

Session 42 - Exploring Mael's Chambers and Rescuing Garnuss

First contact with the Hillfolk has been resolved, time to go deeper into the dungeon!

It is mid-morning as the party sits outside on the terrace, the sun is high in the sky and its warmth is infusing the group and banishing the last wisps of the shadow-creatures influence. They tend to their wounds, Soren is conscious again but is feeling spiritually drained. The sun helps, but he is a little disassociated. Rua is pacing near the entrance, impatiently waiting for the rest to recover. As Esme stands up he asks "Are we ready to go? I want to get this over with." Esme says, "One moment before we go. It would be so much easier if everyone who meddled with dark spirits was pure evil." Rua says "Well that shadow lady seemed pretty evil for sure." "Well yes" Esme replies, "But it is unfortunate that Armul wasn't fully enraptured, he seemed like a decent person led astray. But I made promises that what we do here wouldn't get traced back to Stonetop." "I see what you are saying" Rua replies with a frown "Its my fault because I told him my name." Esme shakes her head "Its not about fault, but it needed to be done."

Fio interrupts saying "This is a great discussion, but lets finish it later. Someone is coming." Soren gets up at this, and Rua and Esme stand ready. A woman exits the door and looks around, she is dressed in traditional Hillfolk garb with a red band tying her hair back. Esme steps forward and asks who she is. She introduces herself as Noln Firewalker, "You killed three of the master's apprentices, which is both good and bad. Bad because, well, you killed them. Good because you got rid of my competition. I assume you are here for a reason and its not wanton bloodshed." Soren steps up, saying they are there for Garnuss and if she steps aside they won't need to kill her too. "The yellow-spear Spirit Talker? Hmm, I see. That can be arranged, if you do a favor for me in return." Soren nods and says "It would be nice to avoid further conflict, but that depends on the content of this favour." She says the favor isn't terribly complicated or even

"The upper floors of this ruin are the Master's private laboratory. We cannot go there, he would know and punish us. In there is hidden a box, if you take that box and burn it right there in the laboratory I will consider our bargain fulfilled. Soren asks how they know it won't harm them when they burn it. She says "It contains a number of tethers the Master holds over those he has made deals with. If you burn it, I gain some leeway in how I can act and I will give you the spirit talker and we can go our separate ways."

There is distrust between the groups, Soren asks for them to see Garnuss as proof of his state. Nolin says no, they could just ambush her and then take Garnuss and run. The group does not trust her enough to go along without any sort of guarantee, so they stand facing each other for a long moment. Soren, Rua and Esme put their heads together, Rua and Soren are willing to go along with it but Esme wants some sort of collateral. Esme approached Nolin and asks for some identifying object so if she stabs us in the back we can finger her as a collaborator. Nolin agrees, and starts unlacing an intricate beaded bracer from her forearm. She steps up to Lowic and hands it to her, saying "You are the baby Spirit Talker aren't you? Hmm, well its not my problem now." She turns to leave and says to follow her and she will show us the stairs to the Master's private rooms.

Nolin takes them to the far side of the hall in which they fought, keeping a large distance from the bodies. As they approach Esme asks her if there are any traps to be wary of. Nolin shrugs, says "I have only been up there once in the Master's presence, but if there are any traps they will likely be magical" Esme nods, and moves to take point moving up the half-ruined steps. Soren places a hand on her shoulder and says he will go first and...nothing happens as he makes his first step. His sixth-sense isn't going off, any more than they are already in a creepy underground place, so he says it seems safe enough for now and they move up.

The top of the stairs goes through a peaked arch, and the landing is another hall with multiple rooms coming off of it. It is fairly strewn with rubble, some may have fallen from the ceiling but other bits looks like smashed stone furnishings. There are also human skeletons scattered around, they look like they lay just where they fell, no indications they have been placed there. Some have clearly been disturbed, with bones scattered about as if they had been looted. Esme doesn't get any indications of magic around the bones, just a vague feeling of sadness. Set high up on the walls are set glowing crystals that cast light on the floor. Some are cracked and others are missing, but enough remain to illuminate the rest of the hall beyond Stella's light. They spread out and look about the hall and peek into the adjoining rooms. One is some sort of antechamber, quite small. Opposite is a larger room they can't see any details about. Another entrance is collapsed, the one across from the entrance leads to another hall, and the last is another large room they can't see much about from the main hall. Rua points at the first large room on the right and says "May as well start here?" The others agree and they enter that room.

As Stella's light enters the room it appears to be some sort of council chamber. There is a massive stone table in the center of the room, 7 feet tall and 40 feet long. It is surrounded by stone stools with a throne at the far end. At the end of the room is a large stone relief carving depicting a large being sitting on a throne with humans beneath worshipping it. Kiva starts immediately copying down the runs in the relief and that line the baseboards of the room. Soren boosts Rua up on top of the table to look around. As he gets up he disturbs what must be tens of thousands of years of dust accumulated, and nothing else. Rua starts to giggle and runs around through the dust, drawing a smiley face before hopping down. Soren hears him running around and is curious what he found, but Rua just looks innocently at him and says "Nothing." Soren is tempted to climb up and look, but Rua kicked up a huge cloud of dust that is choking the air at this point. Esme gets a feeling there is something magical here, but isn't able to pin anything down and once it gets dusty they all exit. Kiva has records of the runes so they can decipher them later if they are important.

Back in the main hall they chat for a bit, it makes sense the box would be important to Mael, so where he sleeps or works is most likely. They quickly peek into the small antechamber, it contains some low stone couches and in the walls are embedded round crystals, about a foot in diameter. Each is a different colour, and sit within arm's reach of the couches. or, Maker's arm reach. This isn't what they are looking for so they move on quickly despite Rua's protests. He wants to sit on the couches, maybe take a nap, but Soren drags him out and as they move to the next room they bicker back and forth on the merits of stone couches. As they enter the next room they both stop and stare, there are statues lining the next room. Most have been struck down and vandalized, seemingly deliberately with sledgehammers. At the back of the room stands a massive bronze gong, with a series of holes in the wall behind it. At the side of the room there is a human-sized passage with a tattered cloth covering it. Rua immediately runs to the gong and gently touches it with his fingertips. "Wouldn't it be cool to have one of these in Stonetop? Then we could bang it to like, get people to gather or sound the alarm!" Soren nods and then says "That is what the bell is for dude, its the same things just not flat." "Well I still think it would be cool" says Rua with a small pout. Soren turns and sees Esme about to enter the side room. As she reaches for the curtain his palms start to itch like mad and he calls out "Esme, hold!!" She freezes and he steps up, but can't put his finger on anything actually wrong. Esme can't see anything either.

Esme resolves to just move forward and trigger whatever lays ahead. Soren tells Rua to give his amulet to her just in case, the more protection the better. She raises her shield and steps forward. As she steps into the portal it feels with a sheet of green, magical flame that envelops her. She is prepared for anything, and catches the fires on her Makersglass shield and redirects it to one of the blank stone walls in the room. She is able to get through unscathed, and sees that it is like a bedroom with furs on the floor and scattered personal paraphernalia. Rua sees her pass through the flames and is convinced the trap is triggered and done now so he steps through, but the flames pop up and sear him, and he is smoking as he steps through the other side. Esme quickly wraps a blanket around him to put out any lingering flames. "Oh gods, Rua your eyebrows are gone!" Rua rubs his face, then shrugs saying "Surely they will grow back before we get to stonetop." Esme looks at him doubtfully before shaking her head and turning to inspect the room. Soren calls from outside, confirming Rua is OK.

They start to look at things, Esme warning Rua not to touch anything and only inspect with his eyes. Unfortunately, nothing matching the description of the box is laying around, they will have to search. Esme is looking through a table with a large crystal on it, covered in carving tools. There is also a reservoir at the bottom of the table and lots of hill folk decorations hung on nails driving into the wall. Rua starts tossing the pile of straw and furs that is the bed. He finds nothing there, but as he moves one of the hexagonal floor stones shifts beneath his foot. He kneels down and knocks on it and the stone wiggles a bit. He wiggles it out of the floor and sees a plain wooden box with leather hinges and strap holding it shut. Rua sets the box aside, its too normal to be filled with spiritual contracts he thinks and moves to keep looking around. Meanwhile Esme has been searching behind the tapestries, shifting them carefully with her shield. She turns and sees the box he set aside and says "Rua! That is a wooden box, it is probably what we are looking for." Rua shrugs and shakes the box, he can hear something moving around inside. Not metal, something soft and he also sees some runes carved into the recess the box came from. Esme takes the box from him

There looks like a trench dug into the floor along the threshold of the door that has been filled in with rubble to make it seem smooth. Poking it makes it clear its loose, and Soren flickes away some with a dagger to find what looks like blackened bones mixed in. Seems like the connection between black magical bone and magical flames so while Esme and Rua are searching he spends the time to clear enough space for a person to walk out. Esme gathers the tools from the bench and places the box on on the straw mattress. Once they exit the room Esme wants Stella to burn the box and everything in the room, but Rua and Soren convince them to wait until they at least poke their heads into the last room. Esme argues against it but eventually relents. They head over and carefully go through the final door and find a balcony of some kind with a railing overlooking a yawning chasm. There are glittering silver in the walls and they can see other balconies, this was clearly a part of a larger community. They each stare in wonder before turning together and going back to Mael's room.

Soren encourages Stella to set fire to as much as possible in there, its seems like a personal space for Mael and fuck that guy. Stella whispers to the flammable objects one by one and whispers to the table, straw mattress, tapestries and the box before leaving the room. Smoke is already billowing out of the doorway so they hightail it out of there back to the stairs down to the main hall. Esme stays long enough to ensure the box catches fire, and just as she turns to leave she sees a shadowy figure float up from the box and disappear into the ceiling. As they are heading down they confirm they all don't trust Noln, Esme thinks she doesn't have the same long-term thinking that Mael would have. Soren nods, and says she clearly is getting something out of this and she confronted the group all alone with confidence so she had something up her sleeve. Esme also gets Stella to check Rua for curses, but doesn't seem like anything is amiss.

They go back down the stairs to the first hall. The bodies are still where they left them and Noln is nowhere to be seen. However there is a circle drawn in chalk in the middle of the room with a human skull. Lowic cries out "Master!!" and runs into the circle, picking up the skull and cradling it in her arms. "Ahhhh fuck" says Soren, and he suddenly realized that Noln said that his soul is tethered to his body but didn't specify it would stay that way. As they are standing there, shocked and sad a voice echoes out from seemingly nowhere "Hello? Can you hear me?" "Garnuss?" Both Rua and Soren call out at the same time. A ghostly figure slowly appears, just a faint human outline. "Yeah its me, what are you doing here?" "We came to rescue you, what happened to you?" "Well they killed me and chained my spirit to my damned skull." They all look at the skull that Lowic is cradling as she sobs as the reality of the situation sinks in. Esme speaks up "We can sort out exactly what is going on later, we need to get out of here now that we have you." They all agree, and the outline of Garnuss bends down and places his head next to Lowics "Hey little sparrow, its time to move. Don't lose yourself now." She sniffs and nods, then gets up to leave with the others.

As they get outside and up the steps they find one of the horses they left from the lookout camp is gone, Noln appears to have taken one. Now there are not enough horses for them to ride double so they go back, pick up Lowic's horse and load them up with all their stuff before hoofing it away, making as much distance from the lake as possible. As they leave the feeling of sadness and spiritual depression slowly lifts. They hike until the sun starts to go down and they find a stone outcropping to make camp under. Once they are settled Lowic pulls out Garnuss' skull and holds it gently. They all gathered around and before anyone could say anything Rua reaches out and knocks on the skull "Hello? Garnuss you still there?" Soren slaps his hand back and says "Rua!

That was so disrespectful!...right Lowic?" Lowic just sits there, flabbergasted as Garnuss' ghost starts to appear again, now more sharp. Not just an outline, it is more recognizable as him.

End of Session! Exposition dump for when the crew is all here.

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