

Session 40 - Exploring Three-Coven Lake

Can they rescue Garnuss? Will evil spirits get in the way?

Once they spot the smoke they get together and decide to try to move cautiously, staying out of sight and hoping to stay hidden. Moving slowly and quietly they stick together, leading the horse with them. With Lowic and Fio leading, choosing firm ground with some vegetation to soften the sounds of their movements they are able to get to the crest of the plateau without any loud noises. As they get to the top they spy a small camp of hillfolk. There are some horses milling around and some tents, but they are at quite a distance still. Rua nudges Lowic and points "Do you think that is them?" Lowic squints at them for a bit, before saying she can't tell for sure but there isn't much reason for any other tribe to be here. Esme turns to Stella, asking her what she can see, if there is any indication of tribal markings or bad spirits to identify the shaman. Stella's directs her orange eyes towards the camp and sees there are about 4-6 people's worth of stuff scattered around. They have nothing permanent built, its a campfire and logs as furniture. She doesn't see anyone that matches the description of Mael, but it is far enough away that she can't be certain.

Rua calls out to Stella and says "Lets the two of us sneak closer to get some more info." Even as he says this Esme notes he is seeming exhausted from the forced march and convinces him to stay with the group and for Soren to go in his stead. It takes a moment of convincing but he relents and lets Soren take his place. As they are preparing, Rua pulls Soren to the side and says "Psst, hey, check in with Stella will you? Make sure she is not too rattled by what Esme was telling her." Soren nods, then gets down low and starts crawling forward. As they move he tells Stella the tips and tricks that Fio taught him about moving quietly through grasses, however halfway through his lecture he notices that she is already moving quietly. He pauses for a second, but quickly realizes that it makes sense. Stella has always been quiet and unassuming, turns out that is helpful when sneaking.

They are able to get close enough to see details. There are four people in the camp, one lying down, two sitting by the fire and one is grooming a horse. The one with the horse is wearing a red headband, confirming this is the World Serpent tribe. "There are only four of them, we should be able to take them. What do you think?" Soren says. Stella hmmmms, then says "Once we have the others sure. I don't see why not." Soren confirms he meant as a group. They don't want to risk getting closer so they decide to head back to the group. About half the way back Soren speaks up "Hey, so I wanted to check in with you, see how you were doing after Esme laid into you..." Stella looks straight ahead and just says "I'm fine". "Riiight, well that sounds more like a 'I don't wanna talk about it' than you actually being fine. Which is totally fair, but you know we always have your

back. I'm glad you are here with us, I hope you know that."

Esme wants to head to the Amphitheatre as that is where she assumes any ritual would be performed. Soren counters and says that they are in a good scouting position, it would take lots of time to go around the lake while trying not to be spotted. Rua also mentions that they need more information, we don't know how many there are in total or where Mael is exactly. Esme relents and they decide to sneak closer, and agree to charge all at once when they get in bowshot. They leave the horse behind and creep onto the plateau. As they sneak closer the day turns into a scorcher, they have to deal with biting flies and other things bugging them but they are able to get within bowshot without being noticed. Thankfully none of them cry out from the biting bugs and they are able to get into range. Soren turns to Fio, says "Watch my back" and gets up off the ground and breaks into a sprint, heading directly towards the one grooming the horse. The man turns around and yelps in alarm before Soren crashes into him, holding his sword with two hands braced against his body and drives it into the man's torso. The World Serpent is not killed outright, but he is a grievously wounded as they stumble back, entangled with Soren and his sword.

The two sitting by the fire turn at their ally's cry and see Soren stab him, and as they stand up to retaliate Rua jumps between one and his weapon. He fumbles around behind him, grabbing the flint-tipped spear and brandishing it towards the two but not attacking. Esme calls out for Fio to shoot the injured one, but she isn't able to get a clear shot so she holds, waiting for a good opportunity. Stella steps forward, pulling a torch out of her pack and whispering a quick prayer to Helior to light and consecrate it. She tries to channel the power of her patron god, but a bug flies into her mouth just as she started her prayer and she erupts into a coughing fit as she tries to spit it out. It takes her a moment, and she has a very annoyed look on her face. Esme tries to emulate Rua's move as she spots a flint-studded cudgel that is close by. She tries to sprint to get between it and the closes Hillfolk but her old bones aren't able to get there in time and he is able to snatch it from the ground just as Esme tries to stomp on it. She stumbles and rolls onto the ground, covering herself with her shield. "Lets dance young pup!" Esme throws out a taunt. "Hard to dance when you are on the ground old lady" The man replies in his thick Hillfolk accent. As she is preparing for the fight she calls out to Soren "DUCK!!". Soren trusts Esme enough that when he hears her he gets as low as he can right away, keeping a firm grip on his sword. Fio's arrow hisses over his head and thunks into the Hillfolk's throat, causing him to slide back off his sword and bat feebly at the shaft. Soren turns around and lifts his sword in a salute to thank Fio for helping him out.

The man Rua is facing off with pulls a flint knife out from the folds of his clothes and lunges at Rua. Rua tries to block with the stolen spear, trying to keep the knife away and grapple his foe. He is able to bat the knife aside, but the man gets a hand on the spear and they start to wrestle control of the weapon from each other. Finally, Rua is able to get control of it and quickly stabs it into the man, running him clear through the gut and into a horse that is behind him. The horse screams and rears up, starting to kick and flail its hooves everywhere and Soren is right on the other side! As this is happening the man looming over Esme takes a heavy swing, trying to bat her shield out of the way. She is in a defensive posture and is able to absorb the blow, kicking up and getting a glancing blow on his nuts in return. Stella is still hanging back, but now that the bug has been spit out of her mouth she takes a deep breath and invokes Helior's power, causing the torch to glow with an otherworldly radiance. She rushes towards the last member of the Hillfolk as he is

rummaging through his pack. He pulls out a small hunting horn and glances towards Stella. He sneers, not perceiving her as a threat before his eyes are drawn to her torch and his face goes slack as he is enraptured by the light and the horn slips from his grasp.

Rua is facing down a terrified and enraged horse and he calls over his shoulder for Lowic to help him calm it. He starts talking in a confident voice, trying to calm it down while Lowic gets in close. Lowic is able to get a hand on its bridle and pulls its head close in an effort to calm it down. The horse is still freaked out and startled, but it has stopped kicking and is stepping in a circle. Rua takes this opportunity to approach the man looming over Esme. He uses his spear to hook under the man's chin to grapple him. He is successful, but the man leans forward then whips his head backward right into Rua's nose, leaving his head ringing. Esme takes this opportunity to get up and make another strong kick in the nuts to keep the man distracted and giving Soren an opening to stab him. Soren sees that Stella has one of them distracted with her oddly entrancing light...He quickly shakes his head to banish the distraction, then moves toward the grappled foe. "One Hillfolk kebab coming right up!" As he gets closer he hesitates, both Esme and Rua are in close quarters with this guy so he measures his attack and stabs forward. However, he held back too far in concern for his friends and only lands a scratch on the man's arm.

Esme tries to grapple the arm he is holding the cudgel with. This successfully takes the man's attention away from Rua, but is the target of his next swing. She takes the hit on her shield, pushing her weight back into it and ricocheting the club back into his face. He takes the hit and goes slack, dragging Rua to the ground with him. Esme takes a moment to slam the edge of her shield into his neck, crushing it completely. With that quiet descends on the camp, just the sound of the horses nickering and Lowic's voice keeping them calm. Soren goes and takes the rope from Rua's pack and uses it to truss up the last Hillfolk who is standing placidly, just staring at Stella's torch. Esme asks Stella to heal the horse to help calm it, so she lets go of the invocation on her torch and waves a hand at the campfire to consecrate it. She bows her head, asking Helior to bring his healing light to the fire and it turns into a golden warmth. She asks Lowic to lead the horse over. She puts her cloak over its head so it doesn't freak out, but as it steps over the fire the flames dance higher, wreathing around the wound and closing it quickly leaving just a small scar.

Rua looks at her, says "Wow, I see how it is, you heal the horse before me?" Stella stammers for a moment "I was just following orders!" "Its fine..." Rua replies, turning away. Stella frowns, then quickly lights her torch again and invokes Helior to heal him, causing his wounds to close up and banishes his exhaustion. He turns around and thanks her with a smile, then goes to keep watch as Esme and Soren go to interrogate the tied up World Serpent. Esme asks Soren how they should handle this, good goat-bad goat maybe? Soren shakes his head, saying "They have been threatening and warmongering from the start, I say we put the fear of the gods into him." Esme nods and kneels in front of him, shaking him out of his stupor. "Hello neighbor. You are alone now, facing a daughter of Helior and priestess of Aratis. Tell us where Mael is, or we will curse you ten ways to Sunday." The man squints up at her, says "Who are you?" Esme sighs and raises her hand, palm facing him. "Your tribe has been threatening and warmongering, you are anathema to peace and civilization. Answer my questions, or I will record your name in the Book of Aratis as an enemy of all that is good." The man looks unconvinced, so Stella calls the light of Helior to hang above his head like the weight of a thousand suns. The man's eyes go wide and he tries to scoot himself away from the terrifying flame. Esme partially shields him from the light and says "Tell us

what we want to know!"

The man breaks, says "Okay okay! Mael isn't here, he rode east a few days ago" Soren frowns, asks if he had Garnuss with him. The man looks confused, Esme clarifies the spirit talker that Mael took from the Yellow Spear tribe. The man says "Oh, yeah he brought a prisoner a few days ago. The favoured ones took him to the shrine, haven't seen him since. We aren't allowed to go there, but its down below us in a carved out cavern." Now that he has answered the questions Esme is thinking what to do with him. Stella takes her torch and waves it in his face, terrifying him even more as a smile starts blooming on her face. She drops the torch on his head, burning his face before Esme snatches it away. "Now that is just cruel" she admonishes Stella, then pulls a small knife out and slits his throat. Rua turns and sees the results, shocked that Stella would intentionally burn someone who is helpless. They look around the camp, not much here except the pot of porridge next to the fire. Esme grabs a bowl and starts to eat, encouraging the others as well so they all eat up.

They move to the bluffs, and as they approach the carved steps into the cliff Soren pulls out the two amulets from Dove. Looking around, he decides to give one each to Rua and Fio. He, Esme and Stella all have ways of dealing with the spiritual. They leave the horses hobbled on the plateau, the rocky stairs are not suitable for horses. They go down the steps, getting closer and closer to the lake. They pass many houses carved into the side of the cliff, seemingly empty and unremarkable other than their enormous size, most ceilings 20 feet or higher. As they get down closer to the lake they encounter a terrace, about 20 feet above the water. There is an empty cauldron near the edge and Esme goes to look at it. It reeks of something foul, but unidentifiable. By its position it was probably emptied into the lake. Maybe a refuse pot? At the back of the terrace is a large, decorated door leading into the cliff side, clearly of significance. They gather together at the entrance and start to quietly enter the gloom.

Inside its 20 foot ceilings with elaborate scroll work on the walls, elaborate patterns looping around the edges. The inside is cool and quiet and smells like dust. It was getting very warm outside, but here it is cold enough to cause the group to shiver, and other than the slice of sunlight from the door there are no other light sources. Their every step makes a faint echo, making sneaking a tricky proposition but they do their best regardless. Esme nearly takes a tumble down stairs she didn't see in the dark, but Lowic is able to grab her tunic and stabilize her. Soren and Fio are walking side-by-side. Just as he is about to step on some loose gravel and make tons of noise Fio taps on his shoulder, points to the gravel in the same manner that she would when they were in the forest together, teaching him how to hunt and track. He nods to her in thanks, and they are able to all get inside the entry hall without incident. The only light is the sunlight streaming in through the door and Stella's hooded lantern. There are stairs going down into the dark, and a passage to the left. Soren moves towards the side passage, He doesn't see any light, so he enters and looks around. It has obviously been looted, there are some skeletons in the corners and someone has drawn an intricate ritual circle 20 feet across the center of the room. On the south wall there are some bags and a couple chests. Soren moves to check out the bags and chests, giving the ritual circle a wide berth. Esme looks in as well, but she doesn't sense anything magical currently in the room, though the ritual circle suggests there may have been before.

The bags contain a bizarre assortment of things. A variety of fetishes and talismans, bags of dried herbs and prairie grasses are piled around. Soren thinks about the amulets from Dove, it would be

great if there were enough for everybody. As he is reaching to take some of the for everyone to have an amulet, Esme grabs his arm. "Don't mess with things you don't understand" she admonishes him. He hesitates, but he trusts her and her wisdom so he reluctantly leaves them alone and leaves the room. The group faces the stairs down, clearly the way forward and they start to move deeper into the darkness.

End of Session!

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