When you wear this stuff people keep asking you for help, and to please stop the bandits, but the look of shock when you start burning down their village is nice."

"Yeah people can get annoying sometimes" agreed Shmee, "but it looks like we are headed south to Peak Ridge Castle. Go ahead and eat him Hoots. Eli send a bird or whatever animal you think best to the others with the info, and the

rest of you pack up.” “I thought you said you weren’t going to let him eat me?!” gapped Thresh. “No, I said probably, and you were probably safe, but the more you talked the more I thought you were a total jerk, so I decided that since you were so fat and full of sugar that I would give my best friend a treat” explained Shmee. “But I can get you in to the castle! There is a secret passage that no one knows exists except for me!” pleaded Thresh. Shmee sighed and looked at the pathetic fat man. On the one hand Thresh was probably lying to save his life, and on the other Thresh was probably still lying to save his life, so just as he was about to give the order to let loose his always hungry friend on the man, he caught sight of Elianna. She had that look that said if he let Hoots eat Thresh that he would probably be dead soon, and not Shmee’s version of probably. Shmee sighed again. Longer and deeper this time, and said, “Bind his upper body and then make a leash for him. If he starts to talk of his own free will, gag him.” Hoots had a very sad look on his face, and Shmee walked over and gave him a hug, “We will find others for you to eat. Don’t you worry.”

Peak Ridge Castle was as far south as you could go and still be in Capraciss. If you went much further you were in Krighten. It was high up in the Peak Ridge mountain range, and it was the type of place that wizards and evil freaks flocked too. It had constant lightning storms and blowing snow. It made quite the impression, but most normal people would stay far away from the castle because like most peak top keeps it was drafty and hard to get in and out of. Worse,

it was excessively hard to host a party there, but wizards and evil freaks didn't have many parties.

The adventurers started their long hike south, and due to the distance they would have to travel it would take at least a month under normal conditions, but since the group had to dodge evil armies and cover their tracks it would take even longer. The journey was excruciatingly boring, so the author decided not to relay it. Just note, that Shmee did keep his word to Hoots. The bird ate quite a few dead evil minion scouts, and they arrived safely a few miles away from the castle, but quite tired and excruciatingly bored.

The team setup camp just north of the castle and made their plans for the next day. "So how do we get through this 'secret passageway' of yours?" asked Shmee. "We have to circle around to the south of the castle, and then head towards its tallest spire. I will tell you the rest when we get there" responded the fat general, who thanks to the long walk was less fat than before. This fact had saddened Hoots. "You mean after all that we now have to circle the mountain top, and then approach the castle from a vantage point where the enemy has their best view?" asked Glin. "Yeah I am guessing we should have just let Hoots eat him" added Shmee. "Wait, you guys don't understand! Due to the yeti infestation no one approaches from that direction, so no one will be watching from that spire!" explained Thresh. "So you want us to walk through a bunch of yetis?" asked Shmee, "One is hard enough to defeat, but an infestations worth? I think it would be safer to just ring the doorbell." "Yes, that is

exactly why we need to come from there. No one will ever suspect it” answered Thresh. “Well there will be no need to expect it because we will all be eaten by giant white wooly gorillas” said Shmee. “I will talk to the yetis; they will let us pass if I ask them” said Elianna. “Well at least dying by yeti is a noble death among the dwarves for some reason” added Glin, “Dumb, but noble.”

The group followed the narrow roads around the castle all the while watching for The Coil’s lookouts. Luckily they were attempting this passage in the dead of summer, so they did not have to worry about billowing snow or giant ice clumps falling on them. No, the grass was growing, creating good tread for their boots, and the warm sun dried all the moisture that would have otherwise made these roads almost unpassable. They made it through the pass unharmed, and not one of the party ever dangled by one hand over a cliff only to be rescued just before they lost their grip on the icy edge. They even whistled a little while walking luxuriously on the perfect pathway.

Just before they reached their destination they started to notice several caves with large white puffballs lying out in front of them. Hoots flew in for a closer look. Without getting to close he could see that they were alive, but they were just lying in front of their caves. He returned to the crew and whispered “I think ... who ... that they are sunbathing.” “Yetis don’t sunbath,” exclaimed Glin. “These ones ... who ... do” replied the Guardian of the Holy Implement. “I will go ask one” said Elianna, but before

Shmee and Glin could stop her, she was off. They watched her from behind some rocks. She was having a long conversation with one, and after what seemed like forever she came back and said, "They are indeed sunbathing, and since it is summer they are so full of game that they don't care if we pass or not, but they would like you to keep your voices down so they can sleep." All hopes were dashed of having an epic fight with hundreds of yetis. The group continued on, quietly of course.

They approached the spire, and looked to see if anyone was watching for them, but all they could see was an occasional soldier on the battlements moving from place to place. It was just as Thresh had said. "Things are going way to well for us. I say we find some other way in. One that requires an epic battle, or for us to scale something perilous" advised Shmee. "You just do not know when you have won" reassured Eli. Shmee remained doubtful, but the quietly moved towards the spire, and once they reached the wall Thresh said, "I will need my hands free for the next part." Eli cut him loose, and Thresh started to press on the stones in the wall in sequence. The stones started to glow, and then started to move creating a passage. Once the passage was completed, Thresh yelled, "Come and get 'em boys!" Soon the air was filled with the sound of boots on stone, and in a matter of seconds the party was surrounded by men with pointy spears.

Shmee was so mad that he could no longer contain himself, and in a blink of an eye he had Ember slicing through the

soldiers. With all the burning flesh it was starting to smell like an outdoor BBQ cook off. Shmee's rage was not all consuming, and he issued a command to his friend, who had followed Shmee's lead and was picking up men and flinging them around like a child does with dolls, "Hoots grab Eli and Glin and get out of here. They are light enough that you can escape while carrying them both." "No!" replied the Owl in common for the first time in his life. "You have too. Eli is already hurt and they will swarm over Glin soon. You have to go now!" "No!" replied Hoots once again. "You have saved my life so many times that any life debt you owed me has been paid several times over. Now Go!" The bird looked at Shmee and screeched so loud it made every Coil soldier cower. He then grabbed Elianna and Glin, and with one quick motion bit the head off General Thresh. He flew back towards the sun bathing yetis with the elf and the dwarf safely in his grasp.

Once the trio were out of range, Shmee lowered Ember and was beaten until little life remained.

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Shmee was surrounded by beautiful women, and he was at the edge of the world looking out over the crystal blue ocean. The women were bringing him things to eat and drink. Shmee was starting to think that he had Roith all wrong, and that he been taken to his wonderful end. He was even contemplating going and trying to find his family when a very lovely woman jabbed him the side with a large needle. It was

excruciating. She pulled it out and then did it again, but this time the world was starting to fade. The blue water started to turn gray, and it soon was made of stone. The women all started to turn in to chained prisoners except for the one jabbing him. No, that one turned in to a bald man in a black healer's cape who was sowing a large gash shut, and Shmee of course was strapped to a wooden table.

"You wouldn't be persuaded to let me die would you?" asked Shmee politely. "Sadly no, it is against my oath" replied the healer with more than a little remorse in his voice. "You do know what they will do to me once you're done right?" asked Shmee. "Oh yes, I have worked here since Master Iron took over" replied the healer, "he creates so much work for me, you wouldn't believe." "Oh, I can imagine. This is not my first trip to a torture chamber" sighed Shmee. "I could tell by your marks, but this is no average chamber, The Master takes great pride in his work!" explained the healer. "So Master Iron tortures his own prisoners? That is rare" asked Shmee. "No The Master is a different person then Master Iron, but I assume they took their names for similar reasons" replied the healer. "Master Iron hired a specialist is what you are telling me?" asked Shmee. "Yes exactly, and he is unfortunately good at it. I tried to escape once, so I wouldn't be duty bound to heal all of you people, but I was caught, and they said if I tried I again I would be a permanent practice subject for The Master. Thus here I remain" explained the healer.

Shmee and the healer became fast friends. It turns out that if you have spent any amount of time in a torture chamber that you have plenty in common. They talked about techniques they had witnessed; the least amount of time it took someone to break; the most famous person they had seen in one of these places, but they for some reason never got around to the healer's name. Due to the circumstances it was probably intentional. They were having a great time until a small old gangly man in a red tank top and some tan wool pants came in with a couple of standard looking guards.

"Is he ready?" asked the old man weakly. The healer gave Shmee a sad look, and gave him a knowing wink and said, "Yes, he is ready to go." "You are the best healer I have ever worked with!" exclaimed the old man, and then slapped Shmee on the shoulder, "I would have thought it would have taken much more than four days to fix this chap up!" "Are you The Master?" asked Shmee looking at the pathetic man before him. "Yes, I know I don't look like much, but I have years of practice, and the key is enjoying what you do. Every day is like living the dream! Can you believe how lucky I am to get paid to do the only thing that I want to do?!" "You are lucky indeed" replied Shmee as sarcastically as possible. "Oh, but you're the lucky one! We only need to know one thing from you, and that is where the elves are hiding the wizard, and we will let you go!" explained The Master. This was a very tempting offer for Shmee, but as an occasional liar himself he could see the lie in The Master's offer, so instead he counter-offered, "Have you checked up your butt?" "We

are going to have a great time you and me! Just wait as I get my tools!” exclaimed The Master.

Sadly the tools must have been in the next room over because The Master returned exceedingly quickly with a burlap bag with a drawstring top, and whatever was in it was clanging as he skipped back in to the room. “Sorry about that. It was very unprofessional not to have had my tools with me, but I didn’t expect you to be ready so soon. I was mostly just coming in to annoy the healer. He is so touchy about all of this” explained The Master, “But that being that, let’s get started.” He reached in to the bag and pulled out a large screw with a crank handle. Then he slowly started to work it in to Shmee’s side. “Careful the healer just sowed that up” Shmee tried to say as wittily as possible, but it mostly just sounded like “Gaaaaaaa!” The Master was very good at his job.

At the end of the long day The Master wiped his sweat from his brow and asked one more time, “Where is the wizard?” “I didn’t see you check your butt” replied Shmee. The Master patted Shmee on the shoulder and said, “Good, I knew we would have fun together!” Shmee promptly passed out as the healer appeared with a needle and thread and a roll of bandages.

The next morning Shmee was expecting either The Master or the healer, but instead he was greeted by a hooded man with metal arms sitting on a chair next to his table. “I see you are still the jerk I have come to know and despise” observed

Master Iron. Something about the voice seemed familiar to Shmee, but he couldn't quite place it. Then one of the metal arms reached down and picked up a steel lute and strummed it horribly. Somehow even worse than when he had real arms. Seeing the realization in Shmee's eyes, Master Iron pulled back his hood revealing Jimmy's deformed face.

"I see Hoots didn't kill you as dead as I thought he did" said Shmee. "Oh your owl friend did a pretty good job, but he left my upper torso intact, so when some industrious gnomes explored the cave they found me, and they used their advanced mechanical knowhow on me. Thus I am here before you now" explained Jimmy. "Huh, I guess we didn't think to check your pulse. I mean Hoots ripped you limb from limb" replied Shmee. "Yeah you didn't think of a lot of things! Like the fact you had a resurrection stone, and you used it on a chaotic giant owl instead of your adventuring partner that you had traveled with for years!" "Well we needed Hoots to complete the quest, and we didn't really need you for anything except for carrying the water jugs" replied Shmee. Jimmy clenched his iron fist in anger so hard that he started to deform his hand, "None of you ever respected me! You all looked down on me, but I will have my revenge! I will take all the magic out of this world, so all your precious loot will be worthless, and that owl will become nothing more than the dumb animal his is. All those fancy wizards will just be old men in fancy robes!"

Shmee was getting excited. This is just the sort of monolog that he had promised the group before he got captured. If

he could only prod his ex-bard ex-friend in to telling him more he could go about coming up with an escape plan. Jimmy must have seen the smile forming on Shmee's face because he said, "Oh you think I am about to tell you my plan, but you are mistaken! That is all I am telling you! How I plan on killing the god of magic is a secret! I am not going to share it with anyone! Especially not how I plan on getting Riginel to tell me her location, so I can use my special god sword to kill her, and then end magic once and for all!" Jimmy then left the room laughing maniacally as went, but he must have realized his error some ways down the hall because he stopped laughing and ran back and said, "I hate you so much!"

The Master soon entered the room shaking his head after Master Iron left and said, "Working on him would be a waste of my time. He tells that plan to anyone that will hang out with him for more than five minutes. He doesn't have many friends, so I think he is just lonely, but you and I have a game to play. Where were we? Oh yes the screw was yesterday, so the wire is today! How fun!" He pulled out a spool of wire and started feeding it in to the hole the screw had left. The man is a genius.

Shmee passed out again after the same question and answer period he had the day before, and he somehow knew that it was going to be a regular feature in his life for the next few days at least. He was having his favorite girl/water dream when his was shaken awake by a different cloaked man, but this one was different in that he didn't seem to have a face.

It was more like he was just a cloak with light for hands, but even though he was featureless Shmee knew who he was.

“Can you tell your brother, Jimmy’s plan, so he can tell it to Eli after you take me to the other side?” asked Shmee.

“Actually we have known his plan for a while now, so we chose you as our champion” replied Roith, “and you have done a pretty great so far, but now you are in a bit of a pickle.” “So my brother and I have decided not to let you die until you get out of here, and relay the information about our sister.” “You know I didn’t even know you had a sister. Let alone the goddess of all magic on this earth. It seems like that would be pretty major lore” said Shmee. “Yeah Dad wanted to keep it a secret, so crazy people like Jimmy would try and do anything stupid, like well, what he is trying to do now” explained Roith. “Can’t you just kill him? I mean you do ferry the dead” asked Shmee. “Well, we are only allowed so much direct intervention, and out and out killing a man is more than we are allowed, so it is up to you and your friends” replied Roith.

“Why me?” asked Shmee. “You and I have been working together for a while now, like we did with the litch, and you are the best person I know at killing people for noble causes, so you were my first choice. There are others, but they are mostly blowhards” explained Roith. “So you are going to just leave me here unable to die until I can escape or someone saves me?” asked Shmee. “If it helps, your friends are trying to come up with a plan to do exactly that, but I think they need to go back to the drawing board because it is an awful

plan. I will be staying with you until you do get out of here or you fail” replied Roith. “So we will be best buddies for a while eh?” asked Shmee. “Yes” said Roith.

Chapter 7: Plans and Outcomes

“So you ... whowho ... want to leave him there for two months, and ... who ... wait for backup!” exclaimed the dangerously angry predatory bird. “What other options do we have?” replied Elianna, “he is in a well-guarded castle being held by who knows how many men. If he is alive at all. Do you think the three of us just going to waltz in there and take him out? Like he would say, ‘we can’t save him if we are dead’” using her best jerk impression. “I don’t think you all have two months. My sis... no wait I can’t say that. Your quest will have failed by then” said Greganor just now deciding to appear. This caused quite a stir amongst the group. They started saying things like: “Gaaaaa!”, “Who is the shiny guy?”, “Should I hit him with my hammer?”, and “I wonder what light tastes like?” Eli calmed the group by saying, “Why have you, Greganor usher of life in to this world, graced us with your presence?” “Because your plan is not good, and you need to think of something better. Shmee now holds the key information to this quest, and you need to get him out posthaste!” exclaimed Greganor, and then he promptly disappeared. “So new plan than?” said Hoots smugly.

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Shmee had quickly lost track of how many days he had been in the torture chamber, but he knew that he was close to giving The Master all the information he needed. He wanted

to believe that if he told them everything it would stop, but his past told him otherwise. He was enjoying the company of his two new friends. He got to catch up on the castle gossip with the healer, and learn all sorts of boring facts about the gods from Roith. Like that there are not two gods, Greganor ferryman of new life, so babies and stuff, and Roith ferryman of the dead, kind of self-explanatory, but four. Their sister Celeste was in charge of doling out magic to mortals. She had automated much of her job by having the moons spread the magic with their light, but still without her magic would be gone. They also had a Dad who created everything. Roith didn't talk about his Dad a lot, but Shmee got the sense that he was really the one in charge. Shmee cared little about all of this, but it was better than being alone.

“So I have been meaning to ask, but how is my family doing?” asked Shmee. “Dad doesn't let me see past the vale. I do get glimpses though, so I am pretty sure they went somewhere good, but that is outside my job. I and my employees really just grab souls and take them to the edge of their afterlife. It is a little tiresome, but you do get to meet a lot of interesting people” replied Roith. “I am glad to hear you ‘think’ they are doing well. That puts my mind at ‘ease’” replied Shmee more than a little sarcastically. “Hey! All I know is what my job lets me know” replied Roith. “Yeah I know, but since I am here I have been thinking a lot about them, and if I will see them soon. It might be kind of nice. You wouldn't be able to talk to your family and have them pick a different champion? Then you could just let me go and be at peace” said Shmee.

“No. You are the one we picked, and if you fail the world changes forever, but I will admit it has been hard for me not to take your soul away from all of this” said Roith while gazing at a very broken Shmee. Roith disappeared and Shmee knew it was time for his appointment with The Master.

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“No, I don’t think ringing the doorbell and pretending to be a door to door salesman will work” said Eli to Glin, “plus what kind of disguise would Hoots wear? ‘Oh don’t mind the giant bird. He is just our pet.’” “Well Hoots wouldn’t have to go in with us ...” Replied Glin. “So we would leave behind our most valuable asset?” asked Eli. Glin just looked at the ground and pouted. “I am sorry! It just turns out Shmee’s awful plans were actually pretty good, and now we seem to be kind of lost without him” added Elianna. “If we can’t come up with a plan soon ... who ... I am going to just fly in there and ... whowho ... start eating people!” said Hoots with rage in his large eyes. “And get yourself killed?!” asked Elianna. “Better to die with him ... who ... than live without him” replied Hoots. Hoots’ devotion caused Eli to pause, but then the thought of reckless danger and action put a very Shmee-like idea in Elianna’s head, “Then let’s make it a death that they will sing about for the ages! I need to take a quick walk, but I think you will like what I have planned!”

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“I must say you have been the best subject I have ever worked on!” exclaimed The Master, “I could have sworn that I accidentally killed you a couple of times there, and I am running out of tools, but that means I get to come up with new ones! Like they say, ‘iron sharpens iron!’ And when I am through with you I will be sharper than ever!” “Well I am glad I could be so helpful! I don’t suppose that means you could just let me go due to all the experience I have provided?” asked Shmee. “Believe it or not I wish I could, but Master Iron wouldn’t like it if I just let his favorite prisoner free, and I would hate to lose my dream job!” replied The Master, “Due to your apparent pain tolerance, I am having our chemical team start working on some poisons to start loosening your jaw. You could open up a whole new avenue of information gathering!” Shmee tried to say something witty, but instead he passed out again.

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There was a large growl followed by booming footsteps, and Hoots and Glin could barely make out the outline of a white figure. A yeti was heading their way. “Hoots distract him in the air, and I will do my best to get in close and smack him around!” said Glin. Hoots looked up. Saw the yeti, and continued to snack on his newly killed deer. “Hoots come on we need to get our attack ready!” pleaded Glin. Glin was doing his best to learn Giant, but he still had a way to go, so the best Hoots could do was shake his head and act nonchalant. “I know the yeti probably possesses no threat to you since you can just fly off, but I would like a little help!”

said Glin. The yeti was close now and Glin would have to try and fight the beast on his own. He grabbed his hammer and set his feet. It was going to be a hard fight. He started to rush toward the yeti, but as soon as he reached the abomination, he saw that it had a traveling partner, and it seemed to be in some sort of amiable conversation with her.

“Oh hi Glin, this is Snarl!” said Elianna, introducing the white hairy monster. Glin was still amped up from his attack run, but he did his best to say, “how do you do?” He was obviously confused by the situation, and he was more than a little angry that Hoots had not tried to better explain his reasoning for not helping him with the attack. Glin decided it would be good to redouble his Giant language efforts. To get rid of some of his excess adrenalin he ran ahead and started to smash some rocks.

Once Glin was back at the camp Eli spoke up, “So how do you guys feel about raiding the castle?” “You just got done telling us that would be suicide” said Glin. “Yes, that is before I enlisted a Yeti Army!” explained Eli. “Why would the ... whowho ... yetis storm that castle?” asked Hoots. Snarl took this moment to speak-up. He spoke a southern version of Giant, but Hoots and Eli could understand him just fine, but poor Glin would once again be waiting for the translation. “We wish to storm the castle so we can claim it for our own. Living in caves is awful, but when you have limited opposability of your thumbs it makes building hard. If we had a nice cozy castle we could live in, and host block parties, it would be so much better for us. Plus, those jerks in the

Order of The Coil move in, and do they even think to introduce themselves, or host a game night? No of course not. I don't care if you are an evil army it is just rude not to be neighborly." "How do you plan on getting in the castle?" asked Glin. "We use the same trap door entrance that General Thresh used. I memorized the pattern when he pushed on the rocks last time." (Epic Yeti Battle!)

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Shmee was awoken by Roith, "Shmee, you have to get ready! Your friends are going to execute their plan!" After a few hazy moments Shmee replied, "I am tied to a table. I am ready as I will ever be." "Yeah, I guess I was thinking you might need to get mentally prepared" explained Roith. "Trust me if you are ever in this position you are in a constant state of mental preparedness to be rescued. It is the number one thing on my mind" replied Shmee. "I was just trying to help. You don't need to get all huffy about it" said Roith. "Again, I'm tied to a table! I reserve the right 'huffy' about whatever I damn well please!" huffed Shmee. "I don't hang out with a lot of mortals, so cut me some slack if I don't get the protocol right all the time!" huffed Roith back. "Sorry Roith, but I have just been irritable lately. It may have something to do with the table and the unspeakable torture. I do appreciate you hanging out with me" apologized Shmee. "I know, and I should be more considerate of the situation before I go off the rails like that. It is just that people are trying to kill my sister" explained Roith, "Fiends?" asked Roith "Friends!" replied Shmee.

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Glin and Elianna walked up to the castle wall with their weapons in hand, and Eli had put on her Mad Mage mask to ready herself for the battle. It turns out the mask was from Glizdin the head of the dwarven Mad Mages. She hated to inflate Shmee's ego, but he was right. The drive for cool loot was starting get to her, and she was starting to understand why he would risk his life for it. She couldn't wait to see what sort of awesome stuff the Coil was hiding in the castle. She quickly pushed the combination of rocks that opened the door, and just like last time a whole bunch of Coil soldiers came out, but this time as soon as the troops exited the castle the yetis that were expertly hiding behind the rocks launched in to action.

It is difficult to put in to words the sort of damage a yeti does to a human body, but you may never think of spaghetti and meatballs the same way again. Because It is like that, but everywhere. There was nothing but blood and chunks of meat all over the place, and the yetis would now have a hard time hiding in a snow bank.

The Coil soldiers did an admirable job keeping the yetis at bay. They lasted a whole three minutes before the yetis barged in. They tried to close the iron-gate that was just inside the magic door, but it turns out that if yetis want to get in to a building it is probably just as well that you let them, so that your insides don't become décor. The yetis ripped down the gate and tore it apart, and they used the

pointy metal as makeshift spears. Though they were quickly abandoned once they realized their poor thumbs couldn't hold on to them properly, and they weren't as potent as their claws anyway, but it is still good to try new things every once and a while.

...

Shmee could hear the rampaging carnage that was sweeping through the castle, and the thought of The Coil getting theirs brought a smile to his face. "It sounds like Roith and his boys are going to have to work overtime to get all these guys to the other side" he thought to himself, and then he saw it. A horrible black mask entered the room. A Mad Mage had come to finish him off.

...

Eli was trying to stay out of the way of the rampaging yetis while searching around to try and find Shmee. She was hoping that scent from Shmee's sleep sack was enough to keep the yetis from destroying him, but it is hard to say with yetis. They are really good at destroying people. Her fears were soon put to rest as she found him in a small dark room. She was guessing from the lack of carnage that they yetis had not been in here yet. That is not to say the room lacked blood or grizzly scenes. It was just different in this room, like there was more thought put in to it. It had barely been a week, but Shmee already looked like a shadow of his former self. Terror shone in his eyes when he looked at her, but

then a look of understanding came over him, and he said, "Those masks are the best!"

Eli grabbed one of her daggers and cut the leather ropes that were binding Shmee, but he could not stand on his own. Luckily Hoots was not far behind Eli, and he was soon carrying Shmee as gingerly as possible. Once they were out in the blood covered hallway, Shmee caught a glimpse of Roith by a doorway. "Go four doors down and to the left" said Shmee to Hoots. It took some time to get down the hallway due to the crazed yetis that now roamed them. Shmee had not yet asked about the yetis, but he seemed to accept them as the current reality without question. His focus was on a little scrawny man that he hoped Roith was leading him to.

When Hoots got to the door, Shmee found that door was locked or barricaded or both, and he was about to have Hoots try and rip it off the hinges, but Glin approached with his hammer and said, "I have been waiting for something to do. These yetis are too thorough!" Glin's hammer made short work of the door and inside they found a chest, and two men. "Put me down Hoots" said Shmee feeling the strength return to him. He walked to the trunk. Found his gear, and he put it on slowly as the two men cowered and looked on. With Ember firmly in hand he turned to face the man now on his right.

For his part The Master didn't lower himself to begging, and to Shmee's credit he ended his life swiftly. Just a clean swipe

through his scrawny neck. Shmee then turned around to the other man who said, "Take me out of this place! I am sure you could use a good healer?!" Shmee just shook his head and did the same as he done to The Master. "Did he treat you poorly?" asked Glin. Shmee replied, "No. He was nice and healed me well, but any healer that was true to his cause would have ended his own life over allowing this to happen to any man." Hoots caught Shmee before he fell over. "Well what are we standing around for, let's go see if the yetis have ripped off Master Iron's limbs off again!" said Shmee excitedly. The group was confused by the 'again', but they agreed to search the castle.

The, now whole, group started to search around the castle, and it was hard for them to not vomit as they went due to all of the smeared remains of The Coil troops. It was also time consuming because all the blood had made the halls slippery. They found some good loot as they went. Poisoned daggers for Eli, a much larger hammer for Glin, and all the meat Hoots could eat, but no sign of Master Iron. Shmee was just doing his best to stay awake, but he was quite happy and proud of his Bride-to-Be's very violent plan. He was going to have to remember that yetis could be an interesting ally.

After some time they made their way to what they assumed was the meeting hall of the castle, due to the long table, the large comfortable chairs, and the handy sign that said "Meeting Hall" on the door in large warm and friendly letters. Eli was inspecting the grand fireplace in the room, and said, "It looks like this fireplace had an enchantment to

teleport to other locations, but its last location has now been blocked.” “So much for being anti-magic” said Glin. “Well they are trying to destroy all magic, but if I were them I would keep using it until I won. Otherwise I would be at a disadvantage, and I am guessing Jimmy has learned a thing or two from me” said Shmee. “Your ego knows no ... Jimmy?!” asked a now interested Elianna.

Shmee had Hoots lower him in to the least blood stained chair, and Hoots perched himself on the back. Shmee then told the party the tale of his torture and Jimmy’s big reveal. “So you were ... who ... right for once, and the bad guy did ... who who ... just tell you his plan” said Hoots. “It is a bad guy’s weakness. They need to tell you so that you will be impressed with them. Even though to tell me makes them look like an idiot, but luckily for Jimmy we all knew he was an idiot anyway. I just thought he was a dead idiot, but that is what I get for not checking. Make a note of that Glin! Always make sure someone is dead, or they may come back and try to destroy the known world” explained Shmee. Glin nodded.

For the most part Glin thought of Shmee as an arrogant cowardly jerk, all be it a successful one, but it was hard not to be impressed with the man slumped at the head of the giant gore-covered table with an eight-foot-tall bird leering protectively over his shoulders, and considering all Shmee had gone through he was starting to think he should start taking Shmee’s self-absorbed advice more seriously. Then again probably not.

“Can we change the fireplace to go somewhere else?” asked Shmee, “I would rather not have to walk all the way back to Valley Deep. It was lame enough walking here in the first place.” “It is probably possible. It looks like the wizards must have used these things to travel all over the place, but Jimmy must have cut this one off when he made his escape” replied Eli, “the problem is that none of us are magic users or enchanters, and I don’t think a prayer of healing is going to get this thing working again.” “Ugg! I can’t believe I am going to say this, but can you send a bird or something to Riginel?” asked Shmee, “That dolt can probably tell us how to fix this thing, and since walking is not in my wheelhouse right now I am willing to deal with him for a little bit, so I can be lazier. Plus I plan on doing a fair bit a gloating about how this mission turned out!”

Eli didn’t have the opportunity to respond because a large group of yeti’s burst through the door in the most literal sense. They tried to use the door knob: it kept slipping in their furry paws, so their angered leader Snarl busted the door off of his hinges. It was an incredible sight. Pieces of wood all over the place. He and his ‘men’ stomped in to the room and then proceeded to try and pull out the chairs to sit in them, but the chairs just flopped all over the place, and when they tried to right them most of them broke. Snarl took a deep breath and lifted his chair gingerly and moved it in to position. He then sat in it triumphantly. He was about to speak to the heroes when his chair promptly shattered

under his weight. He let out a howl of disappointment, and then he stood and faced the adventurers.

“We have completed our end of the bargain, so if you would be ever so kind as to leave our castle. We would appreciate it” said the noble monster. “If you would grant us the ability to use this room for a few days we would be ever so grateful” replied Eli. “I suppose we could allow for you to remain here for a few days, if you would help us with our ... umm ... usability problems” said Snarl holding out his claws. “I think we can work something out” said Elianna. Snarl beamed, “It will be wonderful to be able to use the castle to a greater capacity.”

The group set out to yeti proof the castle, well Eli and Glin started to yeti proof the castle, but Shmee just focused on getting better, or that is what he said. He was really just loving lying around and not doing anything for a while. It is what he had always dreamed of. Living in a castle and not doing anything. It was pretty much the culmination of all his hard work, but sadly the stupid yetis were going to kick him out, and he was going to have to work with that stupid wizard again. Eli had sent a bird back to the mines, and it had returned with the enchanted instructions on how to get the fireplace in working order again. Riginel was on his way. Life it seems had lamer plans for Shmee.

Shmee was wallowing in his self-pity, which he is extremely good at, when a poof came from the fireplace, and out stepped his least favorite wizard. Shmee eyed Riginel with

contempt. This had all been his fault. The orb ended the good war; turned Jimmy in to psychopath, though that was a career upgrade for Jimmy, and now he was tangled up in some sort of god protection quest. He was pretty sure that he was still not going to get paid.

Riginel on the other hand was quite pleased. He had stayed out of most the combat, and he was now standing in one of his favorite castles. He was extremely unhappy when The Order decided to sell it off, and now he was back in its great meeting hall. Though the odor of wet fur and blood was not doing it any favors, and the lack of doors was fairly upsetting, but those things could be fixed as soon as The Order could figure out a way to double cross the yetis. His thoughts of victory over the yetis and reclaiming his favorite summer home were interrupted by the intense glowering of a troublesome swordsman.

“I see that you are still alive and ‘well’” said Riginel. “Oh yes, I spent some time in this facility’s great spa, and it has done wonders for my back. I feel like a new man!” replied Shmee, “and now I just can’t wait to thrust myself headlong in to a battle with The Coil over the life of some god that nobody has ever heard of, except for her brothers and the Wizards.” “I am sure that I have no idea what god you are speaking of! And if I did, none of The Order of Wizards would ever give up her location!”

With that Shmee jumped up, grabbed the wizard from behind, held Ember up to Riginel’s throat and whispered “tell

me everything you know about Life and Death's sister.”

“Absolutely! She resides in a secret palace not far from here. On this mountain range's highest peak in fact. Her name is Celeste, and without her all magic would disappear!”

responded Riginel. “Well if all your fellow wizards are as ‘brave’ as you are than we can assume that Jimmy will find out her location soon” said Shmee releasing the wizard.

“Well given our history, I assumed that you may actually kill me!” retorted Riginel. “So you don't think that any of your wizard brothers may feel that a disfigured man with iron arms, legs, and who knows what else, with a severe dislike for magic users may also be willing to kill them?” asked Shmee. “We must act quickly, there is little time left!”

replied Riginel the Second Chair in The Order of Wizards.

Chapter 8: Journeys and Idiots

Once the group was brought up to speed with the info Shmee had acquired from Riginel, they worked out a deal with the yetis to allow them to transport the pro-magic troops through the fireplace. Provided that in return the dwarfs would further increase the castle's yeti readiness. This sounded like a great plan to everyone except the selfish jerks among them, namely Shmee and Riginel, who would have much rather taken the castle for their own horrible devices, but the rest of the group, and the now on premises elves and dwarves, thought it would be wise to not back out on a deal made with horrible man eating beasts.

The army was streaming in through the fireplace, which was all well and good, but they still did not have plan for what to do with them. Some wanted to march the army up to the palace and guard it from The Coil, but others argued that may be what Master Iron had been planning all along. To trick them in to being the ones to give away the location of the "top secret" palace. All of this discussion angered Shmee. Because with so many people now knowing the location of the palace, at least one of them would be willing to make a little extra coin and live a happy well fed magic free life. Actually that didn't sound that bad to Shmee, but he had Hoots to think of, and a life without Hoots was not one that he was willing to think of for long. Unless of course it was crazy amount of gold, but he knew that with a crowd

this big someone would be willing to get paid less.

Cheapskates!

Shmee was still caught up in his own anger and greed problems, when he heard Eli offering up a plan, “Why don’t Hoots, Shmee, Glin, and I go up and take a look. I am sure that Hoots and Shmee can get up there without much trouble, and Glin and I will back them up.” Shmee had always known that this is how it was going to work, but he was at least hoping to hold out for some money. Eli’s do-gooding nature was nice, but personal wealth and happiness should always be considered before embarking on a doomed world saving quest, especially a quest involving the tight fisted glory hogging Order of Wizards.

Eli could see the displeasure in Shmee’s eyes and gave him a glare. Shmee tried to remain resolute in his dissatisfaction, but Eli’s glare cut through him, and soon heard the words, “yeah we will go take a look”, coming from his lips. That woman had gained the ability to make him do anything, and it annoyed him greatly. What was even more annoying, is that he was starting to want to gain her approval. No good would come from this womanly attachment, but he was finding that he was hooked. It probably meant that his life would be free of buxom bar maids for the foreseeable future, and next to cold hard cash, they were some of his favorite things. This elf had better be worth all the trouble.

The adventuring party was now preparing for their hike up the tallest peak of the mountain range creatively titled “Tall

Peak” (obviously the cartographer was having a bad day, and he should have used the yeti name GrrrodenGrr which translated “Top of the World”, but he was probably worried about being eaten) when Grendon and Ethendael came to the adventurers to see them off, and to offer their advice.

“It is a shame that you have done so much for us already, but now we are sending you in to grave danger again” said Ethendael. “Yes, yes it is, and I think that we got all the information required for the first quest you gave us, but my feet are still not covered in Mithril” noticed Shmee. “Aye, we forgot to get them out of storage before we came, an’ stuff is so hard to find in the vault. We should really change to the Dewey Decimal System or something so that we can more easily find our loot” explained Grendon. Shmee responded, “Yeah, most people come up with similar excuses when it comes time to pay, like ‘I need to feed my family’, or ‘that is the last copper I have’, and ‘I just lost my job because you destroyed my mill to kill all the rats.’ It is always something.” “The dwarves always repay their debts!” yelled Grendon. “Well if I die, see that I am buried in them” said Shmee.

It was at this time that Ethendael piped up and said, “I will see to it that Grendon rains down Mithril on you if your quest is completed. I just came here to see my daughter and future son-in-law off, and to let you know that I am proud of you both. More than that you have brought pride to all the remnant of Wuldinholm who will fight by your side at the appointed time!” “Remnant ... who ... that is one way putting that your village got Shmee’ed” laughed Hoots. “I am not

sure that I like the term Shmee'ed in relation to destruction" said Shmee, "I would rather it meant getting things done." "By engulfing them ... whowho ... in fire and rubble" replied Hoots. "Well the results speak for themselves, so far we are all here to talk about how awful I am" said Shmee. "'So far' indeed. It only took direct intervention from the gods" quipped the owl with his terrifying grin. Hoots was happy the fight was returning to his friend.

"One more thing, Riginel asked us to give this to you. It is a map of the hidden trail up to the palace. Well less of a map and more of a charm. If you have it on you, you and those around you can see the path through the enchantments that are hiding the way from sight" said Ethendael, "He said that he wanted to come, but that he should bring The Order up to speed on what was happening." "Either that or he is telling Master Iron the location of the palace" said Shmee coolly. "How could you ever lay such an accusation against a member of The Order?!" asked Eli. "Well he is not a very good Wizard as far as I can tell, and since he is a coward he may be thinking it is a good time to play both sides" explained Shmee, "If we win, so be it. He is hero of the realm, but if we lose, he is rich, and he can live on an island somewhere." "Just because that is what you would do, doesn't mean that everyone would!" yelled Elianna. Ethendael's eyes narrowed and surprisingly said, "Elianna, I think we may have to at least entertain Shmee's proposed treachery. As you say it is something Shmee himself would do, but Riginel and Shmee are much the same in my

estimation, so I must urge you to hurry, and pray that Shmee is incorrect.”

As the adventurers set out Eli could not help but glower at Shmee. It was one thing that Shmee would even entertain the thought of Riginel The Second Chair in The Order of Wizards being a traitor, but it was entirely another to have her father agree with him over her. It was lunacy to believe that a wizard, who took an oath to uphold the ‘fabric of the world’, would betray them and the gods for money and personal safety. If it was true than maybe the world was worse than she thought, and maybe it was not worth saving. “No, the world must be saved. Even if people like Shmee ruled it. There are always good people that would need to be saved!” she convinced herself.

She started to glower at Shmee again. He was such an aggravating man. He only ever thought of his own personal gain. His cowardice in the face of danger could not be matched, but he had saved them all on several occasions, and he did appear to be extremely loyal to his friends. He was also all that she could think about. Maybe, just maybe she would have to reconsider the whole ‘being betrothed to him until he died and then find a more suitable elf’ idea. Probably not, but perhaps.

They headed towards Tall Peak by following the crest of the mountains. Well Glin, and Elianna did anyway, Hoots decided that Eli with her Elven grace, and Glin with his dwarven sturdiness could make the journey quite well, but

Shmee in his weekend state would make most of the trip flying with him. Shmee was mostly grateful for this, but it hurt so much that he would rather walk for most of the flat parts. They would constantly argue about whether Shmee would walk the next bit or not. "Would you two jerks shut your yaps! Even if Riginel hasn't told Jimmy about the location of the palace, all they would have to do is listen for your yammering!" exclaimed Glin who had had enough. It did shut-up Hoots and Shmee for a while, but friendly arguing was kind their natural order, so they would always start up again, and Glin would then have to threaten them with his hammer.

Shmee had prepared for the usual long arduous journey that generally came with these quests, but they arrived that base of Tall Peak in a little less than a day. Of course it wasn't really the base, that was several miles below due to the fact they were already on top of the mountain range, but the peak was so far up it seemed like the base. Plus, there didn't seem like a better term for it. They decided it would be best to camp at the 'base' of the mountain for the night because scaling the known world's tallest mountain at night seemed like a dumb idea. Even for Shmee and his pals.

"If you are right about Riginel, I hope that the charm works" said Glin. "Shmee is not right about Riginel, so of course it works. Not all people would do anything for money!" chided Elianna. Shmee choosing to ignore Eli replied to Glin, "It probably works. It is hard to play both sides if you really screw over one side. If anything he probably just gave a

similar charm to Jimmy, and he will wait and see which of us wins. It is what I would do in his place if I didn't have a magical friend and a lot of cool stuff." "We know you would, but that is not what a member of the Order of Wizards would do!" huffed Eli. "Most of you meta-humans ... who ... tend to be more like Shmee than you would like to believe" said Hoots defending his friend's point of view, "Self-preservation is a strong motivator." "All of you are too cynical. People are better than you give them credit for!" said Elianna.

Elianna did not say much after that, but Shmee regaled Glin with some of his earlier adventures including how he got his armor. "I had just found Ember, and I was wearing some ratty armor at the time. I was thinking that with such a cool sword I needed to upgrade the rest of my gear, when a young noble came by the village our party was staying at, and he was bragging about how his armor had been enchanted by the greatest armor mage in all the land. He was lying of course. If Rint the Iron Mage had enchanted it, it would do a good deal more than just double its damage protection, but it was still a lot better than the armor I was wearing. I was very jealous.

I followed him around that day to see if he would get in to some trouble that I could help him out of, and then try to get the armor as a reward. Sadly he caught me sneaking around and had his guard tie me up and arrest me as a spy. He didn't know what I was spying on, or who for, but I was poor and he was rich, so his case was convincing enough to put me in the town cell for the night anyway. The jailer assured me

that I would probably just get a savage beating to show the noble that they took my offence seriously, and then they would dump me in a ditch somewhere, so nothing too bad. The noble however had convinced himself that I was a spy and decided that he wanted to 'question' me himself to find out what I knew.

He came down to the cell and started yammering on about 'the security of the realm', and how he would use my information to 'keep our enemies at bay'. Luckily for me it was obvious that he had no idea how to extract information out of a person, and simply smacked me around a bit. I started to laugh at his bumbling attempt to 'torture' me, which of course angered him to no end, and then he started to really let me have it.

It was about that time that my friends decided to save me from my captivity. They were board and drunk, and like most adventures, they had nothing better to do. They came crashing through the cell doors, knocked the guards unconscious, and freed me. The noble took this opportunity to curl up in a ball and beg for his life. I told him I would trade his life for his armor. He thought that was a fine plan, and he handed it over to me promptly. It took me quite a while to find the words to activate the enchantment, but it was worth it in the end. Plus, it turns out that he wasn't a noble after all, but the son of a rich thief who liked to pretend to be a noble every now and then to feel important. He was really just beating me up to find out if I was a member of a rival thieves' guild to try and prove to his daddy

that he wasn't a total screw-up, so we ended up getting a few gold coins out of the deal for capturing him to boot!"

"So you robbed a guy, and then got lucky that he was a bad guy, so you got rewarded for it. That is a good story!" chimed Eli. "I suppose that is what happened" answered Shmee, "but it didn't seem like that at the time. It seemed like a fair trade for the beating he gave me. Everyone has their own interpretations I suppose." "I don't know why I ever started to like you!" said Eli. "It is because I am so awesome" replied Shmee. "Maybe to yourself!" said Elianna promptly slamming down on her bed roll and closing her eyes. "I don't think you stole the armor" said Glin weakly. "Of course I did Glin" said Shmee looking down at his armor with the slightest twinge of regret, "Maybe someday I will find the guy who the kid's dad stole it from and give it back." Shmee paused and smiled, "but not any time soon."

The next morning, they woke up and faced the mountain. It was cloudy, and they couldn't see the peak, but since they had already delayed for the night they decided they would have to make the ascent anyway. Shmee pulled out the charm they had been given by Riginel, and then said the incantation to make it work. In a flash a cave appeared in front of them. "I guess we may not have to climb after all" said Glin happily. They entered the cave and followed it deep in to the mountain, but the cave did not lead them up as far as they could tell. Just straight in to the side of Tall Peak. Just as it was getting too dim to see, a faint light was visible in the distance. They pressed on until they reached a small

room with an old man on a chair in front of a large stone door, and to his left was another smaller door with stairs.

“Have you come to replace me?” asked the man. “Um, no we have come to save the goddess from an evil anti-magic army” explained Eli. “Drat! They said that they would send a replacement for me in a few years, but that was, by my count anyway, one hundred years ago! It is hard to tell in cave with no natural light!” stated the old man. “What do you do, and who said they would replace you?” asked Eli. The old man replied, “The Order of Wizards of course! They placed me as a magical guard to the entrance of the Moon Palace of Tall Peak. They said it was a good job that was full of excitement with moderate benefits, and that when I was done being the guard I would be known throughout the kingdoms. Ha! Those jerks just sent me here and forgot about me! They must have enchanted this place so I couldn’t die either. I am just stuck here in my own personal purgatory!”

“Well can we go up to the palace and see the goddess?” asked Glin, “It was what we were tasked to do. With approval from The Order.” “Meh, I don’t care. I crafted this elevator to do all the hard work for me. If you state your objective truthfully it will take you to the top of the mountain. If you lie it will take you to the bottom” explained the man. “How does ... who ... that do your job exactly? Couldn’t the evil people just say that ... who ... they wanted to kill the goddess and have it take them to the top?” asked Hoots. “Well ... I ... Daggumit! Way to just ruin a man’s life work! It took me fifty years to make this work right!” replied

the old man. “Well can you destroy the elevator after we get up to the top, so the evil army can’t use it?” asked Elianna helpfully. “I suppose I could, but than they could still use the stairs. It is just a long climb is all” said the old man. “Don’t you have some sort of magic ward you can put over the steps keep them out?” said Shmee. “No, I am a pretty awful mage, I think that is why the wizards sent me here. Guarding an unknown goddess in a secret location is pretty lame job now that I think about it. All I can do is stand in the doorway and let them kill me, so that way the stairs will be slick with my blood before they hike up” replied the old man. “Anything helps!” said Shmee. The old man turned white, and then opened the door to the elevator.

Once they were in the elevator and said that they wanted to save the goddess, they could feel the small room lifting up. “The old man shouldn’t have been so hard on himself! This is pretty amazing!” said Elianna. “Yeah, but he is kind of a moron. He just took our word for it that we were the good guys, and that bad guys were coming after us. I bet he doesn’t stand in the door way and get killed, but he just lets Jimmy and his gang through!” said Shmee. Hoots nodded in agreement. “Well I am just happy that we don’t have to walk up all those stairs” said Glin, “All you do in dwarven towns is climb stairs. Down to the mine, or up to the mountain look outs. There are stairs everywhere! If we had something like this, maybe we wouldn’t be so grumpy all the time.”

When the doors opened at the top, they were greeted to a large open and snowy expanse, with sheer cliffs on all sides.

They emerged from a little rock outcropping with the elevator door on one side, and the exit for the stairs on the other. In front of them and across a snowy plain was a large marble palace. It was magnificent. Everything was intricately detailed, and it had large Blood Tree wood doors at the entrance. Shmee opened the doors, and the group entered the main hall. It was filled with fine art and ornate tapestries. There were golden vessels of all sorts on little marble pillars. It was breathtaking. "You know what, I am making guarding the goddess my lifelong quest" said Shmee, "Because I am home!" "Celeste hears your pledge, and accepts it!" said a booming voice from a room at the end of the hall.

The group followed the voice to a throne room, and on a throne up a few stairs sat what appeared to be a young woman. Well she would have been a young woman except that she was radiating light, and she was the most beautiful 'person' they had ever seen. "Celeste welcomes the fine champions that my brothers have selected for me" said the being that was doubtlessly Celeste. "Goddess of Magic we have traveled far to insure that you will come to no harm! We are at your disposal" said Elianna Priestess of Greganor reverently while dropping to her knees.

"Thank you my child! You may direct your army to take a defensive perimeter around the palace. Tell them to guard it with their lives because I am sure that the battle will be fierce!" said Celeste. "Small problem" said Shmee sheepishly, "We didn't bring an army. We are just the

scouting party. We need to send for the army now ...” “You came to save me from an evil army, and you did not think to bring one of your own! I don’t care if you are The Guardian of the Holy Implement, Shmee Captain of the Lumberjacks and Murderer of Fools, Elianna Head Priestess of Greganor my spoiled brother, and Glin the Personality-less Dwarf that Accompanies Cooler People. Your strength is not enough! Already I can hear their boots on the stairs to my home. We shall die here! All I can ask of you now is to honor your vow to me when you entered my hall, and make them pay for the sacrilege they are about to commit!”

Shmee and the group readied their weapons and stepped out in to the cold.

Chapter 9: Death and Life

The group crossed the open snowy plain, and stared down in to the dark chasm of the staircase. Shmee then pulled out a large explosive device out of his bag and grinned, “Another fine use for high explosives.” “How will our army get up here if you blow up the stairs?” asked Elianna. Shmee replied, “If this was going to stop The Coil then they would be trapped down there with them. Which would be the best case scenario, but I am pretty sure that they have enough men to dig out the rubble. This will only delay them.” “Sounds like we didn’t bring enough explosives” said Glin. Shmee shrugged. Eli looked like she had an objection, but she decided to keep it to herself. Shmee lit the fuse and hurled it down the stairs. Moments later the telltale BOOM and blowing rocks singled its success.

“Well Eli send for the army and alert them of our status, and tell them to fight to the very last man! As per the goddess Celeste” said Shmee. Eli furrowed her brow and replied, “I would, but we are too high up for birds, and I don’t see any other animals around.” “I ... who ... should be able to get back to Peak Ridge Castle and tell them of our plight” offered Hoots. “Do you think your wings can fly up here buddy?” asked Shmee. “It will be a challenge ... who ... but I think my greater wingspan will at least let me glide down, but getting back up may be hard” replied Hoots. Shmee gave his friend a hug and said, “I don’t think we have a choice, but I will see

you after all this is over.” And with that Hoots jumped of the side of the mountain.

Shmee, Eli, and Glin retreated back to the palace steps and bared the doors as best they could from the outside, and waited. “How long before The Coil breaks through the rocks and gets up here?” asked Glin. “Oh, with that many men we probably have about an hour” said Shmee. Glin asked, “Should we sit by the stairs instead, so that we can kill them one by one as they come out instead of letting them get out and get organized before we fight them?” “Meh, it doesn’t really matter. Once we have killed a few of them, their dead bodies will act like a natural shields, and the soldiers will just use their dead friends to push their way out of the stairs. We would be standing too close together to fight in our preferred styles, so we will die either way. I prefer to die charging in to the thick of battle. It is a fine suggestion though, and you are more than welcome to go knock a few heads as they come out if you wish” said Shmee. “No, charging in to battle does sound like more fun” said Glin. Eli looked at Shmee and smiled. He was a self-serving jerk, but there is no one she would rather spend her last day with.

Shmee was a little off on the time. It took The Coil two hours to dig out the stairs, but they were streaming out now. Eli and Shmee now had on their Mad Mage masks, and to their astonishment they were glowing with a dark light. Shmee pulled Ember and it radiated heat. He tapped his armor, and it seemed incredibly solid. “Being this close to the source of

magic must have super charged them” surmised Elianna.

“Then this should be much more fun!” said Shmee.

Shmee decided now was the time to give a speech, “When the troops that finally kill us get home and tell their friends and families about this day. I want them to talk in reverence and fear about the demons on the doorstep of the Moon Palace that slaughtered them! The demons that maimed and dismembered them. The ones that caused them all to question their cause and wish they could retreat. Today we introduce them to Death, and I don’t think he will be happy with them. I say we cover the snow with so much blood that the ground will be too slick to stand on!” Shmee unsheathed Ember and charged in to the fray. Glin paused and looked at Eli, “That was pretty good except for the part about us dying, and the enemy being victorious.” He hoisted his hammer and followed the warrior. Eli whispered a small prayer, readied her daggers, and then dashed after them.

Shmee looked like a ball of fire because his sword was moving so fast and burning so bright. The men who were attacking him were soon enveloped in flame, and their burning dying bodies were in turn lighting the men next them on fire. His cape was masking his position so well that when they could see him through the fire he looked like blur, and if they did land a blow it was like hitting solid rock. Shmee had become the doom of the gods.

The mask Eli was wearing was glowing so darkly that she appeared to be void, and all that approached her were

sucked in to it and chopped in to pieces. Her elven agility made her so hard to keep up with that they couldn't land a major blow.

Glin's cape seemed to turn him in to wisp of cloth flying in the wind. Just when it seemed that he was one place he was carried to another. He was everywhere but where the troops were looking. It was exasperating. Especially when the cloth smacked them in the face with an excessively large hammer.

The three had definitely made the troops question the wisdom of attacking the Moon Palace, but just as they started to head back to the stairs Master Iron arrived, and he and his generals cut down anyone that retreated. "They will tire and we will win, just keep it up! Your deaths will free the world from the tyranny of magic!" Master Iron yelled. The troops were not so sure they cared anymore, but with their escape blocked their only choice was to continue to fight the three destroyers.

Shmee and his company fought longer than humanly possible, and that was because Greganor had answered Elianna's prayer, and was busy giving the adventures all the power he could give them without completely breaking his Dad's rules. Roith similarly was ignoring a lot of the major wounds the group was receiving, downgrading them to merely flesh wounds. Plus, there were so many other dead men to ferry to the afterlife, that three people hardly seemed important, and for some reason his helpers were all out at some sort of conference. Unfortunately, protocol only

allowed them to do so much, and soon the heroes got tired and grew sore.

Shmee was the first to grow fatigued, and he soon felt a sword swipe him in the back of the calf. Another sword was soon at his throat, and he was forced to surrender. It was the same with the other two. The troops were so afraid of the three that they did not want to kill them in fear of divine retribution, so they just settled for beating them up a bit.

Master Iron strolled up to Shmee and laughed, "At last I will have my revenge on you, and all those that use magic as a crutch!" He picked up Ember and tried to raise it to strike Shmee down, but Ember burned him and forced him to drop it. "Well, I guess I will not be able to strike you down with your own sword, but I have one as well" he said, as he now grabbed his own sword and raised it over his head. "Stop!" cried Shmee. "Ha ha! You are going to beg! This is a great day! But it will not save you!" said Jimmy again raising his sword, but this time as he raised it a talon grabbed his arm and ripped it off. "No, I just wanted you to wait for my army to get here" said Shmee.

The now one armed Jimmy looked up and saw The Guardian of the Holy Implement holding his former arm and sword, and then looked behind him to see an angry army of dwarves, elves, and more than a couple humans pouring out the staircase. "Attack you fools!" cried out Jimmy, and the two forces clashed. Both armies were tired: The Coil from trying to defeat Shmee's group, and the Pro-Magic group

from marching triple time from their camp. It turns out that Grendon and Ethendael had decided to get the troops in position should the scouting party run in to trouble. Despite everyone's exhaustion they went about their business with vigor anyway.

Jimmy watched Hoots, and made note of where his sword fell and fled the field of battle to recover it. Shmee, Glin, and Eli rejoined the battle, energized by the reinforcement's arrival. Hoots was happy to be at Shmee's side again grabbing Coil troops and eating them or throwing them over the side of the mountain. It was where he belonged.

Eli was the first person to notice that Jimmy was gone, and in a panic looked to the door to see that it was pushed open. She screamed, "Jimmy is in the palace!" and ran towards the open door. The others quickly ran after her.

When Eli entered the throne room Jimmy and Celeste were already locked in mortal combat (Toasty!). She ran towards Jimmy and attacked from the side. Jimmy in his rage threw her off and struck Celeste in the stomach with his sword. Shmee, Glin, and Hoots having just arrived, jumped on Jimmy, stabbing, hammering, and pecking away like crazy people. If Jimmy had escaped Death before, the pile of goo before them would not, and Roith made sure that Jimmy got to where he was going.

Eli ran to Celeste's side and started to try and heal her, but how do you heal a god? She prayed as hard as she could, and

sang a song of mourning. Greganor appeared, and said, "There is nothing I can do. I have given you so much power already, and the amount it would take to heal my sister is even above me. She will die and magic will fade from this world." "What about Roith? Can't he just refuse to take her to the other side?" asked Shmee hopefully. Roith appeared and answered, "She is one of us. She doesn't need my help to cross over. Dad will welcome her with open arms, but your world will be cursed for what they have done to her."

"There is one thing that can be done" whispered Celeste, "I can join with Elianna. She is pure of heart enough for me reside in her, and her elven eternal life will insure that I do not die of old age." "I would be honored" responded Elianna. "What will happen to Eli?" asked Shmee. "She and I will join and be the same" replied Celeste. "I can't lose you Eli! There has to be another way!" pleaded Shmee, "There are a ton of elves outside! Pick one of them!" Celeste smiled, "I have already looked them over, and not one of them has the pure heart I need. Like you, they have all been corrupted by power and greed. Elianna's sheltered life has kept her pure enough for this union, but I weep for your lost love." "Think about Hoots" said Eli, "If I don't do this you will be dooming him. At least this way we both can live, even if our relationship will change."

Shmee nodded kissed Elianna on the cheek, and then sat next his feathered friend. The union did not take long to complete. There was a flash of white light, and in that instant Elianna was on her throne and was smiling. "It

worked!” she exclaimed, “I am alive, and the magic is still flowing out of me in to the world!” “Eli?” asked Shmee quietly. There was no response, so he asked again. Still there was no response.

Shmee walked out of the throne room and through the great hall and out in to the battlefield. The Pro-Magic troops had the battle well under control, but Shmee thought that swinging his sword around a bit may help to get his mind off of things. He stabbed a few guys, but his heart just wasn't in it. The joy that he usually got from watching people burst in to flame just wasn't there. Still, he said he would defend the palace, and that is what he would do.

In the next few hours they had rounded up all The Coil troops, and they had them all backed up against a cliff. Shmee desperately wanted to give the order to send them all over the ledge to their deaths, but he couldn't do it. Eli would have never let him. She would have said it was evil or something. He sighed, and told the troops to start chaining them up and taking them down the stairs. He headed back to the palace.

Celeste/Elianna was still talking to her brothers when he walked in to the throne room. She looked at him and smiled, “I release you from your vow. You have fought well and saved the world. It would be cruel of me to force you to stay here.” “But if this where Eli is, then this where I want to stay” replied Shmee. “She is here to a degree, but my person has overwhelmed her to a greater degree than I had

anticipated, so she is but a memory in my mind. I am truly sorry” said Celeste.

Shmee, Glin, and Hoots started their long walk back to Peak Ridge Castle. Glin slipped and fell on all the all the blood that covered the battlefield. It made Shmee smile. They didn’t say a lot on the trek back. They just walked in silence. They chose not to camp, but just push through to the castle in a single day and see if there was a non-yeti-fide room left to sleep in. They were in luck, and there was. The yetis were still upset the outsiders were overstaying their welcome again, but with the battle over, they decided to give everyone a few more days before they started ripping limbs off people.

Shmee sat at the conference table watching all the soldiers pass through the fireplace on their way back to their homes, and the prisoners heading off to some exotic labor camp. Shmee hadn’t taken the trip yet because he had no idea where to go. He could head back to the Lumberjacks and be their leader, but that sounded like too much responsibility. He could go back with the elves and help them rebuild Wuldinholm. Ethendael said he would always be welcome there, but that was too much manual labor. Plus, a lot of them had not forgiven him for blowing it up in the first place, and he had lost Elianna, so it was probably not a great idea. No, he and Hoots would take to the streets again as heroes for hire. It was a crappy job, but it was the only one that he was suited for. He had just saved the world, so maybe he could raise his rates a bit.

He was about to get up and take his turn in the fireplace, when the room started to fill with light as the hall's door opened, and in stepped Celeste. "You leaving without me?" she asked. "I thought you released me from service?" asked Shmee. "Celeste did, but elven betrothals are not so easily broken" Elianna replied. "I thought Celeste overpowered you or something?" "She did at first, but I am not so easily put aside" said Elianna. Shmee ran to her arms. They hugged and kissed, and made Hoots and Glin endure all sorts of displays of their affection.

After quite a long kiss Shmee finally asked, "So is Celeste still in there too?" "Of course I am! But Elianna and I are joining more closely, so her love for you is flowing through me as well" she replied. "So what should we call you then?" asked Shmee. "Whatever you wish. As the goddess of magic, I have had many names, so adding Elianna to the list is not unwelcome" replied Elianna. "So should we go back up to the palace and setup some guard duty?" asked Glin. Trying not to get left out of the conversation again.

"No, my plan is to travel with Shmee and Hoots" replied Elianna, "Since the location of the palace has been given away, we are going to rotate decoy goddesses through the palace, and since I will be on the road no one will truly know where I am to give away my location." "So the goddess of magic is going to become a sell-sword?" asked Shmee with a smile. "Well, I was thinking we would get married first, but that is the general plan yes" replied Elianna. "We will have to find you some better loot!" said Shmee, "We can't have the

goddess of magic running around the kingdom in crappy leather armor, and I am sure that you might be able to pull off a spell or two given your new status as a god, so we will not be needing a mage like I thought. Provided that Glin is still planning on being a member of our ragged group.”
“There is not place I would rather be!” said Glin.

“So we are off to the chapel to get married?” asked Elianna.
“Nope, we are headed back to Valley Deep to get those Mithril boots!” said Shmee.

Valley Deep welcomed the adventures with a true hero’s welcome. They were playing trumpets and flying banners. It was what Shmee has always dreamed of. Streamers fell from up in the rafters of the cave ceiling, and little children ran around with flowers dropping pedals everywhere. Grendon waited for them in the Great Hall and said, “The Lumberjacks will be forever remembered by the elves and dwarves as the guild that had not one but two members save the world from the loss of magic. Ask anything, and I will give it to you!” “I really just want my boots” said Shmee, “but since you did say anything Elianna and Glin could use some better gear as well!” “Fine, off to the vault with you. Take what you need, but for the love of Roith do not rob us blind. We still need a little money around here to keep this mine running!” said Grendon. “Oh we will not take everything” said Shmee, “Besides we still need to go visit the elves and see what they will give us. It is not every day that you save the world!” “By my hammer you are a greedy thing aren’t you!” said Grendon, “But I suppose you have earned it!”

Epilogue

The rain was coming down hard in the Village, and everyone was idling away in the Inn. The name of the Inn and the Village are of no consequence because they were practically like every other crappy Village and Inn that you would find out in the middle of nowhere. It turns out that there is a scroll out there that the elves gave the early humans on how to layout podunk mud-holes, and the Adventurers at the bar could undoubtedly navigate them all blindfolded. That and they could smell booze about ten miles away, give or take.

No, there was nothing about the Adventurers that made them stand out either, they wore much nicer armor than the average adventurer. It even looked like the human man had Mithril boots, and their weapons were impressive looking, but all living adventurers had good equipment, otherwise they would be dead adventures. No, what was different about them was the eight-foot-tall owl standing next to them drinking ale out of a bowl and speaking some sort Northern Giant tongue. That and the fact that villagers could swear that the woman was glowing, even if ever so slightly. Yes, the owl and the woman were giving the villagers pause.

The human man was retelling his story to a farmer next to him at the bar, "and that is how we saved the world from the anti-magic Order of the Coil. The goddess is up in her palace all safe and sound, and now she has a team of guards keeping safe her instead of that idiot old mage." "I was told

that the Order of Wizards broke up The Order of the Coil” said the old farmer, “They were led by that Riginel fella. He sounds like a real nice chap. Selflessly putting himself in danger for the greater good of us all. Some of his men went through here earlier collecting money for those poor old wizards. I donated what I had. It was the least I could do!” “That tares it” yelled out Shmee, “We are off on our new quest!” “What would that be?” asked Glin. “We are going to hunt down and destroy the Order of Wizards!” replied Shmee.

Elianna rolled her eyes and said, “No we are not, so what if Riginel gave our position away. Getting in to a fight with the wizards will only cause trouble, and we are still heroes to the Elves and the Dwarves.” “I don’t care. I want to be heroes with everyone! They take all the glory and gold for themselves! Would it hurt them to maybe just mention us in their gloating?” replied Shmee. “I am with ... who ... Shmee on this one. They do nothing but buy up ... who ... all the cool castles, and leave poor unknowing owls in caves by themselves to guard dumb objects!” added Hoots.

“Maybe a good old fashioned war will get those old fuddy-duddies to fly a little straighter, and to not take advantage of the poor people like they do now” chimed in Glin. “Oh, I don’t know” said Elianna, “I was kind of hoping that we would be keeping a low profile now, but this would make us enemy number one.” “At least we would be known for something!” said Shmee. “Oh, alright” gave in Elianna, “They have been using their magic very foolishly lately. I can almost

feel it being sucked out of me by them, and it may be time for them to change the guard so to speak. However, if they agree to give us credit in saving the world we don't kill them. Understand?!" "Yes, and I love you Eli" said Shmee, "Let's go hunt some wizards!"

The barkeep not liking where this conversation had ended up, yelled out "Guards! Come quick! We have a bunch anti-wizard rebels in our midst!" With a flash the adventuring group downed their ale and headed for the door. They tried their best not to kill any of the poor guards that came to "stop them" from getting away. They didn't unsheathe their weapons, and Hoots tried not to pierce their soft fragile flesh with his sharp talons.

This podunk town seemed to have more guards than usual, and it took them quite some time to fight to the city gates. After they had knocked just about every guard unconscious, Hoots quipped, "It was much easier when we could just fly away." "Maybe next time buddy" said Shmee.