

Episode 142 / C2E27: Converging Fury

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TIME BLOCK	TRANSCRIBER ONLINE HANDLE	EDITOR (verified editors only)	SECTION STATUS	NOTES
0:00:00 - 0:00:00	@example /u/example		in progress / complete	This was fun!
0:00:00 - 0:04:59	@QuinnMayson	@heyjll/TSB	Final Edit Complete	Welcome! Glad to have your help!
0:05:00 - 0:14:59	/u/melmn2002	@heyjll/TSB	Final Edit Complete	Welcome! Glad to have your help! -Ossi (ed.)
0:15:00 - 0:29:59	daughterofsarenrae	@the_mogget/TSB	Final Edit Complete	

0:30:00 - 0:49:59	/u/jamagotchi	@ossifrageous/kathatherine/@the_mogget/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
0:50:00 - 1:04:59	@caseysch	kathatherine/@the_mogget/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
1:05:00 - 1:09:59	@Senza_Misura_	@the_mogget/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
1:10:00 - 1:19:59	@musicalfantasie	@the_mogget/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
1:20:00 - 1:24:59	@rainydazed	@the_mogget/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
1:25:00 - 1:36:13	@Gloriously_Geek	@the_mogget/@ossifrageous/TSB	Final Edit Complete	I gave the Taskers name my best guess In the future, double check your they're/their/there uses. Thanks! - Mogget (ed)
1:51:06 - 1:54:59	@meta_gaming_pigeon	@asingingbadger	Final Edit Complete	[break ends at 1:51:06]
1:55:00 - 2:09:59	/u/esquiress42	@ossifrageous/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
2:10:00 - 2:19:59	/u/Rndmanswrs4rndmqstns	@heyjyll/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
2:20:00 - 2:24:59	/u/Rndmanswrs4rndmqstns	@heyjyll/@pearwaldorf	Final edit complete	
2:25:00 - 2:29:59	@Senza_Misura_	@the_mogget/@pearwaldorf	Final edit complete	[JENGA 2:26:20 Marisha says something I can't understand] miracle cream ~TSB (ed.)
2:30:00 - 2:34:59	@vtsphinx	@heyjyll/@pearwaldorf	Final edit complete	[JENGA 2:27:22] Spelling for Keylin Keelyn ~TSB
2:35:00 - 2:39:59	u/shadowtag202	@asingingbadger	Final Edit Complete	
2:40:00 - 2:49:59	@emoinatuxedo	@asingingbadger	Final Edit Complete	
2:50:00 - 2:54:59	@emoinatuxedo	@heyjyll/@pearwaldorf	Final edit complete	
2:55:00 - 2:59:59	u/shadowtag202	@ossifrageous/kathatherine	Final Edit Complete	
3:00:00 - 3:04:59	u/shadowtag202	@ossifrageous/kathatherine	Final Edit Complete	
3:05:00 - 3:14:59	u/shadowtag202	@asingingbadger	Final Edit Complete	
3:15:00 - 3:19:59	@eruditekid	kathatherine	Final Edit Complete	3:16:54 - 3:17:21 is when they're all whispering, but putting the descriptor (whispering) felt redundant, unsure of how to address. We decided it needed to be redundant for the joke to come across. Thanks! Katherine (ed.)
3:20:00 - 3:24:59	@eruditekid	kathatherine	Final Edit Complete	
3:25:00 - 3:44:59	@rainydazed	@ossifrageous/TSB	Final Edit Complete	

3:45:00 - 3:54:59	@meta_gaming_pigeon	@ossifrageous/TSB	Final Edit Complete	
3:55:59 - 4:05:49	u/youdontknowme23	kathatherine	Final Edit Complete	[episode ends at 4:05:49]

Relevant Known Spellings

Creatures: Asar Ashly Burch Chandra Crownsguard: name of organization, title of individual “That is the symbol of the Crownsguard.” or “I am Crownsguard Bob.” crownsguard-the guards themselves “There are three crownsguard standing there.” Dwelma firbolg Iron Shepherds Jumnda Keelyn Lorenzo Nila Ombo Ophelia Mardun Righteous Brand Ruzza Sumalee Montano The Gentleman The Taskers Uttolot Wohn Yuto	Places: Clover Plaza Crispvale Thicket Dunrock Mountains Estate Sybaritic Glory Run Greying Wildlands Gruff Slum Marrow Valley Nogvurot North Clover Quannah Breach Pearlbowl Wilderness Savalierwood Shadycreek Run Silberquel Ridge The Sour Nest Xhorhas Zadash	Things: D&D Beyond dndbeyond.com periapt of wound closure Summer’s Dance Wyrnwood Words not in English go in <i>*asterisks*</i> Spells are capitalized (Mage Hand). Classes and races are not capitalized (halfling rogue). Don't bother with bold or <i>italics</i> because the formatting gets cleared!
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MATT: Hello everyone, and welcome to tonight's episode of Critical Role, where a bunch of us nerdy-ass voice actors sit around and play Dungeons & Dragons. Before we get into it, first off I wanted to welcome back our fantastic Ashly Burch.

SAM: Ashly Burch, everybody!

ASHLY: Oh, hello. Thank you.

MATT: It's good to have you back. For those who missed the announcement on Talks Machina, she'll be joining us for the next episode as well, and for our GenCon live show.

SAM: And maybe more?

MATT: We'll see where it goes. I don't want to take up too much of her time, but we'll see where it goes. We will at some point this evening have another guest joining us, which we'll introduce as she comes in. We have already announced her, so it doesn't matter, why am I holding it back? Sumalee Montano will be joining us, but she'll be coming in as the narrative requires. In the meantime, let's get through some announcements. First and foremost, we have our fantastic sponsor for the campaign, our friends at D&D Beyond.

SAM: D&D Beyond, everybody! As mentioned last week, the newly revamped digital character sheet for D&D Beyond has released. With improved desktop and tablet views, better at-a-glance information, all kinds of customization, and an updated PDF export.

MATT: I'm really excited about that.

SAM: As you guys all remember--not you; a couple months back, I asked you critters out there who use D&D Beyond to write in and tell me about their D&D Beyond experiences. With the studio move and stuff, things got lost. Some of the letters got lost a little bit, or misplaced, but we found them. I'm going to read you some of the letters from the fans. They're from a couple weeks ago. "Dear Sam, loving D&D Beyond. Just used their easy character creator to roll a brand-new character after my favorite PC was tragically killed last week. I'm still really sad about it, but watching your show is taking my mind off the loss. I love how Critical Role doesn't remind me about that death all the time." Again, these are from a few weeks ago, so I haven't--

MATT: You're such an asshole.

SAM: "Dear Sam, my whole campaign uses D&D Beyond, and their new shareable links really help us play faster. Side note: I love your interactions with Taliesin in this campaign! Don't change that dynamic, it's perfect and I can't get enough of it. Thank you."

MATT: Goddamn it, Sam. You're the worst.

SAM: "Dear Sam--" These are from a couple weeks ago, that is the premise.

MATT: These are the truth!

SAM: "Dear Sam, just signed up for a Master-level subscription at D&D Beyond, and all their content is so cool! I'm enclosing a photo of a tattoo I just got; it's my first and I'm very proud, as you can see. That's Nott and Mollymauk dancing together. I know it's in cursive, so you might not be able to read that they're both saying, 'We're going to live forever!' What do you think?" There was a picture included in that one.

ASHLY: For my first action I kill Sam.

SAM: Last but not least, we got an actual letter from the D&D Beyond corporation, which also got lost and found. It says, "Dear Sam: Hey, let's refrain from anything sad or emotional in your ads this week. We want players to associate our app with fun, not intense loss that might trigger feelings of pain or misery. Keep it light! Do one of those dumb songs you write. Oh, and give our love to Taliesin! He's our favorite, and he's the only reason we advertise on your show." I could not have planned it because those are from weeks ago, Matt.

MATT: Yes.

MARISHA: I love that you lost the printed-out, e-mail letters in our move.

SAM: Everyone used the same paper, stock, and font.

ASHLY: They look really pristine.

SAM: All right. One of them was fake.

MATT: Thank you, Sam. And thank you, our friends at D&D Beyond, and I'm sorry.

LIAM: You've got to laugh.

MATT: Moving on from that, as a reminder we are heading to San Diego Comic Con, like, in a day. As well as Ashly.

ASHLY: I am.

MATT: We're going to be also at New York Comic Con in October, which we're excited about. Our Comic Con panel is this Saturday, July 21st at 6:30pm in room 6BCF. We'll air the panel next Tuesday in place of Talks Machina, so if you aren't there at the event, you'll still have a chance to see the panel next week, so look for that. The details are at CritRole.com. I will also be doing a Cartoon Voices panel that same day on Saturday at 1:00pm in the same room, 6BCF. Ashly, I believe you have something going on at Comic Con as well.

ASHLY: I'm going to be moderating the final San Diego Comic Con Adventure Time panel, because the series is ending. It will be fun, but probably sad, but fun! It'll be fun. I was told to keep it light. So I'm keeping it light. Then in the evening, I'm going to be joining the good, good boys of The Adventure Zone at their live show. So I'm getting my D&D fill.

SAM: A lot of adventure.

ASHLY: A lot of adventure, a lot of D&D. It's great.

MATT: Give the boys our love.

ASHLY: I will.

MATT: Awesome. Moving on from that. We have Talks Machina every Tuesday. Next week, you'll be able to see the panel. The week after that, you'll be able to talk about whatever next week's episode is and this week's episode together! Every Tuesday at 7:00pm Pacific, here on Geek & Sundry's Twitch or Alpha, where our fantastic host, Brian W. Foster, destroys our sense of well-being and worth of living. If you want to submit or email your GIFs and fanart, give them to submit@talksmachina.com. Currently only the US and Canada, excluding Quebec, are available for those giveaways because of weird laws. Check it out. A reminder that we have our Wyrnwood giveaways during the break of Critical Role, but they are back under the Critical Role Twitch stream. When we come to the break towards the middle of the evening, we'll announce it, you move over to the Critical Role Twitch, twitch.tv/criticalrole, to be able to enter it then. Keep your eyes posted, and I will notify you as that comes about. That is all I've got as far as announcements, anyone have anything else they want to talk about?

LIAM: I just want to procrastinate and prolong the--

MARISHA: Mm-hmm.

ASHLY: What'd you do today? What'd you eat for breakfast?

LIAM: Busy day? Was it a busy day?

MATT: You assume I ate breakfast. You assume I've eaten at all this week.

ASHLY: Oh no!

SAM: I'm sure if Laura were here, she would say there are still many Nott the Best Detective Agency T-shirts in the store. Are there? I don't know.

MATT: I don't know, I should probably--

SAM and ASHLY: Laura?

SAM: Okay, she's not here.

LIAM: Travis, bring me pickles!

MATT: That's exactly what she'd be saying right now.

ASHLY: Oh my god, that was a perfect Laura. I thought she was here!

LIAM: Pretty spot on. I've known her a long time.

MATT: All right then. That brings us into tonight's episode of Critical Role.

LIAM and SAM: (scatting)

[click, TV static]

[groovy Critical Role theme]

MARISHA: --you!

MATT: Welcome back.

(laughter)

MATT: (frustrated sigh) So?

ASHLY: This is too much emotional emotional whiplash. Can you stand for the full four hours?

SAM: I want to.

MATT: No! Oh god!

LIAM: Metal.

MARISHA: I can see the wrinkles from where it was packaged.

MATT: Okay then. Last we left off, The Mighty Nein were making their way northward across the northern side of the Marrow Valley, toward the city of Shadycreek Run, to fulfill the second of two jobs they had accepted from The Gentleman while they were in Zadash. Along the journey, while they were leaving Hupperdook in the middle of the night, three of their members had been taken. It was discovered in the morning when they were nowhere to be found, that they had been captured by a group of slavers traveling north back to the city of Shadycreek Run itself. Upon investigating the details of this capture, you encountered an individual coming up the road with a similar aligning interest, Keg. In discussing the means of traveling to find these individuals responsible, and discovering that Keg had information on them, you decided to travel together making your way around the Crispvale Thicket. Encountering a number of indigenous, insect-like creatures known as ankhegs near the long-abandoned farmlands that were once built in the outskirts of the forest. Camping inside, you encountered a few members of a firbolg village that had long existed, hidden from the world within this thicket that had been assaulted by these same slavers, known as The Iron Shepherds. You encountered an elder protector of this tribe, along with a boy who had survived this encounter, and were sent off on your way. Traveling northward on horseback, you managed to catch up and actually make ground on The Iron Shepherds. Comparing your intel, and through a few surprises as to what they were carrying, a plan was hatched to set an ambush, to halt them in their tracks, and assault them. Upon the plan taking off, things were going in your favor, but through a series of bad lucks-- A bad lucks, the plural, it's an actual English phrase.

ASHLY: That's how bad they were.

MATT: They were bad. A series of moments of bad luck, and a too-late realization of the overwhelming power of the foe you faced, one of you fell. Mollymauk lies slain in the middle of the road at the hands of Lorenzo, the leader of The Iron Shepherds. Making an example, pushing Keg onto the ground, leaving her with the knowledge of what he perceives as her fault, to live with it; and to spread their name and the terror of what they do, and not to let anybody else get in their way. You all watched quietly, unable to really have a moment yet, to digest what has happened, as you see the carts slowly, quietly, make their way northward: out of sight beyond the hills, towards your eventual destination. And that's where we begin. There's a faint bit of snowfall that's still coming down from the clouds above you there in the valley. The flurry, the storm that has been encroaching is not that far off. You look down past the somewhat-muddy tracks of the wheels of the carts that had headed away from you, your horses still stashed alongside the outer hills in which you had set this ambush. You look down to the bloodied, still body of Mollymauk, as the snow slowly begins to fall and rest upon his form.

LIAM: Okay. I'm going to give us about ten minutes to figure out what we want to do here, and then I am sending Frumpkin out after them. We need to decide something now, because I am going to be out of it for a bit.

MARISHA: Yeah. We do need to decide something. Beau walks over to Keg, and grabs Keg by the coif, and tries to slam Keg into the ground.

MATT: Do you resist?

MARISHA: Did you think that maybe telling us that Lorenzo was a high fucking magic user would have been-- Or are you still fucking working with them?

ASHLY: I didn't know! I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't know.

LIAM: Beauregard, she would have told us. She wouldn't have been able to hide it.

MARISHA: Where is his fucking stupid tapestry? Where is it?

ASHLY: They are going to Shadycreek. They are probably going to take them to The Sour Nest, that's where they--

MARISHA: I go, and I look. Is his tapestry still on her horse?

MATT: Yeah, the tapestry of Bahamut is still rolled up and strapped over the back of one of the horses.

MARISHA: I storm over to it and I rip it off the horse and I say: This is ours now. He was our fucking friend, he wasn't your fucking friend. We're taking this back.

LIAM: I pull Keg up. This place they are going, is it permanent? Or a temporary camp, or it's been there for years and this where they always are?

ASHLY: It's where they always are.

LIAM: Do you know how far off we are from it now?

ASHLY: How far is Shadycreek?

MATT: About two days' travel and it's maybe a two hour journey into the forest north of Shadycreek.

MARISHA: I go over to Molly's body.

ASHLY: This is pointless.

SAM: What? What is pointless?

ASHLY: They're even more powerful than I remember. I didn't even fucking know that Lorenzo could do that. You saw what he did, there's no way. It's fucked.

MARISHA: I think she's fucking right. How long have you been separated from these fucking assholes?

ASHLY: Maybe a month, I don't know.

SAM: They learned to do that in a month?

ASHLY: Yeah.

MARISHA: It's not a lot of time to--

ASHLY: They didn't show me much. I'm clearly not very fucking bright, so there's a lot I probably didn't pick up on, but-- I don't know. I'm realizing I don't fucking know anything about them.

LIAM: How many people are in their camp, what did you call it?

ASHLY: The Sour Nest is where The Iron Shepherds have camp.

LIAM: Yeah.

ASHLY: But I mean, Shadycreek Run is-- It's a full city.

LIAM: Sure. What about The Sour Nest?

ASHLY: I thought there were just five. I don't know who those other two were. I don't fucking know! Everything that I thought I knew about them-- I don't know.

MARISHA: I search Molly's body and look for the tarot cards first.

MATT: Easy enough to find. You have to go through a few pockets on the inside of the jacket, but you eventually find where he keeps them.

MARISHA: I take those and I keep those to myself. Take the amulet.

MATT: Okay, so you have the periapt of wound closure.

MARISHA: Toss it to Caleb.

SAM: You're just going to pick his body off?

MARISHA: I'm going to take what his dead body isn't using any more.

SAM: But he woke up before, maybe we should leave it with him in case he needs it later.

MARISHA: I'm going to leave him with everything else. I don't think we should take his sword.

LIAM: What do we want to do?

SAM: Caleb, she's right, we can't fight them.

ASHLY: Cut your losses.

MARISHA: Not without help, anyway. Did you guys just suddenly fucking forget that they took Yasha? They took Fjord, they took Jester.

LIAM: That is what I'm talking about. Mollymauk is dead. Three are not, not yet, and we have invested a lot of time into forging this alliance we are in, Nott. I'm not proposing a head-to-head confrontation. Maybe. I want to know where they are, I want to know what conditions they're in. I'm not willing to walk away from this.

SAM: It would be the smarter bet.

ASHLY: He's not wrong.

MARISHA: Fuck you both.

LIAM: We could live, sure, we could live. We go hide in the woods. Go back to picking pockets and running scams on people. You know that I want more than that.

MARISHA: Do y'all remember what Molly said a few weeks ago when he told us that he left every town better than what he found it? When he first told me that, I remember that my first initial knee jerk reaction was, "You fucking arrogant, narcissistic bastard, no one can fucking know that." He was an arrogant bastard, but he was right and do you know how I know? We had a conversation last night when we were up for watch, and he asked me what my greatest lie was and we pulled fucking cards for it. Loser would go first. He told me this story about tricking a town into thinking he was royalty, being a king, to pull off a scam. I was almost going to tell him about my childhood, and I didn't. Because he told that fucking story and I realized: even in his scams, when he was doing something shitty, he was still making people feel good or feel special. The town was being visited by-- graced by his presence, by his royal highness. And I told him this story of ruining a couple's lives by extorting them because I fucking could. Because I fucking felt like it. I realized if I can deliberately leave a town shittier than what I found it, of course he could fucking leave a town better than what he found it. And I'm not going to do that again. I'm not saying that I'm going to go off and be a fucking hero, but maybe we can equal out and I can at least not fuck any more shit up. Take baby steps towards the leaving the town better... thing. That's the least I can do for him. And I'm going to start with these fuckheads.

ASHLY: I'll take you there.

MARISHA: All right.

LIAM: What are we going to do first? The man crawled out of a grave once, if he's to be believed.

MARISHA: Who the fuck is Lucien?

LIAM: He's done it once, maybe he will do it again. Do we stay here, do we try to find, I don't-- I've read of miracles.

ASHLY: Look, you guys don't have a lot of time for your friends. The ones that are captured.

SAM: We should bury him, and leave some sort of marker--

LIAM: A note.

MARISHA: I'm assuming Shadycreek doesn't have high level priests and the Empire and churches and stuff like that. Doesn't sound like the type of place that has--

ASHLY: One of the last places you'd find something like that.

MARISHA: Yeah.

MATT: The only things that you would know of Shadycreek, from your experience, would be whatever miracle workers that would exist there are owned by the tribes, and weird tales of strange hermits that live in the forest beyond the city.

ASHLY: Okay. But I haven't met anyone directly.

MATT: Not directly, no.

LIAM: How many days' travel are we from the beginning of this journey?

MATT: From the beginning?

LIAM: Yeah. From the Gentleman.

MATT: Close to 17 or so days since you left Zadash.

LIAM: We are in the middle of nowhere.

SAM: Keg, no judgement or anything, but you sort of froze up in the little fight we had.

ASHLY: Yeah.

SAM: When you say you can take us there, are you just talking about taking us there and dropping us off?

ASHLY: I'll take you there, I'll help you through. I'll do what I can.

SAM: How do we know you won't freeze up again?

MARISHA: Or cut and run, like you said.

ASHLY: The way you talk about Molly. I had a friend like that once, just one. They killed him, and I ran then, too. I left him behind: he's the reason I'm here. I didn't think I would do it again, but I did, I fucking froze up. I can't promise it, but I promise that I'll try. My life isn't shit, it's never been. It's kind of the shit about meeting people that are actually kind is that you realize what a fucking nightmare your life's been before.

MARISHA: It's funny how the good people can make assholes like us feel so small.

ASHLY: Yeah.

LIAM: You can get us there, though.

ASHLY: I can get you there.

LIAM: It does not need to be a frontal assault, we don't need to throw our lives away.

SAM: We can't fight them! We can't fight them.

ASHLY: Here's the thing about Shadycreek Run: it is a lawless town. If you guys have got coin, then people will fight for you. There isn't a lot of honor there, but there are people that are willing to fight if they're incentivized. There might be people we can gather, at least get intel, there might be ways of breaking them out, I don't know. There are people there that hate The Iron Shepherds and there are a lot of fucking people there that are scared of them. It is a long shot. I don't think it's unreasonable to say it's a suicide mission, but if you want to do it, if you want to go after them, they don't run the town. There are people that could be swayed. But you're going to need money.

MARISHA: I go back over to Molly's body and start finding his coin purse. He's going to sponsor his own campaign to resurrection.

MATT: Okay, on Molly you find 173 gold pieces and 13 silver pieces amongst a cluster of other knick knacks and trinkets if you are so interested.

MARISHA: Nott, want a trinket? To remember Molly by?

SAM: Molly said not to steal from happy people.

MARISHA: Is that what you think I'm doing?

SAM: Nope. I think you should take everything you can, but I can't steal from this one.

MARISHA: I take the money.

ASHLY: I don't mean to rush you guys, but shit gets way worse once they get back to The Sour Nest.

LIAM: I pull out the clay cat's paw and cast Earthen Grasp and the cat's claw forms out of the dirt and I use it to start digging a hole in the earth.

MATT: Near one of the hills?

LIAM: Yeah. As the cat's claw starts digging down, I'm looking for-- the glaive wasn't left, right? He took it with him?

MATT: No, he took it with him.

LIAM: Sticks, branches, *ja*?

MATT: There are branches to the tree that you had cut down, some of the logs that are there, there are some pieces of branch that could be utilized.

ASHLY: You trying to make firewood?

LIAM: No. I go to Molly's body and begin to get the coat off him.

MATT: Okay.

LIAM: The claw has about a minute, so hopefully it can dig something deep enough.

MATT: I'd say given the size of the claw and its earthen attachment, it can make, in that minute that it has, a fairly functional hole.

LIAM: Okay. I'm going to start to pull him into the hole.

MARISHA: Let's wrap him in his cloth.

SAM: That's a good idea. We certainly can't carry it anymore; it's very impractical.

MARISHA: It was impractical the moment he bought it.

SAM: Absolutely. It's a terrible purchase.

ASHLY: I step back and look away to give them privacy.

MATT: Okay. As you guys carefully and respectfully take the tapestry of the Platinum Dragon, Bahamut, and use it to wrap him comfortably, the spell ends and the hole is complete.

0:30:00 - 0:34:59

SAM: Are we leaving his swords? There's one that can teleport?

MARISHA: It's a pretty awesome sword, from what I remember.

SAM: Sure is.

LIAM: I grab some paper out of my bag and I start writing a note to Mollymauk, telling him to find us through The Gentleman.

MARISHA: That's a good idea.

SAM: Tell him his name, too. Or, ooh! We can make one up.

MARISHA: Mollymauk's pretty unique and different. It's a good name.

SAM: All right.

MARISHA: I take the swords.

MATT: Okay.

MARISHA: Or, at least, is there one fancy one and one basic one?

MATT: I mean, they're both pretty fancy, but one of them is a brass, gold color. It's the one that you had found not too long ago.

SAM: That's the one.

MATT: The Summer's Dance.

MARISHA: Yeah, we'll take that one. Summer's Dance. We'll give it back to him if he comes back to us.

SAM: It's a loan! It's a loan.

MARISHA: Well, and also, there might be grave robbers.

SAM: Yeah, fuck those guys, right?

MARISHA: Looters, yeah.

LIAM: I take that note and I stick it into the lapel of the folds of his clothes, and I brush the hair out of his face, and then I start to push soil back over the body.

MARISHA: I help him.

SAM: Should we say some words or anything?

MARISHA: Pour a drink?

SAM: Sure. I'll pour drinks.

MARISHA: Long may he reign.

SAM: Long may he reign.

MARISHA: That's the best fucking shit I got.

LIAM: Shine bright, circus man.

SAM: I think you're supposed to say things about how good they were and how many people loved them, and what a wonderful life they had, but I don't think any of those things are true, or at least we don't-- I don't think he even knew.

LIAM: Caleb sighs and takes a five-foot, six-foot sturdy branch, one that could be a walking stick, and I take that stone-- that lucky rock that I found-- and I start to hammer the branch into the ground so it is sticking up like a post, and then hang Mollymauk's coat from it.

SAM: That'll be stolen, though.

LIAM: Not right away. If he comes up out of the ground, it will be here waiting for him in a day or two.

MARISHA: Maybe you should write another note and leave it on the coat that says, "Don't fucking steal this, you fucking looter assholes. Dead guy's buried here."

LIAM: I think we will just leave the coat, Beauregard.

MARISHA: I feel like a note could be very convincing, but that's fair. All right, let's go.

SAM: Go after them?

LIAM: Well, we do not have to decide what we are going to do right away. We could have an opportunity, grab our friends. We don't need to rush into the lion's den. Let's see what we are looking at, what we are dealing with. We get our three friends back. We have not traveled with them this far to throw it away.

SAM: To throw what away? I want to hear you say it. Why do you want to go after them?

LIAM: Their deaths would be a waste.

SAM: Wrong. Why?

LIAM: Caleb storms off into the woods.

MARISHA: Keg.

ASHLY: Beau?

MARISHA: Thank you.

ASHLY: For what?

MARISHA: I think we all would have been dead back there had you not made your offer, which you didn't have to do. It's noted.

ASHLY: A bit too little, too late, but sure, yeah.

MARISHA: What was your friend's name?

ASHLY: Yuto.

MARISHA: No more running. For Molly and Yuto. Deal?

ASHLY: Deal.

SAM: If you run, we'll kill you.

ASHLY: That's fair.

SAM: Cool.

ASHLY: Bad time to ask for a drink?

MARISHA: Never a bad time.

SAM: You deserve it.

MATT: Caleb, you've stormed off, a bit around the way to the little bit of scrub and a few trees off to the side, where the horses are set. There's a new horse standing there, one that wasn't with the rest of your trio.

MARISHA: It's a spy!

MATT: Medium brown in color.

MARISHA: Kill it!

SAM: (cooing)

LIAM: I'm in the open right now with the horses, yeah?

MATT: Yeah. It's looking right at you.

LIAM: The horse is? There's no person around?

MATT: No other person that you see, no.

LIAM: I walk up to the front of the horse.

MATT: It clomps up, meeting your step with each step you take.

LIAM: Oh. Who are you, *Freund*?

MATT: Its outer shoulders and well-traveled, muscled body begins to shift and change before you. Its form in some ways pulls in, others extend outward. Sumalee, if you'd like to join us at the table, please.

(cheering)

SAM: You said "Sumalee," not "So Molly," right?

MATT: Right.

MARISHA: That's so Molly.

MATT: Welcome!

LIAM: Hi, welcome!

ASHLY: Hi, Sumalee!

SAM: Wow! You have to do a Mr. Ed voice.

MATT: Make sure you scoot in enough for the camera, there.

SUMALEE: Okay.

MARISHA: We're jumping in a bouncy funhouse over here! We're having a grand old time!

ASHLY: Oh, it's just been a laugh!

MARISHA: Just so great!

MATT: If you'd like to describe what Caleb sees as the horse is no more, and there's now a person standing before him.

SUMALEE: I'm a firbolg. I've shifted into about a seven-and-a-half-foot tall firbolg. I weigh about 200 pounds, and I'm wearing some Mongolian-inspired, almost like a shepherd. I have a round face, a wide nose. No pointy ears, though. My ears are soft, and floppy. I stand tall, strong. My shoulders droop a little forward. I'm looking with big, round eyes at all of you.

LIAM: Hey, that's a pretty good trick.

SUMALEE: Thank you.

LIAM: You're out for a stroll?

SUMALEE: I've been watching you.

LIAM: Oh, *gut.* How long have you-- You are very tall.

SUMALEE: Not for my clan. I am just average.

LIAM: *Ja.* Okay. Did you see everything that happened in here in the last 20 minutes or so?

SUMALEE: I am sorry for your loss.

LIAM: Hey guys, we have a visitor!

MARISHA: I thought you were talking to yourself again.

ASHLY: What kind of visitor?

MATT: You glance over and you see the extremely tall female form of this firbolg; humanoid with a face that comes to a deer-like shape to the front, floppy ears, looming over, looking right at Caleb, who's taking a step back and looking up towards her.

ASHLY: Holy shit.

MARISHA: Oh.

LIAM: Um.

SAM: Hi.

SUMALEE: Hello.

SAM: Ah!

ASHLY: You all right, Caleb?

LIAM: Yes, I just was not expe-- you know, we've been through-- It's been a long day.

MARISHA: Yeah, you're not like a shared hallucination, right?

SUMALEE: No, I assure you, I am not.

LIAM: You don't have any holy abilities, by any chance?

SUMALEE: I do not know this word "holy," but I have abilities, which I might like to share with you.

LIAM: Well, if you've been watching, we have just buried a friend of ours, maybe we were premature. Should we go dig him up?

SAM: Can you bring dead people back to life?

SUMALEE: No, I'm sorry.

LIAM: That's a stupid question from me, I apologize.

SAM: It was worth a shot, right? I mean. You would have kicked yourself if you hadn't asked and later she was like, "Oh yeah, by the way."

LIAM: She probably would have offered though, you know.

MARISHA: We ran into a tribe on the way here, you wouldn't happen to know an older woman named Jumnda would you?

SUMALEE: Yes. She is my elder.

SAM: They all know each other, I knew it!

MARISHA: Nott, that's--

SAM: Do you know Pumat Sol?

SUMALEE: No.

MARISHA: You're terrible.

SUMALEE: What did Jumnda say?

MARISHA: She said a strong woman on a mission to go find her son, part of her clan, was heading north. Would you happen to be Nila? Or is it Ny-la? Am I pronouncing that right?

SAM: It was Nila.

MARISHA: It was Nila? Nila.

SUMALEE: You had it right the first time.

MARISHA: Nailed it.

SUMALEE: I am Nila. It is nice to meet you all.

SAM: It's nice to meet you too.

MARISHA: It's nice to meet you.

SAM: We met your friends. Family? Tribe? Clan?

SUMALEE: All of those work.

(laughter)

SAM: They told us that you're trying to find the same people we are. I think? You're trying to find these folks who kidnapped someone who you know?

SUMALEE: I wasn't sure if I could trust you, but seeing as how I saw what you went through, I could use a little help too.

LIAM: *Ja,* how are you feeling about your chances now, after watching the bloodbath?

SUMALEE: I think I might have some abilities that can help, but I knew I could not do it alone, and I saw you have abilities, too.

MARISHA: On our good days.

ASHLY: What abilities are you talking about?

LIAM: She was a horse a moment ago.

ASHLY: What?! You buried the lede there, Caleb!

SUMALEE: Did you not get that?

ASHLY: No! I thought Caleb-- I mean, he kind of talks to himself.

SUMALEE: Right. I forgot. I was a horse.

SAM: So we have an extra horse!

SUMALEE: I can make other animal shapes, too.

SAM: Ooh! Caleb can turn his cat into a bird!

SUMALEE: Wow!

LIAM: It is a little trick. Can you turn yourself into anything dangerous?

SUMALEE: I think the most dangerous I can be is a crocodile.

MARISHA: That's pretty dangerous.

SAM: We fought those. One almost killed me.

ASHLY: Not the same crocodile, right?

SAM: Was it you?

SUMALEE: No! I never leave. This is the first time I've left my family.

LIAM: Have you ever been in a fight?

SUMALEE: Not really.

ASHLY: Oh, great.

SUMALEE: But I have other abilities that I might be able to use to help! There's one in particular that I want to use against these evil people.

SAM: You can curse in front of us if you need to, I mean.

SUMALEE: What is this "cursing?"

ASHLY: Oh god.

SAM: I think you'll pick it up if you hang around us for more than an afternoon.

SUMALEE: Anyway, I have some abilities that I'd like to use on these bad people.

ASHLY: Killing abilities?

SUMALEE: Yes.

ASHLY: Are you willing to kill?

SUMALEE: Yes.

ASHLY: Can you say the word fuck for me?

SUMALEE: I do not know what it means, but fuck.

ASHLY: Great, all right. Well, she's got a little bit of edge.

MARISHA: I like her. I like her a lot.

SAM: Hardcore.

SUMALEE: You do not understand what they did to my family. I am ready now.

SAM: Please tell us. I mean, if it's not horribly awful to tell.

SUMALEE: I just want to say that I'm ready. I'm ready to do things that I've never done before. To use my abilities to get my son back.

SAM: Son?

ASHLY: I know I'm the proven coward of this group, but do we want an untested horse-person coming with us?

SUMALEE: Why would you not?

ASHLY: You saw the fight, right, lady?

SUMALEE: Yes. I can help.

ASHLY: It's up to you guys. It's your funeral.

SAM: Your son has been captured?

SUMALEE: And my partner. Jumnda, the lady you ran into, my elder, she told me not to come, not to leave. "Accept nature's fate," she said. But I cannot. I have been kind and peaceful and to myself many years. No more. You need me and I cannot do this alone.

ASHLY: Need you?

MARISHA: She's kind of right.

LIAM: Hey, over there is a tree stump on the side of the road. That's the bald one. What do you do?

MARISHA: Show us.

SUMALEE: I will tell you because I cannot do it all the time, but when I am ready, I will summon lightning from the sky and fry him, destroy him! And I can do it again and again and again!

LIAM: That sounds good.

MARISHA: That sounds great.

SAM: We'd appreciate that.

ASHLY: So moving?

MARISHA: Holy shit.

LIAM: What time of the day is it?

MATT: It's early morning.

SAM: Metal o'clock.

MATT: Apparently!

LIAM: The fight was in the early morning.

MATT: The fight was like right at dawn.

LIAM: Right, okay.

MATT: It's maybe an hour after sunrise at this point, and the sky is still mostly clouded and becoming lighter. The flurry is coming closer, there is a gentle snowfall coming down at this early hour.

SUMALEE: I can do the lightning trick any time of day.

ASHLY: That's good to know.

MARISHA: Yeah, good for me.

SAM: Do you drink? Alcohol? Booze?

SUMALEE: There are some tree saps, when left for a long time, they have a funny taste to them. Sometimes I taste that, but--

SAM: Okay, more for us.

ASHLY: Better not.

LIAM: Can I borrow your flask, please?

SAM: Yeah, sure, here.

SUMALEE: So we will join together.

SAM: If you're going after your son, I trust you 100%. What was his name?

SUMALEE: Asar.

LIAM: How old is your boy?

SUMALEE: He's only five.

ASHLY: Jesus.

SAM: Maybe that's fully grown for a firbolg?

SUMALEE: No.

SAM: Okay. It was worth a shot.

ASHLY: Good thinking.

MARISHA: All right. We should keep heading on to Shadycreek then.

SAM: Yes, we should.

ASHLY: Anything else you want to, I don't know, do for your friend?

SAM: Oh.

MARISHA: No.

ASHLY: All right.

SUMALEE: May I suggest something? When someone dies in my clan, we know that their spirit never leaves. It just gets returned to nature, which is why we protect nature so fiercely. I have lost people before. I find ways to see them in nature. Sometimes the leaves on the trees-- I pick one leaf and I know that it is a spirit waving to me. Your friend is here. He has not left.

SAM: That is very lovely.

MARISHA: Yeah. I'm going to go start mounting up the horses.

MATT: You gather the last of your things, retrieve the horses, and head out.

ASHLY: I'll lead the horses, since I know where I'm going.

MATT: Okay.

SAM: Yeah, we have three horses-- oh wait, you had one too. Wait, did you? No, you were on foot. We had three left.

MATT: Yeah, you had three left after the previous battle.

ASHLY: I have to ride on one by myself.

MATT: Correct. You guys can double up.

MARISHA: Yeah, it was you two doubled up and I had one.

SAM: You are probably going to have to share-- Do you have a horse?

SUMALEE: I can be a horse.

SAM: Oh, you are a horse! Of course.

SUMALEE: I can turn into a horse once more. But if I do, I think that is the last time I can do it today.

MATT: Until you take a rest.

SUMALEE: Until my next rest.

LIAM: Horse nap.

MATT: As you guys gather up onto your horses, Keg takes the lead and you all begin your trek northward once more. Both memory of Mollymauk behind you on one shoulder, and the image of the face of your vengeance before you. You continue on your journey for the next hour or so before you catch a glance, Keg, at the road above. You see three shapes in the road.

ASHLY: Can I perception check it?

MATT: Perception check.

ASHLY: That's a 13.

MATT: 13? You get a little closer and you look and it looks to be three figures that are left in the road. People left in the road.

ASHLY: Dead?

MATT: Not moving.

ASHLY: Guys, there's something in the road.

MARISHA: Oh, fuck.

ASHLY: I can't tell if they are dead from here.

LIAM: I send Frumpkin up into the air as an owl.

MATT: Swoops down and does a few loops over it and within a moment of scanning, can see it is three bodies. A human man appears to be in his forties, a younger half-elven man in his twenties, and a young human woman, probably in her twenties, early thirties or so. They are all slain, but there is no sign of traumatic wounds or any damage to their body, though they are damp.

ASHLY: Damp?

MATT: Damp.

MARISHA: Is it snowing-- Is there snow on the ground?

MATT: There is snow on the ground. You can see there's bits that are gathered on them.

ASHLY: Why would they just be left in the road?

SAM: Caleb has told us all of this?

LIAM: Yes.

SAM: I am going to scout up ahead and see if I recognize them.

MATT: Okay, make a medicine check for one thing as you glance at the bodies.

SAM: 12, plus zero.

MATT: Not too bad. You recognize the man as the one you saw in the cage before you, and at a quick glance you can see elements of flash frostbite on parts of their skin. You gather they are probably the ones that were in the cage in front of you.

MARISHA: Does it look like they tried to escape the cage?

SAM: They were dead when the frost blast hit everybody.

MARISHA: Then they dumped the bodies.

ASHLY: Well given that he left them in the middle of the road-- think this is his second warning? Third? Fourth?

SAM: Or maybe he just wanted to move fast without extra weight.

MARISHA: I think he just cares that little for human life.

SAM: Well, we'll cut out their tongues for food and then bury them?

ASHLY: Nott, with the fucking tongues again, my man.

SAM: What, it's protein.

ASHLY: Look, I know you're weird, but if you could tone it down just a skosh.

SAM: You don't have to watch.

ASHLY: I'll hear it. You're so loud.

SAM: Fine.

LIAM: I'm pulling the first of the three off the road to the side.

ASHLY: I help.

MARISHA: I'll help

MATT: You manage to pull the bodies off the road into the grasses on the side.

ASHLY: Nott!

SAM: Don't worry. There's other tongues in the sea.

MATT: You do know, Keg, looking at the road, you're about at the point where you diverge from the path to follow up the road but continue on to Nogvurot, but to head to the Quannah Breach, and eventually Shadycreek Run, is due north from where you stand.

ASHLY: Do I know of any ways to not go through the front gates? Is there any sort of circumventing I could do?

MATT: Unfortunately, not without adding another week or so travel through the mountains.

ASHLY: Ugh, okay. Never mind, then.

MATT: It's possible, but it's a treacherous journey to move through the Dunrock Mountains to get there.

SAM: When we arrive, they may have left word to look out for us. They know what we look like. We should have some sort of disguise. I know that you and I can disguise ourselves. You can--

SUMALEE: I can too.

ASHLY: Beau and I are SOL.

MARISHA: Yeah. I have my cool reversible cloak.

SUMALEE: I can make you disappear for a while.

ASHLY: That would probably be good. How long?

SUMALEE: One hour.

ASHLY: How long does it take to get to Shadycreek?

MATT: From where you are now, it's a little under two days travel.

SAM: When we get to the gates, we could maybe just--

ASHLY: Slip in.

MATT: You do know that just beyond the Breach, there is a gate that is guarded by one of the families of the tribes. There is a toll that's taken as you pass through.

ASHLY: Okay. That would probably be a good idea.

SUMALEE: I can do that.

ASHLY: Thanks.

SAM: For you, we'll find a fake mustache or something?

LIAM: Are you able to do just one person?

SUMALEE: No, I think I'm able to do--

LIAM: Could you do the whole group?

SUMALEE: Yes, I can, right?

SAM: Right, God?

(laughter)

MARISHA: Is it Pass Without a Trace you're looking at?

MATT: That can help them hide if they want.

MARISHA: Yes, so as long as we stay within 30 feet of you, we get plus ten to our stealth bonus, which would be very helpful.

SAM: We don't turn invisible.

MARISHA: Correct:

MATT: If anybody wants to hide, it does help out.

SAM: You guys could hide under the horses or something.

ASHLY: Okay.

MARISHA: That's badass. I like that.

MATT: Keg leading on to the north, you diverge from the Glory Run Road, heading into the high grasses of the North Marrow Valley. You continue on for the better part of the day, taking breaks as necessary, and for you to recover your forms. You continue pushing on-- not at a breakneck pace for fear of catching up to your quarry, but enough where you know at least you are keeping pace. Eventually the light of the sky begins to grow dim as the evening calls to you, at which point the flurry has come. The snow begins to get heavier, the darkness is darker than normal at dusk and the air gets bitter cold. What do you wish to do to set camp?

SAM: Do we still have the tents? Did we keep the tents? We have the tents.

LIAM: We've taken everything, yeah.

ASHLY: Can I see through the dark with my night vision?

MATT: You can see up to a 60-foot distance I believe, and it's a dim light.

ASHLY: Are there any structures around?

MATT: Make a perception check.

ASHLY: 19.

MATT: Pretty decent. The hills here-- you don't see any structures per say, but if you take a moment to walk around, you do see one hill that has a bank that is eroded, and there is a bit of an outcropping that may be about three or four feet outward. If you were to all crowd in, it might be able to prevent piercing wind and/or continuous snowfall, but it would be pretty cozy.

ASHLY: Do you guys feel like cuddling?

MARISHA: Share body heat, keeps us warmer.

LIAM: Ugh.

ASHLY: I'll keep watch. I'm kind of wide, so you'll have more room.

SAM: Okay. Let's cuddle.

MATT: You guys gather up here on the underside of this outcropping of the hill. Who's taking first watch? You, Keg? Make a perception check for your watch, please.

MARISHA: Beau tries to get a spot next to Nila because she's large and fuzzy.

ASHLY: 15.

MATT: Looking out towards the distance, as everyone else is silently sleeping in a cuddled, spoon-like position at times, you glance out and see a few shapes moving past. You see a few stars blink out as shadows move past. You quietly lean forward and begin to inspect and your eyes focus at the outset of your darkvision. You

notice a small set of goats that are roving the plain, making their way. The snow is falling and they're trying to find themselves to warmer climate.

LIAM: Were-goats.

MATT: You don't know that.

ASHLY: Dangerous, violent were-goats.

MATT: You don't find any other threat or anything during your watch. Next watch?

MARISHA: I'll take it.

MATT: Beau, make a perception check.

MARISHA: Six total.

MATT: Everything seems pretty kosher.

MARISHA: I'm a little zoned out.

MATT: During your watch is when the heavy part of the storm begins to hit. No thunder. It's just very cold and you can see your breath, and you're having to involuntarily shiver as the cold kicks in. You can see now the snow piling up and you're thankful, at this moment, that you found this outcropping in Keg's vision, because the distant hills that are open are now heavily piling with this soft, powdered snow. It's starting to fall and the wind is pushing through and some of it's hitting the left side of your face. It's starting to go a little numb and you have to brush it off every now and then and try to do your best to dry up the biting cold water that is melting against your cheek. Nevertheless, your watch comes to an end without an issue. Who wants to take the final watch?

SAM: I will.

LIAM: You and me, goblina.

SAM: Sure.

MATT: Make a perception check for me, please?

SAM: Oh boy. Four.

MATT: Well, you're lucky, because nothing of note happens during your watch. You are nervously keeping your eyes out, just in case, waiting for another reverse ambush, but nothing seems to catch your attention. As the morning comes to, because you guys managed to cuddle, I would like you all to make a constitution saving throw with advantage, please.

SAM, MARISHA, and ASHLY: Cuddle-vantage!

ASHLY: Oh, both terrible.

SAM: Both for me, too.

SAM: I rolled a two and a two, so four.

MARISHA: Is this a saving throw or just a check?

MATT: Constitution saving throw.

SAM: I do have my winter clothes. I bought them. Just laying that out.

MATT: I'll say the winter clothes and the closeness of the group-- sure. I'll say you've avoided, in your hearty goblin form-- You're used to rough weather, anyway.

LIAM: Sam, you're bonier than Gollum.

MATT: Keg, in full metal armor, not so much.

ASHLY: I add my modifier though, yes?

MATT: You do add your modifier.

ASHLY: Then it's actually 15.

MATT: Yeah, you're fine. You shrug it off without issue.

LIAM: 21.

MATT: Caleb, your warm coat keeps you warm.

LIAM: Hearty German living.

MATT: Exactly. You're used to these Zemnian nights.

MARISHA: 12.

MATT: That's enough to withstand it, not a problem.

SUMALEE: 21.

MATT: While the forest definitely keeps insulation to the storm, your body is well suited for extreme weather as well. Actually-- tricky winter clothes, but you got it.

SAM: No, you can--

MATT: No, you got them for a reason. That's what they're there for. Because of the body heat and everything, I'll allow it.

LIAM: You're like the little kid in A Christmas Story, "I can't put my arms down!"

MARISHA: So cute.

MATT: As you guys continue your trek northward for the next day, you slowly push forward and watch as the rolling hills of this northern valley begin to even out. The high grasses growing dense and dusted with snow in the wake of this snowstorm that has passed through the night. It's now this beautiful, ice topped wonderland before you. As the storm is past, breaks in the clouds begin to slowly emerge and show you glimmers of blue in the sky. Sunlight comes a welcome comparative warmth, and this dusted field of diamonds begins to slowly thaw over the midday's journey. The looming peaks of the Dunrock mountain range approach closer, engulfing your horizon almost like a toothy jaw of some ancient titan that surrounds your peripheral. You can make out, as you get closer, the craggy break in the mountains ahead, familiar to you. It's like a spiral fracture of a bone, where suddenly what was once a solid mountain range seems to have torn and sundered into two separate ravines that seem to share a similar shape. This you recognize as the Quannah Breach. You guys begin to approach, by mid to late afternoon, the front of the breach, where you can see six crownsquad in a small outpost built at the base of the Quannah Breach. These, as you know, are usually folks that essentially warn people from traveling into the Breach, and if they do, let them know that any return is going to be probably highly searched and highly inquired. They enforce it, unless you slip them some coin. Then it's not an issue on the way back. They're more there to make money.

ASHLY: For appearances, yeah.

MATT: As you approach, familiar to you, a crownsquad begins to put a hand up to the approaching horses and say, "Hail!"

ASHLY: Oh, goddamn it.

MATT: "Where are you traveling to?"

ASHLY: Shadycreek.

MATT: "You have business in these cursed lands?"

ASHLY: Yeah, we're trying to get fucked. Can we move along?

MATT: "Well, your life is your own, as is your business, but you must understand that coming back is no easy task. A thorough search and inquiry into your person will be required--"

ASHLY: Yeah, blah, blah, blah. Can I give you a couple of coins and you let us on our way, please?

MATT: "Very well." How much do you give him?

ASHLY: How little will he take?

MATT: Customary to your experience and the times that you've traveled with The Iron Shepherds, it's usually about two gold to just pass.

ASHLY: Okay, yeah.

MATT: He takes it and quietly lets you pass. Per person.

SAM: Molly would want us to do this trip, maybe Molly should pay.

MARISHA: Yeah, Molly pays the toll.

SAM: Thank you, Molly.

MARISHA: Two, four, six, eight, ten. Love you, Taliesin.

MATT: Well, eight, because she pays herself.

SAM: Yeah, Molly wouldn't want to pay for Keg.

SUMALEE: Thank you.

ASHLY: As he shouldn't.

SUMALEE: I have gold pieces I can use later, too, if you want them.

ASHLY: You're not going to want to spend any of that in Shadycreek Run. There's nothing there for you.

SAM: Why, they don't take money? Oh.

ASHLY: It's just not a nice place.

SAM: When you're home with your people, are you one of the nicer ones, or are you a bad girl at home?
What's your-- how does it--

SUMALEE: I don't know. I am one of the ones that-- not too many people rely on me.

SAM: They don't rely on you?

SUMALEE: No.

SAM: Why?

SUMALEE: I think I am-- There was always some firbolg that was more powerful, stronger, smarter. More capable. Eventually I grew to accept being myself, and I prefer to support rather than be a leader. This is my first time trying to be more than who I am.

ASHLY: Keg does one of these to her in support.

SUMALEE: I do not know what that is, but I like it. And I heard you use the word "fuck" again.

MARISHA: You know, maybe people don't rely on you because you haven't been given the chance yet. We're certainly going to rely on you.

SUMALEE: That makes me happy.

MARISHA: It'll be a good test run, at least, for you. Then you can go back to your tribe and be like, "Yo, people relied on me!"

ASHLY: "It was dope!"

MARISHA: "It was great, you should rely on me more!"

ASHLY: "It was super tight!"

MARISHA and ASHLY: Yeah.

MARISHA: I don't know. They probably won't sound like that.

LIAM: I kick my horse along.

MATT: As you travel through these winding ravines, choosing the one to the right, which you know to be the wider of the two, the low howl of the wind that's traversing these sheared twisted walls, like a haunting, whistling, and moan sound. It accompanies the brush growing more dense. The air grows colder still, as white banks of snow and ice frame various ledges and outcroppings along these strangely curved and smoothly sheared cliffsides. It feels like a giant had grabbed a mountain range and tore it in two and there's an even break on each side. It winds and curves. It's like a natural labyrinth. A few miles through this strange maze, you're met with a makeshift wall and a ten-foot wooden gate. Your eyes, at first, notice a few dozen wooden poles carved into spikes that emerge from the ground, pointed in your direction from the base, many of which are stained dark while others still bear the weathered skulls of warning. Three armored folk stand there; two human men and a half-orc woman all bearing weapons and watching you carefully as you approach.

ASHLY: This isn't the gate, right?

MATT: This is the gate.

ASHLY: Oh, it is?

MATT: You've reached the edge of the Quannah Breach and turned to the final bastion outside of the Empire.

ASHLY: But it's not the gate into Shadycreek Run.

MATT: It's the gate into the region of Shadycreek Run.

SAM: This is the gate we need to hide in?

MATT: This is.

ASHLY: But they see us?

MATT: Well, they've noticed you begin to turn and approach--

SAM: Quick, hide! Hide, quick!

MATT: You would know this is coming because you've traveled this before.

ASHLY: Okay, so we wouldn't have turned the corner.

MATT: I'm describing it as you-- or you're describing it as you're about to turn the corner.

ASHLY: Okay.

LIAM: Rewind the tape just a little bit.

ASHLY: (rewinds) So!

SAM: So that's just literally around this corner?

ASHLY: Just right around-- If we went even just a few feet that way, whoo whee! Guards, big old gate. It would have been-- oh, man.

LIAM: We were going at a pretty good pace there.

ASHLY: You guys are lucky that I stopped just a few feet right before we would have all seen the gate. You're welcome. You know, I'm really earning my keep here. So!

SAM: So hide! Or something, right?

ASHLY: The plan was you guys can make yourselves look different?

SAM: Yes.

ASHLY: Then you're going to make us invisible and then you're going to be a horse?

SUMALEE: I can do that.

ASHLY: I'll get used to that eventually. Okay. Cool.

MARISHA: You guys are going to have three horses and then two riders.

ASHLY: Do we have stuff to put on the third horse to make it look like a pack?

LIAM: Yeah. We could just take everything off our horses and gather it.

MARISHA: Okay.

LIAM: Yeah?

ASHLY: Yeah.

MARISHA: We'll hide under the horse like Indiana Jones-style, basically? Holding on underneath? Okay, that's going to take some grip strength, but I'm into it.

SAM: Wait! Maybe if one of our horses is a pack horse, you could be on top of the horse wrapped in a blanket or something. You're part of the gear that the horse is carrying.

MARISHA: Do they search you on the way in?

SAM: Oh.

ASHLY: Do they search us on the way in?

MATT: Depends on if you pay them on the way through.

ASHLY: We'll have to pay them.

SAM: We can pay.

ASHLY: Yeah. I think this one's a little bit more expensive, though. Isn't it? Probably. The deeper we get in? Or is it the same?

MATT: You know that the previous gate-- Generally you don't have to pay them, the one you entered? It just helps you with "no questions asked" issue. This is the gate run by the Uteloch family of the tribes and they enforce it both as a means of making money and to know who's coming and going.

ASHLY: Mm-hmm. Okay.

MATT: So it's an equal price to what you were paying previously.

ASHLY: We should definitely pay it, though.

SAM: Which plan do we want? You hiding under the horses or you hiding on the horse as suitcases?

ASHLY: I can hide under the horse.

MARISHA: I'll hide as suitcase. I'll be a bundle.

LIAM: We lie you over the horse and we put a bunch of shit on top of you, yeah?

SAM: Okay.

LIAM: Then you are going to do some sort of horse magic that makes us-- sorry, I'm unclear. Invisible or--?

MARISHA: More stealthy.

SUMALEE: You are invisible to people. To others.

SAM: I believe that.

SUMALEE: You don't have to change shape.

ASHLY: It might be helpful so there's not--

SAM: You can make us totally invisible.

SUMALEE: I think so!

MARISHA: You give us a bonus to our stealth.

SAM: Ask your god.

LIAM: You cannot.

SUMALEE: Aw.

LIAM: But what you can do, it's still useful here.

MARISHA: Is it makes us more hideable.

LIAM: If the people who are hiding try to look like-- covered in cloth and shit and try to look like cloth--

SUMALEE: It'll pass.

LIAM: You can make it more believable.

MARISHA: You know the blanket in Lord of the Rings?

SUMALEE: Yes.

MARISHA: The cloak--

SUMALEE: On the raft.

MARISHA: It's like that.

SUMALEE: Got it. I will turn the blankets into--

MARISHA: Rocky things. Sounds good.

LIAM: This whole pow wow was happening around the bend.

ASHLY: Guards are like--

SUMALEE: Wait, what happens after we get through, though?

SAM: Then we can do whatever we want.

LIAM: No, we keep going for a while--

ASHLY: It will be a little bit of a ride.

LIAM: Keep up appearances. Yeah? You're going carry these two. They're both going to lie on top of your horseback.

ASHLY: I can't be on a horse. Just me. I'm too heavy.

LIAM: Too heavy?

ASHLY: I'll break her. Right? Because I can't--

MATT: A single horse you can do.

ASHLY: A single horse I could be on. It couldn't be me and Beau. Or me and one of you.

LIAM: She's like all sticks, though.

MATT: With Beau it's possible. Not at a full run, but at a travel journey, you could probably do it.

MARISHA: Or I could be a pack on one of your guys' horse.

LIAM: She could be on our horse.

SAM: Yes, yes.

LIAM: Because you and I are skin and bones.

ASHLY: I'll be on top of you, if that's okay.

SUMALEE: That's fine.

ASHLY: Okay.

SUMALEE: And I will make you Pass Without a Trace.

MATT: In this shady ravine, just as it comes to an end before entering this next valley, the shadows seem to coalesce and cling to you and where previously the light itself is shaded and dim. It's almost like you're stepping through moonlight.

MARISHA: Almost like?

MATT: Well, meaning like looking at those of you in the radius, it's like it's nighttime where you're standing. The shadows are heavier. The blacks are crushed.

ASHLY: We've both got stuff on top of us to make us look like--

MARISHA: Mm-hmm. I'm wrapped in a bedroll.

LIAM: *Ja* I mutter a few words and suddenly look like an old coot with a band of hair around the sides and my jaw is off to the side a bit and it's missing a few teeth and very squinty. That's me.

MATT: Like Robert Duvall, good.

LIAM: Yeah, that's it.

SAM: I will mutter a few words and turn into--

ASHLY: What was this drawing back here?

SAM: Oh, which one?

ASHLY: Penis man.

LIAM: Stop the game! What's the drawing? Hold it up.

ASHLY: Sorry, out of character. Excuse me.

LIAM: Let's see!

SAM: It's a dick man with a drink.

(laughter)

SAM: It was a me and Laura collab.

LIAM: Somebody was talking, having a moment. Then you draw a dick man.

SAM: I'll make myself look like Rissa.

MATT: Okay, perfect.

SAM: Because I know that one.

LIAM: Rissa and Robert Duvall.

MATT: Those of you who are trying to be inconspicuous, which would be Beau and Keg, go ahead and make general stealth checks.

MARISHA: Plus ten, right?

ASHLY: Come on, baby. That's not great. Nine.

MARISHA: Add ten to your roll your plus stealth.

ASHLY: Oh, 19.

MATT: That is what the spell does.

ASHLY: I see.

MARISHA: It's not good for me either. 21 with the buff.

SAM: Thank god for the buff.

ASHLY: Woo!

MATT: Okay, as you guys turn the corner, you now see the gate and the spikes and the warning skulls and everything.

SAM: It's not as good as you described it.

ASHLY: I don't know a lot of adjectives. I'm not a great storyteller. I said it's a gate and there are people there. What else do you need to know? You need the fucking colors and the designs.

SAM: You had smells and you had shapes and everything, but this is--

LIAM: Shut the fuck up!

MATT: As you approach, the half-orc steps forward and goes, "Hey, you! Where you headed today?"

SAM: Shadycreek Run.

MATT: "Well, you pass through the breach, you pay the toll."

SAM: All right.

LIAM: Yes, we have that.

MATT: "Good. Pay up."

SAM: How much?

MATT: "Two gold each."

LIAM: Oh yeah. Okay.

SAM: You know what? I'll get it. Don't even look. I got this one. Here you go, four from me.

MARISHA: Yeah, that's good.

MATT: "All right. Let them in!" She steps back in line with the two other they pull the two gates and pull open as

the wood clacks against the sides of the gates. You all make your way through as the guards watch as you pass in. For a nervous moment, you see the eyes pass over the two other riders, but make no issue as you continue inward. You hear the gates (clunking) behind you. Now, looking ahead, you can see the curvature of the ravine opens up into a widening valley. You see a limitless forest of climbing pines, spruce-like trees, only the common green you expect stands instead an unexpected purple-gray in color. This wide blanket before you of this deep valley of fading purple and gray color at the tops of these trees. Along the tree line, you can see a sprawling and matted line of snow-capped buildings, hovels, and mud-covered streets that vanish into this dense forest. The city does not keep the normal cohesive shape of most, instead being a long line built along the tree edge and some sort of river or creek that it has been constructed against. It is a weird, crooked, long town that vanishes into the branches and leaves. You're no longer within the Dwendalian Empire. Welcome to the Greying Wildlands.

SAM: The Greying Wildlands.

MATT: And to the lawless town of Shadycreek Run. Anything you wish to do before you head to the city proper?

ASHLY: We're still obscured, Beau and I?

MATT: Obscured in the sense that you're inconspicuous in dress.

ASHLY: Right, but that's still happening? That spell is for an hour? Okay.

LIAM: Do you have any place where we can lay up?

ASHLY: There are two places I would recommend. There is this place called the Plaza Emporium. A pleasant but can be murderous dragonborn runs that. She's not affiliated with any of the unseemly folks directly, so she's a bit more neutral. We might be able to get information from her.

LIAM: Does she murder everybody or does--

ASHLY: Only people who piss her off, so be on your best behavior. The Landlocked Lady is a brothel. We might want to cover Nila's eyes. It's run by the Marduns, who happen to be--

SAM: That's who we're looking for.

ASHLY: And they are the rival family of the folks that employ The Iron Shepherds.

SAM: That seems like where we should go, because the Iron Sheps won't be there to poke around and find us.

LIAM: That is correct.

MARISHA: What is the name of that place again?

ASHLY, LIAM, and SAM: The Landlocked Lady.

ASHLY: The proprietor is kind of a skeeze ball, as you would imagine. Not necessarily the most trustworthy guy, but it is run by the Marduns. So of the safe places in the town, that's probably up there.

LIAM: Are you still laying across the back of a horse or have you pulled yourself up?

ASHLY: I have a little opening that I made for myself.

(laughter)

ASHLY: It's just my face with a cigarette still.

MATT: This little--

SAM: Our horse is smoking.

MARISHA: Amazing.

SAM: I vote Landlocked Lady.

LIAM: Of course.

MARISHA: (muffled) I agree.

SAM and MATT: All right.

SAM: Lead us there with smoke signals.

ASHLY: That way.

MATT: A short ride you eventually hit the outside of this township. Walking into the main street, you can see they're slick with mud and dirty snow. Ragged peasants clutter the alleyways, looking your way with hands extended for some sort of alms they're hoping to find.

LIAM: (spits)

SAM: Ugh, gross.

MATT: An emaciated dog growls at you from a nearby doorstep and then darts off down the road behind where you passed. A wagon appears stuck in the mud as you pass it, rough-looking folk tugging at it and stopping to stare you down as you slowly move past. They continue their work. You nearly step over someone with your horse who appears to be passed out, face down in a patch of dirty snow. A bit of crimson rests at their side. They're not moving. As you circle around them you watch as two rough-looking fellows in hide clad armor come and inspect him. As you glance over your shoulder, you watch as they rummage through his pockets, lift up his not moving body and dump him in one of the nearby alleys and keep on walking. You see no crownsguard.

SAM: Oh man.

MATT: This is the first town any of you have been in that has no watch. No law keepers. The road doesn't go far north from where you enter as most of the town is this long stretched bar, so within 15 minutes you've hit

the plaza. The central plaza to the town that you know as the Clover Plaza. You see log benches dotting the open area, while a four story tower of motley colored stones stands vigil over the area. Two balconies and a top, housing crossbow and longbow wielding roughnecks. You know these to be Taskers. You're heading towards The Landlocked Lady? Easy to see. On the eastern side of this plaza, there is a very beautiful, two story complex, that comparably seems ostentatious against the buildings immediately to the right and left of it which look to be in serious disrepair and rather rundown and colorless. Just bland woods, gray and brown. Here you can see the second story above the main arch way, a curved top arch, there is a false bow of a ship that is emerging outward. This beautifully carved mermaid in the front that is clutching the piercing front of the ship. There it rests with a sign dangling from it, saying The Landlocked Lady.

MARISHA: I totally get the name of the place now.

SAM: It's a consistent brand.

MARISHA: It's very clever.

LIAM: In Zadash, it would look like shit, but here it's the belle of the ball.

MATT: Comparably, yes.

MARISHA: It seems that they don't have a strong housing code. They can get away with these more unique builds. It's very fascinating.

SAM: Sure, it's really interesting architecture.

MATT: It's like Shanghai, China; everything looks different.

ASHLY: How far away are the Taskers? Did we just pass by them?

MATT: You're skirting around the outside of the main Tasker tower. They're scattered around, and as you guys are walking around, you see most of the people that live in the city are in absolute squalor and are here out of necessity, are here because they came seeking some sort of fortune and failed, or they've come to indulge in vices that have slowly crushed them. The other half of the populace are usually armored to some extent, whether it be patchwork hides, chain, leathers. Almost everyone here is armed, even on a scale of poverty there seems to be a general sense of needing protection amongst the chaos. Some folks look like they're trying not to be seen, many parade their thickened arms. You see one female, privateer looking individual, that comes through the streets and spits on somebody whose huddled by one of the stumps. Growls at them before continuing to walk on. It's a very unique and curious motley group of people that call this place home.

ASHLY: If I talk to them will I be heard.

MATT: If you talk to--?

SAM: Us.

ASHLY: If I talk to the crew?

MATT: No one's close enough to you, you think, if you're quiet enough.

ASHLY: I point out the Tasker tower behind us and I say: Those are the Taskers. Those are probably the only other people in this shit hole that might be of use.

SAM: Of use? They're good guys?

ASHLY: As much as anyone's a good guy here. They try not to get-- they try to prevent the innocent from getting killed or fucked over. Obviously, they're not particularly successful, but they're not under the thumb of any particular group.

LIAM: Are they altruists though or are they mercenaries?

ASHLY: It's altruistic, strangely. I kind of forgot about them because we always thought they were nerds. But now I'm trying to be a little bit better. They might be helpful.

SAM: Do they have a uniform, or how do you know them? How do you know who they are, how can you identify them?

MATT: What you can tell about the Taskers is they wear chain shirts with one leather shoulder pauldron that is painted blue. I say painted blue because most of their uniform is whatever they can put together to create some sort of consistency. There is no built uniform. What you're used to seeing with Crownsguard, and any other royal military where things are built with fine craftsmanship, everything here is put together in slapdash. That one uniform mark is usually the chain shirt and the one blue shoulder armor. Some people paint it completely, some put a line on it and leave it there like a, "Fuck you, I'm not going to finish it."

SAM: They're like Hell's Angels.

MATT: Kind of. For the most part, they're keeping an eye out in the sense that they don't want complete anarchy.

ASHLY: They still want money for their services, but they're slightly less assholeish than the most.

MATT: They're not going to stop someone from spitting on a peasant, but if all of a sudden a giant riot breaks out, they will break it up and beat everybody up till it stops.

SAM: Okay.

MARISHA: It's kind of cool.

ASHLY: Closest thing to law that exists here.

SAM: Okay, thank you. (louder) Thank you, horse, for riding us this far!

SUMALEE: I can't say anything, right, in my horse form? I can nod.

LIAM: (horse huffing)

MATT: You do keep your mental stats in beast form. I've seen it argued back and forth, and I'm pretty sure when we had you in your elemental form last campaign, people were saying that you could still technically talk in that form.

MARISHA: Yeah, but I didn't talk as animals. I wasn't talking.

MATT: That's right. You're unable to actually speak in the animal form, but you can still communicate.

MARISHA: As elementals I was like: Run! Jump! Oh shit!

SAM: That's what you are like now.

(laughter)

MARISHA: I reverted, that's all.

LIAM: Keg, if we find an alleyway to drop you out of sight of you suddenly appearing, can you walk around this town, or is that dangerous?

ASHLY: In some places it's dangerous. There's a place called The Trench that The Iron Shepherds in this area always hang out in.

SAM: The Trench?

ASHLY: The Trench. It's in this area. It's not a huge place, right?

MATT: It's a fairly decent sized tavern. It's one of the more populated areas.

ASHLY: That's where they hang out.

MATT: Every now and then.

LIAM: How stupid is it for you to walk up on open road in this place?

ASHLY: I think it's probably best for me not to be.

SAM: Let's go in the brothel. We're here, right? We can stay here, or we go in here? Do I have to fuck somebody in there?

ASHLY: Why are you worried about this? They would be worried about having to fuck you, my man.

SAM: I'm a lady.

ASHLY: My lady. I call everyone my man.

SAM: But yes, you're right. You're right, that's a fair point.

ASHLY: If any of the Marduns are there, we might be able to-- to be honest guys, there's not a lot of options, but we might be able to get some help from them. I don't know for sure. In any case, it's a place to regroup. This brothel is not in the business of spilling everybody's secrets out.

SAM: Let's go in.

LIAM: *Ja*, one second, though. Which way from here are these Iron Chefs located?

ASHLY: They're north of this, yes, Matt? The Sour Nest is?

MATT: The Sour Nest is northeast of where you are in the city. It's beyond this city, into the actual Savalierwood. About maybe two hours' travel.

LIAM: Two hours' travel?

SAM: That's their headquarters, right?

MATT: Beyond the city. The northern half of the city is almost entirely within the forest itself.

LIAM: Okay. In that direction?

ASHLY: Yeah.

MARISHA: It's in the walls of the city, or in city limits?

MATT: No, The Sour Nest is beyond the city. It's its own little stronghold that exists separate from the city itself.

LIAM: Can you describe to me what it looks like? Is it noticeable?

ASHLY: God? What does it look like?

MATT: It's noticeable. It's half a mansion, half a small stronghold. It has gates around it, heavy walls that have spears atop them.

[wheels rolling]

MATT: Hey, you're in a town.

SAM: Yeah! The caravan just came by.

MATT: It's two story, and there's a subterranean basement floor to it. They do have hired guard that keep watch on it while they're away, and occasionally while they're there. I can eventually provide you with a layout, because you would know. You've been there a number of times.

[clomping]

SAM: I love it! It's so good.

SUMALEE: That's was me expressing my happiness.

(laughter)

ASHLY: It's up to you. We can go up there now if you want.

LIAM: No, I do not want to go up there now. I was thinking of maybe sending my cat, but that can wait. Let's go into this place.

MARISHA: Is it safe for me and Keg to hop out without it looking shifty?

MATT: There is an alley off to the side that if you wait for a moment for nobody watching, you guys would be able to step out.

MARISHA: We do that.

MATT: You have the opportunity to revert, if you wish.

SUMALEE: I actually feel safer in my animal form in this crazy place.

SAM: You're going to-- (shouting) You're going to stay in the alley while we go inside?

SUMALEE: All right.

MARISHA: I think horses have regular hearing.

SAM: Nope. They're mostly deaf.

SUMALEE: I will shift back to my regular self. You make a good point, but this place is not making Nila happy.

ASHLY: I apologize in advance for all the shit you're about to see. I open the door.

MATT: As you guys hitch the horses to one of the hitching post off to the side, you make your way into the brothel. And that's where we're going to take a break.

SUMALEE: Phew. Nila's like: Thank god! Let me regroup!

MATT: We're going to take a little break here. We'll be back here in a few minutes, guys. The giveaway we have today, we have a bolivian rosewood Hero Vault, with celtic knot. It's looks pretty awesome. It's magnet-based, and has your character vault. You can put your minis in it. You can put your dice in there. It's awesome. Go on and head on over to the Critical Role twitch chat, that's twitch.tv/criticalrole during the break and enter the keyword "revenge." Only enter it once. Any more than that and you're disqualified from the giveaway.

SAM: Forever.

MATT: Forever! No, but we'll come back from the break with a winner here for you guys, and we'll see you here in a few minutes.

[break]

MATT: Hello everyone, and welcome back! First, we have our winner for the break. The winner is Wundur. W-U-N-D-U-R. Wundur, congratulations. Chandra will whisper you and get your information and get that sent out to you. Well done. Getting us back in. As you guys step through the archway, the double doors opening as Keg pushes and leads you inside. The first thing that hits you is a fresh smell of lavender, a vanilla incense that strikes your senses, stinging your eyes with its potency. On the inside, you can see a handful of round tables of which two patrons are currently eating a meal that has been placed before them.

ASHLY: I really thought you were going to say something else.

SAM: Eating a dead body.

MATT: Possibly, or a live one. You can see candles that are placed at the center there, these fine silks have been placed. It's such a stark shift from the dreary and generally muck-covered exterior of this city, to step into what seems oppressively luxurious. Though the closer you look, everything is frayed at the edges. Everything seems to have been here for a while or seems to have been weathered through travel or use. The immediate shine begins to fade as you begin to see how much of this is probably a fair amount of work to keep the upkeep of the facade of luxury. To the left of you, you can see a carved window-like bar or a desk and there behind it you can see a human man, probably in his late 30s. His hair, very short, and the male pattern baldness is just starting to set in. You can see a bit of the shine of the back of his head begin to poke through. He has a very well kept handlebar mustache that curves out very wide to each side of his face, and a pointed Van Dyke matching beard point that comes to the bottom. He has a vest over a light green billowing shirt that has a wide collar the curves out to the sides. As you enter and take in, he immediately glances over to meet your gaze and goes, "Why hello everyone, glad you could make it. Welcome! Welcome to the Landlocked Lady. How could I be of service? Oh, you are a big one!"

SUMALEE: I am.

MATT: "Wonderful, are you looking for work?"

ASHLY: No, she's not.

MATT: "No worries. Well, you're here for a reason, I presume. Do tell me what do you seek? We have rooms for rent, companionship to join as well. What do you seeking?"

MARISHA: We'll need all of that above and a little bit more.

SAM: Well, I mean not the companionship.

MARISHA: I've had a hard week

SAM: Oh!

MARISHA: What were you saying?

ASLY: Champ, right?

MATT: "Yes? Do I know you?"

SAM: Champ?

MARISHA: Champ? His name's Champ!

ASHLY: Maybe? His name's Champ. Told you it was a shitter! Yeah, you might know me. Hey, are your bosses around bosses around by any chance?

MATT: "My bosses?"

ASHLY: The people that actually own this place, I know you like to pretend.

MATT: "Are you referring to--?"

ASHLY: The Marduns.

MATT: "The Marduns are not around here today. They are at the Estate Siberitique.

ASHLY: What?

MATT: "It's their estate, its where they live."

MARISHA: Sybaritic?

LIAM: Sitaritic?

MATT: Siberitique.

ASHLY: Do I know where that is?

MATT: You've passed by it, you've never been there.

ASHLY: Is it an insight to see if he's lying?

MATT: Yes, you may.

ASHLY: Fuck! Critical one.

MATT: He's a shifty motherfucker, and you're not entirely certain he's telling the truth or not, but seems honest enough. "Lord Anselm does pass through on occasion, but he's not here today. The rest of them I'm sure are busy with their own business, but if I see any of them, I could ask, see if they're being summoned by-- what is your name?"

ASHLY: It's, um--

SAM: The Mighty Nein?

ASHLY: I'm trying to come up with a fake name.

SAM: Oh.

ASHLY: Rick.

MARISHA: Nailed it.

ASHLY: Rick is my name.

MATT: Make a deception check.

(laughter)

ASHLY: Really? You're not going to let that slide? 19!

SUMALEE: Rick it is!

MATT: Plus?

ASHLY: 19, yeah.

MATT: "Rick? Very well. I'll make a note. If this is pressing business, you are more than welcome to attempt to summon them at the estate, as I know not how often they pass through, but in the meantime, you said you wished rooms and company?"

SAM: Yes, we'll need rooms for sure.

MATT: "How many?"

ASHLY: Give us a second there, Champ. I don't really feel like I want to stay around this guy that much longer. Do you guys want to go to this estate, or do you want to stay here?

SAM: The estate? What would we do there?

SUMALEE: I do not like this man.

ASHLY: Yeah, that makes two of us, Nila. I don't know; that's where the Marduns are. You were looking for them anyway, right?

SAM: We're looking for one of their family, but we don't know enough to march up there and say, "Hey, we're looking for your daughter." We don't even know if it's a daughter, or a niece or something. I don't know.

MATT: All the information that you have from The Gentleman is that an individual named Ophelia Mardun, who is a friend of his, he sent you up to give her aid with a problem that she's having.

SAM: We don't know if she's on the outs with her family, if they're the ones who had her killed or kidnapped. We don't know anything. We'd be marching into a big question mark.

MARISHA: Maybe we'll get lucky, and the problem she wants help with is The Iron Shepherds. Two birds with one stone, we win. Still going along with that plan.

ASHLY: (laughs) The plan has not changed.

MARISHA: Has not changed.

ASHLY: It's the same plan.

MARISHA: The Molly problem was a hiccup. Seems kind of cold. Anyway.

ASHLY: You're working on it.

SUMALEE: I have something I'd like to do now. In these moments, I have a little bag of treasures that I smell. They're little treasures that I collect along the way of things that are significant and meaningful to me. If I smell it, it tells me what the experience will be like. If we leave this man and go to this Ophelia Mardun, let me see what my smell check does. Okay?

SAM: It's like telling a fortune, but with smelling things. All right.

MARISHA: That's pretty crazy.

ASHLY: Is she just getting high?

MARISHA: She might be.

MATT: Nila pulls up this small pouch with a leather flap on the front, and pulling it open there is, within a moment, a pungent smell that is a mixture of earthy, almost mossy scents, mixed with spice, mixed with rotted vegetation, mixed with a bad cheese. It's a plethora of smells, and they come in waves. She buries her nose into this for a second and takes a huge (sniffing).

SUMALEE: Do I know what I sense, or will you tell me what I sense?

MATT: Make a wisdom check.

LIAM: This is what she does in brothels?

SAM: I don't know if she knows what a brothel is.

MATT: Add your wisdom modifier.

SUMALEE: 17. Oh no, wait. 14.

MATT: The smell comes into you, and amongst the barrage of various smells, you catch a rosy, sweet smell that cuts through the rest.

SUMALEE: Yes. We should go to see this Ophelia. It will be a good outcome.

LIAM: You have had a lot of luck predicting things with this stink pouch?

SUMALEE: Oh, yes. It is not stinky, though. You may smell it, if you wish.

LIAM: What do I smell?

MATT: Make a wisdom check.

LIAM: Oh, that's pretty good. 19.

MATT: You get a faint whiff of sawdust that quickly shifts into a very old, molded, after a rain leather.

LIAM: Oh, well, yes, I'm convinced. We should definitely just march up to the estate.

ASHLY: Wait, I want a hit! It's not going to go well.

SUMALEE: I did not know that this works for others.

ASHLY: Oh yeah, it's a nine.

MATT: As you get close--

SAM: (fart noise)

MATT: You don't even get that close to it. You have a fairly strong sense of smell, and while some smells in your experiences of the world have put you aback, you can't even describe this odorous musk that hits your nostrils, causing your entire face to wrinkle and recoil.

ASHLY: Never mind, I was wrong! We shouldn't go!

MATT: At this point, Champ, who has leaned forward, watching this, goes, "Out of my curiosity, I'm now invested. Might I have a sniff as well?"

(laughter)

SAM: Everyone's sniffing your bag!

SUMALEE: It is filled with so many wonderful things. I promise you. Wait a minute. I do not want him to smell this.

SAM: She doesn't want you to smell her bag.

MATT: "I didn't want a piece of the stink pouch anyway."

SUMALEE: I'm sorry.

SAM: It's something you have to earn. Maybe tomorrow.

SUMALEE: Wait, let me smell. Oh, all right. Here.

MATT: (sniffs) "No, no. Lesson learned." His eyes start watering. "Would you like a room for the night? What are your preferences?"

SAM: Maybe we should get a room or two. That way, if everything goes wrong, if we're indeed going to go to this estate, then we could at least have somewhere to crash.

MATT: "I must warn you, if it's more to a room and you require a companion, the group rates are a bit more expensive."

ASHLY: He means slumber parties. If we all want to have a nice rest together, just sleeping, it's more money.

SUMALEE: We have that in my clan, too. We all set up a huge nest of leaves and sleep together.

MATT: "Are you sure you're not looking for work?"

SUMALEE: No.

MARISHA: Maybe we shouldn't stay here. What time of day is it?

MATT: At this point, it's almost dusk. You guys have traveled the better part of your second day to even get here.

LIAM: Well, perhaps we don't want to show up on these people's doorstep as the sun is going down. Why don't we spend a night here? You were looking for some companionship. You can work on that.

SAM: We can ask around. Maybe the clientele might know some things about the Sheps.

ASHLY: That's not a bad idea.

LIAM: Sure, we can talk to the clientele. Maybe you should hang back.

SAM: I think I fit in in this town, but they might recognize me.

LIAM: How do you mean?

SAM: No, I mean, The Iron Shepherds know my face, but it seems like there's so many weirdos in this town that, I don't know. No one seemed to be looking at me funny when we walked in. Oh, wait, I was dressed as a gnome, that's why. Never mind.

(laughter)

MARISHA: To be fair, this isn't The Iron Shepherds' hideout, we said, right?

LIAM: Yeah, that's outside of the city, into the woods.

MARISHA: Seems like they wouldn't come here. Rival family.

ASHLY: Is it safe to say that they keep to themselves?

MATT: For the most part, yeah. They only come into town to occasionally drink and essentially parade dominance. Every now and then checking in to assert their reputation, and if they have to do other bits of dirty work. They are slavers by normal trade, but they do other things for the Jagontoths, if need be.

ASHLY: They wouldn't feel it necessary to tell anyone else about us?

MATT: You're not entirely certain. It depends on if they assume they're being chased, or they feel like the demonstration was enough, but you don't know.

ASHLY: All right.

SAM: Spend the night here, then?

LIAM: Yeah, I think so. We've been traveling all day. We stay here, we get up. We don't know anything about where the Shepherds-- We know nothing about their stronghold, just what you're able to tell us, but that doesn't tell us how many people are there now, what we are going to be up against. We talk to the Marduns tomorrow, figure out the next step from there.

MARISHA: Yeah, let's formulate a plan in the morning. I can't think right now. I'm a little out of it.

ASHLY: All right. Champ, she sleeps alone. No funny business, all right?

MATT: "Of course not. I have a business to run."

SUMALEE: Thank you.

MARISHA: I'll take a room for myself, please.

MATT: "All right. For a singular room rate for the night, that will be one gold, five silver."

MARISHA: I arrange for companionship and drinks.

MATT: "Any preference of companion? We have a spectrum to choose from."

MARISHA: It feels weird going and picking someone out. That feels dirty.

MATT: "Would you prefer it a surprise?"

MARISHA: Yeah. Just make her hot, please.

MATT: "Her. That is a preference. Very well." Goes and writes something down. "Can be done. For a night's companionship, do you wish just for an evening's stay, or for the night over?"

MARISHA: No, just an hour, and then I want to be alone, please.

MATT: That will be an additional five gold pieces.

MARISHA: All right. Then I get really drunk, and I go to my room for the night. Send up booze.

MATT: "An additional five silver. Just racking up the tab, then." The rest of you?

SAM: We'll have a room by ourselves.

MATT: "The four of you?"

SAM: Oh, no, I mean--

SUMALEE: I don't mind staying with you.

ASHLY: No, we're fine, just sleeping.

MATT: "Very well, suit yourself, but I'll be here for most of the night, if you change your mind."

ASHLY: Unless-- No judgment if you want to--

LIAM: No, we have been together a long time, so we're used to--

ASHLY: Oh, you're *together.*

LIAM: Sure.

SAM: Not like that.

ASHLY: Oh. Okay. I was going to say I think you could do better, but anyway.

LIAM: I don't know if that was called for at all.

ASHLY: Sorry.

SAM: No, you're absolutely right. He is handsome, and he could do much better than a little freakshow like me. He could meet any girl in town and sweep her off her feet.

LIAM: Shush. This one and myself will take one room.

ASHLY: I'll go with Nila, then.

MATT: "All right. Two per room, that's two gold for the group rate, so four gold for the two additional rooms, please."

LIAM: I will handle the two gold for Nott and myself.

ASHLY: I'll do the two gold for us.

MATT: "All right." He gives a key to each of you for each room.

SUMALEE: Thank you. I was going to give it for us, but next time.

ASHLY: No problem.

LIAM: Oh, boy.

SAM: What? Do you have any gold left?

LIAM: Sure, I'm good.

ASHLY: Sorry, Nott. You're a great gal. It's the occasional tongue-eating, is mostly what I was referring to.

LIAM: You know, maybe quit while you're ahead. Nott, come on, let's go upstairs.

MATT: You guys all scatter to your separate chambers and find yourselves a, as restful as it can be given the events recently, night's sleep. Beau, drunkenly, you have enough consciousness to recall eventually a knock at your door.

MARISHA: Oh. Right. I open the door.

MATT: Standing there, you see an amber-skinned elven woman, a little older than you, with very bright, almost platinum hair that is pulled up into a high ponytail that drifts past the shoulders, seeming a very sheer negligee.

MARISHA: Hi.

SAM: Looking up the spell?

LIAM: No, something else. You're good. Go on, get it on.

MARISHA: What's your name?

MATT: "Vorsah." She pushes you in the room and closes the door.

MARISHA: Okay!

MATT: Cut to black.

SUMALEE: Nila was going to cover her ears.

LIAM: You're probably nailing a 250-year-old!

MARISHA: Hot!

SAM: Oh, elven aging! Cougar!

MARISHA: Yeah, exactly!

MATT: (singing) Here's to you, Mrs. Robinson. The morning eventually comes, some of you more hungover than others, but as you come to and gather yourselves and wash for the coming day, you hear the sounds of almost broken roosters outside. They call: this horrible, terrible-- It's a harsh north this side of Wildemount for these poor birds.

LIAM: Welcome to Deadwood!

MATT: This is very much the Deadwood of the continent. You can already hear the town coming alive outside; the occasional shouts-- you're unable to make out the words, but the morning has definitely kicked in. You gather your things and make your way down to the bottom floor where Champ is not currently there. There's somebody else-- looks to be a younger man, probably in his late teens, early 20s. He appears to be half-elven, with this curly mop of bright-red hair on the top and a smile, and he's currently going through a ledger of some kind.

ASHLY: Do I recognize him?

MATT: You do not.

SAM: His name is Rex.

SUMALEE: Rick and Rex.

LIAM: Before going down with Nott and Caleb, I would say when we get up: We need to talk for a minute, okay?

SAM: Listen, you should just forgive Keg, she doesn't know that she was being insulting. She's rough around the edges-- and she's right, you could do better than me. Look at this. This is a mess. I mean, the teeth.

LIAM: I don't care about Keg or any of that. I want to talk about what you and I are doing.

SAM: All right.

LIAM: I was this close to running off from that road when things turned on us. You and I, we are going to survive together. That is the main thing.

SAM: Why didn't you run?

LIAM: The dwarf stepped up. (snaps) Changed my mind like that.

SAM: Changed your mind because we had extra help, or--

LIAM: Whatever she said to him, he left.

SAM: Oh, the danger was passed.

LIAM: Yeah.

SAM: Mm-hmm.

LIAM: But we have done a lot and you know what I am about.

SAM: Of course I do, yes.

LIAM: So I just want you and I, you and me especially, to be on the same page because we have been for months now, *ja*? You are my friend, I want you to be with me, and I want us to live. We have done a lot with these people, and if we can finesse this and do it in a way that does not throw our lives in the fire, there is more to be achieved. We will help you get to where you want to get, and myself, together. We will work together with these people.

SAM: I know that you want revenge for what that man did to you, and there's things I want too, but... Mollymauk was amazing. Showed me something. He had this spirit of life that was pretty outstanding. You know, he was the moment that we all traveled together. He came up, and we were all talking, and all cagey, and all iffy with each other when we met all these folks but he said, "Hey, want to come see a circus show?" and that lit the spark, right?

LIAM: Yes.

SAM: But before that, it was-- All I'm saying is, he was a rainbow man who represented life at its fullest, and that's what I want. Even more than what we were going for before. Together, we're sort of living life now, aren't we? Before, we were in the darkness. So I know we have things to do, and I want to do them. But the reason I want to find these people and rescue them is not to use them, and it's not because we've invested time in them, but it's because I love them. We need to find them and rescue them because we're a team now. So if you're just using them or whatever, that's fine and I'll support you; but I want to find them so that we don't go back to the way it was, when we were hiding in the shadows and ducking into alleys to get away from people. We were safe, but we weren't really alive, right? With these people, we're having fun and winning contests and killing bad guys and rescuing children, and it's amazing. I hope you're with me on that, and I hope we are on the same page.

LIAM: I like them.

SAM: That's a good start. I think they like you.

LIAM: We are not hiding anymore. Well, not like we used to. There is a certain amount of risk to what we are doing. And what I want is good, for more people than just me.

SAM: I know it is, and I want it for you. We've used a lot of people in the past and I just want to make sure we're not using these folks. Are we?

LIAM: Well, we are about to risk our lives to pull three people we met four or five weeks ago out of the hands of a lot of dangerous people. Seems like a pretty good offer for them.

SAM: Okay.

LIAM: I don't have any family; you're the closest thing that I have. I have come to rely on you and I am grateful for your company.

SAM: I couldn't do this without you.

LIAM: Well, let's screw our courage to the sticking place and get them out of there.

SAM: Yes. Let's get them home, and let's kill Lorenzo. I have an idea. I know my last one didn't go so well, but listen: we can't fight these people. I've said it before and I'll say it again, but what we can do is exactly what they do. They go out and pick off people one at a time. Why don't we start doing that to them? Follow them, track them, see where they go home at night, and just pick them off one at a time. The weaker ones first, and by the time Lorenzo knows what's happening, he'll be scared out of his mind.

LIAM: He would get more defensive with time. I don't know. We don't know enough. I would like to find out where he sleeps.

SAM: Okay.

LIAM: Head-on, I agree, not a good idea. We will take a roundabout way. Let's figure out what we're talking about first.

SAM: All right. To breakfast.

LIAM: I invite her in.

SAM: I'll nestle in.

LIAM: I don't even say anything, just a firm hug. Let's go down.

MATT: As both Nila and Keg have enjoyed a decent meal, not as much as you'd expect for the money that was paid included for the evening's stay, but a meal nevertheless.

MARISHA: Hotel prices. What?

LIAM: Sex bacon.

(laughter)

MATT: Eventually Caleb and Nott make their way down to join you.

ASHLY: When Keg sees Nott, she pulls out a piece of paper and some broken spectacles and says, Nott?

SAM: What's this? What are you doing?

ASHLY: I'm sorry I said that you were not good enough for--

SAM: Why are you wearing those things?

ASHLY: I'm trying to apol-- just give me a second! I'm sorry I said you were not good enough for Caleb--

SAM: Did someone tell you to do this?

ASHLY: You're very nice-- I'm trying to be nice, just give-- this is as painful for me as it is for you, just give me five seconds!

SAM: Sure, sure.

ASHLY: I'm sorry I was mean.

SAM: Can we get some hash browns or something?

ASHLY: You may be kind of weird, but you're also nice.

SAM: I don't think there was a verb in that sentence.

ASHLY: I am sorry, and when you aren't eating tongue, you're sort of cute. Love, Keg.

SAM: Okay, so, a few things.

ASHLY: Do you have notes?

SAM: I mean, you don't need to sign it if you're saying.

ASHLY: I don't know, I was writing it! I didn't know if I was going to say it to you or give it to you, so I panicked and I-- I'm sorry.

MARISHA: Beau comes down the stairs, hearing the end of it, and just goes (applause)

ASHLY: Thanks, Beau.

MARISHA: I could learn a few things from you. That was a good apology. Damn good.

SAM: Apology accepted. Don't worry about it, I have a thick skin about this stuff, and I know I haven't put my best foot forward with you. We got off on a wrong foot. To a brighter tomorrow!

ASHLY: That was much more eloquent than mine was.

SAM: I just made that up, I didn't even have to write it down.

ASHLY: You didn't even have to write it down?!

SAM: No.

ASHLY: Fuck, I'm so bad at this. And then she shoves bacon in her mouth.

MATT: All right, so what's your plan?

LIAM: We are going to go and meet the Marduns.

SAM: Okay.

LIAM: We are going to ask for Ophelia Mardun.

MARISHA: I have a feeling maybe her business has something to do with The Iron Shepherds as well.

LIAM: Maybe.

ASHLY: We can hope.

MARISHA: Do you know anything about any of the families here?

SUMALEE: I do not. Nila would like to gather these goodberries and, on the way out, give one to each of those horrible sounding roosters.

(laughter)

MATT: Perfect.

SUMALEE: They need help.

MATT: As Nila's out there healing the roosters and you're leaving, the young, curly red-haired half-elven proprietor at the front leans forward and says, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to intrude, but whatever it is you're after, good luck and I hope you're on the right track."

ASHLY: Who the hell are you?

SAM: That's super weird. He seems like a nice, normal person here.

MARISHA: Is it a female?

MATT: "Sorry, I'm Keylin. I take the early shift here--" It's a man. Vibrant green eyes. "But I've overheard you're going to see the Marduns. Just listen carefully."

SAM: Listen carefully?

MATT: Listen carefully.

SAM: Like while we walk there, we should listen?

MATT: As you listen and talk with them.

SAM: Oh.

LIAM: Oh. Not right now, but when we are-- *ja*.

MARISHA: Well, I imagine we should also be listening carefully right now, as well as then.

MATT: That works as well, but--

SAM: What's wrong with them? What should we know?

MATT: Nothing. They're gracious employers, I enjoy my time here, but just listen carefully. I'm trying to help, that's all. Good day! Be off, be off!

SAM: No, I know, but why? We haven't paid you-- okay.

LIAM: It's very enigmatic, but we will-- okay.

MATT: "Good luck." Takes a little glass of tea and sips it.

ASHLY: Can I do an insight check on him to see if he's sketchy?

MATT: Yeah, go for it. He's pretty sketchy.

ASHLY: I mean, yeah, but sketchy in the-- well, eight. Like is he trying to fuck with us.

LIAM: Where are your 20s, Ashly, where are your 20s?

ASHLY: I know, I wasted them all!

MATT: It's hard to read. He seems forthright enough, but also guarded. It's hard to tell.

ASHLY: Okay.

SAM: How long have you been working for the Marduns?

MATT: "Me? About six, seven months."

SAM: Do you like the work?

MATT: "I mean, it has its benefits."

SAM: You mean, like--

MATT: "Be on your way and good luck." Sips the tea again.

MARISHA: That's totally what he means.

SAM: What are those marks all over your neck?

MARISHA: Badge of honor.

SAM: Did you get in a fight last night?

ASHLY: Nott, for real, man. Context clues.

MARISHA: I mean, you could say it was a nice little tussle. It was a nice little square off.

SAM: Who won?

MARISHA: I'd say we both won.

SAM: Simultaneously?

MARISHA: I definitely won. I won a few times.

SAM: Cool, cool, cool.

SUMALEE: Nila will offer you another goodberry, too.

MARISHA: Ooh! Do they make my hickies go away?

MATT: They definitely seem to recede a bit.

MARISHA: Holy shit. This is miracle cream, Nila! Oh my god!

MATT: A use for goodberries I've not yet seen in my years playing D&D!

MARISHA: You could make a cosmetic line!

MATT: All right. As you make your way back into the streets of the city, you begin to make your way back into the Clover Plaza. Now, do you know where you're going?

ASHLY: Do I know a lot?

MATT: You've not been to these estates, specifically because your employers are diametrically opposed to the Marduns, but you know the vague idea of where it is. But you've never traveled there. You could probably ask around, if you'd like. If you were to search for somebody who would hopefully be of help.

ASHLY: Could we have asked that guy?

MATT: You can go back and ask.

ASHLY: Should we go back and ask the creepy guy?

SAM: I mean, he seems to know them. I guess so.

ASHLY: One more thing!

SAM: We're going to go back and ask the creepy guy how to get to the Marduns'.

ASHLY: Keelyn.

MATT: "Hi again!"

ASHLY: Hi. We should have asked this before we left the first time. Do you know where their estate is?

MATT: "You're looking for them and you don't know where they are?"

ASHLY: Yeah, man.

MATT: "Northwest outskirts of the town limits, within the forest. Look for the dark red wood exterior."

ASHLY: Okay.

MATT: "You'll find it, I trust."

ASHLY: Why are you helping us?

MATT: "Because this place is a shithole and decent people are hard to find."

LIAM: We'll let you know if we find them. Come on.

MATT: All right. You guys head out into the streets, and now, it's interesting. As you head out into the plaza, it's much busier than it was towards the evening you were here before. You see a small regiment of people. Armored, geared up. Weapons--

(crowd sound effects)

MARISHA: How does he do that?

ASHLY: The timing!

LIAM: Where does he get such wonderful toys?

MATT: BattleBards! And Syrinscape! You glance and see 20 or so of these figures, all in various types of armor and weapons. They're in lines, ramshackle. It resembles something military, but by people who aren't trained by military or at least have any interest in that type of regimented standing. You see, at glance, a few Empire soldiers, three in full armor. Not crownsguard, but from the actual military, that are inspecting up and down the line.

MARISHA: Is it like a militia that they're forming?

MATT: It looks to be. You recognize most of the folks here to be Grudge Gang.

ASHLY: Okay.

MATT: You have a question?

LIAM: There is a difference between Crownsguard and Empire soldiers? Is one higher than the other?

MATT: Well there's the military. The Crownsguard are essentially the general guardians of every township and they do day to day law enforcement.

MARISHA and SAM: Cops.

MATT: The actual military soldiers, you saw gathering on the outskirts of Zadash when the war first kicked in, and passed one of the large armies traveling eastward from up by the western side of the Silberquel Ridge.

LIAM: Yeah, I don't think we've ever discussed this, but is Caleb's father Crownsguard, or Empire?

MATT: No. Your father would have been low-level military.

LIAM: Which is below both of those?

MATT: No. It's slightly above Crownsguard.

LIAM: Okay.

ASHLY: They're the Grudge Gang that we see?

MATT: Yes, and watching as you pass by. You get the sense that it looks like the Empire is hiring mercenaries for the war.

ASHLY: Okay.

MATT: Coasting around the north side. You tell the group to make a wide berth outside of the trench. Which is on the northern end of the plaza. Following the directive of Keelen you start weaving toward what's called North Clover. Clover Street, you've now begun to note is the large central street that is the one throughline of the entire city. It runs all around the treeline of the Savalierwood. It's strange and not straight in places, and it was designed to follow the southern border of this forest. The northern side of it, North Clover is built directly into this forest. You know-- Make a history check, actually. Caleb, you can make a history check too.

ASHLY: 17.

MATT: Not bad. That works. You've been at this for a while. The Savalierwood has been cursed for many centuries. The once-green forest now stands a greyish purple ashen color that it now holds and the superstition and mythology around it has allowed the city of Shadycreek Run to prevent Empire encroachment. They built the city into the space, and every time the Empire has attempted to move forward they've pulled back and used it as a defensive position. Essentially, over a number of conflicts, the Empire just gave up, and let the region exist on its own. It is dangerous, the wood. The deeper in, the more dangerous it gets.

ASHLY: And The Sour Nest is nestled into it.

MATT: It's nestled into the forest even further north of where the city stops in the forest. Continuing on you begin to enter the canopy of the south Savalierwood. The shade completely consumes the city at this point, even though it's mid-morning and the clouds are broken up so that occasional bits of warmth and sunlight would occasionally pass through the city, now it seems like it's almost dusk immediately. Occasionally you see a leaf tumble past, and then another. It's almost beautiful, the color, but it does have almost a decaying sense to its meeting between grey and purple. It's beautiful in light, and then when it hits the ground it almost looks like it's bereft of life. You don't understand the nature of this enchantment, whatever this curse may be that you've heard of.

MARISHA: Nila. Is there something wrong with the soil here or something? Do you know anything about this?

SUMALEE: I don't like the look of it. Feels bad. Do I have something that can tell? Do you know?

(laughter)

LIAM: Well, you're not familiar with this where you are from?

SUMALEE: No, no.

MARISHA: You could do a general nature check.

MATT: You could do a nature check if you wanted to try--

SUMALEE: I wanted to use Druidcraft, but I don't know.

LIAM: Roll one of your buddies.

SUMALEE: Plus eight.

LIAM: 14.

MARISHA: No, no. Eight total.

SUMALEE: It's right? This roll plus two.

MATT: Correct, yeah. This is beyond you. In all of your experience-- and you're very connected with the land of the valley-- this far north you've not encountered something like this. The forest-- the best you can tell, the forest still lives. The nature of where it draws its life and this color is very unnatural and it spooks you.

SUMALEE: Is it like a half-dead forest? Like a--

MATT: It feels alive and you pick up the leaf that you saw tumbled before you and you feel it and it still brims with health. It also off-puts you. You get chills and you don't know why.

SUMALEE: I don't need to check my smell bag for this.

MATT: I think stink pouch is still my favorite phrase.

SUMALEE: Stink pouch, fine.

MATT: No, smell bag is great.

SAM: Odor sack?

ASHLY: It's somehow worse than stink pouch as far as what it evokes.

LIAM: Sniff nuts.

SUMALEE: Are there any animals?

MATT: Make a perception check.

MARISHA: What was the name of the forest?

SUMALEE: Ooh, it hit that, does that count? Can I roll again?

MATT: It still counts, yeah, unfortunately.

SUMALEE: Eight.

MATT: You don't see anything specifically. You do hear birds, so it isn't bereft of wildlife. At least you get the sense that there is at least a symbiotic relationship with some wildlife in the bit of the forest you've been in.

SUMALEE: I'd love to take one of my Goodberries to draw one of the birds and see if I might talk with it and see if it could tell us anything about before.

MATT: Make an animal handling check.

SAM: Ooh, what is this? Druid stuff.

SUMALEE: 12 plus seven. 19.

MATT: As you hold the goodberry out, which, with your arm length, is a good nine, nine and a half feet up towards the lower hanging branches, and you (bird song) give a little counterwhistle to the sound of one of the birds you hear. You hear a retort (bird whistle) and you return it (bird whistle), and then it returns (bird whistle, flutter), and then down onto the edge of your hand you see this tiny little blackbird with a white stripe that goes down the edge of each wing. It-- (chirping)-- and starts eating the goodberry, messing the edge of its beak.

LIAM: -- giant shitty rooster.

ASHLY: (squawk)

MATT: It's eating the goodberry. What would you like to do?

SUMALEE: What would we like to ask it?

SAM: First thing that pops into my mind is do you know Kiri, but I don't think that's relevant.

MARISHA: You have to stop thinking that all people who look like each other know everybody.

SAM: Don't they though?

MARISHA: No!

SAM: All right. Maybe, "How long has this curse been here? How long has the forest been spooky-ooky?"

MARISHA: Do they know how much further the Marduns' keep is?

SAM: Are there any monsters out there?

SUMALEE: That's too much, one at a time! How long has the forest been like this?

MATT: Are you using a spell or are you using your firbolg ability?

SUMALEE: Oh, I'm using my firbolg ability.

MATT: That allows you to speak to animals.

SUMALEE: Oh yes, I have to use a spell. Sorry. Wait, which one is it?

LIAM and SAM: Wait.

SUMALEE: Do you know which one it is?

MARISHA and LIAM: Speak with Animals.

SUMALEE: Speech of the woods!

ASHLY: Nila's just staring at this bird.

MATT: Speech of the woods is your firbolg ability.

SUMALEE: Oh. I know I have it.

MATT: If you look on your spell list, the cards you have prepared, do you have Speak with Animals prepared?

SUMALEE: I know I have it. Oh, it's because I chose my Spirit Totem.

MATT: Oh right. Because you're Shepherd.

SUMALEE: Yes. I have--

MATT: Yes you do, because you're Circle of the Shepherd.

SUMALEE: Whew!

MARISHA: You got this!

SUMALEE: I was like, "I set this all up and then I'm not going to be able to talk to the bird!"

LIAM: She's an Iron Shepherd, kill her!

MATT: You get to mark off one of your 1st-level spells. As you ask the bird, the bird returns-- and you guys hear her whistle to the bird, and the bird whistles back quite a bit, this beautiful song that plays. The bird conveys to you, "Far, far before my time."

SUMALEE: It says it's been this way a long time.

MARISHA: Wow. I mean, how long is long for a bird though?

SAM: They only live for three weeks, right? That's probably a bad question.

SUMALEE: This bird lives a long time, I can tell you. This type of bird is not a short-lived bird.

MARISHA: Dagon can live to be 30. She's going to outlive us all.

LIAM: Would you like to ask it what is dangerous in the wood?

SUMALEE: Yes. What is most dangerous here?

MATT: "Be wary of spirits."

MARISHA: Ooh, spirits.

MATT: "Be wary of bone-spurred beasts."

MARISHA: Bone-spurred beasts. Okay.

ASHLY: Doesn't sound great.

SUMALEE: What other questions? Are you still willing to answer some more?

MATT: How long does the spell last?

LIAM: Three days.

ASHLY: The bird's a party member now.

MATT: It lasts for ten minutes.

MARISHA: Ooh, yeah.

SAM: How far are we from the Mardun house? I don't know if the bird is going to know--

SUMALEE: I don't think the the bird would know the Mardun house.

SAM: Well, we can describe it: red wood house.

MARISHA: Mansion!

SAM: Red wood mansion.

SUMALEE: Oh, all right.

MARISHA: Northwestish.

SUMALEE: I'd like to send the bird, mentally, the picture of what that bird's eye view would be and to see if the bird has seen that.

MATT: Okay, you focus and express mentally and through small verbal gestures towards it the idea of this color and this shape. Immediately the bird (flapping) takes off.

MARISHA and SAM: (gasp) Follow the bird.

MATT: You guys all start keeping up and jogging behind it. You watch as it goes (flapping) and it lands on a post, lands on a little roof, looks back at you, (whistling) (flapping) and it's waiting and showing you a path through these streets. In doing so, you're dodging past-- originally when you walked in there were broken down tent cities and hovels and not a good space. Here the road and alleys break down. It's more sparse. The buildings are further apart. It's less of like a gridded city and more of a cluster of buildings that are generally more well made, and you get the sense that this is the wealthier area. You in your experience know that the North Clover is where most of the tribes, the different ruling families, exist and claim their territory. You move past a couple of buildings, eventually the bird bringing you to a beautiful, two-story estate that's in the beginning stages of showing disrepair. The dark-red wood appears imported, and the tall stone fence that encircles the building is topped with six-inch spear tips. A few that look bent and off kilter, but still dangerous enough for somebody who wished to try and leap the six, seven-foot fence. The courtyard houses a once beautiful garden that now turns gray with the winter. You can see rose bushes that have since browned and withered but the roses still slowly left there to dry and lose color. You can see in the center of this courtyard a small fountain of some kind, but now it's filled with slushed snow, and here the bits of the snow that have been pushed off the streets, give way to this estate that's glaring now at the outskirts of the forest. You can see beyond it, it's just wood. This definitely marks, at least at this part of Shadycreek Run, the end of the city, before you begin to crest into the Savaliwood itself. There are three individuals that are wearing simple chain mail, that are walking inside the courtyard. One has a crossbow at their side, the other has a shortbow across their shoulder. One is sitting, looking out. The other looks like they're eating some sort of dried meat from a pouch, and they glance over and watch as you approach and keep an eye.

MARISHA: Do they look like Taskers? Do they have the same armor?

MATT: They're not Taskers, no.

MARISHA: Okay.

SAM: They're probably just guarding the place.

MARISHA: Hired hands.

SAM: Does someone want to go talk to them?

LIAM: *Ja.* That is not a problem. Hello.

MATT: The one that's sitting, stands up and puts his crossbow like-- ready, not pointing it at you, but--

LIAM: *Ja.* We are good here.

MATT: "What is your intent here?"

LIAM: We have been traveling a great distance. We are here to speak, if you don't mind, we have a message for Ophelia Mardun. It can only be heard by her. We have been charged with this message and no funny business. I hope that we could impart our message and be done.

MATT: "I can take your message and pass it on!"

LIAM: Would you tell her that a very refined gentleman from the south would like to pass his regards to her.

MATT: Make a persuasion check.

LIAM: *Ja.* (groans)

SAM: (southern accent) A southern gentleman.

LIAM: Not very good at all.

SAM and ASHLY: (groan)

MATT: He goes, "And there's five of you?!"

LIAM: It is a long way.

MARISHA: And an important message.

LIAM: Yeah. Only a fool travels alone.

MATT: "I'll pass on the message! You'll be summoned if necessary, but (clicks tongue)" Gives a motion over to the other guard who's finished eating, who's also pulled the shortbow off the shoulder and has knocked an arrow into it. Gives a whistle and the doors to the estate open, and you watch as three more guards emerge with crossbows, and one with a heavy crossbow at the ready. They all keep them at the ready, very close eye. One of them begins to patrol the outside of the building. You get the sense immediately that there's a general anxiety and tension at this space when strangers approach. They're being very careful.

MARISHA: Can I look around, do I see anybody who's hidden, watching from windows up above, anything that looks like we're being watched?

MATT: Make a perception check.

MARISHA: Not by guards, necessarily. 21.

MATT: You glance up, and on the second floor there is two sets of double windows. They're paned, one of them looks to be partially opened, and you can see on the inside there are curtains. One, the curtains are closed, the other is drawn to a side, and you see a figure looking out below. As soon as you look up and see it, the curtain closes.

MARISHA: Did I catch a glimpse of what the figure looks like?

MATT: The figure looked to be human, though the skin was dark. That's as best as you can get before they vanished.

MARISHA: Okay.

LIAM: I'm just smiling at the guards.

MATT: You see all the other guards each place one of their weapons pointed directly at each of you, and the quiet comes over all of you, as this moment, this standoff continues for a minute, two minutes. As the first guard that you spoke to enters and closes the door behind.

LIAM: (exhales)

ASHLY: So do you like being guards?

MATT: "Shh!" One of them tightens the grip.

ASHLY: Got it.

MATT: This large, heavy crossbow already notched backward and the tension on the wire itself is-- this guy is looking like he is ready to fire.

LIAM: We are all going to laugh about this later, I promise. (nervous laugh)

MATT: A moment later the guard emerges from the door. "All right, stand down."

SAM: Oh.

MATT: They all pull their weapons away, looking disappointed.

LIAM: We are good?

MATT: "Open the gate." The guard who was eating earlier, puts the shortbow over the shoulder, still looking wary, and they're not moving from where they're standing. They're all keeping a very close eye on all five of

you. Opens the gate (clicking) (creaking). The metallic gate swings open, and you're all brought into the courtyard. As you're begin to follow the first guard you spoke with, they all slowly coalesce behind you, still keeping their weapons at the side, but ready if need be. As you're led to the interior chamber of this estate, the Estate Sybaritic. As soon as you enter the main foyer, the earthy smell of the forest gives way to the lingering scent of a recent meal. As if the cooked meats and starches that were eaten maybe an hour or two beforehand still permeate the air of this entryway. You see before you a staircase that continues upward, red carpeted, before switching back to a second floor. In that center landing you can see a very open window that looks down to possibly a backyard of some kind, but currently the view is of the darkened leaves and bits of sunlight that break through. It seems like something that was built for a beautiful view, not understanding until it was completed that it didn't really catch much of a view amongst this forest, like the original builder had brought sensibilities from outside to bring them in, and it was not compatible with this landscape. There, you see to the left and right of you art pieces that depict people. You can see individuals of different backgrounds, and you see one that appears to be of pure elven blood with brown hair, difficult to make out the gender, but beautiful and standing very robust with a chin out and a wily grin. Oils, very well done. To the left of you, you can see the other portrait appears to be a woman with a very well made dress with these large, almost puffs at the shoulders. It seems almost trying too hard to be aristocratic.

MATT: It's garish, but here you are. A moment later the door closes behind you, and you're still being flanked by this bevy of guards. You hear the heavy footsteps coming down the staircase. Turning the corner, you see a figure now, framed in what little of the light is coming through that window behind them. (footfalls) Stepping down you see a woman, dark-grey skin and ankle-length, black hair that is smooth and straight that falls behind her. You see bony crests of horns that curve up into these two large points behind the head and bright yellow eyes that are pupil-less. A grin that shows two fanged canines. As she descends you can see her attire is very formal, colonial style coat with epaulets, but it seems to be tailored to not hide her figure. She already exudes an air of powerful aggression and presence. With each step that she takes down there, you can sense her immediately reading and seeing in and through each of you. Quietly she takes the last step to the landing here in the foyer. (German accent) "You bring tidings from The Gentleman, you say."

LIAM: That is correct, *ja.*

MATT: "Well you have invoked the name of my comrade. You have my attention, do not squander it. Why are you here?"

LIAM: Well, we will be plain. He has sent us. He has told us that you are in need of assistance, and he has deemed us worthy to provide it.

SAM: Are you Ophelia?

MATT: "I am."

SAM: Oh, just making sure.

MARISHA: Yeah, that's good.

SAM: It could be someone else.

MATT: "Thorough, I appreciate that. Well so, you are the help that he sent. Timely, three days earlier would have been better, but here we are. I shall not fret on it. Thank you for coming. Be at ease, go watch the back

walls, make sure nobody tries to sneak in while we're talking." The guards all scatter, except for two who stay posted at each side of the door behind you. "How much have you been told?"

LIAM: (small laugh) Not very much.

MATT: You watch as her eyes looks you from head to toe and her tongue runs across her lip a bit. "(sighs) I've had an open line of shipments to Zadash, through our mutual friend for some time, made a beneficial arrangement for many years."

MARISHA: Can I do an insight check? Did it look like she cast a spell just then?

MATT: Sure, make an insight check.

MARISHA: 25.

SAM: Oh, whispers.

SAM and ASHLY: Whispers.

LIAM: Fireball.

(laughter)

SAM: Guys--

LIAM and SAM: D&D Beyond.

LIAM: Am I right?

SAM: Is a really good app.

ASHLY: (flatly) It's so great.

LIAM: It's like-- I can be on the shitter, if I want to check--

SAM: You can customize that.

LIAM: Caleb's spells.

ASHLY: I can?!

MATT: Oh god.

SAM: You can with their new upgrade.

LIAM: I can be mid dook.

SAM: You can be mid dook?

LIAM: Mid dook and check my spells.

SAM: You're mid dook right now.

MATT: Anyway, bringing it back in.

MARISHA: Shipments to Zadash.

MATT: "However, my most trusted team of smugglers that handle that route and knew it well were slain a little over a month ago."

SAM: Do you know by whom?

MATT: "Well, at first we thought it was maybe the dire beasts of the wood around us, but our internal priest was able to divine the source of their demise. In other words, at the hands of the Jagentoths."

SAM: The who? What?

ASHLY: It's the family that controls the Iron Shepherds.

SAM: The Jagentoths?

ASHLY: The Jagentoths.

MATT: "Now we've-- as you seem to know this well." She looks over you. "You look familiar. What is your name?"

ASHLY: Keg.

MATT: "Keg, I know that name."

ASHLY: I used to work for them. Not anymore.

MATT: At which point you hear the guards behind (cocking crossbow). The crossbows go back up into position. You glance over your shoulder to see them both pointed-- "What assurances can I have that I not need strike you down where you stand?"

ASHLY: You don't have any, but I have a lot of information about them.

SAM: We just killed one of them.

ASHLY: Oh, that's true. That's better. We killed one of them.

MATT: Make a persuasion check with advantage.

ASHLY: That is a 12.

MATT: "Intriguing. Very well." They go down. (sighing) "We and these Jagentoths have feuded for quite some time between these tribes. Many times it has come to bloodshed, but now with the Grudge Gang and the Taskers making open justice throughout the realm messy, we must take to other means. We cannot deliver our retribution with hands that can be traced back to us. As this affects both the Marduns and The Gentleman, he is wise to send you, and this kindness shall be repaid in person. The Jagentoths have slaughtered and stolen from us a nature source of contraband and income. It's only fair we do the same in kind. We here of the Estate Sybaritic require you to cut one of the limbs of their business. Kill their best handymen. Hunt The Iron Shepherds."

LIAM: One more time, please?

MATT: "Hunt The Iron Shepherds."

LIAM: Your accent is thick.

MATT: "I have not been as far south as some of you, I can tell."

LIAM: No, I appreciate hearing the old tongue again.

MATT: She says to you in Zemnian, "Well, stick around." (in Common) "Last I heard, they are still out on the road. They live at The Sour Nest, a small stronghold not far from here on the edge of North Clover to the eastern side. They have a number of hired hands that guard the locale. It's a difficult infiltration, but it's your best chance of catching them off guard. If you have other ideas, we are open to suggestions. Am I to believe that you have been sent," and her eyes fall over Nila, "as trained killers, able to deal with this?"

LIAM: Some of us are trained killers for sure, and we have picked up help as we have seen fit. Everyone has been carefully selected, carefully vetted. I'm sure that with your input on their mannerisms and habits, their routines, we will do quite well.

MATT: "All right. Let us hope that the priest was not incorrect. Either way, I would like to see them taken down a peg. So do you accept this offer?"

MARISHA: What all do you want us getting out of that house?

MATT: "Nothing to get out of it. Kill everything within it."

ASHLY: When you say this can't get traced back to you guys, does that mean you can't help us at all? Give us any assistance as far as your men, firepower, nothing?"

MATT: "No. We can offer maybe a bit of change to grease a few palms or bring some aid your way, but we cannot be traced to this at all. This needs to seem unrelated. A strange occurrence, a random act of murder was in their home, so as not to quell this already boiling blood between us."

MARISHA: You think all of The Iron Shepherds will be there?

MATT: "Well, I don't know. They're there often. But if you've made it this far north, perhaps you are better at finding this information than we."

LIAM: We have come a long way. Is there any-- You know them better than us; we're out-of-towners. Any tips to specifically deal with your problem?

MATT: "Best intel we have involves that they hire their mercenaries from the Grudge Gang. They prefer to find people with keen eyes and distant shot."

SAM: The Grudge Gang-- they've hired the entire gang, or just the members of the--

MATT: "Just members of the gang."

SAM: Where do they hang about?

MATT: "All over the city, but the ones they've hired will probably stay within the estate."

SAM: They would stay there while they're under the employ of The Iron Shepherds?

MATT: "Of course. That is what I do." She refers to the two guards behind you.

MARISHA: Do you know-- sorry. You can go.

ASHLY: You said that they're still on the road? You're led to believe that they haven't come back to Shadycreek Run yet?

MATT: "I haven't seen them return yet, no."

SAM: Would you know if they came back? Do you have spies out there looking?

MATT: I have.

SAM: Because we saw them on the road and they were heading back here.

MATT: "If they have arrived recently, perhaps my whispers have not come to me yet."

ASHLY: There's a chance The Sour Nest is empty, or less guarded.

MARISHA: I wonder if they're hiring.

SAM: Does the Grudge Gang identify themselves in some way? How would we find one?

MATT: "They usually--" and she pulls back her sleeve and you can see the dark gray, almost black skin there beneath. "You will find a burned crescent into the wrist of a member of the gang."

SAM: Let's get a fireplace and some iron and burn the shit out of our wrists, and then we're insta-Grudge Gang. Now, The Gentleman has us on a meager yearly salary, but if we were to do this for you, does that include some sort of bonus?

MATT: "Are you saying The Gentleman has not paid you for this endeavor?"

SAM: Not yet.

MATT: "I was made to understand that that was all taken care of as part of our arrangement."

MARISHA: How about something in trade? Just as a little added bonus as a favor.

MATT: "What are you asking for, if I might inquire, little girl?" She leans forward with this creepy smile that crawls across her face as she eyes you up and down.

LIAM: There we go.

MARISHA: Kind of like her demeaning me with that little girl stuff. I'm kind of into it. Anyway, that priest you mentioned. Is he a pretty skilled priest? Would he happen to have any skills in reviving the dead?

MATT: "You have a problem with someone beneath the earth. I do not know if our priest specializes in such abilities, and if they did, it would be for family only."

MARISHA: Sounds like he does specialize in those abilities when you put it like that. If exceptions can be made for friends and family. Friends and family discount is a real thing.

MATT: "You're mighty presumptuous. You might have better luck with any of the wandering crazies in the city."

MARISHA: What?

MATT: "Our priest is not the only one." She cocks her head. "If you're looking for help, could look to the Blooming Grove."

SAM: Where's that? What's that? Is that a town?

MATT: "It's about six miles out of Shadycreek Run, to the northwest, a little farther from here. It's a burial grove, but there is a temple there and some strange hermit of a priest is said to live there. Most folks are spooked of them. The family that once looked over that grove has slowly dwindled as the years have gone on, and they say the curse itself seems to hold it, but try that. Otherwise, you need to do quite a favor for us, as such magic is not inexpensive."

ASHLY: Killing all of The Iron Shepherds isn't a big enough favor?

MATT: "You've already been paid for that."

LIAM: Yeah, this is a pre-existing arrangement that's outside of negotiation at the moment. I understand. We will take care of what you are asking.

MATT: "Good. That's what I like, straightforward and working to the fine print. Very good."

LIAM: Zemnian.

SAM: All right. You don't want us staying here, I suppose? We should scoot out so that we can't be traced back to you?

MATT: "We'll lead you out the back route. Eyes on you leaving my estate would be unwise. So." Begins speaking in Zemnian to the two other guards-- you're the only one who picks up on the language-- says, "Please lead them through the back tunnel." She turns around and begins to ascend the stairs, stopping and looking back over her shoulder, the hair swishing with each step as she makes her way up, looking back, and the yellow eyes glancing back with the bright white teeth against the darkened skin. "Do not disappoint me. I can be very frustrated when I'm disappointed." Turns back and makes her way back up the steps.

LIAM: We're left with guards?

MATT: Two guards, yes.

LIAM: All right, good fellows, would you escort us out and point us in the right direction?

MATT: They wordlessly walk and lead you around through a dining chamber back to a small storage-- it'd be kitchen adjacent, though you don't see a kitchen yet. You can smell that musty scent of stored oats and grains, rice.

LIAM: Did I see any books on the way out?

MATT: Make a perception check.

LIAM: 14.

MATT: None down here. None of the rooms you were brought through seem to have any sort of a shelf unit or anything that carries tomes or books of any kind, unfortunately.

LIAM: Fuck this podunk town.

MATT: There doesn't seem to be very well-read people though there're probably some. You're led into this storage room and down a staircase through a trapdoor. It's pulled open. You're led into this wine cellar and in the back of the wine cellar, they move aside a case shelving for wine, and they're all resting on it, some missing, others moving it there. There's a small tunnel that you all have to duck down. You have to nearly crawl through to get your rather large firbolg form.

ASHLY: Can I sleight of hand and try to steal some wine?

MATT: Sure.

MARISHA: I was about to ask if I recognize any wine.

MATT: You're moving pretty fast. Make a perception check.

MARISHA: Okay.

ASHLY: Maybe I shouldn't.

SAM: Oh, it's too late now.

ASHLY: Oh, it's great! 18.

MATT: What'd you get?

MARISHA: Nine.

MATT: Unfortunately, you can't see any of the labels the way it's rested. However, you do manage to grab a bottle of wine.

SAM: Ooh, is that a Cabernet Sauvignon?

MATT: You guys are brought through single-file through this tunnel until eventually, met with another door. The guard (knocking) does some sort of pulsed knock. It opens and from this completely dark interior, the light hits your eyes and you have to adjust for a moment. It's really not that bright on the opposite side; it's still within the forest. Comparatively, it hits you. As you step out, there looks to be an older drunk, dirty, filthy-looking man who is completely sober and lets you out.

MARISHA: That's cool.

MATT: You are now in the middle of the forest, and you can see a small bench and an overgrown well about ten or so feet ahead and to the left of you that vines have completely taken over. The vines themselves, a similar purple-grayish color as to the rest of the leaves. A lot of the foliage seems to fall into that same coloration. Not all of it, but a lot of it. It seems to cross multiple types of vegetation. As you're escorted from this room, the two guards give a nod, close it behind you. The old man goes and sits back, puts his bench up against the knotted base of a thick tree that's growing out of the ground where you had emerged from. Leans against it, grabs a jug and sits and looks at you.

ASHLY: Can I tell where The Sour Nest would be from here?

MATT: Make a survival check.

ASHLY: 18.

MATT: With how far you've traveled north, it would be straight due east from here.

ASHLY: Okay. Sour Nest is east of here.

LIAM: You know where you are?

SAM: Should we go run recon? Take a quick scouting pass and see what we can see?

LIAM: Yeah. Let's put a little distance between ourselves and this place and this gentleman and I will send Frumpkin out to have a look.

SAM: Okay.

MATT: You make your way through the Savalierwood.

SAM: Is it a long walk? Or a long travel?

MATT: From where you are now, it's probably a two hour walk. It's the far east side. It's technically past the-- let's see, I have all the locations here. Pardon me as I pull out my notes.

LIAM: While you look, I will say an important point for clarification. Once we are out of the view of this gentleman guarding the secret entrance, Caleb, walking with poise up to a tree, leans against it, bends down and has a panic attack.

SAM: You were in great in there!

MATT: Past the Gruff Slum is what it is. This is the far eastern side of it.

ASHLY: Past the Gruff Stump?

MATT: The Gruff Slum.

SAM: You were great! You handled yourself so well. Man, you were rock-solid in there!

LIAM: Stop it. I am nauseous. Let's go kill a bunch of people.

SAM: Give him a goodberry.

SUMALEE: I have a goodberry.

MARISHA: Oh, yes!

LIAM: That is sour.

SAM: It's a Purin tablet.

SUMALEE: One moment, it will take effect soon.

ASHLY: Oh. End that way.

MARISHA: Keep it down.

LIAM: Let's go.

MATT: It does warm your belly, and that warmth spreads through your torso and it's-- whenever Jester has come and pulled you from the edge of death with a spell, it's a fragment of that warmth from the inside of your torso.

LIAM: 'Member?

MARISHA: 'Member berries. 'Member Jester?

LIAM: 'Member clerics?

MARISHA: Oh yeah, I 'member.

MATT: Following Keg through the wood, I would like you all to make stealth checks, please.

SAM: Stealthy!

MATT: You are no longer under the Pass without a Trace spell.

MARISHA: You get all of your spells back after sleeping as well.

LIAM: Four!

ASHLY: 14.

SAM: 25.

MARISHA: 17.

SUMALEE: 14.

MATT: Caleb's feeling a bit clumsy, but the rest of you, keeping up the slack, have managed to stop him at times and make him aware of his terrible attempts to stay out of sight and stay quiet. Two hours of travel eastward--

MARISHA: We should plan.

ASHLY: We wanted to send Frumpkin in.

SAM: We can send Frumpkin, but also, we have another animal companion now. If you wanted to become an animal something or other and scout around, that would be acceptable, right?

MARISHA: That's true.

SUMALEE: I would love that. What animal do you think would be the best? Maybe something small?

MARISHA: And something native.

SAM: Well, Frumpkin's a bird, right?

LIAM: Yeah.

SAM: Maybe we need something on the ground, like a weasel-y thing or a ratty type of thing or a roachy type of thing?

LIAM: You said yesterday that-- you were a horse first and then you said you could only do it one more time or a certain number of times, correct?

SUMALEE: Yes, I have two times now, right? Because I rested?

MATT: Correct. Two times every short rest.

SUMALEE: I can do twice.

LIAM: If you were to become, say, a raccoon right now and go running around, that is one time that you cannot become a crocodile to eat somebody's face off.

SUMALEE: Yes, and I would like to eat somebody's face off.

LIAM: Okay. I think, let us reserve that for now because Frumpkin can do the job. Let's get closer to this place and it would only take five minutes. He will go.

SAM: In owl form?

LIAM: Yeah.

SAM: Okay. He'll only be able to see from the sky. We should still do that, though, first.

LIAM: I mean, I could turn him back into a cat, but then he's slower, he can't get over the walls maybe.

SAM: Go for it.

MARISHA: Just send the bird.

LIAM: How far have we traveled at this point?

MATT: About an hour into it, a sound catches your ear, Keg. It catches yours as well. (growling) You hear the faint breaking of tinder and dry branch.

ASHLY: Do I know what this is off the top or must I make a check?

MATT: Make a straight intelligence check.

ASHLY: (singing) Ooh, that's not going to go well for anyone.

LIAM: Unless you roll high.

SUMALEE: 20!

LIAM: Nope.

SUMALEE and MARISHA: Oh!

SAM: Yeah, but it's minus one.

ASHLY: So it's zero! Did I help?

MATT: You have no idea, but it sounds unique.

SAM: Ducks, you guys. It's ducks.

ASHLY: We're fine, keep going.

SAM: Oh, great!

ASHLY: But Nila also recognizes it?

MATT: You hear it as well. What's your perception? Your passive perception?

SUMALEE: 14.

MATT: 14. You'd actually hear it as well. You guys all put your hands out, stop, and hold still. You see a heavy shadow moving through the dense forest, just south of where you are.

MARISHA: Nobody move. You want to send an owl towards that shadow, see if Frumpkin sees what that is?

LIAM: Ja, okay, that's easy. I sit down on the ground and send Frumpkin into the air.

MATT: Okay. Under a branch, Frumpkin takes some of the low branches of these trees, underneath the canopy and gets a look. Through Frumpkin's eyes, you see what looks to be a black bear, but black bears that you've seen in passing before have been, maybe, eight feet, ten feet end to end. This one's closer to 15 and about ten feet to shoulder. Its fur is long and matted, almost greasy in patches. At the shoulders and the elbows and ridges on its face, you see bone protrusions, like spikes.

MARISHA: Those were the bone spikes.

MATT: As it comes through you watch its large, heavy, almost exaggerated muscular shoulders (sounds of bear walking, growling, and sniffing) It sits down on the ground. It seems to have chosen a spot to take a nap.

ASHLY: Do I have a sense of what aggro's it?

MATT: Noise. People. Anything that it could eat.

LIAM: (whispering) There is a very large black bear ahead of us, with bones coming out of its butt and stuff and it has just laid down for a nap.

SAM: (whispering) We have to be very quiet.

MARISHA: (whispering) Can you do that thing again?

SAM: That makes us all stealthy?

SUMALEE: (whispering) Yes, of course.

MARISHA: (whispering) So we can all sneak by?

SUMALEE: (barely audible) I would like to cast Pass Without a Trace.

(laughter)

MATT: Okay. With that addition, everyone roll another stealth check, since you are taking the bonus there.

LIAM: What are we going to do?

ASHLY: 23.

MARISHA: Don't fuck me, Gil. Eh, fuck you, Gil.

MATT: Is that with the plus ten?

ASHLY: Without, so I'm at 33.

MATT: But you do have heavy armor, so you do have disadvantage on your stealth checks, I remember that.

ASHLY: With ten, it's 23 again.

MATT: There you go, it's still pretty good.

SAM: 39.

MATT: There's the numbers!

LIAM: 26.

MARISHA: 21.

SUMALEE: I rolled a d20 plus ten, right? Oh, plus my-- that's why, I was like, it seems low. 27.

MATT: As it's sleeping, the heavy breathing almost audible as you curve around the space where it is, trying desperately to not step on anything that would make a large snapping or shifting sound in its presence. You watch as another comes up.

(groaning)

MATT: Alongside it, (growls), awakens slightly and sits down next to it and while it's not sleeping, is keeping watch as it releases out of its jaw, onto the ground a very bloodied and battered body of some person, you cannot make any details of them at this distance.

SAM: Dead?

MATT: Definitely not living! As you begin to walk, you begin to hear the terrible crunching sound as its giant jaws snap into bone and tear into flesh.

LIAM: You guys, Taliesin's a bear.

(laughter)

MATT: You do manage to just skirt along the side of the bear without any notice from their side. Continuing onward. The secondary hour goes without issue, but you do begin to come upon the outskirts of your recollection of where The Sour Nest resides. You're still a good 100 or so feet away, using the trees at your disposal and you can see now the wall that matches the perimeter. It's a thin, five foot wide wall with a very flimsy rail across the top, but it is a walkway for watch guards to keep an eye out. As you glance at this distance, you can see one figure that's walking the perimeter of the top of the wall, with a heavy crossbow at the ready. They stop and look out.

LIAM: How dense is the forest around this place?

MATT: It's pretty dense. The reason it took two hours to get there is because you're going through the forest. Otherwise on foot, in any sort of open scenario, it would take you half the time.

LIAM: There's no manicured, open place around. It's just nestled among trees around it or--?

MATT: It looks there is manicured to be about a ten-foot distance between the wall and any of the surrounding trees, specifically to make sure that any sort of approaching individuals would be out in the open. You can see now a little bit of light is coming through. It looks like they've cleared out a bit of the canopy, not entirely, but a bit of it to also prevent any low-hanging boughs or branches to curl into the interior of the walls. It's not a massive stronghold, it looks to be approximately a little larger than the Estate Sybaritic that you were at, but it's more for function than beautiful decor. A lot of the wood seems to be old and weathered from rain and dry seasons. It's just a beige- and grey-looking establishment. Pure function.

LIAM: Our lot is hidden in the trees, a ways away?

MATT: Yes. You can barely see it above the wall, but the little bit you can see has that visual and you can see it's a mixture of stone and wood. The edges of the actual structure are stone and then wood is either then placed over stone or wood is the intermediate construction material.

ASHLY: The cart is not back?

MATT: From this perspective, you don't see where the cart would come in.

LIAM: This is where we send an owl.

SAM: Sure.

LIAM: I'm going to send him and it's going to take a moment. I want him to go around the entire place and keep an eye on it and watch it. Maybe 20 or 30 minutes. Are we good with that?

SAM: In his talons, he could bring a little mouse and drop it in there. I'm just saying.

LIAM: How will we-- You and I could talk to the mouse.

SAM: We could, but the mouse couldn't talk back.

ASHLY: Wait, wait, wait, what's our plan here?

LIAM: Well, for now this is easy, we're going to send my owl now. If anything goes wrong, will you please tap three times on my left knee? I go blind and send Frumpkin up.

MATT: Okay, so, Frumpkin makes it up. Tree, waits a moment, tree. The one guard you see doing the perimeter notices.

LIAM: I tell him telepathically to just chill and sit there for a while.

MATT: After a minute or so, the guard just keeps looking out. Jumpy. From Frumpkin's view, down inside, you can see the exterior of this. There is a large collection of brown wood kegs and a couple of small crates that contain materials that you're unaware of. You can see there are two entrances, one at the front and one at the back of the building. There are not windows, but small holes put into the wood and from the inside-- Actually, roll a perception check for Frumpkin, thank you. With advantage, due to the form, because it is with sight.

LIAM: Perception, you say? 22.

MATT: 22. Looking through these curved window ports about that big, essentially large enough to look through and fire through, but small enough to not really allow a person to push through. You can see there's about two inches of stone, so it is a stone structure that has wood as a decorated exterior to it, so it's pretty solid. Down inside, you do see about six horses that are hitched on the back side of it and two carts and a third one that is currently being repaired.

SAM: Those are our carts!

LIAM: How many people do I see down inside?

MATT: There's one up top on the wall. You now see with Frumpkin, thanks to that perception roll, a secondary guard on the opposite side of the wall. It looks like there are two doing a perimeter pass, matching each other so that at any given point in time they have a visual perspective on one or the other's side of the estate. You see one more guard that is inside the courtyard and it looks like two individuals that are not in general attire of the hired hands. The guards are wearing the same hooded cloak and armament as the two that were pulling the caravan up with them.

ASHLY: Those are definitely the caravans? The carts that Frumpkin sees are the ones that we--?

MATT: They are very much. The one that's been broken has been carried along the way and temporarily fixed for the journey, but now has two individuals of plain clothes that are in the process of repairing the cart.

LIAM: Total two up top?

MATT: Two up top, one on the inside that's armed, and two that are currently repairing the cart that appear to be unarmed. You gather from the state of repairs that the arrival was probably not that long before you arrived.

ASHLY: So much for getting the jump on them.

MARISHA: Three guards, two hired hands, and were there two more regular individuals?

MATT: No, there were two guards on the wall, only one you see inside the courtyard, and then two handymen. You don't really know if they work for them full-time or if they're a temporary hire, but there are two men that are not in the general attire of the rest of the guards of the estate that are currently repairing.

LIAM: They definitely don't know any ice magic.

ASHLY: Definitely sorcerers, definitely no ice magic. Definitely. Is it accurate to say that if we were to find Grudge Gang members that were unaffiliated, that we could pay them?

MATT: If you have enough.

ASHLY: Okay, because from where I'm sitting, I don't know how this is going to go much different than what happened before. We might need more people.

MATT: The Grudge Gang, they can be expensive and also they're not keen on suicide missions if they have no stake in it. But if they have a stake in it, and you pay well enough, and you have assurances and enough to back you up, they'll go with it.

ASHLY: Would the Taskers have more of a stake?

MATT: You're not sure. You've never really interacted with them much. You know of them, but because of your affiliation previously, you're pretty insulated from dealing with those folks. You grew up hating a lot of the bits of authority that existed around here and now you're finding yourself having to eat crow for a lifetime of--

ASHLY: It's like my thing. Yeah, it's my new thing: eating crow.

LIAM: Did you say how big the structure within the wall is?

MATT: The structure within, I'd say it's maybe 50 feet on one side, maybe 70 or 80 on the other. It's hard to really gauge the full distance. It's a fairly large estate that's been fitted into a small stronghold.

MARISHA: Could make a distraction in the woods, get one of the guard's attention. Bring them in one at a time. Ambush them. Take their wardrobe.

ASHLY: Or we could watch them for awhile.

SAM: You have a sword that can teleport you. You could bamf up onto the walkway with them and knock one off, and we could kill him.

MARISHA: Between me and Nila, we could actually get in pretty quickly. I could get in with the sword and she could be dropped in as a mouse.

ASHLY: The Iron Shepherds aren't there?

MATT: You don't know.

ASHLY: Frumpkin doesn't see?

MATT: Frumpkin doesn't see them.

SAM: We can certainly kill a guard. That would give us a costume, but what does that get us?

LIAM: They find a dead man on their perimeter and know that someone is fucking with them.

SAM: We can drag his body off and feed it to a bear. Steal his clothes. They'll be like "Where did he go? Where did Phil go? Oh, Phil. You know, that old story." Or we drop in mouse girl and she could run around inside and find out if her son is in there, and our friends.

SUMALEE: I'm so confused. The carts that we see were the ones that I've seen people go into before, but we don't see The Iron Shepherds here.

ASHLY: We don't see where the prisoners are being kept?

MATT: You don't see that, but you know. The basement below. There are three separate chambers: one that's for holding, one that's for breaking, which is torture, and the one that is for display if they have any final approvals by the Jagontoth family that has an idea of where they should be sent to.

SUMALEE: This is our best chance, because there are no Iron Shepherds here.

ASHLY and SAM: We don't know.

LIAM: They could be inside. This is not any better than our chances on the road.

MARISHA: Well, then we do one of two things. We either send in Nila as a mouse to scout to see if The Iron Shepherds are in there, or we wait and we watch and we see who comes in and out. Watch the guard shifts, see when the changeover is.

SUMALEE: I want to go in.

MARISHA: A guard shift would be the most opportune time to attack. When they're changing shifts.

ASHLY: Do we have any interest in trying to get more people?

SAM: Sure. Yes. I don't know how much money we have.

ASHLY: Do I have a sense of how expensive the Grudge Gang is?

MATT: You've never hired any of them, so you're not sure, but the way to ask would be to go find them.

LIAM: Looking through Frumpkin's eyes, was I able to see the entrance through this wall that the guards are up top on? What's the way in here?

MATT: On the opposite end, it looks to be ladders.

LIAM: No gate or doorway at all?

MATT: Oh, sorry. I thought you meant how they got up onto the wall, my apologies. There is a gate in the front and there is a gate in the back. The gate in the back is-- actually, both gates are two dark wood doors that have a brace set down that holds them in place that is held and controlled from the interior.

LIAM: Solid?

MATT: Solid.

LIAM: None of this?

MATT: On both sides it looks like a single brace that comes down from one side.

ASHLY: The back gate, is that pressed against the forest?

MATT: Both gates have about a ten-foot open space before it reaches forest. There are stumps and there are places where trees were cleared out, specifically to give that opening so that they'd have a good idea and good visual on anybody who'd attempt to approach.

MARISHA: Keg, do you know if these people would have a secret entrance into the basement, to the dungeon area? Tunnels?

ASHLY: Do I have some sense of that?

MATT: You didn't work close enough with them to know of any secret passage. I mean, it makes sense. There might be one, but nothing that you've come across. If there is one, it's a well-guarded secret. You have no idea.

ASHLY: Has anything changed since last I was here, that I can tell?

MATT: Not really. They're not into renovations.

ASHLY: Sure.

MATT: If it works, stick with it.

MARISHA: Do the guards sleep here on the estate, or do they go home at night?

ASHLY: I'd assume they'd stay on the estate.

MATT: They sleep on the estate. They're paid essentially as live-in employ guards.

ASHLY: I don't know how we do this.

SUMALEE: I just want to see my son. I want to go inside.

SAM: You want to go in and scout around?

ASHLY: How long does your magic last?

SUMALEE: Good question.

MATT: For you, it's half your druid level, rounded down, so per transformation, it's about two hours.

LIAM: How do you get out if you are in a mouse?

MARISHA: Through a gate.

LIAM: The gates are solid.

MARISHA: I thought you said there was a--

LIAM: That's why I asked.

MARISHA: It's a solid gate?

ASHLY: Well, if she were to run out into the clear area, you could use Frumpkin, as if Frumpkin was hunting.

MARISHA: To pick her up. Helivac her out!

LIAM: Possible.

MARISHA: Owls eat mice. I'm just saying. It makes sense in nature.

LIAM: Could you make yourself a very distinct looking mouse, like a shock of white hair on the mouse head or something like that? Something unique?

SUMALEE: So that your friend wouldn't mistake me.

LIAM: Correct.

SUMALEE: I think I can. A particular type of field mouse.

MATT: You can do that.

SUMALEE: I just want to get close.

ASHLY: Nila, do you promise that if you see your son, you're not going to try anything on your own?

SUMALEE: I know I won't succeed, so I won't. I just want to get a look.

LIAM: Send in the animals.

MARISHA: We'll help you find your son. Keep it together in there, all right?

SUMALEE: I will.

MARISHA: Now, here's the thing: goblin girl and hobo wizard have this spell where they can talk into your ear. You probably won't be able to respond back as a mouse except for maybe squeaks. Squeaks?

SAM: How about one squeak is "yes," two squeaks is "no."

MARISHA: That's good.

SAM: Three squeaks is, "My son's been compromised! Please come rescue me! I'm dying in here! Please come get me!"

SUMALEE: Okay, one squeak: yes. Two squeaks: no. Three squeaks--

SAM: "Oh my god, everything's gone to shit!"

LIAM: Would Comprehend Languages work with a mouse, or no? That would be a different spell, right? Speak with Animals?

MATT: Comprehend Languages has to be spoken languages or written language.

LIAM: I agree, yeah.

SUMALEE: I'm not going to do three squeaks because I'm going to hold it together and I will come out. Right?

LIAM: Yeah, K.I.T. Keep it together.

SAM: Absolutely. You are a strong, powerful firbolg. Are you sure you don't know Pumat Sol?

ASHLY: I knew you were going to say it! I knew it. You were doing so well.

SUMALEE: What is that?

SAM: He's one of you. There's four of him.

MARISHA: "He's one of you?" That's so generalizing and demeaning.

SAM: I mean, they're kind of all the same, right?

ASHLY and MARISHA: No!

SUMALEE: Now it's demeaning.

MARISHA: Matt drowns the future comments.

LIAM: You must know Jareth the Goblin King? You're buddies with him?

SAM: All goblins are different.

MARISHA: Question, where this collection of barrels--

MATT: Green privilege. Go on.

MARISHA: The collection of barrels. Are they on the inside in the courtyard?

MATT: They're inside the courtyard, yes.

MARISHA: How about we use that barrel pile as your meeting point? We'll make sure that Frumpkin's watching the barrel pile, and you get back there when you're done scouting.

SUMALEE: I'm up for it.

MARISHA: You got this, and we're relying on you. So, you know, don't fuck it up.

SUMALEE: There is that word again. It has many meanings.

LIAM: Truth.

MATT: Do you take your form, then?

SUMALEE: Yes, I will take my form.

MARISHA: Oh my god, this is so exciting!

MATT: Nila's large firbolg physicality blinks down to this tiny little field mouse. What characteristic of it do you want to stand out?

MARISHA: I'm so happy.

SUMALEE: The nice white stripe across the top, from its head all the way down.

MATT: It's like a skunk mouse. Like Stripe from Gremlins. All right, there is Nila in mouse form.

LIAM: *Ja*, but we didn't talk about the first part. Frumpkin's got to bring her in there. Buddy, don't eat, just carry her. Stay away from the two on the top, okay? Put her by the barrels if you can. Then come back.

MATT: Frumpkin moseys up to the edge of your shoulder. Looks over towards her. Lands on the ground next to you, does a couple of hops up to you.

SUMALEE: I offer my neck to pick me up.

MATT: For a brief moment you all inhale, and you see the claws have wrapped around the mouse's body. Suddenly, you're soaring through the air, a sensation you've never had before. As Frumpkin makes his way over into the trees, make a stealth check for Frumpkin, please.

LIAM: As he's going, I tell him: Correction, find an out of the way place to sit and watch those barrels. Stealth, you say?

MATT: Yes.

LIAM: For my owl, so I have to go to the other page. The owl page.

MATT: Yes, you do.

LIAM: Which I have ready.

SAM: You have an owl page on D&D Beyond?

LIAM: 13.

ASHLY: That wonderful service?

SAM: Oh god, the house is full of tabaxi!

MARISHA: We sent in a laser pointer! Shit!

MATT: It's the best use of Prestidigitation. Look at the red light! As you're soaring through the boughs, the leaves and the branches soar past, the wind past your face. You get that high view of down into the courtyard as suddenly you go into a steep dive. Within a moment, you're lifted back up and then dropped onto the ground next to one of the barrels. Frumpkin takes off. The guard glances over, and is going to take a shot.

LIAM: Take your shot.

MATT: Natural five! It's going to put it at a nine. I'm pretty sure that doesn't hit.

LIAM: Does not hit my owl.

MATT: (arrow hissing) "Eh, shit," you hear muttered over the side. Seems bored and wanted to shoot at something that looked interesting.

LIAM: You hear beside you: *Arschloch.*

MATT: There you are in the courtyard now.

SUMALEE: I want to go toward--

MARISHA: My terrible map of what I think based on what he drew.

MATT: It's not bad. Immediately glancing around, make a perception check, actually, as you are coming into the courtyard.

MARISHA: Were the porthole windows in the wall, or in the actual building?

MATT: They were in the wall of the second floor.

LIAM: Of the building?

MATT: Of the building, yes.

SUMALEE: Shit! Six.

MATT: It's hard to see any specific areas where you can get in other than the main doors. There is a slight gap between the front door to the entrance and the floor of the interior. Other than that, scooting around the exterior, it's the only entrance you see.

LIAM: P.O.V., two inches tall.

MATT: Yep, right at the bottom. This is some Honey I Shrunk the Kids shit now.

SUMALEE: I should have talked to my friends before to get a plan. Nila's a little confused again.

MATT: You're looking at the building right there. You can see the two guards going along the wall. You hear the sound of work being done on the carts around the side, and all you see is that front door with that slight gap at the bottom. What are you doing?

SUMALEE: I think I want to go underneath the gap.

MATT: Okay. You scoot, squeeze under, flattening out your mouse body and making your way through on the inside. The immediate warmth hits you from the cold exterior of the forest. The inside is, mostly being stone, comparatively, the temperature is much warmer in here. Coming inside, it's still a flat stone floor. It's not very well decorated at all.

SAM: So judgy.

SUMALEE: Field mouse is not looking at the decoration.

MATT: In the sense that comparatively to some other places you've seen here, it's just plain, stone walls. It's very basic. It's *so* basic. Looking inside, there is one curved stone staircase that leads up to the second floor. There is a hall that goes to the left and further down to one side. There is a closed door that leads into an interior chamber, and that's all you can see at the moment. The spiral staircase up, the door ahead of you, and the hall that curves around the side.

SAM: You know it's down.

SUMALEE: It's down where my son could be. Sorry, so I don't want to go up the spiral staircase. What are the other two options?

SAM: Around to the side or a closed door.

LIAM: This floor, upstairs or downstairs.

SUMALEE: Downstairs.

MARISHA: Do the spiral stairs go up and down?

MATT: They only go up, yes.

SUMALEE: I have to pick one of the two doors and hope that it leads down.

MATT: The door or the hallway, one of the two.

SUMALEE: (sighs) I wish I had my smell pouch!

(laughter)

SUMALEE: I'll choose the door.

MARISHA: It's the game show host problem.

MATT: You squeeze beneath the door and immediately see a general mess room. There are a couple of tables and chairs that are pressed up against them. The smell of alcohol and stale, dried meat hits your nose and you can see immediately, sitting in two of the chairs, two members of The Iron Shepherds that are in the process of eating a midday lunch. One of them is a small male halfling. He has a weaselly-looking face. He's in the process of finishing what's comparatively to his size, a large tankard of ale, and eating some sort of heavy starch biscuit meal. Across from him, on the other side of the table, you see a human female barbarian with greasy curls of blondish hair that meet with her fur shoulder and very tattered leathers for decoration. They're both drinking and eating. Catching off the side of the ear, the halfling is seemingly mid-complaint about how, "You know, it really ticks me off that we lost some good catches on the way up here. Boss shouldn't've been so careless with that, but I mean, I'm not going to tell him that. You know, it's frustrating." The woman finishes a bite and a big swig of her glass. "Yeah, well, you got to break some eggs, sometimes." Like she's making some big pontification, some big statement. He goes, "Wise words," and keeps drinking and they go into a quiet state, but there's two of them now present. You do know that at least they've returned and there are some present inside. It does not appear that there's any other entrance downward. There's a secondary door on the opposite end.

SUMALEE: Go to the secondary door.

MATT: Make a stealth check.

MARISHA: Come on, mouse. Come on, mousey-poo. Oh! That's good!

SUMALEE: 17.

LIAM: Squeakers!

MATT: Okay. You dart around the side, beneath a table, beneath a bench, and around the edge. None the wiser of your presence. They give no shifts. You make your way and squeeze past the door on the opposite end. There you come to a suiting room. There are weapons that are hung up on racks. There are a couple of small wooden poles with dowels in the sides that are meant to hold armor, shields and things that are there, additional crossbows and things that the guards probably utilize at different points. This is an equipment storage room. There is another door to the left. Where you entered and squeezed underneath, there is a door to the left that you can go under as well. As you leave and pass that room, you head to a back hallway to this interior part of this level. This hallway continues down and seems to meet the hall that continued around the left side, and then continues on. To the right, there is another door that leads into another chamber.

SUMALEE: Got to do it. Down the hall to the right chamber. This now I know that I didn't have to go down that other hallway, the first one, because that's already met up here, right?

MATT: The other hallway would have continued this way, and the hallway you're just emerging now, meets with it. Then on that right side of it, there is a door that leads into whatever room is the next one over from that mess hall chamber. You head into that room? Heading down that room, it's a small closet-like room, and there is a trapdoor on the ground.

SUMALEE: That's it, but how do I open the trapdoor now?

SAM: Maybe there's a little crack or something.

SUMALEE: That's what I think is my way downstairs, so I go toward the trapdoor, see if I can't get in.

MATT: Make a strength check in your mouse form.

MARISHA: Try and squeeze under? This is when a natural 20 is-- aw.

SUMALEE: Nine, that's a nine.

MATT: Yeah, no. I'll put that at a minus four. Your mouse isn't strong enough to budge the door that is currently--

MARISHA: There might be a hole in the floor or something else.

SUMALEE: I feel like that's the key, but I want to keep looking to see how many Iron Shepherds there may be in any other location that I haven't explored.

MATT: Okay, make a perception check.

SUMALEE: 14.

MATT: As you're pushing against the door, you do hear voices muffled from below. Then you hear what sounds like a laugh, a deep billowing laugh.

SUMALEE: Can I gnaw my way through the door?

MATT: You can! And in a few days, you'll probably make your way through.

SUMALEE: I hear a laugh. Oh, have I heard this laugh before?

MATT: You have.

SUMALEE: Shit. This is enough for me, I know they're down there. The leader of The Iron Shepherds is down there beneath that trapdoor. That's what I believe. I don't know what to do now.

ASHLY: Can you guys talk to her?

SAM: We can send a Message.

LIAM: After a while, yeah.

SAM: I'll send a Message saying: Are you still alive?

SUMALEE: (squeaks)

SAM: She's still alive.

MATT: Sumalee, what are you going to do?

SUMALEE: I am going to stick to my mission to scout. I am going to pull everything I have to go away from the trap door, knowing where it is, and I am going to scurry up and I want to explore that spiral staircase.

MATT: You're heading back into the cross-hallway. Are you following down the hall or are you heading back through the mess room?

SUMALEE: I'll go the hallway this time.

MATT: Okay, you scurry around the hallway. There is nobody in there, so there is no one you are trying to hide from. You make it back to the main entryway, head to the staircase, and it takes you awhile to get up there, because the steps are about that high each. It's a little jump, and then you miss a few and have to stop and skitter back up. It takes you awhile, the better part of about 20 to 25 minutes. You eventually make your way to the second floor. Up there, you can see another hallway and as opposed to the bottom floor, which had an L-shaped hallway that went around, this one has a perimeter hall. There are those porthole windows that are carved into the stone, two on each side. As you come up to the top, the hall goes around and there's a central chamber on the inside, or chambers if they're divided. You can see immediately on the second floor, a door directly available to the one that's just north of you. You don't see any other door on this particular corridor.

SUMALEE: All right, let's crawl under that door.

MATT: You scoot beneath that door and inside there, you can see a number of beds. You see four different beds that are lined up. You also find a familiar smell: other mice. Specifically, the urine of other mice.

SAM: Ugh.

MATT: You glance over and in the corner you can see one of the comforters that has been partially eaten and pulled down and tugged. There is a slight hole in the stone on the edge. You can distinctly smell that there are other mice that live in this space.

SUMALEE: Is there anyone in the beds?

MATT: You don't necessarily know if they are in the beds at all-- There's nobody in the beds. Sorry. Yeah, nobody on the beds.

SUMALEE: No people to be seen anywhere?

MATT: No, not in this room.

SUMALEE: Okay. What else can I cover? I want to cover everything and gather as much of the layout

MATT: We'll say as you move into one of the other rooms, the next two, you do notice that there are two other chambers. This upper floor is divided into three different chambers. There is the wide one that has the four beds, there's one that has two other beds, and there's one that has a singular large bed. This one room is almost like a master bedroom. You gather this is probably the room that Lorenzo sleeps in. It's a wider bed. It has, of all the other middling elements of comfort, this one comparatively is more extravagant, more comfortable. The layers of cushions--

SAM: A Dwendalian king.

MATT: Goddamn it, Sam. Make a perception check.

SUMALEE: Good. 19.

SAM: Semen stains.

(laughter)

SAM: Everywhere!

SUMALEE: That's what the mice are eating.

MATT: You look up and there is a makeshift table on the side of the bed, and a stone platter that sits on there, and the remains of a meal. The smell in here is old and slightly decayed, like something had died. You glance up and you can see some a bit of graying flesh and a faint glisten of white.

SUMALEE: Oh, god. I want to explore. I want to get closer.

MATT: Okay. There is an edge of the bed that you can eventually scurry up and use that to climb up onto the bed itself. The bed is bowed pretty heavy. The actual bed was wide; whatever weight it's carried from Lorenzo is sunken rather deep in there. It's a bit of a pit as you crawl across it, the blankets tossed and folded over. You make your way to the edge and look over to this platter and what you see appears to be bones. Bones that are covered in strips and elements of leftover meat.

SUMALEE: Do I know what kind of meat?

MATT: There is a skull. A tiny skull.

SAM: Oh boy. That's not good.

SUMALEE: An animal?

MATT: Not animal.

SUMALEE: I'm almost about to squeak three times but I'm going to hold it together. I want to get out now.

MATT: You make your way down off the side of the bed and into the hallway and begin to turn around towards the staircase down. As you begin to descend the staircase, you hear heavy footsteps making their way towards the base of the stairs. (thumping sounds) You hear the shifting of leather. Make a stealth check... with the mouse's dexterity which--

SUMALEE: Oh right. Oh, that's probably better with the mouse than with Nila.

MATT: What did you roll?

SUMALEE: Seven.

SAM: You've got luck.

SUMALEE: Oh yes, thank you! Luck! Thank you!

MATT: Go ahead. Use that luck point.

SUMALEE: Using my luck point. All right come on. 20!

(cheering)

SUMALEE: Thank you, Sam! It's allowed!

MATT: Oh yeah, no, I know! I'm so thankful because, as you come down the staircase, you see, looming up, towards the muscled form of a tired, but intent to peruse his domain, Lorenzo, making his way up the same staircase. No glaive in his hands. As you step up, you manage to wait for the right moment, hiding in the shadow of the step. As his legs cross over, you dart down to make your way, and he doesn't see a thing. You make your way back down into the main entryway to this, back out under the main entrance under the door. You are now in the courtyard. You head on over to the barrels.

SUMALEE: Yes! Squeak, squeak, squeak! Come get me!

MATT: Frumpkin has kept watch, specifically sees the mouse return. Darts down and snatches you up in your form and swoops up. Make a stealth check for Frumpkin. The same guard is getting slightly--

LIAM: That's a 17.

MATT: 17. He glances over and sees Frumpkin dart down and goes "I gotcha."

SAM: Oh no!

MATT: However, still--I mean good for you!

SUMALEE: Good for Nila!

MATT: Still a natural two. Another bolt goes off. Frumpkin goes up into the trees, back down to you guys. They are waiting patiently, watching as the owl returns and on the ground releases the mouse form of Nila.

MARISHA: (clapping) Awesome! What did you learn?

MATT: She is still a mouse.

ASHLY: Can she become not a mouse?

MATT: If she wants to.

SUMALEE: Yes, I would like to shift out of my mouse form.

MATT: Okay.

SAM: Tell us everything!

MARISHA: That was awesome!

LIAM: What was?

MARISHA: She didn't die as a mouse.

LIAM: That's true.

MARISHA: She turned into a mouse and then came back and was helped back out by your bird-cat! That's awesome!

LIAM: Did you learn anything?

SUMALEE: I did. It's terrible. I don't know if I saw my son. I know where they are keeping people. I know where they are keeping their prisoners. There is a trap door. You can get through it, through a mess hall and through another room and a hallway. There are two Iron Shepherds eating in the mess hall. There are, I think, many under the trap door.

LIAM: Many?

SUMALEE: Well, I saw beds. I saw six beds, plus a big bed. The big bed belongs to the leader.

ASHLY: What do you mean you don't know if you saw your son?

SUMALEE: He was eating something. I don't think it was him, but it looked like he was eating--

LIAM: One of these in the mess hall?

SUMALEE: No, just the leader that was eating something that didn't look like an animal. It looked small.

ASHLY: Jesus Christ.

SUMALEE: Like my son size.

LIAM: How many people? You said two?

SUMALEE: There were six or seven beds, and I heard voices under the trap door. I know they're there. My son is not dead. He is there underneath the trap door.

LIAM: I pull some paper out and say, "Can you draw these rooms?"

SUMALEE: Yes, I will do my best.

MATT: I'll have an actual sketch for you next time.

SUMALEE: Thank you!

LIAM: That's cool.

MARISHA: We know that there are members of The Iron Shepherds here, and we know they have beds here. Wait until the fall of night?

LIAM: Yeah.

MARISHA: Take out the guards, kill them in their sleep?

SAM: I still would like some help, maybe one extra hand.

ASHLY: How much time do we have until nightfall?

MATT: Until nightfall? I'd say with the two-hours travel from the morning, you'd have probably another six seven hours.

MARISHA: How long is it to travel to get back to town?

MATT: If you are heading straight south to the town, it's maybe another hour. Well, actually a little less than that.

MARISHA: Not as far as I thought.

SUMALEE: I wish I knew if there was another entrance or exit underneath that trap door. I couldn't get in, but I heard the voices and I heard many people under there.

MARISHA: If I know anything from my time in the criminal underworld, it's these people always have secret passageways in and out. We could do like a wide walk of the perimeter, see if we find anything out-of-place in the forest. See if there's a path, and if we don't find anything, make our way back into town. Look for a hired hand.

LIAM: Well, I like the idea of an extra hand or two to back us up, but I also agree with you. We go in at night and try to take the guards, who are watching quietly, hopefully. If that is the case, we can go in and get our friends, and if we do that successfully, then we can burn these ones in their sleep.

MARISHA: Again with the burning thing.

LIAM: Write what you know.

MARISHA: So. Let's search around and see if we can search the woods.

SAM: Do a perimeter check?

MARISHA: Perimeter check.

SAM: Looking for secret entrances!

MATT: All right. I will need both stealth checks from all of you.

MARISHA: Super stealth.

SAM: Stealthy searching!

ASHLY: I'm at disadvantage?

MATT: You're disadvantaged with your stealth check.

ASHLY: Well, I got a one, so there's not going to get much worse than that.

MATT: As you are having this discussion, what you can only amount to be like a large pile of pots being dropped onto the ground, Keg gets her foot caught right underneath a nearby tree root and just (crashing sound effect) onto the ground. Glancing over, you immediately see that one guard that was shooting at Frumpkin go like, "Hey, hey hey hey!"

SAM: (whispering) Hey, let's run back to town.

MARISHA: Run! Yeah run! We run back to town. Fuck the perimeter search.

MATT: Heading southward to town or, where are you doing?

SAM: Southward to town.

MARISHA: Away directly from the building.

MATT: All right, and you guys go running as fast as you can towards town.

ASHLY: Sorry sorry sorry!

(laughter)

MATT: Charging through the Savalierwood to find what hopeful aid or fortune you can. And that's where we will end tonight's session.

LIAM: Good game.

MARISHA: Great game!

MATT: Well done, guys.

SUMALEE: I didn't have it in me anymore to do any more.

(laughter)

SUMALEE: I've already seen such scaring things!

MATT: All right. We will pick up on that next Thursday, with both Sumalee and Ashly.

ASHLY: Look who's here!

SAM: Look at this guy!

TALIESIN: Goddamn it, you people! Hi!

SAM: I'm Taliesin Jaffe.

MARISHA: How was it from the lobby?

TALIESIN: It was about ten seconds behind, mostly. Hi guys.

SAM: Were you the little boy being eaten?

TALIESIN: I was, in fact, the bear. Thank you to all those that guessed. I was the bear.

MATT: Missed an opportunity.

TALIESIN: Ah not yet, not yet! Ugh! Okay.

MATT and TALIESIN: Maybe next week.

MATT: Anyway, thank you guys! Amazing job! Sumalee, amazing!

(cheering)

MARISHA: Yes, Nila!

MATT: Thank you guys for coming along with us. For those of you who we will see at Comic-Con, we will see you there! If not, you will see our panel on Tuesday in place of Talks Machina, so you can get caught up. In the meantime, just know that we love you. Have a wonderful weekend, and is it Thursday yet? Good night!

[music]