

A Friendly Game of Cards (A1)

Grand Duchy of Adventure

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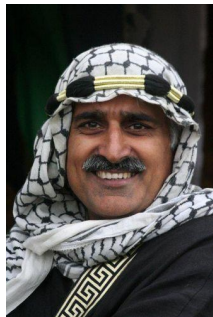
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Nytdain, 1st of Thaumont, 1001AC

The Deal

The traveler shuffled the cards like a pro. [Griffin](#) glanced at his friends. Burik raised his eyebrows in a look of apprehension. Akaios merely cracked his knuckles and attempted to look tough. The other player was another local, [Markos](#), a livestock trader. The traveler was a Ylari by his dark skin and hair, not to mention the wavy bladed blade at his side, though he spoke Thyatian perfectly, had less of an accent than [Burik](#) did, and he speaks Thyatian better than Traldaran. Probably passing through with one of the early season caravans from the north.

[Three Dragon Ante](#) was a popular game at the Shadow Dragon, and apparently in distant lands as well, for the Ylari knew it well, in fact, his horde was the biggest so far in the game. Markos, with the smallest hoard, was the closest to losing. Griffin was not ready for this game to be over yet. He could still catch up to the Ylari, he was sure, if they could manage to continue the game for several more gambits.

[Akaios](#) breaks the silent concentration on the game by blurting out, "Hey, did you hear that the northern ranches have been losing livestock? Some sort of monster come down out of the hills they say. Might be an Owlbear or Dire Wolf or something. The farmers out there have put up 10 Royals to whoever puts a stop to it and [Lady Penhaligon](#) said she would match the reward as well! We should go out there and take care of it!" He lifts his tankard and downs his beer in one gulp, slamming it back down, nearly knocking over the entire table.



Burik jumps at the commotion and sneers at Akaios. “We should have gotten on with the Gnome Caravan and traveled south to Specularum is what we should have done to earn some coin. And at least that way we would have had somewhere interesting to spend it!”

Griffin looked back and forth from this cards to the other men around the table. Akaios was babbling, which meant that he didn't have much and was trying to get folks not to notice that fact. But Burik was jumpy, so he did have something, and was afraid someone would notice. The Ylari was quiet, efficient, and gave little away. Markos was struggling just to stay in the game, and might lose it all if he had to buy a card and the deck didn't like him. That left himself. He had what looked like a solid hand. Several good dragons, and a dragonslayer if someone had a higher one earlier in the round. The Ylari led off, and the round was on.

Griffin tossed one of his good dragons late in the round and filled out his hand with a few lower-lever evil dragons. He smiled - those could be handy for emptying the pot. Then Burik dumped Bahamut, and everyone had to hand over ten markers. Bastard. But played too early, Griffin thought. Still, it put Markos in debt, and would likely make this round the last. He sloughed a low evil dragon to snag some gold from the pot while he could, but it was obvious he was not going to be tonight's big winner. Hmmm...

“So, Akaios, about that Owlbear. Where did you say it was? You boys want to head out there tomorrow?” He looked at his large, drunken, friend. “Maybe leave a little late? Like after Burik regains consciousness?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Burik shot him a glance as the Ylari opened up the next gambit. It looked as if he had just a bit more gold in his hoard than Griffin now. Maybe it was time to make a move. Markos was just about out. He seemed out of the game already. He seemed to be watching the door an awful lot in the last few rounds.

Akaios ordered a round of drinks for the table. He was always so generous with the money he wouldn't be winning. Griffin assumed that he must currently be in the good graces of his father, for his purse was indeed fat this evening. Who knew what it would be like next week, after they had another of their falling outs over who knows what.

“Yea, the Owlbear, we should totally head out there and check it out. The Guard has been so busy securing the roads for the last week, they probably won't have time to look into it for few more days. And anyway, what good would the Guard be tracking down some Owlbear, ha!” His last comment, spoken just a little too loud, brought a hard stare from a few off duty Guardsmen sitting at a nearby table. One started to get up, but Griffin saw his friend put a calming hand on his shoulder and the two went back to their conversation. Akaios was completely oblivious to this reaction and he continued on, talking about some story his uncle once told him about Owlbears, or was it Bugbears, he couldn't remember, but apparently it wasn't that key to the story anyway.

“If we’re heading up into the hills, we should probably bring Eran with us, you know, because of the forest and all,” Burik smiles something of a sickly looking smile. Griffin grins sheepishly back, remembering their last foray into the wilderness. Akaios bursts out laughing at mention of this expedition and spills his beer all over the table and himself.

“Dammit!” he shouts as he jumps up, flinging beer everywhere, mostly on the Ylari traveler’s face. The man, who had been in fairly good humor for the majority of the evening now takes a sour look. He turns and stares deeply into Griffin’s eyes, the foreigners black orbs seem to burn a hole right through the young Karamaikian. “Let us end this,” he speaks quietly and confidently.

In a surprisingly unexpected turn, Burik makes a bold move at the end of the last gambit, pitching several evil dragons and then dropping the Druid to take the win for the gambit. Markos, due to debt, had to throw in his last marker, thus ending the game. Burik, thinking he had at last turned the tide and taken the lead of the game rose in victory but was brought to a standstill by the wide smile of Ylari. “It was a good game, friends. You play well. Your strategy is not the same that I am used to, but you need to count your talons again, young friend. By my calculations, and I never count wrong, I have 7 more talons than you, and that makes me the winner.

Burik stutters, dumbfounded as he quickly counts through his hoard while the Ylari slides half of the pile of Coronas and Kopecs toward him. Akaios slams his meaty hand down on the table, cursing, then laughing. The Ylari then swiftly divides the remaining coins in half, then half again. He scoops up the small stack for the house and signals for [Yurin](#), the portly Traladaran tavern keeper, for another round of drinks. “One more round of drinks for my new friends here, on me!”

The Job Offer

Markos puts his head in his hands, looking down at the table, still occasionally glancing over toward the door of the inn. Burik and Akaios both stand, toasting with the jovial Ylari traveler over the outcome of the game. As a mug is shoved into Griffin’s hands, he cannot help to over hear Markos quietly cursing to himself under the din of the celebration.

Taking a pull on his drink, Griffin slides up next to Markos. “What’s the problem, *tovarisch*? You win some, you lose some.” His voice drops lower as he leans close to his friend. “Or is there something else that’s got you jumpier than a cat in a room full of rocking chairs? You expecting unpleasant company perhaps?” And he casts a long look at the tavern door.

Markos looks up at Griffin and manages a weak smile, “Trouble? Yes, my wife. I’m sure to catch hell from her when she finds out I’m here gambling... and losing! I should have

been home hours ago, but I thought I could take some coin from that Ylari.” He shakes his head and starts to get up, downing his drink in one big gulp. “Thank you, boy. You are a good kid, for a Thyatian. But, hey, you and your friends looking to make some real coin? I might know of something. I was supposed to send some swords to help a friend guard a shipment of horses, but I’m thinking that I’ll be part of that as well. You interested?”

Griffin nods. “Perhaps, perhaps. When, where, and how much? You know, the usual.” and he smiles at his morose friend.

“Well, I’ve got this friend of mine, business associate really. He’s a horse trader from a little homestead out east of here, past the moor. Good trainer. Takes wild ponies from the moor, breaks ‘em, trains ‘em and trades ‘em. Name is Pyotr. Good guy, bit old fashioned, but still a good fella. His brother, Stephan came through a while back and asked me to pull together a crew for him. Said he’ll pay 100 Royals each to take ‘em from Suskiyn over to Rifillian. The crew is to meet him in Kelvin on the 7th and he will arrange for passage to Suskiyn. Not a bad deal. Shouldn’t take more than a couple of weeks tops. Get out and do a little traveling, see the world, you know, that sort of thing!” Markos is looking a little happier as he goes over the job offer. “He wants a crew of about 8 to make the trip. Able bodied, good with a blade. The wilds can be dangerous. I figure I can round up a few more boys either here or in Kelvin if you get your friends to join us. It’s good coin if you’re interested.”

Markos looks again back at the door, “It’ll take a few days to get down to Kelvin, so I’d like to get moving in the next day or so, I know you all were talking about heading...” He is cut off by a loud crashing as the door to the tavern is nearly smashed off its hinges. In comes marching Markos’ wife, Ergae. She immediately spies Markos and lets out a screech!

“Gambling and drinking again, you wretch! You have work to do at home! Get yer lazy ass up and get home!” She grabs Markos by the ear and drags him out of the chair and toward the door.

He looks back at Griffin sheepishly and calls out, “Let me know, boy. This needs to happen!”

Another Job Offer

Several seconds of utter silence hangs heavy in the air of the Shadow Dragon, then Akaios breaks the silence by bursting out laughing. Soon everyone is joining him, the bard has begun playing again and everything is back to normal. Akaios and Burik continue talking nearby to the Ylari traveler. “Griffin, you bastard, get over here, our friend Nizam here is offering us a job!”

Trying to play it cool, Griffin grabs his mug and wanders over to the other table. “All right, boys, what’s all the commotion? I was just talking to Markos about another opportunity. I may be too busy to take on another job right now, but I’m willing to listen. Nizam, you say you might have some work for us?”

“Yes, yes, come close, I do not want the world hearing of my plans,” Nizam motions for the gathered friends to lean in close. “I am have come here with the caravan, traveling from Selenica and beyond in the great desert. Last year, my partner was traveling back home from Specularum with a caravan that was attacked by Gnolls and Frost Giants in the mountains sometime before arriving at the Duke’s Road Keep. During the attack, my partner was separated from the main group and he was able to get away from the battle with some valuable goods and gold. He managed to fall and wound himself in his escape and could not travel on carrying the treasure, so he hid it in some ruins he managed to stumble upon. After resting for several days, he managed to make it through the mountains to the Keep where he was reunited with the other survivors of the caravan. Eventually, they made it back home.”

Nizam looks around to make sure nobody else was listening in on their conversation, and satisfied that they had relative privacy, he continues.” I have a map that my partner made, leading back to the location of this lost treasure. I am not familiar enough with the area but you all seem to be brave souls, plus I feel that I owe you for taking most of your gold earlier!”

Akaios bursts out, “Then let us see this map then, friend!” He starts to stand, but sways a bit. Burik puts his hand firmly on the large Thyatian’s shoulder and helps him sit back down.

“Be quiet, you oaf. You’re drunk! Stop telling the whole tavern our business,” Burik hisses at him.

Griffin ignored his friend’s outburst as he pondered the Ylari’s offer. *A treasure map? Really?* And a treasure lost in the mountains, with only Gnolls and Frost Giants to deal with? Right... Still, for the right price, it could be something to work towards. With Akaios and Burik, and maybe Eran and Ree, maybe they could handle it. Need better gear, though. Now, what’s the catch?

As Griffin ponders this Nizam and his map, listening to the stranger talking about the caravan and his partner, he realizes that the Ylari is not trying to *SELL* the map, he is trying to put together an expedition himself to recover the lost valuables. He offers to give up to 40% of the recovered value, which he estimates at probably \$100,000 worth. He also agrees to pay for general expedition expenses as well.

Burik's eyes widen as he starts trying to calculate the amount of gold that could be his share on an expedition like this. He quickly turns to Griffin, his eyes begging him to say yes.

Griffin looks at his young friend, then shakes his head. "You going to take on Frost Giants, Burik? With what, your daddy's sword?" He turns his attention to Nizam. "First, I want to thank you for considering us for this opportunity. You flatter us with your esteem." Griffin's merchant roots seem to kick in as he talks with the foreign trader. "This is not something to be undertaken lightly. We would need to get better gear, probably wouldn't hurt to get some experience under our belts." He leans back, "So, while I acknowledge the merits of the quest, the risks outweigh the rewards, my friend." Then he leans back in, "At least at the present time. If you were to return to Penhaligon some time in the future, and have not been able to pursue this before then, we," and he looks at Akaios and Burik, "we would be more than happy to talk again." He nods at the bar. "Yulin should know where to find us."

"Ahh, very well, my friends. I seem to have underestimated your abilities. If you change your mind, please find me, I will be in town at least until I put an expedition together," Nizam stands, bows and then excuses himself. Burik and Akaios spend a few minutes complaining about losing the opportunity.

Griffin holds up his hands. "Hey hey hey. I didn't say "No," I said "Later." Can you think of anyone else in town that could take on Gnolls and Frost Giants? No? Then either he'll find someone to try this, they'll get slaughtered, and he'll be more desperate when we talk next, or he'll scour the town and NOT find anyone, and again he'll be more desperate. 40% is just the start of negotiations, guys..."

"Now, I hope you're not too busy these days. Here's my plan. We grab our gear and Eran and head up to find that critter the Lady Penhaligon is offering a reward for. Then Markos needs some guards to accompany a herd of horses from Suskiyn over to Riflian. If we can make it to Kelvin by the 7th, it pays 100 royals for a few weeks work. How's that sound?"

Akaios is not listening to Griffin's plan, his attention has been captured by a young tavern girl who keeps passing by the table, swishing her skirt in his direction. Burik scowls and grits his teeth then mutters, "Yea, 100 Royals is good. You going to find Eran then? I'm going to head home, see you in the morning, bright and early," he looks over at Akaios, then smiles. "At least one of us is getting what they want tonight!" He hops up and heads out of the Shadow Dragon.

As Griffin finishes his drink, he spies Ariadne standing in the back door of the common room. She gives Griffin a hard look. She shakes her head disapprovingly and then turns and leaves the tavern.

Griffin says "Akaios! Meet at the gate, first thing in the morning! Akaios!" The young man

starts, then looks up. "Right, right, first thing. Uh, I gotta do a thing. See you tomorrow." and he heads off after the new girl. Griffin finishes his mug and heads out the back door. He doesn't see Ree on the street, so he starts down towards her place, hoping to catch up. As he passes a dark alley, he smiles and stops. Speaking to thin air, he says "So, what have I done now, Ree?"

Ree

A quiet but raspy voice comes to his ears from the darkness of the alley, "100,000 in silver and you passed on it? I can't believe you passed on it!" Ariadne steps forward from the shadows and slams her fist into the nearby wall. "That's a literal fortune, you know!"

Griffin shrugs. "Can't spend it if my corpse is rotting in the mountains, now can I?" He grins, "Anyway, it wasn't 100,000 silver. It was 40,000, and we would be taking a huge risk."

She stepped out of alley, turned and walked slowly down the street, slow enough that Griffin knew he was supposed to follow her. He stayed close, but not too close, he knew she really liked her space. Ree was a good girl, though she could be tough to get along with sometimes. She was a smart girl, though it seemed to Griffin that he spent almost as much time getting her out of trouble than not. Many of the other townsfolk looked down on her due to her mixed Elven and Human heritage, but that wasn't her fault, was it? Even his friends struggled to get along with her, especially the Elf Eran. But he had taken her under his wing and they had had some interesting adventures already.

"I might just go and find him later and get my own crew together. I'll find that stash of loot myself. I don't need your help!" She had worked herself up into a bit of a frenzy by this point.

"Now, now, don't go doing anything hasty. I didn't say 'No', did I? I have a couple of jobs in the works that I want to get to, first." He pauses, and gets a strange look on his face. "And how exactly did you hear that, anyway? You weren't even in the room! Or were you?"

She smiles at him with those thin, Elvish lips and her eyes narrow to mere black dots. "You know I have my ways, I hear things, especially when it involves money, large sums of easy money!" She turns again and walks off. "So what is this other thing you have going on tomorrow with your jerk friends? Nevermind, I don't care anyway!" She breaks into a light jog, trying to distance herself from Griffin. "Maybe I'll see you in the morning!"

Griffin considers going after her, but decides against it, she was in one of her moods, best to leave her to herself. He considered going to look for Eran tonight, but figured he wouldn't be able to find him in the dark. Though Eran lived in [Penhaligon](#), he normally camped out in the surrounding wilderness. His camp was never in the same place more

than a few days, but Griffin knew of some of his regular haunts and had a hunch he could find him in the morning.

Griffin shrugs and heads back to his tiny abode. Tucked up under the eaves of Mother's Sticky Buns, he was her only boarder - the rest of the place held apprentices and her extensive family. Still, it was cheap, warm, and cozy. And he could usually score fresh rolls in the morning to munch on with his morning coffee. He ponders that thought, and concludes that stocking up on some extra staples from her in the morning would be prudent before heading out into the Wild Lands.

He climbs the stairs and then a ladder, closes the hatch, and pulls off his boots. Something is bothering him, but he can't put his finger on it. Something the Ylari said maybe? He'd have to ask Ree next time he saw her. Now he was too tired to think of much but sleep.

Loshdain, 2nd of Thaumont, 1001AC

Getting the Crew Together

The morning comes too soon for young Garrett Constantine, but he quickly rises as the wonderful aromas rise from Mother's shop below. He dresses and gathers his gear before descending below. He gathers a large armload of firewood and stacks it inside for Mother then fetches her a few buckets of water from the well. She thanks him in the form of coffee and a sticky bun and a few rolls and some dried fruit for the road.

He sets off, heading for the gate to meet Burik and Akaios, stopping to grab a few days of rations just in case. Though it is early, the streets are already busy with shoppers, merchants and city guards. Another caravan must have arrived because he can see handfuls of unfamiliar faces moving about. He keeps his eyes open for Ariadne, but he doesn't see her.

Map of Penhaligon



At the gate, Griffin saw Burik and Akaio waiting. Burik looked ready to go, though

Akaio looked like he could have used a few more hours of sleep. Griffin tossed them each a sticky bun. Akaio devoured his in almost one bite while Burik enjoyed his slowly.

They left town and followed the Duke's Road north toward the farms, stopping just outside of town to find Eran. Griffin found him at his riverside camp. The Elf was already up and cleaning some fish he had caught. He greets his friends merrily, "Good morning friends, what brings you to my camp? Going after some Owlbear today?" Eranthil explains that he had also heard the rumors and done some preliminary scouting of the area the previous day and has a good idea of where to start looking for the creature. "I figured you all would be interested in checking something like that out. With caravan season upon us, most of the city guards will be busy, leaving this type of thing to us. I think it would be best to devise some sort of plan to try to run the creature out of the area, no reason in killing it if it's not necessary, right? If we can find its lair, we might be able to scare it off, back up into the hills, though I wonder what might have driven it down here in the first place, hmm," he ponders this question then stops and frowns, "What's she doing here?" He nods his head to the small stand of trees between the river and the Road.

Griffin sighed and turned his head. He could tell from Eran's tone that it was Ree. "She's probably hoping to come along and help us deal with some Owlbears, Eran. That going to be a problem?" He already knew it would. What would it take to smooth this over?

"C'mon out, Eran, let's hash this out." He put his arm around the Elf's shoulder. "What's the problem? She's okay in a fight, and almost as sneaky as you. She could be useful."

The Elf grunted. "Yes, but now we are five instead of four. She cuts into my share - her coming along costs me 10 coronas. I'm not sure she's worth it."

Griffin hears an intake of breath that hints that Ree is listening and about to say something to make things harder. He holds up his finger and wags it back and forth where, hopefully, Eran can't see it. She holds her tongue for the moment.

"Oh, is that all you're fussing about?" Griffin chides. His voice drops low. "Tell you what - IF you track us this owlbear, AND we collect the reward, I will give you \$10 of my share to deal with your 'concerns.'" He looks the Elf in the eye. "Now, if that solves the problem, can we get on with things? As the farmers say, we're burning daylight."

Griffin waits. He knows that the money is not the problem, but he also knows that Eran won't admit what the problem really is. Elves have a distinct disapproval of half-Elves in general, and, he sighs to himself again, Ree didn't make it easier. But hey, you do what you can.

Eran chews his lip for a moment, then shrugs. "That will do. We should go." And he turns and heads north up the Duke's road, not looking back.

Griffin turns and bows, gesturing up the road. "Gentlemen, lady, I believe that's our cue. Shall we?"

Burik and Akaios shoulder their gear and fall in behind the Elf. Griffin waits for Ree, who walks up beside him. She doesn't look at him. "You didn't have to do that, you know. I don't need any favors."

Griffin smiles. "Hey, we may not find anything anyway. Nuthin' from nuthin', carry the nuthin', yep, still zero. Besides, I can always get it back with a few games of cards. Eran's got more tells than Burik and Akaios combined." He glances out of the corner of his eye and could swear she almost smiles.

The band of Penhaligon youth trek north away from town, passing several small farms and homesteads along the way. There is some bickering amongst the group. Eran and Ariadne continue to not get along. They pass 2 small caravans heading into Penhaligon from lands beyond.

Eventually, the Elf leads them off the road and to the east past the Vakkos farm and into the forested hills.

Continued at [We're Going on an Owlbear Hunt \(A2\)](#)