

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.

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