

Session 39 - Heading out to rescue Garnuss

Plans are finalized and the expedition begins!

A little more discussion happens on what plan of action they should take. Esme and Rua advocate for leaving as soon as possible to rescue Garnuss, while Soren is concerned about being outnumbered and wants more support. However he relents to the majority opinion and agrees to head to Three-Coven Lake to find Mael and try to stage a rescue. They also speculate about borrowing horses from the Yellow-Spear tribe, but their current range is away from the road and it would probably take more time to find them, petition for aid, then ride to the south. Lowic says that it would probably be faster to just go straight there, though bringing a horse to act as pack animal would be prudent. They agree to meet at the crack of dawn in the main square the next day to give Lowic's horse a bit more time to rest, then bring it as a pack animal to help carry supplies.

As they start to disperse to prepare, Soren asks Esme to walk with him, he wants to talk to her for a minute. Once they are a few steps away from the others and out of earshot Soren tells her "I think you went a bit too far in your questioning of Lowic, you really scared her and I don't think that was necessary." Esme replies "Well It wasn't my intent to be cruel but I thought she needed to be rattled out of her stupor and focus up." Soren nods, "Well I am glad it wasn't malicious in intent, but she is a friend and already traumatized. It is not the course I would have taken." Esme goes on to say that people sometimes hold onto hope things will work out and not do what needs to be done. They need to be shocked awake into taking the necessary actions. Soren nods, saying he understands but they have different opinions on how to handle that situation. He thanks her for hearing him out, and then goes on to find Fio and invite her along. After explaining the situation she says that she is not at all familiar with the Steplands so might not be so useful for tracking, but if she can help she will come along. Soren thanks her for her assistance, and lets her know they are leaving at dawn from the town square.

Murdoch and Auvan approach Esme while she is preparing to leave and confront her, they are worried that by heading out to rescue Garnuss they are getting involved with internal Hillfolk issues, and may suffer reprisal attacks. Esme nods, "I see what you are saying, but in my view the worst-case scenario is we do nothing, and a power-mad sorcerer uniting the Hillfolk with xenophobic furor and they come and destroy us all regardless." Auvan goes on to say that they are really putting the village at risk if they get killed and the Hillfolk come to punish the village it will be a dire situation. Esme understands their fears, and offers to call the elders together to get a consensus on the correct course of action for the village. She will honour their decision either

way. Murdoch looks at her intensely for a long moment before saying "Go, do what you think needs to be done. But don't fuck it up, or we will pay the price." He turns to leave, Auvan hesitates like he wants to keep pushing but decides to follow him. After some time has passed and they are well away from the Chronicle Esme speaks out loud "Fucking do-nothing idiots, Aratis but I understand where they are coming from..."

Soren decides to seek Dove's advice for dealing with hostile spirits. Her advice generally is "Don't", but that doesn't really apply here. "You are leaving tomorrow, yes? Its not much time, but I will craft a couple protective amulets. They will only work for a short time though, and I will only have time to make two." Soren replied "Something is better than nothing, I really appreciate this. Thank you Dove, may Aratis watch over you." In the evening Soren finds a leaf-bound package at his door. Inside are two amulets hanging on leather thongs that are woven grasses and herbs in intricate symbols. He securely stashes them in his clothes in the morning, and straps his fancy bronze shortsword on and goes to meet the others.

Rehkken, Lowic's horse, has been rigged with saddlebags with coffers and bags instead of a saddle. It looks distinctly uncomfortable with this arrangement but is putting up with it. They all meet in the town square as the sun is peaking above the horizon, Soren and Rua trading jokes about the journey they are about to go on. Lowic looks at them, commenting that she is glad they are in high spirits but she is not so sure it will go well. They all shoulder their packs, carrying a light load with Rehkken holding the bulk of the supplies. It takes an hour or so to get to the Maker's road. They collectively decided to push as fast as possible to the Three-Coven Lake and make haste down the road, not stopping at the periodic rest spots on the way. The first few days are fairly uneventful, passing by both the Ruined Tower and Titan Bones without incident. The journey through the southern flats is mind-numbingly boring, each scraggly tree breaking up the landscape is a welcome sight. By nightfall they are in the edges of the steplands, the ground transitioning from grassy flats to rolling hills to rocky bluffs. The terrain gets more and more broken, the limestone hills eroded by storms and streams over thousands of years.

Through the journey Soren has been trying to keep spirits up with his usual jokes and stories, but often has to take breaks to catch his breath as they are pushing to move quickly and it is not as effective as he would like. Rua is uncharacteristically morose, his shoulders are sore and at one point jokingly says "Why don't we just starve? We don't need to carry these supplies, right?". Stella on the other hand has been characteristically quiet, keeping to herself and only talking when spoken to. Esme is in her own mind, crafting in her mind the song of this journey. Fio is also taciturn, giving the impression of being exhausted by the pace. "Its so much easier when the things you want come to you and you can just shoot them." At camp that night Lowic says "We can split off the road south by about noon tomorrow. I think so anyways, I haven't been to the lake, only near it." The spring rains have held off for the last few days so they are able to have a cooking fire each night. On the fourth day however the weather changes and a light drizzle beings fall, turning the slopes of the steplands into a muddy, slippery obstacle course.

That night they make camp at the bottom of a ravine where the light from their fire would not be seen from any distance. Partway through the night Stella is on watch, huddled in her cloak as the drizzle has started up again. Then the rain gets heavier, and heavier, until it stops soaking into the ground and pools at the bottom of the ravine. Pretty soon each of them is sleeping in a small

puddle and it wakes up the party, and before they all fully awake they are all in the same puddle. Soren scratches his head, remembering something from his time with the Hillfolk about why heavy rain is dangerous but his mind is foggy from the forced march and can't recall exactly why it's an issue. However, Esme can clearly see the water is rising around them so says they should get moving and so the group starts to pack up horse. Once they are ready to move Stella lights her lantern and they look around for where to go, seeing the water rising all around them. As they realize the danger of the rising flood Stella infuses her consecrated flame with the Warmth of the Sun, banishing the shivering cold from her allies and removing their fear of the trial ahead. They move together, trying to fight through the water to higher ground.

Esme moves directly up the slope, holding a hand out to Fio to help her up as well and they are able to reach the top of the ridge. Rua follows right behind, carrying as many supplies as possible and forcing his way through the water. However, just as he reaches the peak his foot dislodges some dirt that was loosened by the rain, triggering a landslide that makes the slope they used impassable to the others. Soren sees this happening and turns into the flow of the water, pushing against it and taking Rehkken's harness to try to lead it away from the rising waters. As he starts moving he calls over his shoulder "Hey Fio, how do floods show love?... They sweep you off your feet!" He hears her yell from the ridge "For fuck's sake! Now?!" He chuckles to himself as he starts leaning into the flow of water, moving one step at a time. Lowic is on the other side of the horse, keeping it calm and allowing it to move up a steeper slope than it would otherwise be willing. Rua pulls some rope out of the bags he was carrying and tosses it down to Stella, yelling for her to grab it. She takes the rope up in one hand and starts to scale the cliff with the lantern in her other hand. Partway up she stalls, seeming like her will to keep moving has failed. Esme calls out to her "Cmon girl, put your back into it and get your shit together!" Esme's words sting, but snap Stella out of her stupor and gives her the motivation to keep moving. She finally makes it to the top of the ravine, heaving onto the soaked grass, grateful its solid ground and not underwater.

Esme goes up to Stella and lightly slaps her in the face, asking her to be present, she cannot just drift away or give up. We all rely on you. If you can't be present you should go home. Stella responds to this, saying he won't go home. She chooses to be here. Esme questions her further, saying that she just slapped Stella in face and she isn't reacting. "What are you feeling right now?" "Like anyone else could do this job better than me!" Stella replies firmly. Esme scoffs at this and says "There is nobody else! only you have the power and the position as Helior's Chosen. So step up and get your head in the game!" Stella goes silent at this, and Esme shoulders her pack and says "Lets go." Fio has been standing next to Soren and looks at him like "Well THAT just happened! Yeesh" then starts to move ahead to scout as they start moving. Rua starts walking as well and says "yes, let us walk together in companionable silence!" Soren goes up to Stella, places a comforting hand on her shoulder and says "She can be harsh, but she means well." Stella says nothing so he nods, pats her shoulder once and starts walking.

Lowic has steered them well, the next morning they crest a final ridge and see the Three-Coven Lake spread out before them, almost all the way to the horizon. It's the most water that any of them have seen in one place. Rua is amazed at this, speculating at all the things that could be hidden below. Lowic nods, saying they better not go swimming, who knows what is under those dark waters. It takes another day to get to the edge of the waters, and as they crest another ridge Esme walks next to Stella. "I love you too much to bring you further if your heart isn't in it. If the

only thing motivating you is obligation, you should stay here. Are you prepared to do what needs to be done if you come with?" Stella nods. Esme goes on, not taking that as a good answer, pressing to get a more committed response from Stella. Soren steps up and says "That is enough, she has agreed to give it her all. Exuberance is not required, just commitment." Esme starts talking again about how dangerous the coming trails will be until Stella cuts her off "oh gods, will you shut up!" Esme smiles, "That is the most fire I have seen from you all journey!"

As they approach the lakeside Esme asks Lowic about any landmarks in the area. "There is a giant dam, built by beavers, down by the end of the lake. It turns into the river Strewth from there, and flows towards Marshedge." She points south where there is a large, round area that has been carved into the southern shore of the lake. "They say that is an amphitheatre. It is said to be a gathering place, but the barrow-diggers used it to make human sacrifices. There are also a fair number of ruins around where people could camp out, where rooms have been carved into the stone of the bluffs by the lake edge." Esme peers around the lake, trying to get a feeling for the area and where Mael might be hiding with Garnuss. As her eyes pass over the lake, she gets an awareness of a deep, hidden entity beneath the waters that is watching her as she looks around. It is cloaked by magic and its own intent to not be seen, and as soon as she senses it she forcibly turns her attention away from it, pushing it out of her mind and awareness. Keeping her eyes above the water, she looks at the buildings on the bluffs and sees that there are no chimneys. If there are people around and they want a fire they would not be able to hide it. She can't see any drifting smoke, but its early so they decide to wait an hour or two to see if any wisps of fire smoke can be spotted. After about 30 minutes Fio spots a smudge of smoke to the north-west, not coming from the buildings but from the peak of the bluff itself.

End of Session!

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