

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, it's 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, it's hard to know if it's true or not but it's 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 that 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 he 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 are 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 any 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, it's 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

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