

# Stonetop

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# Setting Details

## History

The world was created many ages ago. The details of the creation vary by culture — perhaps one of the various creation stories is true, or none of them are, or all of them are. Who can say? What everyone agrees on is that primeval Things were imprisoned beneath the earth in a time before history, and they stir in their uneasy slumber as they dream of destruction and chaos.

The Makers were races of giants who established mighty civilizations many centuries ago. Humans, fae, and many other creatures served them. (Some believe that the Makers created all these servants, including humans and fae.) The noteworthy clans of Makers were:

- The Stone Lords, masters of shaping matter
- The Tempest Lords, masters of travel and weather
- The Forge Lords, fiery masters of craftworks and the underground
- The Rime Lords, ascetic masters of ice and mountains
- The Green Lords, who shaped and ruled Nature itself

At some point, the Makers' civilization collapsed. Some say the Makers' servants rebelled, or the Things Below escaped and fought them, or that they fought amongst each other. Who can say? But they left the ruins of their mighty constructions all over the world, as well as many strange and magical artifacts which people nowadays can neither understand nor replicate. The lightning-attracting obelisk that Stonetop is built around is almost certainly a relic of the Stone Lords or Tempest Lords, its original purpose long forgotten.

## Animism

The realm of the spirits bleeds over into the real world. Everything has a spirit — trees, rocks, animals, places, everything — and these spirits can often be propitiated and bargained with.

Any water deep enough that you cannot see the bottom is very dangerous. Everyone knows this and will not willingly enter deep rivers or lakes, nor travel by water. When Stonetop villagers go down to the Stream to do laundry or bathe, they never go alone. The spirits of deep water are no friends to humans, let alone the monsters that may lurk beneath the water's surface.

## Religion

Four main gods are worshipped by the people of Stonetop

- Tor the Rain-Maker, god of weather and storms, patron of warriors and hunters
- Aratis the Lawkeeper, goddess of civilization, order, and justice
- Helio the Daybringer, god of the sun, protection, hope, and mercy
- Danu the Great Mother, goddess of fertility, plants, and animals

Tor is particularly venerated in Stonetop, thanks to his association with lightning and storms, but all four gods are respected and invoked whenever people need aid in each god's specific area of authority. Other cultures may have other gods, but these four are the main ones in this region.

When you die, the Lady of Crows guides your spirit as it passes through the Last Door. Nobody is certain about what lies beyond the Door, or the nature of the Lady. Spirits of the dead who don't pass through the Door might become ghosts or revenants, unquiet dead who lament their fate or pursue some goal that was left unfinished in life. People speak in whispers of the Pale Hunter, some manner of powerful spirit or god who hunts the undead and similar aberrations of nature.

## The Region

**Stonetop:** A small village of around 300 people on a bluff at the edge of the Great Forest. The storm-calling Stone, the Old Wall which surrounds it, and the underground vault beneath it are remnants of the Makers, but these days the Old Wall is a convenient quarry for building stones and the vault is the town's cistern for water storage. Farming, hunting, and herding sheep and goats are the main occupations. The villagers trade food, textiles, and whiskey with the other settlements in the region.

**Gordin's Delve:** A wretched hive built around old Forge Lord mines. Capitalist exploitation of the miners' labour. Very few people are from here; they just end up here when they have nowhere else to go.

**Marshedge:** A mercantile town ruled by old, powerful families which raises the question "What's the difference between law enforcement and organized crime?"

**The Steplands:** A rugged plateau inhabited by bands of nomadic Hillfolk. Some bands are peaceable traders; others are fierce bandits.

**Barrier Pass:** The northern mountains are inhabited by the strange descendants of the Rime Lords' servants. Odd monks and unfamiliar spirits inhabit a land of year-round ice and snow.

**The Great Forest:** The Forest Folk took over the stewardship of this massive wood after the Green Lords fell. Now that the Forest Folk seem to have disappeared, malicious fae and all manner of monsters are multiplying there. The villagers of Stonetop have a long-standing compact with the Forest Folk to never fell a living tree in the Great Forest, but we'll see how long that treaty survives after the Forest Folk's disappearance.

# Characters

If you want to edit your own page, send me your email and desired username

# Soren - The Fox

## Backstory

Soren was born to Alis and Gerlt in Stonetop and raised with the other children of the village. While there was no significant conflict between Soren and the other villagers, as he grew into a young adult he swiftly became disillusioned with the simple lifestyle of Stonetop. He wanted more out of life, and believed that he would only find fulfillment beyond its simple walls.

During one of Stout Jakka's visits to the village, Soren asked if he could travel along with him. While initially averse to the idea, Soren's silver tongue convinced Jakka and they left together, heading south to Marshedge. Alis and Gerlt did not approve of this and begged him to stay, but Soren was besotted with the idea of discovering the wider world and went anyways. Along the way they encountered some Hillfolk, and while Jakka was doing business with them Soren mingled among the folk. He grew enamoured with their way of life (and one of the young women there), seeming so free to roam the hills and forge their own paths. He decided to part ways with Jakka and stay with the hillfolk, however it was not long before their lifestyle grew repetitious and dull. Realizing this, he parted ways with the hillfolk and, using the knowledge he learned from them, wandered the Steplands for some time. He encountered other tribes, some he parted ways with amicably, some he had to sneak away and yet others chased him out at the tips of their spears.

Eventually he found himself in the vicinity of Gordin's Delve and entered the town. Here he found even more restrictions, people were expected to do their work in the mines and not ask questions. Struggling with fitting in, he met Jakka again and from him learned his parents had died of a sudden sickness. Grieving, and sick of the confines of Gordin's Delve, Soren returned to Stonetop to pay his respects to his parents. They parted in anger, but he held no lasting resentment for them and mourned their passing.

When he returned he was met with general suspicion, it had been many years after all and he was remembered as a rowdy youth who left his parents heartbroken. Only Delyth, his father's sister, welcomed him with open arms. She spoke for him amongst the villagers and vouched for him. While he only meant to honour his parents and then move on again he realized that Stonetop was not the restrictive, boring village he had perceived. Seeing now with the eyes of a grown man, he realized that while it is small and unglamorous, each of the people were free to pursue their own desires and skills to the benefit of the village as a whole. When Delyth came to him, asking him to stay with her, he agreed and has lived with her in the outskirts of the village ever since.

Characters

# Kiva - The Seeker

Characters

# Old Treasa - The Heavy

Characters

# Old Esme - The Judge

# Rua - The Would-Be Hero

... You mean, the *actual* hero.

## My tragic backstory

Let me tell you a story.

## Deets

- Rua's mother left Stonetop for Gordin's Delve, where she fell in love.
- When Rua was ten years old (six and a half years before the Winter Festival below), the family moved to Stonetop. They had an encounter with the Forest Folk along the way. By this point they were rare and believed to be gone. Rua's primary memory of the experience was a song he heard the Forest Folk sang.
- When Rua was twelve, his mother disappeared in the forest. All that was found was an engraved tinderbox, a prized treasure from her parents (long since dead).
- When Rua was fourteen, his father was on the way to meet Murdoch in town for unknown reasons. He died of a lightning strike, which should never happen in Stonetop -- it's protected by a stone that attracts lightning. Orphaned!
- Two years later, Rua accuses Murdoch of killing his father. Somehow. This doesn't really make much sense, and it makes him look like a fool.
  - This isn't right. You can't get hit by lightning in town -- that's what the stone of Stonetop does.

## Relatives

- My mother died tragically when \$YARR. I think she disappeared in the woods.
- My father was struck by lightning mysteriously in town. He was on his way to meet Murdoch. The old man knows more than he's said!
- **Uncle Cillian** - In Gordin's Delve. Crippled in a mining accident years ago. No kids, but married to ...
- **Auntie Anya** - Blacksmith. Cillian's wife. We haven't developed her much yet.

# Gordin's Delve

Reminder: Rua left Gordin's Delve when he was nine. One of the reasons why he didn't talk about the copper seam in Stonetop is because living in the Delve gave him a bad impression of mining.

## Relationships

### Stonetop

- **Betta** - She's just so amazing, y'know?
- **Gwann** - Betta's mom. After overhearing her complaining about the bandit newcomers and folk from Gordin's Delve, Rua's given up on her. There's no hostility, just weariness.
- **Angrad** - Betta's grandma. She's the closest person he has to a maternal figure. She had a fling with one of the Forest Folk ages ago.
- **Eliam** - Rua's carpentry master.
- **Steffen** - Rua and Steffen haven't really interacted that much, but Rua sees him and **Bedwyr** as his bros.
- **Murdoch** - Rua accused Murdoch of killing his father at the Winter Festival. He has since apologized.

### Gordin's Delve

- **Glenda** - Friend of his mother and former watchman. He remembers her as a friend of his mom who helped them out when he was a kid. She joined the bandits threatening Stonetop and was killed by Soren.

<https://wiki.garethhessels.ca/books/stonetop/page/session-15>

### Other

- **Thistledown** - Rua owes him a favour. Or possibly Esme owes him a favour, and Rua's helping.
- 

## Allegiances

### Devotee of Aratis

We came up with this during character creation. How does this tie in with Rua? How does he express his appreciation for Aratis? What are the aspects of Aratis that attract him?

# Character creation

## Rua's questions

### Whose heart do you hope to win?

Betta! She's an NPC from Stonetop. She's from a *respectable* family, and obviously too good for me ... but she's great. I want to get to know her better.

### Who is counting on you?

Mad Gethin, and I don't know why.

### Which one of you is my closest, truest friend?

Kiva is my bro!

### Which one of you has promised to teach me?

Soren will teach me the ways of drinking, having fun, and being an adult. Esme could teach me how to work within systems.

### Which one of you have I hurt, through what I have done or failed to do?

Old Esme. I don't know this, but she stood up for me after my dad died.

## Others' questions

### Soren: Which one of you joined my in my latest hijinx?

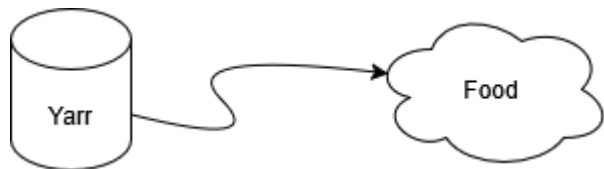
Rua. What were the details?

### Kiva: Which one of you has been at my side the entire way?

Rua. Kiva's my bro!

Old Treasa: Which one of you once dragged me home,  
bleeding and unconscious?

Rua, incredibly.



Characters

# Stella Heliorsdottir - The Lightbearer

# NPCs

## Villagers

**Aerig:** (m, child) A precocious four-year-old who's imprinted on Stella like a duckling. Follows her around and asks a million questions.

**Alis:** (f, deceased) Alis liked weaving and singing. She and Gerlt succumbed to disease some years ago while Soren was away on his travels. Upon hearing the news of their passing from a roving trader, he returned to Stonetop to pay his respects and ultimately stayed with the village.

- Wife of Gerlt
- Mother of Soren
- Sister-in-Law of Delyth

**Angrad:** (f, elder) A clever but irritable old woman. She never got over her husband dying several years ago, and doesn't get along with her adult children.

- Mother of Gwann and Tomo
- Widow of Rusa (deceased)
- Grandmother of Betta and Fio

**Arthur:** (m, adult) Has a collection of books that rival's even Kiva's family. He gathered these books over his travels as a younger man, who knows what knowledge they hold?

**Auvan:** (m, mature) He used to travel, but came back and started running the public house after his joints started bothering him. Tells great stories of his adventures. Does most of the trading with outsiders.

- Adopted father of Nia
- Adopted grandfather of Aerig

**Betta:** (f, young) Lovely young woman. All the lads of the village compete for her attention. She's sheltered and naïve, but seems to have inherited her father's kind personality.

- Daughter of Daffa and Gwann
- Granddaughter of Angrad and Rusa
- Rua has a thing for her. Unrequited? Possible, but who knows.

**Cayu:** (m, child) Wickla's ten-year-old son. Slowly becoming accepted by the other children his age, but still isn't quite fitting in.

- Son of Wickla

**Honoured Cutha:** (m, mature) Priest of Tor the Rain-Maker, the patron god of Stonetop. Highly respected by all of the townsfolk, and jealous of anything that smells of a threat to his authority or respect.

- Brother of Rusa (deceased)

**Daffa:** (m, adult) Gwann's hen-pecked husband. Good farmer, hard worker, can't do anything right as far as his wife is concerned. Everyone in town feels kind of sorry for him.

- Husband of Gwann
- Father of Betta

**Dayed:** (m, adult) Farmer, talented brewer, single father; his wife died of disease several years ago. He can't control his children and doesn't even know where to start.

- Father of Rhan and Shan

**Delyth:** (f, adult) Delyth has an affinity for animals and helps take care of the various livestock the village holds. She is short and stocky and is direct with her words and actions. She was good friends with Soren's parents, Alis and Gerlt, and acted as a surrogate aunt to him growing up. When Soren returned to Stonetop to pay his respects at his parent's grave, she welcomed him back with open arms and convinced him to stay with the village and has been a staunch supporter of him when other villagers call his loyalty into question or complain of his various antics.

- Surrogate Aunt of Soren

**Honoured Dove:** (f, adult) The priestess of Danu. She's the herbalist and healer of the village. Nonsense and prickly, doesn't suffer fools gladly, but takes good care of people. She's also the one responsible for doling out food from the communal granary to people, so everyone tries to stay on her good side.

**Granny Eadna:** (f, elder) Eadna cares for the few orphans and those without a home. She feels it is her responsibility to care for them and give them at least a semblance of a normal upbringing. Stella, having grown up there, acts as an older sister to the other kids and helps Eadna care for them. She is generally respected and beloved by her community, and despite her advancing age she still exudes an aura of love and comfort.

- Foster parent of Stella and Aerig

**Egwyn:** (f, adult) Stoneworker and woodworker; the closest thing Stonetop has to an architect or engineer. She's completely untrained, but has a knack for elegant construction and simple mechanics. People consult her whenever they're repairing buildings or putting up new buildings. Her husband disappeared on a logging expedition two years ago; she's remarried to Offed.

- Wife of Offed

- Mother of Winfred

**Eliam:** (m, adult) Strongest man in town, gentle, quiet, whittles lovely sculptures. Enjoys woodworking and carpentry, but opposes felling trees in the Great Wood.

- Son of Helva and ???

**Emmer:** (m, adult) This logger and farmer is a real Gaston type: strong, arrogant, wants everyone to look up to him. He's agitating to start felling the trees of the Great Wood so that he doesn't have to schlep to the Foothills and back every year for timber.

- Grandson of Murdoch

**Fio:** (f, young) This young woman is proud of being the best hunter in the village. She's very competitive, driven, and serious. Doesn't get along with her parents.

- Daughter of Tomo and ???
- Granddaughter of Angrad and Rusa
- Soren is secretly desperate for her respect
- **Trait:** Lived among the Forest Folk(briefly)

**Gerlt:** (m, deceased) Gerlt was at home in the fields tending the crops. He liked drinking and carving wood. He and Alis succumbed to disease some years ago while Soren was away on his travels. Upon hearing the news of their passing from a roving trader, he returned to Stonetop to pay his respects and ultimately stayed with the village.

- Brother of Delyth
- Wife of Alis
- Father of Soren

**Mad Gethin:** (m, elder) An old man, former hunter, whose mind hasn't been quite right ever since he came back from a hunt a decade ago. He's harmless and good-natured, so people help him out and put up with his spells of confusion and madness.

- No living relatives?
- He is counting on Rua to figure out SOMETHING. After the debacle when Rua accused Murdoch at the Winterlude?, Mad Gethin is hoping that Rua figures out some hidden secret in Stonetop that has been haunting him for ages.

**Gwann:** (f, adult) This arrogant, gossipy middle-aged woman is a spectacular weaver. She stirs up trouble and coddles her daughter too much.

- Daughter of Angrad
- Sister of Tomo
- Wife of Daffa
- Mother of Betta

**Helva:** (f, mature) The village blacksmith is a large woman of few words. She's shy, uncomfortable in groups of people, and will occasionally clobber people who get on her nerves when she's had a few too many.

- Mother of Eliam
- Mentor of Wickla

**Judge Khadagan:** (m, mature, deceased) Esme's predecessor and mentor as Judge. Saw an omen of death and felt the weight of doom on him four days before he died, settled his debts and said the important things, then continued living exactly as he did before until he tripped and broke his neck at the wizened age of his early seventies (he was never sure exactly how old). Not originally from Stonetop — came here following a vision from Aratis.

**Murdoch:** (m, elder) A bad-tempered old village elder, a skilled hunter in his younger days. Rua drunkenly accused him of complicity in his parents' death at the last Midwinter Festival, and he's been stewing about it ever since.

- Grandfather of Emmer

**Nia:** (f, adult) Adopted by Auvan after her parents died in a disease outbreak over a decade ago. She's been learning healing and herb lore from Dove.

- Adopted daughter of Auvan
- Wife of Waldo
- Mother of Aerig

**Offed:** (m, adult) A brawny, boisterous herder who brews small beer for the public house in his spare time. Best wrestler in the village. One of the few people in the village brave enough to help clean the cistern every several years.

- Husband of Egwyn
- Adopted father of Winfred

**Olwinn Heliorsson:** (m, elder, deceased) The former Lightbearer, who died a few years before Stella was born. His final act was contributing to the banishment of an awful monster—a singing horror borne from the depths of the great woods—that he, Treasa, and Esme had to defend Stonetop from.

**Rhan and Shan:** (f, m, children) A pair of thirteen-year-old terrors. Fraternal twins. Unofficial leaders of the pack of village children.

- Daughter and son, respectively, of Dayed

**Rusa:** (m, elder, deceased) Held the unofficial position of captain of Stonetop's militia for many years. He was well-respected and well-liked. The militia has become increasingly disorganized and sloppy since he passed away several years ago.

- Father of Weann and Tomo
- Husband of Angrad
- Grandfather of Betta and Fio

**Tesmi:** (f, mature) A busybody widow who never seems to stop talking. She's a fantastic baker, and her honey rolls are highly prized by everyone in Stonetop. She's taken a shine to Stella, and frequently bothers her for blessings and prayers about trivial things.

**Terrwen:** (m, mature) Farmer, militiaman. Did something terrible in the past and won't talk about it. Clearly tormented by it, lashes out sometimes. Stella wants to help him but isn't sure how.

**Tomo:** (m, adult) A middle-aged man who's a bit too full of himself and loves to take charge. He drinks a bit too much, and knows that everyone thinks he can't live up to his father's reputation.

- Son of Angrad and Rusa (deceased)
- Brother of Gwann
- Husband of ???
- Father of Fio

**Waldo:** (m, adult) The laziest man in town, and possibly the laziest man alive. Often volunteers for shifts in the watchtowers so he can get some sleep up there.

- Husband of Nia
- Father of Aerig

**Wickla:** (f, adult) She's a refugee who moved here with her son from Gordin's Delve three years ago. The town decided to let her fix up an abandoned house and stay after she demonstrated her skill with tinsmithing and whitesmithing. There's not much call for that, though, so she's now the apprentice to the town blacksmith.

- Mother of Cayu
- Apprentice of Helva

**Winfred:** (f, child) A quiet six-year-old child whose favourite thing to do is to follow people around and watch them at work. She hasn't spoken much since the disappearance of her father two years ago, but Granny Eadna says not to worry, that she'll start talking again when she's good and ready.

- Daughter of Egwyn
- Adopted daughter of Offed

## Elsewhere

**Brennan:** (m, mature) The leader of the Claws, the bandit group that eventually became the official police force of the town of Marshedge. Charismatic and calculating. Treasa spent some time running with his crew many years ago before she settled in Stonetop.

**Dermud:** (m, adult) A Marshedge resident who rode up to Stonetop for the Spring Festival. Kiva dragooned him into helping her with the puzzle box artifact.

**Frixet Far-Traveller:** (f, adult) A trader from Gordin's Delve who's been all over the region. She wanders about with no set route, occasionally showing up in Stonetop with strange goods and stranger stories.

**Stout Jakka:** (m, mature) A trader from Marshedge who plies the route between Marshedge and Gordin's Delve. Always welcome in Stonetop, as he generally treats people squarely and sometimes has odd curiosities. It's rumoured that he has friends among the Hillfolk.

## Mythological Characters

**Greenwood Jack:** A trickster figure from old folktales. His origin varies, but he's usually depicted as a Maker or a descendant of a Maker, larger than life both figuratively and literally. The stories about him are often about him tricking cruel and imperious Green Lords, usually with the aid of various fae allies, in order to help humans.

These stories are often used by elders to teach children how to interact with the fae in a respectful and... well, not safe, because nothing about the fae is ever safe, but minimally dangerous fashion.

# Locations

Only locations the party has visited will be here. For all locations in the settings, see the reference documents

# Stonetop

A small village of around 300 people on a bluff at the edge of the Great Forest. The storm-calling Stone, the Old Wall which surrounds it, and the underground vault beneath it are remnants of the Makers, but these days the Old Wall is a convenient quarry for building stones and the vault is the town's cistern for water storage. Farming, hunting, and herding sheep and goats are the main occupations. The villagers trade food, textiles, and whiskey with the other settlements in the region.

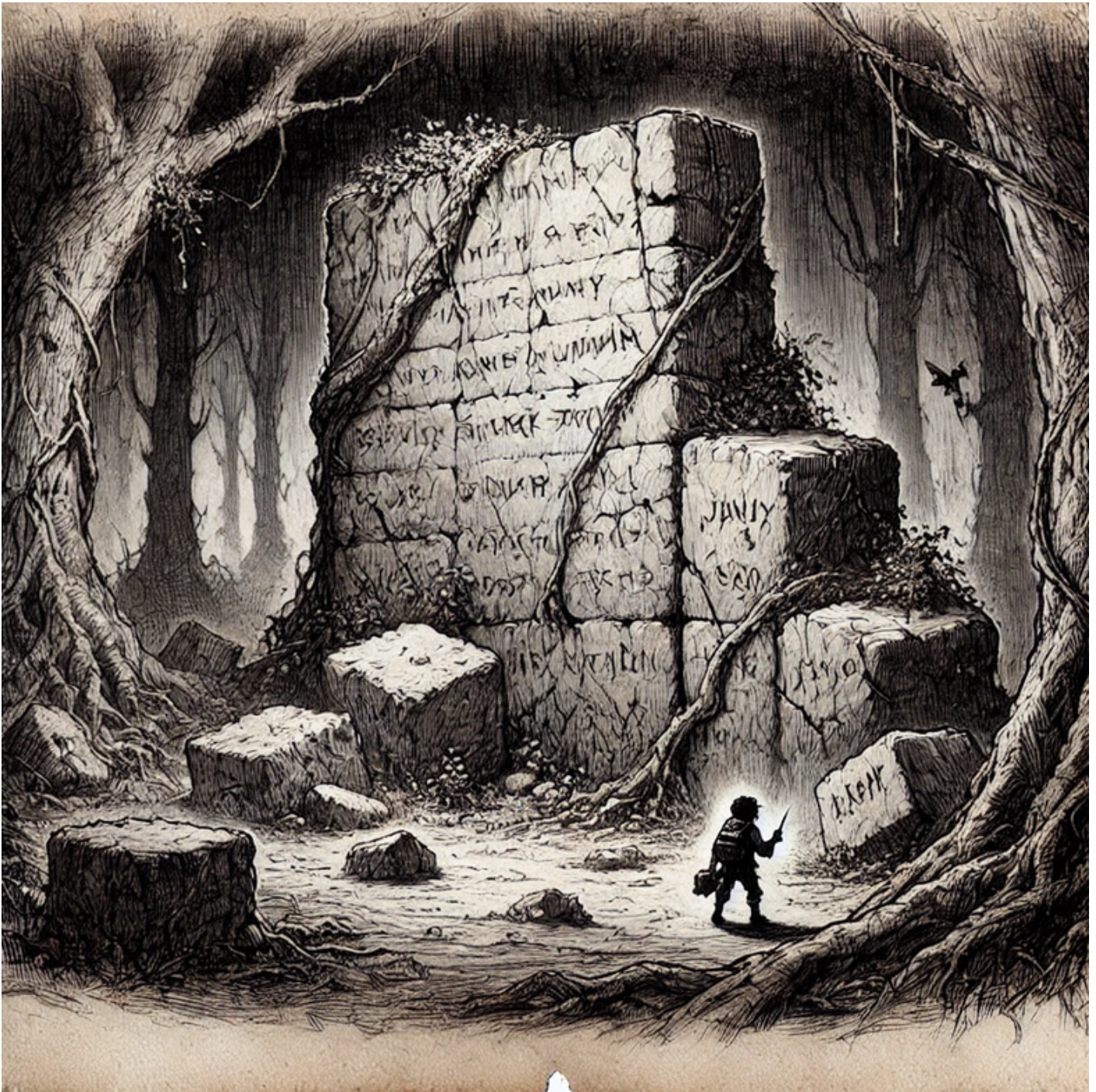
Locations

# The Tumble-Down Wall

## Summary

A ruin in The Great Wood that has no full structure remaining, just one wall standing left. It is a hazing tradition among the Stonetop youth to dare kids to run to the wall and scratch their name or make their mark on the wall.

During the Spring Festival, Ran and Shan dare Cayu to write on the wall. After he does not return for 5 hours they go to Stella and confess, sparking the gathering of a search party that enters the wood in search for the lost child.



## Relevant Sessions

### Session 1

# Hanson's Hill

Hanson's Hill is one of the first small peaks of the foothills, sitting just off the Highway on its winding way up to the Barrier Pass. It is named after one of the first prospectors in this land who discovered valuable minerals in the hills. This triggered a gold rush of sorts that saw the founding of Gordin's Delve and the restoration of the great Stone Lords foundries and mines there. Some adventurous(or desperate) prospectors still go to Hanson's Hill and the surrounding slopes in hopes of finding more of his legendary discovery but none have had the same luck as he.

During the ordeal with Bodgen's Bandits where they were threatening Stonetop to extort valuables and supplies(Sessions 10 through 15 in [Garett's Session Notes](#)), Hanson's Hill was designated as the drop point for the supplies, in a large hollow stump at the top of the hill.

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## The Vicinity



A: Hansen's Hill

# Gordin's Delve

This page contains all the scattered lore and bits of knowledge about the town of Gordin's Delve, either excerpts from the official Stonetop material or bits added by us that don't fit well in the narrative session pages.

From the official material:

“ Gordin's Delve is a town sprawled down a mountainside in the Huffel Peaks, with everything from fine houses to ramshackle huts crammed together cheek-by-jowl. It's maybe three times larger than Stonetop, just under 1,000 souls. Most of them are either miners or people who support the mining industry in some way, but there are also loggers, smiths, tinkers, goatherds, and criminals of every stripe. They all serve the interests of a handful of feuding bosses who extract the wealth of the miners' labour to line their own pockets, and are perpetually locked in a state of anarchic struggle. This is where people end up where they have nowhere else to go. If they're lucky, they'll find a job doing backbreaking labour in the mines; if they're not, they'll be begging outside Sorrow's Gate for enough coin to survive another day.

This was once a Maker city, long since fallen into ruin. The town walls are old Maker ramparts which now protect the town from Hillfolk raids. Many of the buildings are built into old Maker ruins, or built out of their crumbled stones. Old Forge Lord tunnels stretch deep below the earth from openings in the mountainside, but many of them are collapsed or unstable now.

As a town, it's very unlike Stonetop. Smoke from the great Foundry fills the air, and the sounds of busy people and clanging metal are omnipresent. The Hillfolk have a superstitious hatred of the place, as they believe that mining metals is an act of violence against the earth, and would gladly see it razed to the ground if they could. Skirmishes between the Hillfolk and the Delve have been happening on and off for generations.

## Gordin's Delve



And some more character-specific lore, made as answers to questions from the GM

- **Soren**, you've been here on your travels. How long ago was it? What friends and/or enemies did you make here?

Gordin's Delve was one of Soren's last stops before he returned to Stonetop so he was there relatively recently. I don't remember how long ago Soren's return was, a year? multiple years? However long ago it was, Gordin's Delve was everything he hated about Stonetop as a kid cranked to the max. The expectation to fall in line with the powers that be, do your work and keep your head down, and the sooty air all rankled him.

Soren was on a hot streak one night in a gambling den run by one of the Bosses, who didn't take too kindly to the money Soren was winning. While they couldn't prove he was cheating, he had to make a hasty exit when the Boss sent some goons to rough him up, leading him to flee to the seedier side of the town. He was able to lose his pursuers by slipping into the back of one of the run-down huts. He never gave his name, but if they recognize him he is sure they would want to provide the beating he barely escaped (Whether that is true or not I leave up to Dennis).

The hut he was hiding in was owned by Mahsa, an middle-aged woman who runs a very simple food service from the front of her humble abode. Its simple but hearty food, her customers are mostly miners looking for cheap and quick food and the occasional outsider. Soren frequented the place during the rest of his stay in Gordin's Delve, charming her with his unending praise for her cooking and swapping stories with the other guests who came there to eat and socialize.

- **Stella**, two questions:
  - When you travel, is it obvious that you're a Lightbearer in some way? Distinctive garb or regalia? Or do you prefer to travel incognito and blend in with the rest of the group?
  - You've never been to Gordin's Delve before. What are you most afraid of?

Q1,  
Apart from her eyes being an obvious tell that she is a Lightbearer, Stella does usually wear a set of robes that would at least identify her as some sort of priest of Helior. When she wants to blend in she packs them away, but she hasn't recently found many situations where specifically being known as a Lightbearer or representative of Helior's faith would be detrimental. Especially since many people respect or are at least somewhat intimidated by the presence of a Lightbearer, she

has been using it sorta like a mask to hide behind.

Q2,

This trip differs from the others she's had so far because it's a large, scary, unfamiliar town and she assumes that the dangers of openly being known as a Lightbearer among an obscure group of travellers would far outweigh the benefits.

While close to or in Gordin's Delve she would have her regular non-ceremonial regalia packed away, and would likely be wearing a hooded cloak and the simple black see-through eye mask that Olwinn used to wear while travelling. (which is somewhat too big for her)

Also going to add that the act of obscuring one's identity is commonly regarded as sacrilegious among local sects of Helior's faith.

This is usually overlooked when the reasoning for obscuring one's identity is deemed properly moral, but there have been instances where even priests of Helior have obscured their identity for morally sound reasoning and had their reputation ruined because of it.

This rule doesn't formally exclude Lightbearers, but they do commonly travel with their face or eyes obscured, and Stella has heard of one known to hide their eyes at all times outside of ceremonial proceedings. Contrasting local customs, Stella has seen (in her study of Olwinn's books) references to foreign sects of Helior's faith in which it is proper and expected for Lightbearers to hide their eyes at all times except behind closed doors.

- **Rua**, you haven't been back here since you were a child. What are you most looking forward to seeing, or showing off to Betta?

First things first, Rua has mixed feelings about Gordin's Delve. He knows objectively it's not a good place to live, but it's his hometown. Plus he left when he was young, so he was mostly unaware of how corrupt everything was.

I think Rua's looking forward to seeing (and introducing Betta to) his uncle. He worked in the mines, and there was some terrible accident that left him crippled. He's been making his living as a tinkerer ever since. His wife is a blacksmith. Rua hasn't seen them since he left.

- **Esme**, the rule of law is less well established here than in Stonetop, but there would still be a shrine to Aratis and at least one Judge doing their best to stem the tide of lawlessness. What do you know about them?

According to Esme, the local Judge, Anarith Quinn is an affable, obsequious fool that takes harmony, one of Aratis' virtues, to extreme ends as he unendingly attempts to appeal to the 'better natures' of the rotating cast of bosses. He is almost always ignored and when he does 'mediate' deals, once it is time to put them into practice they are invariably discarded within a matter of days. The previous judges who made nuisances of themselves were eventually silenced, one way or another, but Anarith has been 'serving' the community for almost twenty years, having accomplished literally nothing beyond the occasional token participation but is provided a relatively luxurious lifestyle by the bosses in power (which he takes as a sign that he/Aratis is respected).

Esme hates him. So much.

# Events

Significant events with effects on the story and world.

# The Spring Festival

## Summary

The Spring Festival is held in Stonetop each year at the spring equinox. It is much anticipated by the local region, with visitors coming from as far away as Marshedge. It celebrates the end of winter and the coming of spring and all the growth and hope that holds.

A hallmark of the festivities are the garlands of wildflowers that adorn the lintels of all the houses in the village, and it is common for people to wear wreaths of flowers on their heads or clothing. The distillers of Stonetop use this as the perfect opportunity to roll out their barrels and offer samples to any who pass by, competing to see who has the most delicious or strongest whisky. The ovens begin working early in the morning and do not stop until the festival is over, with the public house tables laden with homemade foods and sweets for people to enjoy.

There are many activities, both formal and informal. Ceremonies are held at noon in the Pavilion of the Gods to thank them for guiding the village through the winter and request their guidance for the coming year. There visitors can receive benedictions from the priests and listen to sermons extolling the virtues of the respective deities.

Each year a tug-of-war tournament is held in the morning, with teams facing off in the village square and competing to see who can emerge triumphant. Additionally, a wrestling competition takes place in the afternoon where people try to pin down their opponents or throw them out of the ring. Often there is betting on the games, with outsiders staking small numbers of coin and Stonetop villagers putting up watch hours. While this is not strictly approved there is little oversight.

Throughout the day anyone with an instrument can play in the square and often there are people dancing and spinning in time to the music. Indeed this is a favourite activity for couples, and often they will steal away to the edges of the village to spend some time in each other's company.

## Relevant Sessions

### Session 1

# Garett's Session Notes

These are narrative-style notes taken by me during sessions. I will try to link relevant info, but I may not have the time to do so during sessions.

# Session 0

Character creation and stuff, setting expectations and familiarizing ourselves with the game and format of play

No real notes to take, see [Player Characters](#), [Non-Player Characters](#) or [Locations](#) for relevant information.

# Session 1

LETS GOOOOOOO

The spring festival is ongoing, a celebration of the end of winter and heralds the beginning of planting season. This year it has been ill-omen'd, its cold and cloudy and raining all night so the fields are muddy and the atmosphere is not very spring-like. Still the festivities are being observed, there are people out and about in the village square chatting and mingling and the public house has home cooked dishes freely available for people to eat. There are flowers adorning the lintels of the public house and nearby homes. There are casks of the most recent batches of whisky that are being sampled and shared while friends swap stories and catch up after a long winter. Treasa is concerned about the number of strangers in the town, just as much as Esme is excited to learn about the doings of the same strangers. Rua is hyped up about the tug-of-war game, determined to be on the winning team this time! Stella is caught up in her official duties, at her post in front of the pavilion of the gods to give beneficence to passers-by, and preparing for her noon time ritual to welcome back the sun from its wintry retreat.

As the festival progresses Soren stands proudly behind his cask of whiskey, soliciting everyone nearby to come have a taste but especially all the young women. While they taste the drinks he spins a tall tale of when he won a brewing competition out near Gordin's Delve. Kiva is there, sipping a sample and listening skeptically to Soren's story. Elsewhere, Treasa is conservatively sipping her own drink and eyeing those who are drinking more than a little. She looks forward to when the festivities simmer down and move into a more relaxed atmosphere. Old Esme is costumed up and following an old tradition of 'pranking' people as a method of playing matchmaker. Rua is hanging out with Soren, trying to get advice about girls and how to tell if they like you, before asking Betta to dance with him in front of the musicians. Stella is overseeing the ceremonies, it is a comfortable task for her as she has been performing such duties for all her life. Rua and his team are able to handily win the tug-of-war competition, pulling all comers into a muddy faceplant. He and his team are showered with flowers and drinks, the villagers patting their backs and congratulating them.

Those who are not cooking, drinking heavily or making out are gathered near the pavilion of the gods. Dove, the priestess of Danu, welcomes people. Stella gives a sermon about the glory of the sun and the warmth of Helior, but the overcast day casts a shadow on her words and she seems a little uncertain. Honoured Cutha preaches of Tor and his glory demonstrated through the thunder and lightning so present at the current time. He is a great orator and his speech captivates the crowd. While he speaks he is interrupted by a mild earthquake, shaking tables and toppling loose items. This goes on for some time, 20 seconds or so, and has people a bit worried. Is this an omen, for good or ill? Old Esme, in her Trickster costume, tries to speak jovially and make light of the quake, positing it is a prank of the tricksters, to distract from talk about bad omens. While people are mollified, Cutha finishes his speech quickly, its clear nobody is really paying attention

anymore. Old Treasa scans the crowd and sees Cutha looking a bit shaken. Shaken, and maybe a bit guilty?...

Outside, Betta and some of the other young girls are handing out blue bells and other flowers for people to weave into wreaths as is tradition. Rua asks Betta to dance, she says yes but seems a little uncertain. Is she uncomfortable or is it just nerves? Betta hands the flowers to Kiva and her and Rua go to where the musicians are playing and start spinning around gracefully. Their dance gets more elaborate, people circling around them and clapping along to the music. When they are done with a flourish the onlookers clap and cheer, while Esme whistles from a little way away. Rua asks Betta to dance again later, and she agrees. At this time Rua gets thumped on the shoulder and a drunk man yells "Boy get us some more whiskey". Rua retorts instantly, telling them to get their own. Turning around, it's Emmer and some of his friends, clearly drunk at a nearby table. Emmer stands up and reiterates again, telling Rua to get him a drink. Rua tells him to get it himself, if he can even get there without falling down. Tension is rising, Emmer advances slowly towards Rua. Out of nowhere Old Esme throws a bucket of water on the two of them, shocking them both. Emmer, seeing who intervened, grumbles a bit and moves away to get his own drink.

Time goes on, the tension of the earthquake during the ceremony is mostly forgotten and the wrestling competition has started. This year it is a mudfest, the wet dirt being churned up by the high-spirited competition. Old Treasa is approached by one of the village elders, Murdoch, asking her to gather Esme and meet him and the other elders at his home. He is obviously sweating, seeming distressed in some way. Treasa, in her usual direct way, walks in a straight line towards Esme who is rather easy to find, being in the most colourful outfit of the entire village. Old Esme reads the situation, moving to the side and taking off the trickster mask. Treasa explains the situation and they move together to Murdochs house. At the house there are some other elders and a stranger. Murdoch closes the door and asks the stranger to tell her story. The stranger is a plump woman, mid 40s, clothing stained from travel. "I come up from Cobben to see the festival but was stopped on the road. There were six of them, bandits I think. They had a couple horses, but all had shivs. They gave me a message and told me to bring it to Stonetop." The woman hands Treasa a crudely written and poorly spelled note, reading "Greetings from Gray's Knives. We will be back in 2 months and we expect some sort of treasure. If we don't like what we find we will start burning." Treasa questions the woman, were the bandits hillfolk? No, they didn't seem dressed for it. They were a rag-tag crew, maybe from Gordin's Delve or farther north? This happened on the highway, down from the foothills. Old Esme, leaning on her years of experience, looks deeply into the woman's eyes and determines she is telling the truth. Esme sends her off to get some food and an extra helper of sweets.

After the woman leaves, the elders discuss their response. They will announce the news tomorrow, no need to disrupt the festivities, but they are not going to take this threat lightly. They plan on preparing the small wall and laying some traps to surprise any would-be looters. But the threat is not for 2 months, they leave to rejoin the festival. Esme goes to Soren, who is a little bit drunk at this point, and Esme wants to know if anyone Soren knows might have some information on the bandits. Soren is trying to hide the fact he is playing bookie for the wrestling matches and isn't really paying attention. He gets, eventually, that it is serious but isn't able to parse a real answer for her. Esme says she will follow up later, when he is not so clearly inebriated.

Kiva always has the puzzle box niggling at the back of her mind. She keeps an eye on the gathered crowd and spots a guest from Marshedge and they meet over a drink. Dermud is his name. Kiva speaks in hypotheticals, about a puzzlebox made of metal and how one might go about opening. Dermud considers the question, there are many ways to open a puzzle box, as many ways as there are different boxes. Kiva invites him to stay at her house for a few days to work together on the box, but quickly clarifies this is NOT a double entendre. Dermud stutters a bit but agrees, this would be a purely intellectual endeavour. They head out to Kiva's house to begin poking at the puzzlebox.

In the meantime, Stella is helping Granny Eadna baking pies in the communal ovens. Ran and Shan appear and grab Stella's attention, she asks Eadna to handle the pies and goes with the kids. They confess to doing something bad to Stella's exasperation. They dared Cayu to write his name on the Tumble-Down Wall but he has been gone for 5 hours now. "We didn't think he would do it! Promise!" Stella decides to go to Old Treasa to help organize a search party. Its a few hours until dark, Treasa gets to business right away. She sends Ran and Shan to their father to get him to start getting people together, and Stella to tell Honoured Dove and Cutha. Treasa then heads to the Public House and gathers the least drunk people she can find along the way. Stella finds Cutha at the Pavilion of the Gods, he is meditatively looking at the shrine to Tor. He sees Stella come in and asks "Have we gone astray? If feels this year is ill-omened". Stella doesn't really answer him, but tells him about Cayu. He agree's, yes, and moves out. Stella then finds Esme, who is with Rua and Betta, and recruits them as well. As they gather around the Standing Stone the commotion draws Soren and Kiva's attention and they join the search party.

A group of about 40 total get together and head down the winding stair to the Great Wood. They string out, staying within sight range and singing the traditional village seeking song while starting to walk through the wood and search for Cayu. As they are about to start, Wickla, Cayu's mother, approaches dragging Dayed, the twin's father, to Esme and asks for permission to beat him as reproachment for his poor control over his kids. Dayed thankfully has an armful of torches and, while avoiding Wickla's gaze, hands them out to the search party. Stella lights one of the torches by whispering to them, and the lit torch is used to light all the others. The torches are handed out, one to every third person, and the line sets off singing all the way. Stella infuses her torch with a consecrated flame, adding a holy light to the party.

The line gets bunched up at a point and some of the farmers find a fallen tree that has snapped off at the base and begin to debate taking it back to town. Treasa asks them to remember the location and come back later, the search for Cayu comes first. The party continues. While they walk, Rua and Betta slowly walk closer together until they are within reach. Betta is catching Rua up on the 'tradition' of daring kids to make their mark and tells about how she scratched an X once herself. It was the most scared time of her life. Rua remarks how brave she was and behind them a voice says "So Brave". Betta screams in shock!

# Session 2

Missing 2 players, flashback session! This takes place a few years before the "present" set of events set out in session 1 and depicts how Rua, Kiva, Esme, and Soren went on an expedition that marks the beginning of Rua's heroic journey and Kiva's discovery of ancient, powerful artifacts.

When Soren showed Kiva a map covered in runes she was able to tell it was in the northern regions of the steplands. The map depicted some Stone-Lords ruins, and the few runes Kiva could decipher along with comparing current maps of the area showed the way. Rua, a very impressionable teenager at this time, overheard the conversation and if Soren thought it was a good idea then Rua wanted to be there as well. When they proposed the expedition, Old Esme consulted the chronicle and found that there are some ruins in the area that the Hillfolk avoid it, and they try to stop anyone who attempts to explore the area. Knowing the potential dangers of dark, unexplored areas, she goes to Honoured Cutha and borrows an amulet that wards against the darkness. With this knowledge and protection she accompanied the youngsters to watch over them and make sure they came back safe.

They set out from Stonetop and travel across the Maker's roads, turning south at the crossroads. The wards that provide safety to travellers make the party feel secure and confident in the journey while beside the road the tall grasses ripple in the wind. Rua and Kiva provide a rapt audience for Soren's stories and he regales them with exaggerated retellings of his adventures. The first night passes uneventfully, with each of the party members taking turns on watch. The next day as they travel south a pack of dog-sized two-legged drakes shadow the party on the east side of the road, weaving in and out of the grasses. Only two or three of the drakes can be seen at any time, but the travellers know they hunt in large packs. Rua, feeling secure in the wards of the road, taunts them with "Neener neener neeeeeener" while laughing. Esme starts singing a song, an old song about travelling safe along the road and not straying off to the path. Soren sings along as well, and towards the end of the afternoon the drakes stop following them.

While Kiva is on watch that night she hears her mother talking out in the grass and feels compelled to go to her. While a small part of her raises an alarm, it is not enough to stop her from leaving the camp towards the sound of her mother's voice. Old Esme, who was sleeping lightly, wakes up in the middle of the night to find her gone and immediately rouses Soren and Rua and begins to search for tracks. Soren grabs a torch to provide some light and help out. Despite her lack of proficiency with tracking she spots a point at the edge of the camp where the grasses are bent unnaturally like someone pushed through them. Rua rushes forward, leading the way with Esme and Soren behind.

They find a small, burnt out area and in the middle Kiva sits with her head drooping to the side and a swarm of glowing lights dancing around her head. Esme jumps in and draws the lights to herself while Rua drags Kiva away and starts shaking her and calling her to wake up. Soren jumps in with Esme, swinging his torch through the swarm of lights. It is effective, and after 30 seconds of wild swinging the lights disperse and bob out into the grass and some of them start winking out. When Kiva wakes up she feels like time is jelly, a slight headache but also a feeling of familiarity? However, the Nosgalau spirits have taken a treasured memory of Kiva and her mother baking Winterlude cookies shaped like snowflakes. Esme hurries to her and holds up the amulet while asking if she is OK. The amulet feels heavier in her hands, and between that and the care of her companions, Kiva is able to stand up and walk. They return to the campsite and Esme takes the remainder of the watch, singing a soft and almost wordless song that soothes the other party members into a fitful sleep for the rest of the night.

The rest of the journey on the Maker's road is uneventful until the party turns off the road to cut towards the location marked on the map. The grasses sway around them as they walk up and down small hills, taking a moment at the top of each hill to savour the beautiful view. The grass slowly gives way to rocky ground and small stands of trees as the hills gradually get larger and closer together. There is a moment as they come around the side of a hill where the party hears a sharp crack of shifting stone. Esme looks to Soren and he motions for the group to hide in some nearby shrubs. As they move in haste, both Esme and Soren slip on the way. Rua moves to help Esme and gets her to a good hiding spot but Soren's fall triggers a small rockslide and he drops some supplies. Drawn by the sound, a massive creature the size of a house rounds the corner of the hill. It is badger-like with long talons like a sloth, and it has brown and white patches of fur. It snuffles the air, swinging its head around, apparently not yet noticing Soren stuck out in the open. He tries not to make much noise and move downwind of the creature. At the same time, Rua pulls out his slingshot and prepares to fire a distracting shot. Before he does, Esme gives herself a small cut and smears some blood on the stone before he fires it off. It flies over the monstrous creature's head and clatters on the hillside behind it. After an agonizing 30 seconds, it's head turns toward the stone and snuffles and begins to lumber towards it. Soren waits until the beast is far enough away to not hear footsteps and he goes to join the others and they move on down the hill and make haste away from the beast.

Once they take their bearings and look around from the top of the next hill, Esme asks leading questions to Kiva and they are able to match a horseshoe hill on the map to the shape of a hill about a 2 hour hike away. They set off towards the hill and begin to hear the site before they can see it. There is a high, keen whistling and also a deep thrumming that is felt more than it is heard. As they approach they can see a side of the hill is cut almost perfectly vertical with various holes in the cliff face that make the sounds as the wind passes over them. There are also some ruins of buildings at the bottom of the cliff face. Esme tries to instill caution in Soren and asks him to decide who should go first and pick a safe path. Soren says "Me of course!" and points out a fairly straight path to the buildings, avoiding a couple small patches of loose stone. As they approach the buildings it is apparent that they are mostly collapsed, but definitely human-made. In the center of the town there is a stack of stone blocks, much too large for people to move. Soren and Rua move to search for stashes of booze or money that might have been missed, and Esme follows Kiva as she follows her sixth sense and is drawn to some of the less collapsed buildings. As they explore a feeling of suspense builds while the moaning of the rock-organ provides a creepy

ambience. Soren and Rua find a burnt-out campfire, seemingly a week or two old. Rua, looking at the large remaining logs, deduces that they must have been lit via magic. There is no way such large pieces of wood would have been lit by normal means.

After a couple hours of fruitless searching they are forced to stop and go back to the center of the ruins where the big blocks of rock are to meet the others. Esme looks to Soren to decide where they should camp and he says they should move some ways away so the sound doesn't disturb their sleep. She claps him on the back and Rua praises his wisdom, feeding his ego even more. While they prepare to sleep, Esme sings another old song, one of comfort and strength to prepare for the morrow.

They wake into a misty morning and head back to the ruins. As they move through the town they hear some scrabbling in one of the larger ruined buildings. Soren says that might be a rabbit or other creature they could catch for a celebratory meal. Hearing this, Rua dashes into the building with excitement and when his eyes adjust he sees a stone floating in the air, slowly moving to sit on top of another stone, but then falls and clatters on the floor. Rua is fascinated by this and moved to pick up the stone, but as he gets closer the temperature drops and there is an appearance of an outline of a person, with slightly glowing eyes. Rua says "Hello, is someone there? My name is Rua!". Another stone is lifted up, hovers for a moment, then place on top of a flat rock. It keeps doing this, stacking a few rocks but they keep falling over. The others arrive and see this as well, but Rua sees its trying to almost build...something. Rua tries to help, moving rocks to support the stack and help the spirit. It gets more animated, moving stones faster until it picks up a large rock that is much larger than the stack will support. Rua calls out to to it to stop! it won't work! but it doesn't appear to notice him and the rock causes the entire stack to fall over. After a long minute, another stone floats up and starts stacking again. Soren tries to pull Rua away, warning him of the dangers of ghosts but Rua shrugs him off. Soren looks to Esme and Kiva, not really knowing what to do in these circumstances. Esme softly places her hand on his shoulder and advises that this spirit doesn't seem malignant and appears to be seeking to complete a task, and says that if it was any of us who had an unfinished task she would hope a passer-by would help put our souls to rest. Soren asks Kiva to help him move some of the larger stones close together to make a good foundation and Rua and Esme sing a working song, to make the time pass with busy hands. We work together to build a pyramid of stone, and the spirit gets a bit more animated and starts picking up larger and larger stones and adding them to the stack. It appears to be building a wall around the raised platform in the building, like a rood screen in a church. As time passes, the sun moves and starts casting rays into the shadowed corner, and as this happens the presence of the ghost seems to vanish and the stones stop moving.

The party takes a break and rests from the hard work. After the rest, Soren goes to check out the stone-organ. There are bones and cremated remains in the holes, most too far back to reach, but some of the larger holes we can crawl into and there are full skeletons here laid out like a burial rite. There are also some larger caverns that lead to a series of rooms, containing some additional remains and pieces of decoration. In the back of the complex there is a room, almost empty except for one skeleton that has some interesting artifacts. Kiva finds here the puzzlebox, the copper-banded staff and the Mindgem. She picks it up and muses to herself out loud, "How did this happen?" Unexpectedly, the Mindgem answers! It shows Kiva the last moments of the its previous bearer, running from a group of cultists and finding no escape at the back of the cave. In

desperation, he casts a spell on the Mindgem, cloaking it until the danger passes and the gem feels safe. Kiva is able to hide the puzzlebox, however she does show the staff and the gem to the others after struggling against her cunning instinct since she feels suddenly very possessive of her *precious* new find.

While Kiva is exploring, Rua and Esmé go back to the spirit and continue to build the wall. They work for the rest of the day, not able to do any shaping or engineering but are able to finish the small wall around the platform. When this is done, the spirit doesn't go away but starts moving more aimlessly. When they go to leave Rua says goodbye to the spirit and it flits to him briefly then goes back to moving stones around. Esmé leaves some food and drink there as well.

The journey back was mostly uneventful, though we ran into Stout Jakka on the Maker's road and shared a camp with him, swapping stories and news.

# Session 3

Scary Crinwin!! We are back on the primary timeline.

Betta's scream carried across the search line, immediately drawing the attention of all. Rua is initially stunned but Old Esme reacts quickly, dashing forward to defend Betta and draw the attention of the threat by starting a war chant, reminiscent of a Haka. Rua turns around and upon seeing the scrawny Crinwin he holds his arms out in front of him and tries to calm it down. "Woah now, take it easy!". In response the Crinwin moves forward and claws at Rua's outstretched arms. Seeing its aggressive intent, Rua pulls out his knife and stabs at the gremlin. He sticks the knife in the Crinwin's head and it falls away from him clearly dead, but not before it gets his claws in his arm and scores three long scratches.

As Old Treasa dashes towards Betta's scream she hears another scream from opposite direction! Seeing Esme protecting Betta and one of the Crinwin already falling away she changes direction and moves toward the second scream. As she breaks through the underbrush she sees three of the monsters piled on top of Dayed who is writhing around trying to throw them off him. Wickla is there, trying to beat the Crinwin with her hammer but not finding much success as she is trying to avoid smashing Dayed at the same time. A quick review of the situation leaves Treasa with the knowledge that her torch is her best weapon, it's light is offensive to the Crinwin who are nocturnal creatures by nature. She uses the light as a distraction while swinging her staff and delivers a strong blow to one of them, staving it's head in and sending it flying into the bushes. In response, one of the monsters leaps off of Dayed and latches onto her chest, clawing at her neck.

Kiva is spooked by the screams, and recalling the stories of the Crinwin she ducks into cover of the bushes and inspects her surroundings, looking for the threat and anything she might use against them. Soren starts moving quickly and quietly towards Betta's scream, and as he approaches he sees another four of the monsters in the trees above, waiting to jump down on an unsuspecting target. Soren begins climbing the tree opposite from the fight, but as he reaches the Crinwin one of the branches he steps on cracks and one of them turns to face him, staring with its empty, milky eyes. Undeterred, Soren brandishes his knife and when the beast leaps at him and he drives the knife into its chest while twisting out of the way. The Crinwin falls to the forest floor, slamming into several branches on the way down. There is no sound of it rising from its fall.

Stella is near Treasa, and calls upon Helior's light to shine from her torch causing looping rays of light to flow from the staff like solar filaments. The light spreads through the scene, calming her allies and fortifying their minds. As the light expands, the Crinwin still on Dayed hisses and begins to flee but Treasa still has one of them latched on to her chest.

Kiva, not feeling confident in open combat, flings her staff into the bushes in an attempt to distract the Crinwin. As it rattles onto the forest floor, one of the lurking gremlins leaps through the branches like a simian and dives where the staff fell. After a moment it stands up, holding the staff in its hands and inspecting it curiously, the bands of copper flashing in the torchlight. Rua dashes forward and tries to wrest the staff from its grasp. Unfortunately his approach causes the Crinwin to spin around and, almost by accident, it clocks Rua on the side of the head, dazing him.

Elsewhere, Treasa drops her torch and staff, reaching for her beltknife with her right hand and grasping for the clawing monster's throat with her left, looking to use her large size to overpower it. Following her violent nature she ignores its attacks, taking more scratches as she holds it by the throat and uses her knife to slash its stomach open. Wickla drags the Crinwin towards Stella's light, making sure its down for good.

Soren is still up in the tree and sees Rua's misfortune. Thinking quickly, he ties his rope around a sturdy branch and uses it to fast repel down and launch himself at the beast to try to take it down and save Rua. He sticks his knife in the Crinwin's side, but is unable to take it down completely. In return he takes scratches along his forearms.

With his attackers slain or fled, Dayed's wounds become apparent. There are no serious wounds, but he is covered in scratches all over his body. Stella notes this, but is compelled to go to aid her allies that are still fighting. She approaches the scene, seeing the messy fight between Soren and the wounded Crinwin, and raises her sunlight-infused torch high and brings its warm light to bear. The light bolsters the villagers and strikes fear into the remaining creatures. The one fighting Soren and Rua clutches its side and slinks off into the bushes, and Esme sees the last one in the trees snarl something unrecognizable and leap away through the canopy.

The search party gathers and takes stock of the situation. It is decided that, while Dayed is injured, its better to stick together in the failing light and press on in the search for Cayu. As they go, Stella is reminded by Esme of Dayed's wounds and goes to see if she can help him. He looks at her gratefully and explains that he will be okay through the night, but will be feeling and recovering from the wounds for days if not weeks to come. Stella releases her invocation, causing the brilliant light to go dim and the torch gutters out completely. She leans into the torch and starts whispering a quiet entreaty in the darkness, causing the bright firelight to spring up once more. She then calls to her deity, Helior, and a warm bath of healing light begins to spread from the torch. She brings the torch close to his wounds and he finds the flame does not burn but spreads a soothing warmth and his wounds begin to close. He sighs in gratitude, saying "Thank you Honoured One, I am feeling much better. It would have been a fitting punishment for the twins to see me wounded, but I would much rather being able to walk without pain."

Another hour passes and they arrive at the Tumble-Down Wall. There are large stones strewn in the vicinity, but the only structure still standing is the one large wall. Soren recalls his own trip to scribe his name on the wall as a child. It was a fun adventure to begin with but once the scraping sound of the stone he used to make his mark faded he was acutely aware of all the rustling and creaking sounds of the living forest around him. Suddenly he felt very alone, and fled from the place back to the village. As that feeling rushes in he subconsciously moves closer to Kiva and it seems the sounds of the forest become muted around them.

Rua asks Betta to show him where she made her mark on the wall. They approach and Betta scrapes some moss away, showing her X among the other initials and scratches. Rua speaks, "I know this is not the time to do it, but we should come back sometime so I can mark the wall as well." "Yes, but maybe during the day" she replies. Nodding in agreement, Rua turns and joins the rest of the party in their search, with Betta coming along. Stella feels drawn to make her mark as well and join the ranks of the village youth, but remembers her responsibilities and holds herself away. Kiva feels no such restraint and chisels her name in a flowing script, dotting the "i" in her name with a small heart.

Old Treasa inspects the forest warily but doesn't know the woodcraft to tell if there is anything amiss. She approaches Fio and asks in a low voice if she is able to find any trail or marks of Cayu's passing. Fio nods and asks Treasa to hold her light high while she works. Fio finds a small trail of scuffed moss and lichen leading north, which is curious because it is not the way he came. Treasa quizzes Fio, asking "So was he frightened? Running away? What magic can you sense?" Fio looks at her strangely, saying "What do you think I am a wizard? Look at this scuff here, it was clearly made by a boot but it is not a deep or long so he was likely walking." Treasa hums, "I don't see what you are pointing at, clearly your magic is working". Treasa starts singing the finding song, but terribly off-key and timing to draw the rest of the party and let them know a trail has been found.

Esme starts speaking, trying to re-form the search line in the direction of the trail. Treasa counters by saying the trail is more clear now and a smaller group will make better time. The larger portion of people should head back to the village, there are many dangers other than Crinwin deeper in the woods. They argue back and forth for a moment, but Esme eventually slumps her shoulders and allows Treasa's plan to be the course of action. Many of the villagers decide to head back, but the main party and several others choose to push on. Wickla speaks with determination, "May the Gods curse me if I turn back now.". Fio also joins the party, and Betta takes a shaky breath and chooses to continue as well. Rua gives her hand a quick squeeze, reassuring her and moving forward with her to join the others. Remembering his fear and loneliness, Soren also decides to join the group. He wants to rescue Cayu and save him from the same feeling. Stella is conflicted, knowing she could be useful in either party but ultimately decides to push on.

They move out, following the trail with Fio in the lead. Treasa studies Esme and finds she is seeming more muted, her reflexes slowed, and seems to not being in the same kind of mood as usual. Treasa gets the feeling that Esme is regretting the choice to move on with a smaller group. Aratis is a god of civilization, the more people that come together, the more magic is brought to the forest and turns it from something other to something that is connected. To Esme the finding song isn't just a good idea, it is a song whereby people come together and tell a story and the story evokes and recreates the narrative of what came before. Losing the people and ending the song means that instead of weaving a story together (transforming the forest from somewhere scary to a place where we know what will happen) its a small group, brute forcing their way into the darkness and Esme doesn't just seem but is literally less than she was.

Session End.

# Session 4

The search for Cayu continues!

The much smaller search party moves north deeper into the forest, away from the Tumble-down Wall. Treasa asks Stella to light the way and she does, moving to the front with Fio to provide guiding light with her consecrated torch. As they continue they begin to hear a song, beautiful but also haunting. Kiva thinks back to her studies and knows that this is either a nature spirit or something Fae. Treasa asks Fio if this might be the forest folk, but Fio replies that the forest folk aren't Fae, the folk are more mortal and grounded in reality. Old Esme says there is nothing to be done to prepare for the Fae, we should move forward.

The party continues towards the singing and they come upon Cayu sitting in the loam, his head drooping to his chest and breathing steadily. A creature like a person-sized stoat with a waistcoat is singing to Cayu, walking around him. The stoat has rings on its fingers and earrings on its ears. Esme brings out a small jug of milk from her satchel and a small saucer and approaches saying "An offering for a friend?". The creature turns and says "Ah, more of you. Welcome!". Treasa offers him the milk but he refuses, saying he is currently satisfied. Treasa asks what it is doing here and it replies in kind. This is the forest, its home, and not where humans live. Esme says we are there for Cayu. The Stoat suggests we should leave, and there is a magical suggestion to it as well causing Esme to stagger a bit.

Treasa is keyed up at the situation and can tell that the Stoat is not what it seems, alone against the group but speaking eloquently and with confidence. She can tell by how it stands between them and Cayu that it wants the group to leave without him. Reading the situation, Treasa leaps forward with her staff yelling to Esme "Careful, it bewitches you!". She thrusts with her staff in an attempt to push the Stoat away from Cayu. Esme reacts by pushing Treasa's staff back with her shield and then turns to the Fae creature and says she will pay the price for Cayu. The Stoat introduces itself as Thistledown and asks for Esme's name. Esme introduces herself and Thistledown says that Cayu came of his free will and wants to leave with it. Cayu responds weakly saying "Yes". Wickla is trembling with fury, barely restrained by the scene currently playing out. Thistledown asks for Esme's eyes, her voice, or a year of her life.

While this is happening Rua starts burning with righteous anger at the mental oppression and darts forward, throwing Cayu's arms over his shoulder and stands to run away yells "I got him, lets get out of here!" Thistledown hears this, breaks eye contact with Esme yelling "Treachery!". As soon as its back is turned Treasa whips her staff forward, striking it as hard as she can. The staff thunks into Thistledown but it doesn't feel like she is striking flesh but instead hard wood like a tree.

Soren takes this moment to dart forward and stab at the back of its knee in an attempt to hobble it. His knife doesn't strike true, sliding off the side of its leg, but the blood on the knife appears to boil away and Thistledown screams a piercing cry. It turns into a white bird and flies up to the branches above. "Traitors!" it cries "You have dealt falsely!" Treasa replies saying no, it is it who has dealt falsely, Cayu was not of his own free will but under its enchantment. The Fae promises threateningly to deal fairly with the next humans it meets, it will give them what they deserve. It then flies away and Stella invokes the sun and causes it to bloom from her torch with Solar filaments, bringing warm light to flood the forest.

Wickla darts forward and hugs Cayu sobbing. Cayu's eyes still have a blankness to them as he looks around and asks why are you all here? He explains that he scratched his name on the wall and met a friend. Soren explains that it was not his friend, it was going to take him away but he belongs with us. Treasa takes Cayu's hand that is not already held by his mother. Soren approaches Fio and asks her to show him some woodcraft on the way back, how she knows where she is going and how to move quietly in the forest. Fio replies bluntly "I can either do or teach. I need to work, step back and if you must, watch what I do."

We return to the village and pass the stream, feeling a weight lift off their shoulders as they exit the forest. Esme peels off immediately to the Chronicle as Treasa asks her without looking to start a song as we go up the mountain. Treasa is surprised there is no answer and looks around, finally seeing Esme leaving. Rua takes the initiative to start a song of belonging, where things have been restored to their right way and everything is alright. As the group approaches the top of the bluff the entire village comes to greet them and fuss over them. Eadna is in the crowd, waving happily to Stella. Eadna congratulates her on bringing Cayu back safe and sound. Stella asks about the pies and if they turned out alright. Eadna chuckles and says the pies are fine, she is just happy Stella is back and nobody was seriously hurt. They hug tightly and Eadna leads her away to get a pie.

Esme is in her home inside the Chronicle, etching the story into the walls about how they saved one child but angered a Fae creature in the process, potentially bringing harm to many in the future....

Soren gets a mead pushed into his hands and starts retelling the story with his own embellishments, about how they fought off a horde of Crinwin almost too large to count where he single-handedly wrestled one of them into submission and shows off the scratches on his arms. He goes on about how Fio used her amazing skills to track Cayu and lead us to this Fae creature that was beguiling the child and trying to beguile us too! He tells about how Treasa and him fought the creature head on and Soren dealt a decisive blow, causing the creature to flee into the forest. Treasa grabs a bottle of whiskey for herself, not correcting Soren's story but nodding along. She slips away at some point with the bottle, planning to use it to sterilize her own wounds. Rua walks Betta home and asks her to have dinner with him sometime. She says she will be around, it was a crazy night and she needs to rest. Kiva goes to her home and starts going through her books trying to learn more about the Fae to see what kind of mess they had gotten into.

After the spring festival some weeks pass. Despite the parties triumphant return the season is still ill-omen'd, the weather gloomy and dreary and people are on edge, with small arguments sparking

up here and there. Stella and Kiva bicker about the Fae, Kiva trying to ask questions and keeps bringing it up but Stella wants to put it behind her but mostly keep the kids from worrying about forces beyond their control. Treasa is avoiding Honoured Cutha, he has been as gloomy as the weather and while they haven't argues per se but she always comes away from her encounter more annoyed than she was. Old Esme had to settle a dispute between two homesteaders who argued about whose land a tree was on. She was still feeling a bit off from the misadventures in the forest and snapped at both of them, not really resolving the dispute right away. Rua and Betta had dinner together a couple times, Rua thought it was going well but when he went to her house her mother, Gwann, tells him that she has found a better match for Betta and he should go away. This kind of breaks his heart, Betta appears to be avoiding him even though he thought it was going well. Soren spends a lot of time at his parents grave, the gloomy weather and low spirits in the village have been getting to him and he misses them. Stella struggles with her studies, not knowing why but isn't able to progress very much.

After some time Esme seeks out Treasa, going to her home and knocks at the door. Treasa opens the door, sees her and steps back opening the door wider. Treasa goes to a shelf and starts making tea while Esme moves inside and sits down. Esme speaks "So tell me the story of that night."

Treasa takes her time making tea, taking the hot kettle off the fire and pours two cups. Finally she speaks while looking up into the rafters "The thing about Esme is that she always sees the best in everyone. I like that. But I can't do it". As she finishes she looks down into Esme's eyes.

Esme replies "That is a funny thought. Esme doesn't see the best in people, she asks for the best but not always seeing it."

"The story of that night was you seeing the best in people and me acting on my fears. I am not sure who was in the right."

"I feel like I was made a liar that night. The Fae are not to be treated lightly, and going into the future that Fae will have a power over me that is ten-fold greater than it would have been."

They go back and forth, Treasa asking if Esme would have brought more people into danger, and Esme replying saying she would have had more power with the group and more civilization. Treasa realizes that she did not know if what she did was right, but is still not sure if Esme's path was correct. Esme wanted to treat fairly with the Fae. Treasa counters that no interaction with the Fae would end well, they always end poorly. Esme is willing to give a year for her life for the lives of any of the villagers. At the end of the day, Rua forced their hand. Treasa put a lot of effort into staying her hand while Esme treated with Thistledown. Esme acknowledges this, and Treasa says they will all stand together against it. Esme asks that if the creature does return, for Treasa to trust in the magic of Aratis. Treasa replies that she trusts Esme. At this, Esme leaves.

End Session!

# Session 5

Downtime! Levelling up! Progression!

During the springtime Soren helps with planting and works on his distillery, always striving for perfecting in the art of brewing, experimenting with formulae and fermenting processes to produce a more refined whiskey. While tinkering at his distillery Fio comes to the door and knocks. She brings up that he asked to learn woodcraft from her, and asks if he is able to sit in silence for hours at a time. "There is a first time for everything!" he replies cheerily, "but first, I have a gift for you." Soren rummages around for a moment and brings forth a small wooden whistle he carved. He trills a quick few notes and it trills out "chickadee-dee-dee". Fio thanks him for the gift and says to be ready early in the morning. Soren forces himself up at the crack of dawn and meets her at the top of the stairs. "So, how does this work? Where are we going?" He asks. She nods down the stairs and states "Forest" and starts walking. Soren follows her and does his best to take in all her lessons. He doesn't make a complete ass of himself, but struggles with the extended periods of time spent waiting for game in the silence of the woods. As they return to the village he asks her to join him at the distillery so he can show her how it works and the proper way to drink whiskey. She doesn't spend much time in the village but she agrees.

Kiva and Dermud spend some time poking at the puzzle box. She picks his brain, using his different perspective and bouncing ideas back and forth. Their combined efforts yield results! The puzzle box folds open into a sheet, covered in strange runes and inscriptions. They spend a couple days poring over them and referencing some texts that Kiva has on hand. They can't decipher the runes with what is on hand so Kiva decides to go to her parents with advice and asks Dermud to come with her. He says he has to return home, he has already stayed days longer than initially planned and people will be wondering where he is. Kiva protests initially, but eventually relents and hugs him goodbye, wishing him safety and fortune on the road.

Rua helps out the community by doing odd jobs around the place, ones that always need to be done but nobody individually takes responsibility for. His efforts increase his reputation with the village elders a bit and Esme brings him lunch every now and then. One day Mad Gethin comes to him and says "You look like you've changed boy". Rua explains the search party into the woods and the encounter with Thistledown, emphasizing his decisive action to rescue Cayu while Treasa and Esme were slowed down by speaking with the creature. Gethin chokes his head at this and explains to Rua how the Fae feel a driving need to pay debts, or repay insults.

Stella is doing her duties as a representative of Helior and also helping out at the orphanage. One day, she is there with one of the kids who was throwing rocks at others and got grounded in the bunk room with no dinner. While watching over him Eadna arrives and hands her two towels and a

large crock pot. "I promised Angrad I would make her a pot of stew" she explains and sends Stella off to Angrad's house with a peck on the cheek. Stella goes to Angrad's house, it looks like it would be empty if not for a thin wisp of smoke rising from the chimney. Stella announces herself and delivers the stew. Angrad is grateful for the help, and when Stella asks how she is she goes on with a litany of complaints, about her joints, her stomach, and her no-good daughter who hardly visits. Stella asks what she can do to help and Angrad replies "Well there is not much you can do about age, it comes for all of us. But anything you can do to help would be welcome." Stella grabs a small clay lamp from the wall and lights it with a whisper. It bursts into cheery flame that doesn't let off the thick smoke that oil lamps typically do, and Stella then consecrates the light and tries to draw on Helior's power to transform the flame into a healing power. She is unable to grasp Helior's power, but Angrad is not put out. She pats Stella's arm and tells her not to worry about it, age comes for us all. Angrad then compares her to the previous lightbearer, Olwinn. She invites Stella to come back anytime if she wants to hear stories about him.

Esme has been spending more time than typical in the Chronicle, consecrating her shield. Treasa puts her large stature to use, helping plow the fields and putting her small experience with husbandry to help with caring for the animals. Throughout she worries, thinking of the bandits in the north that had threatened Stonetop. She surveys the defences in the town and finds them wanting. Esme had previously sent out messenger birds to the northern homesteads and the larger settlements, asking if they had any run-ins with a group of bandits. Some of the homesteaders replied that they had encountered the group, but no serious encounters so far. There have only ever been 3 or 4 bandits seen at a time, but they give off a dangerous aura. The bandits always say there are more of them though. Esme inquires deeper about the amount of food stolen, and while the farms in the area are not large they have been taking enough food for maybe 10 people?

One day a visitor comes to the Chronicle and coughs politely at the mouth of the cave. Esme finishes the last stanzas of her song, then grabs some pieces of bread and cheese as she believes in hospitality. It's Shan at the door, who informs her that Murdoch is requesting her presence for an elders meeting. Esme thanks Shan for the message and trades the bread and cheese for a small sweet and gives it to Shan. Old Esme takes the time to point out one of the stories on the wall of the cave, connecting it to one of Shan's ancestors. Shan receives the information thoughtfully, but seems to be more shy than normal. Perhaps she is still contemplating the consequences of Cayu's incident in the forest. Esme goes up the stairs, she is old and takes her time but doesn't need to stop to rest. She finds Treasa at the low wall and lets her know that the elders are meeting.

On the way Esme shares what she learned about the group of bandits. They go to Murdoch's cottage, arriving to find most of the other elders already present, in addition to Merwyn's son Kinbel. Murdoch starts by saying "We may have a situation". Honoured Cutha gripes "what now...". Kinbel shares that Flossy, one of the two horses in the village, is showing signs of serious sickness and it is almost time for plowing to start. Stella may be able to help, but if she can't there isn't much we can do but wait and see if she gets better. Esme suggests going to the Hillfolk for help, they have forgotten more about horses than we ever knew. The problem is how to convince them to help. Perhaps a cart of food, or other non-perishable supplies. They discuss further, talking about other options. Marshedge would have a horse doctor, but it's 10 days each way. Flossy might not make it in that time, or might pull through on her own. The council of elders

decides that if Stella cannot help, then the Hillfolk are the best second option.

After discussion completes, Esme brings up another piece of business. She proposes that the forest should be avoided by small groups, less than 5 people, as the Fae they encountered is probably looking for revenge. Cutha speaks up, he has been thinking about this as well. Wickla come to him and suggested that some iron amulets, blessed with what power of the gods they have, could help protect the children. He also pushes back on the group restriction on the forest, we will need hunters and trappers more than ever if planting is going to be slow this year. They eventually settle on pairs, as too many people gets in the way of hunting and trapping and introduces large inefficiencies.

Wasting no time, the elders go to find Stella and enlist her help with Flossy. They find her at the shrine of Helior in the pavilion of the gods, cleaning and polishing the stone to a shine. They approach her as a group with a grave demeanour, asking her if she has ever used her healing powers on a horse before. Stella replies hesitantly that she has not used her powers on any animal before, but goes with them anyways to give it a try. Stella takes a few moments to gather a good light source and draws one of the sacred relics from its somewhat hidden home. On the way Stella is unconfident and anxious, Esme notices this and gives her shoulder a squeeze and sneaks her a small candy with a wink.

They arrive at the barn, Bitey and Flossy in their usual stalls. Bitey eyes the group warily and Flossy looks gaunt and unwell, hanging her head low to the ground. Flossy looks up at their approach and Esme leads the elders in a gently hymn to calm the horse and aid Stella in her work. Stella slowly approaches the horse slowly, not having much experience with animals, whispering to a torch to light and consecrate it. She draws on Helior's power and this time the connection is formed with strength. The disease in Flossy manifests as a darkness that pushes back against the healing light and Stella has to put effort into burning it away as much as possible. The song of the elders helps lift her up and support her. By the time the invocation fades and the flame of the torch gutters out she feels like she was able to deal with a good chunk of the disease, not fully curing Flossy but at the very least buying her some additional time.

Treasa goes to find Soren at his still and announces herself. Soren offers her a taster of his current batch in a small clay mug, asking for her opinion. She swirls it in her mouth, commenting that it is still young but will make a decent batch with age. She then asks Soren if he knows any of the Hillfolk who would be able to treat a sick horse. Soren thinks for a moment then says "Garnuss would be the person. I have never seen a tribe with healthier horses! There is one small snag, we didn't exactly part ways on good terms. I caused a ruckus and startled the horses, a few of them panicked and ran off. I'm sure it took them some time to round them all up, and Garnuss would not appreciate that I put them in danger." They discuss options to make a peaceful overture to smooth over the grudge and decide on bringing a quality cask of whiskey and some treats for their horses. Finding the tribe is the difficult part though. Traditionally, when Stonetop wants to trade with the Hillfolk they light a fire atop Titan Bones. A small group would be best, with some small trade goods.

Treasa puts the word out that a short expedition to trade is being planned. She is leaning on a fencepost outside Kiva's house at the center of the village. Kiva steps out, bags under her eyes

and lights up a tobacco pipe. Treasa approaches and lets her know about the expedition. Kiva says she has spent the last day hunched over her books, some fresh air might do her good. Also the Hillfolk have deep oral traditions, she wants to ask them some questions. Rua has been tailing Treasa while she spreads the word. Treasa initially ignores him but eventually sighs and asks him if he wants to come along. He answers with an enthusiastic "Yes!" but she follows up by asking him why he wants to go. He answers "Well the vibe has been weird here this season, I want to get out of the village for a bit." Treasa goes to find Eliam to ask him along as well. She finds him chopping wood and joins him for a moment to speed the work along. After some time Eliam asks her what she needs. Treasa explains the upcoming expedition and says that she has a explainable hunch that he should come along. He agrees to come along saying "It's been a while since I walked the maker's road, and it doesn't do any good to ignore a hunch.

While they are preparing, Esme finds Soren while he is leaving the graveyard having just finished visited his parents. Esme remarks that she has noticed a change in him, being more serious and somber, and she sees it as an improvement. Soren shares that the mood in the village has been down, and speaking aloud to his parents helps alleviate the burden a bit. Esme then tells him that people look up to him and listen to his stories, and asks him to keep an eye on the group since he is seen as a leader. Soren feels pressured by this and thanks Esme for her words. As they part ways Esme says that Treasa is reliable, he can lean on her.

Session end!

# Session 6

Embarking on an expedition!

Rua badgers Treasa during the preparations, constantly asking "Are we ready? Can we leave yet?" Treasa bears it with her characteristic stoicism. Soren goes to Kinbal and asks him what would horses love that Hillfolk do not have ready access to. Kinbal goes to the storehouse and convinces Honoured Dove to add a sack of carrots to the handcart of basic goods for trade. It joins bags of potatoes and barley flour. Old Esme approaches Treasa with a crow on her shoulder. Esme gives the bird to Treasa and says "This is Eysa, queen of crows! If needed you can strap a note to her leg and send word back to me." Esme gives the bird a nudge and it flies to Treasa's shoulder. Treasa jumps a little but settles down with a small shrug.

As the group is preparing to leave Eliam arrives with several large bundles of firewood and adds them to the cart, making what looked like a very reasonable load much larger. Rua is still asking if its time to leave and Treasa looks at Soren. He takes stock of the party, counting all 5 heads and quickly takes inventory of the contents of the cart. After a moment he signals everything is ready and they move out. Leaving early in the morning the party's journey starts uneventful. After a few hours they reach the crossroads. The enchantment of the maker's road is here too, but it is not a place to linger long. Rua turns to Soren and Kiva and asks "How do these roads work? The stones are so large!". Soren looks to Kiva and she shares that she read a book that detailed a broken paving stone that had runes inscribed on the bottom side that contribute to the safety spell that protects travellers on the road. She also says that the Stone Lords are thought to be responsible for their creation.

They continue on and as the sun goes down they come across one of the wide stone circles made of the same paving stones as the road. Rua turns to Soren and asks if this is where they will camp tonight. Soren agrees and clears his throat before directing Kiva to start a fire and asks Treasa to walk around the perimeter with him to make sure its safe. Kiva pulls out a flint and some tinder, enthusiastically striking sparks until she has a merry little fire going. Rua pulls out some sheep jerky and shares it around and everyone eats their fill. After dinner they discuss watch rotations and settle down to spend some time together. Kiva asks the group if they have much experience being outside Stonetop. Rua shares that he doesn't remember much about Gordin's Delve but he would love to go back. Soren warns him against this, sharing some of his poor experiences with the town guards. Kiva talk about how she would love to visit the Forge Lords ruins and what she might discover there. As the fire burns low the conversation gets more personal and Kiva shares that she is afraid she will never be able to make an impact on the world. All she has done is read her books and study, but she is only one person. She wants to discover ancient magics and gain power to be able to protect her loved ones.

At some point the topic of hobbies comes up and Soren shares his efforts to learn woodcraft from Fio. While their conversation winds on there is a friendly game of Maker's Road with stakes being some shiny stones they found along the way. Throughout the day Rua had noticed that Treasa has been very observant of the group, always making sure they are staying together like a herding dog almost. He can tell she feels very protective of everyone.

Back at Stonetop, Esme has been finishing her weaving of enchantment on her shield. She spends a chunk of time singing while she works, following one of the accounts in the Chronicle on how to infuse the essence of a story into the shield in order to ward back luck and turn spells. In addition, she has been co-ordinating with the homesteads around Stonetop. There is an informal union of the farmers, where they come together to share resources and support and that is her main point of contact. None of the farms are within easy walking distance of Stonetop, the grasses of the flatlands are extremely tenacious and resist any attempt to tame them. Esme recalls a story of a scholar from Marshedge that came to the flatlands to study the grasses and try to domesticate and/or clear an area to make it suitable for farming. They were able to clear a small area using controlled fires and cutting away the grass. However, as time went on they developed a hoarse cough. It got worse and worse until they started to cough up bits of grass and realized the plants had taken root in their lungs. Not long after they suffocated due to this infection, and this story has warded off any further attempts to settle the flatlands.

In the evening before dinner Esme is sitting in the Pavilion of the Gods with Angrad, picking her mind for old stories that may have forgotten wisdom. The conversation is interrupted by shouting coming from outside. "Get your spears! We have an intruder!" comes the call, and she can tell they are running to the stairs. She heads there as well and sees a circle of villagers standing warily around a bloody and bedraggled man who appears to have crawled up the stairs from the forest. As Esme gets closer she can see he is covered in black Crinwin blood, it is covering his large and burly frame. The villagers are on edge, Esme needs to be wary not only of the stranger but for any of the villagers acting rashly. Esme calls for one of the villagers to fetch Honoured Stella and tells the rest of the villagers to hold steady, he is covered in Crinwin blood, not the blood of humans. She asks him what his business is "Oh you know, it's been a rough couple of days in the forest. Does Treasa still live here?" Esme replies asking for his name, saying it is customary to introduce oneself before asking about others. He introduces himself as Willem, and when Esme presses him for where he is from he says "Willem of the Tired and Hungry" with a smirk.

Old Esme welcomes him into the village and offers him food and drink. The villagers around him have relaxed now that someone is taking charge of the situation. Willem bears an iron-banded club slung over his back in addition to decent armour and some other weapons. He drinks deeply of the water and uses some to wash his hands and face. He sighs and remarks that the Crinwin seem to be more numerous and bolder. Esme asks again where he is from, and why he is so keen on meeting Treasa. "Look lady you look like you have a kind heart and a good soul. I really appreciate that, and I don't want to lie to you. If you don't ask I won't have to lie. I have business with Treasa, I don't want to cause trouble. If she is not here I can wait." Esme tells him that Treasa is not here, but should be back in a week or less. She invites him to stay in a spare hut and if he helps with the work around the village he can eat and drink his fill. Now that the blood is washed from his face he looks terrible, like he hasn't in days. Esme asks one more question, looking deeply into Willem's eyes, "Do you mean any ill will towards Treasa?" He answers no, but through the

power of Aratis she feels there are things he is hiding. After this she shows him to the hut and goes to bed herself.

The expedition spends the night uneventfully, Rua and Treasa appear to be energetic and happy but Soren spent the night stressing about his responsibilities and Kiva is not used to sleeping on a bed of stone. Soren is a bit cajoling, getting people up and packed so they can set out quickly. He asks Rua to help him with the cart, each of them taking one of the handles to move the cart more quickly. Eliam has been helping as well, and all their hands are rough with the effort of pulling the cart over the large paving stones. Rua sees Eliam as a challenge and does his best to work just as hard, pushing to prove himself. Eliam isn't super chatty but bears a companionable silence. At noon they stop to rest and gnaw on some jerky. In the afternoon Eysa, queen of crows, flies from Treasa's shoulder and goes to join a murder of crows that are circling something a bows shot away from the road. Soren is torn, his instinct pushes him to investigate, this is the fun of the road getting into interesting encounters. However he can hear Esme's voice in his mind, reminding him of his responsibility to keep the others safe and leaving the road is definitely not safe. His indecision is interrupted by Rua saying "I'm gonna go look!" and he dashes into the grass towards the crows. Soren cries out asking him to come back, but quickly decides that they should stick together and motions for the others to follow Rua into the grass.

Rua pushes through the grasses and comes to a trampled area, finding a handful of human corpses and one horse. They are not a pretty sight, scavengers have been at work here. They are at least a couple days old. Rua is sickened by the sight, but quickly starts looking around for anything that might be useful or valuable. He finds some broken spears and salvages the iron spearheads but nothing else, the bodies have already been looted. As he searches he can tell that this appears to be a skirmish between tribes of Hillfolk, with one of the bodies having multiple Hillfolk arrows sticking out of it. He also finds one of the bodies has a nasty burn all along its back like an intense flame was pressed against him. The strange thing is, the bodies have been looted but not cared for. The Hillfolk have rituals about death, they believe that those you kill deserve at least a brief funeral to make sure their spirits do not come back to haunt them. The others enter the area, and Soren goes to look at the corpses. He can tell based on the spear markings that they are of the Yellow Spear tribe, Garnuss' tribe. He is not among the bodies though, so Soren makes use of his fledgling woodcraft skills to find a trail moving to the south east. There is also some very fine tack on the horse, a saddle blanket that has been carefully woven and decorated around the fringe.

Soren takes the time to arrange the bodies gracefully, arranging them in a row and placing their hands folded on their chests. Following the tradition of the Hillfolk he sprinkles some dirt over them and says "May your spirits find their way to the final door and find peace in the life beyond." There is some discussion about what to do next, but it is decided that they are not prepared for direct conflict and should keep to the goal. They go back to the road and make it to titan bones late in the afternoon.

Back at Stonetop there is a lot of chatter about the visitor, everyone curious about who they are and what they are doing here. One of the village kids, Trix, goes to the Chronicle and lets Esme know that Mairwyn is looking for her. Esme fusses over her hair and tells her the story of how Mairwyn got their name. Trix leads Esme to Mairwyn's house, and as they arrive Mairwyn fusses about setting out some tea with bread and butter. Honoured Cutha is there too with a tired

expression. "Ah Esme, glad you could make it. We have been talking and you have just been in the forest fighting off Crinwin and Faeries and came home safe. Myself and the other elders have been talking and..." Mairwyn interrupts him "You have no apprentice and who know how long you will last! What if you had not come back, we have a cave full of writing and without you, nobody to read them!" Esme reassures them she has her eye on a potential apprentice but it is too soon to make a call. Mairwyn holds up her arthritic hands and says "I am not getting any younger and neither are you! Can you at least decide by the end of the season?" Esme hums and haws for a moment and says that may be too early to pin it down but she will be closer to a decision by then. Cutha says he admires her judicious nature and trusts her judgment, but it is Time that is forcing her hand not them. He urges her to think about it, who knows what might happen in the coming year.

End Session!

# Session 7

The expedition arrives at Titan Bones!

As the group reaches the foot of Titan Bones they are tired after the day's events. Soren wants to push on to get to the peak of the hill before night falls, but Kiva is very tired so they decide to make camp at the final circle at the bottom of the hill. They setup camp quickly, falling into the same patterns as the previous night. They go to bed quickly, setting a watch. Later in the night when Kiva is on watch she notices some lights bobbing in the distance over the grasses. She wakes up Rua, who is next on the watch rotation, and asks if he can see them as well. He can see them as well, and recognizes them as the Nosgalau spirit they encountered years ago on their trip to the Stone Organ. They decide to stay awake together and keep an eye on the spirit, ready to wake the others if it gets closer. However, it keeps its distance and so nothing of note happens.

Dawn breaks and they strike camp, but it is soon clear that the weather is changing with heavy clouds rolling in. They decide to take the cart a short ways along the path before splitting the wood into five bundles for each of them to carry. Treasa is worried that the cart will get stuck in the mud if it starts raining so they plan to come back and bring the rest of the supplies after carrying the wood up Titan Bones. It takes about an hour to hike with the heavy load, its a steep trail but not very long. When they reach the top they see the flatlands spread out around them, rolling grasses on the 3 sides, and to the south the plains give way to the beginnings of the Steplands. They take a moment to savour the view while Soren warns not to get too close to the edge. Rua, obviously, takes this as a challenge and gets as close to the edge as he can while enjoying the view. He spots some travellers on the road, a small group in the north apparently coming from Gordin's Delve and a larger group from the south with some horses. The wind move across the grass in waves, but there are places where it doesn't follow the same patterns. It must be wildlife, a good reminder that its is dangerous away from the roads.

Rua relays his findings to the group and Soren makes sure that Treasa doesn't go back for the cart alone, and Rua volunteers to go along. Soren, Kiva and Eliam get busy setting the signal fire, trying to get it large and established before the impending rain arrives. As they work the rain slowly approaches from the western mountains, they grey haze slowly swallowing the landscape as it creeps east. Treasa and Rua arrive back at the summit after their long struggle with the cart. They spend the hours tending the fire as it blazes hungrily, and just before noon the travellers from the north arrive at the bottom of Titan Bones. They point up at the fire and Rua waves back, but soon they continue their journey after gathering water from the well.

Meanwhile at Stonetop, Stella is performing her least favourite of her official duties, leading the weekly rites at the Pavilion of the Gods. It is a long tradition that the Lightbearer leads the

ceremonies and Stella feels obligated to perform the rites as her predecessors did. Not everyone is present, but the majority of the town makes an appearance at least once a month to make some small offerings to each of the four gods. This week it is a small crowd as the village is busy with the spring planting, those not present either working or bone tired from their labours. Kinball is present, he leaves some fruits and a bowl of grains in front of the shrine to Helior. He approaches Stella after the service ends and thanks her for her help treating Flossy. He is looking a lot better than she was before. He takes some of the food and places it before the shrine to Tor as well, praying for the same return of Eliam. He spends some more time chatting with Stella, speaking about how he misses Eliam and he is not often out of the town.

They are interrupted by Mad Gethin tugging on Stella's sleeve. He asks her for a blessing, speaking very quickly with his eyes shifting around. "I feel its coming back, its been some time but I think its getting worse and I would like Helior's help with dealing with it." Stella asks him what is troubling him and Gethin gets a little awkward. "The madness, the shifting colours and swirls, it was gone for a while but it is coming back." He goes on about how he thinks he will be getting better but then there are times when he has to ask people if they are real or not. Stella thinks back on her knowledge of Helior's teachings, wracking her brain for whatever assistance she is able to provide Gethin. It is not traditionally the realm of Helior, but she conceives a plan to give him with one of the relics of Helior she has and sit with him in meditation under the open sky on the edge of the cliffs overlooking the forest. Gethin agrees, ready to try anything to keep the madness at bay.

They arrive at the cliff, and Stella brings out the relic. It is a depiction of the sun wrought from gold, with rings of halos surrounding the central symbol of Helior. As she hands it to Gethin she experiences a vivid memory that isn't hers, handing the same amulet to a young woman and telling her it will keep her safe. She directs Gethin to hold the amulet in his lap facing the sky and she slowly performs an invocation, calling the warmth of the sun to suffuse them and add Helior's power to the meditation. She asks him to follow her motions as she closes her eyes, whispering passages of prayer. As she prays she can feel Gethin's presence beside her even without looking. She feels Helior's power start to flow through her and into the spirit of Gethin beside her. At first the flow of energy is easy and she feels like it is going to well, but quickly the energy hits a wall, like there is something in his mind that is not of his mind that rejects her power. It feels like a barrier of swirling colours and sensations, she tries to push through it but it snaps back and her mind is filled with the same visions. After some unknown amount of time Stella opens her eyes and she can see Gethin highlighted by the bright colours, with snake-like streams in the edges of her vision and the chaos gives her a headache. Gethin speaks up, "Wow, I feel much better! Thank you for your work, you did an excellent job!" He pats Stella on the head and walks away chuckling to himself. After he leaves she stands up unsteadily and gathers the relic and lantern. The relic is the same shiny, golden trinket but she can feel it is empty inside, like the essence of the amulet is washed out. She puts the amulet away and falls into bed at Granny Eadna's trying to sleep while staring at the ceiling swirling above her.

At Titan Bones the fire has been burning for four hours, Soren is tending the flames and watching the trail for any approachers. He spots a group of riders coming across the grasslands. He alerts the others, and Rua is surprised thinking they would spend days waiting. Soren cautions him, saying this might not be Garnuss, but hopefully they will be able to lead us in the right direction. It is tradition to meet at the circle in the road, so the group gathers the trade supplies and starts the

trek down the hill, leaving EIAM at the peak to keep tending the fire in case this is not the group we are looking for. Treasa prepares a note, writing "Attacked by bandits at Titan's Bones. Will Fight." and attaching it to Eysa's leg in preparation for the worst. The riders are still a couple hours away so the party takes their time, moving the bags of potatoes, barley and carrots to the Maker's Road. The wait is boring, some magpies try to peck at the bags of vegetables but Treasa stands by them intimidatingly to keep them away. At some point she swears their caws say "Selfish!" as the magpie's settle into the grasses near the circle.

The clattering of hooves on the road heralds the arrival of the riders, a woman is leading them bearing her yellow-tipped spear high as a standard. "For what reason have you summoned us?" she demands. Soren greets them, saying "We came to trade for your services, but first we must speak of a more serious matter for I have grave news to bring." He turns to grab the sack holding the horse blanket salvaged from the skirmish, but one of the riders urges his mount forward and pulls his sun hat back and recognizes Soren. It is Garnuss, and he speaks in shock "Well, I never thought I would see you again. How did you survive in the Steplands on your own?" Soren replied "With some luck, skill and the grace of the Gods I was kept safe in my travels. I hope my past actions do not colour our deals today." He goes on to inform them about the skirmish they found, and how he gave the warriors proper rites and covered them in earth to anchor their spirits and usher them through the final door.

Garnuss listens to his story and responds "I feared as much. We have been out looking for a patrol that went missing and I am seeking the spirits for guidance to find them." The woman at the lead cuts in "Garnuss! These are strangers, don't reveal our business!" Garnuss says its fine, he knows Soren from long ago and he already knows some of the details. The woman snorts, then asks Soren to state what business he has. Soren tells her about Flossy, how he has been sick and our healers have eased his suffering a bit but have been unable to banish the illness. He offers potatoes, barley and carrots as treats for the horses, pulling a few of the carrots out and handing them to Blej as a goodwill gesture. The riders take some time to discuss, and Soren mentions to his group that the fact they haven't refused outright is a good sign. Kiva asks about his history with the Yellow-Spear tribe, how he was initially welcomed and met this beautiful girl, Regan, and they started spending a lot of time together. However, it soon became clear it was expected he would marry her according to their customs and join the tribe and this went against all of Soren's instincts. One night he cut the tethers of their prized horses and scattered them through the camp to cause chaos while he snuck away, and they definitely would not look favourable on him for doing so.

The Hillfolk spend some time discussing, with Blej getting increasingly animated and angry in her gestures. Eventually they come back to the party and Blej says they agree to the deal. Garnuss and his apprentice Lowik will accompany the party back to Stonetop, but she expects them back here in 10 days. Soren thanks her graciously and promises to keep them safe. Blej looks down on him from her tall horse and says "I will hold you to that. If they should come to harm, we will take the price of their lives from you." With that, the Hillfolk ride off to the north to inspect the scene of the fight where their companions perished. Soren waves up to EIAM, signalling they are done and he should put out the fire and come down with the cart.

Garnuss looks dismissively at Soren and says "I did not expect to be travelling with you again. To be honest I often thought about taking one of your fingers in repayment." Soren laughs nervously and says that it has been many years, he has found his people and isn't the same thoughtless kid that he once was. Garnuss glares at him for an uncomfortably long time in silence, then suddenly a smile breaks out on his face. "It has been a long time, and to be truthful it has made for an excellent story!" Soren pulls a skin of whiskey out of his pack and offers to share a drink with him while he tells how the story unfolded after he left. They spend some time catching up while waiting for Eliam to come down the hill and the awkwardness is banished. Garnuss talks about how Regan found a partner from the Badger Paws tribe, a strong warrior. He cautions Soren that while the rest of the tribe may have moved on from what he did, Regan's father will not forgive him and he should be cautious if they should ever meet again. Soren thanks him for his warning, recognizing the wisdom in his words.

As Eliam arrives the clouds break and the rain that was threatening all morning starts pouring on their heads. They start moving north along the Maker's road and it is a wet and dreary journey. The night is spent in misery, the rain precluding any fire for warmth or cooking. The group huddles under tarps of leather through the night and when dawn breaks it is a weary party that sets back out on the road. At some point Lowik speaks up "Riders. South." and the party turns to see a group of armed and armoured riders approaching. As the slower party they move to the side of the road to make way. When they get within bowshot the rider at the lead raises his hand in greeting and they move into single-file to pass. As they move past, one of the riders looks startled as he sees Treasa and calls out her name. "I thought you went through door years ago!" Kiva pipes up "Not our Treasa!". "Indeed" Replies Treasa, "I have not had a talk with the lady yet and hopefully not for some time. It has been a long time since I have seen you, Braddach."

Braddach pulls out a piece of paper and says that he has business with all travellers on the road, showing her a charcoal sketch of a man with a noticeable scar on the side of his face. "I know you recognize him, Rhian is wanted for the murder of Odin. There is a purse of silver for anyone who turns him in." Treasa remembers both Rhian and Odin. She had shown Rhian the ropes when he initially joined the Claws and his scar is easily recognizable. Odin was an ornery man, always ready to belittle and mock anyone he wasn't required to be nice to. It did not surprise her that the two of them came to conflict. Braddach continues, saying that they have riders on all of the roads looking for him, Rhian split pretty quick and they are moving with speed to find him. Gordin's Delve is their next stop.

After they ride away Soren asks Treasa how she knows the riders. She tells a little bit about her past with Brennen's Claws, and that she is very happy to not be with them anymore. Garnuss speaks up, Rhian would not find any shelter with the Hillfolk, they know of the Claws and would not treat him kindly. The rest of the journey back to Stonetop is a wet and boring affair, and as they approach the village a bell tolls signalling the village to their arrival. Treasa is pleased by this, glad that whoever is on duty in the watchtower is not sleeping on the job.

End of Session!

# Session 8

Return to Stonetop! Can Flossy be healed?

It is the evening, with the sun hanging low, as the party arrives back at Stonetop. Several villagers meet the group to welcome them home, the hillfolk riding in with them drawing a lot of stares. After a lull in the greetings Garnuss asks to see Flossy, telling Soren he will be his assistant. Treasa shows the way with Soren following while Eliam goes to find Kinball. Kinball arrives a little out of breath having rushed over from his work and he updates Garnuss with Flossy's state. Garnuss runs his hands over the horse and hums to himself. "I need honey, lots of it". Soren goes to the warehouse and grabs the largest jar of honey he can find. When he brings it back Garnuss sniffs it, dips a finger and tastes the honey then declares it will do. He pulls out a couple white powdery balls of some sort of fungus and starts mashing them into a large glob of honey. After a moment really mixing and working the substance into two balls, he hands one of them to Soren. "One of the these needs to in the front and one needs to go in the back." Garnuss says as Soren took the medicine. Soren takes the sticky ball hesitantly, asking if he is sure. "Well the sickness is inside, the medicine needs to get inside to do its work." With this Garnuss walks to Flossy's head and feeds her the honey-fungus mix. Soren takes a deep breath and pats Flossy's hindquarters saying "Neither of us is going to like this but I've gotta do what I've gotta do". He works his knuckle into and then slowly eases his arm in up to his elbow with the glob of honey clenched in his fist. As he got his arm all the way in Garnuss speaks up and says "And now we are even", then turns around and walks out of the barn.

Soren yells and pulls his arm out of the horse's ass leaving the possible fake medicine inside while swearing profusely. He runs to the nearest trough and starts scrubbing his arm in the water, swearing revenge against Garnuss the whole time. Treasa is barely trying and failing to contain her laughter, at this point Honoured Cutha pokes his head in the barn and asks her for a word. She steps out with him and Cutha informs her about the guest that appeared a few days before asking about her. Treasa decides to go see him immediately. Rhian opens the door immediately and motions her inside without speaking. Cutha takes his leave as Treasa recognizes Rhian, her memory fresh from the encounter with Brennan's Claws on the road. They speak for some time, Rhian informing her of what happened and the fact that Brennan wants him dead. Treasa asks why he came to her, he recalls several times they shared a sense of camaraderie and she was one of the only people who isn't out to kill him. Treasa says he can ask the villagers to hide him, but its a big ask. She warns him away from Gordin's delve, since that is where Braddach was headed on the road. Rhian tells of how he fought his way through the forest, encountering many more Crinwin than expected and he didn't much have food or water for the journey. Treasa remarks how incredible it is he is still alive, weeks travelling alone through the Great Forest is a dangerous task. Treasa successfully deduces that its not just Brennan looking for Rhian's head but the whole of

Marshedge, Brennen has his fingers in so many of the city's dealings he practically controls it.

After some discussion Treasa says that if he wants to shelter in the village, but they have to at least tell the Elders of Stonetop, it wouldn't be fair to put such risk on the people here unknowingly. Rhian says that his worst-case option is to make north for Barrier Pass, or try hiding in the slums of Gordin's Delve. Even though the claws are looking there its big enough he might be able to disappear. Treasa also mentions the Hillfolk, if Rhian can ride a horse they could make him very lost indeed, though they have negative opinions of the Claws. No decision is made, but Treasa comments it is better to have a few bad options than only one. They speak more about Odin, he was always riding on Brennen's coattails. Kissing the ass of anyone bigger than him and making life hell for everyone small than him. As Brennen's power grew so did his abuses of that power. One day Odin was tormenting some bar guest who couldn't pay his tab and it was like something changed in Rhian's head, and he felt compelled to act. It was like gravity pulled his club into the back of Odin's head. Treasa muses that the world may be better without Odin, and it sounds like he did a good thing the wrong way. Throughout the conversation she has been studying him, and while she is fairly confident he is telling the truth he seems to be much more fragile than he let on. She decides to go speak to the elders and see how open they would be to the idea of harbouring a fugitive.

The whole time Kiva and Rua have been eavesdropping on the conversation! They climbed up onto the old shingle roof, enough of the tiles have fallen or cracked so they can hear well enough the conversation being held inside. As the details unfold they look at each other in awe, Kiva realizing that Treasa has a lot more strength and experience than she previously thought. Rua is growing more and more appreciative for Treasa, his suspicions about the elders have him worried that they might just turn Rhian in for the reward money. While perched on the roof Rua spots Betta walking nearby with Stefan with a bundle of flowers in her arms, he looks happy but she seems like she is not having a good time. Kiva sees them as well and she recognizes the courting rituals with Stefan likely having given her those flowers. Betta is smiling along, responding to his jokes but she can tell the smile doesn't reach her eyes. Rua immediately scrambles down from the roof, careless of the noise he is making. He thinks that Betta has moved on and is dating Stefan now and he wants to confront her right away. Hearing the noise on the roof Rhian immediately grabs his club and starts looking up at the roof in panic. Treasa quickly calms him down, saying she knows who that is, or its just one of the village kids. As Treasa steps out she sees Rua approach Betta and Stefan. Rua starts yelling, asking Betta what's going on and asking Stefan what he is doing here. Stefan is confused, and Betta tries to push Rua away but he insists to know what is going on. Betta finally sighs and says "Its my mother, its always my mother. Lets talk about this tomorrow OK?". Rua apologizes for causing a scene and says it has been crazy days, learning about Treasa and the bandits. "Wait, bandits?" Stefan asks, "I don't know what you are talking about, we should keep walking." As they leave Stefan looks thoughtful while Betta glances over her shoulder back at Rua. Rua gives her a half wave, then turns to Kiva and asks her if he messed that up. Kiva replies that she doesn't know much about love, but he spoke from the heart and that is what counts.

Treasa is frozen in the doorway of the house, trying to remain inconspicuous and not be seen listening in to this delicate conversation. Unfortunately Rhian calls out from inside the house "Hey, are they still there? Did you talk to them?" and he walks outside, looking around. Hearing his voice, Rua freezes and turns around slowly. Seeing the two of the adults standing outside of the

house Rua waves awkwardly "Hi Treasa....". This finally breaks the dam of mirth Treasa was holding in and breaks down in laughter, falling to one knee just absolutely boiling over with laughs, tears starting to stream down her face. She hasn't laughed this hard in a long time, certainly not in front of the villagers. Rua and Kiva look at Rhian and smile awkwardly introducing themselves. Rhian introduces himself as Willem and offers to tell them some stories if they visit him. Rua steps closer and whispers "Can you tell us stories about Treasa as a bandit?" At this Rhian looks to Treasa who is finally bringing her laughter under control. She replies "I think some stories may be told, but I would be in your debt if you could keep what you know to yourselves for now, at least until I can talk to the elders." Rua nods, then asks Treasa if she has ever been in love, and how did she know for sure? Treasa replies it was a long time ago, and you don't really know for sure until it is gone and you realize what you have missed.

Stella is spending her evening in the orphanage, helping out the young children. However she is still feeling the after-effects of her attempt to heal Mad Gethin and the faces of the children are all blurring together and has trouble telling them apart. The kids seem to know there is something going on, they keep asking her if she is ok and holding her hand or patting her arm. At one point she finds herself sitting at the table, feeling like she is looking at the room from very far away. Granny Eadna taps on the door and asks Stella if she is feeling OK to meet someone. Stella stammers for a moment and says yes, she is feeling just fine. Eadna walks in with a chair and Lowik comes in behind her wearing her spirit-talker robes. Lowik sits down and introduces herself, saying that her master says it is important to learn from other cultures and wants to know what it is like being a Lightbringer for the village. Stella stares at the table for a long moment, but when she looks at Lowik she get hit with a wave of synesthesia, smelling damp earth and fresh grass, with the patterns of horses running along the wall behind her and a shimmering halo around her head. Lowik seems concerned at the long pause and asks if Stella is feeling alright. Stella waves off her concerns and prompts to ask whatever she needs. Lowik asks "What does your tribe do when one of your spirit-talkers goes bad? We have an obligation to help our people, but what happens when a spirit-talker only thinks about their own power?" Stella feels the room darken, and an angry conversation in some unknown language is heard under Lowik's voice. Stella is barely able to pay attention to the conversation, mumbling her response "I don't really know, I haven't studied that far back, you should talk to the Chronicler, Old Esme." Lowik replies that she has been told about Esme and will seek her out as well, but suddenly her brows furrow and she reaches across and grabs Stella's hand. Stella suddenly feels like Lowik is the only real thing in the room as her perception of everything else fades, leaving Lowik the last solid thing in the world. She startles a bit and Lowik apologizes for her presumptuousness and shows herself out, saying she will come back another time. After a few minutes Stella stands up and begins wandering the village, ending up at the Public House.

Back at the barn Soren has finally scrubbed his arm clean to his satisfaction when he realizes that everyone is gone. he goes back in the barn and Kinball is there with the horses and Soren asks him where Garnuss went. Kinball directs him to the Public House and Soren stomps out to confront him while Kinball is left behind chuckling. Soren arrives at the Public House and scans the room. He sees Stella sitting to the side, but is focused on Garnuss who is sitting at a table with a couple of the older villagers who apparently are already familiar with him. Soren walks right up and starts accusing him of just coming to the village to fuck with Soren and not actually helping Flossy. Garnuss tries to mollify him a bit, saying the fungus is a known method for treating infection, and

the horse was already mostly healed so it should be enough. Soren says that Stella did most of the work, motioning over to her, but if it really does help Flossy get better then he will let it go. Soren sighs and says he needs a drink. Garnuss invites him to join the table, and Soren accepts but decides to go get some stronger stuff from his sill. Before leaving he goes to talk to Stella because he noticed she didn't react at all when he mentioned her. Stella is fairly unresponsive, giving small one word responses. Soren can tell something is not right, but Stella is not opening up so he encourages her to talk to someone if not him, and at the very least get some rest. He leave to get the whiskey, but lets her know she can join them for some drinks if she wants.

When he gets to his still he finds Rua and Kiva chatting and playing a card game while sipping on some pilfered glasses. They stop talking instantly, looking guiltily at him and he pauses, clearly there is something going on here. He presses them to tell him about whats going on, something juicy is going on and he wants in on the mischief. They are evasive and don't say much, but mention Treasa and her history with the Claws. Soren files that info away for later, but grabs a small barrel he keeps around for test brews and leaves to go back to the Public House, calling over his shoulder for them to not drink all his booze. As he gets back to the table Garnuss apologizes honestly, he didn't come here just to mess with Soren. It was just convenient for him to get a prank in at the same time. They pour glasses of Soren's latest brew and start drinking and passing the time. Soren brings up the skirmish they encountered on the way to Titan Bones, there was something wrong with how none of the proper rites were followed and the dead were strewn carelessly on the ground. He asks if there is something going on with the Yellow Spear tribe that they should know about. Garnuss sighs and tells about how a spirit-talker from a nearby tribe has become a Hdour, more focused on power than communing with the spirits and helping his fellows. He has been gathering followers at ... and it is very close to the Yellow Spears territory. The scouting party had been gone too long, so they had already been out looking for them when they saw the signal fire at Titan Bones and decided to come investigate. Soren shakes his head at the bad news, someone meddling with spirits and not paying them the proper respect could bring something up from the depths to terrorize the world. Garnuss agrees, but states that its a Hillfolk problem and it will be solved by the Hillfolk.

Stella is loosely paying attention, she can see some sort of dark aura around Garnuss, and it seems to recede slightly as he takes sips of his drink. Seeing this she gets up and approaches the table, standing next to it staring at the whiskey. Soren sees her and pours her a glass, inviting her to sit down and join them at the table, introducing her to Garnuss. She immediately takes a gulp and pauses like she expects something to happen...Garnuss speaks up, remarking how he is impressed that she is dealing with her curse so well. Soren is shocked at this, looking to Stella and asking how she got cursed. She slowly starts telling how she wanted to help Mad Gethin but struggles to speak in cohesive sentences. At a certain point Garnuss says "Oh to hell with this" and reaches into one of his many pouches then reaches across and smears a symbol on Stella's forehead. She feels the madness recede from her mind, not completely but pushed to the side for now. "If I didn't do that it would take all night to hear this story." he continues. Stella is grateful to him, he goes on to say that she doesn't know what she doesn't know, and if she doesn't understand right now what that means she will learn in time. With this Stella puts her glass down and excuses herself from the table.

End of Session!



# Session 9

The Council of Elders will decide Rhian/Willem's fate!

The town elders are meeting in the hearthroom of Murdoch's cottage. It is truly night now, with a spring storm raging outside. The loud booms of thunder from lightning striking the standing stone cause small pauses in the discussion but the villagers are well used to the noise. Murdoch has a sour expression on his face but still insists that everyone try one of his tea cakes. Merwyn is there, struggling to stay awake in her old age. Ovin, the old man who runs the public house, Rua and Kiva are brought in by Treasa and Merwyn speaks "Well this is lovely but I don't have all night, what are we here for?"

Treasa begins "You have all been wondering why I brought Rua and Kiva here, I called us together to discuss something they found out accidentally, but the elders should first consider knowing it affects the safety of the townspeople. They have been sworn to secrecy and should be aware of the decision that is made as it will affect all of us. Willem is the subject of the discussion, you know him from the last few days but he has a petition for you."

Willem stands up and speaks "Thank you for your hospitality, I would like to request shelter here in the village or safe passage out of it. I am hunted by the Claws of Marshedge, if you would let me stay here I would be very grateful or at the very least help me move on without returning to Marshedge in chains." Willem falls silent, but Treasa prompts him to go on, the elders need to know everything in order to make a decision. "I killed one of the Claws" He continues "I was one of them, there was a fight and I killed one of Brennen's lieutenants." As he finishes, Esme speaks up to press him for more details. "That is not a full accounting, if we are to shelter someone we need to know the why and the how." Willem stays vague and says that the man he killed deserved it and nobody would shed any tears at his death. This is not enough for Esme who presses even more for details. Willem finally bluntly states "I staved a mans head in because he was beating an innocent to extort them for bribes." Esme stands up and moves before him, staring deeply into his eyes and asks if he is hiding anything further. Willem answers honestly "No." Rua pipes up "Well sometimes things get out of hand and we act before we can think." Murdoch smirks at this while Esme asks Willem what he can bring to Stonetop. Willem says "I am strong, not averse to a hard day's work, and I noticed that Crinwin are becoming more and more of an issue. You could use more fighters to keep the village safe." Honoured Cutha adds his voice, saying with the bandits threatening from the north it could be worth it to take the long-term risk for some short-term assistance. Murdoch angrily retorts that Willem is a killer! They would be crazy to shelter a murderer in their village. Treasa says that the village welcomed her in, knowing she had a sordid past.

Esme again speaks to Willem with a resonance in her voice, "Would you swear an oath to protect the village and possibly give your life in its defense, in return for a safe haven and the support of the people around him." Again he answers honestly "Yes, I would swear." Esme grunts and says that is good enough for her. At this Cutha asks Willem to leave so they can deliberate. Treasa hands him a couple extra tea cakes as he leaves the house to stand under the eaves. Once he has left the elders continue to discuss the proposition, with Treasa bringing up the issue of sheltering a person who is wanted by the Town Watch of Marshedge. Also, if they do decide to shelter him, do we tell the rest of the village? It is hard for hundreds to keep a secret. He is willing to swear an oath, but when the Claws come riding in with his face on a piece of paper and telling his story it is not him who we have to worry about talking. Ovin speaks up to share stories he heard from the bar about how Marshedge performs executions by burying people in the bog. This makes Treasa shudder, but also highlights the other side of the coin in this decision. Keeping him would be dangerous to Stonetop, but he faces a terrible fate without assistance. Rua offers, if they decide to let him stay, to pretend Willem is his uncle who was visiting and learned he is still alive and decided to stay. Esme cautions Rua that this would make Willem his uncle in truth, it would be an act that would be performed for the rest of his life. Hearing this Rua backs down, nodding seriously.

Murdoch then calls for a vote, should they shelter him in the village? Esme replies Aye, Murdoch says Nay, Treasa abstains as she is too close to the issue and doesn't have a clear mind. Ovin says Aye, if Esme says he is telling the truth then I trust her. Merywn is unsure if this is the best decision but doesn't want to turn away someone in need, so she says Aye. Cutha also says Aye, they could always use another strong sword-arm. With that Cutha remarks, they have a clear consensus. Treasa makes a face at this, not wholly agreeing, but not bringing up any further discussion. Cutha asks Rua to bring in Willem from outside, while Esme brings up that they have decided what they will do but not how. Perhaps it is best to stick to a half-truth, telling the village that he has a dark past but not any details, and if anyone comes looking for him to give them nothing and send them along. Willem comes back in, still munching on the second teacake and asks "So what will it be?" Treasa stands and offers him her chair as Cutha informs him that they have decided to let him stay, though they are still working out the details. The discussion turns to sending him to one of the nearby homesteads, it would prevent visitors and traders from recognizing him and cashing in on the bounty.

As the discussion winds down, Esme motions for Willem to come with her, giving Murdoch's shoulder a quick squeeze before leading Willem outside. Soren is standing under the eaves of a nearby building, not listening in to the council but knowing something is going on due to Kiva and Rua's evasiveness earlier in the day. Esme motions him to join them, and Soren looks behind him to see who she is motioning to, quickly realizing that it is him. He moves forward to join them, greeting Esme and asking who the stranger next to her is. Willem introduces himself, they shake hands, and Esme starts moving to the Chronicle. On the way she tells Willem about the coming of age ceremony that all village kids go through, that is also done for anyone who is looking to join the village. Soren, hearing about the details, has the ceremony cast in a new light. For him, this ceremony was another one of the oppressive factors of Stonetop that initially drove him away, but now he has returned and is committed to the village he is understanding the seriousness and importance of the ceremony for recording the history of Stonetop and binding the village together. As they enter the Chronicle Willem looks around in awe at the centuries of history inscribed on the

walls. Esme gets a black paste and direct Soren to smear some on Willem's face while beginning to sing a song. Soren is burning with curiosity about who Willem is and where he came from, but goes along with Esme's directions. The song Esme is singing is short, and she repeats it twice. At the second repeat the song stirs Soren's memories and he joins in for the third repeat. Once the song ends Esme snuffs all the candles and lights a special blue one and asks Willem to state his oath. "I vow that as long as Stonetop gives me shelter I will give them labour and protection, like the old guy said. As long the village is here to support me, I will do my best to support them." After he is done she gives him an onyx tool and directs him to chisel his name in the list of Stonetop residents. He says "Is now not a good time to bring up that I can't read? What if you mark the letters and I will carve the shape. Esme nods and says that is fine, and directs Soren to do so. Once the letters are outlined Willem carves his name in the wall. She then gives Willem a hug, who stiffens at first then responds in kind. She then talks a bit about Soren, how he makes the second-best whiskey in the village.

Esme says they will find a permanent home for him soon, but he can continue to stay where he has been for the last few days. After he leaves Esme turns to Soren and breaks into a grin "So how cool was that!" Soren replies "It really cast this ceremony in a new light for me. The trick with the blue candle was nice trick, really added to the solemnity of the occasion." Esme takes some time to fill in Soren about Willem's circumstances, asking him to support him and help him integrate safely into the village. Soren agrees, he can sympathize with how past decisions can get you stuck in a bad situation. We have done a good thing to offer him freedom from his past and give him a new start. Esme says that she trusts Soren, and he replies that her regard means a lot to him, he will do his best to make sure Willem feels welcome. Esme then speaks about the importance of stories, knowing Soren tells many of his own. He starts to launch into a story of how he distracted an entire crowd while Esme cuts him off and shoos him from the Chronicle.

Elsewhere, Rua and Kiva are back in Soren's still discussing the council. Rua asks Kiva if that was the first council she saw. She answers that is the first one where they knew she was listening. Rua asks her if all the council sessions are like that, he expected it to be more plotting and scheming, but they all seemed so reasonable, even Murdoch. Kiva replies that yes, it is mostly just boring discussions about mundane things. Rua shares more about his confrontation with the elders during the winter festival, he always felt they looked down on outsiders and on him particularly, and it was a shock for him to see they accepted Willem into the village, even knowing what he had done. Kiva replies that all friends start out as strangers, it is how people meet and grow to trust each other. Rua is still upset and talks about how he felt like his family was pushed to the side because of how his mother left the village and came back married to an outsider with a child. Kiva offers to help him continue to investigate, see if there really is any malicious plotting against him by the elders. At this point Soren enters to get another flask and they speak of little things for the rest of the night.

A few weeks pass with the party living their lives in Stonetop, Esme helps Willem get setup in a nearby homestead while still communicating with the nearby people by raven to plan for the bandits who promised to come soon. She also spends some time with Kiva researching into the Fae and how to counter them. Kiva starts her research by reviewing what books she has concerning the Fae, and works with Esme to tease out old stories of the Fae and try to pin down some of their names. In the stories they find multiple references to the Fae being servants of the

Green Lords in ages past, but there was a rebellion against them. They also find that the Fae can eat and drink but they don't need to, primarily drawing sustenance from intense experiences and emotions. They tend to hover around the edges of civilization, drawn to the emotions and energies within. They can get energy from animals and such, and also from deals or rituals. They also find that Fae cannot lie, and that makes any deals or debts very powerful indeed. Iron is the most effective against Fae, it is the only way to truly kill them. Other materials can inconvenience them but they will only stay dead if they are killed with Iron

Stella has had a rough time, the madness that took her when she tried to help Mad Gethin slowly recedes over the course of a week and a half, with Gethin getting more and more mad as she gets more and more sane. While she is recovering Ridney, one of the kids in the orphanage, injured her arm and Stella cares for her through her hallucinations and disorientation. It is an annoying process, the kid is not one to sit still and let someone fuss over her and is always trying to get out of the house and explore. Stella's attention sometimes slipped and would realize she wasn't there anymore and has to rush outside to find her. Thankfully her older brother, Anders, also was helping care for Ridney and was able to pick up the slack. When they were spending some time together Anders speaks up "I heard that Treasa used to be a bandit, can you believe it?" Stella asks where he heard this from, and he says Corey told him. "What do you think, was she a bandit?" he asks. "Yes," Stella replies, "I can see that being the truth."

The spirit talkers stay for a few more days to make sure that Flossy is recovering well, and he is. Before they leave they seek out Soren. Garnuss sticks out his hand and says "No hard feelings, yeah?" Soren takes a moment to look closely at his hand before grasping it and saying "Yes, you did well with Flossy. Thank you, and I wish you luck with your troubles." Garnuss sighs and says that a gathering of the tribes will be required, it has been some time but the Hdour is something they need to come together to resolve. Soren says if he is ever back in their corner of the plains he should stop by and they can share a drink and swap stories. Garnuss says that would be very nice, then they say their goodbyes with Lowik giving an awkward half wave. Soren spends the rest of his time distilling a new batch of whiskey, Esme's remarks about how Soren makes the second best whiskey in the village has him motivated to tweak his recipe and outdo himself. Additionally, whenever he is with Rua or Kiva, he drops subtle hints or comments about Willem, trying to draw out more of his story since he is fairly sure they know more than what Esme had told him. They are both evasive, not giving him any more details.

Outside of helping the village in the day-to-day Rua decides to go the Treasa and Willem to ask them to train him to fight. Whenever he has a day to himself he hikes the couple hours to where Willem is staying and trains with him. Willem's style is very blunt, using a large two-handed club as his chosen weapon. One day he meets Betta away from her family and goes to talk to her. They go to a storehouse by the watchtowers to talk in private. Betta sits on the floor and apologizes to Rua for being so distant. Her mother is very concerned about who she is to marry, and Rua is not one of the candidates that she is considering. When asked why, and if it's because he and his family are outsiders, she replies that is part of it, but it's also the scene he made against the village elders last winter, as well as the fact that he doesn't have a trade. He offers to talk to her mother, maybe he can convince her and Betta chuckles at this and says that is not likely. He then offers to learn a trade, but she says that she doesn't want him to do anything that he doesn't want to do just for her. She goes on to say that she knows he will do amazingly at anything he decides to do.

End of Session!

# Session 10

Downtime, levelling and moving plot forward

Esme has been communicating with the nearby homesteads regarding the threatening bandits. Bran Fartreader often travels around the area for trade and is able to write, and has been sending detailed reports back to Esme. The reports show that the bandits seem to be divided, and witnesses report their leader doesn't have a good amount of control over the group. The leader calls himself Bogden, the group calls themselves Bogden's Marauders. The reports also notes that they are running low on supplies, and are likely to strike again soon. They have mostly been operating from the barrow hills, it is not a populated area so either they have business there or it is their lair.

A few weeks pass with the village continuing with business as usual. One day Cadmor brings an arrow with a note attached to Treasa. Treasa unrolls the not with a hint of trepidation and it reads "Leave your food, money and treasures in the hollow stump at Hanson's Hill. If the goods aren't there then your fields were burn." Cadmor then says a person on horseback rode near them, fired the arrow towards them and then rode off to the north-west. Treasa takes a minute to observe the arrow and look around the outside of the village before heading towards the public house, spreading the word on the way for a general town meeting. When she gets there she pulls out the note and pins it to the wall. Once the majority of the village is present she gives a breakdown of the situation. Rua speaks up quickly "They want all our stuff? We can't give them our food, we need it, we should fight back!". Esme also shares the intelligence she gathered from the nearby homesteads. Soren supports Rua's idea of fighting back, if we wait for them to come here the collateral damage is certain but if we take the fight to them then the damage will be outside the village. Ogden and Stella also share their fears of potential damage to the fields. There is another aspect to consider, Cutha speaks, we need access to the foothills for wood and salt. If they are there long-term it could make our lives really difficult.

With a general agreement that waiting for them to come is a bad idea the discussion turns to two different ideas; Setting an ambush at Hanson's Hill when they come to pick up the tithe, or send a party to the Barrow Hills to scout their camp, cause some mayhem and report back on their exact location. Soren wants to setup the ambush, but it becomes apparent from Treasa and Esme's comments that it is a very risky plan, putting a small group in the middle of armed adversaries. It only takes a day and a half to get to the barrow hills, it would be better to at least scout a bit and there will be enough time to setup the ambush if that can be done, or another plan that may become apparent.

With a general plan set Esme starts up a battle song, a quick and repetitive rhythm that is not subtle with the lyrics, the song about fighting and winning. Treasa goes around the village rattling a spear on the doors of homes and drawing as many more people as possible to the public house.

Oden breaks open a keg of beer and he and his two assistants pass it around, adding to the growing aura of community and determination. Once the song finishes work begins on organizing the initial scouting/strike group. Soren and Rua and Treasa volunteer immediately, Stella as well to bring Helior's light, and Kiva and Esme to help with planning/coordinating. Fio stands up and volunteers as well. Willem would also be a good choice for his experience in the bloody business, Shan pipes up and says she will go get him. Emmer also stands up to volunteer, but Treasa's protective instincts kick in. Emmer is boisterous and impulsive, not a good fit for this mission, and says to him that if she is going on the missions she needs someone smart, strong and capable to organize the watches and keep the village safe while they are gone. Esme winks from behind Emmer's back to the gathered villagers to get them to go along with what Treasa offers him. To show her confidence in him Treasa gives him her sword, a distasteful act for her, but Emmer is sensitive to slights against his pride and needs some concrete symbol of the responsibility he has been given.

# Session 11

2 week hiatus, down 2 players, but pushing forward anyways!

The expedition consists of Soren, Kiva, Old Treasa, Rua, Stella, Old Esme, Willem, Fio, Corradin, and Trayhern. While they wait for Willem to come from the homestead, fetched by Rhian, they all get outfitted for the journey and meet back outside of the public house to plan their route. Taking the Maker's Road would be quickest, being able to get to the Barrow Hills in a couple of days, but Esme makes a good point that they will likely have watchers posted at some point on the road. Cutting overland will take extra time, about 4 days to get there, but with a reduced chance of being seen. Kiva has ranged the area around Stonetop extensively and in discussion with Esme and others they plot a route using known animal trails skirting just south of the cliffs that can shave a day off the journey.

As they finish planning Willem arrives geared up and the expedition departs, heading almost due west from Stonetop, avoiding the main exit. When possible they follow the faint animal trails through the grass though at times they need to push through the wait high grasses to forge their own path. At these times Treasa takes the lead, flattening the grass beneath her for others to follow more easily. The afternoon blends into the evening and they find a small dell in the plains where they stamp down the grass and setup a campsite. After the work is done, Esme spends some time with a sheet of hide and a rock, scratching the story of the expedition so far to preserve moments both big and small. After the camp tasks are done and as the group sits around the fire before turning in, Soren takes some time to speak about how to travel through a hilly area like the Barrow Hills without sky lining yourself, sticking to the slopes and valleys. He then launches into a story of how he used these tactics to avoid 3 separate Hillfolk bands that were roving around him after his negative parting with the Yellow-Spear tribe.

The night passes uneventfully, as well as most of the rest of the next day, except for when Fio spots a herd of aurochs on the horizon. Thankfully they are not moving in the direction of the expedition, a few of them look up and eye the group warily but they do not react strongly. Treasa starts thinking about moving towards the cliff, away from the herd if necessary, but realizes after that might be even more dangerous, pinning the group against the cliffs against a potentially stampeding horde of massive beasts. She brings up her plans, and this sparks a discussion between Kiva and the hunters about optimal hunting strategies and the habits and behaviours of aurochs. The conversation helps the time pass, and they reach Beorn's stream as the sun is starting to set. Where the stream goes over the cliff it showers in a white cascade down into a sparkling pool far below, but the view is not easy to see with the rocky terrain. Trayhern remarks that it is beautiful sight from below in the forest. The stream is very deep and fast at this point, crossing would be very dangerous. Esme knows that there is a fordable crossing a few hours west, but it is a trade-off of time for safety. They start moving inland, the hunters leading the way while Treasa and Esme inspect the riverbanks and surrounding foliage to try to spot any resource that

could assist the crossing.

They spot a deadfall log laying at an angle in the stream, the roots are stuck in the bank and it points upstream crossing about two thirds of the stream. The water behind the log has pooled and is much calmer, leaving about 6 feet of waist deep full speed flow between the far end of the log and the opposite bank. They spend a bit of time to formulate a plan, Treasa being the biggest and strongest would use her axe and Soren's spear to anchor herself to the end of the log and the far bank, allowing the rest of the group to use her to steady their passage across. The hunters, Esme, and Soren all cross without incident, but as Kiva is making the final push she loses her footing and starts to be swept downstream! Treasa reacts quickly, letting go of the spear anchored into the far bank and catching Kiva with one arm causing them to spin into the lee of the deadwood. In a feat of strength Treasa hauls the both of them up the haft of the axe back to the end of the log where Soren is holding a spear out as far as he can. Kiva takes the spear and with his help is able to clamber up the far bank. They then hold the spear out to Treasa so she can follow in her wake.

They take a moment to catch their breath on the far side and Treasa laughs and crows their victory in a taunt to the river itself. Since the sun is mostly set at this point, they quickly find a sheltered spot to camp and set to gathering some wood and settling down. As they are drying their clothes and themselves around the fire they begin to talk. Soren tells a story about another time he found himself struggling against nature and how with strength, cleverness, and more than a little luck he pulled through and was able to laugh about how he got himself in such a situation in the first place. Esme counters with a story about when she and Olwinn fought against a shadow beast, using song and good cheer to weaken it before eventually taking it down. Soren then gives an involuntary shudder, remarking that he is glad there was no dark water spirit to drag them under. This sparks some thought in Treasa about the wisdom of mocking the stream after their crossing. In a lull in the conversation Soren asks Fio what is going through her mind, she has been characteristically quiet so far. She says that she is thinking about if shooting a person with an arrow is anything like shooting a deer. She has not killed anyone before. Esme says to think about them like chickens, it will make it easier. Kiva then goes on to share that she feels like deadweight, she is much weaker than the other members and feels inadequate. Esme comforts her, placing a hand on her shoulder and says that whenever she needs answers about an esoteric topic, Kiva is the first person that comes to mind. Soren slaps Treasa's shoulder with the back of his hand and says not everyone can be giant hulks of muscle. This causes Willem to bark with laughter, and he chimes in to say that when it comes to bashing heads yeah, Kiva is deadweight, but when it comes to almost anything else she is much more useful than him. Soren says that is the whole reason he decided to stay in Stonetop when he returned was because everyone is not only able but encouraged to contribute to the village in a way most aligned to their strengths. It is a beautiful community, small enough that everyone can contribute but large enough that there is room for specialization. Kiva is comforted by all their kind words and expresses her thanks to the group. The rest of the evening around the fire is spent swapping stories, focused on family and history.

The next day they continue north towards the hills, reaching the beginning of the hills in the afternoon. Grass gives way to rocky patches and dry scrub at the base of the Barrow Hills. The ground is getting more rocky and gravelly as the hills get denser. The group begins to move slowly and quietly, moving roughly parallel to the river with the aim of the hunters finding the trail the bandits use to get to the highway from their camp. As they move Esme is not able to keep her

tracks covered well, but Kiva goes along with her and assists her with covering the worst of her mistakes and helping her along. They all keep in mind Soren's words about staying off the hilltops and not highlighting their silhouettes against the horizon. All except for Soren, who forgets his own advice and is moments from cresting the rise of a ridge when Treasa grabs him and pulls him down, admonishing him for forgetting his own lesson. Fio chuckles under her breath seeing this. Soren stammers for a second, then covers his embarrassment by saying he was totally just making sure Treasa was paying attention. A little after this Fio spots the trail, and after inspecting it for a while and conferring with the other hunters concludes that one or more horses came by earlier that day, heading southwest. This is definitely the trail they are looking for. Corradin says that around the next bend there is a hill with a copse of trees on top, it is very likely a place where they have posted a lookout. If they haven't then they are really bad at their job. The group discusses whether its better to try to sneak up to the hill and take down the watchers or go around and avoid it, but Soren points out that their goal is to cause disruption and not take the whole group head-on, the outer watch is a good place to start causing mayhem and using that to lure more into an ambush.

End of Session!

# Session 12

Bandits! There are likely some scouts on a bluff up ahead, what is going to happen? Down a player again today but that is how big groups are I guess.

Having agreed that taking down the scouts is the plan, they discuss how to approach without them immediately sounding the alarm. Esme wants to send some people around the other side and have her walk along the trail to act as bait, then ambush them as they come down to investigate. Treasa wants to sneak up and catch them by surprise, take them out before they can raise any alarms. Soren supports this, and adds that both ideas are good, they should send a few around the back to catch any that try to run when they ambush. There is a bit of debate about the best course of action and Treasa just starts moving into the trees towards the back of the bluff. Rua and Soren go after her, Soren saying "well action is better than inaction" as he goes. Willem and the hunters go as well, leaving Stella and Esme on the trail. Esme asks Stella for her cloak, and upon receiving it turns it inside out to hide the decorative weave and starts shuffling slowly along the trail, acting as a frail old woman. Stella is left alone and confused, has a long moment of indecision before hurriedly following Treasa and the others with the intent of alerting them to Esme acting as bait.

Treasa doesn't just rush headlong into the bushes but scans the landscape to find the path with the best cover. She sees a tangle of branches and bushes at the crown of the bluff that doesn't look natural, like a small hunters blind. She angles her approach to keep as many trees as possible between her and the blind with the others following. As they move slowly and carefully Rua steps on an unsteady boulder causing it to shift and begin to slide down the slope. Treasa throws her body onto the stone with an oomph as her breath is forced out by the impact but is able to steady the stone, stopping it from rolling away and causing a ruckus. Rua looks back, sees how a little dirt and small stones had shifted and realization dawns on his face as he turns to Treasa and gives her a thumbs up! Treasa slowly raises her hand and gives him a thumbs up back with an incredulous look on her face. At this point Stella gets within a stones throw of the others and throws a stone, it landing in some leaves behind the others causing Soren to turn. He sees her and raises his hands in a "what the hell?" kind of gesture. Stella is visibly distressed so Soren quietly goes down to her within loud whispering distance and says "what the hell, are you trying to get us caught?". She responds telling him that Esme is acting as bait and apologizes for not stopping her. Soren replies saying that nobody can stop Esme really, and grabs her and goes back to the others and lets them know as well. Knowing that things are gonna happen soon they start moving the rest of the way to the top with as much speed as possible.

As they crest the rise they see a small clearing behind the blind with a one bandit sitting on a log and the other stringing his bow. The one with the bow rouses the other and points over the bluff, they go back and he nocks an arrow, preparing to shoot down on Esme! Treasa sees this and

breaks into a full charge, running headlong at the bandits. Soren, Willem and Rua are all a step behind, joining her charge. The bandits turn hearing the noise, the one without the bow has just enough time to pull out a bronze-tipped mace before meeting Treasa's charge. They clash, he dodges her blow and strikes back with the mace, hitting the fingers of her hand on the axe. As this happens the bandit yells "The log! Go for the log!". Soren is keeping an eye out for traps, knowing that means something, but can't discern what it is. With no time to think he just charges the bandit with the bow, aiming his spear at his chest. As he rushes he steps on a loose stone, turning his ankle and flailing his arms to regain his balance. Unbeknownst to him, Rua was also rushing the bandit and Soren flailing his spear wacks Rua with the haft. The two of them get a bit tangled up, allowing the bandit to slip past them and run towards one of the logs. Treasa yells for the hunters to shoot him, they let fly but two of the arrows fly over his head and one only grazes his arm. Willem takes a swing with his heavy club but he dodges that too! Treasa pulls back from her initial clash against the bandit with the mace and prepares a strong overhand blow, disregarding defense. As her axe starts to fall the bandit swings his mace and impacts her hip, however the axe was already on its course, crunching down into the bandit's chest and dropping him to the ground. Just as the last bandit is approaching the logs Rua comes out with a flying tackle, taking him to the ground. The bandit struggles and clubs Rua in the head with his bow but is unable to get away. Soren, seeing the tangle of limbs on the ground, drops his spear and jumps in, pinning the bandit's legs to the ground. Willem comes up as well, helping hold him down and clamping a hand over his mouth.

With the three of them restraining the last standing bandit the fight is over. Once he stops struggling Rua pulls out some rope and they tie his arms around his back and start interrogating him. They ask his name, it is Grumman. They also find out that Bogden took the horses and two others to go to Hansen's Hill, leaving 9 others in the camp. They will be sending one person to relieve the scouts at sundown, Horsh will be coming. Fuda is the other bandit they killed, he and Shering came down from Barrier Pass. It seemed to Grumman that Bogden had a backer, someone funding his venture. Grumman was hired from Gordin's Delve to join his crew, he and a couple others are just regular people trying to get away from the oppressive environment of Gordin's Delve but the rest of the bandits seem to know each other and know the banditry business well. He also says that if anything were to happen they were to bang on a hollow log, it makes quite a racket and that will signal the camp.

While they press him for information, Stella is standing in shock looking at the corpse of Fuda, with his chest split open and his blood soaking the ground. Esme had made the trek up the hill, arriving after the fight ended and saw her standing there. Esme took the cloak off her shoulders and placed it back on Stella's shoulders and turned her away from the body and led her down the hill a little ways, talking to her in a soft voice and helping Stella through a bout of nausea. Esme gets her to focus on her light and breath, getting her to focus on what she feels she should do next and not get stuck in her mind. After taking a moment they go back to the top of the bluff.

Treasa calls Esme over to Grumman and fills her in on the information they gathered. Esme turns to Grumman and says that he looks like a steady young man, and starts to convince/ask him to join the village, they have already taken in other bandits and there is always room for more hands to do the work. Soren objects to this, he was just trying to kill us! He doesn't think Grumman can be trusted and can't believe that Esme is just asking him to join them out of the blue. This doesn't

dissuade her and she stares deeply into his eyes as she asks if he could turn his back on banditry and join them. He honestly answers yes, his last 10 years have been nothing but struggle, he is willing to do some honest work. At this point the adrenaline is wearing off and he sits there in a bit of a daze. Esme undoes the rope tying his arms and leads him to sit on one of the logs, asking him if he would like something to eat. He acknowledges and she starts to build a fire to make a meal. Soren looks at Grumman with a deep and untrusting stare, always taking care to stand between him and Stella is hovering around the edge of the clearing, trying not to look at the corpse while looking at Treasa's wounded hip. Esme calls out to Treasa, saying she should tend to her injuries, and Stella offers to heal her. Treasa is hesitant, she is used to taking her lumps and walking them off and she also doesn't fully believe in Helior's stuff. However, she does trust Stella and allows her to approach with her glowing white consecrated flame. Stella invokes Helior's healing light and holds the flame to Treasa's wound and a tingling heat spreads along the injury and soothes the pain away. Grumman is taken aback by this, and constantly shoots glances at Stella for the next while like he expects her to toss magic around at a whim. After healing Treasa, Stella goes to a sunny spot on the edge of the bluff and spends some time soaking in the sun and contemplating the events of the day.

End of Session!

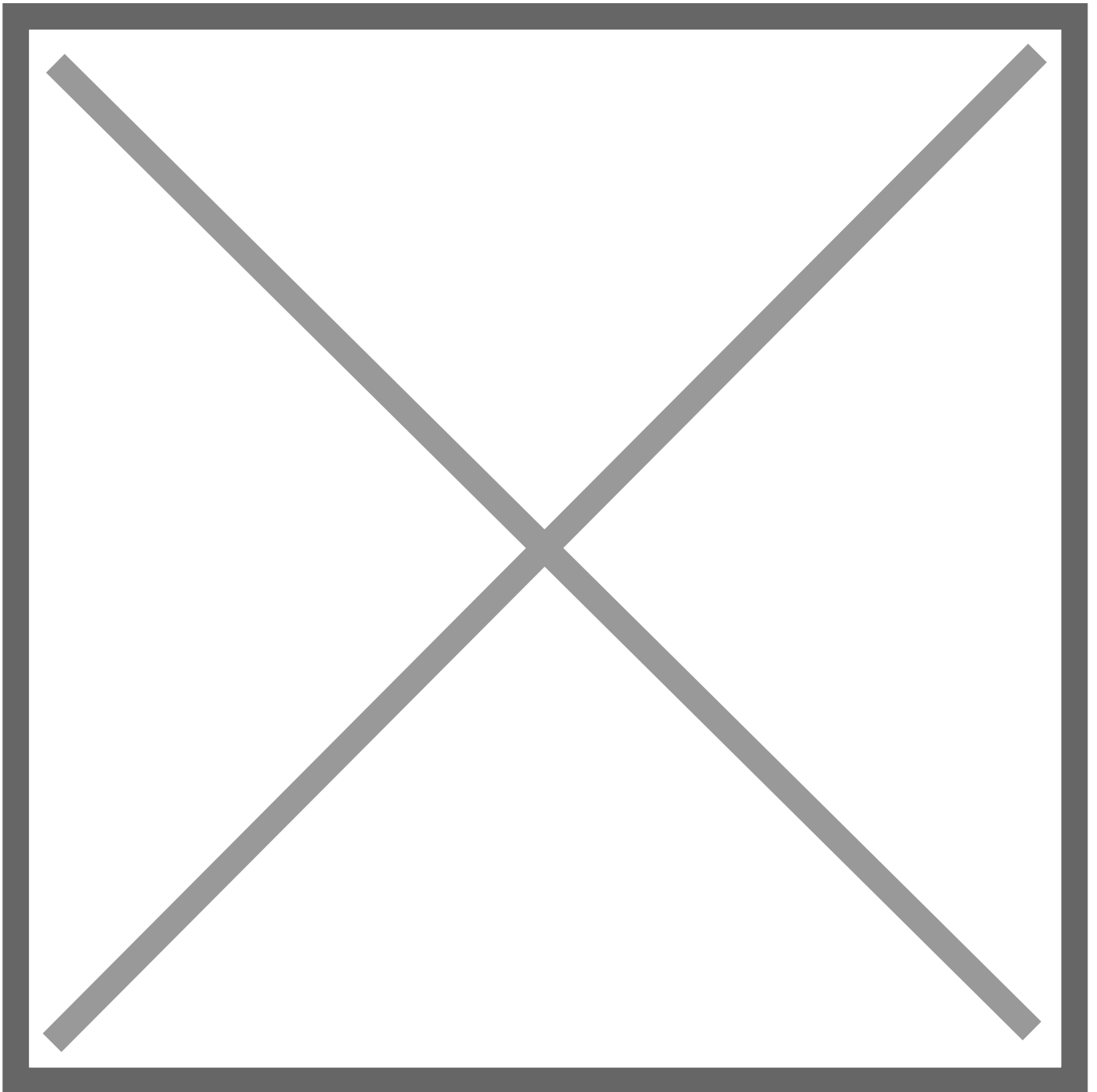
# Session 13

We have a new friend? And some more enemies still need to be dealt with.

As the afternoon goes on, with Stella basking in the sun to recharge her invocation, the others are in the clearing discussing the ambush plans. Soren gets the direction that Horsh will be coming from Grumman. Esme asks the hunters to setup a blind to get the jump on him, and Rua pulls out his crossbow. Soren asks him to go with the hunters and add his crossbow to the volley. "Sure, and maybe they can tell me how this thing works!" Soren shakes his head in exasperation in response. Stella is closest to the build of the dead bandit, but Esme says Stella is already shook enough, Kiva should wear his cloak and hat to be a distraction/stand-in for the dead bandit. When Horsh approaches and does the "pickles" "cheese" call and response they will spring the trap, with the hunters+Rua letting loose a volley and Soren rushing him. With the plan sorted they spend some time chatting idly, with Esme shaking out the hat and turning it inside out to shake out any bugs or things.

As dusk starts to fall everyone gets into position. Grumman and Kiva are at the clearing, the hunters and Rua are hidden behind a blind, Soren is hiding behind a tree to the side of the hunters and Esme and Stella move a ways away. They wait in position, a tense silence settling over the bluff. Minutes tick by, but eventually the sound of whistling starts to grow louder, and then steps on the rocky hillside. Horsh's head comes into view first, and as he crests the top of the bluff he calls out "Pickles!". A couple moments of silence go by, then Kiva answers "Cheese". Horsh takes one step forward, then pauses confused at a woman's voice responding to him. "Now!" Soren shouts and Rua lets loose with the crossbow. The bolt flies true, sinking into the dead center of the bandit's chest, and the three arrows from the hunters also hit home. Horsh staggers under the assault, then tips backwards and falls down the slope, crashing into seemingly every rock on the slope going down causing a small landslide of crashing and bouncing down the slope. The sound continues for several seconds and then silence falls once again on the dim forest.

"Well shit, I guess there is such a things as a TOO successful ambush" Soren muses. Worrying about the noise drawing the attention of the rest of the bandits, he asks Fio and the hunters to go down the hill and keep a lookout for anyone coming to investigate the noise, and Esme comes back into the clearing talking about recovering Horsh's body and hiding it. As people are about to start moving Grumman speaks up and says that he and Fuda will be expected back in camp, if they don't show that will tip them off. That gets everyone's attention and it is agreed that they should go directly to the camp and move the plan forward, with Kiva and Grumman leading in case they run into anyone. They do not encounter anyone and soon see firelight through the trees and they creep up to the treeline and see the camp down below the slope to the south.



They see a sheep pen with 4 sheep in it, a low building that looks like stables, some scattered tents and huts, another low building with a smoking chimney and a campfire in the middle of camp with benches around it. Three people sit around the fire playing dice while two others are at the south edge chopping and stacking wood. Grumman points out a woman sitting on a bench by the fire and the cook inside the building with the chimney as being decent folks that he would prefer don't die. With 5 of 8 bandits visible the group makes their plan. They don't want to charge the fortified camp head-on, Grumman and Stella will go to the edge of the light on the west and he will call out for help, saying he twisted his ankle in the dark. Hopefully Greta?, the woman Grumman knows, goes to help and he can convince her to stay out of the fight, then he will enter the camp and go to the cook, closing the door and keeping him out of the fight as well. If its someone else who goes then the hunters and Soren(with Treasa's crossbow) can ambush them and thin the numbers. Esme will approach from the east and block the narrow exit there while Treasa, Willem, Rua and

Kiva will circle around then charge down the south hill after the trap is sprung at the front. They agree if Grumman's plan works, they will count to 10 before charging.

Everyone gets into position, Kiva giving words of encouragement to Stella who is a little unsure of herself and her part in the plan. Once they are in position Grumman calls to the camp "Greta, come help us get back to camp, Horsh twisted his ankle!". Thankfully it is Greta who responds, coming alone out of the west entrance going towards his voice. As she approaches she realizes that it's not Horsh and hisses at Grumman "Whats going on here?". Stella tells her not worry, Helior is watching and will protect her. Grumman explains that the camp is about to be ambushed and she should get away while she can. Greta is unsure, but with reassurances from Stella that she will not be hurt she goes further down the path. Grumman takes a deep breath, and after a quick exchange with Stella telling her that she did well after she expresses the felt she didn't do a good job in her role he goes into the camp. He strolls in nervously, exchanges some greetings with the bandits around the fire with a strained chuckle and enters the cook's building and closes the door. While he is moving through the camp all the others sneak closer. Kiva stumbles on the south hill, tripper over her own feet and falling onto some branches and breaking them but Esme sent Eysa, Queen of Crows, to go and make a bit of noise to cover for the blunder.

Once everyone sees Grumman enter the cook's building they count to 10 then burst into action. Treasa runs headlong down the south hill and engages the woodcutters, one of whom Grumman identified as Bogden's second in command and the greatest threat. With Rua backing her up she enters into an exchange of blows with him, axe to axe. Soren and the hunters have snuck up to the west entrance and he takes a prepared shot against a bandit leaning against the stable while directing the hunters to shoot at two bandits remaining at the campfire. Soren's bolt flies true, pinning the bandit's head to the wall and killing him instantly. The hunters are less successful, by pure chance the bandit had reached down to pick up the dice as they loosed their arrows, causing 2 of them to fly harmlessly overhead and only one sticks in his arm. The bandit clutches his wounded arm and looks around wildly, utterly surprised by the ambush. Esme appears in the east entrance and bangs her mattock on her shield twice, causing the shield to resonate like a gong and yells a challenge "Lay down your arms before the might of Stonetop or die!". She can tell the bandits in front of her by the fire care only about their own lives, and leaves room for them to flee if they wish. Up on the south hill Kiva spots a stump of a tree that had fallen then been harvested for wood for the camp leaving the stump with root network attached that had been pulled up by the initial tree fall. Using her staff as a lever she starts trying to push the stump down the hill. Willem sees what she is planning and moves to help her, and between the two of them they are able to tip the balance and send the stump flying down the hill! It crashes into the second bandit that was chopping wood, missing Rua by inches, knocking the bandit back next to the campfire and landing on him with a crunch. The bandit does not get up. Stella has approached the west entrance, initially hanging back but has lit her lantern and attempts to bring the warmth of Helior to the battlefield to bolster her allies but the shock of the battle and the sight of the two dead bandits has broken her focus and the light grows bright for just a moment before sputtering and going back to its mundane level of illumination.

At this point a bandit appears from one of the huts brandishing an iron sword, trying to rally the remaining bandits together. This just paints a giant target on his back as Soren and the hunters switch targets to him, nailing him with multiple arrows and a crossbow bolt causing him to drop just

moments after emerging from the hut. Seeing him go down the two bandits at the fire run away from the archers, heading towards Esme at the east entrance. She stands there and demands they put down their weapons before fleeing, putting her mattock down behind her as well in a gesture of good faith. After a moments pause the first bandit says "Fuck it", drops his spear and darts past Esme, fleeing for the woods. The second bandit starts, dropping his weapon and chases after him calling for him to wait up. At the south edge of the camp Treasa and Rua are still fighting the 2nd in command, going blow for blow with the bandit voicing his surprise and yelling, somewhat rhetorically, "Who are you people?!". Rua overextends himself on a spear thrust, missing and losing his balance and the bandit scores a glancing blow on his back, slicing into him. Seeing this Kiva runs down the hill and steps in front of Rua in a protective stance. Seeing a woman with just a staff and Rua kneeling down bleeding the bandit focuses his attention on Treasa, the real threat. As he looks away Rua pushes through the pain, his anger burning brightly seeing Treasa being wounded and he suddenly acts, thrusting his spear with unerring accuracy into the side of the bandit. The blow is the final one in the battle, the bandit letting out a pained gurgle before sliding off the spear onto his knees, then onto his face.

With the noise of battle finally over, Grumman opens the door to the cook's house and steps out with the cook. He is an unsightly man, shot and squat with his knees having been cut off in some past fight. He looks around, observing the bodies and says "well that was over quickly." He then introduces himself as ... and Soren approaches introducing himself as well. ... is the quartermaster of sorts for this group, and indicates all the supplies are in the building he came out of, as well as a stew he has been cooking that will be ready in about 30 minutes. Soren goes inside to investigate what is in there. Stella is still standing at the west entrance, seeming frozen in place. Esme goes to her and offers some encouraging words, directing her to Rua and Treasa who are wounded from their clash with the 2nd in command. Stella heals them both, consuming the oil in her lamp and having to refill from her pack. Healing both of them strains her and seeing the carnage around her leaves her miserable.

End of Session!

Stuff in the camp:

1 Surplus worth of food and trade goods — heavy load for everyone if it were to be taken right away

Five usable bows, several bundles of arrows, six spears, four iron swords, one bronze sword, a handful of knives, two woodcutters' axes

Spare tack for one horse

Four sheep (will add a couple extra days to the journey back if you take them)

# Session 14

Server was down so this one is up late. There may be errors or missing names since I wasn't able to reference previous sessions.

In the silence after the battle people bustle around, making sure that the two who fled really stayed away and taking initial inventory. Oliga, who was lured away at the start, came back and slowly walked into the camp with her hands up and sat at the fire. Stella is also at the fire on another log, staring deeply into the fire. Treasa is level-headed after the fight and goes to stand watch, moving just outside the firelight with her back to one of the buildings with the head of her axe on the ground between her feet and her hands resting on the haft. Rua goes up to her and asks "So what now? Do I like cut something off their body? or take some teeth?". "Well," Treasa responds slowly, "Some people do take trophies, some people don't. Do you want to?" Rua shakes his head and says "No, that feels gross." He then goes to the fire and tries to strike up a conversation with her, asking if she is one of the good bandits. Oliga chuckles darkly and says there are worse out there.

After walking into the cookhouse Soren quickly steps out of view of the door, leans his back against the wall and slowly slides down, clutching his arms around his legs and starts sobbing quietly.

Esme has been looking around the camp for any Problems with her mind on the morale of the group. She notices that Soren, who is often telling stories and lightening the mood, is conspicuously absent. She goes to the cookhouse and upon seeing him sitting against the wall she moves to sit beside him in silence. Soren acknowledges her presence with a look and after sitting in silence for a moment speaks softly "It was too easy. One moment he was sitting there smoking his pipe, and the next he was dead. Maybe I would feel better if I fought them directly? I don't know, but it was too damn easy to kill them." Esme response, saying "It is easy, and that is why we have to make it hard in other ways." She spends some more time comforting him, talking about how he could spin the story about this adventure into one about why were there and what they were protecting. Then she directs him to start counting the loot while she goes out and deals with the bodies. She recruits the hunters and they strip the bodies of anything useful and drap them into the ditch on the east of camp, grabbing some tools and filling it in with dirt to cover them, and she begins soing their last rites.

Rua is still trying to draw Oliga into conversation when Stella suddenly consecrates the fire, casts an invocation on it causing it to change hue from cherry red to golden yellow, with coronal loops projecting from the burning logs. She reaches forward and takes a burning brand in hand, stands and walks west out of the camp without saying anything. Seeing her go, Rua cuts off his conversation with Oliga saying he has to check on her. He follows her out of the camp, asking what she is doing but she doesn't respond immediately. Instead he walks with her some ways outside of

the camp before she climbs up a small ridge and sits at the top. Rua sits next to her and asks why she left the camp. She replies that she was getting sick from the smell of blood and needed to get away, and that she doesn't feel like she belongs being around such violence. Rua sympathizes, sharing that he also feels out of place. Him coming along with the whole journey was probably a mistake, but sometimes we do reckless things. Rua playfully punches Stella's shoulder and smiles at her. She starts for a moment, stares at him then slowly returns the smile. At this time a soft blue light shines out through the trees. Rua asks Stella if she sees it as well and she does, and after a moment Rua says they should get back to camp.

Borshu wanders around for a bit, then gets into a whispered conversation with Oliga for a moment. When that is done he looks around and asks who is in charge? Soren steps out of the cookhouse, looking around and not seeing Esme speaks up and says "Me." Borshu says "Right, well are we gonna be hanged or what? If I am to face the gallows I would like to know." Soren replies "We have no plans to kill them, Grumman spoke for you and Oliga and he has been true to his word. We will probably ask for your help moving the stuff out of the camp, but as long as you don't try to stab us in the back we won't be killing you. But I am keeping an eye on you, if you try to backstab us I will know." Treasa is watching this exchange, looking keenly at the ex-bandits and can tell that they are not hiding their intentions. At this point Stella and Rua come back to the camp and tell the others about the ghostly blue light they saw. Esme also finishes the rites for the bandits and returns to the fire. Borshu speaks up saying yeah its ghosts, they noticed them around a few times and have just let them be. They haven't been any trouble.

The group then starts to discuss what their next move will be. It is decided early that they should go after Bogden and make sure this dirty business is done completely. The debate about what to do about all the supplies, but it is eventually decided that they will split the group. The hunters with Stella, Kiva, Grumman, Oliga, and Borshu will take the supplies and sheep and slowly make their way back to Stonetop while Treasa, Esme, Rua, Soren, and Willem pursue the riders to Hanson's Hill. Plan decided, they set a watch and each head to bed. Soren doesn't feel like its right to sleep in the dead people's beds so sleeps in the stable. Treasa sleeps in the light of the campfire.

In the morning the combat group gears up and heads out the west entrance of the camp, following the trail the horses have made. Soren draws on his lessons with Fio to follow the trail, through the soft ground of the hills it is easy to follow but sections of stony ground force him to make a guess and search for the trail on the other side. As they leave the hills towards the river the trail becomes more obvious as the ground is soft and marshy. They are able to cross at the ford with relative ease compared to their first crossing. On the other side Rua points out a curl of smoke from a campfire, that is most likely Bogden's camp. A very short discussion has the group agreeing to finish things tonight and move to sneak towards their fire. They move slowly and quietly, approaching the camp with little noise.

Back at the encampment, the group left behind begins packing things up with Oliga stacking piles of kindling around the buildings with a certain relish. The people remaining look to Stella for guidance and she simply states "Lets get everything we can carry and go." After everything is packed up Stella pours oil over the piles of kindling that Oliga set then walks up to one of the cabins and whispers "Be cleansed" to the pile of wood. She can feel that the wood is almost

wanting to burn and at her slightest word they burst into flame. She turns her back on the fire and shoulders her pack and moves with the others to leave the camp as a roiling black smoke starts to rise above the old encampment. It is a miserable trek, each person is loaded to their absolute limit with as much piled onto the sheep as well. None of the group are experienced shepherds and wrangling the sheep to all go in the same direction slows them down even further. They make it to the river as the sun goes down, all feeling their burdens twice over after a full days trek. Fio takes Stella aside and talks to her about potential routes back to Stonetop. They could go straight through the grasses back the way they came, but the sheep may be more of a problem, they are easy to lose in the grass. Alternatively they could go south and hit the maker's road and take that route. Stella asks about the possibility of Bogden seeing the smoke from the fire they set. Fio bites her lip and scans the horizon then says the smoke is already hard to see in the clouds, if they are on horses they will be even farther away. I doubt they saw it, and if they do come back they will run into the other group first. Stella falls silent for a moment and then says "Highway, lets take the highway." Fio nods and says once they get to the road it will be a couple days to get back to Stonetop.

End of Session!

# Session 15

Full house today, wrapping up the Bandit adventure!

Before sneaking up the plan is made thusly: We all sneak up around the camp and Soren will ambush whoever is on watch with a thrown spear. If he is able to silence the guard the rest rush the sleepers and pin them down to get information. If he can't silence the watcher its a fight and we rush the camp. Rua will go with Soren and step into the light, with his nonthreatening demeanour to momentarily distract the watcher giving Soren a clear shot.

The plan goes off without a hitch, Rua's distraction is perfect and just as the guard opens her mouth to wake the others, or maybe question Rua's presence, the spear sails from the darkness and pierces right through her throat, stifling whatever sound she was about to make. She topples to the ground and the surprise on her face jogs Soren's memory. He remembers her from his time in Gordin's Delve, she was leading the squad of watchmen who nearly clapped him in irons during his stay there and he narrowly escaped. Her name was Glenda. There is no time to puzzle over this as the others step into the light. Soren and Rua move to secure the sleeping Bandits

Its a quiet night back at the ford where Stella, Kiva and the others are sleeping. Stella and Kiva is woken by Fio who was on watch, saying she heard something outside their camp. On top of the usual nighttime sounds of crickets and wind blowing there is a rustling in the grass like something is moving in the dark. Kiva moves into a defensive crouch, holding her spear ready. Stella lights her lantern with a word, holding it high and casting light over the trampled grasses. The light is reflected in two orange/yellow dots coming from the dark, floating about 4 feet from the ground. Stella whispers to Kiva "what is that?" Kiva responds with panic in her voice "I don't know! I haven't seen anything like this before". "Don't you like...know things??" Stella replies in a hiss. "Usually yes!" Kiva snaps back, fear still in her voice. The lights move closer still, and as they approach Stella's light the massive furry body of a bear is revealed. Stella calls upon an invocation of Helior and holds her lantern directly towards the bear and commands "Back, bear!". A dark spot manifests inside the flame of her lantern and quickly grows to encompass the light as it turns a deep orange, eclipsing the darkness and appearing like an eye of the sun god himself. The bear had been turning towards the sheep which are huddled together at the edge of the light with the largest in front but it turns to Stella's light and pauses for a long moment. Suddenly it turns and lopes off into the night. Stella slowly lowers her lantern, the eye winking out and the light returning to its normal colour.

"Did...did I do good?" Stella asks nervously. "Yeah kiddo, you did real good" replies Fro, and Kiva also praises her impressive act. Kiva is still freaked out, that bear was massive! Fio agrees, it was a big one. It must have followed us down from the foothills, smelling us and the food we are

carrying. They would be hungry after hibernating all winter, I'm glad we didn't have to fight it. Things start to settle back to normal around the camp, but the others look at Stella with a new look, uncertain and awed by her display of power. Fio offers to maintain her watch until morning, its only a few hours away.

Back with Bogden in his predicament he starts naming names. "Mutra the Teeth, a boss from Gordin's Delve. He is a Big Deal. The other bosses, sometimes they get along and sometimes they don't. I get the impression this is a 'sometimes they don't' period." Esme asks him if he has proof and he asks to open his bag. Esme nods, and Bogden uses his finger and thumb to slowly push Treasa's axe away from his neck and sits up slowly and grabs his bag. From it he draws a letter and hands it to Esme. Esme reads it, "You debts are settled with Pagala and have new accounts with Hawtrey in Marshedge have been setup as agreed. Don't loot travellers with red hats, they will be carrying your payment." With that Esme asks who would want to stab Mutra in the back the most, who would want to use this information against him? Bogden says "Jahalin the Keys, he runs the foundry at Gordin's Delve." Esme then draws an oath from him not to hurt anyone from stonetop unless they do harm first, and if he does swear it then he is free to go. Bogden agrees and says he will be heading south to Marshedge, collect whatever he earned and move on south to get away from this mess of a situation. Esme then turns to the other bandit and asks her name. "Wulberga" she replies sullenly. Esme then gets her to swear a similar oath.

At this Rua starts to protest, asking why they are letting them go, they are right here and easy pickings. Esme and Treasa say that there is no need for anymore killing, there is no point now. Rua throws his hands in the air and storms away from the camp. Esme calls after him, he pauses and she says that the threat is finished but he heeps waling into the grass a little ways. Soren says "I got this." and goes after him with a quick step. While the bandits prepare to leave Esme goes through Bogden's bag and finds a ledger with various names of people and groups, with Hillfolk and followers of Helior circled in red. Esme asks them to leave their weapons and Bogden protests, saying they wouldn't stand a chance in the wilds without a way to defend themselves. Treasa cuts in and says there is a way to deal with this and asks them which way they are heading. Bogden points south, towards the road, and Treasa hefts two spears and lobs them into the darkness and says that will be their defense. Esme also hands Wulberga a whistle, who receives with a sarcastic comment about how useful it is. Just before they go Treasa hands Bogden some rations of food and he thanks her for her munificence with a smirk. Then they walk away towards the thrown spears.

The others start inventorying the camp and tending to the horses while Soren catches up to Rua. He hadn't gone too far and Soren starts by asking him "Hey dude, that wasn't really like you. Whats going on?" Rua turns to him and says that he knew Glenda, the woman Soren killed with the spear, she helped him and his mom when they were in need, why did she have to die and the other two live? It doesn't make any sense! Soren sighs and says he recognized her too, after the spear had struck, but it wasn't as pleasant a memory. She was the leader of the squad of watchmen that almost put him in chains. Rua then went on about how she was a person, same as the bandits he killed before, they were all people. Soren agreed, and said that had things been just a little different then it would have been Rua, or someone else they knew dying, and they are people too. We have to keep that in mind and only resort to violence when its required. Rua shakes his head and says it doesn't make any sense. How do you draw the line? When is killing OK and when is it

not? Soren shakes his head and puts his arm around Rua's shoulder and agrees with him, its a hard line to walk and its easy to step across it but they have to do what needs to be done but they have to keep trying. Rua nods and they start to walk back to the camp. On the way back they pass the two bandits who are leaving. Rua feels bad for them without their weapons and leaves them the spear he took when they ambushed them. Bogden accepts it with a small smirk then they part ways.

After Soren rides ahead to the town to let them know all is well and the others are returning with some guests? captives? TBD. The town is joyous at his arrival and peskering him for details. He gives the broad strokes but pleads tiredness and headed to his home and started composing the story of the adventure. Once everyone returns the next day almost the whole village has turned out to see them return triumphant. That night there is a big party and Esme starts tell the story as she had chronicled it. She gives the floor to Soren partway through and he weaves the four gods into the tale of their exploits, telling how the hand of Aratis guided them in their mission to defend the village and its people, the burning eye of Helior watched over them and channeled through Stella to ward away the darkness, and they fell upon the bandit camp with the thunder of Tor to break their defenses, and the loving embrace of Danu made space for mercy, sparing some and giving them a second chance at life.

Betta finds Rua at the party and sits next to him. He has a glass of Soren's whisky but it has been untouched for a while. As she sits she says that she is glad he is back, and asks if he was scared. Rua says that he is happy to see her again, and Esme and Treasa were there to keep them safe. Rua asks how her relationship with her mother is going. Betta replies that she is still trying to set her up with Sefan, but she has been finding ways to look busy and stay out of the house. Rua then softly talks about how he had to kill people, and he is really not sure about if it was right or wrong. Betta hugs him with one arm around his shoulder and says that is what they left the village to do, it was necessary and kept Stonetop safe. In this moment Rua leans forward to kiss Betta and she leans into it as well. Time stops for a moment between them, then it quickly snaps back when a villager taps them on the shoulder and says Betta's mother is watching. Rua says he doesn't care and leans in to continue the kiss and Betta embraces him again and a cheer goes up from the people around them. Esme is still telling the story at the front of the public house and starts talking about Rua's exploits and how we was a crucial member of the expedition to make sure Gwann had no grounds to interfere.

Kiva's father approaches her as the party goes on, saying "Hey kiddo, how are you feeling?" Kiva replies "Have you ever seen a bear before?" He laughs and says "Once, and only from a distance and thank the gods for that." "Well they are huge!" Kiva exclaims "as big as you thing they are they are even bigger!" He laughs and says "Well am proud of you." Kiva hugs him and saying "I love you Dad" and he hugs her back and kisses the top of her head and says "I love you too."

Wickla approaches Stella hesitantly and holds out to her an iron medallion with a sun engraved on it. She says "You saved my son and I wanted to make something for you. Its not much but I want you to have it." Stella takes it while stammering thanks and Wickla smiles and says "No, thank you." then moves on into the crowd. The pendant is surprisingly high quality, the engraving is prominent and clearly finely crafted. The children soon cluster around Stella, oohing and ahhing at the pendant as Stella puts it on, admiring it and pestering her with questions about the bear. Stella

says that it was scary to face it, they had better be careful if they ever encounter a bear. Anders puffs up his chests and proudly states that when he is grown up he will be able to take a bear in a fight. Stella just nods her head and says sure...

Treasa tests her constitution in a whiskey judging contest, sampling all the proffered brews from the towns distilleries. She doesn't make any qualitative judgments, but waxes eloquently about the merits of each of the drinks and weathers the cajoling of the competitors who want a firm answer.

# Session 16

Summer has come, the party recovers from their adventure in the warmth and safety of Stonetop.

The morning after the party the village rouses for the morning chores, with a large number of residents feeling much worse for wear. Treasa and Esme are both approached by Murdoch separately and asked to join him for lunch with a meeting of the elders. Esme asks who's cooking, Murdoch replied that he will be and Esme replies "Ah, excellent!". When midday arrives they have lunch together and Murdoch updates them on the happenings in the village while they were gone. Emmer was put in charge of the militia, and while he was bothersome by ordering people around and being all full of himself. His mother even made him a sergeant's cap. However, he did make things happen and the watchtowers were fully staffed, allowing a Crinwin incursion to be spotted early. The village rallied some folks and a show of force was enough to drive them back into the forest. Murdoch goes on to update them on some other minor details of happenings in the village.

After lunch is finished Murdoch pushes back his plate and says "Well you have brought back 3 bandits and expect us to do something about it." Esme says "We brought back 3 people who have not been given many chances in life. One of them provided concrete assistance to our cause that certainly tipped the odds in our favour, and one of the others is a non-combatant." Treasa cuts in here and says "He made the most amazing soup, you have no idea how delicious it was." Offed, who runs the public house, strokes his beard and says "Hmmm, is that so, I might want to have a chat with him then."

Mairwen says "Still, these people were threatening to burn our fields and kill us if we resisted just a few days ago! How can you trust them?" Esme lays out that Grumman and others were hired in Gordin's Delve and were not professional bandits. They were hired to target us, and other travellers on the roads, specifically the Hillfolk and followers of Helior. They were hired by Mutra the teeth. Treasa says it seems like Gordin's Delve is coming after Stonetop, or at least one of their lords is. Esme Honoured Cutha rubs his brow and says "Yes, you could certainly say that. I would rather not get embroiled in it." Treasa counters saying we are already involved. Mairwen speaks up again, saying that the three bandits are killers, and some killers might change and be better people but eventually one of them won't, and people will die. She says that the safety of Stonetop is greater than any individual. She knows she is probably going to get outvoted but she has to voice her concerns that they can't be trusted. Esme says that it is her job to be untrusting, and will be watching them closely. Mairwen sighs and says that Esme is only human, nobody is perfect and she hopes that she will never have reason to say "I told you so."

Treasa lays out the situation when they captured Grumman, pinned on the ground with his companion swiftly deceased by her hand. She goes on to say that they had a choice, let him go

and leave a bandit loose in the area, execute him, or give him a chance at a better life. What would Mairwen have chosen, had she been in the same spot? Treasa doesn't know the right answer even now, maybe there isn't one. Mairwen stays silent at this, and Olwinn speaks up and says that it seems like they will be letting them stay at least in the short term, they should find somewhere they should stay. Esme suggests lodging them with existing families so someone can keep an eye on them. Olwinn opens his mouth to continue but looks down at his tea and sees that it is rippling. Shaking is felt throughout the room and a loud rumbling can be heard in the distance as another earthquake makes itself known. Nothing major seems to happen, and Honoured Cutha is unable to say if this is an Omen, the gods work in mysterious ways. The discussion winds down with the folks finishing off the bread with some honey.

Feeling the earthquake and hearing the rumbling noise Rua is curious and goes to Kiva's attic room and knocks on her door. Kiva opens the door looking dishevelled and still waking up with bedhead. Rua asks if she felt the earthquake and she looks at her "alarm clock" contraption she uses to wake up in the morning that triggers some stones to fall and wake her up. The shaking and the noise was way to much to be her device so Rua says that maybe something has been uncovered, like Maker's stuff, and that they should go looking. Asking around the village they narrow down the noise to have come from the north.

Heading out they quickly find a section of the cliff has shifted, with freshly moved earth and rock clearly showing a landslide that fans out into the forest nearly to the stream. Rua studies the slide and to him it totally looks like someone could be lowered down on a rope to take a closer look. He suggests this to Kiva who also takes a close look at the recent landslide. She sees that the top of the cliff appears to be pretty stable, there isn't much danger of a further slide being triggered. There is also no trees or fence posts or anything to tie the rope off to so if someone gets lowered on a rope it likely end with them falling as it would be one person's strength against the other's weight. She peers farther down the rockslide and she can see something glinting in the bright summer sunlight. She points it out to Rua and he can see it too. They plan to take the stairs to the base of the cliff and climb up from the bottom, but Kiva knows that there is likely still some loose rock ready to shift and its a great place to twist an ankle with the jagged rock and unsteady footing.

They head down to the stairs and after about 20 minutes they are at the bottom of the slide looking back up at where they were. They can see the glittering among the rocks more clearly from this angle, and Rua starts to climb up the slope to take a closer look. He carefully picks his way up the slope and as he gets closer the rock clearly has a greenish orange sheen. Kiva recognizes the colour and it is clear it is some sort of copper ore. Large metal deposits haven't been found around Stonetop in a long time, this must be some undiscovered deposit. Rua says "Oh is this some sort of mining? Dad really didn't like that kind of thing. Maybe we should just cover it up and never speak of it?" Kiva refutes this, saying it is likely very valuable and she really wants to take a closer look with her magnifying glass. She finds a fist sized chunk that has plenty of the shiny bits on the outside and says that she will inspect it, and once she has thoroughly inspected it they can show it to the elders. They make the trek back to the village and Kiva takes the ore to her room and starts to look closely at it, poking and prodding it to learn more about it.

Nothing else particularly interesting happens in the coming weeks, with each of the party members attending to their own personal projects. Esme focuses on learning more about the fey, Thistledown in specific, as well as slowly introducing Soren to more civic duties and ceremonies of Aratis. She also keeps an eye on the three new members of the village to see how they are fitting in. One day she ropes him into helping her with introducing the ex-bandits and assimilating them into the village. She asks what his thoughts are about where they could fit in. He says that Borshu is the easiest, he would fit in well at the public house and Offed would love to have him cooking. Esme asks about Oliga, she is a hard read. Soren thinks about this, but asks her why she is going to him specifically. Esme starts to talk about how Soren is well travelled and a good reader of people, and is skilled in stories and people react to that. Soren puffs up a bit at the praise, but presses her further, asking why him specifically. There are many other people in the village more respected and capable of finding them a place. He does know people, and he knows that Esme always has a second angle, and he wants to know what it is regarding him that has her so invested. She explains that even back on their first journey to the ruined village with the singing stones that she can tell that Soren has that spark. He steps up when its needed and makes things happen. She has plans for everyone, but specific plans for him and they are good plans. Still not getting a super clear answer Soren sighs and says that if helping the ex-bandits fit in is part of that plan then he he is willing to help. Esme then tasks him with winning over Oliga, and says that he can use her name and whatever resources this requires, within reason. Soren leans back and strokes his chin, starting to think of angles to get her invested in the village.

Rua is interested in developing a skill for himself. Betta's previous words about him not having any prospects have stuck with him and his thoughts turn to woodworking as a productive trade. He approaches Elaim and asks him to teach him how to work with wood. Elaim says that they are getting low on lumber, they haven't made a trip to the foothills to gather wood in some time, but starts him off with splitting logs and planing them into planks. It is not creative work, nor is it easy, but Rua takes to it quickly and finds satisfaction from turning a lumpy cylinder of wood into straight and even planks.

Aside from his mission from Esme, Soren spends some more time with Fio, learning woodcraft and the hunters craft. In addition, Soren wants to be the BEST distiller in Stonetop, but right now he is not. Distilling liquor is fairly easy, but a big part of it that hasn't really been explored is the wood in which it is aged. Having barrels made from a wood that others don't have would be a clear way to make his brew stand out from the others. Right now oak, ash, and elm are most commonly used to make barrels. Maybe some apple or cherry wood would make a unique flavour? He decides to keep an eye out when he goes into the forest with Fio.

Treasa is thinking about the bandits and the Crinwin attack and wants to take action to have the village be more prepared for whatever may come. She has an idea to train the militia to work together as a cohesive unit, to be more confident in themselves and able to react quickly and effectively to future threats. However, this will take a decent amount of resources and time so she approaches each of the village elders to get their opinion and persuade them of the necessity of her plan. Mairwen is surprisingly on board, though it aligns with her goals of keeping stonetop safe. Honoured Cutha is a harder sell, but by pointing out the recent dangers and that this will keep the people fit and active through the summer months he comes to agree with her in the end. Treasa also approaches Esme while fetching water from the stream at the base of the cliffs. Esme

does eventually agree, but not before extracting agreement from Treasa regarding designating a leader of future expeditions to forestall long debates in critical moments when decisive action is required.

Later in the evening the bell in front of the public house starts ringing, calling a town meeting. As a crowd starts gathering it is apparent that there is an argument going on. Murdoch stops ringing the bell and steps between Emmer and Eliam who have been arguing about how they should gather lumber. "OK that is enough, lets put this to a vote." he says. Emmer speaks first, "It has been 10 years since we have seen one of the forest folk, a full decade! Sure we had a deal with them, but once someone dies that means you don't have to keep to the deal anymore. We can rig a pulley on the bluff to haul logs up to the village and sleep in our own beds rather than stay in a logging camp for weeks at a time." Esme gets a grim look on her face hearing this. Emmer steps forward to speak, his words coming haltingly "Its not just about wood, we had a deal with the folk and those of us who made that deal are long dead and we still keep to it." Esme speaks up as well, saying that the forest folk were doing them a favour by signing that compact. After a little more back and forth Treasa steps up and says "There appear to be 2 main questions, are the forest folk actually dead? And what is the original wording of the compact? Maybe there is a condition or stipulation we are missing. We talk about it a lot but knowing the exact wording would be useful. Esme, is it recorded in the Chronicle?" Esme replies, laying out the terms. "The deal was that no member of Stonetop would cut a living tree, and the Forest Folk would come to the village's aid in time of need."

Treasa nods, asking next when was the last time they aided us and held up their part of the deal. The Chronicle's last recording of assistance is a tough winter 13 years ago, where they left fruits and other food outside people's doors for a few weeks that let the village survive until spring. Rua speaks up and says that 7 years ago someone helped him and his mom when they were travelling before they came to Stonetop, he was young and doesn't remember much but she always told him that it was the Forest Folk. Emmer feels the crowd slipping away from him and brings up the blood plague of 5 years ago, where were the Forest Folk when we needed them? Esme prompts Soren to speak and he clears his throat before saying that overall he aligns with Emmer, Soren's parents died during the blood plague along with many other friends, families and loved ones. Where were the Forest Folk when Stonetop was in need? However, breaking a generations long agreement should not be done lightly. Indeed there was a reason the deal was made in the first place and they should seek more information before taking such drastic action as felling the trees of the Great Forest. Murdoch stops the discussion and says that an expedition to the forest will be planned to determine the fate of the Forest Folk and shed light on the compact and if it should be upheld. In the meantime they will need to undertake one more logging trip to the foothills to supply the village with the lumber required.

End of Session!

# Session 17

Whats going on with the Forest Folk? Only way to know is to go looking!

The next morning Kiva is nose-deep in books about rocks and ore, but her studying is interrupted by a knock on the door. "Hun, there is someone here to see you...? Strange folk at the door." comes her Dad's call. Kiva quickly brushes off her rumpled clothes and tidies herself up and opens the door, asking who was looking for her. Her father says that there are some friendly and rich people there who are asking to see her. Kiva is unsure about this, friendly and rich are not often seen together. She says she will wash and go to see them so he leaves to let them know she will be coming shortly. She cleans herself up and then heads to the Public House where she finds a crowd starting to gather. She spots Soren near the edge and goes to speak with him, asking what people are saying about the strangers. They are from Lygos, a place of prosperity and science, both natural science and magical science. They look the part with clean, square-cut beards and fine clothes Soren doesn't know, but they are rich and must be looking for something. Why else would they come to Stonetop?...His eyes quickly open wider, seeing this as an opportunity to test his whiskey on unfamiliar taste buds. He asks Kiva to talk to them while he runs and gets his latest brew, and when he gets back she can introduce him! Kiva agrees hesitantly and Soren dashes off to grab his whiskey and some cups.

Kiva takes a deep breath and studies the men before approaching. She knows that Lygosian's have a penchant for cunning speech, with a legal history that is much more detailed than anything around here and very good at twisting the truth to make it appear as something else. Keeping this in mind Kiva approaches them, introducing herself and asking them what they want. One man wearing a stained travel cloak introduces himself as Foruza. They have been looking for a colleague of theirs named Baraz. He was travelling north seeking knowledge and adventure and we fear he may have come to a bad end. He was a scholar and he might have consulted with other learned people, so we were hoping you can help us. Kiva asks for more details about this 'bad end'. They don't have any details. He motions towards his cloak which is emblazoned with a round shield of bronze studded with stars. "I am of the order of the three bronze stars. It sounds more musical in our language but its an organization that seeks to gather knowledge about the makers and things that were lost. Baraz also had an artifact with him that had some significance to us, if we cannot find him we could at least get the treasure back." Kiva humms and commiserates with them, it is a shame when someone goes travelling alone and meets a bad end, then bandits scavenge all they have.

Foruza starts to describe the gem, motioning with his hands about the size of a person's head and the colour and lustre match the looks of Kiva's Mind Gem she found years ago in the village with the moaning cliff. Kiva tries to hide her recognition and stammers out that she hasn't seen it,

giggles interrupting her speech. Soren comes back at this time and steps into the conversation and introduces himself and offers a sample of his whiskey in an attempt to cover for her obvious lying. Foruza is not distracted and stokes his beard, but does accept the offer of a drink, though only one. While Soren is laying out the cups and making small talk Kiva points at the bar of the public house to show off the stores they have and while they look away she slips some concoction she has handy on her belt into one of the cups. It is a laxative she likes to use to play pranks on people. Soren sees this and rearranges the cups to make sure its in front of Foruza when he settles down. Soren regales the quality of his drink, saying just one sip and they will know its the best around, then raises his cup with the others and Foruza gives a small toast and they all drink.

While talking to them Soren is analyzing the group and it becomes clear that Foruza is the only scholar, the other three are servants or bodyguards. They are dressed more roughly and are well armed. After a few sips Foruza starts asking if they know any myths or legends of the area and Soren is more than happy to tell some stories, like how the giant bones at Titan Bones came to be. Anytime his cup gets low Soren offers to top him up and he accepts the first time. By the end of the second cup he is starting to look very white, and suddenly he interrupts the conversation to excuse himself and quickly moves out the back door of the public house. With him gone, Soren continues to apply whisky to the remaining group. He asks about the liquor they have in Lygos and while two of them give non-committal answers one is happy to talk about the fortified wine, the barrels that have been used for aging wine can be used for other liquors later for a distinct change in flavour. He keeps feeding them booze and tries to get them to loosen up and give more details and while they do wax eloquent on their homeland and customs they glance at each other and change the subject anytime the Mind Gem is brought up. They do say that they have heard from people who have seen him pass through, people from their order are rare enough around here, however the trail ends at Marshedge. Soren warns them about the Claws and how they run the town and drown people who cross them in the swamp.

Sensing they aren't getting anything out of this group Kiva surreptitiously signals Soren that they should get out of there. He makes a show of draining his cup and bids them enjoy Stonetop's hospitality, he has other business to take care of. Soren is trying to make a smooth exit but as soon as he says this Kiva gets up and grabs his arm and practically drags him out of the door. They go some ways away from the public house and Soren asks her what she put in his drink, did she just kill him? He walked out so suddenly. Kiva explains it won't cause lasting harm, just keep him out of the way for a bit while they figure out what to do. Soren doesn't know, but decides to go to Esme for advice, and to let her know there are dangerous strangers in town. He suggests to Kiva that she should hide the Gem somewhere, maybe they can get the strangers to go look somewhere else if they can't find it here. She agrees and they split up.

Soren goes down to the Chronicle and lights a torch to enter and calls out for Esme. He finds her a little ways in, hunched over a section of wall re-marking the letters that spell some ancient story. Seeing his haste and excitement she asks him what is going on and he fills her in on the details. They were both with Kiva when she found the Mind Gem in the unnamed ruined village with the stone cliff that sang with the wind. Esme deduces these might be the cultists that were after the Gem's previous owner, while Soren thinks they are his colleagues. Either way, they are potential threats to the village as either group would kill to get their hands on such a relic. They decide to spread the word, first going to Treasa to see if she can stay with Kiva in case they come looking

before we are ready.

Elsewhere Rua has been going to everyone around the village who will give him the time of day and asking them about the Forest Folk. Many people are glad to share what they know and he is bombarded with stories and myths about the Folk, but nothing concrete or actionable to help search for them in the Forest. He is starting to think about giving up this approach when he sees Angrad at her house. He asks her and she tells a story about an affair she had with a Forest Folk man that went on for a little while but she eventually broke it off from feelings of guilt. He would still come back every now and then to check in on her, but the last time he came around was 12 years ago, and I knew something was wrong. Usually the Folk are so full of life it made you feel more alive just being around them but he was nervous and distracted by something. Rua tells her he had no idea, and expresses sympathy for him and promises to keep this story secret. Then he asks if he had left anything for her. She says yes and takes off an earring that is made of polished wood in a spiral, tapering down thin enough to pierce her ear and dangle there.

Rua has seen this kind of symbol before, not knowing their meanings, carved into trees and chiseled into rocks in the forest. He never said what it is meant but he wanted me to have it. She told her late husband Rusa that she bought it from a passing trader. She didn't lie to him much, but she did here. After some more chatting Angrad they say their goodbyes and she sends him off with some scones. While he is walking away from her house he sees Kiva walking nervously towards her home. He offers her a scone and asks her what's up. Kiva catches him up on the situation and he immediately offers to help. She asks him if he has a bag or something that can hold the gem and help her hide it. He says he has just the thing and takes her to where he sleeps (it's a barn on the edge of town) and when they arrive he opens the door and shows off his first piece of furniture, a crate! It is next to his bed with a small candle-holder on top. He says they can hide the Gem in the box, surely the strangers wouldn't go looking for it in a barn.

Kiva likes this idea and they take the crate to her house and slowly lower the Gem into it. It glows when they touch it, and it feels like a heartbeat is coming from inside. The glow concerns Rua, the crate is not airtight and has many gaps light could shine through, but after they put it down the light dims and goes out. They hastily grab the crate and start carrying it back to Rua's barn. Stella sees them hustling through the village carrying a crate and this piques her curiosity and she follows them, not interrupting yet. When they get back to the barn they take the crate inside and Rua says that they should hide it in Esme's caves, surely they wouldn't go looking there at the bottom of the bluff. As they are making plans Stella knocks on the door. This startles Rua and Kiva, he tells her to go hide, he will check the door. He opens it nonchalantly, ready to lie his ass off but upon seeing Stella he ushers her inside and quickly shuts the door behind her. Stella asks him what he and Kiva were doing, carrying a crate around. Rua hums and bit and says that Kiva should explain it, and calls for her and tells her it's alright it's just Stella.

Kiva fills Stella in on the situation, and Stella wants to know what the Mind Gem is, she wasn't there when Kiva found it. Kiva pops open the lid of the crate and explains that she found it on a dead guy in a cave, and when she picked it up she saw a vision of him being chased by a deranged cult. She also explains that it can answer questions, not by talking but by showing her images in her mind. Rua is curious and wants to try asking a question, but Stella warns him about powerful magics like this and Kiva backs her up saying it's not a great feeling, it leaves you with a strange

sensation after you ask it a question. Rua decides its not worth it, and says he is going to Esme and Kiva should get out of the barn and be seen somewhere else so the strangers don't get suspicious. He asks Stella to watch the gem until he gets back from Esme's.

Rua books it through Stonetop and runs down the precarious stone stairs to the Chronicle two at a time. As he is about to enter the cave he runs in to Soren and Esme coming out. At first Rua isn't sure if Soren knows whats going on, but Soren immediately tells him that strangers are looking for the Mind Gem and he should not mention anything about it at all. Rua says "Oh good so you know whats going on, we hid it in my place and Stella is there watching it." Esme questions this, asking if he left the Lightbearer of Stonetop alone with an ancient artifact when there are people in town possibly ready to kill for it? Rua stammers a bit at this, saying that Stella can take care of herself. They need to get the strangers out of Stonetop and allay any suspicions, killing them won't work if they truly come from a scholarly society they won't leave this sort of thing alone. She comes up with a plan to trick them, get a different crystal from Orlando who is a bit of an odd sort but has a decent collection of fascinating crystals. Soren adds that they can pull the 'dumb country bumpkin' approach and pretend they thought this fake crystal was magical and gave the mgood luck or something, and Rua pipes in saying that Stella can make things glow, that can throw them off too! Esme instructs him to get Treasa and go to his home and make sure everything is OK with Stella and the Gem, and Soren will go to Orlando to get a fake crystal while she distracts the strangers until everything is ready.

End of Session!

# Session 18

One player has left the group, Treasa is now an NPC. How will her story go from here? We will find out together.

Rua is the first up to the stairs and he runs directly to Treasa's house but she isn't home. Without much time, he decides to go bring the box with the Mind Gem to the Chronicle himself. The potential cultists don't know who he is so he walks suavely through the village towards his home and picks up the crate, and with Stella he nonchalantly brings it back to the stairs and takes it down to the cave. At the bottom of the stairs he looks around and seems he was not followed. He then takes the crate inside the cave.

When Soren got to the top of the stairs he recalls that Orlando's house is in the north of the village, but he doesn't want to risk getting intercepted by the Order of the Three Bronze Stars so he goes south, the long way around the village keeping to the outside of the low wall. He makes it to Orlando's house without incident and knocks on the door. It creaks open and Orlando's face peeks out and he says "Oh, Soren, what brings you by?" Soren says he wanted to come by and see some of Orlando's stones and crystals. He welcomes him in, opening the door wide with a loud creak.

The house is dark and smells kinda weird with stuff piled all over the place. Orlando brushes some stuff off a chair onto the floor and gestures for Soren to take a seat. Soren picks his way across the floor and sits on the chair, and asks to see the biggest crystals he has. Orlando is more than happy to show off his treasures and brings out a dozen or so assorted shiny stones and chunks of quartz, the largest about 4 inches long. Soren asks leading questions about them and Orlando is more than happy to talk about them, where he found them and describes the different types. He also talks about some magnetite he has, it polishes up very well.

After some more chatting Soren takes a breath and says "Well, I do have a reason to come see you today. See, there's some outsiders from Lygos, real city folk, and they are looking for a giant magic crystal", he holds his hands in front approximating the size of a person's head. "They think someone in Stonetop has it, and they look pretty rough and tumble so we want them to leave. Can I borrow one of your crystals to use as a ruse so they think we don't have the one they are looking for?" Orlando winces when Soren says the word 'borrow' but after a moment he nods and says "well if its for the good of Stonetop I suppose I can lend you one. Make sure to always carry it wrapped up so it doesn't break, and I do expect to have it back." Soren thanks him wholeheartedly and safely couches the wrapped up 4 inch chunk of quartz into the crook of his arm. As he leaves Soren says "I will return this to you, and when I do you can show me that magnetite you were talking about." He then retraces his steps, moving along the edges of the village back to the Chronicle.

Kiva has been thinking about how to stay hidden and decides to make a disguise for herself. She goes home and gets some ash out of the fireplace and rubs it into her hair to stain it black and

borrowing one of her mother's scarves and wraps it around her head and face. She decides to look for the rest of her friends so sneaks around the village looking for them while trying to stay out of sight. She doesn't see anyone following her and after a bit of time wandering around she sees Soren approaching the top of the stairs down the cliff face. She goes up to him and says "Hey Soren, what are you up to?" Soren starts a small amount on seeing Kiva's hasty disguise and says that it's not much of a disguise, she is the only one around wrapped in a scarf at noon on a summer's day. Kiva brushes him off saying "well it worked, nobody followed me here I think." Soren then updates her on the current plan to use the crystal he got from Orlando to trick the Order members. They then go down the stairs together.

The Chronicle starts with a 30 foot tunnel that opens into a cavern, and from there another 5 tunnels branch out and it repeats this pattern deep into the cliffside. It is a maze for sure, but one who knows the stories can tell the way through the caves based on the progress of the ages. There is one cave somewhat near the entrance where the writing doesn't match the rest of the style of Stonetop and the walls are unnaturally smooth. It is fairly out of the way, and also defensible in a last resort. This is where Rua stashes the Mind Gem, and waits near the front of the cave to guard and watch out for the strangers. When Kiva and Soren arrive, Rua is fooled by her disguise and stands protectively in front of the crate while interrogating her. Once she speaks he recognizes her voice and relaxes. Kiva points this out to Soren to show her disguise totally works, and he is forced to concede the point.

Soren carefully brings out and unwraps the quartz before handing it to Stella and asking if she can work with it. Stella sits on the floor crossing her legs, holding the crystal in both hands. She bows her head and at first it seems like nothing is happening, but soon a small glow starts in the centre of the quartz and it grows and grows until it is the brightest light in the cave, casting shadows on the walls. She stands and hands it back to Soren, saying she doesn't know how long it will last. Soren is in awe at the display, he was expecting some subtle pulsing and not such brilliance. He cradles the quartz in his hands for a moment and lets the soothing heat it is emanating suffuse him. Slowly he turns to Kiva and before handing it to her says that he promised to bring it back to Orlando so please be careful with it.

The group begins to discuss how to trick the strangers, and Rua suggests Kiva plays as a fortune teller at the midsummer festival in a week, and when they see her with the fake crystal it will be obvious that it's not the real Mind Gem. It's a good plan, but Soren thinks they can finish this today and Kiva agrees. They settle on Kiva going to her attic lab with the glowing quartz, and Soren will suspiciously walk through the public house to catch their attention and get them to follow him. Rua wants to go with them, but Eliam has been working hard on the preparations for the Midsummer festival and he has to go help him. First Rua finds Stephen and asks him to watch the crate in the Chronicle until he comes back. It doesn't take much persuading, this gets Stephen away from the summer heat and out of helping with the preparations for the festival.

Esme's role this whole time has been to run interference, and when she finally crests the top of the stairs after the Soren and Rua she heads to the public house. There she plays the act of chatty old woman and goes on and on with roundabout stories about rocks and gems that never seem to end. The entire time she gets this feeling that there is a 4th strange presence in the room, other than the three in front of her. When she turns her head it's like she can *almost* see it in the corner

of her eye. She goes to the kitchen and boils a pot of water, and when she gets back to the hall she pretends to trip and splash boiling water in the direction she feels the 4th presence. However, as she starts the feint her knee gives out and she falls for real, smacking her knee into the floor and scalding her hand and arm. Several people jump up to help her, and one of the strangers starts in his chair. They help her up and get some rags to mop up the mess, and she brushes off all concern and joins the table again to continue the conversation.

The chat always turns back to scholarly matters, with the strangers asking mostly about nearby Maker's ruins and any stories about them. Esme isn't able to get anything else out of them, and just keeps the conversation flowing. A little bit later Soren approaches the central square, checking to see if the Lygosans are outside. They are not so he proceeds inside, hugging the wall and glancing at the Lygosan's waiting until he catches the eyes of one of them then quickly looking away. He goes into the kitchen and asks for a little bit of food to take with him. Auvan is more than happy to pack up some bread and assorted fruits for him. Borshu is also there, the chef from the bandit camp. He and Soren make some small talk, and Soren is glad to see he is fitting in well. Gathering the food, Soren suspiciously sticks his head out the kitchen door before hurrying directly to the back door of the building. Esme calls out his name and he raises his hand to his face to cover it from view. Esme tuts and says "that young man is always up to no good." 30 seconds or so one of the Order members says it is his turn for his stomach to unsettle him and leaves by the back door to visit the privy.

Soren doesn't know if the ruse worked or not but he keeps playing the part, shuffling from building to building and looking around before crossing the street, though he is careful not to look behind him. When he arrives at Kiva's he enters and her parents are there in the main room. He gives them the food and says he wanted to bring them something. Her parent's have always been such kind people. After spending a bit of time having a bite to eat and a pleasant chat he thanks them for their hospitality and goes upstairs to see Kiva. As he leaves he lets them know to send up any of the Lygosan's if they arrive, Soren and Kiva talked with them at the public house. Back at the public house, the stranger who left to use the bathroom returns after a few minutes and the day goes on without any further incident. They end up bunking at the public house for the night, sleeping on the floor by the hearth.

At the end of the day Rua returns to the Chronicle to spend the night watching over the Mind Stone. He sends Stephen home, and after some time Esme arrives as well. They settle in and soon Esme approaches the crate, opening it up to look at the Mind Gem. It is not every day you are protecting a magical artifact and she is naturally curious about it. Before she can reach out and pick it up Rua calls her out, saying it is Kiva's and she wouldn't appreciate Esme meddling with it. Esme is conflicted for a moment, but restricts herself to studying it visually.

Back in Kiva's room, her and Soren wait impatiently for one of the Order members to show up. They get more and more restless as time goes on, until at sundown the enchantment on the quartz fades and it goes back to normal. At this Soren accepts that the plan has failed, and it is at a loss for what he should do. Should he stay with Kiva in case they come for her at night? Or go guard the Mind Gem, their actual objective. He muses this out loud, and Kiva assures him she can handle herself, she has all sorts of traps and mechanisms prepared for something like this. Soren stops moving completely, still any stray fidgeting and glances around the corners of the room. "Alright if

you think you'll be fine I am going to go to the Chronicle" he says as he carefully steps to the door without touching anything. He heads to the Chronicle, meeting the others and the night passes uneventfully.

Kiva spends the time sitting reading in the corner of the room where she can clearly see the door, and she finds intrusive thoughts coming into her brain about how small this backwater of a village is, how she will never really amount to anything here. What interesting thing has come out of Stonetop? They export whisky and farmers for Tor's sake. She tries to brush off the thoughts but pervading feelings of doom and despair loom over her. However, in the back of her mind she realizes something is not right, something is pulling these thoughts out of her brain. She looks up and sees a shadowy spirit hanging above her in the room with a dark aura. It seems to be searching for something, rattling the shelves around the lab. As Kiva shakes herself she feels the connection between her and the spirit break, her mind stinging from the backlash. The spirit turns to face her and she sees two burning eyes in the centre of the miasma cloud. Seeing its focus on her she recognizes it from one of her books, its a Dhool spirit. It is not strictly undead, having never been alive, but is a being from the Other Side of the door. They cross the border to investigate and learn about the physical world. They are purely nocturnal, sunlight renders them weak and powerless. Like almost all spirits they are usually bound to something, and Dhool feed off fear. It is said that they can only be harmed by those who have mastered their fears.

CLIFFHANGER ENDING

# Session 19

What spooky scary adventures await?

Kiva knows that sunlight is the bane of the Dhool but the crystal has long since gone out. She decides to do the next best thing which is run to Stella, Helior's light will counter this thing. She springs through the air, aiming to flip through the room and avoid the traps she had set up to get out as quick as possible, and she gracefully slides over the stair trap but trips a wire that triggers a bucket to fall from a high shelf and it bonks her in the head and she falls down the rest of the stairs in a tumble. She winds up on her ass, and pushes backward with her feet until her back hits the door, then levers herself to her feet and books it outside. She starts running right away, but as she looks over her shoulder there is a moment where the figure you see at the door of the building isn't the spirit but Kiva herself, 30 years from now with graying hair, rough peasant's clothes, and looking rough. A thought occurs to her that this is who she will inevitably be, a nobody who never amounts to anything. Her feet are already moving though, and she feels a pain in the back of her head as it drains a portion of her lifeforce as she pulls away. Beneath the village Esme starts awake, realizing that she never mentioned the additional presence she felt.

Kiva arrives at the orphanage where Stella sleeps with Granny Eadna and the kids. The door is latched to protect against wandering children so she is forced to bang on the door and yells out Stella's name over and over. This wakes pretty much everyone in the building and Anders begins to cry. Stella opens the door with a grumpy look on her face, and asks what Kiva wants. Kiva is taken aback by the look on her face and says "listen, I'm sorry to wake you up but I am being chased by a demon and really need your help! Please!" Stella's face turns serious and she turns around to shoo the kids who are gathering curiously behind the door back inside the sleeping room. Lona goes to wake Granny Eadna as well. When Stella steps out the door and closes it behind her she calls through to lock the door. A faint "Okay!" comes out from inside, and as she turns around the sound of the wooden slat falling into place echoes hollowly into the night.

Standing outside with Kiva, the night is deadly quiet. Stella brought her lantern and reflexively lights it. She then consecrates the flame and invokes the Dancing Light of Helior. The burning flame separates from the lantern and floats up above Stella's head, illuminating the street around them. Some heads donned with night caps poke out of doors and windows to check out what is going on as they walk down the street towards Kiva's home. When they arrive the light bathes the front of the house. The night is still preternaturally quiet, but there is a faint murmuring coming from inside the house. Kiva steps inside and looks around, but it looks much the same as she left it just a few minutes ago. The murmuring gets a little louder, clearly coming from Kiva's parent's bedroom. Kiva calls out to them "Mom? Dad? This is serious, I need to know if you are home. Are you there?"... Silence is her response. She steps forward quietly, with Stella and her light following

behind, and pushes open the door of the bedroom.

Sleeping in their bed is her parents, but her mother is weakly stirring and mumbling in her sleep. Hovering above her is the Dhool, and as the door opens it floats up towards the ceiling to get away from the growing light. As Stella sees the spirit for the first time she is suddenly aware that Kiva is not there, and her parents aren't there and the ghost is not there, and it is silent. She realizes with the certainty of dreams that she is the only person alive in the village. Just before she succumbs to this vision she bursts out of it, feeling the pain of the Dhool sucking her life force. She sees it move up into the corner of the room to get away from the light, and Stella moves her flame forward into the room, fully illuminating the spirit. It seemed to fold into itself, letting out a pained screech and rushes out the window into the night. Stella dims the light and Kiva turns to her giving her heartfelt thanks for saving her parents.

Esme has just woken up Soren when she hears footsteps outside the Chronicle. Bedwyr comes running in, and tells Esme that Granny Eadna sent him, there has been a bunch of shouting and you should go check it out. Esme wakes Rua up and makes sure he knows what is going on and asks him to guard the crate, and she takes Soren with her and explains to him the presence she felt in the public house while they run up the stairs.

Back at Kiva's house, her father sits up in bed and rubs his eyes blearily and asks what is going on? He turns to his wife and she is laying there unresponsive, her skin an ashen grey tone. Kiva calls out to her and shakes her, but there is no response. She turns to Stella and pleads with her to help. Stella rushes forwards, the dancing light going out as she reignites her lantern and prays to Helior to bring his holy light to heal Kiva's mother. Her lantern's flame grows and she passes it over her brow and the golden light suffuses the room as the colour returns to her skin. Kiva's mom's eyes flutter open and she sees Kiva leaning over her and softly says "Oh thank the gods above and below you are alive!" Kiva hugs her tightly and says she is so so happy that she is okay. Stella takes a few steps backwards and gives them space, and explaining the spirit that was feeding on their fears. Kiva's father harumphs and says he is not going to be getting any more sleep and goes to the kitchen to get tea.

When Esme and Soren get to the top of the stairs she angles towards Kiva's home. Soren is convinced that their plan failed but Esme is concerned about Kiva being left alone. When they arrive they see the front door standing ajar Esme calls out for Kiva and Kiva calls back from inside. "Oh thank goodness" Esme exclaims and they head inside. The four of them are sitting around the table, the dad is making tea and he serves it to Stella first, thanking her for being a hero and saving them. They catch Esme and Soren up, and Esme's immediate reaction is to want the Lygosans gone. Soren also wants to see them kicked out, they sent a phantom in the night to hurt people for crying out loud! Esme and Soren go to Treasa to recruit her help, then head to the public house to confront them. Stella and Kiva stay behind, and end up taking a stroll together since neither of them would be getting anymore sleep.

They knock on Treasa's door and explain the situation and she puts on her armour and gathers her axe and they head to the public house. On arriving, Esme slams her mallet into her shield, and it rings out with a resonant sound as she calls out "Agents of Darkness and Chaos, I denounce you in front of the gods, you are anathema to civilization! Begone from this place!". Foruza comes out

with an angry look on his face, asking what evidence does she have for her accusation? Esme lays out the presence she felt, and the attack on Kiva's family, it all clearly points to them being the cause. The other two strangers are looking guilty in the background but Foruza is the image of indignation at being called out like this. In the exchange, Esme can see in Foruza's eyes that he has done many dark things in the pursuits of his goals, and cares not for Esme or her authority.

Esme again tells him and his companions to leave the village immediately. Soren chimes in as well, saying that they came to the village asking questions about the Makers and myths and stories, and now there is a spirit flying around? Too much to be a coincidence, for sure. Foruza looks at him in disdain and says mockingly "Oh yes, the outsiders consort with demons and are agents of chaos, damn you northerners really are idiots." He threatens to spread bad words about Stonetop and how they roughly treat visitors while packing up his things. He and the other two get their stuff together and head out of the village with Esme, Soren and Treasa making sure they left, and a growing number of curious villagers following them out as well.

Meanwhile, Stella and Kiva are sipping their tea and start to discuss what they know about spirits and creatures of darkness. The conversation starts out halting, but soon they are animatedly discussing snippets of books and lessons they had learned. Stella says that she learned from Olwinn, her predecessor, that creatures of darkness could be banished by trapping them in sunlight. Kiva's also knows from her research that silver works against supernatural entities. Stella recalls that there is a ceremonial silver dagger left by Olwinn at the shrine to Helior, and they plan to use that if the Dhool comes back.

Once they are gone Esme pulls Treasa aside and discreetly discusses with her the merits of going after them in the night and killing them on the road. Rua sees them and butts in on the conversation, quickly picking up on what is going on. He calls out that she already passed her judgement by kicking them out, she can't go back on her word and try to kill them now. Since Rua has already figured out what is going on she drops it, and they turn back to the village.

Soren spends the night going around and assuring disturbed villagers that all is well, the strangers were consorting with spirits and are no longer welcome here, if they are spotted again raise the alarm. Rua goes back to his home and tosses and turns as he replays the events of the night.

End of Session!

# Session 20

Pasted by Nigel. Mwuahaha.

It's the Midsummer Festival! What fun, a celebration of the height of summer. But before that, wrapping up a couple loose ends from last session

Stella and Kiva patrol through the night on the lookout for the Dhool, but no eyes glow out of the alleys and no more assaults happen in the night. Stella had given the silver ritual knife to Kiva as she almost felt more vulnerable with the knife than without. Eventually the day breaks and they go their separate ways, and Kiva's mother, Mara, goes back to her normal vibrant self after a few days of rest and recovery. The rest of the week before the midsummer festival is a frenzy of activity as the village prepares to host and trade with the visitors who come far and wide for these festivals.

Kiva has been embroidering a lovely scarf that she often wears around her shoulders on cool summer evenings, adding lots of erratic lines and angles to spruce up her look. Esme has been studying the tales of the Chronicle and finds, chiselled in the far history of the village near the front of the cave system, a story that tells of one of the earlier encounters between the Forest Folk and Stonetop. The stories of the Folk go back as far as the founding of the village and this one extolls the cooperation and synergies between the two peoples. Soren has been talking about his planned archery contest to everyone he meets over the next week, and showing off what will be the prize: A small hand mirror made of silver and an ivory handle, quite the luxury item

When Midsummer's day arrives it dawns in a perfect cloudless sky, promising good weather for the rest of the day. As the day gets going the central plaza is filled with booths and tables laden with food and other small items, giving and trading between each other and visitors from out of town (for coin of course). All the villagers are decked out in their best.

Soren notices in the morning when he is getting the archery range setup a familiar cart that rolls into town. It is Stout Jakka, and upon seeing him Soren drops what he is doing and heads directly to where he is setting up his booth. Upon seeing Soren, Jakka calls out "Soren, my boy! It is good to see you!" Soren replies "Jakka you old fart! I was starting to think you weren't going to make it!" They share a big hug and spend a moment catching up, agreeing to go get a drink later at the public house. Soren also mentions the archer competition to him.

In addition to Jakka and the villagers there are several other travelling traders who have arrived in time for the festival. There is one vendor with a big chest of bottles in a cart that appear to be the only thing being sold. There is another person out front, a barker that is calling out "Dreams! Dreams for sale! Come and take a look all, it will truly be something you have never seen before!" Soon there is a small crowd gathering around and the crier catches Rua's attention. He grabs Betta's hand and heads over to their cart and immediately the eyes of the barker latch onto him and he calls out "You there young man, you look like the type who thrives in adventure. Would you

like to try some bottled dreams? One drink of this and you will go on a fantastic adventure without having to move at all!" Rua looks around curiously, checking if anyone else had tried some of the liquid dreams. He sees Stephan hand over a few coins to the vendor and gets handed a small bottle. Stephen tips it back and drinks the cloudy liquid. He lowers his hand, then stands perfectly still with a vacant look on his face. This goes on for several long moments, 30 seconds pass and just as people are about to grab and shake him he shakes himself and looks around. "Wow, that was something else! You should try it." This satisfies Rua that it is safe to drink and he happily

He is at a feast, sitting at a laden table with lots of people sitting around it that are missing their faces. They are making the motions of grabbing food and moving them to their faces but not actually eating any food. He is constantly provided a wide variety of exotic dishes that taste perfectly real in a constant sequence of courses. When he finally returns to Stonetop he sees the sun hasn't moved in the sky at all and he can still taste the food in his mouth. He looks around for a moment before grabbing Betta's hand and moving away from the dream seller. Betta asks him what is going on, he just stood there for a little while. Rua explains that it was very weird, there was a lot of food but the other people at the table had no faces. It creeped him out. Together they move on, and find Stephen having a beer and telling everyone around him about his dream. He says that when he drank the dream he found himself by a lake, and he just knew it was safe so he went swimming in it. He said it was really nice, and there were no evil spirits there at all. Rua counters with his creepy dream, but it doesn't sway the onlookers or stop Stephen from continuing to talk about his dream.

Rua thinks this kind of thing Kiva might know about so he walks with Betta while keeping an eye out for her, and finds her browsing a fruit stand looking closely at the tomatoes. She stands out from the crowd, her outfit heavily adorned with the custom embroidered scarf featuring front and center. Rua is amazed at this display of finery and compliments her on it. They exchange pleasantries and Rua quickly brings up the dream seller, asking her if she knows anything about this. She doesn't, but she is aware of the kind of snake oil salesmen who often are drawn to large festivals like this to prey on the uneducated and unwary. She asks Rua to show her where the seller is and they go there together.

When they arrive Kiva asks the barker about the bottled dreams and where they come from. He says they are the product of the Priesthood of the Lygosi god of Dreams. He sends prophetic dreams and insights to those that please him. Among many other miraculous things these priests can extract dreams and distill them into these little bottles here. Kiva doesn't know much about this god, but Lygos is a polytheistic land that have gods for every conceivable thing. There is a temple there she has heard about that is an architectural marvel call the Temple of a Thousand Gods, a shared shrine where all gods are worshipped. It sounds completely believable to her, and her curiosity has been burning since Rua first mentioned bottled dreams so she hands over a couple of copper coins for a drink of her own. It smells earthy, and she chugs it down feeling a definite tingle of magic as this happens. There are many snake-oil salesmen in the world and this doesn't seem to be one of them. When the dream takes hold she finds herself in a covered garden with her Grandmother. They spend time together pulling weeds and Kiva catches her up on all the events that had happened since she dies. When Kiva wakes the feeling of warmth and comfort suffuses her, but she realized that the person in the dream looked nothing like either of her grandmothers. She makes a connection between the faceless persons in Rua's dream and the non-

identity of the woman in her dream, but she doesn't know what to make of this knowledge yet.

Elsewhere, Stella is administering a friendly game of capture the flag between two groups of the village youth. At least, it starts out friendly but a dispute about where the team borders are quickly devolves into bickering back and forth "I was safe!" "No you weren't, I tagged you!" "Nuh-uh, I was totally over the line!" "Cheater!!" Stella intervenes as the argument escalates, trying to distract and deflect the issue but her efforts are in vain as tempers boil over and a brawl breaks out among the children, until Stella and some other nearby adults have to step in and pull them apart. There is a lot of glaring across at each other as Esme arrives and defuses the situation by taking both flags and challenging the kids to work together to take them from her as she stands mock seriously behind her shield up in a guard position. Stella is frazzled by this, and goes to a clear patch of the grass and sits and basks in the sun for a while. It helps center her, reconnects to Helior and restores her confidence and stability.

Rua is at the drinking tents out in front of the public house with Betta, enjoying a light drink together and enjoying each other's company. A little ways behind them he hears Gwann, Betta's mother, say "I am not surprised they are letting these bandits stay in the village, considering the trash they have let in from Gordin's Delve recently." Both Rua and Betta hear this and she winces, squeezing her eyes shut. Rua takes her hand and says "come on, lets get out of here". As they are just about to leave the square, Oliga, the ex-bandit, gets up from a nearby table and walks over to Gwann and decks her right in the face, one punch that sends her crumpling to the ground. Oliga shakes her hand then walks away. Seeing this Rua turns back to help Gwann, getting her back on her feet and steadying her, asking if she is alright. Gwann appears to take offense at this, asking Rua if he is implying that she is old and can't get up on her own? He replies "No, just trying to help. Cmon, lets go get you checked out". Gwann stays haughty but allows herself to be led away.

Rua takes her to Treasa, since Treasa would know what its like to get punched in the face and how to deal with it. Treasa inspects the injury, saying she got her bell rocked but no permanent damage, and provides a wet cloth to hold up against Gwann's face. Rua mildly admonishes her, saying that she shouldn't be surprised to get a reaction when she was just talking shit about Oliga, and Rua as well. "Well it doesn't give her permission to punch me in the face!" Gwann replies. Once she has been seen to, Rua offers to walk her home and again Gwann takes offense at his offer before drawing herself up and mustering what is left of her dignity and leaving on her own.

At the edge of town the archery competition is about to begin. Soren has been leading the promotion of the competition for weeks so nobody questions when he starts drawing up the tournament bracket that will be used, with groups of 4 competing at a time, with the leader of the group moving to the next bracket, culminating in a one-on-one shoot-off for the final round. Before finalizing the bracket Soren takes time to study each of the competitors, looking to gauge their skill with the bow. Soren identifies a couple people that, to his eye, appear to be quite skilled, stringing and preparing their bows with grace and care. One fellow from Gordin's Delve named Paradur who is old and carbunckled from drinking but his fingers still seem sure on the bow, and a young woman named Rina who doesn't share anything about herself but Soren heard came with a carriage train from Marshedge. Fio has also joined, which is good because giving her a platform to show off and ultimately giving her the hand mirror as her prize was the whole point of this competition in Soren's mind. Soren puts Paradur and Rina in the opposite bracket as Fio, and seeded her early rounds

with beginners

Before the competition begins Soren shows off the decorated hand mirror to the contestants and the crowd, saying "Those with the keenest eye and truest shot will gain the privilege of witnessing themselves in high quality anytime they please!" Fio struggles a bit in the first round but pulls ahead of the scrub that Soren matched her with regardless, and performs excellently in the second and third rounds. She even scored a double bulls-eye in the third round. Heading into the final round it is Rina who conquered the opposing bracket, and her and Fio line up to take 3 shots against a target placed at 50 meters. They trade shots, each showing remarkable skill in hitting the target. As the final shot thunks home and the accuracy is inspected, Rina has won the round with a margin less than an inch! Fio's face is a storm cloud as she begins to stomp away as Soren presents the mirror to Rina. However, Soren doesn't put nearly as much showmanship into the awarding of the prize, handing it to Rina with a quick "well done!" and a pat on the back before hurrying after Fio.

He catches up to her quickly, and she is muttering about all that practice wasted if she can't even win a simple competition. Soren tries to boost her spirits, saying he has seen Fio land her shots perfectly in the dead of night with only a flickering campfire to guide her shots, Rina can probably only shoot in a bright and clear field. Fio shakes her head at this, saying "What is the point of practicing and working every day on my archery if I can't be consistent with it?". Not knowing what else to say, Soren asks her to come with him, he has a secret 2nd place prize for the tournament. He leads her to Stout Jakka's booth and introduces Fio to him, saying "I was just telling Fio about how I asked you to hold on to the 2nd place prize for the archery tournament" while giving him a wink and wordlessly begging him to play along. Jakka may be getting old but he still catches on quick, his handle rummaging through his trinkets even before Soren finishes speaking. He pulls out a burnished bronze armband, embossed with celic knots and swirls and hands it to Soren, who turns and in an exaggerated bow he presents the armband to Fio. Fio stands there for a moment, then slowly takes it and puts it on. "Thank you." She says, "You didn't have to, but thank you. Do you want to get a drink?" Soren replies "Yes, definitely" and as they turn to leave he looks over his shoulder at Stout Jakka and mouths "I owe you". Jakka just nods with a smile, implying "Oh yes you do."

Esme is reviewing the story in her mind, going through the story beats and rehearsing the parts mentally when Treasa walks in, dragging Oliga in and telling Esme about the altercation at the drinking tent. Esme turns to Oliga and says "Well I'm just going to say it, Gwann is a bitch and probably deserved it, but reacting so harshly to her words only gives them more power. She is like a bellows, always spewing hot air and everybody knows not to listen to her." Oliga counters saying that words have meaning, and to let such insult go without reply didn't sit well with her. After a little back and forth, Esme can tell that Oliga still doesn't feel fully safe in Stonetop, like she is expecting something to happen and ruin the good thing she has going. Esme decides to have one of the village children to find Stella, and asks Stella if she would include Oliga in one of Helior's rituals. Not as like a central piece, but to bring Oliga into the village a bit more and head off any further deteriorating opinions. Stella agrees hesitantly, annoyed to be disturbed from her meditation for politics but realizes the worth of the idea. Oliga is surprised, she says she thinks she is getting off a bit easy for starting fights, but is willing to go along with it.

End of Session!

# Session 21

I did not get around to editing and fixing up these notes to make them make sense...so enjoy the disjointed notes

Session 21! A bit of a hiatus but it is still the midsummer festival!

An unfortunate event

The town bell rings once, echoing over the roofs of the buildings to invite both visitors and residents to the center of town. There is a raised platform and upon it stand both Esme and Soren, dressed up in decorated outfits and wearing ancient masks made of wood as they are prepared to perform a story close to Stonetop's origin that closely involves the Fae. Soren has prepared his costume

Esme is performing an epic poem about Stonetop's history and relationship with the Forest Folk, and Soren is a part of it as well.

Emmer is complaining about the Forest Folk not letting them log the forest, complaining that they are gone and still telling us what to do. Kiva confronts him

An out of townner, and old woodsman speaks up saying it would be a true shame if they are truly gone. Rua asks him if he knows anything about them and the old man tells of how he visited one of their villages, it was an incredibly magical experience. Rua and Kiva are immediately interested in his story and hand off his every word as he talks. Every area is covered in vines and branches, causing each neighborhood to have a distinct atmosphere.

Vimrod

Theden

Pass to the north of the red grove, a stream there with a clearing and a bend after the clearing. East from there there is a rocky tor that points east?? and it points directly to Vimrod. They used to call it the Dawn Rock, though they had a name for it in their own language. Rua keeps asking for more details and he eventually offers to draw him a map. Rua thanks him profusely and tells about how he had seen one of them in the past when they rescued him and his mother on their journey from Gordin's Delve to Stonetop.

Anghrad comes up to Esme white as a sheet and puts a hand on her shoulder and says "Esme, I need you to tell me I'm not crazy." Esme nods and Anghrad's voice drops to a whisper "I think I might be seeing things, but there is a monster in the Public House" Esme immediately gets serious and starts grilling her for info, "Is it physical or spiritual?" "I don't know, you're the expert!" Anghrad cries in response and after a quick back-and-forth Esme learns its not see-through and

about person sized. Having heard enough Esme starts to leave the Pavilion of the Gods, and spots Kiva passing by. Esme calls her in and ropes her into coming with to investigate the public house, which Kiva immediately has so many questions about but Esme just shrugs and says that is what Anghrad is saying. "Monster, Public House. Lets go". Kiva stammers a bit then says "Alright, lead on!" and they go together. As they arrive they step to the side and carefully check out the Public House. Through the milling crowd of people bearing drinks and food they see Rua is having an animated conversation with what looks like a large furred animal. Esme notices quickly that it looks like Thistledown, the fae they fought in the forest when rescuing Cayu. Kiva doesn't see it until Esme puts a hand on her shoulder and gestures her to look closer, and its like an optical illusion falling into place and she can see them for the mythical creature they are! Esme looks around and looks for the fastest runner within 15 feet of her, and grabs Shan's arm as she walks by and sternly says "Get my shield. Now." Shan nods with her eyes wide and she takes off out the front door running towards the Chronicle. Her and Kiva spend a quick moment conferring and decide to wait for the shield before starting anything, Thistledown is an old creature and very powerful so they need all the tools at their disposal. Anghrad comes in behind them and whispers "So I'm not crazy, you can see it too? Why can't anyone else?" Esme shrugs and sends her off to find Soren.

This whole time Rua has been telling his life story to Thaeden, about how they went to these weird ruins in the south and he met a ghost, and how they met some Hillfolk along the way and saved their horse. As the conversation goes on Rua tries to get Theden to promise to take him to Vimrod, but

Soren takes a moment to see the Fae, at first it looks like a normal bustling tavern but slowly Thistledown's form starts to blur and it suddenly snaps into focus with his furry ears sticking up over the crowd. Soren whispers "Oh shit" and ducks down with the others. At this point Esme's shield arrives and she takes it and approaches the hidden Fae. She slowly kneels down with her creaky knees and interrupts their conversation by acknowledging

The fools who attacked me, either of them could replace the things that they took. There is something a little more intangible, a few years of someone's life, your singing voice perhaps, or maybe your eyes? They are very pretty eyes. Rua pipes up here saying "Wait you were attacked? Who attacked you?" "Silence you whelp!" Thistledown snaps back. Rua is stunned and Esme offers 3 years of her life, and asks for friendliness after the deal is struck, not just a balancing of the scales. Hearing this exchange about giving years the gears in Rua's head start turning and he slowly comes to realize what is happening in front of him. "Wait you...you are Thistledown, the Fae creature from the forest!" "Finally he catches up" Thistledown smirks. Rua stands tall and says "I stand by what I did, but also what I said earlier. Its a lot easier to get through life if we all work together, is there anything I can do to pay you back?". Thistledown humms and says "Years were offered, but not specified from whom. I could take 2 from you" He says, gesturing to Esme, "and 3 from either of those two." pointing towards Rua and Soren. Soren has been staying back, knowing that the plan is to deal with him and he was the one who cut him with Iron and he doesn't want to make things worse. Esme argues correctly that 'a few' is not 5, 3 years were offered and he is a being of his word. He begrudgingly acknowledges her point and gives a counter-offer of a unspecified favour, to be collected in the future. Esme agrees, but only if the favor doesn't harm Stonetop or the Forest Folk. Thistledown nods and says "It's a deal!" while standing to leave. Rua

Terwyn runs up to the Public House and starts telling anyone who will listen that he heard some screams coming from down by the stream. a loud bubbling moan

It looks like this body has had chunks bitten out of it, and claw marks all around. It looks like Crinwin, and there are some fairly clear tracks in the mud and soft grass around the banks coming out of the forest and going back in, but the tracks going back in look a little weird.

Stephen is hovering around the back of the crowd, unsure if he wants to look. He finally looks and says he recognizes her with Bedwyr, they were courting Willem's voice coming out of a metal mask

# Session 22

OK, got access to the wiki back but needed to make a new account. Let's do this

The rescue team starts to gather at the bottom of the cliff, nearby the scene of the Crinwin attack. Soren is going around organizing the group, making sure there are plenty of torches as the light is failing quick. Esme is also handing out whistles to everyone to sound on in case of trouble. Once the bustle dies down and the group is ready the final headcount is Soren, Kiva, Rua, Esme, Treasa, Willem and Fio. Soren looks to Fio, indicating they are ready and she starts to inspect the visible tracks. After a moment circling around she steps into the forest, leaning close to the ground and holding an oil lamp close to the tracks. The moment they enter the forest the last light of dusk is blotted out, and the many and varied noises of the forest start to close around them.

Fio leads the group east into the forest. She explains that the only reason tracking will work is because they are dragging a body with them, typically they travel through the canopy. Soren is paying close attention, not only to her tracking method but to the trees above and to the side as well, making sure nothing gets the drop on them. Soon the trail starts to go down in elevation and the ground starts to get soggy. Fio raises an arm and halts the group, explaining that they are entering a bog. "I know this swamp, its only a half-mile wide. We could circle around and pick up the trail on the other side, or just push on through." Soren knows that they only get one shot, if they circle around and can't find the trail again Bedwyr is as good as dead. Kiva agrees, its best to follow the trail we know than risk losing it. Fio nods and says "Well I hope you don't like your boots. Its gonna get soggy from here..." and she starts heading into the swamp. Soren looks down at his feet, sighs heavily, then picks his head up and trudges forward.

They keep going through the bog, their feet sinking several inches into the mire with each step and making a sucking sound as they walk. Soon enough the ground starts sloping up again and the soil firms underneath their feet. A little farther along Fio stops again, saying she can smell blood much stronger ahead. They take a moment to deliberate, and decide to move forward inspecting the surroundings closely. They come upon a small area of the forest that has been trampled heavily. Esme spots a Crinwin body off to the side, its limbs mauled and leaking sticky black blood. Kiva also spots what might be a racoon's body, but its hard to tell given how deformed the corpse is. It almost looks like its bones spontaneously exploded out of its body. Kiva recognizes that no natural effect would have done this, something twisted this animal and either enraged or provoked it to attack the group of Crinwin, killing one and, based on the blood splatters, wounding more of them. While spooky, none of this changes what they are here to do, and that is rescue their neighbour. They press on, the trail even easier to follow with the black Crinwin blood dripping next to the red human blood.

Soon the undergrowth starts to thin and Fio is able to pick up the pace, almost breaking into a jog. It is hard to tell how long exactly they have been tracking the Crinwin, the torches have guttered out but they still have enough light with the lamps others have carried. Fio comes to a stop, announcing they have arrived. Ahead is a small clearing with a giant tree in the center. The trunk of the tree is naked, its branches high up in the canopy competing for light. There is a white, papery substance substance the trunk, reminiscent of a wasps nest. It is several meters high, fairly skinny but a person could go in, or be dragged inside. Looking at the rough size, a dozen or so Crinwin could be hiding inside, but its a couple storeys up from the forest floor. Soren is on high alerts, scanning for threats while Kiva and Esme inspect their surroundings looking for some advantage. Soren mentions fire would be great, if they didn't have Bedwyr to worry about. Kiva also sees some trees at the side of the clearing, possibly they could be bent over by Treasa and Willem to get to the Crinwin nest. She spares a glance to the canopy and sees an extra thick branch. She tilts her head as two points of light shine out from a protrusion on the branch. It is quickly made clear this is a Crinwin when it opens its mouth, full of jagged, pointy teeth, and slurs out "whats going on here?" in what is clearly an imitation of Bedwyr. This shocks the group, but they are aware now of the watcher and are not caught by surprise when more of them jump out of the canopy!

Rua is somehow overlooked by the ambushers and he uses his opportunity to light a fresh torch and head to the base of the big tree with the nest. He calls out "Bedwyr! Can you hear me?!" He hears a faint groan from above and immediately resolves to rescue him. Emse's first response is to step between Kiva and the closest Crinwin, raising her shield in defense. Kiva starts swinging her staff around her, ready to counter any moves the Crinwin make. Soren responds quickly, seeing one of the monsters jumping at him he sets his sword against his hip to catch it. It works, the Crinwin impaled on the length of his blade by its momentum but not before it gets its claws in his arms, scoring some long scratches. Across the way two others have leapt at Kiva from opposite directions. Esme catches one of them on her shield, ramming it into a nearby tree and crushing it completely. Kiva slashes her spear at the other, tearing a large gash across its chest but not felling it. It bats at her in reply, hurting her in the process before slinking back. Outside the main circle of light they can hear Willem cursing and fighting, but he has no light of his own.

Rua has started climbing the tree towards the nest. As he gets in he wriggles inside. It is surprisingly damp, the papery walls looping into cramped chambers connected by vertical shafts. It is a tight fit, but he can wiggle himself through. As he heads inside it is a disgusting display. Little hexagonal cells containing oozing flesh and plant matter, but also trinkets and baubles clearly stolen from Stonetop. The deeper he goes, the dryer the walls become. The walls and floor are tough enough to support his weight, but there is some give so Rua thinks he could put his fist through the wall if he really tried. He looks around, inspecting his surroundings to get an idea of where Bedwyn could be. Unfortunately the nest is an alien environment, bearing no resemblance to anything Rua had ever seen before. He is disoriented and can't see any tracks or trails to lead him along. He calls out in frustration "Bedwyr! Where are you?"

Outside the battle rages on, four of the beasts advance towards Soren and Fio in a rough semi-circle. Soren glances backward, seeing Fio getting ready with her bow he decides to give no ground. Wanting to keep attention away from her so she can shoot freely he angles his sword to catch the light from the lantern she set down and shine it towards the approaching foes. This

works almost too well, with all four of them hissing at the light and quickly moving to attack him. He swings his sword wildly to drive them back, but each time he pushes one back another comes in from the side and claws at him. Before Treasa is able to step in and behead one of the Crinwin with a swift stroke of her axe Soren takes multiple hits, his arms and back scored with claw marks and blood running down his body. Kiva sees this and hurls her spear towards another of them, impaling the creature through its chest and taking it down instantly while Esme moves to cover Soren with her Makerglass Shield as he stumbles back.

Inside the Crinwin hive Rua is getting desperate. He starts running around the circumference of the trunk and looking around as quickly as he can. Finding nothing on the first level he hauls himself up one of the vertical shafts. In one of the chambers he comes to up there he narrowly avoids a wriggly white grub that launched itself at him from the wall. He is grossed out for a moment but looking around he sees Bedwyr laying on the papery floor, with some misshapen lumps on his neck and arm. Looking closer with his torch he sees the lumps are more of the wriggly grubs latched onto him. Rua thinks quickly, pulling out his pocket knife and using it to stab and peel the parasites from his body while Bedwyr moans weakly, blood loss and shock having rendered him entirely immobile. As Rua picks him up, intending to carry/drag him out he hears hissing from above. Above him in a darkened corner of the chamber unfurls a bizarre looking Crinwin, larger than the others with long spindly arms and fingers and its hissing maw full of sharp teeth. It crawls down the wall towards them with murder in its eyes.

Down below Kiva moves towards Soren and the others to reclaim her spear, but after just one step another Crinwin drops from above, landing on her shoulders and yanking the hood of her cloak down and over her head while it lashes into her with its grimy claws. Those wicked points find their target, piercing her abdomen. The shock and pain jolts Kiva into motion as she reaches up and grabs at the clinging beast, finding its neck beneath her fingers and squeezing with all her fear, anxiety, and rage to crush its throat in revenge. The two remaining Crinwin by Soren move back in to strike again, but Esme steps in front and takes the hit from one while bashing the other with her shield, crunching its face but not taking it down. Soren gathers himself for a moment before reaching for a spare torch and lighting it off the lantern to shed more light on the battle. Hearing Willem swearing from outside the circle of light he takes a risky move and flings the torch towards the sound. In the dancing orange light, Willem's silhouette is writhing with the shape of 3 Crinwin who are trying to overwhelm him. Three others lay broken on the ground around him, the great iron club he bears stained black with their ichor. Fio takes aim, timing his body swinging back and forth trying to shake them off and letting fly her arrow just as he is bent over. It knocks into one of them, sending it tumbling to the trampled loam below.

In the Crinwin Hive Rua's fear and disgust ignite, turning into righteous anger at this twisted creature. He shoves his torch right into its face as it approaches, blistering its face and causing its hissing to pitch up into a tea kettle whistle. It staggers back then opens its mouth wide and a wet sticky tongue lashes out towards Rua, wrapping around his neck and starting to squeeze. He scrabbles for a moment before remembering his knife, grabbing that and slicing across the muscle strangling his throat and pulling it away from his neck. His struggling causes him to slip on the uneven floor, crashing down onto the papery material and right through it, sending him and Bedwyr tumbling down to the chamber below and wrenching him free from the grasp of the Crinwin Queen's sticky tongue. He gasps as he gets up off the floor and tastes smoke in the air. Rua looks

around the dim room, looking for something, anything to use against the Crinwin that is sure to be coming to finish the job.

CLIFFHANGER ENDING!!

# Session 23

Starting from the cliffhanger, fighting the Crinwin!

Rua shakes himself after crashing through the ceiling onto the first floor of the hive. He can feel the floor below him is dented and weakened from the impact, thankfully it held or they would have dropped 15 feet to the forest floor below. He looks around, not able to see much with the torch gone, and he can smell smoke in the air. Next to him Bedwyr is stuck in a stupor, his head lolling around on his shoulders. He is trying to speak but he slurs so badly nothing is intelligible. Rua picks him up and hauls him towards the entrance, intending to climb down with Bedwyr over his shoulder. He sets himself up, finds a foothold, then a handhold to lower himself down, but then the prehensile tongue rolls out and grabs his wrist, trying to pull him back into the hive. Bedwyr slips off his shoulder, falling down onto a branch and then rolling off it towards the floor down below.

Esme catches the movement out of the corner of her eye and calls for Soren to try to catch him. Soren is not engaged in battle, having stepped back after taking some big hits so he dashes towards Bedwyr's falling form but misgauges the distance and Bedwyr's head knocks into his with the sounds of two coconuts coming together. Soren falls limply to the ground, dazed and unresponsive with Bedwyr crumpled beside him. Above, Rua grabs hold of the grasping tongue and plants his feet against the trunk of the tree to engage in a tug-of-war, starting to drag it out of the hive and drawing it closer to him. Rua uses his compromising hold to surprise the craven beast, pulling it forward while jabbing his fingers towards its eyes. He catches it off guard, getting one of his fingers hooked into its eye socket. It thrashes heavily, and when it finally throws off his grasp parts of its eye come with his finger in a goopy mess, splattering his face with ichor.

After directing Soren to help Bedwyr Esme calls for Kiva to assist Willem while she holds two more Crinwin at bay with her shield. Kiva thinks quickly, grabbing a handful of the loamy clay and flinging it in the eyes of the monsters attacking Willem. Her aim is impeccable, knocking one of the off Willem and causing the other to claw at its eyes in an attempt to clear the obstruction. She acts quickly, stabbing down into the heart of the fallen beast. In its death throes one of its legs scored a hit on Kiva's thigh, causing blood to well up in a line. Esme takes a defensive stance against her two foes. They show a surprising level of cunning by separating, circling around her to attack from both sides. Esme tries to keep her back to a tree and begins throat singing, taking a minor hit from one while countering the other with her shield, dazing it and causing it to stumble back.

The last Crinwin on Willem has climbed all the way up his back and is trying to claw his face while he holds its arms back from dealing critical damage. Kiva takes advantage of its distraction and spears it in the back, taking it down in one blow. As the Crinwin falls away, Kiva sees a cut with

blood blooming around it on his back right where her spear had pierced through the Crinwin and immediately starts to panic. "Ohhh my god, I stabbed you, I'm so sorry, I'll fix this I promise, I'm so so sorry!" she stammers out while rummaging through her things looking for bandages, eventually tearing a strip off her cloak to staunch the bleeding. She starts to push it into the wound to stop the bleeding, but stops and puts it in his hands saying "I have done enough already, oh my god, I thought I had it but I didn't". Willem chuckles lightly, wincing as his wounds make themselves known, saying "Well its better than the alternative!"

The Crinwin Queen is reeling after having its eye clawed out, giving Rua the opportunity to scamper down the tree. It is not the most graceful dismount but he makes it down. Esme covers for him, taking the hits from the other two Crinwin on the ground to cover him in his dash down from the nest. Soren is laying on his back with his vision blurred and seeing double, but it is impossible to miss the large, spindly Crinwin crawling down the tree as easy as walking, framed by the light of the burning hive above. His first move is to turn to the side, checking on Bedwyr's state. His eyes are open and moving, but he is still not mobile. Satisfied that he didn't mess up completely, he holds his sword out handle first to Rua while warning him about the incoming threat. As Rua turns to face the monster Soren stumbles up and grabs Bedwyr, dragging him away from the centre of the fighting.

Rua takes the sword and turns to face the Queen just as it launches itself from the tree towards him, bearing down with all of its fury as its home has been torched, its brood slain and has nothing left to lose. Esme is still there, covering him with her shield and helps him take it down as it lands but not before it claws Rua, scoring some deep cuts. The two Crinwin that were fighting her have used this opportunity to sneak up behind Kiva as she fusses over Willem, tackling her from behind. She tries to fight them off, but her wounds are mounting and is unsuccessful as they add to the cuts on her body. Rua sees this and calls for Treasa's support as he goes to help her without thinking, leaving Esme to confirm the kill on the Crinwin Queen. Still wielding Soren's bronze sword, he slices the back of one of them as Willem grabs the other, allowing Treasa to take it's head off with one clean cut of her axe.

With that the last of the Crinwin has been slain, and the group gathers near the edge of the clearing. Soren has been trying to drag Bedwyr, but is not very strong and hasn't gone far. He calls out for Fio to help him, and together they haul him up, each taking one of his arms over their shoulder. Soren is still dazed from his collision with Bedwyr and pauses after they stand up, transfixed by the lines of Fio's face highlighted by the flames flickering above them. "You are so beautiful in the light of the fire..." he says quietly, almost without noticing before instantly shaking his head and saying "Oh shit, fire!! We need to get out of here!". They go to rejoin the others and they move a little ways into the forest away from the clearing. Esme has gathered the body of the slain Crinwin Queen and drags it away from the fire, calling out to Kiva "I have a present for you!"

They take a moment to gather themselves, and on closer inspection they see Bedwyr's left foot is mostly missing, with what looks like bite marks around what is left. He also has a few large lumps on him, two on his arm and one on his neck. Esme feels around them, feeling heat radiating off them with a minor wriggling. She says they need to remove them immediately. Soren backs her up, but Rua is not so sure. Healing people is more Stella's purview, and the thought of cutting into their friend disgusts him. Soren takes Rua's shoulder and turns him away, saying he should help

Treasa with making the travois to carry Bedwyr back home while Esme and he take care of Bedwyr. Soren turns back, pulling out a belt knife but his head still aches and his vision refuses to focus so he hands the knife to Esme and holds Bedwyr down, keeping him steady and positioning the parasitic lumps for her to operate on. It is a tricky process, especially around his neck, but they take it slow and steady and succeed in clearing him of the pests. Almost immediately he regains some lucidity. "Esme...is that you?" he mumbles, squinting up at her. "Yes, I am here child" she replies while brushing his hair away from his face. "Am I..Am I home?" he asks, and she replies "No, but we will be there soon"

After 15-20 minutes, they successfully lash together two travois and lay Bedwyr and the corpse of the queen on them, starting the hours long journey back to Stonetop. The trip passes uneventfully, the noises of the forest consistent but non-threatening. As the group returns there are people waiting at the creek and they quickly rise to their feet doing a quick headcount of the returning members. "By Tor above, they have all returned!" one of them cries, and the party is swiftly swarmed by welcoming villagers as they take Bedwyr from their care and rush him up the stairs to a healer. Rua follows shortly behind, running off to find Trahern to inform him of his return. Esme pats Soren on the back and says that she trusts that he can take it from here as she turns and heads into the Chronicle. As she steps into the cave she turns and where there is a stone basin that is filled with water during the day by the village children. She swiftly lights a small fire under the basin and takes off her clothes to step inside, settling down into the water with a resounding sigh. She retrieves a stitch kit she laid nearby and slowly stitches the cuts on her arms while relaxing in the hot water.

When Esme leaves, Soren shakes his head lightly and prepares to

# Session 24

A well deserved rest after a difficult night in the forest!

Kiva's first act in the morning is to go to the stream and wash off all the blood and dirt from the previous night. Afterwards, she collects the body of the Crinwin that was left on the trevois. She drags the Crinwin into the house, hauling it slowly up the stairs as her father is sitting in the main room with a mug of tea. Kiva nods nonchalantly at him saying "Hey Dad!". He just raises his mug to her, staring as she brings it up to her room. He takes a long, slow sip of his tea after she closes her door.

Soren awakens in his bed, sore all over from the fight. He shifts, looking to the side seeing Fio in a chair, she seems to be nodding off as well. He tries to get up quietly and prepare a hot brew of tea for the both of them. Her eyes flutter open just as he sets out the mugs, and she drags herself to the table and takes a sip. "Morning already, huh? Are you sure you should be up and moving?" Soren brushes off her concern, saying he didn't feel fall over when he tried to stand so he's probably okay, and he isn't planning on pushing himself at all today, just needs to talk to a couple of people. She nods, and after spending a quiet moment together she decides to go to her home to get a few hours of real sleep.

Rua wakes up in a strange bed, a little disoriented after the last night. He quickly looks around and sees Anghrad softly snoring in her chair. He panics briefly, thinking it can't be good for her old bones to sleep in a chair like that. He gets up and softly wakes her, and helps her move to the bed. After her breathing settles back into a sleepy rhythm he stretches his arms above his head, feeling inexplicably tougher than he did the previous day. He decides to sit in the chair that Anghrad recently vacated, contemplating the recent events he has been a part of.

Esme is usually awake in the morning so she is already up and about when she hears a stone knocking at the entrance of the Chronicle. She sorely shuffles over, seeing Ridney, one of the kids at Eadna's orphanage, is shuffling about anxiously. "What is it, child?" Esme asks softly. Ridney replies "Umm, Murdoch sent me, he says there is going to be a gathering or something, and wants you there...". Esme slowly kneels down, smiling at the child and says "Thank you so much for telling me. Here, this is for you." and with some slight of hand she makes a piece of candy appear out of her ear and hands it to the kid. Ridney immediately unwraps it and eats it, her expression one of bliss as it slowly dissolves in her mouth. Esme grabs her walking stick

Murdoch is on the bit of the stage that didn't collapse and waves his cane for silence. He updates the whole village of the events of the previous night, with one visitor being killed and one of our own being dragged off into the night. Thankfully we were able to get them back, but it is clear that the Crinwin are becoming a problem. "Becoming a problem?!" A visiting merchant yells "Someone is dead! Did you see her body? Ripped to shreds it was! Why should we stop here if its so

dangerous? we would be better off going straight to Gordin's Delve." Esme replied, saying they already have a plan to go to the forest and investigate the missing Forest Folk, as they used to hold the Crinwin at bay. Another merchant speaks up saying that this isn't the time for investigations, its the time for swords and walls! Rua feels a blaze of anger, lashing out verbally saying "yeah thats a great idea! and we could tax all the visiting merchants to pay for it!" There is some general laughter from the gathered people, but the merchants face falls into a glower as he crosses his arms and turns to Rua. "Mira was just killed and you jest about it?" Rua gets even more mad, pointing out that he was one of the people who went into the dark forest to rescue Bedwyr, what was he doing huh? Murdoch cuts off Rua before he can say too much more, saying they will talk about this later. Soren steps up and places his hand gently on Rua's shoulder and addresses the merchants. "Swords and walls are all well and good, but it doesn't stop people from straying into the woods. It has always been dangerous, and it is truly unfortunate what happened last night. However, we people of Stonetop have lived in the eaves of the Great Wood for generations, and we know that burning the powdered bark of the the hemlock tree will ward away the Crinwin. They should keep some on hand for when they travel near the woods. That should keep them safe for now, and they can rest assured Stonetop will be looking into the uptick in Crinwin activity, be it by finding the forest folk or some other measure that will push them back." There are still grumblings in the crowd, but at his mollifying words they are sounding much less angry and anxious.

After a few moments of chatter Murdoch calls for the visitors to move on as there is some village business to discuss. Esme announces that there will be a meal at the Public House, and this hast most of the visitors moving off towards the building. He goes on to say that they will be looking for volunteers to travel into the forest for the investigation. Esme says that she will be among them, Soren speaks up too but ruefully says that he will need a week or so before they can depart. Rua jumps in, saying he is ready to go right now, maybe this afternoon? Gwann calls out from the crowd saying he looks like shit, not really in condition to go on another expedition. Soren says that there is no way this expedition of going without him, so he will have to wait a few days at least. Rua nods and says okay..okay. He then says since they will be investigating the forest, they will need additional volunteers for a woodcutting trip to the foothills to gather wood for the winter. Rua also volunteers for this trip, asking when they will be going? Murdoch chuchles and says we will talk about that later.

Once the meeting is over, Soren finds Kiva and retrieves from her the crystal he borrowed from Orlando. He wraps it back up in some rags and scrap parchment after double-checking it is not damaged, and takes it to Orlando's house. Once there he hands it over, Orlando takes it out and inspects it thoroughly for damage. Once he is satisfied Orlando sets it carefully back into its home, before thanking Soren for bringing it back safe. Soren apologizes for it taking a week, but its been a crazy week with the festival preparations and everything, but if Orlando finds another cool rock he should tell Soren about it. Orlando lights up at this, immediately pulling out a stone he bought the previous night from one of the merchants. It has red bands throughout, which he explains is iron and spends the next 30 minutes or so gushing over his collection. Soren is 100% down for this, he is sore and tired and sitting there absorbing Orlando's stream of words takes little effort, and there is a simple pleasure in watching someone talk about their passion.

Rua seeks out Mira'a father, the merchant. He finds him sitting on the low wall at the edge of the village with a despondent look on his face. Rua approaches him hesitantly, asking him about his

daughter. He starts pulled together initially, but when Rua asks him if he has any stories of his daughter he breaks down crying. One of his friends comes by and puts his arm around his shoulder comfortingly, waiting for his sobs to slow down. Once he is once again able to speak his voice is a low monotone, but as time goes on he gets more and more lively in his speech as he retells his favourite stories of Mira. At the end, he mentions he doesn't really know what he will do now. They were partners, missing her is missing half his business. After a little while he says he needs to go lie down, Rua is understanding and lets him be. Esme is sitting on a stump nearby witnessing this exchange, gives Rua a proud look when he is walking away. He goes over to her to say hi, and Esme offers to talk to Murdoch for him so he doesn't have to deal with it. Rua tells her its fine, he can deal with it. There is a little back and forth between them, but Rua assures her that he can handle it.

Kiva spends two days slowly dissecting the Crinwin Queen up in her room. It has remarkably flexible joints and soft, springy bones. They are capable of remarkable feats of squeezing through small spaces and darting about the treetops. Blunt weapons would not be ideal. Piercing weapons would be best, and she notices the area around the armpits and groin have a lot of blood vessels and would be especially vulnerable.

"Rua, its like there is just nothing between your brain and your mouth. You just think of something and it just comes right out without thinking about the consequences or how people are going to receive it." "You are not wrong", Rua replies, "but that guy was out of line. I had to say something." "That is kinda the point" Murdoch countered, "sometimes its okay for people to be a little out of line, and after a murder is one of those times. It can be good to let them express their frustrations, and deal with them directly at a later time." "Oh, like you are doing right now with me..." Rua points out. "Exactly." Murdoch says with satisfaction. "It is critical we do not get a reputation for being a village where people die. If the merchants stop coming to trade for our whiskey with metals and glass and other supplies we would be poor indeed." Rua nods his head in acknowledgement. While he is there, Rua also apologizes for making a scene at the winter solstice festival, accusing him of murdering his dad and all. Murdoch goes back to his point, after a death people can say things, and I know you didn't really mean it. Rua is kinda blown away, he was not expecting Murdoch to be so understanding. He thanks Murdoch for his advice, and asks if they will be going to the forest to look for the Forest Folk tomorrow? Murdoch replies saying that he is not going anywhere for a few days, Rua needs to go home and get some rest. That is an order! With that, Rua goes home and goes straight to bed.

Esme spends her time researching recent incidents with the Crinwin, trying to find a pattern in their movements or attacks. She leans on her network of contacts in the surrounding homesteads, and finds out it is somewhat regular that they steal livestock from the nearby farms, but no incidents in the last week. None of the farms out in the foothills report any issues since the bandits were dealt with, but any farm bordering on the Great Forest have had to take to sealing all their livestock inside during the night or they will be attacked. She also spreads the word that it was Stonetop who stopped the bandits, as a bit of counter-PR for whatever disgruntled merchants might say about Crinwin attacks at Stonetop.

Details for the expedition to the Great Forest, following Thisteldown's directions to the Forest Folk town:

8 days there-and-back at the best case.

Biggest risks are getting lost in the forest, or drawing the attention of Crinwin or other forest predators.

# Session 25

A new expedition begins! The expedition consists of Soren, Kiva, Esme, Rua, Fio, Stella. They are going to go deeper into the Great Wood than even Fio has ever ventured, unknown perils await!

As they are going around the village preparing their gear Rua runs into Betta. She says that she knows she can't ask him to stay, but she feels terrible seeing him go and never knowing if he is going to come back. Rua sighs and says he has to go, this is important and he needs to see it through. Betta nods and says that is what is so great about him while blushing, then pulls a small pendant from a pocket and offers it to him. She made it from a piece of cobble in the town square, so he can take a little piece of home with him anywhere he goes. Rua immediately puts it on, promising to come back to her. Esme appears from around a corner and butts in, saying that she will definitely make sure he comes back safe, and Betta turns to her and says that she will be held accountable then! Esme also notes there is a strong presence of Aratis' will in the pendant, the square is where all the major social events of the community happens

Once they are mostly prepared the party gathers in the Public House where Fio lays out the map they received from Thistledown. She adds some notes and markers from her own experience, then starts laying out the route they would take. She points out a clearing on the near side of a river saying that is the farthest she has ever been, but you can see the Dawn Rock that Thistledown talked about if you climb a tree. If all goes well, we should be able to get to the Dawn Rock in 3 days.

When they set out it is a bright and cool morning with no rain in the skies. They cross the stream at the bottom of the cliffs and enter into the forest where it is cool and quiet, with the sounds of birds and leaves around them. They quickly move past the familiar ground around the village and soon all but Fio are hopelessly lost as they tread steadily eastward. Sometimes they walk in silence, other times chat about meaningless things. The first night is uneventful, with Rua and Kiva spending their time playing cards and dice games and Kiva demonstrating slight of hand techniques and bluffing to him. Gambling is an important life skill after all! One thing Soren does that Esme finds increasingly annoying is he tends to absentmindedly bite his fingernails. On the second day she 'accidentally' takes his hand and brushes his fingertips against a tree leaking sticky sap so it coats his fingernails, making them taste nasty. Soren has no idea why she did this as she just walks away, whistling innocently. He isn't even thinking about biting his nails, he is(unsuccesfully) trying to rub the sap off on passing plants and moss. The second day Rua asks Kiva about her experiments, and how she has reconciled her Mind Gem with her scientific understanding of the world. Kiva says that she has ultimately one of two conclusions: Either the Mind Gem is an example of some lost or forgotten field of knowledge, or the world doesn't work nearly close to the way she thinks it does.

On the third day they encounter the banks of the river cutting through the forest. It is much wider and deeper than the stream by Stonetop, and the gods only know what spirits reside in its depths. They follow it eastward until they approach the clearing marked on the map. Fio says that she has been here a couple times before, not much of interest here except some stones with weird writing on them. Soren inspects the surroundings, looking for anything that will help them cross the river. Rua scampers up a nearby tree to help look. He spots a tree that has fallen into the river, making a slight barrier against the current. While the spring rains have passed, the river is still deep and strong in places. They will need to be careful not to get dragged away by the currents or any malicious spirits. He continues looking for anything useful, and while scouting the edges of the clearing Soren finds a boulder. It looks ordinary, except he sees some strange markings on it. Looking closely they are a looping set of symbols, these can't be natural markings so he calls over Kiva and Esme to inspect it. Kiva recognizes the script as Forest Folk writing, and her experience with ancient runes, along with Esme over her shoulder pointing out a couple specific symbols, allows her to get the gist of this message. The stone is a warning, there is danger nearby! Esme immediately starts to scan the clearing.

Esme looks around and as she moves around the edge of the clearing she gets a sense that something is nearby...She finds a ring of mushrooms a small way into the forest away from the clearing. Inside the ring is a stone, but it almost seems to be hiding from her mind. The knowledge of the stone keeps trying to slip out of her mind, but she is able to focus through and remember it. She knows that there are many a story about Faerie waystones, allowing quick travel over long distances to the Fair Folk, but mortals taking the trails often get entrapped or lead astray by the mysterious denizens of the Faerie realm. She also knows that Greenwood Jack, a folk myth with many stories about him, used the waystones with his Faerie friends to enact his many hi-jinks. She takes some leftover hardtack from the previous night and lays a breadcrumb trail from the mushroom circle back to the clearing, and puts the last of their milk into a bowl. She then sits a small way away from the bowl and sings a song of entreaty to any Faeries that may be nearby. Rua, inspired by her previous comments about his amulet from Betta having Aratis' influence, joins her in song. As they sing Soren and Fio leave the clearing to try to forage some provisions but are not able to find anything edible in the immediate vicinity.

Rua and Esme sing together for some time, until their throats start to get sore. Just as they are about to falter Esme notices a small figure perched on the edge of the bowl. At first they mistake it for a dragonfly, but looking closer they see it's a small humanoid figure with gossamer insect wings and faceted insect eyes on its head, which is currently dunked in the bowl of milk drinking deep. Esme and Rua switch the song to one about Caradoc the Courageous, a Stonetop folk hero who has a whole lot of fun in the forest with his friends, going on many adventures! The Faerie raises its head from the milk, cocking an ear to their tune. Esme sees it listening and calls out to it, asking it if it wants to join them. Rua waves, introducing himself and Esme and says Well Met. The little insect-looking creature flits over to them, first hovering in front of Esme then in front of Rua. It buzzes around a few moments more before nearing Rua's pack. It rings out a high pitched buzzing after approaching it and rapidly zooms off into the forest. Esme calls out loudly "Oh no! and I had some candy here I was going to give away!"...There is silence coming from the forest. A quick inspection of Rua's pack reveals the mess kit they have been using to prepare their supplies, the iron pot must have scared it away.

Rua apologizes for this, but the others quickly assure him its fine, he shouldn't take it too hard. Shit happens. They turn their focus to crossing the river, mostly looking at the tree that has fallen partway across. Rua remembers he brought some rope! He decides to tie it to a sturdy tree and around his shoulders to swim across and tie it to make other's crossing easier. Nobody else has a better idea, so he goes for it! As he swims across he gets a deep, uneasy feeling. What he is doing is so wrong, his whole life he has been told about the dangers of water he can't see the bottom of. However, nothing untowards happens. His feet soon touch the stones of the far bank, and he hauls himself dripping out of the water to tie the rope off on another tree, making a taught guide across the flowing river. The others follow along one-by-one, with only Kiva losing her footing and needing to be helped across to avoid being swept away. They all come out dripping, and gather some dead wood around for a decent fire as the light slowly fades.

The next day they approach the Dawn Rock. Its lower slopes are forested, but it turns to bare rock near the summit. They make the trek to the top, and the view is well worth the effort! A seemingly endless sea of green flows away from them, with the suns rays playing over the swaying tree tops. Wispy clouds wreath the tops of the mountains to the north, and to the north-east they can see the far-flung figure of the Golden Oak, the great tree at the center of the Great Wood. They spend a minute taking in the view, but just as they are to start heading down a rumble sounds from the north-east and they can see some trees fall down accompanied by a deep rumbling, so far away its barely audible. As they are all staring that way wondering what happened another ring of trees fall, creating a clearing in the forest with a rumbling sound, like an earthquake. Everyone is concerned, at first Esme wants to stay far clear of these disruptions but Soren points out there have been multiple earthquakes around Stonetop. This might be related. Kiva is naturally curious and wants to know more, but they all agree to focus on the Forest Folk first since it is closer(the earthquakes are at least a few days away from the Dawn Rock), and that is a more immediate high-level issue. They scramble back down the Dawn Rock, it is solidly in the afternoon now so they push on until nightfall.

They do not notice it right away, but the atmosphere has subtly changed. The sounds of birds aren't quite gone, but is noticeably muted as if the trees around them are holding their breath. They agree on double watches that night, and Esme and Soren take first watch. Regardless of the uneasy feeling nothing disturbs their fitful rest. The morning dawns with a thick mist that proceeds into rain that envelops them. The overcast skies and precipitation makes it hard to track the passage of time, but at a certain point they realize they have passed into the city limits already. The buildings have been cleverly built into the forest around them, and adding what looks like decades worth of dilapidation makes it even harder to pick out the outlines of the buildings. As they slowly move through the run-down structures Esme's jaw is clenched tightly. Rua notices, but doesn't want to draw attention to it.

End of Session!

# Session 26

Exploring the hidden city of the Forest Folk!

It is a grey, misty and drizzly day. Visibility is low, making the camouflaged buildings even harder to make out against the trees and bushes. The trail that the party is on gradually transitions from packed dirt to slate cobblestones. Weeds have nearly covered them completely but some still shine through.

Soren enters one of the buildings and it seems to be the remains of a small yet lovely home. The furniture is low to the ground, with a central table and some beds behind a collapsed screen. Half of the roof is caved in as well, adding to the dilapidated nature. Moving farther inside he finds a storeroom that used to be full of ceramic jars, but now they are just a pile of shards on the floor. The shelves are still intact, and the remains are in one big pile so whatever or whoever did this was methodical and focused in their efforts. Other than this, there are no signs of violence or a struggle. Soren and Esme discuss the possibilities of what happened, but there are still many more questions than answers. They leave the house and continue down the path, winding through the trees in such a way that makes it hard to see more than a dozen meters ahead.

As they follow the trail it opens into a small clearing and the party sees the first thing that resembles a body. It is like a wooden statue with spiky protrusions sticking out of its body all over. It is contorted, laying on the ground next to the path. The detail is remarkable, even if there are some spreading cracks through the figure. Esme brushes some moss off its face, studying its features. She turns to Kiva asking if she had heard of any magic like this, that could transform a person into wood. Kiva is stumped, transformation magic isn't unheard of, but usually into animals not plants. Something tickles Soren's mind though, and he is brought back to the scene of carnage they found on the way to the Crinwin nest. The racoon had spiky bone growths similar to these spikes. Esme points out that maybe the wood transmutation was an attempt at curing or stalling the disease. Hearing the word disease Soren takes a step back, advising the others not to touch them. If it can infect racoons and forest folk, it could infect us as well.

As the group continues along the buildings get dense and less cunningly hidden. More and more of the wooden bodies appear around them, and Esme inspects each one's face, looking for any sign of familiarity. Rua cups his hands and shouts "HELLOOOOO! IS ANYBODY THERE!?" No sound comes back, except the patter of the rain. They find another of the bodies that is lacking any spikes, but has a hole punched clean through its chest, big enough to put your fist in it. Rua walks up and tries to put his arm through it and Esme quickly slaps his hand away. "Be respectful of the dead" she admonishes him.

Continuing forward they come to what appears to be a central square, the trees pulling back and revealing a veritable carpet of bodies on the ground. There must be at least a hundred of them strewn about. Around the square there are several buildings, one the remains of a tall tower that has signs of a fire, collapsing in on itself. Another one looks like a large hall, easily enough to fit 3 or 4 of Stonetop's schoolhouse inside. To the south there is a massive building looming over the area as well. Rua heads to the burnt watchtower and the others follow with him. As they approach Soren's sixth sense starts to tingle. He has been distracted by the bodies and the architecture but his instincts start to kick in and tell him to be on guard. He looks to Fio and he can tell she feels it too. Suddenly it hits him, the sounds of the forest have stopped. No birds are singing, no critters are moving about. He looks around suddenly and he sees the branches of a small tree at the edge of the clearing...looking closer, is that the head of a deer? with antlers sticking out?... Soren calls out to Rua "Rua stop! something is very wrong here, listen, no birds, no sounds of the forest. We need to be very careful, I feel like we are being watched." Everyone freezes, they can't tell if the deer thing is wooden or not, its a little too far away.

Esme pulls a small set of pipes out of her pack and starts to play a tune unfamiliar to the rest of the party, but possibly familiar to any forest folk. As she plays the deer starts to move, jerkily stalking out of the bushes now that it has lost the element of surprise. It immediately charges at Esme who has her hands full. Kiva reacts quickly, flinging her spear at it but in her haste she overshoots it, missing completely. Thanks to Soren's warning Esme has just enough to pull out her shield out and brace for impact. The deer hits hard, a screeching sound coming from where its antlers and bone spikes are grinding against her shield. The impact is heavy, breaking some of the spikes on its chest but its antlers poked over the top of her shield and raked her slightly. Soren steps forward drawing his bronze sword, striking at the back legs of the mutated deer. This is a thing of supernatural chaos and he imagines a connection with Aratis as Esme has been trying to teach him, praying for the god's favour to guide his strike. Unfortunately, communing with Aratis has always been Esme's thing, Soren hasn't really been able to make a good connection with him so his sword bounces off one of the bone spikes, dealing no real damage. It lunges back at him in response, off balance from Esme's block but still poking him with its spikes. The wound is shallow, but he immediately feels a burning sensation emanating from it. He calls this out, telling people to be extra careful.

As they engage in melee, two more of the misshapen creatures stalk out of the forest and start to circle the group. Esme calls for a retreat to one of the smaller buildings, with more of the monsters joining and the bony growths causing burning sensations they need to get out of the open. Rua however jumps forward, sticking his spear into the side of the beast. It sinks in deep with a gurgling sound, and its clear these things are biological and can be hurt. Kiva is suddenly feeling very vulnerable so she darts forward and grabs at her spear, seeking to rearm herself. One of the circling deer darts forward, getting between her and the rest of the group. Its eyes are gone, replaced by bony spikes but it still turns its head as if it is looking directly at her. She hesitates for a moment before deciding to try to run past it and rejoin the group. Rua supports her, waving his spear around and trying to distract or antagonize the beast. He gets its attention away from Kiva, allowing her to run past but just as she gets clear she slips on the slick slate stones and falls to the ground. She is up quickly and running again to rejoin the others, but with a pronounced limp as the fall twisted her ankle.

Back together as a group they all start to retreat to the nearest building with a door small enough to bar the antlered deer. One of the deer tries to cut them off, but doesn't quite make it and has to veer off to not hit the building. They slip through the door and find themselves in a partially collapsed three storey building. The ceiling is still intact on the first floor and the walls looks sturdy enough so it feels safe enough. Esme calls for Stella to look at Soren's wound. She brings her consecrated light close and it seems like just a shallow cut, except for a small lump at the end. This is where the wound burns the most Soren says. Stella cups her hands, focusing her light on the wound and invokes Helior's light to the wound. It is a very weird feeling, the shard of bone shivers in his arm and slowly slides out of the wound until Stella is able to pull it out and drop it on the floor. Kiva inspects it closely, peering down on it and sniffing it. She can't tell anything about it, but it definitely feels...off. A weirdness is the only way she can describe it. She starts to move to pick it up and put it in a small ceramic jar. Soren immediately speaks up, saying "Please tell me you aren't saving that. Its infectious! what if it spreads to others or the village?" Kiva replies "We need to study it, who knows if it will spread and having more knowledge is better than less." Esme also points out, the racoon shows its already spreading. We need to be prepared to fight it if we need to.

Fio has been standing by the door, observing the deer as they stalked around. She says, rightly so, that they are trapped so now what? Esme suggests shooting them from the safety of the house. Fio draws back an arrow and shoots, but misses and the arrow flies past them. They each raise their heads in unison, turning to regard the door before turning together and leaving the clearing, the injured one trailing behind slightly and leaving a bleeding trail. They spend the time to fully inspect the interior of the building, this was a communal eating area by the furniture strewn around. They find one wooden body, ridden with spikes like the others. Rua is seeing for the first time artistically crafted furniture, and the images sit in the back of his mind. There is another door at the back, opening out to the forest/city mix.

Fio calls out that the mutated deer are fully gone now, the misty square completely empty of movement. They decide to head to the largest building in the square, if there is anything for us to find it will probably be there. The massive main doors sit ajar, the gabled roof slightly leaning to the side and the 2nd floor windows gaping empty. Soren pulls out an oil lantern and has Stella light it and he pulls the door open the rest of the way. It resists him, creaking heavily as it slowly opens up. Inside it is very dark, a tree was growing at the center but the roof around it has fallen away letting the rain and mist fall to the floor. Lifting their lights they look around, in one corner there is an altar? a stage? not front and center but off to the side. On one wall there is an intricate wood carving. There is a chair at the edge of the room that is intact, but most of the other furniture is showing serious signs of wear and damage from the elements.

Esme and Kiva work together to inspect the room, looking for magic or script that might give them some information. Esme can feel a tingling of magic in the corner, looking closer she can see two skeletons. Notably they are not wooden, just corpses clad in rotting rags. As she focuses on the area she gets the feeling that something there is watching her back. She gets the send of a pair of floating, red eyes in the corner but when she blinks they are gone. It doesn't feel like the same malevolent feeling they got from the deer outside, so Esme calls out to it "Hello neighbor. We mean you no harm, we are trying to respect this place and redress any wrongs that were done here." There is a couple long moments of silence, with the others looking at each other cause

Esme seems to be talking to thin air. But suddenly the eyes reappear, then rush towards them. It quickly retreats again as it approaches the dim light penetrating through the broken roof, but the whole group feels a wave of gnawing hunger roll over them. Esme moves slowly to put herself between the entity and the others, directing them to stay away and check the mural on the far wall for information.

Soren and Kiva head to the mural to inspect it. Moving from right-to-left there are multiple panels, and on the right there is an inscription that Kiva can make out with some effort "All Thrive When Earth and People are One". In the first, tall figures wearing antlered-skull masks are holding smaller beings in their hands with other smaller beings at their feet bowing before them. The next few panels are confused, but seems to be some great war or series of battle between the tall skull-headed creatures and what looks like Fae beings with a wide variety of shapes and forms. There are a couple forest folk in each of the panels, first bowing at the masked figures feet, then battling against them, and finally scenes of them building and shaping trees. At the end there is a gathering of people, where one of the folk is kneeling before a big crowd of forest folk.

End of Session!

# Session 27

We continue unravelling the mystery of the Forest Folk!

While Soren and Kiva are inspecting the mural Stella steps up to the spirit off in the corner. She draws on her studies and memories of Olwinn and knows that this being cannot be affected by physical weapons. It gets colder the closer she approaches, and Esme keeps careful watch on the being with her shield is raised. Stella can't really tell what it is feeling, but she can definitely feel the hunger emanating from its eyes and she says "When Helior's eye goes down this place will become very dangerous." Esme nods and says that they should clear out and check other buildings. They all step out, staying close together and moving quickly across the square to the 2-story building with remnants of stained glass.

One of the doors is lying on the ground, the other hanging ajar. What looked like maybe a cathedral from outside turns out to be a library. There are shelves running the length of the building, and places for people to sit and read. However, there is moss and other creeping plants overgrowing. It's hard to tell if it was cultivated initially or crept in later, but some of the mosses are glowing faintly with a blue-ish bio luminescence. Rua is fascinated by this, immediately going up to a patch of the glowing plants and inspecting it. Esme is interested in the books, but as she peruses the shelves there isn't much to find. The years exposed the books to moisture and insects so every one she picks up just sheds a mass of wood pulp, she cannot find anything legible. She starts looking for what might be the Folk's version of the Chronicle, something big or valuable enough to have been protected more. Soren is helping her look around, the party needs information more than anything else right now.

Rua quickly grows bored of the moss, so he calls out "I'm going to make sure this place is safe" and heads off, methodically searching the building for any surprises. What first struck him as beautiful soon becomes a solemn scene as he explores more and more of the ruined building. He doesn't find anything solid, but he slowly gets a feeling of being watched. Once he is well away from the others he pauses in a quiet room and calls softly "Hello?". At first there is no reply, but as he looks around he sees the ghostly apparition of the upper torso of a Forest Folk, its face regards Rua sadly then flickers out again. Rua takes a step back, but then goes back to the others

A fair number of books have survived, more than they could carry back for sure. Most of them are not immediately useful, some are linguistic texts, others are botanical. Soren found a book that instructs on how to grow trees specifically for shaping living wood. Esme finds an alcove where the roof burnt down. The damage here is particularly bad, the burned roof exposed them directly to rain. Here she finds a shelf of very large books, each one is obviously destroyed as she handles them as gently as possible. Just as she is about to turn away she spots one more book, it had

fallen behind the others and was more protected. The back half of the book is illegible, but there are still many pages that can actually turn and be read. She treats it with utmost care as she witnesses the illuminated script. It is clear someone spent many hours on each page, many of the depictions are of combat, of the Forest Folk at war.

Rua finds Stella near the entrance of the building and tells her about the spirit, asking for her help to like, talk to it or something. Stella asks him to show her, and so they go together to where he saw the spirit. After waiting for a few quiet minutes the spirit's face appears again, looks at them sadly and goes away again. Rua says "Did you see that too?" Stella confirmed she did, and muses that it is not hostile, likely it is tied to this place with some sort of unfinished business. Rua remembers the spirit from the ruined village that was trying to build a wall that fell over and over. Rua says that maybe they should take the spirit with them, it could tell them what happened. He asks out loud "Hey, do you want to come back with us to Stonetop?" The spirit appears again, maybe a bit dimmer this time? It floats next to a bookshelf and slowly runs his hand along it and shakes his head slowly. Rua thinks that maybe it needs something from the bookshelf so he inspects it closely, then grabs an armful of books and asks "Is the book you need here?" The ghost appears again, a little more translucent this time but gives him a look he knows well from the elders of Stonetop. "Oh..yeah OK." he says and puts the books back on the shelf.

He turns to Stella and asks her what she thinks, what does it need? Stella is not sure what to think, she has never actually met a spirit before, or a Forest Folk so she is way out of her depth. They are fairy tale creatures to her. Esme chooses this moment to enter, she had been observing letting Stella interact with it but seeing her indecisive she comes in and pats her head reassuringly. Esme turns to the center of the room and makes a gesture of greeting while speaking a greeting of respect. This time the head does not appear, but a ghostly arm shows up close to the wall and it traces a rune there. Kiva can read it, the rune has a marker of a proper noun, she thinks its a name. Radco. Esme turns to Stella and asks her to bring the warmth of Helior to see if it will bolster its flagging energy. Stella directs her consecrated lamplight at the apparition, invoking the god of the Sun to send a ray of his comforting light to wash over the spirit.

The light suffuses Radco and it is clear that some energy has returned, now his entire body is showing not just torso or arm. Esme asks him if there are any survivors, where they are they? Radco moves his arm to the wall again and traces another glyph that glows and Kiva reads as meaning "far away". She then asks if the bone spur threat is known to them. He draws another glyph that glows and fades, another name like "Beresija"? Its hard for Kiva to make out exactly, and she doesn't know what it is talking about. Esme asks again about survivors, which direction are they? Radco points to the west, the direction the part came from. Seeing their surprise it pushes more energy into another rune on the wall, a name "Ustrina". This name tickles something in Esme's memory, its a people that is related to the old forge lords and they live out in the mountains. She remembers that they have a variety of factions and sects, and nobody knows exactly what they look like because they always go about cloaked and masked. They have never been seen in Stonetop.

The spirit moves again and writes two more runes on the wall which Kiva reads as "Save the books". Esme promises to take away as many of them as she can, and the others nod agreement. She asks one final question "Do you know if Nya is alive?" The ghost shakes his head then draws a

short series of lines on the wall that Kiva reads as "uncertain". Radco is starting to fade again, his legs have disappeared and its just his right arm and upper torso remaining. With this Esme finishes her questioning. Rua steps forward and bows, saying "It was nice to meet you, sir". Radco bows back, touching his forehead with the same gesture of respect Esme gave. They all make the motion back and a look of relief comes over his face and he slowly fades away. They gather as many legible books as they can, not taking with yet but putting them all in one place with a protective covering to be collected later.

On the way they notice something odd about the square. Most of it is paved with regularly shaped stones, but near the library there is a hole about 10 feet across where it looks like some sort of tunnel broke the surface here. It looks like it opened up from below, cobblestones are scattered a little ways around but whatever it was is collapsed now. As they closer to the ruined tower it is obvious the structure is unstable. They carefully enter, and Esme pauses at the entrance and squats down near the door, her eyes unfocused looking off into the distance. The others enter and carefully pick their way through the rubble. They find the crushed wooden bodies of some Forest Folk near the centre. One of them was carrying an iron-headed spear. One of them appeared to have been carrying something, their arms are clutched to their chest when they got crushed. If they had been holding anything it seems to have rotted away long ago. Rua looks up and sees fragments of the upper floors still remain, and is about to start climbing up when Soren asks him to stop, this building is clearly unstable and its not safe. Stella chimes in that fire has gutted it as well, its unlikely anything survived up there. Rua looks up and back down, but agrees and doesn't try to climb up. Finding nothing else of note, they leave the building and decide ot head north.

The path north winds through some trees, working through the forest for a ways towards a series of domed buildings. They are interconnected, and there is only one entrance at the front of the smallest dome. The door is intact and shut, but not locked and it creaks open as Soren pushes on it. He beckons Stella forward to shine her light through the portal as he pushes it open. The smell hits them immediately, its very humid and damp and filled with the smell of greenery, it clearly hasn't been opened in 10 years. Fio gets one whiff of it and says she will stand guard outside. The rest head inside and start to look around. The first dome has a bunch of wrecked furniture and bodies of some Folk, the bone spurs appear to have killed them bu bursting out of their skin. Esme takes a scrap of cloth, gets it wet and covers her mouth with it and encourages the others to do the same. As they proceed into one of the other connected buildings it becomes clear this is a set of baths. There is a cabinet to the side with the remains of some ceramics. The smashed jars contain some sort of incense or scented oil, and some of them are still intact, Kiva takes an interest in these, gathering up several of them and taking them with her.

As they move into the third building its more baths that are raised up so fires could be lit under, though now it is cold and damp. There is a relief of a beautiful figure, half Forest Folk and half tree. It has clearly been carved with extreme skill. Soren and Rua take a moment to appreciate its beauty, even with years of decay and splits in the wood the figure is exquisitely carved. Nothing else of interest is found in the buildings so they clear out before breathing too much of the foul air. They discard the cloths on their faces, Stella burning hers.

End of Session!

# Session 28

Exploration continues! Will they find danger or treasure?

The group is standing outside the ruined bathhouses, further to the north there is a large depression in the ground and to the east there is the remains of what used to be a carefully manicured path leading to a large, open area like a park maybe? The rain is still drizzling down on them, the gentle sounds of running water falling from the trees being the only sound they can hear. They move towards the north and the streets here have succumbed to decay more than others, with roots and moss taking over. As they get closer the depression clearly becomes what looks like an amphitheatre, the tiered steps made of worked stone. At the upper rim there is a giant, spreading elm that has covered the floor of the theatre with a mat of fallen and loamy leaves, like it had been placed to provide shade to the seating area. As they approach the edge they hear a faint whistling through the trees as if the wind was blowing. But they feel no wind...over time it gets stronger, a strange melody emanating from the empty stage at the bottom.

Soren cocks an ear to the melody, his danger senses are still so he carefully steps down towards the stage. As he gets closer he sees the faint outline of a Forest Folk playing some sort of Oboe instrument. Esme takes a seat partway done, sadness clear in her posture. Soren listens for a moment, and gets a slightly different feeling from this ghost as the one in the library. Less sad, and definitely not dangerous like the one in the great hall. The sound compels him to move to the music, and he starts to dance in small semi-circles in a large loop. The spirit appears to look to him and starts to pick up the music, playing a more sprightly tune and Soren picks up speed to match. However, as he moves faster one of his feet slip on the carpet of dead leaves, sending him tumbling down a few more of the stone steps and sliding to a stop. The music halts, and it appears the ghost has stopped playing to double-over in laughter. Soren gingerly picks himself up, peeling some of the damp leaves from his behind before sketching a jaunty bow to the musician on the stage.

Esme is wrapped in memory and emotion, but she is still analyzing this apparition in front of them. It doesn't have the same desperate feeling as the other spirits they encountered in the city. This one appears to have gained some sort of control over and contentment with its existence. Soren's humorous blunder has caused it to solidify slightly, and the sense of peace radiating from the spirit increases. Esme comes to her feet and carefully steps down with many years of practice with walking down wet stone stairs. As she gets down to the bottom she gets the feeling that the elm tree is not just a tree, almost like it is watching her. She asks the ghost if that is them, pointing to the tree. The spirit smiles gently at her and shakes its head. Esme then asks it for help, they are looking for answers as to what happened here. The spirit nods before sitting down on an invisible

chair and begins to play again, however this time the music is chaotic and discordant. As he plays shimmering blue images form around him, scenes of chaos as people flee through the city, some of the collapsing to the ground with bone spikes bursting out of them as they shift into stone. They see some massive creature mauling some of the folk, it might have been an animal but now it is a beast covered in bone spurs. It is savaging any of the folk it can catch. The images fade as the musics does as well, and the spirit appears a little dimmer than before.

Soren speaks up and asks "Is there a way to hurt them? A way to drive them back or bring them pain?" The ghost looks thoughtful for a moment before playing a stirring martial tune. The images appear again, more of the bony beasts in battle with Forest Folk who are fighting back with spears and swords. However, even as the Folk are able to take some of them down they are still stricken down by the bone sickness, their skeletons bursting out. Esme tries to sing harmony with him, to add her voice to the magic and maybe lessen the burden of telling but there seems to be no effect. She then asks if there were any survivors of the fighting and the spirit simply points to the west. Esme nods and then says they should probably start to leave. Soren nods his head in agreement, it doesn't seem like there is much more to learn here and if the Folk had an effective way to fight back they wouldn't all be dead here. Kiva and the others nod in agreement and the group starts to pick their way out of the ampitheatre.

They move back to the library and carefully stow the books they found in their packs, each taking a heavy load. Esme takes the large illuminated manuscript. As they make their way out of the city they are moving slower than they were before they came in, and each of them sways slightly from the weight on their backs. Esme first asks Fio to cover their tracks, but she says that one of the deer had spikes through their eyes, seeing doesn't seem to be much of an issue for them. Soren agrees, speed and distance are probably their best bet. They won't be very speedy with the books, but there is still hours of daytime so they can get some distance away before nightfall.

They leave the village and are some distance away when Fio steps up to Soren and whispers "I think something is following us." Soren's danger sense also starts to tingle, and remembers how the deer first tried to surround them before engaging. He asks Fio how far away the Dawn Rock would be, and she says its really hard to tell in the cloudy day but probably at least an hour. "Too far, we need somewhere defensible" Esme chimes in. Fio nods and says "Wait here, I'll be right back". She quickly slips off and the rest set down their packs, keeping weapons to hand but not actively wielding them to not provoke attack. Esme starts to sing a little bit to bring comfort to the group, and Soren lights up a torch to prepare. After a few minutes suddenly they hear Fio shout "AHHH, son of a bitch!". They are already on guard and each grab their weapons and leap towards her voice, leaving their packs behind to move quickly. As they rush towards her voice she keeps crying out wordlessly, like she is keeping a wild animal at bay.

As they approach they see Fio clutching her left arm to her chest while waving a long iron dagger in front of her in the direction of the one of the bony deer creatures. Esme steps forward to cover Fio while calling for Stella to try to heal her. However, Stella doesn't have a consecrated flame ready and fumbles a bit getting prepared. Rua steps forward immediately, striking at the deer while keeping his distance. He lands a glancing blow, but doesn't have much effect as he only chips a bit of bone away. The deer seems focused on Fio, until Esme raises her shield between them, drawing its attention. It reacts quickly, charging her with its head down straight into her

shield. She is able to deflect the brunt of it, but some of the spikes slip around on gouge her forearm. As she pushes it back she digs her nails into her own arm to dig out any shards of bone left behind.

While it is trying to savage Esme Soren leaps in, leading with the torch. He can feel the unnatural wrongness of the creature as he closes with it. He thinks about the burning pain he felt from their bones, how Fio must be feeling the same and images flash through his mind of what would happen to Stonetop should this bone plague reach them. He has prayed to the gods before, but knowing the disaster that will come should they fail he opens his heart to Aratis and feels a strange power surging through his heart and soul as the torch strikes it's neck. A spark of energy flows from his arm, down the torch and into the beast which expels an oily smoke from it's body. This smoke dissipates, causing the bony growths to melt away and the deer collapses to the ground, riddled with holes.

Kiva hears a rustling behind her and is caught off guard as another of the deer lunges from the underbrush towards her, head down ready to gore her. Esme reacts quickly, covering her with her shield and taking another hit from the deer, again scraping her arm to pull out any shards of bone that may have been embedded in her. Rua takes this opportunity to fight back, stabbing at the deer and again chipping the bone a little bit but not able to do much damage. Kiva spots a thicket of brambles behind the deer and uses her spear to harry it back, getting it's hind legs tangled in the brambles making it vulnerable. Soren sees the opportunity and steps forward, channelling that feeling of Aratis' power into his arm as he strikes the monster with Esme backing him up. Another jolt of power flows into the creature, expelling the dark smoke and causing it to fall to the ground, hind legs still tangled in the brambles.

On the first night after crossing the river, when they are sitting around the campfire before going to sleep Soren sits next to Esme and quietly asks her "So, who's Nya?" Esme grabs at her necklace and says "someone special", in a tone that isn't prickly, but also doesn't invite much more comment. Soren nods and says "Well, I hope they made it out OK." He puts his arm around her shoulders and sits there, providing what comfort he can. Esme quietly begins to cry.

# Session 29

Back at Stonetop, the party rests while the village prepares for the autumn harvest.

The first thing that Rua did upon returning to Stonetop was find Betta and let her know that they have returned. She greets him warmly with a hug, and he fills her in on the happenings of the adventure. Stella heads to the orphanage to check in with Eadna and the kids, also to bathe to cleanse herself of the grit and grime of travel. Afterwards she heads to the Pavilion of the Gods and sees that all is well in order there, people have left offerings of heads of wheat and other summertime gifts at the shrines to each of the gods. She spends some time puttering around, dusting and tidying up, making herself feel at home once again.

With the summer coming to a close harvest is soon upon the village. It is a time where the community all comes together, every able hand helping with the harvest to do all the many and varied tasks. Even the very old and very young find ways to contribute in small ways. Soren isn't the strongest in the village, but he is out in the fields with the rest of the adults reaping the fields of wheat. Even through the sweaty summer heat he keeps telling stories and cracking jokes, keeping the mood high and the people working together smoothly. Rua has been putting his developing muscles to the test, threshing, baling and hauling with the best of them. Stella is multitasking, supervising the younger children in their minor tasks in the harvest while also subtly emitting a warm and bolstering aura of Helior's light to aid the villagers in their task. Esme's knees have been getting worse year over year, so she contributes by directing the work teams, making sure the ripest fields get harvested first and each task gets the right amount of hands to complete it in time.

Overall the harvest is progressing smoothly. One night, as people gather in the public house after the sun goes down for some quick drinks a trader arrives. Trixit Far-traveller comes into the building after putting her heavily laden mule in the attached stable. She comes in and asks for food and ale, before sitting down next to Soren. Soren greets her, welcoming her to the village and asks how her travels have been. She says she has been up at Barrier pass, mingling with the peoples there and is now heading south for the winter. Speaking of Barrier Pass, she says she has something interesting to trade. She goes out to her pack mule and comes back with a package, wrapped in cloth and puts it heavily on the table. She unwraps it slowly, revealing a brick-sized piece of what looks like dark glass. As soon as she reveals it the temperature in the immediate vicinity starts to drop. Stella comes over feeling the chill and is immediately distrustful of it. Soren is fascinated, his first thought is to use it to chill his whisky but also realizes it could be used for a cold room or ice box, to preserve the spoils of hunts and other perishable foods. Rua also points out that Kiva would be super upset if they let a unique find like this pass by.

Soren hides his excitement, analyzing Trixit subtly to see if she is hiding anything, but he has met her before and was always honest and straightforward in her dealings and he doesn't feel she is acting any differently today. He expresses his interest in the item, and they haggle back and forth for a few minutes before settling on bartering some of the surplus of supplies that was plundered from the bandit camp a few months previously. Trixit accepts this trade, those goods are a lot easier to move than on rare item.

Eafric from Marshedge arrives after the harvest to visit Stella specifically. When she sees Stella, Ifric bows to her before saying "I have news, chosen of Helior. Cahir, the lightbearer of Marshedge, has just passed away. It looks like he was ambushed by fen trolls." Stella nods sadly, saying "May his soul be like glass so Helior's light can pierce through." Eafric says he was a good man and will be missed. She is managing the shrine to Helior in the city, but if Stella was to meet a wandering apostle of the god of the sun to send them to Marshedge, or failing that to come herself to visit and perform the proper rights to keep the faith alive. Stella assures her that if anything can be done, she will do it. Ifric thanks her profusely, then excuses herself. There is much work to be done, taking care of the shrine and searching for his incarnation in the children of the city. Eafric bows again before leaving, staying one night at the Public House before heading back south to Marshedge.

The harvest wraps up, a bountiful one but not a bumper crop. Their stores were not close to empty though, so they are well prepared for winter. Once people have a day to rest, Esme starts talking about heading west to find the Ustrina. She had a vision before the harvest that if she went alone it would end poorly, so she bided her time but now she is pushing to travel west. She spends the next days poring over the Chronicle to see what is known about them in Stonetop.

There are not a ton of references to the Ustrina. They are known to the people of Gordin's Delve and come there sometimes to trade. There was an incident approximately 80 or 90 years ago where some people from Stonetop were visiting Gordin's Delve and encountered them. During that visit one of the villagers disappeared and they never heard from them again. It is said that Ustrina have been seen poking around the Ruined Tower, the great Maker's ruin the flats. It was once a great Maker's stronghold that has since collapsed, but it is hard to tell if this is confirmed or not. There isn't a solid location on where they live, but it is said they live under the mountains to the west. She can't find much more about them, they are a very enigmatic people.

Soren has spent time going over the books recovered from Viemrod, looking for any method for harvesting wood from the forest. He heavily relies on Kiva's help to decipher the complex Forest Folk language. They work together to narrow down which texts are relevant and direct their search. The Forest Folk seem to regard trees in different classes, there are some types of trees that are OK to fell in order to gather materials or carving supplies. There are others that are basically sacrosanct, any damage to them would be a great insult and dishonour. There are many types in between, with varying degrees of sanctity and utility. He doesn't grasp what the difference is, he knows that it's not by species as there specifically runes that designate it and they aren't used in these passages. When they start planning to look for the Ustrina, he goes to Emmer and updates him that it looks like there are some trees in the forest the Forest Folk are OK with harvesting. They don't know which types yet, but that is one of Soren's priorities to discover on the trip. Emmer slaps his hand down on the table saying "Hot damn that is some good news! Maybe next

year we can start felling trees much closer to home." He wishes them well on their journey before giving him a friendly punch in the shoulder before leaving. Soren acts like this didn't hurt, but it did a little bit.

When Rua tells Betta that they are planning another trip away from the village she is shocked, "But you just got back! Why would you want to leave again?" Rua explains that he feels responsible to see through what they started in Viemrod, to find the remnants of the Forest Folk. She sighs and nods, understanding but not super happy about it. "Bring me something back from Gordin's Delve will ya?" Rua agrees, assuring her he will come back safe and sound. Esme hears through gossip that Betta is sad that Rua is leaving again and casually drops some hints to him that it can help one stay close to others by writing down how they feel and sharing that with them, to leave them something to remind them. Rua is only half listening, nodding along until suddenly realizing something. He approaches Esme, saying that he realized in the library that he couldn't tell the difference between the language the Forest Folk and the language of Stonetop. He asks Esme if she could teach him how to read and write so he could write letters to Betta. Esme agrees, they will spend a little time each day teaching him his letters.

Stella has been thinking about what she knows of the faith of Helior in Gordin's Delve. Yomar is the name of the Lightbearer of the town, but he was very old when Olwin was corresponding with him, so he must be ancient by now. Also, there are prayers and chants to Helior she knows that mention glass. One, The Litany of Glass, that she sings to herself often. She will be looking for any quality glass items, or ideally a glassblower that could make her things, but she doesn't know if there is one in the town. There are a few glass items in Stonetop, most notably the altar has bits of glass embedded in it that catch the light that hits it, reflecting it in spots around the shrine.

#### The Litany of Glass

"To forsake fear, one must be glass."

"Beholden to His sight, I allow Him to gaze through me and cleanse me of doubt."

"I must carve my truth into my glass.

So when His sight lands upon me,

I may keep my mind and self."

"When I am glass,

My self will not cast shadow, but colour."

"Then, I may see without fear."

They plan to bring a cart of trade goods, hitched to Bitey, on the way to Gordin's Delve to trade for things that the village needs. The night before Rua invites Betta along with them. At first she is hesitant, she knows her mother will not agree with this. However, she resolves to sneak away and deal with the fallout later. Rua gives her a jaunty smile, happy that she is coming along. She arrives in the morning, wrapped in a cloak and eager to leave. Soren raises an eyebrow at this, but trusts that she is a responsible young woman who would make sure things are arranged properly. Esme arrives just as they are ready to leave, and they head west along the Maker's Road.

The first day passes uneventfully. It is a bright, sunny day and they pass a few other traders on the road but there are no conflicts. Stella's mood is clearly content, and everyone soaks up the warmth of the sun after their last journey in the rainy forest. Betta is not used to this much

travelling, starting to develop some blisters on her feet and takes some breaks sitting on the cart Bitey is pulling. Esme gets her to catalog the goods they are taking to barter with in the town. Soren does his usual storytelling, exaggerating his exploits especially now Betta is there. He hasn't talked to her much, which means she hasn't heard his stories so he walks next to the cart when she is sitting on it and regales her with his adventures.

There is a group of travellers coming from the west on the 2nd day. These ones are notable in that they don't give the usual head nod as they walk by but approach the party directly. They are also wearing bright clothes of many colours. Their leader approaches to talk to the group, a bald man with a wispy moustache wearing bright yellow clothes. He bows slightly and greets them. Rua bows back uncertainly and Soren returns the greeting, asking how is the road? The man nods and says the road is clear and smooth. He introduces himself as Kunza of the Unmoved Mountain. We have come south seeking a particular person. Esme replies cheekily "Do mountains typically move?" He chuckles at this, saying it's really just a figure of speech. Rua suddenly snaps his fingers and says "I solved the riddle, earthquakes! Earthquakes would move mountains." Rua smiles, self-satisfied with figuring it out. "Right...yeah, uh, earthquakes could move a mountain if it was really big, I guess."

Small talk out of the way, Kunza says they are looking for a woman named Dawa, and he points to one of their companions, a woman with straight black hair. Her eyes are an unusual shade, orange tinged with red you see. She may have other unusual abnormalities as well. This woman is a criminal, and not to be dealt with lightly. Rua asks if we do find her, how we will let them know? They will be travelling south to Marshedge, and if they don't find her there they will be going back to Barrier Pass. They will be travelling these roads for the next few weeks at the least. Soren is concerned about the "abnormalities" comment and digs deeper, asking them to be more specific. They said she has an illness, she will have an air of madness about her, and a great hunger. "A hunger for what?" Esme asks. "Oh you know, normal human food." Kunza replies nonchalantly. Soren raises an eyebrow at this noticeably specific statement but doesn't say anything about it.

Esme inspects the group, they are dressed in what she recognizes are the garb of the Monks of Barrier Pass. She gets the impression from some of them for whom monastic life isn't about meditation or contemplation. They have an air of violence. She gets a feeling that, should they find this person, they will probably kill them. That being said, she knows as a whole they are honourable people, and respect the rules of hospitality. Esme tells them that she knows someone, Elsa in Marshedge, they can get in touch with her and she can provide lodgings for some work. Esme will send a messenger bird there if she hears anything. When they part ways Soren says he hopes they can find the person they are looking for and help them with their illness. As the group gets out of earshot Esme shares her thoughts, and Soren is shocked by this. He thought they were looking to cure her, and says they only know one side of the story so they should think twice before turning this woman in if death is what waits for her.

The rest of the trip is uneventful and they arrive to Gordin's Delve at the end of the fourth day of travel.

End of Session!

# Session 30

The party arrives in Gordin's Delve! What mischief will they get up to? Some additional lore/backstory established outside the regular session can be found [here](#)

Before setting out on their journey, Kiva had spent some time inspecting and researching the bone shards recovered from the mutated deer. Each night she would work with Esme to sift through her findings, with Stella looking in as well since these malicious bone shards concern her as well. Working together they observe the shards have some power infusing it from far away, but after some weeks pass they slowly morph into regular shards of bone. Through their studies they are able to identify the dark power as originating from the Things Below. Once this is uncovered Esme spent days looking into references to the Things Below and how often they influenced the world. Clearly there has been a decline in their meddling, recently there hasn't been much impact but there are many stories from hundreds of years ago of much more active influence. Nobody knows how they got trapped below the earth, but legends say it was the Things Below getting free that brought down the Makers of old.

Their third day of travel to Gordin's Delve is uneventful, other travellers pass them without comment and the wind blows through the grass, rustling it in gusts. Unseen birds trill from the surrounding prairie as they walk along. In the afternoon they spot three riders going east through the grass, and they veer towards the party on the road. As they approach they can see clan markings of a red ouroboros. Soren doesn't recognize them, and shares that with the others. They ride up, two women and a man, and the woman in the lead hails them as they ride up. She mocks them for heading towards Gordin's Delve and fraternizing with such "unclean folk". Rua reacts defensively at the derision to his hometown and asks what's wrong with it? The mounted woman laughs harshly, going on a rant about how they desecrate the earth by digging holes in her body and burning her blood.

Soren is rankled by their blatant aggression, and says that they are neighbours and should work together and not kill each other. The Hillfolk woman snorts at this, saying that they should choose wisely between supporting the Hillfolk or the Delve, as the flag of the infinite snake will soon hang from the walls of the town. Esme introduces herself, saying they are from Stonetop, and asks who the leader of her clan is. The aggressive woman dances around the question, not revealing a name but giving more vague threats about how strong he is, and how he will unify the Hillfolk. There is more back-and-forth as Esme tries to get more information out of them while asking innocent questions before the riders say they have many miles to travel and start moving away. Rua flips them the bird as they go, with Esme wapping him with the back of her hand. Once they are out of earshot, Soren backs up Rua, the riders were being threatening, why was Esme so polite to them? He wanted to confront their behaviour, but Esme explained she was trying to get information out of

them, and not start any negative incident while travelling.

Stella comments that they gave her a bad feeling, and Betta asks if all Hillfolk are that rude? Soren shakes his head "No, I lived with them for many years. Their lifestyle is unique, always moving, but they are a good folk at heart, just people trying to live well and get by like most out there. He then says that he wants to check in with the yellow-spear tribe at some point, he is worried about what Garnuss had said about trouble brewing with the tribes and the Hdour that appeared. Stella nods but says they need to focus on the immediate problem of the Things Below and whats going on with the Ustrina so the party continues on the road to the west

At camp that night they are in the foothills of the mountains. There are wildflowers blooming in the meadows and they start to feel the chill as night falls. They sit around the fire before going to sleep and plan what they will do when they get to the Delve. Honest Draigh is the Delve Boss that mostly deals with trade relations with Stonetop and Marshedge, or interferes with them. He has made himself pretty much indispensable, using his leverage over outside trade to keep a handle on the other Bosses. Its the most secure position possible in the turbulent political atmosphere of the Delve. Esme is in contact with Cairra, a mid-level servant of Honest Draigh and plans to get in contact with her, she may be able to provide them a place to stay or get them information. Rua's uncle Cillian used to work with his dad, until the mining accident that crippled him. Now he works as a tinkerer to support himself and his wife Enya by fixing whatever people bring to him to fix. Rua was close to him as a kid, and is really looking forward to reconnecting with him. Eventually it is decided they will split up when they get to the Delve, going to Mahsa's together for lunch so they all know the location, then splitting up. Soren, Esme, and Willem will take bitey and the trade goods to the market while getting in touch with their respective contacts while Kiva, Rua, Betta and Stella go visit his uncle. He knows a guy named Vaughn who told stories of trading with stranged masked people that match the descriptions of the Ustrina, maybe he can point them in the right direction.

On the fourth day they spot the Delve over the next rise. Its hard to miss, dark smoke curls up from the stack of the Foundry and a pile of tailings runs off the side of the town with red streaks and other contamination from the mines. The walls are very large, clearly of Maker origin, and would be a formidable bastion if well defended. The road up to the town is surrounded by a shanty town of tents and semi-permanent shacks. Some people are just passing through, pitching camp outside rather than paying for room at an inn. Others are those unable to afford living within the city walls. Herds of goats line the final miles of the road before the tents. As they make their way through they are surrounded by the sounds and smells of lots of humans, all total strangers. Stella hugs her arms around herself, taking solace in her nondescript clothing. Kiva is looking around, engrossed with the sheer novelty of the experience of so many people around, and all the interesting things they have. As they approach the giant gates in the wall Esme notices that people come and go freely, no guards or other authority is manning the entry to the walled town.

They go to Mahsa's food stand and they get in line, slowly moving forward as Mahsa makes miner's lunches for the line of hungry workers as the lunch rush is nearing its end. A miner's lunch is a specialty around here, a bunch of beef and vegetables wrapped in pastry like a hand pie, usually served with some paper or other cheap way to hold it while you eat. When they get to the front of the line greets Mahsa warmly, ording a miner's lunch for everyone in the group. Mahsa starts to

server them, and Soren and her chat for a bit and catch up. He asks if Vaughn has been around, Mahsa says yeah he can be found at the The Broken Thumb in the afternoons. Soren remembers this as a really seedy place, in a rough part of the town. Mahsa is quick and efficeint with her movements, serving all seven of them quickly, and now is waiting for them to move aside so she can keep working. Soren is quick to move out of the way once she indicates this, leading the others to some nearby barrels and rough-hewn timber for seats as they munch. He makes loud and appreciative noises when eating his hand pie, Stonetop has many great things but Soren had really missed Mahsa's cooking. The others dig in as well, the food surprisingly delicious for the simple fare.

After enjoying their meal the party separates. Esme and Soren lead bitey to Honest Draigh's house, Willem walking behind the cart keeping a shifty eye at the people crowding around. When they get there Esme hands a prepared letter to one of the guards. The guard is incredibly rude, but eventually acquiesces to take the letter inside. She wrote an innocuous note in cipher, letting Caira know she is there and looking to meet. Then they head to The Swap, the central market where people from all over come to trade in various metals. They move around, trading the food and other sundries from the cart for some silver coins, should be enough to hire an engineer for a large project back at Stonetop.

Rua leads Betta to Cillian's place, with Stella and Kiva following along. They approach the smithy his aunt works at and when they get there Rua's uncle is seated on a chair outside talking to another old man, talking animatedly to him. Cillian looks over at Rua, not recognizing him and turns back to his conversation. Rua is perturbed by this, a little crestfallen at not being recognized so he walk up and says "Uncle Cillian, do you not recognize me? Its Rua!" Cillian squints for a moment before his eyes go wide before exclaiming "By the Gods its Rua!" Rua runs up and gives him a huge hug. Rua's uncle asks if he is come back or passing through. Rua says he is just passing through, they will be travelling to the north but he wants to say hi, catch up and introduce his friends. Cillian welcomes them inside, waving goodbye to his friend and waves them inside. He calls out "Enya, put your hammer down! We have guests!" Enya comes out, a wide-shouldered woman who is sweating from working in the hot smithy. She gives them a warm welcome, and Rua introduces Betta as his girlfriend, and also introduces Kiva and Stella to them.

They sit around the small table and Cillian says he heard about Rua's parents passing and wished he could be there for the funeral, but gestures to his injured legs that he couldn't make it. He does say that Rua is the spitting image of his dad. Rua didn't know this, and thinks its nice that he has a part of his dad with him. Cillian and Enya then talk about how business has been good enough, but there has been some trouble about. Hillfolk threatening and raiding, and more earthquakes than usual too. Rua talks about the threatening hillfolk on the road, but Cillian laughs him off saying they have always been that way, but always in small numbers so it should be fine. Rua also tells him about their quest to find the Ustrina, His aunt and uncle nods along, they don't know anything about them or their city. Rua also brought them a wooden box he crafted. He says that he has been apprenticing with a carpenter, and made him this box with his name carved in it. Cillian takes it, thanks him and inspects it. "So you just started learning, eh? Well thanks, I'll find something to put in it!"

After some time catching up, reconnecting and updating each other on the small things in their lives. At one point Rua's uncle says he has a friend who runs an inn, The Cracked Anvil, and if they mention his name they will get fair prices for a safe room. As the afternoon draws long Rua says that they have to go meet some others, so they say their goodbye. Rua promises to come visit again before they leave the town, giving each of them great big hugs. Enya gives Betta an awkward hug as well.

# Session 31

Still in the city, looking for knowledge but what will they find?

Before going to the Broken Thumb the party gets back together and decide to head there as a group to find Vaughn. As they move towards the mines the city gets more and more rough, with the residences and business being tailored to the miner's and their needs. The Broken Thumb is a run-down building propped up against the stone wall of a sturdier building. There are some people nodding off out the front, lost in their own worlds and take no note of the approaching group. They push aside the hanging skin that serves as a door and it takes a few moments for their eyes to adjust to the gloom. The room smells of stale beer and sawdust, and the common room is fairly full with miners at the end of their shift. The idle chatter dies down and the room falls into a hush as the patrons slowly turn to look at the newcomers.

Soren affects a local miner's accent and says "And this here is a local watering hole, where you can get a cheap meal and drink to wash the coal dust out of your throat." as if he is playing a local tour to some visitors. Most of the room takes this at face value and turns back to their drinks, except for one local bravo who stands up and confronts the party "Did you really bring a judge in here?" he questions aggressively. Esme looks him up and down before stepping forward, reaching to grab his drink on the table and knocking it back in several swift gulps. She sighs loudly and says "Not that kind of judge, son." The bravo looks down at her, then at his drink, then he laughs boisterously at her. He says "Well if you buy me another drink then we are A-OK. So uh, what are y'all doing here?" Soren says he knows Vaughn from way back and looking to get in touch. The man points with his thumb over his shoulder to a shaded corner and says "He's over there, same as always." Esme brings him two drinks, and as he takes them he says "Just don't go putting your nose where it don't belong"

Vaughn looks a little worse for wear, it appears he has been drinking more than is healthy. Soren also buys a couple drinks and brings them to Vaughn's table, setting down one in front of him and saying "Vaughn! Its been a long time, how've you been?" Vaughn squints up at him before his eyes go wide "Soren! oh my lord its been years, come sit. You look like you've been doing well for yourself" Soren pulls up a chair from a nearby table and takes a seat, sipping from his mug. He tells about how he went back to Stonetop to visit his folks, found they had died from a sickness, and he ended up staying there. It is home. Vaughn chuckles, saying "You can take the farmboy out of the village, but not the village out of the farmboy." Soren laughs, and asks how things have been here. "The bosses still working everyone to the bone?" Vaughn nods and gripes a bit about how tough life is in the Delve. Soren then asks if he has had any more dealings with the Ustrina and he starts telling a rambling drunken story about hooking up with a hot Ustrina woman, and the longer it goes on the more obviously unbelievable it is, until one of the other people at the table, a

woman with short-cut blonde hair, bangs the table and says "You are full of shit Vaughn." He protests, saying that some of that happened...probably...maybe. She snorts, saying that everyone knows the Ustrina come around every couple of months trading in oddities. Soren asks when the last time they were seen, and she says a couple weeks ago, but she doesn't really keep track. But she did hear about a room deep within the mines there is a gong, and when it is rung the Ustrina will appear.

Betta is sticking close to Rua, uncertain in this rough bar. He leads her to the counter and orders a couple drinks. He takes a sip of his, and starts to hum a song his Dad used to sing when leaving the mine and heading towards the bar for a drink. One of the rough miners next to him takes up the song, starting low and rising in volume until some others take it up and soon enough the front of the bar is turning into a party as people sing at the top of their lungs and knock their mugs together. Stella is uncomfortable in this rowdy place, but Willem has been standing protectively over her shoulder. Their masks give them an aura of mystery, and his size keeps a small buffer of space around them. Regardless, someone pushes a mug of beer into Stella's hand before moving off, and she stands there awkwardly, not sure what to do with it since her face is covered.

Back at the table, the woman, Rosch, introduces herself and puts forward a dusty hand while asking "So uh, are you planning to head into the mines?". Soren shakes it and introduces himself as well, then says "Why, is there something going on inside?". She shakes her head but says the gong is fairly deep inside, the upper levels are mostly safe but not deep down. It would be best if they went with a guide, she knows some people she can get in touch with if he needs. Soren thanks her, but says that they have a friend with family in town, they might just see if the Ustrina show up soon. But if they do need a guide, he knows where to get one. Soren then starts to swap stories with them, and he tells about the aggressive hillfolk they met on the road, how that is very different than his experiences with the hillfolk previously. They scoff and brush him off as nothing but idle boasting, they have been raiding the delve for years.

Caira is renting a room above some stables that house mules and horses for working in the mines. When Esme knocks on the door she opens it, and they embrace each other warmly. Caira welcomes the group inside, its a tight fit but they all do. Her room, while small, is adorned with splashes of colour with simple decorations livening up the place. Once they are in and settled Esme says she wishes this was a social call, but she has some business to talk about. "We are looking for information on Mutra the Teeth. He has moved against Stonetop, and we need to know more about him and his doings." Caira quickly moves to the front door, opens it up and looks around to make sure nobody is lurking. "Well you sure don't deal with small problems do you?". Esme chuckles and says "No, not since I was a little girl." Caira goes on to say that Mutra manages the lumber industry, and also gets a cut of the mines. He is one of the more stable bosses, kept his position for about 10 years now. But he is not someone you want to casually ask about. People have mostly stopped trying to unseat him, he has a reputation for ruthlessness. Esme also asks about the woman with orange eyes, but Caira hasn't heard about her at all. Esme catches her up on what the monks told her, and the reactions of the people at the bar.

Caira has also heard of the gong that summons the Ustrina, its hard to know if its true or not but its an old miner's tale that has been told for years. Not many people go down that deep, there would only be a handful that know the lower levels. Caira knows the top levels, she has been there a few

times. That is where the Forge Lords mined, the corridors high and wide running straight and smooth. Earthquakes have broken portions, and more recent miners have made offshoot shafts to follow veins of ore. The miners say there are a bunch of caverns and tunnels further down that the deeper shafts intersect. Soren asks her if she knows anyone who would be familiar with the lower levels and would be willing to act as guide. She doesn't, but can ask around and will send them to the Cracked Anvil where they are staying. Esme also introduces Soren as her apprentice, and says that he is shaping up well and for her to deal with him as she would with Esme. They spend some more time catching up and eat dinner there. The others leave to the Cracked Anvil while Esme stays there to spend the night.

The moon is up at this point, and they move together to the inn and see it clearly marked by the sign above the door showing an anvil with a crack in it. They enter and get a couple rooms right next to each other. They get a fair rate, and will pay when they leave. The next day Rua and Betta go to his aunt and uncles for breakfast and spend some family time. Esme leaves Cairra's early as she has business in the town and she goes around the Delve, getting a feeling for the mood of the town before going to the Cracked Anvil. Soren spent some time last evening, and the next morning, sitting in the common room of the inn sipping a drink and listening to the varied gossip and small talk of the people coming in and out.

Later in the morning, Stella and Willem have joined him at the table and they are making small talk when a large, bearded man with rough clothing and one of his arms in a white sling enters the room. He looks around before spotting them at the table and walks over. He introduces himself as Garvan, he heard they are looking for a guide in the mines? Soren stands up, introduces himself and shakes his hand before inviting him to sit. Soren says "yeah we heard about a room with a gong, and if you ring it the Ustrina will appear. Are you familiar with it?" "I have been to the room and seen the gong, but I have not rung it. Seems like something you shouldn't do willy-nilly. I know the way there, but if we are planning on going that deep, make sure to bring a goat." Soren is a little surprised by this, but accepts it as he is the expert. He invites Garvan to sit and have a drink with them, and he agrees. Soren asks more about the mines, if the lower levels are dangerous and what the goat is for. Garvan fills them in on what the mines are like a little bit more, and says there are beasts that live down there. They might not need the goat if its not hungry, but better the goat gets eaten than them. Soren recognizes the wisdom of that statement, and is intrigued by what they will find below. He confirms the job is just guiding them to the room with the gong, then back to the Delve afterwards.

They are chatting and swapping stories while they slowly sip their drinks until Garvan suddenly gets quiet. A man has walked into the inn, well dressed and clean shaven. He spots them sitting together and heads towards them, greets them and says that he has heard they are new in town. Soren nods and says they are passing through, doing some trading. The man nods and says Soren's group have been asking around about some things, and their inquiries have attracted the attention of his employer. They possibly have mutually beneficial business, and he hands Soren a rolled-up parchment. Soren accepts it, and thanks him for the message. The man then turns and walks out of the room. Both Garvan and Willem visibly relax when he is gone. Soren looks to Garvan and asks what that was about. "His name is Shag. He works for Smiling Francis, she is one of the bosses around here. If she wants to do business with you it may or may not be something you want to do, but she is not the kind of person you ignore." Soren nods, saying they were hoping

to avoid the attention of the big players. Garvan shrugs saying its a small town, lots of people with nothing better to do than gossip. Soren opens the parchment, it says "I may have a business proposal the may be beneficial to us both, and may coincide with your interests. If curious, come to my house on Mattock street and show them this note. Signed, Fransis" Soren scoffs and says "why can't they just say what they want, couching their speech in so many 'may's and 'possibly's.

Rua has been getting impromptu blacksmithing lessons from his aunt, his strength makes the task not too tiring and they spend some quality family time together. After a little time Cillian offers to go with them to Rua's old home. Rua agrees, and he, Betta and Cillian all go there together. When they arrive Rua is struck with the thought that the house is much smaller than her remembers. He wants to go inside, but it is clearly occupied by a family with four small children running around. He spots a little nook up the side of the hill, where he used to hang out as a kid. He excuses himself from Betta and quickly scrambles up there. The nostalgia hits like a brick, there is the clear signs of kids continuing to play and enjoy the space. He feels satisfied at the continuity, and quickly heads back down to the others. Betta takes his hand, squeezing it gently but gives him space to sit in his thoughts. He kisses her on the cheeks and they walk back to Cillian's house.

In the afternoon everyone is back at the Cracked Anvil and Soren catches everyone up to speed about meeting Garvan and the invitation from Fransis. Esme says they should go, but not all of them together. Betta says she will stay behind, she wouldn't be anyu use at this kind of meeting. Rua initially wants to go, but Esme persuades him to stay and spend time with Betta. Stella says that she will be coming along. Esme is also initially welcoming of this idea, but Willem points out that she will have to deal with this kind of situation eventually, better to do it while as a group. Esme is concerned about possible danger to Stella from one of the Bosses of the Delve, but Soren says they were invited in broad daylight with witnesses, they should be fine. Stella says she feels like she will be more useful at the meeting than not. Soren says they should treat it as enemy territory though, just in case. Willem sighs at this, saying he will be coming along as well then. They decide to go today, may as well get it over with, so they head out.

Fransis' house is made of stone, one of the more well-maintained manors in the city surrounded by a low stone wall. There are a couple bored toughs lounging around outside the front gate. Soren walks right up to them and hands them the parchment saying "We were invited." The guard takes the note and glances at it quickly, clearly not even reading it, before handing it back and motioning them to head inside. They head inside, its a 3-story building and where one of the walls is an old Maker's Ruin. The door opens as they approach and Shag is standing there with a wide grin. "Welcome, I'm so glad you could find the time." Esme nods and says hospitality is important, and Shag agrees. He shows them to the parlour and says he will let the master know they have arrived. The interior is rather luxurious, the furniture has stuffing and all matches. The walls are covered in knick-knacks and trinkets, the room displaying the wealth and sophistication of its owner. After a few minutes two people enter and sit down. One of them in a comfortable chair that faces the rest of the room and the other taking up position behind them. The woman sitting down must be Smiling Fransis, she is in her late 50s with steely gray hair with a pinched, hawk-like face wearing a richly embroidered house coat. She gives them a warm, friendly smile that doesn't reach her eyes. Her penetrating gaze sweeps over them in turn, and Esme returns it in kind. The man behind her is a familiar figure, they recognize the tanned skin and trimmed beard of Foruza, the Lygosi member of the Order of the Three Bronze Stars. He is standing there with his hand on

the back of her chair.

Esme's eyes widen momentarily seeing Foruza, but quickly collects herself. He also seems surprised to see them, but hides it quickly. Esme thanks Fransis for the invitation to her home, and she says that she is looking forward to talking with members of one of the Delve's most valued trading partners. Your whiskey in particular is quite good. Esme nods and pats Soren's shoulder saying he is one of their best distillers. Fransis looks to him and says if he ever is looking to relocate, they could use someone with his skills in the Delve. Soren smiles and thanks her for the offer, but he has found a home in Stonetop. However, his heart is warmed that they so enjoy the fruits of his labour. She motions for Shag and asks him to fetch drinks for their guests. He steps out and while he is gone Fransis inquires about a few members of Stonetop, making small talk until Shag returns. He has a tray of drinks that are handed out to all present. It has a very sweet, honeyed smell that is unlike anything else they have tasted before. They each take a sip before Fransis says "Now, to business. I heard you were asking after the Ustrina in the Broken Thumb." Esme nods and says "You are well informed, yes we were. We are much alike, I always know what is going on in Stonetop." Fransis nods "Indeed, and if you were to encounter them above or below ground, if you brought one of them to me, alive or no, I would pay a handsome sum of gold." Esme hmms, and slowly says "That is...not likely to align with our interests. If they happen to attack or waylay us, we may do that if we have to defend ourselves." Fransis nods at that, and asks them to keep it in mind.

Soren speaks up at this, informing Fransis that he has some plans to distill a new generation of whisky by aging it in rare woods. Stonetop and the Delve have been trading for generations, would she be interested in having a sample sent her way to see if it something she is willing to trade for. She thinks about this for a moment then says "There is not much call for finer drinks in Gordin's Delve, but the more refined of us would be interested." Soren offers to give her first choice if she is interested or not, and Fransis agrees saying she could help him source that wood. He is looking for cherry wood, and Fransis says she will inquire with her caravans, and maybe come spring she can have some sent to Stonetop for a small discount. It may take a couple years for his work to bear fruit, but its a worthwhile investment. Esme quickly notes down the basic terms of the agreement, and hidden in the records of trade dealings she includes a subtle message that Foruza has dealt with Stonetop unfaithfully in the past and works with dark forces. Esme hands a copy to Fransis who reads it quickly, then folds it and tucks it into an inside pocket of her coat.

Business concluded, Fransis stands up to excuse herself saying she is very busy and has other work to do, but invites them to sit and enjoy their drinks before seeing themselves out. Foruza says "I will stay for a while and chat with our guests." Fransis nods then leaves the room, and Soren turns to Foruza and says "'Our guests'? You got comfortable here quickly, its been just over a season since we last met." Foruze replies "Yes, well they appreciate a man of my knowledge and education here. You would do well to consider her offer, I know we have no love lost between us but we may just have a common enemy here in the Delve." Esme snorts at this, and says the only reason she has not branded him as an enemy of civilization and an agent of chaos is the laws of hospitality. So in the spirit of those laws, she wishes him health and gets up to leave. Foruze nods and agrees with her, he abides by the same laws and so if they don't start anything, he won't. At that the party from Stonetop turns to leave, Soren giving him a gruff "Good day." on his way out. Stella pauses and looks at him from behind her mask and says "I hope your dealings here are

honest and transparent". They all leave the manor together, the guards at the front pretending not to notice them.

End of Session

# Session 32

Still in the city, what will they do next?

Rua and Betta were out on a date while the others were meeting Smiling Fransis. While they were out eating Rua ran into an old childhood rival and it took all of 30 seconds for old grievances to spill over into an outright brawl in the restaurant and they were summarily kicked out, ending the date early. Betta doesn't say anything outright, but is disappointed at how Rua acted. He spends the rest of the evening trying to make it up to her.

They get in touch with Garvan before turning in for the night, planning to go down into the mines in the morning. In the morning Soren goes out to buy a goat. He finds one that is older and a bit sickly and is able to haggle down the price a few silvers below what you would normally pay for a healthy goat. Rua volunteers to take care of it as they go and Soren passes off the lead to him. Rua quickly sidles over to Esme and says "psst, how do you take care of a goat?" Esme chuckles lightly and says that they will eat pretty much anything, so don't stick his hand into its mouth. Rua nods sagely at this, then asks why they got the goat anyways. Soren relates what Garvan said about beasts in the dark, and how the goat will be bait if needed. Rua gasps and crouches down and hugs the goat and says "No, don't say that in front of George!" Soren shakes his head, flabbergasted that he had already named the creature and says "I would rather feed George to the beasts than you, Rua" Rua speaks softly into the goat's ear "Don't worry George, I will protect you"

When they get to the Delve, as the locals call the mines, it is an intimidating sight. An archway is carved into the side of the mountain 30 feet high, the wrought stone is joined so artfully they can hardly see the seams and it appears like a yawning mouth opening into darkness. They light several oil lanterns and head inside. The floor is littered with the varied detritus of mining while the walls and ceiling are clearly crafted very well. After a bit of time they come to a place where the path forks in three different directions. Garvan plays tour guide, pointing to the three arches "This is First Delve, Second Delve, and Third Delve. We want the third one." and he leads them towards the third arch. Periodically in the tunnel there are holes in the wall that are clearly human made, not maker made as they are only barely taller than a person and rough hewn stone instead of artfully crafted stone. As they walk he talks to them about the history of various tunnels, where they lead and when they were dug out. After a while he turns down one of these person-sized passages where they are forced to walk single file. Time is hard to keep track of underground, but after some time the rough hewn stone stops and there is a narrow crevice in the tunnel that looks possibly natural and a faint breath of wind from beyond it blows across them.

"Alright, this is the first fun bit. I hope you can all squeeze real nice." and he turns sideways and starts to push his way through. Soren does the same and his gangly frame has no issues getting

through while carrying his bags. Behind him Rua gestures for Betta to go ahead and as she gets through he hands her George's lead and pushes the goat through as well. Kiva follows next, but gets her ankle caught in a snag of rock. She pulls a couple times and can't get it out and starts to hyperventilate a little bit. Rua notices this and calls Betta back and takes George's lead from her and gets the goat to gnaw at Kiva's pant leg until it tears free, letting her keep moving. She is uninjured, but one of her pant legs is now chewed/torn off just below the knee. She is able to get through the crevasse and on the other side takes some deep breaths to steady herself. Willem has to remove his armour and still scrapes his chest a little on the way through, and Esme sucks in her gut to get to the other side.

On the other side the air is very stale, a clear difference in the air and the darkness outside the flickering circle of light from the lamps is absolute. The awareness of the unimaginable tons of rocks above their heads rises within the party, with the realization that the sky is very far away. Kiva is feeling it the worst, her claustrophobia started peaking after getting momentarily caught in the crevice and she is a little jittery. Esme starts to softly hum a peaceful song and this helps calm Kiva a little bit and keep it together. Soren raises his lantern high and puts his arm around her shoulders to comfort her and they start moving again while Kiva whispers to herself "one foot in front of the other...okay..."

The next tunnel looks more natural, not carved by human hands. Garvan is moving carefully, counting his steps and making sure not to miss any side passages. At a certain point he turns into one of the passages, and soon they can hear the dripping of water ahead. The tunnel opens into a natural cavern, and a large pool about 30 feet across sits at the edge of the lantern light. The dark water makes Soren cautious, but his danger sense isn't triggering so he carefully moves up to the edge of the water and dips his hand in. When he does, bubbles form all over his skin and he removes his hand quickly. Garvan tells them the water is safe to drink and says they should fill up here, it might be the last water they find. "The miners here believe the water cures their dust coughs." Garvan shares, still doing his tour guide routine. "They come here sometimes, fill up a few skins to bring it back. The regular miners will only ever go this deep, only prospectors will go farther."

Once they have all filled up their skins he sets off again, heading around the pool. There are two exits from that cavern and Garvan takes the second and the tunnel meanders down until they come to another cavern, this one so large their lanterns are unable to illuminate the ceiling. The floor drops away, they can see the bottom of the ravine 20 or 30 feet below but it cuts right across the floor with only a 5 foot wide path along the left hand side of the chasm. They walk slowly and carefully along the ledge, keeping close to the wall and moving carefully. A few hundred steps along they hear a noise, like wind blowing through leaves. Garvan peeks over the edge of the chasm and says "ah hell!" then pushes himself back against the wall. Everyone emulates him, with Esme guiding Betta to cover herself with her shield as a tide of white beetles pour over the ledge and start crawling all over them. They aren't biting, but starts crawling over and past them in their flood. They all squeeze their eyes shut to weather the storm but George starts to freak out and tries to dash away, but Rua wraps the rope around his wrists and plants his feet, holding the animal back while it bleats in fear and panic. Eventually the tide passes, each of them shaking out their clothes to dislodge the remnants of the insects. "That was unexpected" Garvan states "Something big must have died nearby". Soren gives a full body shudder from the experience, he was not

particularly skittish around insects but the experience has given him a minor phobia.

"We call them Corpse Beetles, they are the ones that clean up anything that dies around here." Kiva grows concerned and asks if a lot of things die around here. Garvan relates that there are a fair number of people that go into the mines and don't come back. The upper levels are safe enough, but this deep we need to keep quiet and move swiftly and we should avoid most things. He leads them even further as the tunnels start to slope downwards. The initial chill of the mines is fading as the air gets more and more oppressive. After another indeterminate amount of time spent meandering through the tunnel until they come to another opening cavern. Garvan holds out his hand, stopping them from going further and says "This is where we see if Jenny is hungry. Get the goat, push it ahead of us." Rua clutches the rope possessively to his chest and says "No! We can't feed her to the beast!" Soren gently puts his hand on Rua's shoulder and says this is what they got the goat for, and the odds are good nothing will happen anyways. Rua hesitates, but slowly relents, and Soren takes the rope and leads the goat to the edge of the cavern and pushes it out. George resists at first, but Soren is able to push her out after a short struggle. Garvan is tense the entire time, but 10 minutes pass and nothing happens as George wanders in the open cavern at the edge of the light.

"Okay, it seems she is asleep or not hungry, we should be able to get through without trouble as long as we stay quiet" Garvan whispers, and each of the carefully moves out into the cavern. Rua clicks his tongue to George and she trots up and he takes her lead again. They are able to sneak through without any trouble. They come to another passage, and once they are a few dozen feet in Garvan breaths a sigh of relief that they got through without waking Jenny. They come to a spot where the passage starts falling down into a natural chute. There is a metal spike driven into the wall and Garvan says he drove that in 7 or 8 years ago, it will help them down. The group ties some rope to it and uses another length to craft a crude harness for George and lowers the beast down to the bottom, Rua unwilling to leave her behind. They do the same to help Garvan climb down with his injured arm.

Another thousand or so steps they come to one more cavern littered with stalagmites and Garvan says their destination is just on the other side. They pick their way through until Garvan pauses next to a smooth section of floor that has a tunnel dipping down and away. "Huh, this is new. This used to be a pool." Soren wonders aloud what could have caused that, and Garvan shrugs. "earthquakes? magma worms? who knows." Soren turns slowly and asks about the magma worms. They are an old miner's tale apparently, in one of the forges there is a giant beak mounted on the wall and they say that the tunnels down here were carved out by them.

As they approach the far wall there is a space where the stalagmites have been cleared away and there is a pagoda-like structure in the middle of the clear space. Hanging inside there is a bronze gong that is corroded and clearly very old, but still reflects their lantern light in flashes of orange and green. Esme walks up and looks to Garvan asking if there is some ritual to follow here. He shrugs, so Esme hefts her Makerglass shield and whams it into the gong as hard as she can. It sounds out in a loud, crashing noise that echoes around them. As the sound starts to die down it seems there is another gong that sounds in the distance, then another a few moments later another even fainter one, but it could have been echoes. soon enough the sound fades and the only thing to be heard is the occasional shuffling of people's feet. "Well, who knows how long this

will take, may as well get comfortable". He puts down his pack and sits with his back against one of the pillars of the pagoda and blows out his light, leaving just one burning to conserve fuel.

They all get comfortable, sitting or laying in various positions in the area, all staying in the flickering light of the remaining lantern. They start playing cards to pass the time and casually talking to each other. Betta is sitting leaned up against Rua's shoulder, watching the cards move around and asks "Is it always like this? So boring, and also so stressful at the same time." Rua shrugs, "More or less, its usually days of walking and nothing and short bursts of excitement. But it will be really nice to get back to Stonetop." Betta hums uncertainly at this, "My mother is there, and she is NOT going to be happy about me coming along for this trip. I am tempted to not go back, just to not have to deal with her." Soren chimes in here, "You could. It is tempting to run away from your problems, that is what I did after all. But while I was gone, both my parents dies to the plague and I never got to mend that rift, or to say goodbye. It feels like a hard thing to do, to face your mother but I think it is something you should still do." Betta pulls her knees up to her shoulders and wraps her arms around her knees and goes quiet. Willem is wary, but after some time he is able to relax and starts swapping stories with Esme about their pasts. Kiva has been really uncomfortable down in the mines and it is really making her aware of her own mortality, and is worried about the hillfolk they ran into on the road. Soren shares her concerns, especially because the Delvers seems to be completely dismissing of the threat.

Time passes and nothing has happened so Garvan gets up and says he is going to take a look at the drained pool. Esme decides to go with, leaving Rua sparring with Betta to train her shield skills. Kiva wants to stay with the group, she feels safer there and Esme asks Soren to stay so Rua isn't the face they show to the Ustrina. Garvan and Esme head to the drained pool and start to head down the gently sloping tunnel. It is not wet and slimy, and gentle enough to not require rope. There seems to be faint indications of stairs, but the limestone deposits covering the floor and walls make it hard to tell. After some time it levels out and Garvan lifts his light high. Its a cavern but it looks like the stone has been shaped like clay, columns of spiral stone and doesn't look fully natural. They start moving through and more of the moulded stone is revealed and soon enough they see old bones on the floor. Some are so old that the limestone has started to grow over them.

There is no smell of rot or decay, Garvan says "This is weird" looking at a large slab of stone that looks like it was chopped into a smooth rectangular plinth. Esme gets close, touching and inspecting it and finds one side of the plinth seems like ordinary rock at first, but on closer inspection it shimmers slightly under her gaze. The closer she gets to it the more it shimmers, until the illusion breaks and reveals a cavity within the plinth. Its a couple feet wide and one foot high, she reaches in and feels around and grabs something metallic and pulls it out to reveal a tarnished and scaled silver necklace, but clearly of high quality craftsmanship. She can tell there is more metal objects inside as well, and she kneels down to see an assortment of jewelry, a handful of silver coins, a polished human skull and a rosary of polished ceramic beads. Esme gently sifts through the items, the skull is cleaned and free of any tissue, with clear tool marks but feels otherwise fine. The jewelry and coins also feel normal, but as her hand brushes the rosary she gets a deep feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach that she learned long ago not to ignore. She pulls out the valuables, leaving the rosary and skull, and shows it to Garvan saying "This is a nice result of exploration." He whistles softly and says its a worthwhile trip if he can get a share of the loot,

but before he says more he pauses and says "Do you hear that?" Esme tilts her head and it seems like very faint whispering in the distance. She immediately hefts her shield and says "Lets get out of here" and bundles her prize and they start to move to the entrance.

As they get close to the entrance of the tunnel Garvan slows then stops, the lantern he holds swinging gently and his eyes get a vacant look. Esme looks back, now hearing the whispers louder and she looks down at her hands and realized she is trapped in her body. She is so far away from everyone else, separated by fleshy prisons and it is a true shame. She shakes her head vigorously before hefting her shield and bonking Garvan on the head to banish the enchantment with her Makerglass shield and grabs his hand and starts to run up the tunnel, away from whatever malevolent thing lived in the darkness.

Back at the pagoda Kiva heads a faint rustling, scraping noise in the distance. Its hard to hear over the sound of Rua and Betta 'sparring' and Soren fidgeting but it doesn't side like its coming from them. She looks around in curiosity and holds her spear ready. After a minute or so Soren hears it too, and since they are expecting the Ustrina he calls out "Hello? Who's there?" The noise doesn't change in pace, slowly getting louder. Kiva grabs a nearby rock and throws it toward where she thinks the sound is coming from. It flies out of the ring of light and hits a stalagmite in the darkness and clattering around in the dark. A few moments later there is a glint of metal as three figures come out of the darkness, they are tall and wrapped in robes and wearing elaborate bronze masks. One walks in the front with the more elaborate mask, with two more just behind, and says in a strange, echoing voice "An unusual display of aggression **for one who summoned us!**" The sound is clearly not made by a human voice, it sounds alien and reverberates through the cavern.

Soren gestures to Kiva to calm herself and steps forward, making the sign of respect they learned from the Forest Folk ghost in the library and says "Thank you for coming to meet us, I apologize for the aggression we are not comfortable so deep within the earth." The one at the front says "This one is the Valorix, Art Keeper of the Sitrikeepa" It extends a hand in greeting to Soren, its movement is twitchy and rapid movements as the arm extends. "Let us bargain." Soren replied "Indeed, we are here to trade information and knowledge. The village of Viemrod has fallen, its inhabitants killed or driven away by a dark plague of bone growths. We found remnants there that spoke of the relations between the Forest Folk and the Ustrina, and have come to bring tidings of the fate of your cousins and learn what we can about the dark plague that brought them low." The Ustrina replies in it's strange tones "This one is aware of the fate of Viemrod, and the tragedy of its people. Let us bargain." Soren nods and says "Yes, we would like to trade knowledge and goods, to know more of what befell the Forest Folk and how to counter the bone plague."

End of Session!

# Session 33

They have found the Ustrina, what will they find out?

"Names, names are required" The Ustrina states. Soren complies, introducing each of the those who are present and mentions two more are away exploring. "This one is the Valorix, Art Keeper of the Sitra" it replies. Soren then requests information on the fate of Viemrod, the location of any survivors and how to fight the Bone Plague. "This one shall tell The Soren about the agreement with the Folk of the Forest, explain the manner and cause of the flight and tell the Soren of their location."

"This one would request 10 pounds of Aetherium...we have need of it". Soren nods, he knows that Etherium is a rare metal that is used a lot by the makers. There is some in circulation, traded or found in ruins. It is said to be metal that is infused with lightning. 10 pounds is a lot, Soren is not sure where he would find that. Soren says that they put a lot of time coming here at no small risk to themselves. Would they be able to at least tell them if they know the fate of Nyah? The Valorix looks to their companions and they communicate with each other in some manner the group cannot understand. After a few moments they turn back and say "This one is not aware of the fate of the Nyah, but as a token of good will we will inquire after them and have that information for you when the bargain is completed.

Soren mentions that Aetherium is quite rare, he has only seen it in small trinkets. He asks if there is another material they would accept. The Valorix says "There is another material, abundant on the surface that we would accept. One container of this size of human blood could replace one pound of Aetherium" and they gesture with their hands, a volume of about 2 litres. Soren is dumbstruck by this, restraining his reaction to not give offence but unable to respond quickly. Rua speaks up, asking what they use the blood for. The Valorix says "This information is also for sale, for 5 of these containers of human blood" and gestures to a similar sized container before.

At this time Esme shows up with Garvan and is confused as to the circumstances of the conversation and Soren quickly catches her up on the happenings. Esme knows from reading the Chronicle that, hundreds of years ago, people used to find Aetherium in the soil while plowing or digging in the ruins of what was there before Stonetop was Stonetop. Rua keeps pressing them, asking why they are asking for human blood. The Valorix states "Why would we ask for something that we did not need?" Rua hmms at this, and is getting disgusted by the conversation so turns away to go stand with Betta, leaning against the building. Soren asks when they are expecting the metal and they reply "Time is of no difficulty, but a bargain must be equal in value. Return here when you have it, and ring the Gong once more."

Esme asks if the Ustrina care for the bodies of their dead

As they are moving through the cavern, retracing their steps back to the surface, they hear a sound in the darkness that clearly doesn't come from them. Soren's danger sense is tingling, so he calls out in a genial tone "Ahoy there fellow miners! What brings you so deep into the delve?". After a moment of silence a man steps out. It's Shag, Smiling Fransis' enforcer, and he says "I am no miner, but I do have to thank you for leading me to the Ustrina. Now I know which direction they come from, I will be going to them now." Esme steps forward at this, asking him what he intends to do with them and he laughs, saying it's not like he is going to hug them. The group all looks to each other, unspoken agreement passing amongst them as they decide to try to stop Shag. Soren draws his sword, saying "We can't let you do that, we have business with the Ustrina and need them whole and healthy. You will be coming with us, and if we come to the surface with nothing unpleasant happening we can each go our separate ways." Shag gives Soren a disparaging look and says "quit yapping young pup" and turns to leave, taking out a tinder box to light his own oil lantern.

Rua is burning with righteous anger at Shag's threats to the Ustrina and darts forward to snatch the lantern out of his hands. Unfortunately Shag has lightning quick reactions and is able to pull it away in time, drawing a short sword in response. Soren is circling around to flank him, attempting to cut him off and Shag in response throws his lantern right at Soren. It splashes burning oil all over him before falling to the ground and shattering. Soren screams, batting at the flames on his arms and Kiva rushes over, bundles him onto the ground and scatters what dirt is present to put out the flames, stopping them from lighting his clothes on fire. Esme snatches the lantern from Garvan's hand to use it to chase after the feeling rogue and Garvan mutters "I can't believe this is happening..." while he shelters behind a nearby pillar. Esme isn't able to find any trace of Shag. Without a light he must still be nearby but they can't pinpoint his position. Stella has been whispering to a bundle of torches and passes them out to everyone around her. Rua calls out in a taunt "The children of Gordin's Delve have a boot coming for you, you coward!" Esme joins in "Yeah, you must be too afraid fight a granny!" Their bait is successful and Shag reveals his position by flinging a dagger towards Esme. The light of the torches flashes off it and Esme is able to dodge to the side, taking only a grazing hit. Stella invokes Helior, she can sense the sun's position in the sky even through miles of rock and she channels his warmth into the flame of her torch, causing it to detach from its source and become a ghostly flame that she sends towards Shag, hovering above his head and illuminating him clearly. Soren is panting from the pain and moves to stand near Betta while telling Willem to go take Shag down!

Willem stomps forward, bringing his club to bear and charges at the now revealed position of Shag. Esme is on the flank, causing just a moment's distraction that allows Willem's club to hit home, striking Shag's ribs in a direct hit and knocking him back a few steps. Willem doesn't get away unscathed, the handle of a dagger sticks from his side. The villain winces in pain, then says "Fuck this..." pulling out what looks like an egg and smashing it to the ground, causing a deeply foul smoke to envelop Esme and Willem. As it gets in their eyes and lungs they start to sneeze and cough uncontrollably. Rua takes this moment to charge forward in an attempt to grapple Shag to the ground. Rua is able to get a good grip, but takes Shag's sword to the thigh and brings them both down together. Kiva sees her chance and grips her spear tightly in her right hand, walking up to the grappled Shag and stabs him right through the neck. Blood fountains from his neck,

covering both Rua and Kiva as he stops thrashing in his grip.

Once he is still Willem walks up and looks to Kiva "Good work" he says simply, then leans down to make sure Shag is dead. "Yep, hes a goner." Betta rushes forward to Rua, shocked at his injuries and fumbling in her pack for the bandages she brought with her. Stella kneels next to her and asks her to make some room, and Betta quickly moves aside as Stella brings out her lamp and consecrates it, then invokes it into a bath of healing light to envelop the wound in Rua's leg. So deep in the ground Helior's light isn't quite as warm, but the wound mostly closes, leaving a deep red welt. Betta then moves forward to bandage the remaining wound, and Rua thanks her profusely. Stella checks on Willem, but the knife he took didn't go too deep and he shrugs her off.

Esme goes through Shag's pockets and finds an iron sword, two more throwing daggers and some assorted jewelry. Esme pockets it all as Garvan slowly approaches the group. Rua turns to him and says "Best if what happened down here stays down here, yeah?" Garvan nods quickly and says "I didn't see nothing!" Esme promises that when they come back to close the bargain there will be extra payment for him, and Garvan replies "There better be, y'all are getting me mixed up in business that I really don't want to be involved in." After this, Esme asks Willem if he is willing to carry Shag's body to be bait for Jenny. Willem snorts at this and says "He may as well be useful for once." Stella is not happy about this, but when pressed she doesn't have an alternative option to deal with his body. They don't have the fuel to burn it, and there is not much difference if they leave it in a crevasse so she relents. Willem hoists the body up once everyone else is ready and they start moving again.

They struggle together to get up the ravine they left the rope in, and when they approach Jenny's cavern Willem puts the body down. Soren takes the arms, Willem the legs and on a count of three they send the body into the cavern and then wait for a few minutes. Nothing much happens, so they move as quietly as possible around the edges of the cavern. Near the exit they hear a rustling sound of scales on stone, but its not moving towards them so they are able to get clear safely. The rest of the trip back is uneventful, but they take time at the pond near the surface to wash off the blood and disguise their wounds so its not as obvious they were in a fight. Once they get to the surface they head directly back to the Cracked Anvil Inn and pay Garvan. On top of the agreed pay they agree he will take the ancient coins he and Esme found and she will keep the jewelry. They promise to check in with him when they are back in town.

End of Session!

# Session 34

Out of the mines, should be wrapping up the events in Gordin's Delve.

Before going to bed that night Esme checks in with Caira about any potential engineers who are looking for work. "I asked around, but engineers are well sought after here and generally paid quite well. There is one who would fit the bill, but he is a heavy drinker. If he is not at work, he is at the tavern." Esme thinks about it, this doesn't sound like a person they want long term but they are at least worth an interview. She gets his typical location from Caira then goes back to the Inn.

After a decent nights sleep they meet in the common room in the Cracked Anvil. The first thing they all notice is the background noise of the building. Underground it was eerily quiet, no whooshing wind, no hustle and bustle of the city. It is comforting to have the regular noises envelop them. They go to meet the prospective engineer, but he is clearly not the kind of person they are looking for so they thank him for his time and move on. They spend the rest of the morning trading their food and other supplies, as well as the necklaces Esme looted from the crypt, from Stonetop for iron tools and other sundries that are more easily found in Gordin's Delve.

In the spare time on the last day Soren and the others get a last Miner's Lunch at Mahsa's. While there, Soren uses his silver tongue to get cozy with the locals and surreptitiously ask about the orange-eyed woman. There have been some whispered rumours, they say that she works for one of the bosses, Mutra the Teeth. One of the woman there says that she saw someone matching that description at the Unfilled Mug, also known to the locals as the Vomit Hole. Soren is able to deflect any inquiring questions, leaving subtle hints that Smiling Fransis is the one who wants to know.

Across the street there is the merchant from the Midsummer's Festival selling bottled dreams, there are various people slumped unconscious around his cart. This makes Rua a little uncomfortable, and the group does not engage with the vendor. Once they are done eating they decide to go to the illustrious Vomit Hole. Rua and Betta go in a few minutes before the others, acting like kids running away from some responsibility and the rough characters at the bar soon ignore them, not caring about kids shirking their duties.

Outside the dive bar there are some unconscious bodies lying around. Esme takes a closer look at them, one is clearly blackout drunk and the other is stabbed and the pallor of death has taken their skin to indicate they have been dead for a while. There is no door in the frame, just a ratty blanket strung up on a rope as a visual block. Esme is wearing a thick cloak to disguise her judginess so they don't get the poor treatment they received at the Broken Thumb. They take a seat near Rua and Betta, and each get a drink. Esme slides a glass of liquor in front of Stella and Stella just looks from the mug to Esme in shock, uncertain of what to do. Betta leans towards her and whispers "It tastes *terrible*." While sitting, Esme Soren and Stella all look subtly around, trying to see if any of

the other patrons match the description of Dawa. In the far corner there is a woman with her cowl pulled low, her eyes pointing down to the table as she nurses her cheap drink.

They look at each other and nod, deciding to do this. Esme buys two of what the woman is drinking and takes it to her table, sitting in front of her and sliding the drinks forward. She looks up slowly, and even beneath the shadows of her hood her irises are clearly stoned orange. "Dawa, I presume" Esme begins, and Dawa's immediately tenses up, either to flee or to fight. "Who the hell are you?" she counters, immediately suspicious. Esme assures her that they are not from her homeland, and indeed sent them even farther away from the Delve. Dawa shrugs, and says "What of it, why would you do that?" Esme says that they did not seem like very trustworthy people, and Dawa's situation seems like something that she might be able to help with. At this point the entire bar is silent, tension building as they all listen in on the conversation. Stella has been inspecting Dawa's persona and gets the feeling that there is a cloud of dark magic covering her. Esme knows that there are rumours and stories of furious fighters from the north, that would fly into murderous rages. She always thought it was a story to keep wayward children from leaving the village and wandering too far. The longer they spend around Dawa the more...off she feels. The fingers on her hand are a little too long, her mouth shaped a little cruel.

Esme decides to be blunt, and asks "Would you like help with a curse?" Dawa's hand clenches hard on the mug, the wood creaking as she says harshly "This isn't the kind of thing you just cure, everyone knows that isn't possible." Soren speaks up, saying that it isn't the first time he has banished a dark spirit, its possible. Hearing Esme's genuine offer and Soren's truthful statement her hand relaxes slightly, and she says "Well its not like you could make it any worse. There's an alley out back, meet me there in a few minutes." She then downs the rest of her drink and pushes past them, stomping out of the dive bar. They gather back at the table, taking a few minutes before also leaving. They get to the mouth of the alley and Rua and Betta offer to stand watch and make sure they are not disturbed. Esme suggests that they make out to keep people away and Rua immediately says "no no, she just joking Betta, she doesn't mean it." Esme immediately refutes that, saying she very much does mean it. Betta blushes furiously, and says that she is ready to do her part for the team. Rua steps close to her, taking her face in his hands while the others enter they alley.

They find Dawa waiting there, her posture tense and she looks at them warily as Stella, Esme and Soren stand around her in a circle. Soren says that he will have to put his hands on her and she nods curtly. Soren looks into himself, searching for the connection to Aratis he had when banishing the spirit from the deer and raises his hand to the sky before letting it fall on Dawa's shoulder, trying to banish the darkness within her. At first there is no effect, but over her shoulder Soren sees Rua and Betta kissing and sees the seeds of the future of community, and realizes that those little meddling moments from Esme is her building relationships and tightening the bonds of community and suddenly the power rises inside him. He raises his arm again purposefully, and strikes her shoulder with intent. When Soren makes that connection to the power of Aratis it feels different this time. Last time he was cutting the string of the thing that was controlling the deer. With Dawa it feels like a seed that has been planted in her and is slowly growing. He focuses his energy on the seed as best he can, and it feels more and more like a flame on the wind. Stella has invoked the Warmth of the Sun, the light of her lamp illuminating the circle and she channels the light into Dawa. She can sense the same seed, and starts using her light to prune away the

growths inside her and slowly revealing the core of the dark sickness inside her. The darkness has to go somewhere, it sloughs off Dawa's body in waves and Esme wields her Makersglass shield, planting it in front of her and angling it into the sky. She braces herself against it, and as the darkness falls it hits like a heavy weight causing her to grunt with effort. She begins to sing a simple, child's song of hope and resilience. It seems simple, but Esme believes wholeheartedly in the power of the song to provide the resilience and direct the exuding darkness upwards and into the purifying beams of sunlight above. Stella feels like they are arduously chopping at a choking bramble, cutting it back to clear the field. She knows the seeds below will likely sprout again, but for now the field is clear. It would take a magnitude more effort to tear out the roots of this curse, but Dawa's soul is free of the corruption for now.

Dawa stands there for a while, staring at the ground before quiet sobs start wracking her frame. Rua and Betta run up, "I felt something there, did it work!?" Soren looks at his hands and says "I think so, I felt something leaving her but I don't have much of a feel for these things yet." and he looks to Stella and Esme for confirmation. They both nod, and Stella steps forward to comfort her and asks Dawa if she is alright. She replies "No, but...I think I might get there eventually." As they are getting their bearings and helping Dawa deal with her newfound freedom from darkness five men step into the alley, their shadows falling on the group. The one in the lead calls out "What are you doing there with Eye-gouger?!"

End of Session!

# Session 35

Confrontation in the alley! No good deed goes unpunished.

The party stands in the trash-strewn alley behind the Unfilled Mug. It is dark and gloomy, Dawa is on her knees in the hard packed dirt staring blankly into her hands, trying to come to terms with what just happened. The five toughs are advancing towards them, and the one in front calls out "Hey, step away from her!", gesturing towards Dawa. Rua calls back "Who are you anyways?!" "Who are we? We are the worst trouble you are ever gonna get in kid. Now you better get out of the way." Rua stands his ground, asking what they want with Dawa. They reply that she works for them, and then they notice that she is not paying attention to anything happening around her. One of the others steps forward, moving as to walk right through Rua and asks "What did you do to her?". Rua holds his arms to the sides and says "You are not getting past me unless Dawa says she wants to go with you." The tough steps right up to Rua and says "You need to be taught a lesson kid." Then snaps his head forwards to headbutt Rua. However, Rua's youth has made the man underestimate him and is doing this as a dominance move and not guarding himself.

Rua twists out of the way, taking the blow on his shoulder and the man gets Rua's bone in his eye. He staggers back and growls, then lunges back in shouting "Cmon boys!", and the rest of the thugs follow drawing short blades. Soren calls for Willem to give Rua some backup, while trying to sneak around the edges of the alley to flank them. He gets past 4 of them, but the one at the back spots him and calls him out, "Hey, what do you think you are doing?". At the back of the party Stella notices the conflict starting and reaches for her torch. She whispers to it to ignite it and raises it high above her as she calls for Helior's light to come down and cover her enemies. Helior's light indeed infuses the torch, the flame condensing to a pinprick of light so dense that the illumination is enormous and affects even her allies. Everyone around her is struck with fear, like the overwhelming weight of the sun is hanging directly over their heads. Kiva's anxiety spikes, but with an effort of will she calms her roiling stomach and holds her ground, ready to defend her friends, but she can't bring herself to look anywhere near Stella and her terrifying flame. Esmé lifts her shield above Dawa to protect her from the effect. Two of the thugs at the front try to charge past Rua, but as they approach Stella they are stopped in their tracks, daunted by the enchanted flame she is holding. One, a chipped toothed fellow, takes a hesitant step forward then breaks and runs out of the alley. The other stands his ground, but isn't able to advance any further. The other two approach Rua, one stabs at him and he tries to fight back with his fists, having not brought any weapons on this excursion. He quickly learns why you don't bring fists to a knife fight as he takes a slash while another of the thugs grabs his arm, trying to pull him to the side. Soren tries to fast talk his way around the last thug, trying to get behind and surround them but isn't able to avoid suspicion and the thug lashes out with brass knuckles and clocking Soren on the jaw. Nothing is broken, but he is a bit rattled.

Kiva notices the thug that is stricken by Stella's light and advances on him, thrusting her spear into his side. It sinks deep and he gasps hollowly before stumbling away and collapsing to the ground, trapping her spear underneath him. Stella steps forward, her veil still up and while passing the downed man she brings her torch down and sets his clothes alight, almost as an afterthought. She continues to the mouth of the alley to aid Rua in his 2v1 struggle. As her awful light approaches, Rua's burning anger allows him to push through the fear and stand his ground. Stella strikes out with her torch trying to hit the man holding Rua's wrist, but unfortunately the man tugging on Rua pulls his arm into the path of her blow and it sears a patch of his arm. The light reaches Soren and his foe as well, and Soren becomes immediately aware of how foolish it was to try to surround them on his own, and the sting of the hit he took is throbbing even more in his jaw. He shuffles back, taking a defensive stance against the alley wall. However, his opponent isn't able to withstand the light and turns to flee. Rua turns to the last two opponents and says "This is the Daughter of Helior, if you don't get out of here, she is going to burn you both alive!!" They glance at each other, their dead companion and notice the other two have already run away and they back off and flee as well. Some bystanders who heard the commotion poke their heads into the alley and immediately nope out when seeing the enchanted flame.

Rua jeers as they run away, but when he turns to face Stella he startles back in fear, yelling as he witnesses her light. This jolts Stella and only then does she realize her light has been affecting her allies as well. She throws her torch down, stomping out the light with vitriol. Willem turns to Esme and says "You know they are going to be coming back with more, right?" Esme nods and says they need to clear out. She takes Dawa's hand to lead her out of the alley while Kiva retrieves her spear, its a bit scorched and she has to be careful as the man's clothes are smouldering. They move out of the alley together, there are few people around as the fight has cleared out any innocent bystanders. The remaining people stare of the group conspicuously, but that dies down as they head directly to the cracked anvil to gather their belongings. Soren casually mentions that they don't have time to sell George now, they'll just have to bring them along to Stonetop. Rua is concerned that Soren planned to sell the goat, but its not like they have much use for an old and sickly goat. Soren tells him he will be responsible for taking care of it, and Rua agrees readily even though he has no real experience of caring for a goat. Stella has her veil covering her face and her cloak pulled tight, but feels like the passing glances from people on the streets are like accusations. She is miserable from her light affecting her friends and the burn she gave Rua. They make it to the Inn without incident and Soren settles the tab while Rua says he will be right back and grabs Betta to go say goodbye to his aunt and uncle. Willem says oh no and runs after them. As they pack up the cart and start leaving Stella crawls into it and covers herself with some empty sacks, trying to hide from the world. Soren notices her discomfort, and when one of her legs is still poking out he says "Here, I got you" and takes his cloak and throws it over her, adding to her covering.

Rua, Betta and Willem make it to his uncle's forge and starts quickly saying his goodbyes, thanking them for their hospitality, inviting them to come visit him in Stonetop and saying he loves them. His uncle is a bit taken aback at the rushed goodbye and gives him a gentle hug, trying to avoid his injuries. When they part Willem taps his shoulder, gesturing to two men who are staring right at them and walking purposefully towards them. "We should start running." He says grimly. Rua takes a closer look and it is clear that they are looking for him specifically, it seems the bosses are already aware of the fight and looking to get revenge. The three of them quickly get scarce,

running to meet the others at the front entrance. The rest of the group has been blending in with other traders leaving the city, and when the three run up their followers don't go through the gate. They get onto the maker's road and start the journey home to Stonetop. As the city

One day out of the city Soren spots some Hillfolk riders to the south, away at the edge of his vision. He can't place their tribe, but it reminds him of the aggressive hillfolk they encountered on the way in. It makes him uneasy, and he wells on the bad news he previously heard from Garnuss regarding the Hdour. On the second night a friendly mushroom spirit approaches their camp and latches itself to Stella's leg in a playful manner. It follows them for the next day, but as they Stella has been noticeably withdrawn, almost avoiding the sun while pulling her cloak tightly around her. The third day breaks clear and the sun is too strong for her to ignore and eventually she pulls her hood down and tilts her head back to bask in the warmth of Helior's light, reconnecting with him and restoring her faith. On the third night, Kiva sees the bobbing lights of the Nosalgalau in the distance. She knows they took something from her so is careful not to fall under their spell again but she is curious and wants to know more about them, to protect herself and others from them in the future. She spends the night sketching the various shapes the spirits takes, and relating her experience onto the pages of her notebook, letting the intellectual pursuit distract her from their hypnotic patterns.

After 4 days of travel that is exhausting but a refreshing break from the noise and bustle of Gordin's Delve they approach Stonetop. The watchtower bells ring out announcing their return on the Maker's Road. They pull into town and Gwann is standing arms crossed in the middle of the road. Rua runs right up to her and moves to embrace her tightly, thanking her for giving them such a warm welcome home. As he approaches Gwann pulls back a fist and slugs him in the gut, right where he had previously been stabbed and he staggers back, clearly in pain. She has a deathly glare in her eyes, if looks could kill Rua would be six feet under. "H-How-How dare you entice her into danger! When you end up getting killed just like your parents you are going to drag her down with you." Rua freezes at this, stunned and doesn't know what to say. Soren steps forwards at this, fixing her with a steely glare and says "Now that is too far, Betta is a grown woman and capable of making her own choices." She steps up to Soren in turn and says "You knew this was happening, and you let it happen. She hasn't even held a weapon before!" Soren nods, and says "She still hasn't, though she can now wield a shield to defend herself if necessary. Don't take out your misplaced anger on Rua." "MISPLACED!! I don't think so, he is a bad influence on her." She then turns to Esme "and YOU, these youngsters I can understand being reckless but you are supposed to know better." Esme matches her glare and says "There comes a time when us older folk need to step back and let the youth make their own choices." Gwann asks if that is a threat and Esme states that it is just advice. She knows that Gwann will not be placated easily, it will take time to wear her down and she will probably be easier to mollify if she knows the youth in question are more responsible. Esme invites her to the Chronicle so they can share a drink and Esme can fill her in on all the details on how Betta and Rua acted on the trip. Gwann mutters and is still furious, throwing a sharp look at Betta before stomping off grumbling.

While the confrontation is going down Stella slips away from the group, heading to the Pavilion of the Gods and spends some time before the altar of Helior, basking in his light. Then she returns to the orphanage and Granny Eadna welcomes her home warmly and asks her about the trip. "Did the trading go well?" Stella stutters and stumbles on her words a bit, and goes quiet before

completing any full sentences. Eadna nods gently and says she will go and take care of some chores, but it is good to have Stella back to help with the kids. Stella perks up at that and asks after them. "are they well?" Eadna says "Yeah, for the most part. Can you take the time to sit and chat with Ridney? She has been extra eery recently, she is talking more and more about her imaginary friends and she is getting much too old for that." Stella nods and says that she will, after she has something to eat. "Take your time, you are coming from a long trip so make sure you get some rest."

After Gwann stomped off and the curious crowd started to disperse, Soren gently puts his arm around Dawa's shoulders and starts to guide her around the village. He shows her the landmarks of the cistern, the Stone, where to get water and the stream so she can bathe. All the time, introducing her to villagers they pass. The villagers clearly notice she is from Barrier Pass by her dress, and are a little discomfited by her strangeness and orange eyes, but Soren is polite so they are in return. He finishes the tour at the Public House, arranging for her to stay there and leaving her with a bowl of hearty stew. Kiva takes her notes on the Nosgalau and compares them against her parent's library, trying to understand more about the spirits and how they work. Esme looks for Stella after settling in and finds her in the Pavilion of the Gods. Stella is not quite as miserable as before, but still has some lingering melancholy around her. Esme puts a gentle hand on her shoulder "Still beating yourself up?". Stella replies "Do you ever feel like you are too powerful?". Esme nods sagely and says that Stella has been looking to the healing and supportive side of Helior all her life, and is just now seeing the more terrifying and dangerous side of her god. She was born with this power, didn't have to work for it, but if she doesn't acknowledge the fact that the Sun can burn then she is ignoring half of Helior's nature. Stella nods and says that is what she is afraid of. Esme goes on to say that there are some definite evils, the Things Below want to eat everything and the dark spirits at the bottoms of the lakes are a danger to all. But power isn't evil, it simply is, and you have it due to your birthright. If you don't use it, some other asshole is going to try to force their will on the world. Stella nods at this, and thanks Esme for her advice. Esme gives her a light noogie, and asks if she has had anything to eat. Stella shakes her head so they go to get some food together.

End of Session!

# Session 36

Back at Stonetop, the party takes the time to relax, unwind and level up!

The last time relationships got strained with Gordin's Delve it was when the plague swept through the village and there was a missed deliver of whisky to the town. Just before the breakout Stonetop had received a visitor from Gordin's Delve, so general sentiment had the town as the source of sickness, and the Delve hadn't heard about the plague and just thought that Stonetop failed to deliver the goods.

While out hunting in the Forest, the villagers heard an intimidating sound from the distance, seemingly coming from the south. They have notified Stonetop about this and it has stirred up uncertainty and fear regarding the forest.

Stonetop organizes its tools by using a crude sign out system. In the building where they are stored, each family has a symbol that they mark where the tool is stored so that if someone needs the tool they know generally where it may be and go knocking on the door.

Since he has returned to Gordin's Delve he is more aware than ever of the differences between the two towns. The Delve may be a hot mess, but the people have a sense of industry that Stonetop lacks. They have a greater tendency to get up and go, to build and create.

Now that the party has returned, they need to catch up on some tasks that have been neglected through their absence. Esme enlists Soren's help to add to the Chronicle the recent events, births and deaths, significant changes and various items that need recording. Before leaving Rua had promised Eliam to check each house in the village for potential woodworking needs before winter and that was not done, so he has to run around and use his budding literacy skills to track things and update Eliam. The orphanage is still running like always, but with Stella away it is looking a little rough around the edges. Granny Eadna keeps things going but is looking worn out, the common area is messier than usual and the kids a little wild. She also picks back up doing sermons at the Pavilion of the Gods and doing rounds of the village to check in and guide the residents. Soren spent an evening at the public house drinking and catching up with various villagers. He hears that the packing away for the harvest for wintertime hasn't been going well so he spends his time helping out in the granary and making sure things are squared away for winter.

In the past, Esme had tasked Soren with integrating Oliga in the village and convincing her to stay. Soren was inspired by the young love between Rua and Betta and during one Chronicling session he talks to Esme about his plan to try to set Oliga up with Dayed. Dayed is a single father to two

teenage terrors and always looks frazzled so could use the help around the house, the twins are a handful and might take well to learning from someone from outside the village, and Oliga needs a connection to the village. In his eyes its a win-win-win, and Esme gives him tips and tricks from her years of experience meddling in the village. It seems to go well at first, Dayed and Oliga have some chemistry and seem to get along but Oliga doesn't seem to know how to deal with the kids, she is awkward and unfamiliar with being around children much. Soren gets the idea that if the twins were out of the picture for a short time they could really hit it off.

Stella is working hard in the orphanage but she also spends a good amount of time basking in the late autumn sunlight, soaking up the rays while she can. She never feels like Helior talks to her, but communicates more with feelings and sensations.

Esme has that drink with Gwann in the Chronicle, going over how Betta and Soren conducted themselves on the adventure. Esme tries to impress upon her the responsibility with which they acted in Gordin's Delve, and their responsibility as elders to step back and allow the younger generation to forge their own path. Gwann is somewhat receptive, but Esme gets the feeling that she will not really change her perspective on Rua and his relationship with Betta unless she has some more respect in the village. Gwann thinks poorly of Rua and is worried that he will tarnish the image of her family and drag Betta down. Esme then subtly hints that Betta would be an ideal candidate for the maiden's role in the winter festival, and Gwann's eyes get a glimmer in them when thinking about it.

Thinking about how to keep Rhan and Shan occupied, Soren goes to Granny Eadna for advice about getting them out of the house for a few hours a day. They put their heads together and decide that getting the twins to lead the village children in some small tasks like collecting tinder at the eaves of the forest, or mushroom picking in the shade of the old Maker's wall outside Stonetop. Soren knows they won't just do this when asked, but he notices the twins are interested in the stories he tells in the evenings at the public house. When he has their rapt attention in the story of how he seduced his way into one of the hillfolk tribes he drops the story on a cliffhanger, taking a drink and moving to leave the building. Rhan and Shan start to pester him for the story and he brushes them off, but eventually relents to tell the story if they helped guide the other children in gathering deadwood at the forest's edge the next day. They grumble a little bit but ultimately agree, and he manages to keep this con running for multiple days, interrupting the story at tense points to bait them into working more and keeping them out of the house so Dayed and Oliga get to spend some quality time together

One of the villagers had a miscarriage recently, Asha who is the cousing of Helva. Esme has set her up to assist in the Orphanage as a way to grieve for her loss, and help Stella and Eadna out in keeping things running. Stella is there with Eadna when Asha makes her first appearance. Asha has mousy brown hair that curls around her ears with freckles and clear eyes and Stella recognizes her from the Pavilion of the Gods. Asha nervously steps in and says "I heard there is a lot to do around here, and I am done my chores and thought I would offer to help out." Stella perks up a little at that and asks "Who told you that?" Asha says that she was at the public house and chatting with Esme and the topic came up. Stella hmms at this, but says that there is a lot to do but they have a handle on it. There is an awkward silence that falls, until Eadna steps in and asks Asha what the visit is about. Asha mentions she has time and is looking to help out and Eadna

grabs her sleeve and pulls her into the kitchen saying "There is a lot of scrubbing to do, and my old hands do not have the strength they used to." Asha helps for a couple hours, she seems to get along with Eadna just fine but is awkward around Stella. For her part, Stella mostly ignores Asha and tends to her own duties. At the end of the day when Asha is leaving she says goodbye to Eadna she says "see you tomorrow." A few days of this pattern goes on, with Asha helping out here and there, maybe entertaining the kids or doing some cleaning. She picks up on that Stella isn't happy with her presence, but gives her some space and flashes a quick smile her direction from time to time.

Rua runs into Mad Gethin leaning against a fencepost, he is drawing patterns in the dirt with a stick and crossing them out. Rua can see in his eyes he is in a less crazy phase right now, he is more stable at the moment. He is still a little loopy but can hold a conversation. "Rua, pull up a stone and have a seat!" Rua says "Absolutely! and I brought you something." Rua hands him a small flask of Soren's whisky and Gethin thanks him and takes a deep pull, rolls it around in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. "Ah, that was good. So how are you doing?" Rua talks to Gethin about how he has been running around and working on people's houses and cataloguing the woodworking issues. Gethin nods sagely and says "You have made the grave error of letting them think you are responsible enough to handle it. Nobody expects me to do anything, so when I do get things done I always receive a lot of thanks like its a big thing!" Rua comments that he seems to be doing better and Gethin says that he has the hardest time with reality in the middle of summer and winter, so right now he is doing just fine, enjoying the sun and some time to myself. Rua asks if he can sit in the sun with him and Gethin nods saying "I think I would like that".

Rua notices the designs Gethin is drawing intricate geometric designs in the dirt, and when its complete he absentmindedly wipes it out. Rua inquires about this, and Gethin stammers while answering "you know how there are patterns that go through everything?" Rua nods, not understanding at all. "There are times when you can see them, just on things, on the ground or wall or someone's face. You can follow the lines between people and places and map them out. Haven't really figured out what it means yet." Rua asks if there are any patterns on himself? Gethin squints at Rua's face closely, bringing his face uncomfortably close and scans his face. "Oh yeah, I can't see it clearly now but there is something there." Impulsively, Rua asks if he knows how to tattoo, and Gethin laughs and says "no, no I don't. And people wouldn't let me near their skin anyways." Rua squints at the dirt where Gethin is tracing the designs but can't see anything, its just some dirt to him. Rua shakes his head and then awkwardly asks "Hey Gethin, I've got a feeling that you want something from me, or there is something I should do. Do you know what that would be?" Gethin sighs and says "I was hoping you could see the patterns too, cause the patterns have been getting all weird recently and nobody will believe me if I say so. I got the feeling you were different, maybe different like me, but I guess you have your own road to travel." Rua promises that he if meets anyone else you can see the patterns he will learn everything he can. Gethin smiles painfully, "That would be appreciated, cause the alternative is that it is all up here" he taps the side of his head. "It would be nice to know that it means something. Can I have another swig of that whisky?" Rua hands it over and they spend the rest of their time together in silence.

Soren goes to talk to Stella after one of her sermons in the Pavilion of the Gods, and tries to get her assistance with gathering some able bodies to dig a cold cellar to use the Dark Ice they got to help

preserve food. Stella is reticent at first, she does not trust the ice because it gives her a bad feeling in her gut and she doesn't want it around food. Soren says "Well if you are involved you can make sure there is nothing dark going on, and I am sure it would help ease the minds of the others." Stella nods, but says "If something evil should happen because of this, consider yourself warned." Soren nods seriously, but then has her confirm she will spread the word. "Anyone who is available should meet me north of the public house, that is where we will be digging." Stella confirms she will, but after Soren leaves she inspects the Dark Ice, trying to plumb its secrets. After examining it with her physical senses and her spiritual ones, she doesn't think it has a will or a mind, but its not just cold. There is a definite magical effect, like a soporific, calming, sleepy magic emanates from the thing. She knows from Olwinn's writing that there are legends about Dark Ice. The Rime Lords were able to form and shape it at will, it was something they created and its unclear if anyone is capable of creating it anymore. Unfortunately there is nothing about using it as a refrigerant.

Soren is able to get the Elder's council buy-in to dig the cellar, but they don't approve installing the Dark Ice until it is studied more and known to be safe. With Stella's help there are a bunch of people who show up to work to dig, but many of them are called away to do other work and while the job gets finished, there is a giant ugly hole in front of some people's houses with piles of dirt around. It causes some grumbling around the village, some good natured and some not. As time passes they notice something odd. Every few days at night there are barely perceptible vibrations that run through the ground that continue for a few minutes then stop. It causes some gossip around the square each morning it happens so its not their imaginations. Soren remembers the earthquakes when they were in Viemrod so he volunteers for some night watches and spends his evenings near the cliff edge, waiting for the vibrations and looking out over the forest for disturbances. On his second night he feels the rumbling, like a subtle directionless vibration, and there is no disturbance from the forest. No cracking of trees, no sudden sinkholes. Rua shows up in the morning, pack full and spear ready, asking where the issue is and when they are leaving. Soren pats his shoulder and says that he admires his drive but unfortunately there is no clear indication its related to the issues in the forest. Rua seems crestfallen, and Soren says if he is so eager he can take the next watch cause he is tired and needs to sleep. Rua haltingly agrees, so Soren goes to bed.

End of Session!