

The houselights dim, the red curtains open, and all of the guests at the New York Sour Grapes settle down to watch the show.

We are all clad in armor, a dark midnight blue, reminiscent of a nighttime sky. As in dreams, where you know someone is someone, though they aren't, but they are... we now know that we are members of the griffon cavalry. We are approached by an imposing figure. She stands about 6'1", stern-faced, with dark copper skin. (Human-ish?) We have a sense immediately that she's in charge here, especially as she starts to bark orders.

"We have cleansed this village. In this cart are 900 gold pieces. You four are to deliver these 900 gp, 300 gp each, to the next three villages down the eastern road. Just follow the Dwamish River. Do you understand your orders?"

It is a dry grassland we find ourselves in, the carnage of battle behind us, but to the East it looks peaceful, somewhat verdant.

"Exactly 300 gold per village. No more, no less. And you know I'm always watching."  
And she solutes us.

Izar: "Excuse me good lady! How are you always watching?"

She doesn't answer, but just gives

"Uh, a moment, O captain my captain, the coinage that we are here to distribute -- has it been pre-counted into 300 pieces batches, or shall we do that ourselves...?"

"I trust you to accomplish the mission. There is much to do. You have to the end of the evening. I expect to see you on Genussa by morning."

She turns and her cape flows dismissively as she walks away. She mounts a griffon that takes flight, and, about half-way out of atmo, disappears in a white streak of light.

About 20 ft away is a cart hooked up to two massive water buffalo-looking creatures.

Hrothulf goes over and looks in the cart. There are a number of chests and a couple bags strewn about almost haphazardly as if tossed in the wagon, covered. The bags are filled with coin. Nothing uniform about the chests, as if they came from different households and peoples.

"We should count the coin," Darnit says.

Hrothulf's armor is not his usual en-pouched armor. But looking over at one of the griffins, its barding sure is filled with pouches.

There is some attempt at figuring a secure way of taking the coin by griffin for speed, but Izar instead starts sneakily-but-not-at-all driving the water buffalo with wagon away.

Darnit races after Izar. "We need to count that coin first!" he says, climbing into the wagon.

We get the sense that the griffin-griffin rider bond is so tight, they can move together without words. We notice one of the griffins has distinctly Hiare-like features(!)

Ego jumps on the wagon too, noticing that the wagon is structurally sound. There is little or no metal to it -- largely wood fastened by wood. Which for the rocky terrain maybe is good. It's a relatively smooth ride. The way ahead looks mostly flat, though windy with the river.

Hrothulf rides slightly ahead and looks out for booby traps, tomfoolery, etc.

The first village is really close. He gets to a cruising altitude and sees right away there's nothing in between. Just the road and his thoughts.

Darnit is counting coins fastidiously, and Ego is checking just to be sure.

We approach the first village, Erksineville. It's a short trip, so by the time we're there we've only had a chance to verify one 300 coin allotment. Pulling up to Erskineville we find it's a meager town. Maybe 300 families here. Rural, filthy poor. 300 coin will be like more than they've ever seen ever. There isn't really a leader, but Jed is the one they look to.

Ego suggests counting out all three allotments before we give out, just to make sure. Darnit suggests that Izar and Hrothulf speak to the villagers to figure out how to give it out -- to a leader, selecting a few to be in charge, or what.

Two characters meet them at the entrance to the town, or where the road passes anyway. They come out with some animal skins and a couple baskets that seem to be full of dried fruits or some kind of vegetable crop. They put them on the ground saying, "This is all we have this time, we're so sorry, please don't hurt anybody!"

Hrothulf: "Quite to the contrary, good people! We are here to share our bounty with y'all."

They don't look up at him, but they're confused, elbowing each other and muttering to themselves. They're clearly terrified.

Izar: "Are you often visited by people who take your fruits and skins from you?"

"Oh, it is the tax for being this close to the waterway, from Lord Dwamish himself, up in Dwamton."

We know Dwamton as the third city on our list. Erskineville, Tolland, and Dwamton.

Izar muses about how we'll know what to do, how we follow the book as it's written. Don't we need to know how it goes?

One of the water buffalos raises its head and, in the voice of Daryo: "Naw, man, you don't have to be so bound to the script, bro. Just let it be method. Let it be improv."

Izar: "But what we do isn't necessarily gonna be the story as it happens. Isn't it important that we know the story isn't happens?"

Daryo: "Naw, it's important that you experience the story as it unfolds."

And he goes back to chewing the grass.

Hrothulf asks for their leader and they tell of Jed.

Abel, loathe to leave his friend Dean alone says, "May we go and fetch Jed Holliver for you?"

Riding out to meet, in a short time, is none other than Jed Holliver himself, riding a horse. "Y'all ain't from around here. What brings you to Erskineville. I presume you're responsible for that commotion to the west?"

"Yes, my man, we are here to share our bounty with you and the people of this fine town,"

Hrothulf says.

Izar asks about how this all works.

"Dwamish is a powerful man. He comes and collects his taxes. It's increased in recent memory. Used to be on a lunar cycle. Now it's every couple days. Doesn't seem to have a schedule. I suspect it's whenever he passes by. The road and the river serves bigger people too. We pay to use the river. This town wouldn't exist without the river. But the springs are up in Dwamish, so he's got a point there I guess."

The coin counting is going well. 900 exactly, spot on. Darnit and Ego bring out 300.

Izar: "Here's the chest for you all."

"And what do we owe you...?"

Izar: "Nothing. It's yours."

"We can't take this from you."

Hrothulf: "We must. It's our orders."

"What are we to do with this?"

Hrothulf: "You could pick your teeth with it, or spend it, or dig a hole and bury it?"

Izar: "Melt it? You can use it as you see fit."

"And... what remains of Port Bail? It's the only place I can imagine we'd go to spend any of this."

We have a flashback to a battle we had against a corrupt merchant guild, taxing ships that come in to make trade from Felucia. It's a pretty big port city. We can still see fires burning from the battle in the distance. But we know it was mostly sending away the corrupt people, large for this area, but not so large in the grand scheme of things. What remains now are people with just scales and people with trade code. Our mission was to suss out those being manipulated by the system, and protect those who were exploiting the system.

Izar recounts some of this, and assures "It'll be cleaned up in a couple days. Then it'll be a great place to spend your money!"

"Oh, then we have some planning to do. We thought this was going to go to Lord Dwamish," he says, gesturing toward the fruits. "Would you stay for a feast?"

Horthulf: "We have more to do, but we appreciate the offer," he says, hopping back on Merv. "Come now, my compatriots. Let's be off."

There's a crack of a whip, and, with uncanny speed and agility, Dancer and Prancer pull away at Izar's beck toward Tolland.

The next town is about twice the distance away as the first was. On the way is a dark wood with a thick canopy.

There's some thought by Hrothulf of trying to get the wagon attached to the griffins to avoid the woods, though it would be sort of belittling and require some convincing.

When we get to the woods. Hrothulf lands and walks in front of the cart instead.

As expected, there is a black knight at the entrance to the wood. The deepness darkens, and the black knight goes, "Halt! Who goes there?!"

Hrothulf steps up and says, "We are the griffin cavalry, and we have urgent business. I ask you to step aside."

"Urgent business, you say?"

Izar: "To Tolland. To the... Tollanders..."

"Well, since your business is urgent, and your armor shiny, we will let you pass through our forest for two gold coins. *That* is a mighty discount! You're welcome."

"Are you all from Tolland? Or are you from the woods? A... woodsman? Or...?"

We hear about 30 different voices shout out their places of origin all at once. Some close ones, and others we're vaguely familiar with, though none Erskineville.

And the black knight shares that they're commissioned by the spirits of this wood to be guardians of this forest, and the money they collect here is to improve the armaments for the protection of this wood. The trees here do provide a wood that is incredibly durable and resistant to contagion and disease. It's a highly coveted lumber, so they're protecting the wood. So, two gold coin will suffice, and we may pass.

We griffin cavalry carry no pouch of our own money.

Izar: "Silver and gold have we none, but we go on humanoiditarian missions and we're supposed to be on our mission. We didn't know there was anywhere we would need to pay for passage."

"What sort of mission?"

H: "Our mission is our business, but suffice it to say, it's to the benefit of the good people of this region."

I: "And it may be good for you to know that the corrupt in Port Vail are no longer in power there, which could mean that your lumber is already better protected."

"I understand you have your mission, but we have our own, and we cannot let you pass without a tax. We are oathsworn to the spirits in this wood."

"Well, we saved you from the corrupt of the merchants."

"Those merchants provided us with quite a bit of commerce!"

I: "If we were to supply you with something other than gold? Such as clothing or food?"

E: "Darnit or I could make some nice armaments from the wood."

I: "Surely you could save with some food."

"We are a wealthy people. We don't need food and clothing. We need the tax for the protection of the wood."

I: "The fact remains that we do not have it."

We are in theory willing to give up some of our armor, but it is requisitioned and not our property. Hrothulf could see earlier that we couldn't go around the wood within our timeline.

Hrothulf offers some fine leaves from a pouch, good, he promises, to take the edge off at the end of a long day?

"I stand here, and I guard the black wood, and you would offer me leaves?"

Izar takes of an arm brace, to give.

The black knight receives.

"I will have to tell them where this went, so..."

"The spirits of the black wood look on you with favor as you pass."

"Are you the spirit of the black wood?"

"I am but their servant."

And to most of us, he fades into the wood and disappears. But Izar, knowing these tricks, sees him back away into the woods then quickly scamper away.

We drive into the woods. The animals slow, fearful of the wood. We also hear haunting, eerie sounds from the depths of the wood.

Ego is apprehensive.

Izar isn't bothered at all.

Darnit and Hrothulf are scared, and thinking about maybe turning back. Darnit and Hrothulf are looking for a way out.

Izar makes noise to scare off anything nearby, and assures that of all of us he can see best in the dark.

Darnit and Hrothulf remain afraid.

Izar casts *charm person* on them, and makes an encouraging speech. "My friends, I know that this is the correct way, and we only have to do this so long, and we will be ok. We need you to stay with us, you are our best fighters and we must complete our mission. I assure you there is nothing to fear out there, and I need you to trust me!"

Darnit moves toward the back of the weapon and takes a courageous stance as a rear guard.

We finally reach the other side of the black wood, we find the sun is beginning to set, and Tolland is just ahead. We ride to this town. It has a wooden gate and seems to back up against a sizable lake. The river runs past as well, and there's a mill we can see. The street lanterns are being lit as the sun begins to set. We are running out of time.

Hrothulf knocks on the gate barbarically with his big magman paw.

"What ho! Who goes there?"

"We come with good business."

"The Merchand went on business to Vail two days ago."

"Who did he leave in his stead."

The archers roll their eyes, "He left Jareth in charge, his woefully inept nephew. You would do well to wait. Your business should not be conducted with Jareth."

"I assure you our business is most urgent and cannot wait. Is there a captain of the guard who would be trustworthy?"

"Well, if your business is with the people you need the Marchand or Jareth."

Hrothulf thinks we should give it to Jareth, and that makes sense to the rest of us.

Ego suggests we turn it over in view of as many people as possible, so as to forestall corruption.

Hrothulf tells the archer, Djawn, that we come with bounty for the people.

Izar -- "For the *people* of the town, as you so poignantly put it a moment ago"

Djawn -- "You are clearly busy travelers... we could deliver it for you"

H: We are no mere travellers! We are griffin cavalry.

Dj: "We have an inn you could stay for the night."

"We have no time. We need Jareth, or the people. Ring the belltower, perhaps!

"Bounty or not, I'm the one who has to open the gate. So, there's a fee to open the gate."

But as he's saying it, the belltower sounds, as the other archer left to ring it.

People start to come out, wondering what's going on and what these magnificent creatures are.

There's a large gathering in the town square, a couple individuals in stocks and a gallows nearby give the sense that they don't usually use this bell for *good* news. They invite us upon the gallows stage, that we might be seen.

Darnit stays to protect the caravan, and Izar stays to ready the water buffalo. Hrothulf carries the chest of 300 gp. Ego walks alongside him, making him look good.

Darnit and Izar do have some curious bystanders looking to peek through the canvas.

Hrothulf and Ego stand upon the gallows, but there is still no sign of Jareth.

Hrothulf asks where Jareth is.

There's an annoying clanking as someone is unlocking the stocks, and the guy in the stocks belches and says drunkenly, "I'm Jareth!"

"This bounty is here from the griffin cavalry."

"Bounty as in booze"

"We are to leave it here for the good people of this town"

"There are no good people here! They're all assholes. I should know (I'm one of them)."

"We are in haste. We will be leaving this here."

As we begin to walk off, Jareth walks up and opens the chest. "Holy crap this is a lot of money! Guys, look at this."

They all descend upon the cash as we mount our griffins and head toward the next town.

Izar finds some nice dandelions for the water buffaloes. They light up and are excited, as whatever was in the dandelions has gotten into their system, and they are *gone*. Izar has to secure the remaining 300 gold as everything in the wagon is bouncing all over the place, Darnit included, whose own personal strength is the only thing keeping him in there.

We see the massive city of Dwampton, carved out the largest mountain the area and waterfalls flow out of Dwampton as the river is gushing out at this point. Almost immediately outside the city it splits toward the north and toward the south where we were. The walls are made of stone, and we saw high spires and citadels throughout this city.

And we hit a bump. We lose a wheel.

In all of the hubbub, the last chest of 300 gold coin bursts open and scatters about in the wagon. The water buffalo pass out. Their snoozing. Their hearts our racing and breathing fast, but they are out cold.

Darnit shouts for Hrothulf and Ego to check on Izar.

Hrothulf checks on Izar.

Izar his fractured an arm (where the bracers used to be).

Ego checks on Darnit, helping him pick up the coins and count, with the system they worked out earlier. 298. Darnit goes to Hrothulf and Izar, our best vision and source of light, to try to go together to where the wheel broke and find the missing coins. And to make sure Izar's ok, I guess.

Hrothulf pulls out his sword, lights it on fire, and hands it to Darnit.

Darnit uses it to begin looking, and Ego with him. Hiare looks for the coins too, flying overhead.

We all look for the coins, knowing that time is short. Even Izar is pushing through his injury.

Darnit finds one of the coins.

We look a little longer, and Ego, nearly giving up, finds the last one!

The sun has gone down, the moon is rising, and the city is 300 yards away.

Hrothulf suggests we all hop on our griffins for speed. He climbs upon Merv with the chest of coins in tow.

We fly with haste to Dwampton.

A volley of flaming arrows comes at us. They all miss wildly. Warning shots.

We land, and approach the drawbridge at the moat.

The gatekeeper, speaking through a horn: "The gates are closed. Come back in the morning."

Hrothulf appeals to the gatekeeper. "We come bearing gifts from the griffin cavalry. Is there perhaps a captain of the guard we can speak to?"

"I am the captain of the guard and you are not on the list."

"Would you permit us to overfly the city?"

"That would be seen as an act of aggression and you would be shot down. You may return at first light. Good. Evening."

"I can see if in this low, dim, late evening light that you are a man of honor and your duty is important to you. Would that be fair to say?"

"Shove off 'till morning light!"

"We are duty-bound to complete our quest today. We mean you no harm. We bring you gifts for the people of this city."

"What kind of gift?"

"The good kind. The kind that your boss would be disappointed to miss out on."

"More specifically?"

"I would hate for you to disappoint your boss."

"You're free to camp out in the plains. 'Till morning light!"

"This is a, shall we say, *golden* opportunity for you to gain favor with your boss."

"How much favor?"

"More that you can imagine."

"Try me."

"Please good captain open the gate, and then we can all move on with our business."

"Keeping the gate closed *is* my business."

"We are no vagabonds. We are charged with delivering this sweet, sweet, precious cargo, then we will be on our way."

Hrothulf suggests we take off and drop the gold from orbit, or at least out of arrow shot.

Hrothulf turns back to the guard and says, "Good captain, I implore you. Is there no way we can find our way to make a... "

"You can wait 'till first light."

Ego suggests the other towns seem they could use the money a lot more.

Hrothulf to guard: "Am I to understand correctly that this town is so wealthy as to turn down gold from the griffin cavalry?"

"Come back after first light."

Hrothulf maintains we should fly over the city but out of arrow-shot. We have some concern that the falling gold could do harm though, so we may need to fly somewhat in the danger zone.

We fly up and away, far swifter than a mere typical griffin, high enough that they can't likely see us.



We do a single pass to find the poorest part of town, but Ego sees there is no poor part of this city. They probably kick them downstream and that's what made them poor in the first place, she thinks.

Hrothulf sees the town square, where a bunch of mercantile shoppes sell high-end goods. He aims for that and dumps the coin while the rest of us run interference. Somehow, despite our best efforts, they have to have something on retainer that triggered our approach, because the darts are flying. We take evasive maneuvers against flaming arrows and balls of fire. Hrothulf keeps his eyes on the prize, knowing that a second pass isn't an option. Izar and Hiare do a barrel roll, dodging. Darnit charges, seeing a bolt from the ballista flying straight in the path of Hrothulf. He throws his hammer, dings the back of the ballista changing its trajectory ever so slight, and it narrowly misses Hrothulf, who remains laser focused. Gold is unleashed on the fountain. We are already in ascent as we hear the splash in the fountain and the tinkle on the streets, as playing children scoff at the measly sum. Ego's griffin takes an arrow in the back, but not enough to make a difference as we all fly out of there to our destination.

"Whooooaa! Pretty cool to live it, huh?" Daryo says, as the moon fades out and we see the audience clapping.

"You ready for another chapter?" Daryo says.

H: "Indubitably."