

PREFACE

It has been many years since I've endeavored to write my personal experiences down on paper. But alas, how is Tristol Starweather to be remembered if my feelings and thoughts are not written down in some permanent form to be looked up centuries after I have passed on? There are lots of things in my recent past that should be noted down as well, but I fear that I won't have the time for them. Perhaps through my various entries and random recollections of events as I write these logs the wary reader can piece together the details of my meetings with Shemeska, how I came into possession of The Ubiquitous Wayfarer, and my explorations of one of the Lady's mazes. If I become comfortable with the telling of these tales, or even the entire understanding of them, perhaps I will write them. For the moment though, I shall stick with the present as that is what is in my mind. While I certainly will forget details, I will never forget. It is to inform everyone of my feelings about my deeds and escapades that I am writing these entries, in the hopes that when I am remembered, or at least looked upon, that there will be some sort of definitive answer to the questions people may ask.

VISITING WITH THE MASTER OF BONES

Several days ago I left my sanctum on the edge of the Clerk's Ward in Sigil to make my way through the busy streets and crowded byways to a person I only vaguely recall having met. His name: Lothar, the Master of Bones. The time I remember meeting him was only a short while ago at the Palace of the Jester. It was shortly before my run-in with Shemeska, the same fiend that I have no wish to run into again. She scares me to the very depth of my being, wasting powerful magic on someone who is obviously no threat to her or her schemes, and likely someone who could barely throw a monkey wrench into her plans. I digress though.

The path to Lothar's residence wasn't long from the Portal Jammer, however it was composed of many sites that I had only briefly seen in sigil. The ditch, where the 'water' for the city is supplied, was it's usual disgusting color and smell, and the area about was full of smog that the Great Foundry was spewing forth. I don't think my nose will ever get used to the smell, but only time will tell that. My first impression of the residence or perhaps business where Lothar keeps himself, was, to say the least, unimpressive. At least the street level portion. The burned out guts of a house, obviously quite old and used for more than one berk's temporary residence, were what remained of the front of his residence. I can't believe I've become so accustomed to life in Sigil that I've picked up the phrase 'berk'. Who knows how long before I call myself a cager. Again, I leave the point of my entry. The only unique and clean looking thing in sight at Lothar's place was a stained glass window, obviously protected by some sort of abjuration magic to keep vandals and age from taking their toll. Venturing inside, I began to wonder if I had the right place, but the all too cheery atmosphere seemed to suit the Master of Bones. The light from the window outside shone through and left decorative colored patterns on the dusty floor. Right where the beams ended in their colorful display was a trap door that descended downward. Opening it up and perking my sensitive ears

for any sort of sound below, I proceeded downward into the gloom, which, comparatively was much nicer than the world outside.

In this rather average sized room one couldn't find much except for a few paneled walls, a locked door, and the stairs from whence I came. I look around curiously for a moment, pacing the floor anxiously, wondering where the doorbell was so that I could inform my host as to my arrival. After a moment, I walked up to the locked door and knocked politely at it, expecting some sort of scurry of activity from within, but there was none. From off to my side I heard the dull hissing of a door as it was slid open and naturally I turned to look to see who my visitor was. At first I was expecting Lothar, but this person moved with a bit too much grace and speed for the old man I remember meeting. I presented him with my card and shakily announced: "I am here to see Lothar. He wished to exchange some information with me." This seemed like as good of an announcement as any, and I expected a reply. But instead of a vocal response, the robed figure pulled back his hood and revealed a half-human and half-rat-like face. I patiently held out my card while he sniffed at it, not sure if he was Lothar's door keeper or just someone who didn't think I belonged here.

After a few moments of awkward silence he introduced himself as Tattersshade, King of the Wererats. We spoke for a moment or two about my business here and he either sensed no malice from me, or decided that I was a legitimate visitor and produced the key to the next area of Lothar's Chambers. Stepping inside to the next room, my tail curled around my leg and my ears splayed out in either direction, I gazed in awe and repulsion of the sight that lay before me. Covering every wall in the room, were shelves and on each of these shelves every few feet was a skull. They ranged from human to aasimar, and possibly even some celestials and fiends as well. A few of them had names on the shelf below them, and some of them were just nameless bones. One name in particular caught my eye and drew me over towards it. The tag below it had a large question mark and the text "Will not talk. Fix later." below that. I stared at it for a moment, pondering exactly how to make the dead talk when they didn't want to.

These thoughts were interrupted as Lothar descended the staircase in the room, obviously fetched by his wererat associate. I bowed politely in response to his own bow and greeting and took a seat on the couch conveniently located on one side of the room. We fell to discussing the various facets of Sigil history and ultimately ended up talking of my adventures in the lower catacombs of the Jester's Palace. Suffice it to say that neither he nor I believe that I that I was in Sigil when my associates and I descended down that far. I told him all he was interested in hearing, keeping secrets of The Lady and some of the more important details of the traversal of the catacombs to myself. I lent him my maps to make copies of, which, as far as I could tell were utterly useless. I suppose if one spent long enough down there wandering the mazes and charting the paths you could find a sequence to safely traverse, but that is beyond my ability or my want. That's not to say that I wouldn't like to return to that creepy place and learn more of what it has to tell, but I fear that I wouldn't be able to find my way out again.

Lothar seemed particularly interested in the actual design of the door to the infinite staircase, and the devices I had seen down there. But the things regarding The Lady, or the items that had her touch upon them, he wanted to hear none of. Honestly, I don't blame him. Those things were more than creepy and the less time I spent around them the better. Still, my curiosity is peaked and I would like to learn more. Fortunately

I'm part fox and not cat, or else I might wind up spending all my nine lives in the pursuit of answers to my questions. I explained to him a few details regarding the way out, and some of the things we encountered below, but I kept the actual details of the journey to myself. After all, I don't need him sending servants down there to explore without Jeremo's permission. He'd never forgive such a thing, and irking him is not something I wish to do.

We wound down the discussion with an issue of payment. I honestly wasn't expecting any sort of compensation for my time, nor did I really want any. But he spoke of it as though he was indebted. Rather than argue with him and promise a favor from him in the future, I requested a book of which I've only heard of before. The book is one that Karsus himself wrote regarding magic and anti-magic. I wasn't expecting to actually receive a copy of the book itself, but he just so happened to have one. He explained multiple times that he wasn't a wizard, but for someone who isn't a wizard, he seemed to have an awful lot of wizardly goods. I guess anyone who deals with the dead could use a reference book, or perhaps a future bargaining tool. I was granted permission to browse the book for a period of ten-days. While this normally would have sufficed, I had other plans to take care of in the near future that would keep me from looking it over. Nor do I want to take such a precious item he expects returned out on an adventure. That's hardly the place for such a minor artifact.

Oddly enough, he was interested in loaning the book to me but when I asked to copy it, he asked a future favor of information from me. I'm not sure why I agreed to such a shady character, but I felt that I could trust him. Of course, I might end up a skull on his wall somewhere for all I know. I doubt he'd kill me just to find out what I know, but I don't treasure the idea of my remains ending up in his possession. Imagine sitting with Mystra, or just enjoying the wonders of the afterlife, only to have someone tug on your tail and start asking you questions that you have no choice to answer. Or even worse, imagine having your memories and thoughts recalled to spend eternity in a skull. I would be awfully bored. Regardless of his motives, I agreed to his terms and left with a rather large and powerful book in my hands.

To me, the book represents a wealth of knowledge that all the wizards of my homeland hope to inherit some day. But to Clueless, the one I actually retrieved that book for, it was just a mere toy. Perhaps once he read of the consequences of using the heavy magic he came across, he would embody a new outlook. For some reason though, I doubt the boundless curiosity and the foolhardy desire to explore everything would be so easily abated. I only wish I had the guts to do such a thing. When my frustration reaches a certain level, or when posed with a challenge I know not how to solve, I will often take action on a guess or curiosity, but usually only at those times.

As I made my way back to the Portal Jammer, I reflected on exactly why I was getting this for my companion. Certainly there were more things I could have asked for that were in Lothar's power to give, but I chose this book. True, it might save his life, or at least make him more cautious, but I think there was something more behind it. I had grown to like the fellow and his odd motions at scratching my ears. Perhaps a brotherhood has sprung up between us without me having ever seen it. I suppose at some point I should tell him about the celestial's attraction towards him, or at least, what I suppose could be considered attraction. Where I come from, whispering behind

everyone's back to other people and then going out to a one on one dinner would likely constitute a plan of some sort. Of course, I could be totally wrong.

Despite the fact that Nisha is of a different species, I can't help but feel at least a little comradeship there as well, but who knows if it would ever go anywhere. She's possibly too wild a spirit for me to even get involved with, and likely already has her own kind to worry about, but I still wouldn't mind at least exploring such an avenue. I guess my own loneliness is finally catching up with me, despite being surrounded by friends. I think I should just leave things the way they are and not press for more. It's usually better to just keep things simple, right?

Looking at the time, I realize that I have spent far longer than I intended this evening writing in my journal. It being my first so far I felt it prudent to explain a lot of relationships, and of course I digress a lot into the minor details and tangents. But that's the mind of a mage: always thinking in a different direction when it shouldn't be. I suppose it's time that I retire to my bed for the evening so that I can wake on the morrow and journey with our kobold friend to find her dead pantheon. I'm not sure what she intends to learn from them, but I suppose it would be interesting to explore the astral as I've never been there. I have a funny feeling that we'll likely be getting involved in more than that while there. We can never go anywhere without causing some sort of trouble. And with that, I take leave until I return from my explorations on the astral.

THE ASTRAL, GODS, CATS, AND OTHER AMAZING THINGS

As promised, I return to write again of my excursions in the astral. I really shouldn't be writing this evening before I go to bed, but I feel compelled to write down as much detail as possible before it fades from my mind entirely. Forgive the occasional rambling as a lot has happened in such a short time and it's hard to keep any of it straight.

At first it started out as a simple jaunt into the astral to find a few dead gods and note them down for our kobold friend, but as with everything simple our campaign managed to bring some sort of calamity with it. This time again is no exception. At first, we had to make our way to the outlands and travel inward towards the spire where our first portal awaited us. I don't suppose anyone will ever know if Sigil is at the top of the spire or not, but it does make an interesting philosophical topic when you're in need of a good discussion. After much pondering, walking, and teleporting, we eventually arrived at the portal designated to us by the note our companion had received. The odd thing about the portal was that it existed inside a large broken hour glass, with all of its sand spilled out. All around there were hour glasses as far as the eyes could see. Some running, some stopped, some just broken and laying over. We took a few minutes to examine the portal and found out that the key was permission to use the portal. Certainly we had permission to use the portal. After all, we were instructed to use this particular portal.

After looking around for a short bit, down inside a deep bowl in the ground, we came across an ancient dragon, far older than any I've ever seen before, or would really like to see. After talking to him for quite some time, we learned his name was Chronopsis, the god of Fate. I learned his official title a bit later, or else I would have liked to ask him about my own. It would certainly save the effort of having to remember and write down all my diary entries when I could just learn of them before they happen.

Fortunately for us, he seemed to have a hospitable attitude and didn't must asking him for help. After a few moments of brief bantering back and forth on both sides, in particular from our kobold friend, we were finally given permission to use the portal in the hour glass. On our way out of the depression, we took a few minutes to look at the hourglasses sitting about and realized that each of them had the name of a dragon, or great wyrm, written on them. Taking mental note of a few of the random names, we finally got back to the portal leading into the astral.

Walking through we found ourselves standing the middle of a dull grey-white world. Off in the distance you could see small random shapes floating around, possibly just debris, or perhaps dead bodies of the gods that are no longer worshipped. One of the more interesting things about the astral is that you don't necessarily 'walk' anywhere. Gravity and other effects are subjective, so it's just a matter of what's convenient for you. That's not to say that you can get anywhere instantly, but it's a lot quicker than walking on your own feet. We continued on, following the directions given to us and spotted a few of the large rocky outcroppings that were the bodies of dead deities. One has to wonder what happens to people when they die? Supposedly if you're an outsider you just end up on your home plane again. But, what if you're not? Most of the other people where I come from all think that you'd spend eternity in Mystra's care. I could certainly go for that. Mystra has been kind to me thus far in giving me my talents, and I can't imagine how much nicer she could be if I were on her plane. Of course, when gods die, they don't go to their deity's home plane. They just sort of vanish and end up in the astral. What a chilling way to spend eternity.

Regardless though, we passed several dead deities, Abrymoch and Ibrandul were two if I remember my history correctly, and came across an astral dreadnaught. Fortunately, they don't seem to attack people actually on the astral. Just people projecting into it. I'm not sure what the problem with that is, but they don't seem to like it. As we started nearing the first of the major landmarks along the way we came across an empty Githyanki ship, sort of floating along. We boarded it, constantly on the lookout for a trap, or possibly some raiders waiting to see who'd stumble aboard. I've read stories about astral pirates and their deeds, of course, they could just be stories though. After some time of looking around and poking our collective noses into just about every nook and cranny in the ship, we concluded that no one was home. Or at least, not at the moment. Seeing an opportunity to practice a spell I had learned recently, I decided to legend lore the entire ship and see what happened to the crew. Little did I know I was to be treated to a long and boring history of the entire ship and all of its battles and ports, and every place it had been up until now. Skipping ahead though, it turned out that the crew aboard the ship were abducted, by a Rakshasa and a few loan Gith that were under his employ. Odd, I never figured the two would work together, but I guess something mutual brought them under one roof. They took a few things from the hold and took all the crew as well, including the knight that was aboard the ship. Where they went, I didn't know at the time, but I was sure I was going to find out. A good number of my party wanted to take the entire ship back to Sigil with them, but honestly, I'm not sure how you'd manage such a feat. Portals aren't really that big, and there was no way to reduce the ship to a small enough size to take it with us. We all ended up leaving somewhat disappointed, myself included.

Several hours later we started nearing the corpses we were interested in. However, the corpse of Manzicorian we were approaching had a few buildings on it and some commotion going on below them. It's well known that the Gith were pioneers on the astral, building cities on the remains of the dead gods without actually disturbing them. Surely the Gith hadn't started building cities on another corpse? As we approached we could see a dreadnaught circling the place, a good clip away. Obviously, it was keeping his distance, or hesitant to enter. The kobold checked her letter and realized there was now another script written on it, with a glowing symbol at the bottom. Normally, this wouldn't have bothered me, but it appeared that the letter was informing us about a job we had unwittingly taken. This was only the first of much bad news. Turns out, the letter was from a servant to one Prince Lovistus. I don't know much about devils and the like, but I certainly didn't expect them to be asking us for a favor. I suppose our little reptilian friend has a few people in high places looking for favors that need doing. The letter wasn't really asking much. Just get close to corpse, find out what's going on there, and return the news if necessary. Rather than wait much longer, the kobold wandered right through the protective shield and disappeared from view. Some time later, she returned with a look of determination on her face and summoned our would-be employer here. I don't think she was expecting our summoning this early in the game, but we decided it'd be worthwhile to discuss our payment and the terms, not to mention have an extra body along to help us figure this stuff out. We settled the terms of payment as a favor to be owed in the future. That seems to be a rather popular bargain. A job for a favor. I'm not really keen on the idea, but it seems to come in handy.

As we made our way up towards the dead god, our new companion filled us in on the details of her work and what she was doing. Certainly it seemed like a good cause, and there's no reason why we couldn't help out. At least as far as anyone could tell. As we approached, we realized there were three major buildings. Two that were floating above the god, obviously the headquarters or some other similar base of operations, and a smaller spire that was projecting a strong magical energy. This would most certainly be what was keeping up the shield around the entire place and keeping the dreadnaughts at bay. That thing would have to go if we were to expose the place and help stop what was going on. Landing on the docking platform between to the two floating towers, we cast an invisibility spell on ourselves and first went to our left. A rather wise choice in my opinion as it happened to have a good number of Gith forces inside. Taking care of the first few guards we were soon affronted by a dozen or so more, and a mage. I like being a wizard, don't get me wrong. But I certainly don't like being on the receiving end of some of these nasty spells. Feebleminds, polymorphs, and especially finger of death and disintegration. Nisha's been hit by one or two of those, and not had much luck in avoiding them. I'll have to do something about that in the near future. Continuing though, we dispatched a few more of the gith, and I turned two of them into statues. Clueless, Toras, and Firehowl all seemed to have the Githyanki knight taken care of, and the mage fled before he had much of a chance to be too big of a nuisance. But a mage on the loose is never fun and we all decided to hunt him down and deal with him in the same way most of their race deserve.

Heading up the stairs we were summarily assaulted by a large cannon placed directly in the stairwell. Needless to say, it hurt! Toras, charged up with the rest of us in close pursuit and we finished off what remained of the defending forces. We poked

around some more, setting off a few wards that were a bit too well hidden for Nisha to spot, and eventually departed that tower with a few of the cannons in our possession.

As we reached the door to the other tower, we were all hit by some sort of symbol that was engraved into the door. I trust Nisha with my life when it comes to finding these traps and sigils carved into things, but I'm not sure I shouldn't be helping her out some. Perhaps it would give me an opportunity to get a little closer and learn a few things about her. The first step to starting a relationship is finding out about each other. This sigil, however, didn't seem to effect me. Perhaps I just had a stronger will than it could overcome, or perhaps I just got lucky. Mystra can be mysterious like that sometimes. Walking inside, we went upstairs and came across a lavishly furnished and ornate library. In the center of the room was a small table, some chairs, and a teapot with some chamomile tea. Was somebody expecting us?

Almost as soon as that thought entered in my head, a Rakshasa came into view at the bottom of the other set of stairs leading up. He certainly didn't seem to have a menacing tone about him and was most welcoming. Toras quickly cast a detect evil and not only did he see the aura of the large feline, but a large number of our party as well. This must have been the effect of the symbol from downstairs. I'd have to take it slowly around them, just in case their disposition had changed any. We chatted for a while, somewhere around an hour, before it became evident that the feline couldn't convince us that he and his Gith friends weren't up to anything they shouldn't be, here on the corpse. Our newly summoned companion, who was in charge of this was promptly incinerated by a spell flung at her from the Rakshasa. So much for getting our favor. In almost the same instant, a wall of force dropped down between us and the recently arrived warlock who was standing by the stairs. I knew this couldn't be good. Walls of force protect you from a lot of things, but not spells that don't have to physically pass through it. Power words, gasses, and other non-projectile and ray weapons still function as normal. However this was the least of our worries. Coming up the stairs into the space behind us and effectively blocking us in, were a large number of goblins with what appeared to be large staves and metal tubes mounted on them. Strange contraptions to say they least. They looked much like a miniature cannon and seemed to hurt like one, particularly when used in large numbers.

Seeing that our situation was grim, I had no choice but to pull out one of the highest spheres of casting I had access to. Leveling aim at the wall of force, I tossed a disintegrate at it and watched as the tangible magic quickly dissolved into nothingness. In the same few seconds, I recall summoning my strength to cast another spell. I don't recall ever being able to do this before. Normally casting a spell is so taxing that it takes a few seconds to actually focus on and summon, but here, it seemed to almost flow naturally. This time, I cast one of my recently acquired spells: prismatic spray. I've never dealt with prismatics before, but this spell certainly seems to have all of the bases covered. However, the tiger-like creature just didn't seem to even bat an eyelid at it. Must be some damn Rakshasa ability. Casting spells and the ability to resist them. The warlock however, wasn't as lucky. He was hit by the fifth ray in the spectrum, which I vaguely remember being a flesh to stone spell. In a flash of light, he was turned into stone and then he vanished a moment after that. Obviously a contingency of some sort. I figured one of them was a teleport or plane shift, and the other was likely a heal or some such. Being turned to stone is not something one normally anticipates, but being extremely

wounded is fairly typical in the adventuring work. Life began to get rather interesting after that point. I vaguely remember a loud screeching sound coming from the Rakshasa's pipe, and shaking it out of my head. Followed shortly by a cannon blast, some quickly moving swords and fists, and then another loud wailing sound as the Rakshasa lay close to death. Not knowing what else to do, I summoned up my quarter-staff of force, and took a swing at the injured feline. I felt a sickening thud as it struck true, followed by a silence as he fell to the floor. Almost in the same instance, a flash of light blinded me for a moment and then he disappeared. Firehowl took care of the rest of the goblins while I looked around and tried to figure out what had happened.

Half the party lay on the floor, dead from the cursing wail of the Rakshasa. Why do all evil people want to make one last ditch effort at killing us all. If I were in that situation, I'd make one last effort at saving myself, or my friends and then fade from existence. I guess evil just doesn't work the same way. Not but a minute or two after the few of us who were left alive began to finally register the situation in our brains a small imp popped into existence. I was all set to toast him on the spot, but I had lost the urge after seeing both Nisha and Clueless fall to such an unheroic death. Yes, they went out fighting, but this wasn't how I pictured them ending their lives. The imp carried with him a bag that he turned over to us, before proclaiming that our debt with Lovistus was taken care of. Then he disappeared again. Inside the bag were a enough gems and scrolls for a true resurrection of each of our fallen comrades. If Florian hurried with the casting, we could likely bring them back before they really had a chance to become too accustomed to death. The spells seemed to do their job remarkably well, despite a slight headache that seemed to plague Florian from overexerting himself. At last, we were all back together again and could finish what we started and bring these activities to a halt.

Rummaging through the quarters of both the Rakshasa and the warlock, we were witness to several flashes of light as books, or papers, or some other useful items were teleported from their places in the room. I sort of had the feeling that not everything was warded as a trap. We ransacked both of the rooms, and gathered up what we could find and then set off for the final tower that hopefully powered the field keeping the dreadnaughts away. Inside that tower were some of the most foul and disgusting things I can remember smelling or seeing. Gith bodies mutilated and cut apart, their blood used to scribe a sick and twisted poem on the walls in a strangely intricate pattern up the spire. I certainly didn't like the feeling of the room I was in. Something just wasn't right. Felines being the immaculate creatures that they are, why would they leave the room in such a condition and smelling so? I didn't figure they'd want to smell it each time they entered. However, my concerns were disregarded as simple paranoia and chalked up to the overall freakiness of the place.

Proceeding upstairs, we found the source of the power. A small basin filled with a silvery liquid known as 'god's blood'. Above it, floated an orb that seemed to radiate an evil and a sickness whenever you got close to it. I conjured up an invisible servant to collect the blood for me and place it into a vial. I never thought that casting a spell could feel so fluid and normal, but on this plane, it had a pleasant effect. One I suppose that could be almost addicting if you let it get to you. Continuing though, as the unseen servant performed his task the orb seemed to slow down and the entire building shimmered while loud screams issued forth from outside. Figuring that the dreadnaught had finally seen past the screen and was attacking the building, we all decided to part the

tower as quick as possible. However, when we got downstairs, there were several bodies waiting for us with their eyes fixed upon our souls. As we came down and locked gazes with each of them, I could feel my body getting cold and sluggish, and my mind refusing to work with it. Fortunately, Mystra granted me the will to protect myself from their stares and kept me alive yet again. I'm not sure what the other gods do for their patrons, but I do know that Mystra certainly keeps tabs on those that appreciate her blessings. Again, several of my party members dropped to the ground, pierced to the soul by the stares of the undead creatures on the ground below. We quickly dealt with the bodies, which consisted of several Gith, and another knight, and took the bodies of Florian and the kobold outside. The destruction the dreadnaught was wrecking on the place seemed quite appropriate, but not worth watching at such a close range. We quickly high-tailed it out of there, and watched from a much safer distance. It was at this point, that I learned what those undead creatures were. They had possessed the bodies of our friends and unless resurrected in the next twenty-four hours, they would rise again, their souls eternally trapped in a hell beyond reckoning. Death is one thing I think I can handle, but entrapment of your soul is another thing. I'm not sure I could deal with that, and I figured neither could they. Something had to be done.

Finding the quickest route back to Sigil, we flew over the remains of the kobold's gods, just so the trip wouldn't be a total failure, and saw a pair of green eyes, scrying upon us from afar. I can handle people looking over my shoulder, but I don't like being watched, not matter how much I do it to other people. I suppose the real difference is that they're evil, and I'm not. Or maybe that I'm just paranoid. I'm not exactly sure. Not wanting to waste too much time we finally made our way to the outlands and then back to Sigil. Raising Florian first, we then talked with the spirit of the kobold. Given that her species can be rather weak, it was decided that a partial resurrection wouldn't work. Instead, we should dispose of her body, and find the required components for a true resurrection, which would come from her share. This seemed to satisfy all of us, at least for the most part and we proceeded to have the reptile cremated so the creature wouldn't possess her body and wreak havoc on Sigil. In fact, I still have the ashes sitting on the fireplace downstairs. As soon as we find a place that can order the gem we need, then we'll be able to bring her back.

As you can tell, that's an awfully long story. I digressed in more places than I should, but my ramblings at least hopefully provide insight into how I think and the way I feel, something that many diaries and histories don't portray enough of. However, I think I shall get to sleep. It feels as though I've missed a lot of sleep while on the astral, and I feel the urge to catch up with it. Till next time.

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Due to recent happenings, I felt that it was necessary to add a few more lines to my entry regarding the Rakshasa. After a rather peaceful night of sleep, I awoke to a rather scary and dead silence. There was nothing inside or outside the bar, which is totally uncharacteristic. As I woke some of my other friends, we all heard a strange rumbling noise from downstairs, almost like a growl. Not wanting to walk into a place unprepared I cast a scry spell upon the taproom but got nothing. Something wasn't right. Certainly there was something downstairs, but yet, there wasn't anything, not even a

block spot on the scry. I conjured up a few dozen eyes and sent a few down stairs to see what was there. The moment they got into view of anything though, the disappeared. Not one to be outsmarted I sent a few eyes out the window around to the front of the bar to peer inside. Again, as soon as they entered into visual range of the taproom, they vanished. Something about this was just totally wrong. We walked downstairs and who should we see, but the same Rakshasa we had killed not more than twenty-four hours ago. He made some vague threat about death only being a temporary setback, and as Clueless put it, openly declared war upon us. As if Shemeska wasn't enough of an enemy, now we had a crazed feline. As the vision faded, I got the vague impression of a pair of colored eyes watching us from a distance, hatred and contempt pouring out from them in intense waves. I don't think I've ever felt more loved in my life than at the moment. I jest. This feeling was nothing but pure loathing and anyone would have to have been nothing but evil to have felt any good from that. We all woke up some time later, Nisha still in her sheet, and everyone else looking like they had pretty much had the same wakeup call that I did. Downstairs, breakfast waited for me, which was totally odd. Nisha said something about reminding her to compliment me for something, but I honestly don't know what she's talking about. We enjoyed a good breakfast, talking back and forth idly about a few random things, and then she promised that I'd get to meet her ex-boyfriend. I figure she means a pumpkin pie, but one can never be too sure with her. The rest of the day we spent searching for spell components and cleaning up loose ends: scrying on the warlock and the Rakshasa, both of which didn't bode well, and identifying items. Also during this time we stopped by the great library and compared notes regarding Lord Sidhartha, the Rakshasa, and his clan and learned a few interesting things. Apparently he's got a sister named Brampandra, possibly another self-acclaimed 'lord'. Perhaps it's not necessarily the same creature, but his sister that's threatening us. After all, two albino Rakshasas is a bit rare, and I thought for sure we had killed the first one. I figure Brampandra would be rather upset with us for killing his family, particularly when his clan has already been nearly wiped out.

I will certainly be revisiting this subject in future writings of my journal, so expect to hear what ultimately happens in regards to all of this. For the moment though, I can smell dinner and the faint traces of a pumpkin pie downstairs. So, I shall bid you farewell for now. May Mystra's hand guide your heart and mind.

PIES, FIENDS, AND ONES OWN WORTH

First off, I'd like to apologize for the strangeness of the script in which this is written. It is not under the most favorable of circumstances that I'm writing this entry this evening and it's certainly possible that it could be my last. Admittedly, some of you might be somewhat grateful that my incessant ramblings have come to an end, but hopefully there are at least a few of you who appreciate the time I spend writing down these deeds. I will get to the details of my unique circumstances shortly, but as I was taught, the best way to relate a story is from the beginning, so I shall start where I left off.

Nisha's pumpkin pie was certainly a welcome addition to the evening meal. It had just the right amount of cinnamon and made me think a bit of some of the more interesting meals I used to eat back home. Of course Nisha made a big deal of watching everyone intently, making us suspect her cooking in some way. I figured that I put my

life in her hands often enough that there was little to worry about in the way of some harmless cooking. Besides, if she had added a love potion or some other such concoction to the pie, I would have been quite impressed with her creativity. Not that such a thing would be needed, but I would like to get to know her a little better first.

Later that evening, we happened to spot a few guests that seemed a bit better dressed than most of our normal clientele. Typically this wouldn't have raised much of a suspicion, but after he left, a similarly dressed companion returned and did nearly the exact same thing. Sensing something out of the ordinary, our resident half-celestial bouncer decided to take it upon himself to warn the newcomer of the dangers of stealing from the bar. Needless to say, accusing someone who hasn't done anything yet of stealing is a sticky subject and I don't think he had been exposed to such situations before. It called for a bit more decorum than I think he knew how to put forth and I felt compelled to help him out before he made a scene in the center of the bar. The short of the matter was that I apologized for my associate's rudeness and explained to him that such matters were necessary for our patron's security. Of course, to make amends I offered him a drink on the house and kept a rather close eye on him, just in case he was trying something.

Nearly an hour later, I sent a small prying eye after the berk to keep a watch on him, in case he had intentions of breaking in later. Coincidentally he met with his other companion, discussed a few things, and then headed off towards the Lady's Ward. Later, after discussing the incident with Clueless and Florian, we remembered that the Inn of the Twelve Factols happened to be over in that general direction and they had yet to file their grievance with the courts. For some reason I figured that they would treat the matter with a bit more decorum, but everyone can certainly be different. And besides, all we had at the time was a speculation and nothing more, so it wouldn't do good to bring legal matters into the issue. That evening I stayed up most of the night with Clueless and kept an eye on things just in case our guests decided to make a return to the bar. At some point long after anti-peak I went upstairs and got some rest.

The following morning, we received word that the gem for our kobold friend's resurrection had been delivered. I had intended on stopping by and picking up a ring to protect Nisha from necromancy spells, but she tagged along as well, so she made it somewhat difficult to inquire about one without her overhearing. I enjoyed her company though and found out she's certainly a playful thing. I haven't been tickled in the ribs, or had someone actually play with my tail in such a long time that I'd forgotten how much fun it was. Kids used to tease me a bit because of the tail and the ears, but there were always those that seemed to think them a rather pleasant addition. I don't think I could imagine life without them.

After procuring the diamond we dropped it and the kobold's remains off at Toras' temple so that the resurrection could be performed. We expected the ceremony to take a while, but none of us were really intent on waiting around for the return. Besides, we had matters to attend to before we went to the friendly fiend's auction. Journeying back to the Portal Jammer was, as usual, uneventful. However, as we approached there was a rather loud commotion outside that certainly didn't sound like it belonged there.

A few moments later, we rounded the corner towards the bar and saw the source of the problem. Apparently a rather lousy musician and an even worse poet had decided to take up spots outside the tavern and sing their works to the world. After some rather

militant tactics on Florian's behalf we found out that they were paid to come and sing on our doorstep. And who should be paying them you might ask? None other than the owner of the Twelve Factols. Certainly this meant war. After paying them a rather large amount of jink, we sent them on their new assignment to sing outside the location of their previous employer. Hopefully this would at least perturb them enough to think twice about employing such tactics in the future.

Inside, we received a few thankful claps and offered a round on the house for those patrons that decided to stay and weather the annoyance. Nothing like keeping the patron's happy. It was then that we noticed a rather confused and lost individual among the regulars that were in at this hour of the day. Never being one to miss out on an opportunity to help out a new cager, I decided to offer what little wisdom I could about the city to the newcomer, in the hopes that his time spent here would go just a little bit easier. We chatted for a while, explained a few things to him, procured a vacant room upstairs, and then eventually invited him to the auction we'd be attending in a few hours. Certainly seems like a nice fellow, but I'll admit, he's much quieter than I'd have figured him. That'll likely fade in due time, it always does.

When the appointed hour finally rolled around, it was time to make our way to the auction hall and see what new goodies our fiend friend had procured or made. Certainly this would be an event to remember, not to mention a time to empty our pockets of all our recently acquired jink. I wasn't too terribly fond of having to lower my anti-magic field to gain entrance, but I suppose a policy is a policy, and I had to respect the owner's wishes. Besides, I was assured that the event was adequately protected against magical attack and intrusion.

There were quite a number of people there and certainly a lot of unique items. I must admit, I didn't figure that some of them would sell, but the ones I was present for all seemed to have a fairly heavy asking price. There was even a lot of rather unique celestial wine. The lupinal wasn't all that impressed with the idea of spending such an amount on something she'd likely grown up on. As she put it, I suppose you value a few centuries worth of age more when you're not immortal.

Shortly after the auction for the painter's doll, which happened to be purchased by the person it was imitating, I was summoned outside to meet with someone on an apparently urgent matter. Exchanging trinkets with Clueless, just in case a scry was necessary in the future, I ventured outside into the hall with my new escort. Just around the corner, I saw what could only have been described as a nightmare. Immediately, my ears flicked to either side, and my tail curled around my leg, my submissive and rather skittish attitude becoming a dominant factor in my mood. Standing there, not more than a dozen feet or so, was Shemeska the Marauder. I thought for sure she was going to break me in two the moment she laid eyes on me, but that was far from her intention. She apologized profusely for her horrible behavior the other evening at the Jester's Palace, which I shall write about at some point in the future, and extended a sort of friendly gesture towards myself. Honestly, I wasn't impressed with her description of the Titan and figured that she was describing herself in much more detail than she was describing the other big player in Sigil. She also apologized for calling me *boy* and *other* names, for which I was rather glad to accept an apology, but I could sense that she certainly had no weight behind any of what she was saying.

At some point during this conversation, she managed to get her arm around me and walked down the hall, talking as she went. I was very hesitant to leave the gaze of some of the guards, but I didn't really have a choice unless I wanted to anger her. Personally, I feel like such a coward at having debased myself and lowered my intellect to her level. Complimenting her on her dress and playing to her ego will certainly help you in any situation you might encounter with her, but it does make you feel like you're betraying your better values. By the time we had finished our conversation, I guess she had enough of my company and announced her departure. Before going though, I asked her if there was anything I could place a bid or two on for her in the auction, to compensate for the grievous error in not inviting her. I can understand why she wasn't invited, but I didn't really want to walk off without extending the offer that I sensed she was so desperately hinting at. As it turns out, she did want me to bid on the last item in the auction and hinted that it would make a nice gift. Well, perhaps more than hinted, she told me it would be a nice gift and that I was to procure it for her.

Before departing, she had the nerve to break every decent thing she had said in that entire conversation cleanly in half. After committing to buy the doll for her, she patted me condescendingly between the ears and said *good boy*, as though I were some common mutt for her to order around. That bitch! The nerve of her to summon me out here, apologize with empty words, get a favor from me, which I had no intention of not following up on, and then promptly insult me to my face again. I know she had done it on purpose, unless her memory is more full of holes than a cheese wheel in a cranium rat lair. I sincerely doubt the later.

Feeling much more exhausted and spent than I had twenty minutes ago, not to mention, thoroughly beat with the proverbial rolled up scroll, I went back inside to the auction, tailed tucked neatly between my legs. Of course, everyone had to ask me if I was okay. I appreciate the concern, but there are some things that you just don't want to talk about until you've had a chance to absorb them. This was one of those things. I shrugged off their attention, and made a quick reference to Shemeska, and then directed their attention back towards the auction at hand. Besides, it wouldn't do to be whispering the entire time the auctioneer was trying to sell things. It's just impolite.

When the final auction piece came up, I wasn't all that surprised to find a life-like Shemeska doll up for sale. As the opening bid started out at a thousand jinks, I was the first to raise my staff to the cause. After all, you don't necessarily want to disappoint the Marauder, no matter how much you hate being submissive to her. Within a matter of minutes, the auction had escalated the price quite a sum and my companions joined in to help me, perhaps sensing my motivation for the piece. After all was said and done, we each had spent about sixty-five hundred jinks, quite a sum for such a simple little doll, despite it being dead on accurate for the creature it was representing. Picking up the doll, we made our way back to the Portal Jammer. I managed to loose myself for the evening in the midst of a rather strong drink. I was so desperate to sleep without dreams that I don't even remember the bottle I was drinking from. It was a good liquor though, if not strong. Within a short amount of time, I was out like a light and when I came to I was sleeping in my own bed again. Somewhere in the back of my head, I was hoping Nisha had a hand in getting me upstairs, or had at least kept me company while I slept, but there was no indication of the matter. For all I knew, I could have stumbled up there myself.

In the morning, I found out that Shemeska had paid a visit to the bar shortly after my departure from the waking world, to retrieve her gift. I had intentions on sending it to her, but I guess she was rather impatient and wanted it *now*. Just like Shemeska to invite herself where she really isn't welcome. From what I understand though, the evening fared fairly well and she made it out of the bar with a menu and said that she might come back in the future. Hopefully she makes a reservation so that we adequately prepare the place for her in the future.

However, that encounter wasn't the only thing to add to my stress level. This next little incident makes one rather humbled, particularly when you're given a glimpse at your own self worth.

Several hours before peak, we happened to hear a rather loud scream outside, and a pair of apparent no-goods were attacking someone outside. I stuck my head out the door to watch, as Firehowl decided to leap to the situation. Within a few moments, I quickly found out the hard way that my presence wasn't wanted. I remember a dull bang, followed by a rather intense burning and a piercing deep into my left shoulder. The wound burned immensely and I couldn't move my arm as easily, but fortunately it hadn't impaired my ability to cast. I sensed that whoever had stunned me with such an odd weapon had intended to kill me with the first shot, but I suppose Mystra was looking out for me again. When next I have a few free moments, I need to go thank her for her generosity. It's been a while since I've done such a thing, and I don't want to seem ungrateful.

Sensing that being outside was a bad idea, I retreated inside behind the one way force walls. Well, it was more like being blown back through the doorway than retreating, but it was still a tactical decision to remain inside. Apparently Firehowl saw, heard, or sensed something on the roof of the building across the street. It would be sometime before she made it up there so I decided to help her out. Using a recently acquired spell, I cast it on the rooftop across the street. A rather loud booming echo peeled forth from the building and echoed down the street in all directions. I'm guessing it must have stunned whoever was up there, but I can't be too sure. All I know is that a few moments later, Firehowl was on the roof and hopefully dealing with whatever was up there.

Bad news never comes by itself, so I threw a dispel illusion out on the middle of the street, hoping to catch another sneak in the process. Somewhere off to the side of the field I caught a random blur that certainly didn't belong there and immediately threw out my hand in that direction, showing Clueless where I thought I saw something. Fortunately, Clueless is good at spotting things and managed to get a faerie fire to surround this invisible creature. Within a few moments, I had a force cage up around the uninvited guest, effectively trapping it in the middle of the street. The version I had chosen though used bars instead of flat panels of force. This allowed me and my party to cast spells in, and the intruder to cast spells out as well. One thing I wasn't expecting though, was the quick change to a gaseous form, and a slide through the bars. Damn clever trick if you ask me. I'll have to remember that for the future. Now that we knew that we were up against a human woman, or at least someone who looked human, everyone who was present went out and started beating up on her.

It didn't take long before she was on the end of Toras' sword, but for some reason, she was still alive! Because of the spells she seemed to be tossing around, and the

fact that she wasn't dead yet, I was afraid that we were up against a lich of some kind. The scary thing was that it was more interested in me than it was in the rest of the party. I have a good sense of self preservation and this time it was certainly acting up and making me act. Before my conscious thought had caught up with my actions, I had already cast a flesh to stone spell and had petrified the intruder. Normally, this would have been enough, but I had a sneaky suspicion that a flesh to stone wasn't going to stop this creature. In a more authoritative tone that I realized I had within me, I got everyone out of the way. Right before I started casting a spell to destroy the statue, a small scrying device popped into existence a short distance in front of me. Needless to say, this infuriated me a bit more than it would normally, given the circumstances, so I tossed the chained lightning right at the scry device. In retrospect, I would have loved to have seen the reaction of the creature on the other end, but at the time I cast it, I was just in the mood to destroy it, not scare the other caster to death.

The chain lightening arced from the scry device to the statue and turned it to little bits of dust and debris. A suiting end I would figure. Normally, I'm adverse to killing people, but I don't have a qualm when then openly attack me or my friends. Even after the statue was destroyed, the hand, which had the symbol of the black paw on it, was still animated, having turned back into flesh. I had a funny feeling it was the Rakshasa behind this, but I was hoping he hadn't wanted to start in us this soon. No rest for the weary. Florian was nice enough to throw a destruction on the hand which ended the life of the creature that apparently didn't care too much for us. Picking up a small chunk of the statue I wandered back inside and let Florian tend to my wounds, ever grateful for his help in such needful situations. I have a funny feeling we'll be seeing more of those debilitating weapons.

The next part is where life gets interesting though. As we wandered into the back room to discuss the recent events, another scry device appeared above our heads. Florian again, decided to take this one out before it managed to meet my wrath. I certainly wasn't in the mood to deal with a spy. I sat down at the table while everyone discussed the recent events and began the process of casting a legend lore on the stoned flesh. The vision I was treated to certainly confirmed our suspicions. The Rakshasa had employed three assassins to return the favor for his untimely death. He made them sign a contract that he bound them to with a geas and then provided some sort of contingency spell as well, most likely what was keeping this other women alive that we had run into.

However, the contract which they signed was what makes my hand shake with trepidation even as I write this entry. For the most part it was a standard mercenary contract, drawn up to dispose of unwanted people, but the odd thing was that I was the only one listed on the contract! I can understand why he might not like me, but honestly, was I that much a threat to him and his empire? I may have struck the killing blow, and turned his warlock friend to a statue, but is that reason enough to single me out of everyone else that was present? Mystra, why couldn't it have been easier than this? I'm not usually fond of being the center of attention, especially when it involves being the focus of an assassination attempt. Just when Nisha was starting to notice me, I end up closer to experiencing the black void of death than I would care to. I've had a mild interest in it, but I certainly didn't want to see it first hand.

Of course, seeing one's own worth enumerated as thirty-five thousand jink is sort of flattering, but honestly, is that all a life is worth? If paying off this contract got me my

life back, I'd certainly jump at the chance. Somehow, I doubt it's that easy. I know my friends will help me in this situation, but I feel somewhat guilty getting them involved in it. If laying prone before this feline and putting my life in his hands would solve all our problems, it might be worth it. However, I'm sure I could do a lot more harm than good as an undead abomination forced to obey his commands. Having my soul trapped in an eternal torment and bound to heed the Rakshasa's every word would be a far worse fate than any I could imagine. Hopefully it doesn't come to that, for the sake of my friends at least. I'd hate to be the one responsible for hurting them, especially Nisha.

I sincerely doubt I'll be getting much sleep over the next few days, so I'm going to spend the remainder of the day studying and reviewing my spells. It would help to be prepared for the inevitable. It's only a matter of time before they find me and try it again. Hopefully, I shall write to you again. Until then, Mystra's blessings upon your soul, and mine.

MORE RAKSHASA GOODNESS

I'm not entirely sure if I should be writing optimistic news this early after recent events, but I felt that I should make an attempt to note it all down before something else happens to change things. The short version of the news is that the Rakshasa who doesn't seem to care too much for me, is now, for lack of a better word, dead. The long version of the story follows.

I think it was shortly after a meeting in our recently fortified back room that our next adventure was to begin. We were discussing our options regarding the assassins and trying to find a plan of attack to deal with them appropriately. After over an hour's worth of casting and discussing things we decided that we should hunt these people down and deal with them ourselves rather than waiting for them to find us. Walking out the door of our safe room we headed straight for the front door, not wanting to waste any time in preparing our assault. However, as we walked out the door, we were greeted by two rather interesting individuals. Before I ever knew what was going on, Kiro had jumped in front of me and taken the full blow of a bath of acid coming from the mug of one of our patrons. Almost in the same instant we were attacked by another person as well. It was at this time that I realized the assassins had been in our midst all along, waiting to spring their deadly trap. It had nearly worked, and I would have been little more than a splatter of liquid on the ground if it weren't for our new friend. Despite the fact that we don't know all that much about him, he certainly seems to have a lot of insight when it's necessary. Not to mention, he apparently has no qualms about sticking his neck out to protect others, for which I am eternally grateful. No doubt, Mystra had a hand in directing his actions. I'll have to show him my appreciation in a gift, or perhaps a dinner of sorts to thank him. It's not often you'll find someone that will throw themselves in front of danger for you.

After a few spells were tossed back and forth and much noise making and table shattering, we had finally dispatched of them except for the hand of the one that attacked me. I don't recall how exactly, but it ended up underneath a glass jar, running around and trying to break its way free. I wasn't about to touch the thing, except that Nisha pricked my pride and said that I was a 'big strong man' that could take care of it for her. Despite being nervous as hell, I couldn't back away from a challenge like that and readied my

rapier. The moment the glass dome was lifted, I slammed the point through the bones and into the floor of the tavern. Borrowing Nisha's dagger, I quickly defaced the symbol on the hand, and cleaned both the weapons. Breathing a much needed sigh of relief I returned the dagger to Nisha and put my own away. I was then rewarded with a light peck on the cheek for my courage, and again turned about four different shades of red as my emotions and embarrassment bubbled to the surface. I don't mind the affection at all, but I'm not really used to everyone seeing. I'm sure they're not keen on it getting mushy or anything, but I'm not about to tell Nisha to stop. It makes me feel comfortable. Fortunately now, I wouldn't have to worry much about the three people who were contracted to deal with me and would have a little more room to breath and enjoy the comfort. That's not to say that there weren't others, but at least the immediate three were dealt with.

Within about five minutes of dealing with the would-be killers, a messenger comes to the door with an envelope containing a gem. Upon touching the gem an illusion of the Rakshasa shoots forth from it and stands before us and begins to rant on about how he hated me and how he would have his revenge, and so on. I do so hate when people send gems to ramble on about things that should be discussed in a personal manner. It's just so impolite. And this cat was beginning to wear on my nerves. I was a heartbeat away from smashing the damned thing into little pieces when he spoke up about the Kobold. Apparently he had captured her and was holding her ransom. In exchanged for myself, he would give up her. For some reason, I rather doubted that. Either way, there was no way I could destroy the gem now, we needed it for the directions to the kobold's place of captivity. After the message ended, we scryed on the Kobold and got an entirely different picture of where she was located. Certainly not the same place we were being directed to. Rather than fall for an all too obvious trap, we decided that we should be heading towards the kobold's place first. On the way there, we picked up a wand of change self. I must say the reason we picked it up for was quite igneous and well thought out. Instead of one Tristol wandering in to meet the Rakshasa, there would be several. I was sure that it would be an odd situation to see myself mirrored on everyone else, but I was caught completely unprepared for the actual effect.

Looking into a mirror is one thing, but seeing yourself act in ways contrary to how you normally would is just plain odd! Not to mention, I got all sorts of odd thoughts when Nisha snuggled up to me in that form. It literally made my spine crawl to think those things and I banished such thoughts from my mind. Never would any such things happen, at least not from ME. Some of the others in the party, I might question. Enough on that though, as I'm not going to speculate on things I have no business in.

Wandering through some of the much less nicer parts of the Hive we discovered that the Kobold's location of captivity had been moved on us. There wasn't a soul there, although the lizard-like creature's smell was certainly around, and not too long ago. With Fyrehowl's excellent tracking abilities we traced the scent out into the Slags, which was coincidentally where the gem had instructed us to go. Funny how things seem to work out that way.

Inside the ruins of a burned out building we found the first of our several invitations to join the Rakshasa. This particular greeting was in the form of a symbol of death. I'm not sure if Fyrehowl was effected by it or not as I remember her collapsing, but I wasn't really paying that much attention behind me at the time. All I know is that

she seemed to be okay within a moment or two. Perhaps it was Florian's doing, or even Mystra's hand, I'm not sure exactly. All I know is that she doesn't seem to be too much worse off now than she was earlier. I think this is the first time she has fallen to a trap or in combat. It's strangely fitting that such an event would be so contested. Being a Celestial though, I suppose she would eventually be alright again at some point. Over by the flagstone that triggered this symbol was another gem, wishing us ill and hoping that it had killed off at least some of us. Judging from the hasty scribbling of the symbol, I'd say that he obviously didn't intend for it to kill us all, or else he would have spent more time preparing his traps. Stupid cat. Next time he should try a little harder and not take things so quickly. This time, the crystal also instructed us to use the flagstone as a portal key to our next destination. In order to prevent another such mishap as happened with Fyrehowl, I doubled checked my casting of the Antimagic field and stepped through the portal with Nisha.

Directly on the other side, was another symbol, this one a symbol of pain, which fortunately was warded off by my sphere. I've personally never been subjected to a symbol of pain before, and I'm certainly not one to want to start now. I also wonder if the Rakshasa hasn't started slipping. We know he's got a fondness for symbols and can adequately protect ourselves from them. Why doesn't he try something different? We followed further instructions on the next gem, directing us twelve miles North to his abode, where he was hopefully holding the Kobold captive. However, he also made mention that the jungles were hostile and would likely get us first. He certainly wasn't kidding about it as there were plenty of things that would get the unprepared. First, was the heavy air that seemed to be tainted with a sort of poison, or perhaps just very acidic. And second, were the vines that almost seemed like they would close around us and squeeze the life from us if given the chance. Fortunately, Clueless happened to know a spell that would at least keep them away.

It was several hours later that we actually ran into something, and Mystra did we run into something. As we were flying along, below us in the tall grasses was a large thing I later heard called a retriever. Accompanying it were a bunch of Vrocks. It certainly wasn't easy dealing with them, and I had no intention of wasting all my more taxing spells on such a small smattering of planar scum. But, without at least doing something I was afraid that we wouldn't be making it to meet the Rakshasa. Giving in, I threw a disintegrate on the retriever and watched as it ground to a halt. Shortly after, we finished up with the Vrock's and vacated the place rather quickly, not wanting to wait around and see what came to clean up the mess we were leaving behind.

Again, after some amount of time, we came to the edge of the cliffs a little less than a mile from our destination. Odd that we should meet someone random there, but meet someone we did. I figured him for some sort of planar inhabitant, but there was no real way to be sure and I wasn't going to ask him. He informed us that the feline we were seeking was watching the plateau above and would certainly see us if we came up that way. Despite the fact that we had no real reason to trust him, he seemed to know a good deal about the Rakshasa and we opted to at least test his theory. As with any good information, it comes at a price. I'll have to remember that I need to open up a shop that deals in free information. Certainly that'll get my name down in the annals of Sigil history.

After some walking in the deep dark tunnels under the plateau our guide left us with a final direction to the exit. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew we shouldn't have trusted him, but it was a bit late for that by this point. I was so tempted to dispel his feather-fall ring as he gracefully glided down to the bottom of the other path we didn't take, but I refrained. Perhaps Nisha's unique attitude and lack of reserve is rubbing off on me. Normally I wouldn't think of doing that to someone who hadn't offended me, but something about him irked me. As we approached the exit, two rather large spider things filled both the way we had come and the way out, effectively blocking us in. Without much thought, we hacked our way through them and laid waste to their plans, with almost as much gusto as they shredded Toras' armor. Fortunately, it could be repaired. Taking the 'glitter' out of his recently acquired nickname 'glittery boy' would make him just 'boy' which reminds me too much of Shemeska. Damn fiend.

Poking our head outside the hole in the ground we found ourselves mostly level with the castle we were seeking, which was certainly a good bit further away than I was expecting, but still within distance of my helping eyes. I had Florian throw a protection from elements on them, so that they would be able to resist the acidic nature of the plane, and then sent them forth to scrounge up as much information as possible about the place. Somewhere outside the fringe of the castle, one of my eyes happened to stumble across the Kobold, trying to hide from view. I directed this particular eye to hover in front of her and wait there patiently, but I suppose she got scared and popped the eye with her claws. The good thing about these eyes is that they come in rather large numbers and can see much more than I can by myself. I sent a few more of them after her to keep track of her whereabouts while the rest kept an eye on the castle itself, looking for any movement.

Seeing an opportunity to speed up our journey a little bit, I teleported all of us directly to the Kobold's location. Certainly she was surprised to see us and let loose an arrow or two before we could convince her that we weren't there to kill her. I must admit, she's got good reflexes. They're sort of required for such a small and helpless creature, but she did an excellent job of defending herself. Fortunately she didn't have her whole arsenal of spells equipment, or we all might have been in some trouble. After dealing with the kobold's inability to cope with the inhospitable environment, we turned our attention toward the castle and started debating over how we should approach this, and when. I had spent a good deal of my talent getting us this far, and I would certainly be no match for a Rakshasa. It was while we were arguing this that I remember Florian saying, 'Tristol, take a nap.' I felt a hand on my shoulder, and a moment later, I was out on the ground. Normally, I dream of odd things, particularly when I'm stressed or have things on my mind, but this time there was nothing. Just a sort of deep and peaceful quiet. It was a refreshing nap to say the least, but not one that I'd relish taking too often. As odd as my dreams are, I certainly don't want to eliminate the possibility of dreaming of Nisha by taking too many of those 'naps'. There's something unnatural about them that I just can't place my finger on.

Upon waking up, there was a very odd creature standing in front of us. It looked like a Tiefling, but it had no eyes and was stamped on the back of the hand with the Rakshasa's seal. I wasn't sure exactly what happened, but apparently we were being instructed to come inside and rest. We were to be at our best before we met with the *lord and lady* of the house. How nice of the Rakshasa. Test us by sending us through the jungle to whittle us down, and then give us food and rest to replenish our spells. I had no

reason to trust him, and I wasn't about to start now. And not only was Sidhartha there, but so was his sister! Great. That meant that we had TWO of them to deal with. I thought one was enough, but two? This looked completely hopeless, but we had no choice now that we had come this far. Not to mention, running away now would only mean that he'd have to hunt us down and try again at some point in the future.

Inside the castle, there were quite a number of your normal estate items: statues, boring books, and tapestries. It looked impressive, but there was literally nothing here to impress upon the senses, at least not mine anyway. We ate the dinner provided to us, which was quite good actually. I'm sure it was something horribly grotesque and disgusting, but finding out after the fact would only mean that it'd make me sick, so I opted not to explore that avenue. Even if it was human, I'm sure Mystra would forgive me for my error. Besides, it beats the cooking at the Fortune's Wheel. In fact, even some of the things in the dust mephit's shop would make a better meal than their food.

While exploring the area around our guest quarters, we came across a most unique room off the same hallway that our chambers were on. Inside, were limbs of various kinds, humanoid in shape and function, and cleanly detached from the body. Only a small hint of blood remained on the floor every few feet where we happened to find these body parts. Further down the corridor, and inside a room was a rather unfortunate soul. All of his limbs had been removed and his mind appeared to be totally gone. The humane thing to do would have been to send him to his god, and put him out of his misery, but apparently Clueless has some compulsion about saving everyone. Kiro and I both see eye to eye on the issue, but I'm not sure Clueless could be convinced otherwise. Personally, if I were disfigured and had been tortured long enough to drive me insane, I wouldn't want to be brought back. It's a nice gesture I admit, but if Mystra saw fit to put me into that situation, I'm certainly not one to argue with her choices.

But, before much could be done, Florian had already healed this poor creature's mind and regenerated his body. While he was certainly whole in mind and body, he lacked the spirit and the will that most people have. Even if he is resilient enough to recover and function again as part of a society, I doubt that he'll ever forget the horrors or eliminate the fear he has of it happening again. I'm still not sure what they plan on doing with him once they remove him from the bag of holding that they're keeping him in, but I want to have no part in it. Hopefully it won't come to that.

Some time later we found ourselves all in one room, not wanting to take the chance that anyone's room was trapped or warded against them. Besides, I was looking for a 'real' sleep in a comfy bed. Besides, Nisha had an open offer to spend the night in my room which I would protect by an alarm spell. The nine hells if the others didn't put the kibosh on that plan. It's not like I had anything of evil intent. Far from it. I just wanted someone to snuggle with. Regardless, Florian took himself a nap and when he awoke again, we discussed what we should do about the cat. In a fairly unanimous agreement we decided that waiting for them to grace our presence wasn't a worthwhile way to spend time and we resolved to set out for them immediately. Heading towards the foyer where we first entered I cast my anti-magic field and knocked on the door of the private wing. Even though we were disobeying his instructions, I wanted to at least seem civilized. Barging through doors never solved any problems and has killed one too many thieves, and I wasn't about to add a wizard to those statistics. As I figured, there was no answer. Opening the doors, we heard a sound behind us and turned to see the two statues

of the Rakshasas animate and head towards us. Not wanting to deal with constructs at the time, we hustled inside, and closed the door behind us. Amazingly, there was no pursuit. Who'd have thought a simple door would stop them?

Inside, we wandered around for quite some time, triggering traps and setting off symbols, all within the confines of an anti-magic field. Thank Mystra that most everything is stopped by this simple spell. At some point, we even came across a small little fairy dragon, who was scared to death to leave his cage. Far be it from me to coax one of them from their perch, but Clueless again seemed to have an affinity for the creature and tried to convince it to come. It wouldn't be persuaded. Instead, we left it with some food and continued our adventure in the castle. In order to keep track of the doors we were going through and to find out if anyone was following along behind us, I pulled a small tuft of fur from my tail and placed it on the hinge of the door. If anyone was wandering around behind us, we'd at least have some warning of it. The good news is that the fur I pulled out of my tail was loose anyway. It must be that time of year when my newer coat starts coming in. Fortunately I don't have to worry about an entire body of fur, not that I'd really mind one, but it certainly saves on the brushing and hassle costs.

Sometime while we exploring, we came across an odd looking creature in the confines of a small glass sphere. After staring at it for a few moments, all the tales I was told in my childhood came flooding back to me. "If you don't stay away from this, the Nishru will get you" was what they used to say to keep little kids from things they shouldn't be near. I always thought that they were myths of some sort, but apparently not. These creatures could devour a mage's magic in a matter of moments and leave them nothing more than a quivering mindless mess. I'm so glad it was stuck inside the sphere or I would have been in so much trouble. Despite the other casters in our party, I would hazard a guess that I'm the caster with access to the highest sphere, but I could be wrong. Certainly, that thing hadn't eaten in a while, and would love to feast on me. Personally, I don't suppose I'd taste all that good unless you had a glass of nice red wine to accompany me. For some odd reason, Florian decided it was worthwhile to keep the creature. Mystra knows why anyone would want to keep one of them. All I know is that if it got loose, I wouldn't be around long enough to argue with anyone. I'd be gone quicker than I could get the words of a planeshift out.

In the middle of a large crossway, we came to a statue of a blood war battle, depicted in exquisite detail, right down the facial expressions and gestures. At the base were two switches on either side that set the statue in motion and moved it across the floor to reveal a winding staircase going down. I was hoping to stay above the ground, but the fur on my tail would have to deal with the pressures of being in a rather dirty underground. Before we could continue down though, we had some old company show up to stop us. Nearly catching us by surprise we were forced to confront the two statues from earlier that could apparently walk through stone. I'd have to remember that trick for when I make my first golem.

The group seemed to make quick work of them and we continued on down the stairs and further into the darkness of the dungeon below. In the rooms below, horrors worse than death awaited the prisoners held there. Some bound to just remain in the room, others obviously tested and experimented on in some evil fashion. Each and every one of them had notes regarding the experiments, all written in a cruel unfeeling tone, much like a death report would read. For some reason, I imagine that the Rakshasa

wouldn't take it that easy on me. Some far worse punishment would likely be my fate for killing him. Perhaps I should rob him of the pleasure and just end my life myself? Certainly it's an option... actually. It's not an option. Someone needs to protect Nisha. Continuing with the journey though.

At the very end of a particularly long tunnel, we came across the same type of room we found on the Astral plane. Covering every available inch of every surface in the room was scrawled a sick and twisted poem written in a combination of infernal and draconic. Certainly, this had taken a while and wouldn't be easy to undo. Just as we were pondering that, Nisha got sick and turned around to walk to the door for some air that was just a little fresher than it was in here. In a rather disgusted tone, I heard her mutter something under her breath and when I called her name, there was no answer.

Everyone called again, and we immediately knew something was right. Stepping outside in the hallway again we were greeted by the Rakshasa, who was holding Nisha captive behind a force band on a far wall. He seemed to enjoy making me squirm, but I had no intention of giving him the satisfaction of torturing me. I wouldn't put up with him harming Nisha though. I had only just begun to understand her a little more and he wanted to take her away from me. I was surprised how protective I felt. Every ounce of fear and care for myself went out the window and all I could think about was protecting her. At this point, he summoned forth a monster from beneath the floor that could breath fire and surprise us by popping up right below our feet.

I was in no mood to play games with the feline and ignored anything the new creature might be doing to me, if it had planned to. In short time, I had made quick work of his protective wall of force, and was preparing to cast another spell when he mazed Toras, and prevented Florian from throwing the nishru at him. Had he done that, I would have been on top of Nisha in a moment and gotten us both out of there in the blink of an eye. Certainly the feline would have made a good meal for the nishru, but I had no intention of becoming the second course. Clueless managed to throw up a second wall of force, this one of a one way variety and trap the Rakshasa behind it. As my next spell, I summoned up my thunderlance and used it to deal a horrendous blow to his chest. He had met my lance before, but this time he would feel it's full weight upon him. Messing with me is one thing, but messing with my friends is another. Within a moment or two more, clueless swung in with his blade and dispatched him in quite an amazing display of skill. The Rakshasa muttered 'not again' and then promptly imploded and was pulled through a small portal of sorts to another place on the plane. I figure it was likely his sister picking him up again to teach him a lesson or two about failure. Fortunately, this time he didn't appear to have any contingencies go off, and I feel safe assuming that he is taken care of. His sister however, is likely not going to be an easy creature to deal with.

Having finished off our objective for the moment, I turned around and disintegrated the thing coming out of the floor at us and ended its short life rather quickly. I was hoping that when the Rakshasa had been dealt with that this creature would return to its own plane, but I suppose it wasn't that sort of summoned creature.

Bending down, I helped Nisha up and she gave me quite possibly the warmest hug I've ever received in my life. This was warm and heartfelt and made me feel like I had one too many good drinks at the bar. My legs turned into a sort of jelly, and I could barely hold myself up, although I imagine that Nisha would have been easily able to do so. My tail poofed out behind me like a bottlebrush, and my ears turned a rather dark red

on the insides, giving away a full range of emotions, that you didn't need Fyrehowl's extended senses to figure out. When we return to Sigil, I'll have to take Nisha out for dinner, and formally court her as is custom of a mage of my ability. But, I have a feeling that the order in Halruua wouldn't approve of this coupling, so perhaps I should just stick to dinner and a nice glass of wine? We'll find out what happens when we return.

For the time being, we seem to have some time to rest. Perhaps I'll go see Nisha and spend some time talking with her to calm my nerves until the next phase of our journey begins. Mystra's many blessings upon you.

HEADACHES AND HEARTWARMINGS

Thanks in no small part to Nisha and her gentle graces, I can feel my mental faculties returning to me, and I'm able to do more than whine and bitch about things being loud or being stuck in bed. Technically, I could have gotten up and wandered about, but I, nor Nisha, would trust me out of bed on my own for too terribly long. I wasn't really of the mind to argue with her either, so I just spent a good two days complaining about every blasted thing that popped into my head. Not to mention, all this sitting around and not being able to study my spell books has made me quite agitated. There's so much work I could be doing, and so many spells that I could be casting that I'm all frustrated. There'll be more on that in a moment, but before I ramble on too far, I think it best that I start at the beginning of this most recent tale, hopefully illuminating the reader to what sort of things caused this drastic decline in my health.

Not too long ago, perhaps the evening we returned from the Astral last, I invited Nisha out to a dinner on my tab, figuring that I should at least get to know her if we're going to spending more and more time together. I let her pick the restaurant as I'm not exactly all that keen on picking out good places to eat. After much thinking on her part, we ended up at the Cutter's Vineyard, an extremely nice place on the other side of Sigil. The food there was just exquisite and the atmosphere was just what I was looking for: not too busy, somewhat quiet, and overall a nice place to sit and talk while you dined. I was quite impressed with her selection and will have to remember to let her choose the places again in the future. Hopefully at some point, I'll be able to remember half of the places I've been and can adequately make a decision based on my experience, rather than what I like off the menu.

Either way, we talked about a variety of things, some about her past, some of the things she had been up to, and I told her about a little of my past and how things work back in Halruua. We even started to talk about the sort of things we were looking for in other people, and coincidentally, we happened to find a good number of these things in each other. She seems to think I'm cute, but I'm not so sure. Levelheaded and thoughtful, sure, I've been told that enough to not argue, but cute is a rare compliment not often given to wizards in general. We spend so much time honing our mind that often our physical attributes go to waste. I found a respectful balance I think, but cute isn't really what I'd consider myself to be.

After dinner, we both returned to the Portal Jammer and settled in for the night. I left Nisha with an open invitation to come in and visit in my room any time she liked. After all, the company and companionship never really bothered me any. That, and I want her to feel comfortable in my room, so I can get used to it. I've been alone in my

room so long that I begin to wonder if it's not all just in my imagination and that I sleep in a closet somewhere. Some theory I'll have to test eventually.

The next morning, we were back off to the Astral again, hopefully wandering back to finish business quick enough that the feline Raksasha wouldn't be prepared enough to deal with us. Scrying on the cannons we knew to be transferred back to the astral, I was greeting with some interesting imagery. Between astral storms and odd tentacles destroying my scry focus, I was sure that we were up against something quite unique and prepared to say the least. Either way though, we needed to deal with this creature and hopefully get her off our backs. You tend not to sleep well when you know someone is plotting against you.

In order to work our way through the Astral storm, I provided an anti-magic field to deaden the effects of the interesting phenomenon. While I'm sure there were a good number of effects that could make it through the field, we didn't seem to be too adversely affected by them. We pretty much kept in a straight line through the storm, headed onward in the hopes that we would find something unique inside that would clue us in to where the feline was hiding. Out of blue, we came across a large magical bubble separating a god isle and a building on top of it from the dangers of the storm. Sensing another strip-mining operation, we decided to pay a visit to the inhabitants and at least get a better idea as to what they were doing. While we were circling the building to get to the front entrance, we were the recipients of a few cannon blasts, fortunately, we seemed to be a good bit out of range for them and managed to escape pretty much unscathed, and Clueless managed to nearly total a few towers by directing a fireball into the windows with the cannons.

I'm not entirely sure what compels Fyrehowl to think she can just randomly turn my tail purple without due warning, but she certainly did, and without a spell too! Admittedly, my response was probably a bit hasty and unprovoked, but when a part of your person (and one of the prettier parts I might add) ends up changing without your consent, and it doesn't appear that there's anyway to reverse it, you tend to get a little upset. I'll apologize for locking her in a forcecage and threatening her later, but she seems to be on a vacation of some sort for the next few days, so I'll have to remember to extend those apologies later. Admittedly, I don't use that spell except when absolutely necessary, and the times that I did use it, I don't remember it actually feeling as good as it did. Supposedly the Astral is pretty much raw magic, where you become so adept at melding it in your hands that you can cast much more fluently and quickly than any other place on earth. Certainly that has to have some bearing on why it just feels so unique and special there.

In fact, the casting seemed to have such a natural feel at my fingertips that when the two guards stepped out from the gate we were approaching, that I just turned around from my argument with Fyrehowl and toasted them on the spot. Looking back, I realize that I probably shouldn't have gone so overboard with them, but those spells were just on the forefront of my mind and fit the need perfectly. In addition, I figured it would serve as an appropriate deterrent to Fyrehowl in the future from changing anything else on my body any color outside of what it's supposed to be. After releasing her, she made some idle threat about big swords and such, but honestly. I wouldn't have gotten this far in life manipulating the world with Mystra's granted powers if I was afraid of someone with a big metal stick. Some people will never learn I guess.

After dealing with the door guards, several more come out from within the castle, a good majority of them falling pretty to my favorite of spells, flesh to stone. Those that were left, probably wished that they were stone as I followed up with a spectacular chained lightning that seemed to finish the job without question. Inside, there was a large delayed fireball waiting for us, that incinerated whatever was in the next room, but at least it missed getting us. It's a useful spell, but it's so difficult to time it right to do the most damage. Perhaps if someone linked that spell to a triggered condition, then it would make a difference, but that's just my thoughts on the matter.

The rest of the building was pretty much empty, despite a few prisoners, some leftover gith, and other random things that warranted a general cleaning out. Deciding to make the work a little easier, and less dangerous, I conjured up some more of those all too beneficial eyes and was about to set them about searching the building when Fyrehowl got a tad upset with my insistence on using them. Not wanting to make them seem like they were all that useless, I plucked one of them up and squeezed it gently, squishing it a bit and sort of showing off. Needless to say, this produced a rather interesting reaction with Nisha and Clueless, both of which took it upon themselves to attack the eyes in a desperate attempt to grab one of them and do odd things with them. At first, it was just mild curiosity, but Nisha decided to eat one. That's where I just had to cringe. After swallowing it, the squishy thing went down her throat and then popped out of existence. Thank Mystra those things are fragile enough that they disappeared the moment they hit her stomach acid.

Never one to resist messing with my head, not to mention trying to weird me out, she threw a protection from elements on it and a light as well. This time when she swallowed I was treated to an all too gross view of the inside of a digestive tract and stomach. I think seeing the inside of your girlfriend with magical eyes is seeing a bit more than you cared to. I had to ignore the eye in order to keep from getting sick. Clueless on the other hand, grabbed one of the eyes and proceeded to lick it once every so often. That just made me shiver. It's not like I can feel it, but the mental image of someone licking over your eye is just strange! Not exactly something I think you'd want to experience with your real eyes. At least they seemed to be having fun, which is certainly a good thing. Fun in a stressful situation always helps me relax a little bit.

Cleaning out the rest of the castle would have been easy to deal with, had we not found a prisoner that knew a bit more than the rest of them. Factor Tethonas Marfall was his name. When we first found him, he was horridly worried that something had followed us up here and was waiting for him, but after a few minutes, we managed to get him to talk. He mentioned a few things about 'her' who we assumed to be the Rakshasha, and some details about the location we happened to be visiting. For some reason, I think we'll be asking Factor Terrance a few questions, one way or another.

A short time into this conversation, the very thing which this man feared, floated down through the ceiling. Immediately lashing out and killing him, the new creature then focused its attention on us. Not being as quick as a few of my companions, they got to attack it first and I quickly learned the things that this creature was capable of doing. One of the more chilling things that it could do was absorb spells. It didn't seem capable of getting them all, as mine managed to get past its resistance, but a good number of the spells that were thrown at it, just got absorbed into a field around it. I've never heard of anything outside a Nishru that's capable of doing such things, and I was quite spooked by

it. Had it started looking at me with hungry eyes, I hasten to say that I would have been out of there faster than a fiend who got plane shifted to Mount Celestia.

The fight certainly was not an easy one, but in the end we seemed to triumph, or at least we managed to get it to run away. We took some heavy damages though, and several of the party ended up being weakened by this creature's abilities. That's not where my foolish mistake comes in though. I decided to scry on the creature and followed it a good ways through the Astral storm, obviously where it was heading straight for the middle. It stopped a good distance away from where it appeared that it was going, and two of its friends joined it. Likely they also took the time to heal it as well, but they destroyed my scry focus before I could finish watching them. One of them was bad enough to fight, but three in total would have been suicide. As we were making plans to leave, I felt another one of them pluck at my mind for a moment, which only spurred on my desire to leave more.

We found the rest of the prisoners in the cells and quickly gathered everyone up into a group, where we could count everyone and make arrangements to get people off the plane before those evil creatures showed up to finish what we started. The downside is that in order to get our party off the plane and the fifteen other prisoners as well, we were going to need three plane shift spells. Certainly I could provide one, and Clueless seems to have a knack for knowing useful things, but a third one would need to be found. Kiro seemed to think he could case one, but he'd first need to pray for it before he could focus on it in his mind. We didn't have the time for that, and we needed it now. Clueless always manages to carry a bit of that heavy magic around with him, and from what I remembered, it could recreate spells in the caster's mind. Certainly a useful quality, even if I didn't know the dangers behind it.

First, I cast the plane shift spell into the kobold's ion stone, and then cleared my mind in preparation for focusing on the next spell. I took a few minutes to prepare myself and concentrate on the spell, and then rubbed a bit of the heavy magic between my fingers. The last time I tried this, I simply just remembered the spell, this time I got a different effect that's almost too hard to put into words, but I shall certainly try. Imagine it's a cold day and you're taking a sip of some warm sweet cider or some sort. As the liquid races down your throat and into your stomach, this happy and ecstatic feeling races out all of the extremities of your body, quickly warming you up and making you feel extremely content and happy. This is sort of what the feeling was like, except that it gave me a surge of power. I felt that I could take on anything at that moment, Shemeska included. Nothing was beyond my reach or power, and everything around me felt super-amplified with magic. Even my tail was all frizzed out and wagging quite happily. As with any feeling that good, you have to make it last so I quickly focused on the plane shift and we popped into the outlands.

The moment I hit the normal air though, I felt as though I had been raped by a modran and left for dead in a ditch somewhere. My head reeled with all sorts of strange thoughts, and I couldn't focus on anything clearly. If I didn't have Nisha with me, I likely would have gone completely insane at that moment. Essentially, it felt as though my head had gotten ten times as big as it should be when I was on the astral, and then when I left, it all crushed into a space smaller than a pea. Combine the loss of all that magical amplification and enhancement with the time resurgence from leaving the astral, and you've got one hell of a headache. I gathered up what courage and sanity I had left,

teleported us to Tradegate, and immediately hopped into Sigil, making my way back to the Portal Jammer to sleep and let myself recover.

Mystra knows what I was thinking messing with that heavy magic. Likely that was her subtle way of telling me that I shouldn't be messing with things that enhance the gifts she's given me without first discovering them on my own. I think her point was very aptly made and I won't be trying that again any time in the near future, even if it is a great need. Only when my life becomes useless, would I dare go that far again, as I feel that if that happened again I wouldn't know what to do.

In the past few days I've felt my mind returning to me, and I've been able to regain some of my lost ability, and I've allowed myself to cast again. There's something about not being able to cast spells for a few days that just makes me irritated and upset. The downside to all of this though, is that casting even the simplest of spells, or sometimes even the most complex, doesn't feel as it used to. It's like my senses are dulled and every time I try to focus on the magic for a moment, I lose my concentration and the spell fizzles on me. Hopefully this doesn't become a trend. I'd hate to think that Mystra is punishing me more for my bad behavior. In all honesty, I was trying to help, but I guess things are looked upon differently at times. Maybe another trip to the Astral where the magic is a bit more pure will help me feel better. There I can at least get a feel for it and rid myself of this nagging feeling that I've somehow been cheated. But a whole six days! How am I supposed to wait that long? Maybe I'll sneak off here in a day or two and just give it a try, in the off chance it'll help me remember. In the meantime though, I feel the need to be a little social, hopefully my grumpy worried attitude doesn't scare anyone away. I think Nisha understands me, but that's only because she's been by my side nearly non-stop recently. I don't know what I'd do without her. Calm shelter in a chaotic storm and all.

I'll write more in a few days, after I've regained enough of my senses to be able to adequately report my thoughts, and perhaps after we've ventured a bit further into the Astral storm to find this Citadel of Shattered Faith that everyone keeps talking about. May Mystra find your heart pure, and worthy of her gifts.

A HASTY RETURN

A few short days after I first returned from the Astral and at least had enough sense to do more than whine and moan, we were already out and running around Sigil again. I'm not going to complain though, it got me out of my room for quite some time, even if it did mean that I had to be social. I've found that even though I'm compelled by my nature to go and talk to people, that I'm just not in as good a mood as I once was. It must have something to do with my magic. It's just not been the same, and the unique and accomplished feeling I get when casting hasn't returned to me. Hopefully this isn't a sign that I'm losing my edge, or my ability. Magic is my life, and without it, I'm not exactly sure what I'd do. I'd survive alright, thanks to Nisha and my other companions, but I'm not sure of what use I'd be any more. Admittedly, it would give me more time to expose myself to their ways and become more social with the guests at the bar. However, I just don't think I'd truly be happy in that case. Perhaps time will heal my mind and make me forget about the absence of substance to my spells, or perhaps time will help it

return. In the mean time, I certainly hope no one is too terribly offended by my attitude, I just can't seem to say what's on my mind without snapping and being rude.

Despite my obvious deficiencies at being social, I agreed to go with clueless and Nisha to the Jester's palace. Even if my abilities weren't as honed as they used to be, they'd still be useful to them if they got into trouble. Who knows, maybe casting spells would help me recover that feeling I once had. As it turns out though, we didn't particularly need any spell casting to avert danger. For the most part Clueless did the talking, with Jeremo, and the images in the records halls in the area under the castle. He even decided it was worthwhile to taunt some of the images while we there. I certainly don't begrudge him this activity in the least, but it isn't what I came down there to do and I was getting a headache just thinking about the magic that was powering the devices we were speaking with. The trip overall turned out to be extremely useful information wise and we got a few questions we had before answered, but there were still many more that would have to wait until later. On the plus side, I managed to do another small favor for Lothar. On the other side of the door that leads to the infinite staircase, I wrote the draconic word for Jester in some chalk to leave there. Hopefully it stays long enough for it to become useful for him in finding the entrance to the castle. He'd likely appreciate the access. I'll write him a letter later this evening and give him this advice, and perhaps he'll find some kindness to return to me at some point in the future. Favors are powerful things here in Sigil.

As a brief note in passing, it is worthwhile that I've saved a good portion of the funds I've acquired over the course of our adventures. Turns out that I happened to acquire a copy of an Astral Teleport spell, one that would allow us fairly free and quick roam of the plane. The story of how I obtained it can be saved for another time perhaps, as it's not the sort of interesting thing you'd write into your diary of deeds. Suffice it to say that it cost me a fairly sizable amount of jink to get it, but I certainly think it'll be worth it. In a few days, I'd be using it to move us about on the Astral to get into Pitiless.

After I had finally felt that my mind was adequately prepared to tackle the challenges of casting again, we set forth on our journey to Astral again, however, none of us knew where Pitiless was, or even really what it looked like to be exact. A quick stop by the library yielded several maps and descriptions of what we were looking for and some other interesting details about various places on the plane. As dangerous as the place is, it certainly seems to have enough interesting quirks that it'd make a nice place to just wander around and explore. I certainly wouldn't mind it, if I could be assured that I wasn't going to be attacked by any more of those odd wraith-like things.

Hopping the nearest portal to the outlands I cast a plane shift and brought us all back to the plane we had begun to know and love so much. Even as I cast the spell, I could feel a shiver run down my spine at the memory and aftershock of casting that spell. While it felt so good one moment, it was murder the next. Those memories will likely haunt my every casting of that spell. It seems justly suited though that it would happen to such a useful and commonly used spell. Had it happened to acid arrow perhaps, I could have torn it out of my spell book and banished it from my mind, but it happened when casting a plane shift, something I'd be using quite a bit more now that we were hopping between places quite frequently. Maybe Mystra designed it that way to help me recover and get over the shock quicker. That's one way to force someone to deal with an issue.

As we landed on the Astral, I began to focus on the living sea that was described in some of the directions we had been given to Pitiless. As the image became clear in my head, I started the casting of my recently acquired Astral Teleport. As the spell words rolled off my tongue and my hands traced the intricate arcs and dips of the spell in the air, I began to feel some of my talent return to me. Perhaps all I needed was a new spell to spark my interest in casting again. It certainly seemed to feel better and my head was just a lot clearer than it had been in several days. For once, I felt like I could tackle any problem again and all the worries that had entered into my mind seemed to just float away, leaving me content and feeling just generally better. Over the next day or so, I talked with Nisha and thanked her for all the help she had given me in my difficult time. I'm not sure where I would be without her, but I certainly doubt I would be here this soon, that's for sure. I'm not sure exactly what she sees in me, but I am grateful for everything that she does.

After much travel, we finally found ourselves at Pitiless and proceeded to make our presence known to the warden and some of the other guests within. The much nicer dwarf that runs the place, seemed to have no real problem with us visiting anyone, so long as we abided by a few simple rules, which made a whole lot of sense to us. After all, breaking any of them would probably either get us killed, or thrown in here with all these people. I imagine that spending an eternity here would be just about as bad as spending an afterlife as a talking skull on Lothar's library wall. Just not something I'd be interested in doing.

As we walked down the long corridors towards where our next source of information, Vast, was being kept, we met quite a few interesting people. A Parai, at one point if I recall, as well as a fallen celestial. It tried to convince both myself and Fyrehowl to let it out, but I certainly would have none of that. Even if I am descended from a Guardinal Vulpinal, I haven't followed any of the protocols or creeds that such a lineage dictates. Not that I don't appreciate the title, it just doesn't even really seem to be me. Perhaps there's more to my past than I really know, or perhaps it just saw an easy way out. I think it picked the wrong patsy as I sure wasn't going to let it out. Fyrehowl on the other hand, seems to go all barmy whenever she meets another celestial, particularly those that have swayed from the chosen path. If there's something I don't know, hopefully it doesn't come back to bite me in the end.

In addition to other various creatures, we ran into a rather rare group of beings known as the Devete. It's rare to see one of them by itself and even more rare to see two together. But there were five of these things here, and Mystra knows why they were being kept against their will. Awfully cute little creatures, that seemed to match my mood brilliantly. Eagerly they asked me to cast a spell to 'make them feel happy'. Not seeing any harm in the spell, I cast a simple mage hand and levitated a copper piece for a few moments. As I cast the spell, I could feel the power once again returning to my eager hands. Whatever I had forgotten in regards to that spell had recovered fully, and it now felt entirely normal to be casting it again.

Moving on beyond the Devete's, we encountered an Ultraloth named Heskaton Sid'malgrith standing in the higher security area of the prison. He wasn't a prisoner here and had a whole entourage of other fiends accompanying him of various types, all presumably taking notes and helping to torture the other Ultraloth by the name of Felthis Ap'Jerran that was a member of the prison here. After the group of rather distasteful

fiends left, we discussed with the loth some of his history and why he was here. Turns out, he did some rather bad things and was now beginning to question some of what he did. I'm not sure where exactly he fits into all of this in relation to the current goings on, but I'm sure he does. He posed some rather interesting quandaries that I hadn't thought of before. In fact, Akin might be in the answer to it, if only we knew for sure if he was being truthful. I'd like to think I can trust him, but you can never be too sure. The quandary that puzzles me is this: If your very being and essence dictates how you act, and you follow it, but then repent, is it possible to change your ways? I imagine that it would be, but would you ever really completely change, or would you retain some of your former thoughts and reasonings. If Akin is truly converted, then he answers that question quite easily, but if it were all a rouse, then it's certainly a very good and clever one. Much to our convenience, Vast was right next to this Ultraloth, so when we were done discussing various matters of business with him, we left him to his devices while was spoke with the true objective we came into find and query.

When I say that Vast was completely barmy, I'm not over exaggerating. He was an extremely brilliant man at one time, but was eventually driven insane. Now he just babbles on endlessly about all sorts of things. Even though he no longer has his spell books, he still has a good deal of his spells stored in memory. Honestly, if we did let him go, I'm not sure if I'd fear standing there, or trust him enough to assume he wouldn't kill us on the spot. He was quite a good bit of fun, and I got a chance to exercise my good mood on a more than willing subject. Coincidentally, we learned a good bit about what we were getting ourselves into from this gentleman. As it turns out, he developed the 'Divinity Leech', a tool used for extracting some sort of substance from the isles of the gods in the Astral. It's rumored to have some amazing powers, but I'm not interested in trying to figure out what they are, so long as they stop mining the corpses they find up here. I'm sure the deity that you're destroying doesn't appreciate it all that much.

In addition, we also learned that when he built this machine, he had some help as well. He wouldn't say for sure, but he explained that his friend wanted to help him out as a 'present for an -old friend-'. Certainly it was meant to sound like someone had a grudge still, but who would it be that wanted to see this work in such a manner, and how exactly were these Raksashas related to all of this? Of course we had to ask, and coincidentally, we found out.

As we learned, Lord Sidhartha was not the first Raksasha's real name. And now that that I think back on it, Yethmiil was a much more suitable name for him. I had a hard time imagining him to be any sort of lord, and putting up a pretense of such thing appears to be easy for them. Fake a little education and power, and you've got an adequate disguise. It also turns out that our hunch was true: The Raksasha's are not really what they appear to be. They are 'brothers' perhaps, but Vast certainly seemed to be convinced that they were something else. Originally they were Raksasha's, but they were slain rather easily by whatever had possessed them. Oddly enough, if those things are able to deal with a raksasha in such a simple manner, I figure that they would likely be making easy work of us in a matter of moments.

Overall, the things we've seemed to have gotten ourselves involved in have gotten more and more complex. Every time we find a new avenue to explore, entirely different and random things appear as well in addition to the information that we're seeking. Perhaps it's time to sit down and discuss our thoughts on the manner. We don't need to

be going too much further into the wilderness without having an idea of where we're going with it all.

Of course, as with any visit to any highly prestigious place, we have to make the occasion special. As we turned to leave the complex, we heard a loud scream. As we turned around to look at the cell where Vast was being held, all we could see was dripping blood and dismembered body parts all over place in small denominations. I've seen some scary and nasty stuff before, but this was just pure enjoyment in the destruction of someone. You didn't do this to a person unless you were really adamant about them being dead, or unless you enjoyed doing it. This sort of thing and the power with which it's done makes me shudder to think what could have done it. Apparently though, the partner that Vast had assist him in his work came back to finish him off as he predicted. I suppose it's better than living an eternity in a small cell. Still, I rather liked him, even if he was crazy. The scream and the missing person started an all-out search of the prison. We were questioned quite thoroughly, and while I answered every question they asked truthfully, I deliberately omitted particular parts of our discussion so that it stayed only between us. Once we were left alone for a moment, we turned and looked to the remaining Ultraloth captive, and he was cowered in a corner, shivering. Not a usual pose for one of these creatures, but this one seems to at least have a general repentance. He quickly flashed us the image of a Bhernaloth appearing in the cell, killing Vast in a second, smiling and then stepping out of the cage again and vanishing. By all means, if these things exist (they've been nothing more than statues and rumors up to this point), then they have much more power than I have deemed possible. Pitiless has some tight security and if this guy can just breeze right through it without a problem, then we all need to be rather worried about what he can do. In fact, the security in Pitiless was so tight, we were almost required to stay as guests of the prison for an oblivion while we helped to solve this mystery. I could understand the requirement if it was necessary, but I felt that my companions would probably liked to leave at some point before their lives outside the Astral had dwindled away to nothing. Seeing an opportunity to extend my services a little further and explore other avenues of helping out without directly helping, I left the wardens with the card for the Portal Jammer and told them to keep us apprised of the situation and that if they needed to further question us, that could easily be found there and brought in for further discussion. It seemed to smooth things over nicely. I guess listening to all the diplomats and friends my parents had over when I was little turned out to be somewhat useful.

As a final note worthy of Mention, Nisha never seems to be able to not impress me. Between being a light caster, an extraordinary cook, and a very obviously accomplished rogue, she's got top notch ratings in my book. Occasionally she's a little slow to catch onto puns, but her reaction to them is more than cute. I believe it was at some point while talking to an Arinase that my sexual preference was brought into question. I assured Nisha that I wasn't about to run off with a man over her, and she told me that I would have to prove it to her tonight. Well, the interesting about the astral is that you don't age, and time really seems to stand still here. So, it's quite possible that we could have had a night of passion that wouldn't have had an end, nor a beginning really. I'm much too scared of doing anything like that this soon in our relationship. Sure, I reserve the thought, but I'm more nerves than anything else when it comes to her. I'd still like to speak with her a bit more regarding her past before it gets too involved. While it's

fun to joke and kid, and I appreciate her presence more than anyone else's, I think muddying the water with sex is just a bad idea. So, hopefully she'll understand that we'll have to leave the question of my preferences up in the air for the time being. Why do I see this being a source of torment to me until I'm able to show her exactly where my mind lies on the matter of me with her.

Anyway, it's time I stop rambling and get back to studying my spells. I've been working on coming up with a few unique elements to add to my repertoire that still need some polishing touches. Again, I get the feeling that my talents are somewhat weaker than they should be off the Astral. I'm not sure if that effect is permanent, but I can feel the agitation returning to my head already. Perhaps I should go seek out one of the more knowledgeable wizards in Sigil and see if they have any advice for me. I doubt that they've experienced the thrill of heavy magic before, but they might know of a strange combination that makes the astral such a unique and wonderful opportunity for casters. That will have to wait until later though as we have other more important things to tend to. Mystra's many blessings upon you.

I SMELL A FIEND BEHIND THIS

So much has happened in such a short span of time that I find it hard to recollect all of it without reeling at the enormity of it all. As with all good tales, starting at the beginning would be a good idea, but there is no clear exposition and certainly no worthy end in sight that would warrant proper tale. Nevertheless, I shall not let that get in the way of my ramblings, as it never has before, and I shall start as close to the beginning as I can comfortably say.

As everyone should know, we had recently returned from the astral prison and had some rather interesting things to ponder over in our heads. The picture for the most part seemed to be getting a little clearer as to who we had in front of us and the people we still had yet to add to our list of enemies. It seems that no matter how hard I try, that list continues to grow at an alarming rate and I've decided that I should probably make more friends quicker to offset the balance. Admittedly, I'm a bit more reluctant to trust someone than I should be, but so far it's kept me alive.

While we had time to spare for the next day or so, we eliminated, or at least we hope we eliminated, one nuisance from our midst. Amberblue, the fairy dragon, decided it would be within his best interest to go and visit Ysgard, and possibly spend some time there with some others of his kind. Certainly I couldn't object to the matter. He's cute and endearing, but with my progressively grumpier moods as of late I don't feel that I could deal with someone as upbeat as that without wanting to strangle him. Not wanting to miss the opportunity to say goodbye, I decided to tag along with the party to give him a polite sendoff and wish him well with his new friends.

After arriving on the plane, Nisha decided that she wasn't in the mood to walk the short distance to the tree line and practically begged me for a teleport spell. I didn't really have much objection to the matter, I wasn't in the mood to walk, but I didn't really have the proper information I needed to accurately complete a teleport. After proposing a race to the trees, we all took off like lemmings, leaving Nisha quite some distance behind. This had the double benefit of allowing me to return to her a few moments later, and teleport her the rest of the way. After wandering around in the forest for quite sometime,

and getting ourselves thoroughly lost, we can across a nest of quite a few of these fun-loving creatures. The plane itself seemed to have an overall comforting effect, so I wasn't in too bad of a mood, but I could still feel the weariness looming over my head. After introducing Amberblue to the rest of the fairy dragons, we let them talk to each other for a while and play a game or two with us, before we decided that it would be a good idea to get back to the Portal Jammer and take care of business before business took care of us. Before we left however, I was treated to a barrage of acorns to the back of my head. I knew it had to be the damnable little creatures as each time I turned to look I could hear them snickering. They even tried to better the ruse by saying something about vicious squirrels, but I would have none of that nonsense. I made a quick quip about foxes eating squirrels and was promptly rewarded by another volley, this time one or two of them from Nisha. I smiled at her widely and shook my head. I'd have to come up with some sort of creative revenge for that one. Certainly one good prank deserves another.

Having finished our business on this plane, we returned to Sigil and spent an evening resting and recuperating. I spent a good deal of my time updating my spell book with some of my current thoughts on spells and managed to complete the research on an anti-magic shield. It's quite possibly one of the most useful spells I've created yet, and it seemed simple enough that I'm surprised no one else had thought of it before. Imagine taking a shield spell, which provides cover from attacks and some spells, and extending that a bit further. Instead of making the shield out of a force effect, make it out of anti-magic instead. It would have the same properties essentially, except that it doesn't provide cover from physical attacks. Instead, it automatically dispels any targeted spell cast through the area. Essentially, if someone were to try and direct a cone of cold at me, it would prevent it from affecting the immediate area around me. However, if the spells were targeted at someone else and I was just in the effected area, the spell would still succeed. Essentially it provides me with a bit of protection, and the ability to be a useful caster instead of just hiding within the confines of a magic-free bubble.

The following morning, we awoke at our regularly early hour and headed back to the Astral to follow up the leads we had there. Instead of just popping back into the Astral and randomly working our way around, I knew exactly where we were headed and so did the rest of the party. I managed to land us a good deal from the astral storm itself, which was rather fortunate. Ending up inside the storm completely unprotected would likely not be a fun thing at all. After arriving, I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, savoring the magic-rich air and reveling in the feeling of power that seemed to wash over me. I quickly used my recently acquired astral teleport spell and popped us into existence just outside the tower. The sight that fell before us was, to put it simply, amazing. In the air in front of us was the corpse of what we could only assume was Aoskar, looming there with it's forests of razors and blades. Had I been a weaker willed person, I might have given into the strange voice inside my head telling me to touch the blades. This place was just that alluring. Hovering above the dead deity's body was a rather large building that had a wide ray of light that pulsed with a strange energy that nearly blinded me as I looked at it under a detect magic. This was likely the divinity leech that we had heard so much about, stripping the flesh from the body and turning it into something, with who knows what powers. Unfortunately we also attracted the attention of one of those odd tentacled creatures, and had to deal with it before we could get much further. Fortunately, I learned that an anti-magic field would prevent most of the negative effects of being touched by

one of those things. Thank Mystra that something was able to stop them. This particular creature was surprisingly easier than the other one we had encountered last time, but I supposed preparation and understanding of your target does make things a good deal more level on the playing field.

After dealing with it, we worked our way up the front door. I seemed to have taken a liking to being direct and the front door is quite possibly the most direct entrance there is to any place. While it's quite an obvious place to put traps, we're also expecting them to be there, so it works out quite well in that respect. Inside the room, I caught the familiar glow of a symbol and managed to avoid triggering it long enough for Nisha to try her luck at disarming it. For some reason she's grown increasingly secretive about her trade, and I'm not sure if that's typical, or if she's just trying to be cute about it in the process. It certainly makes her that much more of a mystery to me, and I like the game to some degree. Keeps me guessing I suppose. Within a moment or two, we heard the symbol trigger and turned to see the results of her actions. Sitting in the middle of the next room was a small rat that hissed at us, its eyes glowing a brilliant green color. Seeing that the trap apparently reset itself, I stepped forward and quickly threw a few magic missiles at the symbol, effectively destroying it. The rat however, didn't seem too amused and breathed a line of fire directly at me. To say I was surprised by this random action, would have been a tremendous understatement. I quickly looked down at the creature and sensing a growing evil from it, I quickly retaliated without much thought at all and breathed my own cone of fire back at the thing, quickly turning it into nothing more than scorch on the ground. Strange how spells just seem to pop into my head at random when they're needed. Admittedly, it was probably a little too severe a response to that, but I felt justified in totally obliterating it as it wounded my pride, in front of Nisha non-the-less!

Beyond those doors we were greeted by our old friends, the Raksashas. To tell you the truth, I had honestly gotten tired of seeing these two, even if I knew they were nothing more than dead husks of a creature. Creatures coming back from the dead to fight you again are one thing, but these guys seemed to have an unlimited ability for doing things like that. Fortunately, they didn't seem to pose much of a threat, even though they were a good nuisance for the most part. In addition to fighting them, there were a few giths, and a few of their friends that saw fit to make an appearance as well. Never one to back down from a challenge, we all immediately started attacking these two and their recently arrived friends. It took some doing, but within a few minutes we had them all dispatched and laying on the ground. For some reason, the two Raksasha corpses started to glow a brilliant red orange in addition to universal underneath a detect magic. I had only seen this sort of effect once before and that was from a delayed blast fireball that we narrowly missed. Again, before I even knew exactly what I was doing, I had dispelled both of the corpses using two targeted dispels. Somewhere in the back of my head, I knew that an area dispel would have done the job, but there were just too many people and their magical items standing around to warrant that sort of treatment. Before moving on into the next room, we sent the bodies tumbling down the stairs, just in case they decided to reanimate, or possibly a delayed contingency I hadn't seen before. I wonder if anyone really appreciated the tail-saving I had done. I'm certain they did, but it's nice to know that you're doing a good job once in a while.

The next portion of this stronghold was certainly an amusing one. Obviously someone had taken precious amounts of time to construct a hallway filled with various different colored tiles and imbued spells into each of them that appeared to be quite devastating. Looking down the hall that was about a hundred feet long, it appeared that every square inch of the floor had been covered with them and there was no way we were going to be walking down there. As usual, everyone who could fly immediately suggested that it was a good idea that we do so. Of course, I was still opposed to the idea really. I don't particularly find it all that useful to take my feet off the ground if I don't have to and I didn't believe that this was our only solution to the problem. Besides, it would be like a fiend to have a dispelling screen about halfway down the hall so that you go flying along merrily and then smack into it and fall onto the tiles, in the middle of the hallway. I quickly tossed a ray of frost spell down the hallway and was actually rather surprised when it fizzled out about a third of the way down. I was just joking about the whole dispelling screen, but apparently my hunch was at least correct. We'd have to find some other way down the hall. As we quibbled about how to get around the screen and other random details, Clueless was breaking each of the tiles using a telekinesis spell. This worked remarkably well until we hit the dispelling screen, at which point we had to solve that problem. Fortunately, Florian came to the rescue there was able to shape the stone away from the wall and allow us access to the other side. Even though on the other side the tiles appeared to be on the floor, these were hiding on the ceiling and the gravity was reverse as well. What a clever ruse! Apparently I hadn't given these fiends enough credit when it was due. Still, they weren't clever enough to outwit me yet.

The last third of the hallway was just like the first and we were able to get down it pretty much without incident. At last, we came to the final set of doors that hopefully guarded the divinity leech. After opening them and looking inside, we were quite right, but the odd thing was that nobody was home. I've never been one to trust an unguarded doorway so I picked up my lucky copper piece and tossed it through the doorway into the other room. It bounced on the ground a few times and then halted a dozen feet away. No ill effects seemed to have befallen the coin, so I took a deep breath and took a step forward, realizing as my foot crossed the threshold that I had finally been had. Damn the fiends behind this. Hiding portals in doorways and keying them to live creatures only. I suppose it was bound to happen at some point, but did my shortfalling have to present itself while Nisha was watching? Hopefully she didn't think less of my abilities just because my luck had finally caught up with me. And what's worse, I didn't have my lucky copper piece any more! I guess it's not as lucky as I thought it was, as it had finally let me down.

As I was whisked away, I quickly realized that I hadn't been left on the astral by that portal. I was now on some random demi-plane on the ethereal. Sitting there in front of me, sipping a drink, was none other than Shylara Akt'atarm, arcanaloth and servant to Vorkannis the Ebon. I expected a fiend of some sort, but an arcanaloth? While I could have mentally dealt with that, she was also a holder of some power in the world. There was no way we were going to be dealing with her, was there? Just as I was pondering over these things in my head, I felt a white hot burning start to etch itself into my head, making my ears flatten out to either side of my head and causing my tail to wrap itself firmly around my left leg. Had I been a fox, I would have been on the ground whimpering in dismay. Fortunately, almost as soon as the pain had started it went away

and I felt my conscious mind quickly return. I gathered what I could of my strength and retorted with a comment that I wasn't that easy to deal with. My words were devoid of any real feeling as I knew what sort of mess we were in, and I honestly didn't feel as though I could resist another spell of that nature.

Before I had time protect the rest of the party with an anti-magic field they all popped into the plane and had that determined look on them. The good news being that Shylara didn't seem too interested in trying to burn out their mind as well, so at least they didn't have to suffer through that agony too. Once we had all arrived, Shylara honestly didn't seem as talkative as I thought. She pretty much sat in her chair, refused to answer any real questions we had, and demanded things from us. Honestly, if she had completed her work at that particular god isle, than why would she waste her time with us? There was something she wasn't telling us and quite possibly a few pieces of the puzzle we had yet to put into place. While we were all trying to figure out exactly what we wanted to know from her, she senses the kobold's paranoia and offered us a method to leave. If we decided within five minutes which one of us would die, then she would let the rest of us go. Not that I trusted that in the least, but it appeared to be our only option at the time. Somehow there had to be an alternative to that, and we wracked out brains trying to figure it out.

Finally, Kiro stepped forward and made the decision for everyone. Obviously Shylara knew something about our friend that we didn't and they discussed his place in the planes for a few moments. Then, right before she cast a power word kill on him, he let his illusion drop and standing before us was one of the rarest creatures I have ever seen on the planes: a Rilmani. It wasn't often that these creatures left the base of the spire, and when they did, people usually didn't remember them. Surely he was sent here to gather information and to ascertain the depth of the fiendish plot, but who knows exactly how much more information he had managed to gain from us without our knowing. Shylara's spell went off, and there was a brief sizzle of magical energy as the death ward placed on him was activated and ended the spell before it could do its work. The look of confusion on Shylara's face was priceless as she tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Not to be robbed of her pleasure though, she quickly summoned up a disintegrate spell and hurled it at him. Before even my mind had time to catch up with me, my hands were already working a counter to her spell and had fired it off the same instant she had. By instinct I had added in the spell turning as well, and nearly fainted when I saw her spell return to her at full effect. Had that spell breached her resistance, I would have likely passed out. It just seemed the right thing to do. After all, I did feel sort of responsible for Kiro, even if he was a Rilmani. I had introduced him to the rest of the people in the inn and had dragged him around with me to see a few things and learn some of the ways of the planes. Little did I know that he already knew way more about the planes than I'd likely ever know.

We all started to close in on Shylara, and just as we were about to attack, three of those tentacled creatures that we later found out to be astroloths appeared and started attacking as well. Considering that they were now three of those things and a rather powerful fiend to deal with, I cast an anti-magic field and offered what little protection I could to those in my party. While it certainly lowered their abilities as well, it protected them more than it hurt them I'd say. We took quite some time to deal with all of them, and I vaguely remember Florian casting a destruction on Shylara, which promptly made

her vanish in a puff of smoke. I don't remember that spell having that sort of effect before, but then again, we were dealing with an arcanaloth so the rules might have changed. With one less creature to worry about, the astroloths weren't as difficult to deal with and were soon nothing more than an ethereal goo.

Just as we had finished dealing with the last of the astroloths we took a deep breath and Shylara popped in again! Fortunately, I had an anti-magic field running to protect us from the loth tentacles, but not everyone had bothered to step inside it. Pretty much the only people it was protecting at the time were myself and Nisha, which was obscenely fortunately as she obviously wasn't herself any more. The recently reappeared arcanaloth tossed a meteor swarm at Kiro, which struck him full on before they promptly exploded behind him. Had that been a caster I knew personally, I would have been thoroughly impressed as it takes a lot of dedication and hard work to be able to cast a spell of that magnitude. Not to mention, it's not that often that you see people able to cast spells of that sphere. Those that can usually aren't the kind you run into all that often.

Kiro didn't even have a chance to defend himself from this sudden attack and was immediately stricken down by this ultra powerful spell. Had I a chance to counter or dispel it, I would have, but there was no way I could have anticipated the power or the magnitude with which the spell was cast. As the blast settled, everyone looked extraordinarily tired and weary and I was beginning to wonder if hiding inside my anti magic field was such a good idea. It's not that I wouldn't like to do some damage myself, but when you're protecting one you care a good deal about, you have to balance the protection with the ability and it's not easy to do with such high level spells. As I sat there pondering why the arcanaloth was able to recover so quickly from a temporary inconvenience such as death, I realized that she was quite possibly using an astral projection and then hopping through a color pool to obtain a new body. This certainly is a creative use of the spell, but there are always drawbacks to it as well. First, you are completely and totally vulnerable in your true body. All it would take would be a well aimed sword blow to end your life and you wouldn't even have a chance to defend yourself. And second, when you're possessing a new body like that, your conscious mind tends to move with you as well. If the body is destroyed, you are returned to your original form without harm. But if the body is put in stasis, knocked out, or even turned into stone then you can't will the spell to end and are trapped within it. I must say that the possibility of such a thing happening just makes my skin crawl. I wouldn't wish that sort of thing upon anyone at all, no matter how evil they are.

However, one must compromise your morals once in a while, particularly when your life and the lives of your friends are on the lines. Personal beliefs, regardless of how strict can be suspended if it will save them. Clueless, Toras, and Fyrehowl all immediately set themselves upon this creature, trying their best to beat her senseless so that she wouldn't wake up. Even though I expected the result I was still surprised when it worked and her body remained here on the ethereal plane. By this time I was becoming slightly agitated not being more useful than a mere shield, and I ended the spell while Clueless made sure that the arcanaloth was kept unconscious. We decided that the best way to keep her from waking up was to turn her into stone and keep her that way until we could best decide what to do with her. Quite possibly someone would come looking for her, or her real body would be killed back on her home plane. The first time I threw the

flesh to stone spell, an arc of red magic sped back from her body and left at my hands. I jumped back about five feet, just from the surprise and was rather hesitant to try again, but try again I must. I summoned up on the strength and cast the spell again, this time rewarded with a flash of light as her body quickly turned into stone. I could almost feel the hatred and agony as she realized she was trapped inside the stone form. If she was ever released from that spell and was still alive, I wouldn't put it past her to come looking for me. Apparently I make a lot of enemies this way.

Within a minute or two of creating our recently acquired bargaining chip we were contacted by another prominent figure of arcanaloth society. Well, I should say that clueless was contacted by this fiend. Admittedly, Clueless is keeping a good bit of information from us for our own sakes, but at the same time, it makes it hard to understand what's going on and how's he's able to talk with these fiends without going anywhere. That, and dealing with fiends is just a messy business. I hate to just blunder along trusting my life and a lot of decisions to someone else. Certainly I trust clueless to make the right decisions for the time, but everyone has their weak moments, and I'd have for him to have one and me or Nisha end up having to pay for it. I'd much rather be responsible for my own downfall than to find out it was because Clueless forgot to mention something to me. Still, in this instance it seemed we had two choices: hand over Shylara, or die. Considering that Shylara would likely be tied up for some amount of time before she'd be able to claim revenge upon us, and also considering that our lives were at stake here, it was pretty much decided we should agree to whatever deal Clueless had already prearranged.

Taking the fiend's body we exited through the nearest portal and began our plane hopping back to the Astral. Once there, we found the color pool indicated to us, and a rather odd ringing sound that went along with it as well that got louder as we got closer. Florian solved that problem with a localized silence, and we continued on our way to our final destination. Looking at the color pool floating in front of us, it was obvious that we had never seen one like this before. In addition to multiple colors, it also had a good amount of clear color to it as well. If I didn't know better, I'd almost swear that it wasn't a color pool, but that's what it appeared to be and I wasn't about to ask questions of fiends. There's just too much there to comprehend. We quickly vacated the Astral and returned back here to Portal Jammer to find that business had been fairly normal and steady as of late. That was certainly welcome news as it allowed me a chance to sit down and write this entry. As an aside, I've got a letter in the mail from Lothar regarding my last bit of information sharing with him which I will likely read later this evening, but for the moment, dinner is sounding like a good option.

I just noticed that as I reached into my pocket for some silver sand to dry the ink on this page that I still have yet to explore the little trinket Nisha gave me after her experiment with the statue. I'm sure the curious reader wouldn't mind if I took a moment to examine it and relate it's purpose to you.

Mystra blessings! I can't believe that she would do something like that! The trinket turned out to be a sensory stone with a hastily recorded set of feelings. At first, I got the impression that she was quite embarrassed by what she was going to do, but then I also got the resolve as well. In my head I could picture Nisha leaning over and french kissing the statue of Shylara, even as I felt the smooth stone rub over my tongue. I could even feel the cold stone as she rubbed her body up against it, picking up her leg in the

classic exotic pose. I was completely overwhelmed by the sensations plucking at my body while the stone transmitted them to me. I had never known that fur and skin could feel so kinky when gotten near stone. As I sit here recollecting these feelings I can't help but feel a bit aroused by it, and I honestly think that it was her intention to some degree. But, there is one thing troubling me about all this though. She did that to an arcanaloth! Even if she is stoned, it's still Shylara. It's one of those conflicting emotions. Had it been an aasimar, or another tiefling statue that she was doing that to, I doubt I would have these issues, but for Mystra's sake, it's an arcanaloth! I'm not sure what I should feel at this point.

I think it best that I stop fondling the stone like some indecisive berk, and go downstairs and get some dinner. I'm quite hungry and there's other business that needs attending to. I'll find some way to get Nisha back for that one, even if it means tying a blue ribbon bow to her tail. Until next time, Mystra's blessings upon you.

KISSING THE ASTRAL GOODBYE

Admittedly this entry in my journal here is much sooner than I would have anticipated writing, hence why it will likely be a bit shorter than most of the previous entries you've discovered so far. However, I found myself with the free time and the will to write, so rather than waste that time I decided to spend it accordingly.

Upon finishing my last entry I went upstairs to stow my book away on the shelf in my room where I normally keep such things, but much to my surprise I happened to find a particular tiefling already asleep in my bed, sprawled out in the cutest manner I could imagine. Rather than wake her from her obviously tired slumber, I put my book back on the shelf and pulled the covers up over her, tucking her into my bed. I then stole one of the pillows she wasn't using and place it on the floor along with my cloak and proceeded to make myself comfortable. You wouldn't believe how uncomfortable a floor is until you've had to spend an evening on it. I'm seriously debating adding some sort of rug to the floor in case I find myself there again in the future. Regardless of where I slept though, the night passed uneventfully and I found myself awake again the following morning much earlier than most other people. I thought that perhaps an early breakfast while studying my spells wouldn't be such a bad idea. Before I left the room though, I did decide to pay Nisha back for her little gift the other day. I rummaged around through my stuff and found a short blue ribbon which I promptly tied to her tail right next to the bell, being very careful not to wake her. When she awoke a short while later, she thankfully didn't notice the addition to her person, but I would certainly hear from her later about it.

Instead of taking our 'time off' and just relaxing, we decided to make one last sweep of the Astral, in case we happened to miss something while we were there. Popping back into the plane, we quickly made our way through the remaining bubbles in the storm only to find large gathering's of Astroloths, most of the buildings destroyed or empty, and in the case of one of the last locations, a group of bandits obviously employed by Shylara at some point to clean up the mess there. After dealing with this cleanup crew and its pet pyroclastic dragon, we played interrogation on one of them and found out that he and some other groups were there to dismantle the machines and things inside the castles. Admittedly, we couldn't get him to say exactly who he was working for, or

answer any of the more pressing questions, but we at least found out his reason for being back in the Astral. True to our word, we released him when he told us what we wanted to know, and he quickly vanished off into the wiles of the world. It's much more than likely that someone was watching us and will know of his cooperation. Then again, he's also betrayed most of his own kind anyway, but those he did know likely don't hold respect for him any longer.

Finding that we were already beaten to the scene, we decided to take our leave of the Astral for the time being and decided to head back to our inn and recuperate, perhaps enjoy some of the lag time we'd be having. Unfortunately, Mystra's fancy being what it is, we ended up rather deep inside the rings around the spire and we weren't able to teleport ourselves to Tradegate like we normally do. Instead, we'd have to start walking for a few hours before I would be able to cast spells of any sphere greater than four. However, I do believe Mystra knew what she was doing when she stranded us so close to the spire. While on the way back, the topic of children came up, particularly since the kobold would likely be laying her eggs soon. The conversation took a rather interesting turn at that point and Nisha and I were clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

My feelings about children are quite simple: not right now. I've got no qualms about raising them or dealing with them, in fact, I think they're quite cute when you don't have a headache, but I just don't think I'm ready for them. I'm still out seeing the world, learning the ways of Mystra's fancies, and generally trying to enjoy life. With children, it poses more responsibility than I'm willing to take on, what with seeing to their proper training and all. Not to mention, there's just too much turmoil in my life to worry about such things right now. However, that's not to imply that I wouldn't enjoy spending some 'quality' time with her. I just think that when we're both ready for that form of commitment that it'll come naturally to us. So, for the mean time I'm waiting patiently and still learning all there is to know about her. Back to my tale however.

Seeing that we didn't want to be part of the situation, we both used a much more minor version of teleport and dimensioned doored ourselves a few hundred feet ahead. I'm sure we caused a bit of commotion amongst them as we immediately ducked down behind some shrubs and waited, but I figure that Fyrehowl probably spotted me at some point. Apparently I'm less vulpinal than I thought I was. How much of that ancestry I have within me remains to be seen. The tail and the ears among other things are what seem to be the most useful gifts that were passed along. After a few moments of hiding, we got up and resumed our ever forward pace bantering back and forth ourselves while we kept out of range of the disturbing conversation. When I figured we had gone far enough that I could safely cast a teleport spell again, Nisha spread out a picnic blanket and we had a small lunch while we waited for people to join us. While we were waiting, I became the target of a large amount grape throwing target practice. I caught a good number of them, but a larger percentage just bounced off my nose or muzzle and rolled away on the blanket. When the others finally arrive, we stood up, brushed ourselves off and immediately set off for Tradegate.

Upon arriving there, Nisha realized that she had left her picnic blanket sitting somewhere in the outlands. Not exactly a good place to leave something you want to keep. So, instead of just leaving it there, I teleported her back and asked how long she thought we should strange them in Tradegate before I returned with the Sigil portal key? She responded by reminding me that the longer we remained away the more they'd think

we were out rolling around in the grass. Not one to pass up such a golden opportunity, I pounced Nisha and pinned her to the ground and then we rolled around in the grass for a few minutes. After a sufficient amount of time elapsed, I teleported us, blanket and all, back to Tradegate. I'm not sure what the people of the town thought, but Clueless and the others seemed surprised at least. I just smiled and let them think what they wanted. I endured a little ribbing from Clueless about the whole five minute thing, but I honestly think if it only took five minutes then something was obviously wrong. Still, we had a good laugh, even if it was at our own expense.

...here there appear to be pages that were added after the initial binding of the book, glued back into the binding using a sort of magical polymer. The additions are quite obvious as the color and quality of the paper have changed, and the handwriting has changed slightly to be less graceful and perhaps a bit more curt and short. Quite likely this was added a good deal of time after the initial writing...

Returning to the Portal Jammer, we found ourselves with a letter directing us to go visit someone named Tessali over in the gatehouse. Apparently this was the end result of our encounter with the ghereleth quite some time ago. Eager to find out what information he could be providing us with, we all set off for the gatehouse, following the instructions to the letter. Passing through the orphanage there was somewhat depressing, but it was at least good to know that they children were being looked after and surviving. Having them run the streets of the hive would be a horrible fate for them. After telling Tessali that we were there to speak with the Shackled Warden, we were ushered off to his cell much deeper in the bowls of the gatehouse than any cutter would likely ever be permitted. This place was atrocious compared to pitiless. The section he was being kept in was quite run down and decrepit. You'd think that if they wanted someone to recover from being insane, they'd provide a much more hospitable environment than the one through which we were walking.

The name on this person's cell read as **Marason**, one none of us had even heard of in history or recognized from recent events. Ushered into his cell, we were greeted by an old man that was in the middle of writing in a small batch of books. However, he wasn't to remain in that form long. As he introduced himself, he changed into his true form and dropped all of the illusions around the room. I'm not one for pretenses, but given the grandeur of this creature and his physical form, I sort of wish that this ghereleth had just kept his original form. Despite the initial uncomfortable feeling, we continued with our conversations and learned that he was in the process of updating the only remaining COMPLETE copy of the Book of Keeping. This book, for those berks that don't know, is the one in which all the 'loth true names were written and distributed. By using the names contained in this tome you could conceivably summon any of them and bind them to your will. For some that would be extremely difficult, but for others, it would likely be easy. If this journal of my adventures has survived in its entire form, you may likely also find a copy of this book on the same shelf as this diary.

Needless to say, I never did like dealing with these evil creatures, but this one posed an interesting proposition. In return for providing him with as much information about the 'loths and other fiends we encountered, he would in return grant us any information we may be seeking about them. Considering that he held similar opinions

about many of the creatures we were up against, I felt that the deal seemed at least reasonable. Considering that he wasn't necessarily expecting a lot in return, I thought doing this service for him wouldn't pose a huge problem for us. After all, knowledge and information don't come cheap these days. We asked what little questions we had of him and took our leave, Clueless remaining behind to discuss one thing or another with him.

... here the new pages end and there appears to be a page that was torn out. Given that you can't see any ink stains along the seam, it's possible it was just used as filler until the addition could be added ...

You'll have to pardon me if I rant shortly on the topic of Clueless. Clueless is a good friend of mine and I'm honored to call him so. However, I'm beginning to wonder what 'our own safety' entails. Obviously he knows much more than any of us do, and while that really doesn't bother me, the fact that I'm continually placing my life in the hands of someone who deals with fiends does bother me. Assuredly there are quite a few things and people we should likely never want to meet, but if our lives depend on the outcome of a deal we have to unwittingly participate in, then I'd at least like to know what my options are. If I have no options available to me, I'd like to know how that came out, particularly since I like to keep my options open. I sense that I'm standing on an isle by myself and the bridges off it are being burned, but few by my own accord. I'm making enemies who are much too difficult for me to deal with and likely too stubborn to talk my way away from, and I'm not even saying a word! In particular our dealings with Helekanalaith. I had no idea that he was looking over our shoulders, and when Clueless said we had little choice but to hand Shylara over to him, I was a little more than upset. Grant it, I don't question that particular creature, but I do question the fact in which he contacted only Clueless, and that we were left with no choice but to trust in Clueless's judgment.

Suffice it to say, I wish I could get more information out of it. If Clueless is protecting me in some way, I'd like to know how, and why. I don't need someone sticking their neck out for me if I can't repay them in some manner. I also can't help but wonder that if we all knew what was going on, we could all protect ourselves from it. There's nothing worse than an unexpected surprise that has ill consequences. I've been burned too many times by those scenarios than to let them go right by me without at least a second thought. Still, I will continue to trust in Clueless as long as it takes. When it warrants it, I suppose he'll tell me eventually.

Back the Portal Jammer that evening, we had several rather interesting things happen, none of which bear any great importance in the matter of life. However, I will say that Nisha was quite amusing dressed up like Former Factol Rhys. I also think that thanks to her cunning in her trick on Fyrehowl, I managed to relax a little and enjoy the occasional prank now and again. It's amazing how liberated it makes you feel when you can laugh at something, and then make your friends laugh too. I'm sure the patrons of the bar also loved the random discussion of three ways between myself, Rhys, and Nisha. Neither one of us would dream of such a thing, but it's certainly an interesting kinky thought. I think Nisha alone would be enough for this wizard, particularly since I have no idea what I'd be getting myself into. It's surprising the life you miss when you spend all

your time studying the mysteries of Lady Mystra. Hopefully Nisha will understand why I may be a little nervous about us at times. It's just that it's unfamiliar territory for me.

Anyway, enough of my random ranting and rambling for the evening. I've decided that now that I've got some time to myself, I'm going to have Nisha accompany me on an official tour of Sigil. I know the price ranges for the average tout to take you on a tour, but I'd appreciate the most detailed one as possible. I'd like to know a bit more about where I'm staying and who I'm dealing with, particularly if I'm going to be here for a lot longer. Supposedly these tours can be quite expensive, but it remains to be seen. I'll trust Nisha's judgment on the selection of the tout responsible for our tour. She has enough worldly experience to find one that won't fleece me for every dime I'm worth. Hopefully this will prove interesting.

Until another evening, good luck with your journeys and may Mystra grant the mage's wind to your sails to keep your course true and straight.

DINNER (AND ENTERTAINMENT) AT THE JESTER'S PALACE

Despite my incessant ramblings and want to digress from the topics I have set forth in my entries here, I realize that not everything will be told about certain events that have happened to me. In particular, the events regarding my arrival in Sigil, exploration of one of The Lady's mazes, and my first real confrontation with Shemeska to name a few. It's possible the aware reader who happened across this tome of my escapades will have pieced together some detail of what happened and when, but it will always be left open to speculation. It is for this reason that I decided I must write down some of the details regarding these events. The first event that comes to mind would be that of the first social dinner I had in Sigil.

Dinner itself up until this point had been routine and mostly uneventful. I had been to several of the more obscure places in Sigil and ordered some of the strangest stuff I could find to eat, just to sample it. Of course, I found out I also didn't really have the stomach for a lot of it, not to mention the requisite drink that went along with the meal. However, the evening I was invited to the Jester's Palace was a special occasion. Of course the food would be good, but it was more of a social event and I was honored to be counted among the various people who were allowed to attend. Considering that we had just recently acquired the Portal Jammer itself and the dust had barely settled on the renovations, I'm surprised we were even considered land owners. Almost assuredly there were people there who had some of the same feelings I did and fostered a certain animosity toward myself and my companions at our stroke of fortunate luck. Despite this though, I felt compelled to at least make an appearance at the dinner and get to know the other assorted bunches of people who were of high social or land owning status in Sigil.

Before I could attend though, I wanted to make sure I was appropriately outfitted. Showing up in wizard's robes that were fresh with the dust from a recent adventure and rife with the smell of dead things likely wouldn't have been a good way to make an impression. Certainly it would have made any necromancers present do a double take when they saw me, but overall the impression wasn't what I wanted to generate. In order to solve this problem, I finally decided to spend a small portion of the money I had accumulated thus far. I've never been very diplomatic in nature, but I knew how to make an impression if necessary. I can't recall the name of the shop that I visited, but I do

remember that what I purchased cost me a fair chunk of change. However, it was well worth the investment and the quality was exquisite. The finery in which I found myself consisted of a pair of loose fitting pants of some sort silken material that had much more weight than normal silk would. The shirt was of the same material but had an accompanying vest with it of some sort of cloth. The color schemes of browns, orange-reds, blacks, and the small amount of a deep blue seemed to work rather well and fancied myself up quite nicely. The person doing the measurements even remembered that I had tail to account for and made the appropriate adjustments to the garments without a need to remind.

Of course, the outfit makes the person, but I also needed a way to signify myself as a mage. True mages can easily identify others with just a glance, or if they're less experienced, a small spell or an item that will help them out. Others however, would have more of an issue unless they already knew me. To those people, I wanted to show my rank and station and the talent of Mystra's blessing that was granted me. For this, it occurred to me that I needed a staff. Every great wizard that I can recall possessed one at some point during their life time. It's more likely that they were old enough to need a walking stick as well. Even though I was still young and needed no such aide, I thought it would be a good show of power. But what to do about it? I made my way through sigil and found a tout that seemed to know her way around and she directed me to a quaint little shop that specialized and catered to the more fortunate and rich members of the town. I suppose my new attire led my guide to believe that I either had a good bit of gold to spend, or had recently come into a fortune. To promote this idea, I left her with a few gold instead of the requisite amount most tous are used to getting.

I ventured inside the little store and looked around before being approached by a kindly old gentleman. He walked me through a few questions and asked my preferences and the purpose of my purchase. Seeming as how I didn't want any enchantments on the staff itself, or at least not at this juncture, he knew precisely what sort of staff I needed. He brought me over to a selection of rare woods that he kept separate from the normal goods and allowed me a few minutes to peruse the stock and select one that matched my temperaments. I selected a rather nice dark brown wood, nearly to the point of being black. It was richly colored and when polished it had a grand and amazing look to it. The old man smiled and noted down the preference before beginning to ask me questions about the staff itself and how I wished to have it adorned. Never being much of a decorator, I wasn't sure, but I eventually settled upon a staff with a fox's head on the top, and a tail that curled about a fifth of the way down the staff. The emblem itself was to be done in a pure form of silver and the end of the tail was to be colored gold. Needless to say, I'm not sure what possessed me to be so extravagant, but this was the first time I had spent any of the money I had come into so far, and I thought it was a worthy cause.

I returned the next day and was quite impressed with the result of the staff I had in my hands. It was just the right height for my body, allowing me to use the staff as a walking stick if I so wished, or it could even be used as a quarter staff of sorts. The entirety of the staff itself was made of this polished dark wood which reflected any who looked into it, and sparkled slightly in the darkness where light was scarce. Needless to say, I was quite impressed with this purchase and felt that it would identify me as a mage quite well to those who weren't in the know. Not that I possesses any great amount of

power, but there's nothing wrong with giving people that impression. Perhaps it would garner me a few favors.

The evening after picking up staff, my comrades and I ventured forth through the city towards the Palace of the Jester. Along the way we passed the Twelve Factols Inn, a place I doubt we'll ever hear the end from in legal disputes. Outside the palace were a few guards checking invitations and beyond the gates a large courtyard had random numbers of people milling about, not really doing much. I presented the invitation for myself and my party and we were admitted beyond the iron gates. The majority of us were all decked out in our finest. Several had purchased new clothes for the occasion, and those who were addicted to their armor, like Toras, had bought new armor and had it polished to a high shine. To me, I thought we all looked quite impressive, and for the most part, we looked a rather noble bunch of people. The palace itself was more than impressive in its size and stature. Corridor after corridor of paintings, furniture, plush carpet, and chandeliers were all about. Those doors that were locked to prevent prying eyes likely contained the same lavishness and detail as the ones we were allowed in. The curious thing about the palace though is that there were a lot of locked doors. I can understand the need for security with so many people showing up, but this place was more like a fortress. Covering many of the walls were walls of force, a spell that would be expensive to cast and keep up in such numbers. And each of the doors had seals and protections on them too numerous to describe. It almost appeared as though something was being kept behind the doors, as well as keeping things from entering the doors. I didn't necessarily understand the ways of sigil, so I thought it would be wise to keep my questions to myself.

The large chamber in which the party was to be held was entirely devoid of people, but the furniture and tables were all placed and name cards were already in their designated positions. Jeremo happened to be hiding in his chair, wearing his crooked crown, and watching us. After a moment, he leaped up and greeted us with a good deal of cordiality. More than I felt I deserved. Still, it was a pleasant experience to be welcomed in such a manner and I wouldn't turn down the chance to repeat it. We spoke with him for a few moments before we wandered off to find our seats and look at the names of the other people who were due to show up. A few of my companions found Shemeska the Marauder's name card and moved Shamus, the rather odd and talkative dust mephit, next to her. Needless to say, this was likely a rather bad choice, but it would prove interesting none-the-less. Our party was seated next to a few people I hadn't heard of before, but some that I would at least come to know purely by my strange fascination with their species. In particular, a modran was seated next to us and had some interesting, if not confusing ideas about things in general. Of course, if you've ever met a modran you can understand exactly where I'm coming from.

At last the party was to begin, and it was as I expected: very ritzy and lofty, but with a good degree of openness to it. At some point, I vaguely remember being addressed as the group who now owned Portal Schmortal, but those details weren't exactly important, particularly since I didn't want to be singled out. The food was good and the conversation sparse and light as we got to know people. The Jester, however, livened it up with a few *rumors* of various people which made me feel as though they were a bit closer to my level. Several times, rather interesting disputes broke out between Shemeska and Shamus which usually ended up with him being flung against a wall. Fortunately,

dust mephits being what they are, he seemed to be mostly unphased by it. I met several random people who seemed interested in learning things from me, in particular Lothar the Master of Bones wished to find some time to speak with me regarding some of my previous adventures. The night was pleasant for the most part, up until things started to wind down and the Jester made his final accusation for the evening.

This last poke of fun came unto Shemeska herself, which was certainly an odd person to attack so openly. Being one of the larger landowners in Sigil and certainly one of the most wealthy among us, she shouldn't have been targeted for such an open assault. Still, being that she is so popular I'm surprised she isn't able to deal with public scrutiny as well as most other people can. I guess she has her own problems to deal with. I don't remember the exact content of the personal information she wished to keep private, but I do remember that it did upset her a great deal. It also managed to amuse quite a number of us as well, which seemed to set her temper off even more. I also don't wish to write down the exact nature of the things she wishes to keep private for fear that if she did discover my notes on the content that she'd find some reason to treat me as she did the others that evening. It's also quite possible that even writing down her public embarrassment in such a trivial manner as this that I'm offending her. Enough on that train of thought though. If I keep up such things, I'll never write any entries in this tome.

Before walking out in a fit of wild temper Shemeska had cast some sort of silence or feeble mind spell upon those who openly poked fun at her. Among those, was the Titan, a person you couldn't miss in crowd. The effect of the spell was strange and seemed to make them quiet and unresponsive to any sort of inquiry to their well being. I'm not very familiar with Arcanaloth magic, but I do suspect that she has many more spells much more powerful than that one. The Titan, apparently insulted by this rather rude casting and restriction of her freedoms stalked out of the room after the loth, intent on getting some sort of revenge. Never one to ignore the problems of others, I ventured along behind them a few minutes later, hoping to at least see the results of what I suspected would be a battle of mind against brawn.

Outside, there was little left of the action. One of Shemeska's body guards was on the ground, dead, in a pool of blood, and the Titan was on the ground, apparently frozen into place. Worried that she might have killed her, I quickly ran up and examined the large Titan. Again, I reiterate that I'm not an extremely skilled mage, but I do know the results of magic when I see them, and this was certainly a magic. Taking a chance, I begin the ritual of casting an antimagic field. Hopefully, when completed it would remove at least part of the effect on her so that I could learn the spell that did it and reverse its ability. However, moments before I completed the spell Shemeska blinked back into place rather close to me. Once the spell was cast, I suspect that she ended up inside the field, but there's no way I can really tell. She looked at me and muttered a threat "Don't tempt me little man..." I'm sure she didn't mean my height as I'm not exactly short. More along the lines of average. Either way though, she didn't come across too well and nicked at my courage and rebellious spirit. I gave her a rather disgusted look and stood up, picking up my newly made staff and standing back a short distance, just in case she was inside the field. She countered with another threat and I continued to back off, obviously not interested in getting into a mage's duel with someone who likely knew a lot more magic than I did, as well as a whole other type of magic. After her third insult to my pride, she started casting a spell, one I didn't have the ability to cast, let alone

barely comprehend. I quickly dived out of the way of the focused disjunction, hoping to save a few of the items I had on my person, and possibly my life had I misjudged her casting. On the positive side of things she missed me, but only by a short distance. On the downside, she was likely now enraged at having missed me and wanted my blood more than before.

I think that's when Mystra stepped in and saw to my favor. Of course, it might have just been dumb luck considering that Mystra wasn't likely to affect Sigil. The disjunction she cast had destroyed my antimagic field, but at the same time, she also ruined her own crafty work in the process. With a quick movement from the Titan, who was now free of the spell, she reached for Shemeska which prompted a surprised yell and then her popping back out of existence. Now that I look back on it, I'm not entirely sure how she's able to do that! In Sigil, teleport, dimension door, and other means of travel don't really seem to work. There's a slim chance that they might work as expected, but usually not enough to gamble on. Apparently Shemeska had found a way around that rule or a way to increase her odds a drastic amount as she had used the spell at least three times now. That evil devil. I wonder how she did it? I'll likely never find out, or if I do, it'll be only the beginning of my torment.

The Titan thanked me for my courage and offered me a little incentive in return. I accepted the offer and figured it wouldn't be a bad idea to ally myself with a powerful being in Sigil and perhaps help out my newly started business. We went back in to the party and I settled down into a glass of some strong drink, my tail curled tightly around my leg as I shivered, nerves still all riled up over the recent excitement. To tell the truth, I was scared out of my wits. Shemeska wasn't the person you didn't let have her way. If she didn't get it, she'd likely just appear in front of you and that'd be the last thing you'd ever see. This is the sort of thing I feared more than most. Since then, I've tried to forget about the encounter, hoping that Mystra will come to my aid should she decide to repay the accidental insult I threw her way.

The party ended some time after that, myself receiving one or two other business cards that I'd have to look into at some point in the future. The rest of my companions gathered together, minus Toras, who apparently went to spend the night with a rather needy lady, and started to make our way out of the palace. As with anything, we can never go around without noticing, causing, or becoming some part of a problem. Leaving the palace was no exception. Scurrying across the floor in front of us was a cranium rat, rather cute critters, but mean when in large numbers. It disappeared into a small crack in the base of one of the walls protected by all those wards and spells. Odd. Florian, our elected official for this occasion decided it was wise to tell Jeremo so we hunted down a servant and were brought to his side. Some short time later, Florian had arranged for us to take care of his problems under the condition that we keep silent about it. That was perfectly understandable to myself as having rats in a fancy place like this would surely ruin your reputation. Florian also mentioned something about a geas, but I was in no frame of mind to have my will bent to someone else's. I've read of too many wizards and other people who've undergone those spells and found out they could no longer do things that weren't even remotely related to what was agreed upon. It takes a keen mind to twist one of the spells to do that, and an even sharper one to know when it's being done. Words are a powerful tool that can be used for good or evil.

Yet again, we found ourselves employed by someone with a problem. As amusing as the journey was through the catacombs and mazes beneath the palace, there are a lot of things I'd like to have not seen, and a lot of danger that I wish I could have avoided. Still, if one is to come to any truly great station or power in life, magic or otherwise, then there will always be some danger that will seek to destroy you. Heading home I mulled a few of these ideas over in my head in preparation of the journey I was to make the following day. In order to finish calming my nerves when I arrived back the inn, I put the finishing touches on a spell I was working on. One that allows people to place orders from the bar without actually being there. It's simple enough in its own right, but certainly quite useful and a popular addition to the bar. I suspect that it has other uses that have yet to be explored. Only time will show how that course is to be laid and if it will truly become as useful as I had imagined.

Again, I come to the close of another tale. I apologize for my ramblings as usual, but one cannot chain the mind down and make it follow the paths of memory. Perhaps if I went to see a psion of some sort, or bought a memory stone it would be easier. I think I'll stick to my writing though. It's more personal and seems to flavor my events with a certain color all their own. Till the next entry, may Mystra's blessing be upon you.

PANDEMONIUM PANORAMA

Things have changed quite a bit since my last entry... no... let me try to start that again. My mind has become muddled as of late, and I think there's a better place to start this.

I've got a fondness for chess, as you might have come to find out in some manner or another. And being that I do have such a fondness, I know a good many things about how powerful the pieces can be. Some believe that the queen is the most powerful and that the pawn is the weakest of them all. Continually at the command of the king and queen, the pawn is there only to serve unquestioningly, and sacrifice itself for the greater good if necessary. However, the pawns are not to be underestimated. Oftentimes they can journey far and achieve something far greater than even they could imagine. It was this idea that I tried to impress upon the fiendish smile nearly a week ago when he visited me and my companions in our home.

The results of his visit were quite astonishing. He managed to get nothing out of me, except for a few thinly disguised threats and casual banter. Admittedly, I probably should have acted a bit more harshly than I did, but there wasn't exactly much I could do about the inevitable death of **Marason**. Obviously Helekanalaith had everything well prepared and planned out, even down to what part he expected each of us to play in his plan. Had I been better informed about it, I wouldn't have participated, but as it was I was an unwilling pawn in his game, and now I've been discarded as a useless playing piece. Hopefully he hasn't underestimated the value of a pawn, nor its power and ability. And if he did, woe be unto him when he finds me staring him down. I realize this sounds pompous, but it's how I feel. Mystra granted me powers and the will to use them as I see fit, and I don't intend to use those abilities without a choice in the matter.

In addition to the rather large explosion over on the backside of the gatehouse and the death of someone who could have proven very useful to us, we were also informed of an unwilling informant in our midst. I of course knew all too well who was keeping

secrets for our own good, and it made sense to suspect him of such a position. I don't fault Clueless for his actions, however I do think that he could have made it more evident that he was being compelled. We didn't have to know by whom or for what purpose, but it would have been nice to know that something was indeed up. Surprises can be awfully fun, but then again, they can also be rather detrimental.

The only other thing that was worthy of note was that the other inhabitants of the criminally insane ward had managed to get themselves loose in the rather large explosion and disappearance of their cells. We offered to help look for them and return them to their cells, but the warden seemed to think that he had everything under control. I seriously doubt under control is an adequate way to describe their handle on the situation. In fact, the next morning we found ourselves awoken by loud banging on our front door while someone posted a warning notice of their escape. I didn't figure they'd have much of a chance at hunting them down and recapturing them.

In the days following though, Nisha and I did an awful lot. I think she sensed my increasingly agitated mood and kept me busy enough that I didn't have much time to think about anything that would depress me. We took our tour of Sigil, which I must say was most entertaining and revealing. You'd be surprised at the multitude of things that are to be learned about the place you live. Of course, this is Sigil, there are always new things to learn. Nisha also taught me about the joys of pumpkin tossing. I now see why she wanted to get the catapult working. Even though it did knock a few people out, or perhaps knock some sense into some of them, it was quite amusing. It had that certain dangerous appeal to it that I seemed to enjoy. It's like casting a spell that has the potential to come back and slap you if you're not careful. I'll have to see what else Nisha enjoys so that we can go try some of it out. Perhaps I'll even find a few things that I enjoy and let Nisha try them out as well. It couldn't hurt.

Near the end of that week we went to see a professor Loebtav of the Whitefire institute about an offer we had received a few weeks ago. He seemed to be a rather interesting sort of person and offered us our choice of three different jobs he had available. The first was a scholarly trip to Howler's Crag in Pandemonium. Once there, we were to help in protecting the group as well as researching some of the leads on the Gautish language that supposedly had some sources there. The second option was an offer to go to the Shifting Sands on Carceri. It had the same basic premise, just on a different plane. However, I didn't treasure the idea of going back there. I've spent enough time on the Astral and that plane that I likely won't be going back for at least a few months. The third and final opportunity presented to us was a trip to the Quasielemental plane of Ash to go on a lower planar treasure hunt. While this sounded fine and dandy, there was a good bit of history that I'm not going to get into about why we didn't take this offer.

After some debate among the party, we accepted our first option to go to Howler's Crag on the layer of Lamentation in Pandemonium. We were to return in three days after having equipped ourselves with various necessities, like planar attunement spells, and spell components.

On the third day, we returned to meet with Professor Loebtav and were introduced to the main people we'd be working with during our stay in Pandemonium. First, there was Settys Al Khylian, paladin of Thoth. He seemed to have a good head on his shoulders and would likely prove very useful in both the scholarly realm and others as

well. After there was Larill Moonshadow, whom I figured I could get along with rather well myself. Third was the diviner Doran Highsilver. Being a wizard, I had particular interest in this character, and he seemed a helpful enough fellow. In fact, he even told me of his specialties so that I could adjust my own studies so as not to overlap his. This would save us both a good deal of time when the need arose to actually use my spells. Lastly was Frollis Terpense, obviously some sort of follower of both Mask and Hoar. I can't even begin to describe how much trouble I can foresee between myself and him.

Frollis is a Tiefling, much like Nisha is, except he's a bit more mysterious than I believe she is. His eyes have tiny little flickers of flame in them and he often smells of brimstone. Despite Nisha's assurance that she wouldn't leave me for him, it's not her that I don't trust. As if to make matters worse, Frollis gave me this completely evil sneer shortly after winking at Nisha. Given that I was honestly not feeling well when I was introduced to him, it took every ounce of strength and will I had left in me in order to avoid incinerating him on the spot. As long as he stayed away from Nisha and myself, I wouldn't have a problem with him, but I don't that being an option with him.

We first went to Bedlam where would meet the last portion of our crew, the portals and servants who would be doing the majority of the grunt work. Once there, I was to cast one of the plane shift spells, Doran another, and Professor Loebtav the third. Upon arriving in the gatetown of Bedlam though, I was hit with a wall of grief and depression. As if my mood hadn't been perky enough, it was now going to be worse. Frollis seemed to delight in this notion, and again, I had to restrain myself from making a scene. I could already tell that this was going to be the beginning of a very long journey. I think the others sensed my apprehension with this person and Professor Loebtav took Frollis with him in his group of people to plane shift. Had I been the one to take him, I would have been so tempted to leave him behind and blame it on some magical fluke. I think we could do without him.

Once on Pandemonium we found ourselves in a pitch black cavern, the wind blowing by us and the howling sounds echoing all around us. Had I not been prepared for something of this nature, I would have surely gone insane right there. Fortunately, planar attunement exists and I was able to ward off the effects without much more than a mental switch. Of course, I still suspect that if we stay here too long we'll begin to feel some of the effects eventually. There was some movement off to one of our sides, and I decided that staying around here wasn't a good idea, so I teleported us to our meeting spot without a problem and there we awaited the arrival of the others.

Within a minute or two, the Professor showed up with his group of people, but the final group led by Doran were not yet accounted for. We waited a few more minutes, before I took the initiative and scryed on the missing group. What I saw in the crystal was certainly surprising. Doran was holding up a wall of force, and everyone else was cowering behind it for protection from the wind storm that had sprung up rather suddenly. Putting away my scrying globe, I teleported myself there and gathered everyone up and teleported us back to the meeting site.

Even on this plane my magic seems to have dulled some and is less effective. Or perhaps it's just my concentration going on me. I'll have to dig out my books and see if I can't focus long enough to make sure I'm not forgetting anything important to my spells. The effect seems to be the same, but the way in which the energy flows through me seems to have changed. If I'm sick in some manner, that might explain why I've been so

agitated and have had one too many headaches as of late. Hopefully I can make it through this assignment without incident so that I can go find someone to check up on my health.

Once we were all there, we migrated to our final campsite and we set up our camp. I sent my eyes out to scout ahead while everyone else put up tents and began preparations for their studying. As we were just finishing up, we were attacked by a glabrezu and an accompaniment of vrocks. I should have known better than to assume everything was as it seemed, and checked for illusions, but again, my mind hasn't been what it used to be. I think I made it rather mad when I hit it and its friends with a fireball. Not that it would have hurt it all that much, but it still had some effect on it I'm sure. The rest of the party dealt with the creatures in a reasonably quick amount of time, and I setup a perimeter with the rest of the eyes to keep any such future surprises down to a minimum.

I took first watch this evening, and I spent a good bit of my time writing this, studying, and patrolling the camp site. So far everything seems to be fairly calm, but I can tell that Frollis is up to something. Maybe not directly a bad thing, but I'm sure he's got some new way to poke fun at me or Nisha. One of these times that barmy berk will end up inside a force cage filled with a stinking cloud. Or perhaps he'd look better as a statue in a wizard's tower somewhere. Damn berk. Rest assured, if he keeps messing with me, I will end up snapping, and it will not be pretty at all.

Deep breaths Tristol. It does no good to agitate yourself over someone you have to work with. Besides, you're an Archmage and it would do your reputation no good to go off the handle over someone who just wants to make you mad. I think I'll go and get some sleep, perhaps see if Nisha has some kind words for me. Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll feel better tomorrow, but I rather don't see that coming. Till another time, Mystra's Blessings on you.

MISS SCARLET, IN THE BEDROOM, WITH THE CANDLESTICK

Mystra be praised! These damn berks around here wouldn't know a subtle way to wake a cutter up if it bit them on the nose. As if the screeching winds of the layer and the constant headache I've had for the past few days weren't bad enough, imagine waking up to see your girlfriend being dragged off by some dark fuzzy creature. I was awake in such a flash when my mind picked up on it, that the tent collapsed around me from the sudden upheaval. I must have looked like I was on a rampage to poor Fyrehowl when she first saw me because she immediately dropped Nisha and bolted off across the camp. Caring less about the perpetrator and more about Nisha who still didn't really look awake yet, I fell forward and caught her an instant before she hit the ground. The moment I confirmed that she was okay and the commotion died down, my head started pounding like a bad bleaker drum parade. I must say that long nights and fretful interrupted sleep are just not supposed to go together.

After being woken up and having to deal with an already bad day, I was left puzzling over the reason to being awake. Obviously Fyrehowl had to be getting Nisha and myself for some reason, but what might that be? Almost as if on cue, loud screeching screams cut through the air. As my ears flattened back against my head, I couldn't help but think that this certainly was not a noise you'd find naturally on the plain. Sure, there were screeches and howls, but not like this. Imagine the scream of a barmy as he meets

the thing that drove him insane in the first place and multiply it by a factor of ten. Not knowing any other way to quiet the awful noise, I bolted in the direction of the screaming, my tail trying to curl its way between my legs as I ran. Oddly enough, the screaming death cry was coming from the mortuary tent where a few of yesterday's casualties were being kept. Why would dead people need to scream? As my head did its best to clear itself so that I could think, the screaming stopped. Within a few moments of that, I walked into the tent to find Florian and Clueless looking over the corpses of yesterday and a new one.

This new corpse didn't die a normal death and from the general lack smell it was obviously just a recent happening. The hands and feet looked like they had been pinned back against something and sure enough, I was informed that he had died a short distance outside the camp, crushed to a rock and left to die. Or perhaps he died instantly instead of being driven insane by a slow agonizing death. That could explain I suppose. If the creature was driven insane at the time of its death, it might have reason to scream when you tried to communicate with it. Judging from the horrible nature of this berk's death it's likely what Florian was trying to do. It's what I would do if I had the ability or the stomach to actually animate something that was once alive just to speak with me.

Suspecting some sort of magical blockade or perhaps foul play with these two, I was asked to cast an Analyze Dweomer over the corpses to determine if they had been tampered with, or if any residual traces of the weave were left upon them. Having no reason not to, I called the spell into my mind and began the incantations of it, pulling the small ruby eyepiece to my eye and glancing through it. What I saw was certainly heartening news. Someone had cast a contingency necromantic spell on the corpse, which could have been blocking the speaking attempt. Put the lens down, I began the swift motions for a dispel magic and targeted the energy directly on the corpse in front of me. Making the weave and tangle of magic in front of me visible, I quickly picked out the knots tying to the magic together and watched as it returned to the source. As I continued to stare at the corpse, another dark necromantic spell began to slowly seep over it and I advised Florian to do his business quickly before the spell's strength returned. Little did I realize that the new spell being pressed upon the corpse was some sort of animate spell, which surprised Florian quite thoroughly. Not having much choice in the matter, Florian quickly dispatched the corpse and eliminate the spell. Unfortunately the extreme nature of Florian's abilities left little of the corpse to use for interrogation purposes.

Not knowing what else to do we all left the tent to speak with Professor Loebtav, and get the days events started. I've always been a firm believer that if something is bothering you mentally, that you should do something you enjoy that requires a good deal of attention. Usually this focuses the mind elsewhere so that you can at least let your body relax from the stress and tension.

We all agreed that in order to cover the most ground that we should split into groups and each examine different areas. Once we found some of the Gautish language, we could report to the other groups and get a team together to decrypt it. Fortunately the group assignments for the day kept Frollis away from my group by about a mile or so. Considering the way he's been eyeing Nisha and the disdainful looks I get from him occasionally that's not far enough away. Fortunately, Nisha came with my group and I was able to keep an eye on her. Not that I don't trust her. Far from it. It's the other people I don't trust. Of course, she's sensible enough so I shouldn't have reason to doubt her

word that she'd stick with me. Mystra's Blessings! I don't know why I'm so worried about it. Maybe it's just Frollis' attitude, or perhaps just his over-confident cocky look. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was a slutty as Larill Moonshadow. Who knows, it could even just be the fact that he's damn spooky. Even he manages to get my hackles up with his abilities sometimes.

My particular group was going out to examine some pillars that had fallen over or broken in half while Florian's group went out to examine the last free standing pillar in the area. Clueless volunteered to stay behind with some people and guard the camp, in addition to being a sort of information's officer as well. Considering it was the halfway point between the two expeditions, it only made sense to have him there. If something were to go wrong, Clueless would be easily reachable by either group.

Before we left, I got my second shock of the day. In order to make it easier to keep an eye on people, I conjured up some of my prying eyes and through alarm on the two groups so that we could tell if people got into trouble while working. Should anything happen, we'd all immediately know about it and be able to react. And at the very least, I'd be able to examine three places at once, which is certainly a useful ability. However, Florian decided that he would take one of the eyes as a sort of constant scrying device and hold onto it. To do so, he stuck it in the waistband of his pants and I was treated to a view I didn't really need to see. As he did this, I could feel the blood rushing up into my ears, and my tail curl around my right leg rather firmly, all while I was trying to explain to the groups in front of me what the eyes did and how they worked. I could barely finish my speech because my astonishment was so great. Florian wasn't a he, he was a she! As odd as it sounds, it's entirely true! And to think, the way she carries herself and the ability which she possesses with her weapons rivals most men that I know. Not that I'm saying that females finish lower on the totem poll. What I mean is that she has more command over the traditional manly values than most of the males I know. Somehow the fact that I didn't pick up on this is somewhat frightening. Then again, she did such an excellent job covering it up that I'm not sure how I would have been able to tell. Obviously, there's a lot I still have yet to learn about my friends.

After I managed to calm my nerves, I finished my explanation and we all broken into our separate groups and went off to explore. My group arrived out our site and began poking around at all the random ruins. Scribes copied down information into their journals, sketched pictures, and maps, and took copious amounts of notes to further their research and understanding of all the different languages out there. While they were busy doing that, Fyrehowl and myself explored around and came across some intriguing script written into the columns. The runes themselves were in Draconic and read as follows: *Howl into the winds of lament, scream in the face of the storm and be not surprised to find the Howling answer back in turn.* Taking it quite literally I asked our resident Lupinal to howl for me, which she did under the circumstance that I wasn't to laugh. I had no intentions of it, regardless of how ragged it might sound. Whatever she could do had to be better than what a distant vulpinal could do. Heck, we can't even really growl very well.

As Fyrehowl howled into the bounded space between the two fall pillars a portal swirled open and remained there, crackling and showing off its brilliant blue energy. Not really expecting such a thing to happen, I fumbled for my spellbook to help me recall the Analyze Portal spell that had recently began to become of less and less use since the

Kobold we normally had in our group took care of most of these things. After a moment of searching and adequately refreshing my mind, which lately has been going faster than a barmy who's in the gatehouse, I brought forth the spell in my vision and began the incantation. Once the spell was completed I stared at the gateway for nearly a minute, picking off all of the individual details I could from the magical signatures of the portal before I ended the spell and recorded my findings. The interesting thing about this gate is that it didn't lead offplane, but just to the fourth layer of Pandemonium. Portals to the same plane are common enough, but I didn't expect to find one here between the pillars. After taking our notes on the portal we let it close and then proceeded to look over the area for examples of the Gautish language. During this process, Florian interrupted my concentration by tapping on the eye she was carrying with her and pointing it down her shirt. Either she was putting on a strip show for me in private, or she was trying to get me in hot water with Nisha. Admittedly, the action got my attention, even if it did make me turn about three shades of red.

After she got my attention with the eye, she called over with the sending stone and held the eye out towards some script written on the wall. Normally it couldn't be read without the aid of a detect magic spell, which Florian graciously cast upon the eye for me to be able to read it. The script read as follows: *Do you hear the code? Can you listen to the keen and wail of the winds and hear their secret whisperings even the gods deign to ignore out of ignorance... and fear?* The language itself was written in an extremely Old Netherese, known as Loross to some. While not really required reading when I was in school, it was certainly encouraged to pick up at least one or two unique old languages. Seeming as how we in Halruaa learned from the mistakes of Netheril, it would only make sense to be able to read their script if I ever came across it. Oddly enough, the schooling had come into use and wasn't such a random bit of knowledge after all. Even after having found the portal, I was eager to run off and explore that particular bit of script more. Certainly it had more to it than just that. A hidden meaning that needed decrypting, something I could use and learn from. In a way, the language almost seemed to call me to it. It would have to wait however, for another day or so at least.

Finally having finished our tour of our assigned area, I teleported our party back to the camp where we settled in for the evening, going over bits and pieces of our findings and discussing where we'd journey the next day. I fell asleep a bit earlier than normal, leaving explicit instructions that I was not to be waken up unless absolutely necessary. I could use the extra sleep.

Little did I know that I wouldn't be getting any that night as there was yet another murder. This time, we were staying inside the caves we had recently cleared out and this thing had followed us inside before it was sealed up using a stoneshape. Normally a murder wouldn't have bothered me so much, but the manner in which this fellow was murdered did. Instead of being stabbed or cut, he was cut from his upper body all the way down to his calf and then strangled with the stringy sinews inside. I for one am glad that I didn't have to witness this awful scene. I can stomach the gore and the blood, but it takes a lot out of me mentally to be able to deal with such things.

Fortunately for everyone in the party, they had Nisha wake me up and tell me the bad news. Mystra knows that if any of them had woken me up again, I would have probably made them think twice before even talking to me again. It's not that I'm trying to be grumpy, but I instead find it increasingly difficult to be nice to people. My mind

keeps wandering off to think of how I can improve my spellcasting to make it feel right again, but then someone interrupts my thoughts and causes me to want to snap at them and throw them into the depths of a maze. I sure hope that Mystra is keeping an eye over me and won't let this confusing continue on forever.

Instead of dividing into the normal groups we had decided upon the previous day, we instead grouped together into a large band and headed towards the location where Frollis had discovered ghouls of some sort. Certainly, they wouldn't be too much to deal with, but at least it would give us something to get our minds of another murder. And as an added bonus, I'd be able to practice some of my spells again before they too began to fade from my mind.

Battles being what they are and having described a few of them to you before, I don't feel the need to offer up more of explanation for these. Suffice it to say that if I'm here writing to you, then we obviously made it out okay. While the battle is certainly not the interesting part of journey, the location we ended up in was. Like most every other surface on this plane, the cave walls were littered with carvings of long forgotten languages. The one that stood out the most though was off by itself on a wall in the chapel. In between two different phrases was the mage rune of Shekelor. To the left of his rune was the symbol for the hole in the sky, and on the right was the continued phrase *and long shall you gaze*. Quite possibly Shekelor had been her at one time and left his run upon the wall, and someone after him had added the bit about gazing. But, what would he be gazing out, the hole in the sky? And why did this tidbit of information harken to another phrase I remembered reading in one of the locations here: *HUBRIS lies not dead but waiting... though the hidden hands of fate dictates action and not greed or envy*. The only other place I remember reading about Hubris was at the base of a statue beneath the Jester's Palace. If my memory served me correctly, then this was a confirmation of what was said before, Hurbis is waiting. Who knows what he's waiting for, but obviously something paradoxical was bound to happen.

In order to read some of these phrases written on the wall, I had to cast a comprehend languages spell. Normally I just rely on my knowledge to help me out in these situations, but alas, it was failing me here. I worked my hands through the gestures of the spell and about halfway through casting it, I could feel the weave begin to slip and loose it's coherency in my grasp. In order to combat the dead feeling magic seemed to have been taking on for me lately, my mind raced ahead, changing the incantations of the spell and the movements to counter and enhance the weak grasp I had on the magic. Had I just finished with the casting, the spell likely would have worked, but damnit, I wouldn't to feel a sense of accomplishment again! Ever since I had that mishap with the heavy magic, I hadn't felt the same flow since. Perhaps this was Mystra's way of punishing me for such a foolish abuse of power, but surely she wouldn't leave me this way, would she? Even though I tried my hardest to reclaim the spell and the feeling, I must have altered the spell too much and it died before the magic affected me and I was forced to recast it. I wasn't sure if I was more embarrassed by the fact that I had botched a spell, or by the fact that the mighty Archmage Starweather had botched the spell in front of so many people, including Nisha! Fortunately, the second chance I had at the spell, it worked flawlessly and I was able to continue reading, but who would have thought that such a simple spell could go so awry.

Not sure what else to do, we left that cavern and returned back to the camp. An hour or so of walking in each direction, followed by fighting and exploring always left one's stomach growling and the head swimming with ideas and thoughts. Each of them I should have written down, but they've long since vanished from my mind, likely never to be thought again. Such is the way with fleeting things.

The following morning, I was awoken yet again, with the request to join a meeting. This would make the third night in a row that I hadn't gotten a full night's rest, and I certainly wasn't going to be in a cooperative mood with everyone. I was going to try my best and be civil, but my patience was starting to wear thin and I was beginning to get tired of this constant threat to our lives. It's one thing to leave in fear, and another to live in fear and be constantly awoken by the manifestation of it. This time the body was turned into ash. Not a pile of ash, but a statue made entirely of ash. I was told that upon touching it, the body just crumbled and fell to the floor. Obviously this was somebody's perverse idea of a joke. Whoever was responsible was having way too much fun doing this and wouldn't be interrupted by increased patrols or security, they're too good for that.

Hoping that more work would keep people busy and mentally occupied, we assigned everyone to a group that would be out and about, not remaining at the cave. We took the suspects we had compiled over the past few days and split them up among the three groups we had chosen and had the leaders of those groups keep a close watch on them. Likely today would be our last day on the plain, as we only had one more site to explore. If the Gautish language wasn't going to be there, then it was highly unlikely that we'd find it just by wandering around. Seeing that it would be most beneficial for Professor Loebtav to be with that group we sent him off in that direction with Florian, and Clueless took another group and went back to explore the Portal, while Fyrehowl and myself took off to explore the first set of caves so that I could get a better look at the Loross writing there.

Once to the caves in question, I was surprisingly disappointed that my idea hadn't panned out. The first set of writing we encountered said to howl, and when someone howled, a portal opened. This set of writing asked if you could hear the code. Well, when you listened, you didn't do much except strain your ears and concentration to try and hear something. The most I remember hearing was a howl or perhaps sequence of howls off in the distance. Here I was thinking that somehow the key to this puzzle lied in listening to the words, but there has to be more to it than just that. I guess I was just mildly disappointed by the lack of a fanfare. Surely there's got to be something that requires an archmage's finesse to accomplish. Then again, my finesse as of late has been rather unreliable, so perhaps it's good that some of the puzzles don't require my touch.

Getting a call from Florian some time later the group that was with me decided to relocate to her position to act as backup and help in clearing out the tunnels of the last site. I don't really think they needed our help, but Fyrehowl managed to get dirty and killed two of them on her own. I certainly think that's quite an impressive feat, even if she does seem to rush into things a bit too quickly. Still, it can be a potential boon as well. Further exploring the caves and tunnels underneath we did indeed find our Gautish language, in addition to three portals: one to the ethereal which required a sliver of silver and something once owned by a risen ghost as a key; one to limbo which required someone to giggle and do a jig while wearing a red hat; and finally one to shadow, which

required a mortal's blood and some black onyx. Without the kobold around to tell us all of this information, it was left up to me to determine this information. Unfortunately, I hadn't adequately prepared myself for portal scanning and this couldn't be of too much help for that day. Nisha was curious however, and I wasn't about to let the chance to impress the girl go away untried, so I allowed Florian to cast 'nap' on me. Honestly, the unnatural sleep through which you go to regain the clarity in your mind is just too scary. When I woke an hour later, I felt somewhat refreshed, but my headache still hadn't gone away. I picked up my spellbook and started reading over the notes I had taken on the spell and in a few minutes time I had managed to prepare myself for casting the spell three times. Hopefully Nisha's curiosity in the future will lend more towards spells I already have prepared and less towards spells I have yet to prepare. This whole nap business just doesn't strike me well at all.

Having gotten the information we needed we went back to our camp and settled in for the evening. I think everyone was in a fairly good mood, even myself, despite the day's disappointments. Perhaps it was just that we might be able to go home now where I could adequately rest and recover from whatever it was that was plaguing my head.

As I sit here writing this, I can already hear Fyrehowl's pawsteps getting closer in that angered stomp she has. Something must have happened...

As I predicted, something did indeed happen. Three people now have disappeared. One of them we found dead outside, executed by draining all the blood from his body through miniature little cuts and scrapes on the extremities. Before he died though he wrote in *Celestial It Speaks*. And as if continued later by someone else, was added *and I listen*. I've been scrying for the past few hours looking for the other two, but I nearly ended up with my face in the bowl of water I had in front of me. At Fyrehowl's insistence I got myself to bed. I couldn't sleep much however as I'm awake writing this journal entry. I've been at it for several hours now, and can sense the need for sleep returning to me, and I shall in a moment. Hopefully the hound that howls doesn't decide to return and tell me to listen in my dreams. I spent so much time trying to listen to everything in the dream as he walked away that I think I used up more energy sleeping than I did the entire day. Hopefully now will be different. Perhaps tomorrow we'll find our suspects and put them to the blade and end this charade so we can go home. Somehow I doubt it'll be that easy. Until later, may Mystra's divine light continue shine favorably upon you.

BEHOLDERS, UNDEAD, AND HEAVY MAGIC, OH MY!

For once in a long while I actually know where to start. Things have cleared up considerably in my outlook, and I believe it shall be reflected in my musings, if in nothing else.

The morning after the most recent deaths was quite a trip for me. It's not often you wake up to the sounds of someone standing over you casting a spell. Admittedly I did sleep in a little bit, but I didn't expect Florian to try and throw a Greater Restoration on me. Waking up in a start, I did what any mage would do when he's being cast upon. I lashed out with a hand, muttering the first spell words that came to mind: a maze spell. Most creatures are intelligent enough to escape a maze in a matter of moments, and

Florian would be no real exception to this general rule. The point behind casting it is that it guarantees you at least a few seconds to gather your thoughts and prepare your next spell. However, I spent those few leftover seconds standing up and realizing that I was surrounded by a good number of my own party, including Nisha. Considering I hadn't recognized that it was Florian when I slapped her with the maze, I was awfully confused. Before I could say much in the way of my own defense, Florian popped back in looking rather perturbed. At least it was only a few moments in the maze, instead of being hit with a disintegration or similar spell. That wouldn't have been fun in the least.

It turns out that the others had been talking about my recently botched spells and were trying to do something about it. I must admit the thought was enough to overcome any real objections to the casting I had, but my mind was thinking like that at the time. Besides, what did they know about mishaps with heavy magic. Clueless and I both know that the heavy magic symptoms can't be cured by magical means. Florian started talking about Astral Addiction. I had heard of the thing before, but it hadn't crossed my mind until just then. Still, I figured it was less likely to happen to an Archmage of all people. I still had my bets placed on the heavy magic. Useful stuff, but I count it as evil in liquid gold form. As long as Florian didn't mess with my mind by casting that spell, I couldn't think of any real objection to it. If it didn't work, it didn't work and I was none the worse off. At the very least, it'd likely temporarily fix the headache I'd had for quite a few days.

I closed my eyes and perked my ears as Florian cast her spell. The moment her hand touched me, I cringed and all feeling went away in my body for a split second before it came rushing back. For the first time in a few weeks, my mind was actually clear. The headache was gone, I could focus and concentrate on things, and the day just seemed a little brighter, even in Pandemonium. I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not, but I felt much better and involuntarily my tail began to wag a little bit, my ears perking up and twitching about. Given that these are quite obvious signs that I was feeling better everyone seemed to sense that it had worked. I thanked Florian a few times, but tried not to get my hopes up too much. There were still murders to consider and that's enough to dampen anyone's mood.

We spent the remainder of this day discussing our plans and decided that it would be wise to spend at least one more day in Pandemonium. At the very least we'd be able to gather more information about the murders and hopefully narrow things down a bit more. After all, we didn't need a murder following us back to Sigil and randomly killing people off. Clearly we needed some way to tag these people before we went home.

The next few events happened in such a flash I can't even really recall what triggered them all. Clueless and myself were outside of camp looking at the two most recent bodies that were discarded there in some lewd joking manner. The next thing we know, we get a call from Fyrehowl on the sending stones and we're told to come running back. Taking all the speed we could muster we bolted back to the campsite to find things in a rather distressed disarray. Inside the cave Fyrehowl was sniffing around towards the back, on the trail of some shadow and Ash smell. As we walked towards the rear of the cave, the sight that greeted us was just horribly grotesque. Cut clean in half with the upper body sitting on a makeshift stone altar was Larill Moonshadow. Her multicolored wings were spread out with arms held high towards some spot on the ceiling. Written on the wall were some things scrawled in her blood. We stood there,

open mouthed at the ferocity in which this attack had happened, and as we were contemplating it, the body began to smile.

I can handle a good number of things: vicious rats, poison, mental prying, grotesque and gory scenes, you name it. However, a corpse that starts *smiling* at me is a bit beyond anything I'd care to handle. I quickly cast an anti-magic field around myself that covered the corpse and stopped it dead in its tracks. Of course it was already dead, but it was at least not reanimated any more. I looked over at Clueless who directed me to step back and let the thing speak, if speaking is what it was going to do. I slowly took a few steps backwards and watched as the thing started to smile again and spoke in a very familiar voice belonging to Professor Loebtav.

That bastard! The nerve of him to call us out to help him guard his exploring crew and then turn around and kill them. What sort of sick depraved mind does things like that, aside from someone who wants to get caught? Mystra's curses upon the mind that takes her fine arts and uses them in such manners.

Having no real reason to stay and research any further, those of us that remained agreed that we should get the crew back to Sigil and let them take a nice long vacation. Surely some of them needed one. We gathered the evidence we had and packed everything up and plane shifted away from the plane back to Tradegate. From the outlands, we teleported back into the city itself and waited patiently for the other group led by Dorian to return before dispersing. Frollis, either because the damn Tiefling was still trying to get in bed with Nisha, or because he had some beef with Loebtav, decided to accompany us on our journey after him. Before we did that though, we needed a full night's sleep and a little time to research our options.

Clueless, being the ever creative and foolish sort that he is, decided to throw a legend lore spell on the text of the Gautish translation. The spell revealed a lot of information, but at a rather high cost. Apparently all the continual use of heavy magic finally caught up with him and returned the favor of a splitting headache and fatigue. As mean as it sounds, I think Clueless finally understands how I felt and can see what sort of dangers that stuff has. Maybe now that he's felt the full effect of the stuff, he'll reconsider using it as often as he does. The next step beyond that effect though, according to the book, would be death or permanent loss of all spell-casting ability. Neither of them a very wonderful fate.

Clearly we needed more time to rest, and we weren't all just going to sit around on our tails doing nothing for a week. Or at least I wasn't now that I was feeling a bit more chipper than I did before. Seeing an opportunity for some good deeds I took a trip to Sigil to fetch some blueberries for Clueless and to catch up with the Kobold, making sure she was okay. In addition, I'm sure she would have at least appreciated some information on what we were doing. Perhaps she'd have some insight into the whole Gautish, Gautieray, Prince of Agony, Lord of Conflict, and what not scenario we were seeing set up. Certainly she provided some interesting information that we would be using to our benefit, but that didn't really give us any solid leads.

In the meantime, Florian was busy casting Attonement on Ficklebarb in the hopes that it'd make him feel better and perhaps rid him of the evil enchantments that were still hanging over him. While it certainly did keep him awake more and in a better mood, it didn't really seem to do much to change his spirits. However, he did suggest that if we wanted to know about Loebtav's future that we look into his past.

From someone's memory we dredged up the fact that he used to live in Hopeless. Personally I had never been and didn't know what to expect. The last thing I was counting on having to do though was change the color of my tail and ears! I can handle changing the wardrobe and appearing to be disinterested in anything that goes on, but come on.. changing the color of my tail? I was convinced though that it'd be a bad idea to go in there with any sort of vibrant color, particularly the orange-red of my fur. Not having much to argue with, I cast prestidigitation and started muting out the colors of everyone in the party, changing them to a dull grey-black or dirty white.

Once I teleported us there, I realized exactly what everyone had meant by not wanting colors. There wasn't a single speck of color in the entire place, unless you count the odd creature that seemed to take a keen interest in the male presences in our party. As we walked down the one street of Hopeless I began to see the beholders that were said to have existed here. Scanning one way and then another with its many eyestalks I got this creepy feeling running up my spine. All it would take would be one simple glance from its central eye and the anti-magic cone that it could shower us with would eliminate the prestidigitation spell I had cast. As much as I would like to have the color back in my tail, I didn't want a disturbance in the city, lest the other beholders that were there come and decide to see what we were up to.

Making our way through the city towards Loebtav's house in the fourth ring, we passed by the execution stage and a trio of city guards and their beholder accompaniment beating up on some random villager. Knowing much better than to interfere with anything a beholder would supervise, we continued walking along to our final destination. Once there, we noticed a sign tacked to the door of the dwelling that informed us that the building was condemned and that no squatters were allowed, by order of Thingol the Mocking. Not wanting to chance the fact that we could be considered intruders by breaking the magical protections over the windows or doors, we journeyed back one ring and I approached the guards who were just now finishing their business with the villager.

As I spoke to the guard, keeping a very civil tone and trying my best to show as little emotion as possible, one of the beholders floated over and started to watch me. I think Nisha was as scared of this beast as I was as I felt her tail start to curl around my leg, much as mine was doing to myself at the moment. I was told to wait as the beholder floated off towards the palace, obviously seeking permission for us to enter the building. I can't recall ever being more glad that we asked permission first, instead of begging for forgiveness afterwards. A few minutes passed by before the beholder returned, accompany by another one, and the largest beholder I think I've ever heard of, the elder orb. The larger one closed its large eye and turned to look down at me, focusing all of his other eyes directly on me as he asked me questions about my business in the house. I answered as best as I could, trying to not to look as scared and paranoid as my ears and tail were obviously telling me that I was. Nisha's own tail was about to cut off the circulation in my leg she was holding on so tight.

After many questions and an agreement that I report any findings and information on the professor to the Cardinal when we concluded our research, we were allowed to enter the house after being accompanied there. Once inside, we explored for a few minutes, letting Ficklebarb be a little bit of a guide to us as we hunted for the information that would give us a definite clue as to Loebtav's whereabouts. As we wandered through

the house, I kept a sharp eye out for magic using a detect magic spell, and was greeted with some sort of odd whitish sparkling magic. Something I had honestly never seen before. Being rather careful, we made our way past a few minor happenings and down into the basement level of the building. Once there, we found a room with an altar in the center and a swirling pattern on the floor. Before even venturing inside, we knew this had to be what we were looking for.

Florian cast a dispel evil over the room and immediately the pattern started to move, figures of bodies and heads popping up from the floor and forming into a massive column that appeared to be one creature composed of dozens of souls. Not knowing what else to do we attacked it, and found that it was much harder to hit than corporal beings, which meant that it had to be some sort of undead or shade. We continued to beat on it for a short while, trying random spells and swords to destroy it, before I chanced a disintegrate spell. I figured that a ghost would have the speed and dexterity to avoid most spells, but not the fortitude to avoid something that would drain the life out of it. Of course, there was the chance that it would miss entirely, striking an incorporeal part of the being rather than one that was manifested, but it was chance I was willing to take. Fortunately, the spell went off and struck true, easily dusting the newly formed being and causing it to explode in a shower of spiritual energy which quickly dissipated within a few seconds.

Looking around, we found a map on the back wall which illustrated a large spike with a circle on top with a city set a good distance off from it. In the middle of the city was a large question mark, obviously bespeaking the fact that Loebtav didn't know where he needed to start. Beyond the city was a single mountain range, of which there were a set of two forests depicted on the back side. And lastly, beyond that, there was a small hollowed out area in between three sets of mountains that contained the symbol for the Gautish word, Traitor. Surely this is where he was headed to, but where to start. Thinking over it for a few moments and pooling the information we had, we determined that Plaguemort would be our starting position. The good news is that the map and the city seemed to match the vision Clueless got in his Legend Lore experiment earlier.

In a few days time, after Clueless had a sufficient amount of time to recover, we set off again, this time starting outside of Plaguemort and making our way towards the mountains quite a ways off in the distance. Given how the Hinterlands seemed to work, it could have been a few hours before we reached our destination, or it could have been a few weeks. There was no way to tell except by walking it.

This first day has been extremely uneventful and the only thing that's really happened today has been my entry in this journal. Perhaps tomorrow evening, or some point in the near future, I'll have more to report. But for now, I'm going to get as much rest as I can. Walking takes a lot out of you, and the more rest I have, the better off I'll be for the trek tomorrow. Mystra's many graces upon you dear reader.

CLOSURE

The next days in the Hinterlands were a little more interesting. In the early afternoon, we came across an army marching towards Plaguemort. Obviously they were involved in the Bloodwar, but we had no intention of stopping them and asking them what their business was. We expected the same from them, but obviously curiosity got

the better of them. The Arcanaloth that was in charge, along with a small contingent of the soldiers and their commanders teleported over to our location and proceeded to stall us for the sole purpose of making life miserable. Even with the delight of stopping casual walkers through the Hinterlands, the 'loth seemed rather bored. I'm sure we could have made his life a lot more interesting had we wanted to press the issue. As it was though, we were in a hurry and figured the best way to avoid any confrontation that would be less than acceptable would be to do what they asked and then move along. He cast a truth seeking spell and watched curiously as we all gave him our names. Fyrehowl was less than pleased with this situation, but she just gave him a nickname instead of her actual name. It wasn't necessarily a lie, but at the same time, it wasn't exactly what the 'loth wanted to hear either. Seeing that we weren't going to be any fun, he asked our business and then left to return to his army. By killing him, we would have only delayed the inevitable a little longer. The bloodwar was sure to finish him off soon.

That evening we came across a band of **Kasta**. We had seen a few of these creatures before, but not all that frequently. Not wanting to take a chance with their intentions, we had them halt a short distance off and had two of them approach for a confrontation. Apparently their tribe was destroyed by the very man we were seeking. However, not completely expecting them to be attackers, as they only carried light weapons, we didn't suspect them enough to throw detection spells on them. In hindsight, this was a positively rotten idea. We realized this when the leader and his companion said *We're sorry* and then promptly imploded in a burst of force that sent us all toppling to the ground. Not wasting time to let the other eight of them approach and do the same thing, we finished them off from a distance and sat back to reassess our tactics. I of all people, should have been smart enough to scan them for latent magic and other things. Fortunately, we were all just as much to blame as a detect undead would have discovered them as well. After that incident, I promised myself to be a little more careful around strangers. As impolite as it might seem, a detect magic spell is always a useful thing to cast before inviting someone into close quarters with you. Maybe I should look into getting it permanencied on myself or an item so I don't have to remember to cast it.

As the night wore on we took our individual watches and finally I got to sleep some hours later. During the night, I remember sharing a dream with Fyrehowl. She's a celestial, and I'm distantly related by some long thread of ancestry, but I still doubt that it's a good enough reason to actually *share* a dream. In it, we bantered for a moment, making sure this was a dream, or at least something as dream-like as we could assume, before we heard a howling off in the distance. I remembered having a dream like this before and was hoping the same thing would happen again. That clicking pattern was stuck in my head and figuring it out might have unlocked some hidden key to the mystery we had before us. Fyrehowl and I headed towards the howler in the distance and eventually we were rewarded with a soft rustling sound somewhere around us. Out from behind a hill stepped the howler and it sat on it's haunches, eyeing us curiously and not making a sound. Certainly it was odd enough to question it's motives, but the last time I saw it, the creature did nothing to me. Besides, it was only a dream, and dreams don't necessarily hurt you. After a few more moments, from all around came the rustling sound of more howlers, as we realized we were surrounded. Turning back towards the lead creature we waited to see what would happen when he crouched down and leaped towards us, landing a few feet distant and howling loudly. The sound reverberated inside

my head and left a dull ringing in my ears as I woke up with a start. Normally, sounds don't carry over into the real world, but apparently this one did as the ringing took a few moments to go away. I look over at Nisha, who was looking a little confused at my antics. After a few moments, Fyrehowl and Clueless stepped into the tent and started querying me about my dreams, trying to find out what might have caused them. I honestly don't think there's much behind them, but mere chance or coincidence. A lot of diviners experience the same thing, and sometimes planar influence will cause odd things to happen. Nisha said I was howling in my sleep, and honestly I thought it would have been a cute thing to see, but she was more confused than anything about it. Eventually their questions were satisfied, at least for the evening, and they let us get back to sleep. The morning wouldn't be long in coming and we had yet more marching ahead of us.

The next day still had its surprises, but they were less of the detrimental kind. After no more than an hours walking, we found a forest sitting front of us. As we turned around to look, a mountain range we certainly didn't cross lay behind us. We knew where we were as we had a map, which was certainly a good thing, but how we got to the other side of the mountains is a mystery the hinterlands weren't going to reveal. Glad that at least a portion of journey was removed from our path, we continued onward toward the forest when Fyrehowl's nose picked up the smell of wood smoke coming from the edge of the forest. Given that we didn't see a blaze or large plumes of smoke yet, I doubted it was a forest fire, but we hurried on none-the-less, just in case it was something else Loebtav's influence had touched.

As we approached, we found a ravaged town, or at least a village. Bodies of various Kasta lay strewn about the ground, rock melted into puddles, and large scorch marks over everything. Apparently the good professor had beaten us here and had already made had his way onward, leaving destruction behind him. We scoured around for a few moments, looking for survivors, before we found two of them, sitting behind a building. A younger male, and a older female, likely the mother. The male was busy cradling the dead body of a female roughly his age, likely a mate. Fyrehowl, being the only one gifted enough to possess the ability to speak with any creature, related our condolences to them as we offered to raise the young girl for them. Both of them looked extremely overjoyed, and Florian was happy to help, at least in this situation. Before leaving towards their next village, the older lady told us of the man we were seeking who had a demon on his shoulder that whispered into his ear. Clearly the professor had gained a new friend since we had seen him last and was hanging on his every word.

Realizing we were getting closer, we redoubled our efforts and made our way into the forest. When it started getting dark, we made camp under the trees and set up our usual watches. I would have liked to make it out of the forest before we made camp, but it was a bit too much of a journey, so I would have to deal with the surroundings. It's not that camping in a forest bothers me, it's that the surroundings conceal way too much from the eye so you never know what might be right behind that tree. During the first watch, we heard some noise off in the distance, all around us, and I sent Nisha to wake up the others while I listened. Clueless came out a short time later and decided to ask the trees what was up. He grew strangely silent for a few moments and then came back to tell us that those around us we Rillmani who were off to fight Loebtav and keep him from entering the palace. We were instructed to leave the palace alone, unless they had failed in their duty. I imagine Clueless offered our help, but was denied, as that sort of message

isn't one you'd hear without explaining yourself first. Seeing no reason to enter the palace unless the professor was in there, I figured it was a safe bet to follow their instructions. Still needing sleep, we all curled back up in our furs and continued the evening, only to be awakened an hour or two before dawn. Off in the distance of the palace, there were large explosions, and waves of force swept across the plane, making the ground beneath our feet rock. Not sure if we were that close, or if the hinterlands were just playing tricks on us again, we gathered up our camping equipment and set off in that direction at a rather slow pace. If there was a battle going on, we didn't need to be part of it until it was over. If we were lucky, we'd arrive at the palace before Loebtav had a chance to replenish his supply of spells and magic.

Within a few hours, we were out of the forest, staring a long ways off towards what could have only been a gigantic temple. Still hours away, it loomed large against the mountain ranges around it, cutting a stunning figuring into the air. Certainly this had to be the palace of a god. I had certainly not seen anything like this. Even the most power mages in Torril didn't have buildings as large as this one. We quickened our pace a good bit and worked our way up towards the building. Now that the explosions and the force waves had stopped, we thought it safe to proceed while Loebtav was occupied with things inside the temple. As we approached, several of the Gauteria were outside, screaming in lament and anger. A female Rillmani, obviously one of at least some manner of power, was standing outside the palace gates with them. I began to wonder if she wasn't expecting us to show up. We finally made our way up to the gates and were told, at least by the Rillmani that we could enter, at our own risk of course. Somehow, I doubted that the Gauteria would be all too happy with us, but we had no choice. It was either let the murderer escape and free some vile god, or disturb a holy place in the intention of stopping him. We chose the latter.

Once inside, the furnishings were lavish beyond compare. Every wealth imaginable had been put into this place, and gave the inside an even more stunning appearance than the outside had. Even if the palace itself was large and dominated the sky, the inside captivated the eye with its riches.

I cast an anti-magic shield to protect us from traps and we continued towards the right, following Ficklebarb's directions. As we rounded the turn, we were greeted by a large contingent of statues. As everyone should be well aware, gods and mages do *not* put statues in their foyers just for decoration. Anyone who thinks this is the case, should be sent on a trip through the great mage towers in Halruaa. While they serve some aesthetic purpose, they also serve as a protection agent. If not a golem of some sort, then they're likely imbued with some sort of magic. Some mages might trick you as to which statues are truly dangerous, but there is at least one in every tower that has intentions on keeping you from places you shouldn't be. These first ten statues were of no exception to this rule. Somehow Loebtav made it through without setting them off. Unfortunately we weren't so lucky and we triggered all ten of them at once. They lined up blocking the hallway and started to advance on us. I could have easily thrown up a wall of force, but I imagine they'd have gotten themselves around it somehow. I watched as Frollis tried to cast some sort of spell and was rewarded with an evil glare as it turned out not to work. I figure he never spent too much time around mages that used anti-magic. I couldn't help but smile a little bit. Seeing that the field wasn't going to do much good, I let the spell drop the moment I had the chance, and cast a chain disintegrate, targeting the center

group of statues. Several of them powdered into dust and one of them lost an arm to the cascading green rays. The rest of them that were left, closed the ranks and stepped into combat range. Not having much ability to affect golems with spells, I fell back a few paces, taking Nisha with me as I plotted my next spell. As their ranks began to thin out more from the expert swords of Toras, Fyrehowl, and Clueless, I aimed a Prismatic Spray at three of them that weren't terribly close to my companions. Two of them were caught in a planeshift ray, and the third was apparently unaffected by the final ray. After a few more moments, the rest of the statues were nothing more than rubble and dust on the floor.

Having finished off the armed statues, this just left the ones with glowing red hands. Fyrehowl experimented with them and found that sure enough, they were protection too. I wasn't in the proper mindset to waste another anti-magic field just to tear it down at the next need for a spell. So, as suggested, I used a dimension door spell to move us all to the other end of the hallway. It was a little bit of a chore to handle that many people, but it worked out well I think. Proceeding on, we came to a spiritwall at the end of another hallway. Florian took care of this one with a bit of dispelling magic, presumably releasing the captive spirits back to their fates. After a few more minutes of passages and hallways, we came to the center of the palace. Inside, all of the divine magic was being drawn towards the center. Right in front of this focal point of magic, was a dark magical spot. It wasn't the absence of magic, but a dark magic I had never seen before. I didn't even recognize it as the powerful shadow weave either. As we entered, Loebtav's shadow spun off four dark pools to the ground about forty feet away from us, from which, three different fiends and a fourth creature emerged. In the next instant, the damning mage also created a force wall between those creatures and himself, while he continued to study and work on the odd stabbed corpse that floated in the center of the room.

Before the creatures had a chance to move, Toras blinded two of them with a divine spell. While everyone else started to approach them for combat, I waited patiently for the grey slod to cast its own spells. I knew that those creatures often used death effects and other very powerful spells, so being prepared to turn, or at least dispel it would be a good idea. As the battle ensued, the Slod cast his first spell, a power word blind. I could easily recognize the spell and turned it back upon him, as he quickly became blind. Within a minute or two the creatures were consumed by the rest of my companions, as Loebtav turned his attention back towards us. With a wave of his hand and the bark of a few arcane syllables, a large black spike started to lance out of the ground beneath clueless. For the life of me, I've never felt so inadequate before. I had the powers of the weave at my fingertips, but lacked the knowledge and experience to focus it into a spell capable of countering it. I tossed out the best dispelling magic I knew, but it was enough to turn the spell away and within the blink of an eye, Clueless was skewered by the magic construct and screaming in pain. Now that the only other people who could cast disintegrate were either writing on the ground in pain, or screaming in horror, it was left up to me to dispel the wall in front of the professor. I grabbed the rod of chaining again and held it tight as I focused the wisps of magic inherent in the air into the disintegrate spell and then channeled it through the rod. First, the beam struck the wall and it flickered and faded away. Then it arched towards Loebtav himself.

When I first learned the inner secrets of Mystra's art and earned the title Archmage, I was impressed to learn that I could return spells back at the caster instead of dispelling them. Several times, this has proved to be a valuable ability and has saved my life, if not the lives of party members numerous times. However, the horror of having your own spell turned back upon you is something I've now had the joy of experiencing. Typically, my casting style has been to sink every ounce of my ability into the casting of the spell to make sure that it hits its marks and does the damage it's supposed to do. However, when you see a spell like that returned at you, particularly one of such a devastating ability, you begin to wonder if this is the right tactic. Fortunately, because of the buffer of spells that were around me at the time, my resistance to my own spell had gone up. Without that help, I would have been nothing more than a pile of dust on the floor. You'd think that having to deal with such a spell would have humbled any wizard, but it did nothing of the sort to me. Truly, it has made me thank Mystra for the awesome power in which she has made vessel of me for. Undeniably she has seen more in me than I do myself, and allowed me the ability to cast in such a manner. For that I am grateful.

I digress however. Seeing that the spell would not effect him, and knowing full well he wouldn't have a counter for an area spell, I cast the only spell I could think he wouldn't have a resistance to: the touch of the four fold furnace. I had never cast this spell before this moment, so I was curious to see how it felt to form it in the weave. At first, it was dark and cold, tainted with the touch of evil. As I begin to work the spells somatic component and say the arcane syllables that formed the verbal portion of the spell, it began to grow warm and more friendly. The spell began to take on a more personal feeling as it became less of a fiendish spell and one that had passed through my able hands. As I brought my hands up to the crescendo of the spell, and said the last draconic word, the area around Loebtav was consumed in fire, ice, acid, and heated stone. Even though no one thing would do much damage to him, I was confident some flaw in his armor would be present. Sure enough, as the magic cacophony died down, it appeared that the flames that charred his body had done the most damage. Unfortunately, he appeared to have regenerative abilities and would likely shrug the damage off before another minute had gone by.

Now that the opportunity had presented itself to my companions, they rushed forward and attacked with sword and spell. With the first blow, the shadow creature jumped off Loebtav's back and onto the body hovering in the air. It quickly consumed it and then with a flash of light, it was gone, leaving the dagger to hover in the air a moment before it clattered to the ground. Loebtav immediately began to scream about being abandoned. Not sure what powers were left within him, Toras threw a flame strike over him and he immolated in a column of flame, leaving no trace behind. Likely Ficklebarb had suffered the same fate, but I fear that it was unavoidable.

Finally, Loebtav was dead, but we had a rather injured Clueless on our hands. I cast an antimagic field and stepped over towards him, effectively shunting the spell from his body. It was apparent that if this spell kept him from complete and total agony, that I was going to become his new best friend. I prepared Clueless for the pain again, giving him a strip of leather to bite down on instead of screaming out. I then lowered the field and cast a dispel magic upon him. Immediately the weave became visible in front of me and I plucked the strands of the spell from his body and drew them out. Slowly, the pain faded away for him, leaving him somewhat drained, but at least alive. I sort of glanced

around at everyone, now that they were recovered and wondered what we were to do next. There were still the people outside to inform of the events, and I had a report to deliver to the High Cardinal of Hopeless. Clearly, the Gauteria outside and the Rillmani deserved to know the details before anyone else.

Outside, the scene was much as we left it, except that it was quite a bit quieter. The Rillmani we left outside was still there, but now taking an active role in calming the Gauteria. Perhaps calming would have been too strong a word for what she was doing. I think restraining them might be a bit more appropriate as she had a force bubble and a silence spell going to keep them there and quiet. As we approached, we got her attention and handed over Loebtav's holy symbol, a vial of ash. Seeming as how their God was dead she said what must be done, must be done, and then promptly incinerated the captives she had contained in the force bubble. I had to turn my eyes and look away as that was the last sort of thing I was expecting. I don't necessarily agree with her choice of actions, but she's likely much more familiar with what's going on there than I am. After that, we teleported back to Tradegate and found ourselves an inn to spend the night in, primarily so I can pour over every magical item we had acquired off these two. Given that the dagger that came from the God's corpse might in some way have unforeseen power, we didn't want to take it back into Sigil in case The Lady objected to its presence. It turns out that it had some fairly substantial properties, but nothing I could discern to be of great enough importance to keep out of Sigil. There were likely more powerful items sold in the market ward than we had in our hands at the moment.

In the end, we ended up taking care of the murderer like we promised to. It may have cost a god his, life, or afterlife, whichever you might view it as, but the goal was accomplished and we stopped him before he could do further damage. I'm sure we'll see the fall out from this eventually. May Mystra protect our path.

RUBBING SALT IN THE WOUNDS

In the morning of the day following the previous entry, I took a few of my party and journeyed back to Hopeless. I wasn't expecting on taking as many of them as I did, but I certainly appreciated the company. Once there, I found a beholder, which wasn't very hard to do, and asked him, or it, to take me to see the High Cardinal. Even in all of my random childhood dreams, I never imagined that I would be talking to a beholder. Typically, you run *from* them and not *to* them. I suppose there's still a lot more to learn about the planes than I thought there was. The beholder guided me and my companions to the palace, under full grayscale cover thanks to a prestidigitation spell. Hopefully there wouldn't be any dispelling screens in the castle, or I'd be in a world of trouble. There was only so much I could do to get the red out of my fur, short of bleaching or dying, and I wasn't about to do either of those. As we approached the palace, we were greeted by Jerican Blackblood, one of the few professional looking guards in the city. He told the others to remain outside, and took me in to see the Cardinal. I suspected that security would be tight, but even the sending stone Clueless tossed me wasn't allowed in there. I took a deep breath and followed him in.

As we walked down, around, over, and under various portions of the palace, I was beginning to be glad that I had a guide. There was no way I'd be able to remember all these staircases and which ones led which way. Finally, I was standing in the main throne

room for Thingol the Mocking. I took a few short steps forward into the center of the room and waited patiently to be addressed. I've learned from many years of watching the King's court that you don't speak unless spoken to. Wars have started over less than that. Finally, I was allowed to speak and I delivered my report about the previous occupant of the Charnal house. While I was providing my information, I got a good look at Thingol. I must say that is one of the more confusing beings I've ever run into. For the most part, the cardinal's face was covered with an iron mask that vaguely resembled some sort of dog's head, possibly a jackal. The air around Thingol even had a sort of mysterious and terrifying charge to it, but the creature beneath the mask had an entirely emotionless voice and demeanor. I wasn't sure if the information even meant anything. Still, I delivered my report and waited patiently for a reply, or at least a dismissal. There were a few more questions asked, just to find out if I was telling the whole truth, or only parts of it. I had delivered my report as accurately as I could tell. I was trying to avoid mentioning the Guateria and their god, but if Thingol wanted to know, I had no compunctions about keeping it from him. I saw the wave of a hand followed by a light poking in my mind. Normally I would have been insulted by the sheer inconsiderateness of the action, but I suspected someone of this power didn't have much room for propriety and due course. I closed my eyes and cleared my mind a bit, letting the cardinal poke at my thoughts for a moment just to prove the fact that I wasn't trying to hide anything. People who can mess with your head are not to be taken lightly. If they can easily just wave a hand and look at your thoughts, then it's likely they could wave two hands and destroy your sanity.

Once the interrogation was over, I volunteered to communicate any further information regarding the incident to Jerican. At least I wouldn't be wasting the Cardinal's precious time with such silly nonsense. I also preferred to speak with Jerican. Despite his rather mean attitude, he was at least a bit more talkative and easier to read. As I exited the palace I rejoined my friends and of course the mammoth sized beholder had to make an appearance. Fortunately, he didn't say anything and just sort of floated over head. I still couldn't help but cringe and wrap my tail around my leg at the sight of him. It was quite likely he was the cause of all the children's horror stories back in Halruaa. We walked back towards the edge of town before teleporting back to Tradegate. I try never to teleport in the center of a town with such strict rules. You never know if what you're doing is against them or not.

After Tradegate, we picked our stuff up from the inn and ventured back to Sigil, only to find a letter detailing that Shemeska would be coming a day early. Damn the stars! Why did she have to come so soon after this? Did she already know about what happened on our journey and just want to pry us for information, or was she trying to be as inconvenient as possible? She was probably going after both I imagined. And as if things couldn't be worse, our Kobold friend had decided to adopt a chaos-touched cat as well. Fyrehowl was certainly not pleased, and I was a little irked, but there wasn't really much we could do about it. So long as it stayed out of my way, I wouldn't have to skewer it on the end of a lightning bolt. Besides, a chaos cat couldn't be much worse than some of the dolls we had on the mantle, could it?

We spent the rest of that evening preparing the inn and looking for a cook for Shemeska's favorite meal. It took some hunting at Tenser's employment service to find anyone who could cook Bebehleth eggs, but eventually we did find a few people. Looking over the locations of these various cooks, we decided to settle on the Barghest's

Tear. It was one of two, not located in the hive, and was also the one that we hadn't ventured into yet. Once there, I asked to see the manager and explained the situation to him. Surprisingly enough, he was completely understanding and seemed less interested in the fact that I wanted to hire out his cook, than in getting rid of me. At least he had the courtesy to direct me into the kitchen in the back, where we eventually found the Half-ogre named Markus. He didn't provide a last name, so that's how we addressed him. He was so tall, I was surprised that Toras didn't have to talk up to him by much more than an inch or so. Florian paid him some random amount of money that apparently shocked him so much that we didn't even have to dicker over the price any. He agreed to be there at anti-peak and leave after Shemeska had her meal.

After having that matter settled, I went back to the Portal Jammer and went to bed. I wanted to be awake when he arrived and be able to survive the rest of the day in her presence.

The following day, she arrived at peak, or sometime shortly thereafter, accompanied by her entourage. After being seated in the best table in the bar, we provided her with a drink menu and she made random comments to me about the interior of the place. I wasn't about to pull out parchment and a pen and start taking notes, but I at least was pleased that she found there to be some improvement over previous times. After ordering her own special drink, which we had to send Clueless out for ingredients for, she informed us that she would be having company as well. I prepared another seat, and left a glass of wine for whoever the guest would be and waited patiently for the guest to arrive. Almost the same time her drink was prepared, someone by the name of Artemis Hal'ought walked in and took a seat next to the marauder. Their conversation wasn't particularly interesting, and consisted of what appeared to be mostly nonsense and babble. When he left, it seemed as though their entire meeting had nothing to do with business at all and was more like a friendly lunch meeting.

Seeing as how she no longer had any amusement other than herself that is, she started picking on Fyrehowl, Toras, and Florian to share information about their recent adventures. Fortunately, none of them seemed to let anything important slip, and in the case of Toras, he hid himself away quite excellently from what I understand.

Finally, she had her fill of us and got up to leave, taking her accompaniment with her. We all breathed a heavy sigh of relief as someone in the bar commented on her being a bitch. I could have agreed more, but I wasn't about to voice that opinion. Even though she left, I figured it would be typical of her to leave something behind. Casting a detect magic, I began to scour over the bar and found a neatly scrawled version of a clairaudience spell carved into the underside of the table she was at. I wasn't surprised in the least that she had done something like this, but I was surprised that she didn't make it obvious at all that she was doing it. I got Florian to throw a silence spell over it and we discussed leaving it there, and just watching our tongues around it. After all, if we just destroyed it, then she'd make it harder to find next time. If we left it alone and just kept aware of its existence, then she'd be hard-pressed to find a reason to put another somewhere else in the bar. So, we left it where it was and decided to keep all important matters of discussion to the back room.

After cleaning up the bar, I spent the rest of the evening relaxing and studying myself, amidst chasing Nisha around when she saw fit to interrupt my studies. I'd likely be going to bed at a more normal hour myself as tomorrow was the council meeting, and

there'd likely be things worthy of being mentally prepared to discuss. I think it was quite late before I got to bed, close to anti-peak or there about, but the meeting was after peak tomorrow, so I wouldn't have much to worry about.

The following day we made our way over to the park that the meeting was to be held in. There were guards of course, checking for invitations and matching faces with names, just to be on the safe side. Clueless took a date, of all things, to the meeting, so I took Nisha, just to not feel left out. Not that she wouldn't be going, but it at least suited the purpose. We all got seated, and I was treated by a ruffle on the head from Kylie as she walked up to the stage. It was certainly nice to be known by someone in power that wasn't going to try and kill you in your sleep for looking at her the wrong way.

After about twenty minutes the meeting was called to order. As Rhys was about to hand the floor over to the first order of business, she stopped and waited patiently as the marauder burst in through the back doors. I couldn't help but roll my eyes at the pitiful attempt at an entrance. Everyone knew she was going to do that, and it was beginning to get somewhat cliché. The least she could do would be to surprise everyone and show up *early* for once. That also has the double benefit of being able to eavesdrop on everyone's conversations. I'm surprised she hadn't done that yet. After she was seated, Rhys recalled order and passed the floor to various orders of business. One of the first was an issue regarding the increase in the tax on the importation of building materials. The Kobold, who was current in the process of building something, stepped up to say a few words about it, obviously having been informed that the topic was even being considered recently. A later item was one that concerned the majority of us as a whole, the increase in tax on intoxicating liquors and drugs. The tax would over triple the current rate, and make it much harder to make a living off the profit of alcohol sales. We all breathed a heavy sigh relief as the vote kept it from passing, by one.

Next on the slate was a law that was likely put forth to do nothing but spite Shemeska. Even though it had its various uses and some of the things made sense, placing a tax on fiends entering into the city and registering them would only create more violence and underground smuggling than before. Shemeska was outraged at this and couldn't help but stand up and yell her disapproval at Zadara, who was the one who seemed all too happy to be the one announcing this law. Several of our party members were interested in getting up and saying how this would be a bad idea. I didn't want to voice any concern over it as I still looked upon myself as being in Zadara's favor. The others though were certainly doing an excellent job of ruining that for me. The law didn't pass fortunately, and we moved on to other important matters of business.

One of the final things that made the afternoon all too tense was a motion proposing that all spellcasters in Sigil be registered. Back in Thay, this had already been implemented, and it caused more animosity than it helped to prevent. I personally think that whatever business you have regarding your own choice of arcane spells is your business and need not be shared with others. I'm proud to be a servant of Mystra, and would gladly flaunt that fact given the opportunity, but I don't need to be put on a list somewhere so that I can easily be hunted down and exterminated if the need arose. It's just something I wouldn't stand for. Both Fyrehowl and Shemeska got in lines to discuss this one, Fyrehowl in the line on the other side of the audience from the queen of the crosstrade. First up to speak was our Lupinal friend and while her reasons were just and eloquent, I'm not sure she was the appropriate one to be defending the matter.

Particularly when Shemeska started to interject over her, telling her to sit down and let her betters do the speaking. The response Fyrehowl gave was most shocking. Between being told where to shove her fake tail, and questioning the fact that she was a better, I was all too surprised that the fiend hadn't incinerated her on the spot. Even if Shemeska was out of line in her comments towards the celestial, there's no reason she had to snap like that. I do admire the courage though. If it's one thing she's got, it's courage. I would have been up there with my tail tucked between my legs, squirming away at the insult. I know better than to pick fights I can't win. The location probably prevented much of her ire from striking Fyrehowl down where she stood, and given the topic under discussion, a display of arcane power might not have been in the motion's best interest. Fyrehowl stepped down eventually, still fuming mad and Shemeska made her comments. The topic was so debatable and hot on everyone's breath, that it was withdrawn before a magical firefight ensued in the center of town. I was going to vent my choice words as well, but in a much more diplomatic and introspective way than everyone else, but I was saved the embarrassment. Besides, I wasn't going to bring myself into the limelight while Shemeska was mad at the Lupinal, and quite Likely Clueless for his comments. The last thing I needed from her was more attention.

After that much debated topic was put to rest a few more simple matters were brought up before the panel and they were either accepted or rejected as they saw fit. Finally, the last matter came to the plate. A decision on whether or not to allow the shattered temple to be demolished and rebuilt as a temple to Pluto. It seemed to be going rather well, up until a guest of the Ather teleported in to the side of the stage, screaming and shouting his dissent. I rolled my eyes a bit. Certainly there wasn't going to be another firefight, was there? I grabbed the rod of chaining hanging inside my cloak and grasped it lightly in my hands, waiting to cast a spell in case this should get worse. Indeed it did. In a matter of moments, three more men stood up in the audience, all about to cast spells. Rhys jumped down and laid out the man at the Podium, in a single blow, knocking him back into the ground and in effect knocking the wind out of him. Not knowing what else to do, I quickly cast a force cage spell and directed it through the rod of chaining. Centering it on all the man who was no on his back, I managed to catch all of the other people around the room so that they couldn't flee or cast projectile spells. It didn't prevent things like flamestrike and such from working, but it did keep magic missiles, fireballs, and lightening bolts from reaching their targets. After that, I saw an antimagic field come up to protect one of the two combatants over by Rhys, but the force cage being a force effect, remained in place. Seeing that the others weren't going to cast spells or do much at all, Rhys told them to end it, and end it they did. The new arrival stalked off with a very angry look on his face and a threat directed at the man who was on the podium. I kept the force cages up until the guards showed up to press charges, not wanting to let them escape without at least a fine.

As the audience cooled backed down and things returned to normal, the board voted to hold a decision at the next meeting regarding the building rights on the land. Until then, no building or destruction should be done on the site. Seeing as how that was an excellent place to conclude the meeting and let everyone have a chance to relax and let their nerves calm the meeting was adjourned. We took our leave of the place and went back to find a letter on our door from A'kin, thanking us for the defense of him and his kind. I must admit, he certainly is a very friendly, emotional, and affectionate fiend. On

that note, I shall close for the evening. I have dinner and some studying still left to do. I'm almost done completing the final touches on an altered cloudkill spell, and another sonic type spell. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to finish these and put them into my spellbook for future reference. At the very least, I can start thinking about how to ask Lothar if he's found anything in the mazes underneath the Jester's Palace. Until another day, Mystra's blessings upon you.

EVERYBODY GET DOWN AND FUNKY

I spent the remained of the previous evening scrying on the Shattered Temple, half expecting some commotion or at least *something* to happen there. However, it was all quiet and eventually I fell asleep. The evening reprieve I've come to enjoy, given that Nisha's tail is always curled around my leg, wasn't as enjoyable as I had once thought it was. Again, Fyrehowl and I shared a dream, this one slightly different than before. Instead of being out in an open plane, we were in a confined and closed tunnel. The repetitive clicking sounds that have started creeping into my conscious mind echoed from both ends of the tunnel getting louder. It was quite easy to tell that we were surrounded. Spells didn't work, lights didn't work, Fyrehowl was short her sword, and there was no way in the nine hells we would be running through any large group of howlers. Not knowing what else to do, we stood where we were, and held our ground.

Within a few moments, the howler's closed in and we could see some of them through the shadows. A slightly larger one stepped into the dim light we were in and sat down in front of us, looking at us with its curious eyes. Slowly one eye would dilate and the other would get much smaller. We watched for a few moments and then he yelled out loud with an ear splitting scream. I woke up with a fright, scaring Nisha in the process no doubt. In the back of my head the clicking sound had returned, and had gotten much louder. Even my ears had begun to twitch to the sound when I was concentrating on it. Who knows what they were doing when I wasn't thinking about them.

Fyrehowl went and got Florian, and while I could still hear the clicking Clueless directed the cleric to throw a detect thoughts on me. Normally I don't care for people poking my head, but this instance warranted it. Once the spell began, I could hear the sound echoing back and forth from my head to her own, the sound quickly getting louder again. Fearing for my own safety, as well as Florian's, I had her break the spell. Fortunately, the sound started to die away again, but it remained there, just at the edge of my conscious thoughts, poking ever so slightly at my increasingly shorter nerves. There wasn't much any of us could do at this point, and as far as I knew, it was nothing more than just odd dreams that Fyrehowl and I had shared. Admittedly, dream sharing isn't all that common, but it does happen occasionally. Nisha started to hum to me as I drifted back off to sleep, leaving the others to handle things as they saw fit.

The next morning I was awoken by Fyrehowl telling me to come downstairs and attend a crying Daubus. The last time Fel cried, things were in a bad way. Obviously, something bad had happened or was going to happen in the near future. The question I had in my mind was why was he *here*. We weren't any greatly powerful people. We just seem to have a knack for getting involved where we don't belong. Fel began his explanation of his worshipping of Aoskar, telling us about how he served him. Lately though, the words of his god had been getting quieter and quieter and he feared that

something had happened. Hearing that we had seen the corpse of this fallen deity, he supposed that we might be able to offer some insight into why this might be happening.

Up until this point, we hadn't told anyone of the divinity leech. It just wouldn't be a good idea to work people up over such a thing, and besides, if we told them, they'd likely want us to do something about it. Fel however, we figured, needed to know. So, we told him. I'm not sure if a crying daubus or a frightened daubus is more scary to me. Neither one of those pictures did I ever need painted in my head again. With all the other stuff that was floating around in there, scared daubus were something I didn't need images of. Not knowing where else to turn, Fel begged us to do something, anything. We agreed to look into the matter and return to the Astral, where hopefully we could find out what was happening to the corpse.

Before we could do that though, I wanted to go the Library and research on howlers, the crag, pandemonium, and anything else that might possibly be related to what I was experiencing. Having a catchy tune stuck in your head is one thing, but having nightmares and random – no, they aren't random noises. There is a pattern and I'm sure of it – noises in your head keeping you from concentrating are another.

The information I found in the library was more than frightening enough to make me want whatever was in my head out, and out immediately. Apparently some poor berk by the name of Jarmin Dupreche had journeyed to the crag before and had encountered the same thing. Interspersed with references to howlers and their habits, were other much more disturbing words. The penmanship was the same, and the ink hadn't changed, but the fervor in the writing and the way in which it was written made me think someone else entirely had written it. My tail frizzed up at the mere thought of this. I didn't need anything else taking over my body and forcing me to believe in it. However, it seemed that Jarmin was trying to keep this thing repressed and at bay. He was refusing to believe in it or acknowledge it. At the least, I knew it was there, and knew there was a key to this dilemma. It most likely did not involve in trying to forget about this thing. The last words upon the page, where it was splattered with a few blood drops were *death won't make your escape so easily*. Now I HAD to have this thing out of my head. If it transcends even death, I don't want to have anything to do with it.

By this point my tail was curled around my leg and I had to reach down and rub the leg to get circulation back into it. I picked up the last scribblings of my notes and took them with me to hall of records. Certainly there had to be something there regarding Jarmin's death. How did he die? Did the thing plaguing his mind gain control over his body and kill him, or did he try to beat it out of his head? These were questions I had to know the answer to. Damn it all if they didn't have ANY records of this person in their keep. Apparently they only go back a few centuries, and this guy must have been from much longer before that. Going back to the library I got clueless and Nisha and we ventured out to the Mortuary in the hive. If the smell of that place doesn't make you sick, than the sight of the corpses that run the place will. Each of them stamped with a number and consigned to performing some menial task in order to keep the place working.

We got directions to their hall of records and were promptly escorted back there by one of these zombies. Insides, I got the attention of the least busiest looking attendant and had her query the records for me. In order to facilitate such requests, they had a special apparatus setup composed of a skull and its stand, which when given a name, would pinpoint the particular book in the long series of volumes. Not surprisingly, with

such a vast collection of data they did have some information on this Jarmin fellow. Apparently he had died some four and a half centuries ago, of self-inflicted head wounds and no sign of struggle. Creepy. Now I knew that he did it to himself, but which him? Apparently he had also sold the rights to his corpse to the dustmen, but it couldn't be used as when they animated it, the corpse would not stop howling. This made the promise of death seem very unwelcome if it'd plague you even after death. In fact, this almost seemed to be what was happening to the souls Loebtav had killed back on pandemonium. When you tried to communicate with them, they wouldn't stop screaming. Here, Jarmin wouldn't stop howling. Perhaps there was a connection somewhere.

A little curious if anyone else had the same fate, I had her search through the records for anyone else who had died around the same date of similar causes. A Hader Silverbeard, and Nela Truearrow had both suffered similarly grotesque deaths. If this was a search expedition as Jarmin's notes had claimed it was, then the university would likely have some notes regarding it, or at least could point me in the right direction to looking for more information. After all, what do they have scholars for if they can't help solve problems? Before going to see him though, I had one more thing I wanted to try back at the library. A legend lore could reveal so much information about Jarmin's past that I had to give it a try.

Talking Clueless and Nisha back to the library, I got the attention of a daubus and asked it the rules regarding spellcasting in the library. Apparently there were no objections to such things, so long as you were watched. I had no quarrel with this in the least, and hopefully it would provide some valuable insight into my predicament. I led the daubus over to the book and sat down to begin casting the spell. Once it was complete, I gently touched the book and closed my eyes, focusing on the image that quickly went from fuzzy to clear. Standing before me was a man that seemed to be smiling. He reached out a hand and pointed through my head behind me. As I turned around, I spotted a howler, already in the middle of its leap, mere inches away from my head. I tried to duck, but it was much too late for that and it contacted me square in the forehead. Instead of bowling me over though, like I had suspected, it seemed to dive *inside* my head. I woke up with a start and realized I was screaming at the top of my lungs. The next thing I remembered was a hand coming down and striking me across the face, knocking me out.

When I came to presumably a short while later, I was looking up at Clueless and Nisha, who were standing over me in this worried and curious manner. I rubbed my cheek and could already feel a light bruise starting to develop and the bone was rather tender. However, I had control of my body again, and aside from a serious headache, I felt okay. I explained what happened and we immediately set off for the university. The resolution to this problem couldn't wait any longer, and I had to get some quality sleep some time soon or I'd be a wreck.

Once at the university, Ms. Brittlestone informed us that Dorian was unavailable at the moment and would likely be in his office tomorrow. I left a note with her that should be delivered with all quickness and also left a few jink to cover the cost of a courier if necessary. With no other leads to explore, this research would have to wait until tomorrow. We all returned home to the portal jammer and sat down and had a nice meal. Just as we finished the meal, Nisha, Fyrehowl, and myself all became rather sick. The first thing that popped into my head was poison. Either Shemeska was exacting her revenge, or someone else had it in their heads to kill us off. Someone popped off a detect

poison but there wasn't one. As I sat there spilling my guts onto the floor, Clueless figured out that we were diseased, via some manner or another. Casting a heal, or maybe it was a remove disease on me, I immediately felt much better. I quickly grabbed my staff and scryed on Florian's whereabouts. At the very least, we had to be sure everyone else was safe. Florian and Toras both seemed to be okay, as far as I could tell, but I didn't want to take chances. Forgetting I was in Sigil, I summoned a teleport spell from my mind and worked through the incantations and was surprised to find that I could feel the spell actually working! However, before it actually completed, I could feel something resisting the spell. Of all times for something like this to happen, now was the most inopportune time. As the spell fizzled, I called my backup spell to the foreground of my mind and cast again. This time, the weave slipped through my fingers and as I disappeared into a sparkle of orange magic, I reappeared on the other side. Apparently it is possible to teleport in Sigil, it's just somewhat difficult. Hopefully the lady's shadow didn't decide to wander over and punish me for doing it. I quickly tapped Florian and Toras and used my last available teleport to get us back to the portal jammer. Florian then proceeded to remove the disease on both Fyrehowl and Nisha, making them feel at least better than they were a few minutes ago.

The disease appeared to be magical in nature, and the only one capable of casting such a thing would have been Loebtav. That would be just his style. But when did we get with it? We'd likely never know. The thing to worry about now though, is who did we have contact with? In the past few days, we had been at an inn in Tradegate, seen Shemeska the Marauder, and of all things, attended a council meeting. How to remedy this? Likely Clueless' date to the council meeting was in contact with a lot of the people at the meeting. We could probably find a lot of them there and cure as many as possible. Without thinking much, I cast a scry on Clueless' girlfriend and quickly got a look around the room she was in. Before a moment had gone by, it popped out of existence. I opened my spellbook to the teleport page and quickly refreshed my memory on the exact nature of it, walking my hands through the gestures in a hurry. Within a few minutes, Nisha, Clueless, and myself were standing in the middle of the fest hall, with a crowd of rather important people all sitting down with food and looking at us in a confused manner. I stammered through an apology and let Clueless inform his girlfriend of the situation. Before I could really offer much of an explanation Kylie had informed me that I was the entertainment and I should be up on the table dancing.

Not seeing much of a way out of it, and certainly not wanting to disappoint Kylie, whom I had hoped I'd at least strike up a genuine friendship with – one can never know too many important people – I decided to hop up on the table and dance. Hiking my robes up a little bit, they started clapping their hands and within a few moments I was enjoying myself a bit too much. My tail darted back and forth, ears twitched, and I danced my heart out, and as far as I could tell, I looked pretty good doing it. Nisha reached up and offered me a platinum piece. Under the guise of accepting the token, I reached down, grabbed her arm, and pulled her up on the table to dance as well. A few more tokens were tossed that Nisha eagerly caught, while I just continued to dance. Somewhere, my sense of sense of duty took over and I activated the staves I carried with me and caught everyone with remove disease, and as far as I could tell, they didn't even know it. Nisha and I then hopped off the table and took a deep bow. Standing up, we both smiled, thanked them for the time and wished them a good meal and then bolted out the door

with Clueless in tow. Once outside, we regained our breath and then hurried over to the gym, where Fyrehowl had been earlier in the past few days. Right inside the door there were a group of people quarantined off, apparently waiting for us. We stepped inside, caught the attention of two people in charge and were told that we were expected. I was *very* surprised by this. We had only just found out about thirty minutes ago, and news never traveled that fast in Halruaa. Not one to turn down a good chance of events, I quickly cast the spell over the waiting people and the guards, thanked them, and then returned the staff of healing to clueless.

Finally the night had come to a close. We still had to visit the inn and take care of the epidemic there. I doubted they'd be too happy with us, but we'd at least take care of our problem. It is awfully hard to find a good quality inn and I didn't want to ruin a chance at a profitable business relationship in the future. The rod of chaining though would have to wait until tomorrow. It's usefulness had been expended for the day, and I couldn't do much with it outside of weight down papers until tomorrow. We three returned to the portal jammer and had a light drink. After all that running around, I was exhausted, and needed a break. Before I could do that though, I had to study and write this entry. As you can tell, I'm trying to be more dedicated about updating this. When so much happens in one day, it's hard to remember it all, so I'm writing it the evening it happens. So far it's worked out well. Hopefully Mystra will see me through this mental crisis and you'll have another entry in a day or two. Her blessing upon you.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Because I'm writing this entry, it likely means that things have gone well regarding my recent dilemma. One can't be too sure when messing with the delicate fabrics of the mind, but I feel secure in the knowledge that things have been taken care of regarding it.

After talking with Highsilver again, we found out that there is a peculiar nature to that portion of the plane. Some of the writing on and around the crag often takes on some sort of curse that's dependant on the time and location. This particular bit of text apparently had been discovered before by previous explorers and the curse it bestowed upon those that touched it was known as the Curse of the Smothering Howls. I'm not entirely sure why they would be considering smothering, but they certainly did have me worried. Apparently some we would have to make some sort of trip back to Pandemonium to destroy the text, or at least study it in more detail. It seemed to be the entire key to the puzzle at the moment.

Before we left though, Toras was forced to endure personal humiliation at the hands of the Marauder. Apparently he had emphasized the listing of her name on some historical religious documents and she wanted it removed. Magical religious documents being what they are, this wouldn't have been possible without several different steps that I'm sure Shemeska wouldn't approve of, nor even think about considering. Needless to say, he was forced to read the apology letter to her in person, and Florian went along with him as well. When things didn't fall to Florian's liking, she left in the middle of what I bet was a rather strong tantrum on the fiend's behalf. Personally, I know the bounds of good grace and know better than to just walk off on someone who's treating me poorly, or at least I like to think I do. Regardless of how much of a nutter the other person is

being, you stick it out and politely take your leave. This is particularly important when dealing with people in high positions of power, such as Shemeska. At least extend the courtesy, even if she doesn't take it. But who am I to talk? I balk the moment she even enters my presence. Survival instincts are strong, but there's no reason I should let them turn me into a complete and utter coward.

Again, I digress though. Florian decided it was in her best interests, as well as everyone else's, to leave in the middle of a tantrum. I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but I was certain it couldn't be a good thing.

Once Florian and Toras had returned, we took our leave to go back to Pandemonium, retracing our steps back to the site I remember the inscription being at. Once we were in the crag itself, a chorus of howls echoed around us, almost forming a sort of odd music, or so I thought. The good news was that I wasn't the only one hearing it, so at least I knew I wasn't getting even more crazy. We bolted into the cave and took a quick breather to catch our breath. Hearing the sounds of the howlers getting even closer, I decided it would be a good idea to put up a wall of force at the cave entrance. At the very least, we'd just be trapping ourselves with whatever was in the cave, rather than letting the whole pack of them into the cave with us. Taking our demons one at a time seemed like a good idea to me.

Once the wall of force was cast, we ran down into the cave and quickly spotted the accursed writing that began all of our problems. It was quite easy to spot as it was glowing of its own accord, quite brightly I might add. Toars, sensing the strings of evil within the writing, decided to cast a dispel evil on the writing. The effect must have been positive as the howlers outside at the cave mouth howled again and immediately started scratching feverishly at the stone and the force wall itself. The stone seemed sound enough that it would hold, and the wall of force wasn't going anywhere unless I told it to. For the moment we would be safe.

Unfortunately, the dispel evil didn't seem to do much more than agitate them and bring the sound of claws clicking against the stone floor echoing down the cave. Florian, taking a cue from our discussion earlier started to stone shape the text away. Outside the howlers were whimpering and scratching even harder at the cave entrance, all the while the clicking sound grew louder. As the spell completed, a sort of haze enveloped all of us around the height of our heads and small beads of flashing lights seemed to spread from us to the writing on the wall. When it receded, the clicking stopped and standing at the end of the cave, was the same howler from my dreams. The eyes were of two different sizes, and the creature itself was as easily as large as me.

The creature itself didn't seem to be in a talkative mood, and immediately leaped at us. Fighting back, it wasn't long before we had managed to beat it down, and it tried to jump back into the script on the wall. None of my spells seemed to be too effective against the creature, and raw steel blades seemed to have the best advantage against it. As the final blow landed on the creature, I could sense a clarity of mind I hadn't since I had first laid eyes on that text. The clicking noises were gone, and the constant fear that someone was looming over my shoulder seemed to fade. Even the howls outside had stopped and the creatures likely dispersed. As we all turned and stared at the text that was there on the wall, new writing appeared in its place. The text itself read *A light in the darkness and the confluence of past and future*. I'm not entirely sure what it meant, but it

seemed like a good enough omen to me. At least it was better than *Do you hear the code?* I don't think I'll be looking for any codes anytime in the near future.

We took our leave of pandemonium again and went back to our bar. I was in the mood for a light drink and some quality time with Nisha. Now that I didn't have to worry about being a danger to myself or her, I felt safe in letting my guard down slightly. Unfortunately, the time we were going to spend hanging around and relaxing was ruined when we learned that people were trying to attack us. In particular, Florian and Toras were the focus of these latest attacks. I was willing to bet that they had something to do with Shemeska, but we soon found out that they were members of the illuminated. Through some poking and prodding, it turns out that Toras had taken it upon himself to end the life of a child slave trader. I would be a barmy to say that ending the enslavement of children is a bad thing, but the method in which it was executed left a lot to be desired. It's one thing to put a stop to his operations, ending a life to save others if necessary, but selling the soul into *eternal* slavery just doesn't set well with me. People, children included, only live one life and then they are free. This poor soul was doomed to spend the rest of this life, and all of the next as a slave to some evil being. That, I don't think I could handle. Closure is a good thing in one's life.

As it happens, Toras was told to see someone named Green, out in Plaguemort. Apparently, he had known about Toras even before the attack and had the dieing man deliver the message to him. Neither Florian nor Toras were inclined to listen to him and visit this man, but he ended up being rather persistent, even sending a trio of men after Florian when she was about the markets. We decided as a group that going to see this Green fellow might at least get him off our backs for a while. Oddly enough, during this time, the Cobald took it up herself to hire a personal body guard. I feel somewhat insulted that she doesn't find enough trust in us to stay around us longer. After all, we know her better than any random cutter off the street would, and could likely provide a more adequate protection. Not to mention, we wouldn't charge her for our company. Sometimes I wonder if she's not just in the business primarily to reap the benefits without contributing to the greater good of the party.

We decided to take the next day to travel to Plaguemort via regular means, and spend the day finding out what this Green fellow wanted. However, we were awoken at the crack of dawn by the sounds of hammering outside, and some confused noises. We all immediately thought the inn was under attack and leaped to the ready, myself peering out the window and watching curiously. It turns out that outside there were several groups of barmy chaos followers posting Hashkar Lives signs all over the place. Florian managed to scare a few of them off and we began our morning rituals, getting ready for our trip to Plaguemort. I put on my good robes, wanting to make a positive impression on people, or at least one that doesn't say 'I'm here to beat up on you.' For some reason, that's what I imagine when adventuring parties show up at the bar all dressed to kill. Something about the garb just bothers me.

After breakfast, we wandered outside and started our trek towards the hive. On the way there, we noticed that building on the corner for us, was being vacated of its previous residents. None of them could really say for sure who was going to be moving in. Not wanting to take a chance that it was some of Shemeska's planning, I paid the previous owner a few cold to leave a copper coin as a scry focus somewhere hidden in

the place. This would at least give me a chance to keep an eye on any surreptitious business that happened to be going on in there.

Once we reached Plaguemort, it was obvious that a recent battle had been fought here. The ground was all torn up, and we passed several places on the outskirts of town that had been demolished and were still smoldering ruins. Even the smell death seemed to pervade the air. As we got closer to the palace in the center of town though, the smells and the sights gradually lessened to that of a normal city. Clearly the owners, either new or old, had kept this place in a good enough condition to render it an awe-inspiring sight, at least to myself. There were several doors to the place, some of which were locked and guarded way beyond reason, and others where people just wandered through without being hindered. Toras explained who he was and directed inside the castle. Following along, we were ushered into a large throne room where someone who seemed strikingly like Jeremo was sitting. Not that his facial features were the same, but his energy and charisma were at least on par with the jester.

Toras spent some time talking to him, and we all listened to his explanation of the spark, and how it could be found within certain people. He even told us a few things about ourselves that only we should know. However, with enough spying and with the right contacts, anything can be found out about anyone. Espionage is something all too common these days. If this guy could really tell the future, like he claims, what's to stop him from altering the future by telling us what the future will hold so we can change it? It's one of those paradoxical things that I don't think he could really explain well even to someone of a much higher intelligence. Certainly a divination spell can glance bits of the future, but it's far from specific. It can tell you if the tide will be favorable, or if a certain course of action is wise, but it won't tell you the knowledge or skills you need to accomplish things. Asking fate to be that specific is like asking Lady Mystra to distill the weave down into symbol common language, instead of the ancient draconian language that we use to harness its power.

Still, his insights provided to be interesting, for the most part anyway. He had a lot to say and I don't think I had seen Toras contemplate things that much since I've met him. Perhaps there is a solid logical brain behind that shiny metal armor. If only his temper didn't get the best of him sometimes. There I go again, speaking where it isn't appropriate. Temper has always been one of my weak points, especially when it comes to illusion magic. No matter how tolerable I am of it, the mere thought of it being used out of laziness or to circumvent the need to be there in person, just angers me. I may never get over it, even if I do see a good use for the school.

We all left the presence of Mr. Green and he shook our hands, introducing himself to each of us and wishing us well. As we all turned and walked away, Fyrehowl singled me out and had be look over at the diviner under a magical analysis spell. She sensed that something wasn't right and wanted me to take a look. As rude and intrusive as that is, I cast an Analyze Dewomer and looked him over. What I saw surprised even me. Green himself was completely and totally devoid of any magic. Even his clothes were absent of the multitude of colors that normally washes over someone who practices divination magic. The real kicker though, is that around him, there was a large radiant aura that was possibly the brightest I had ever seen. The magic felt divine to me, so I couldn't adequately identify each of the schools, but I knew for a fact that he was heavily immersed in the school of divination. Perhaps that's how he seemed to know so much?

Simple magical trickery perhaps? Green resembled an anomaly, something I thought couldn't happen. The only place I had seen anything even remotely similar to this, was on an artifact, and those didn't happen between my hands all that often at all. I had never heard of a persona being an artifact before though, so I was quite confused. Perhaps this mystery would unravel itself eventually.

We got back to Sigil in time to meet our new corner neighbors, which was fortunately, or unfortunate, however you might consider it. Apparently a bunch of Duregar were moving in and setting up a distillery. The smell wouldn't be too nice, but at the very least, we might be able to strike up a business relationship with them. Once we wandered back to our own place, a group of three gentlemen wandered in to speak with the owners. Clueless and I both chimed in and offered to seat the man, offering him and his rather buff guards a drink. He accepted, but he declined for the other two. It turns out that he was the new owner of the place that would be moving in upstairs and the distillery. I don't approve of his war profiteering, or condone the promotion of war or the trade of arms for a war, but everyone has to make a living I suppose. He was interested in procuring a discount for his own employees, given that they would be taking up residence rather close. We agreed that we would find some suitable discount for him and told him to check his mail in a day or so. Clueless, Florian, and I discussed the possibilities of giving him a discount and settled on a ten percent number. If we had mercenaries in here, and they enjoyed the place, at the least, they might feel obligated to help out if the bar should need it at any time. I made up a few discount cards, putting my own personal arcane mark on them to make it official, and delivered them that evening, along with a copy of my blackboard spell. It might prove useful for those who are in a hurry and would like to order ahead.

Those two groups weren't the end of our new neighbors though. In retaliation for Florian's rudeness, her Most Wise, decided it would be in the best interests of all on the block to make good on her threats to move in a T'nari brothel. As if that wasn't a bad enough situation, she also had some anti-Tempus priest move in as well, just to spite Florian. I hoped the fiend was amused, as I rather enjoyed the nutter and the occasional ruckus outside. At the very least, it'd give me new targets to cast spells at if it came down to it. The brothel however, got rather annoying rather quickly. Patrons from that side of the street would occasionally show up here, and I didn't particularly care for their type of business. Pleasures of the flesh are one thing, but displaying your personal preferences in public are another. It was becoming apparent to me that Toras would have to be more selective on the clientele he let into the bar.

We spoke the proprietor of the house of carnal pleasures, and were informed that if we wanted to do anything about the noise, that we'd have to take it up with the landlord. Before I could do that though, I'd need a spell to handle it. Venture's Gained happened to be a good spot to procure the rare and unusual arcane oddities, so I had them put their feelers out for one. In two days time, we acquired our spell and I wrote a letter to Shemeska informing her of the situation and what my plans were to do about it. I used all the possible courtesy and respect I could. Given that our recent dealings with her had turned sour, I thought I should write the letter. At the least, she might grant us this boon and recall the favor from me later. The thought just makes me shudder.

In the lag time between her response and the time I sent the letter, we acquired a band and setup a lounge area up on the roof. At the least, we could drown out the noises

from across the street and have a unique feature to our bar, aside from the ship that apparently crashed through the roof of the building. We enlisted Toras to do the lighting, and I hung up decorations and moved tables upstairs. When the morning rolled around, we'd likely have a nice attraction for new and old patrons alike.

The next day however turned out to be a bit more event filled than I anticipated. A loud clap of what sounded like thunder echoed from the other side of The Cage. I had never heard of thunder in Sigil before so I looked outside in the direction the sound had come from. Then it dawned on me. The sound was coming from the direction of the Shattered Temple. I quickly pulled out my scrying mirror and focused in on that section of the city. The sheer multitude of creatures of varying types and races was amazing, and all of them were bent on taking out the priests of Hades. The Ather were there of course, apparently orchestrating the whole thing, and there were even a third group who seemed to also be bearing a large portion of the attack. What really bothered me though is that they were new portals opened up in places I had never seen a portal before. I wasn't sure if Her Serenity had opened them there, or if they were old portals that were just recently opened for the influx of new and destructive creatures.

Not knowing what else to do, I put up a forcewall around the base of the portal, preventing any more of the hordelings from getting in through the gate. Once that had stopped, another portal opened up on the other side of the battle, underneath the priests of Hades. I closed it as quick as I could, and watched as another portal opened up in a window, letting in what appeared to be icy ghost like figures. There was no way I could keep up the feverish pace of portals opening and closing, and if Her Serenity didn't want me closing portals, I'd likely know about it rather soon. All I knew is that the more things that came out of those portals, the more that could get loose in the city. Fortunately, the battle began to wind down after the appearance of those icy demons and we were decided to go home before we got involved into the politics regarding this. At the very least, we knew the Ather were in control again, and Fel would be pleased, or so we hoped.

That evening we got our band and had them setup and play, drawing a slightly larger than average crowd. Hopefully as word got around about the new attraction, we'd at least get a few more people to the area. Dancing and music was always something we lacked, so I think we'll be making it a permanent part of the place.

The next few days saw us back on the Astral, doing research for spells, and getting a positive reply from Shemeska on the allowance of one way sound walls. I was more than happy to cast them and get a good night's sleep again, and we even kept the band. They were proving to be a rather pleasant addition and the patrons seemed to like the new sound.

Alas, I sense this is the end of things for a while. My sense of adventure grows somewhat weary and I feel the need to hone the new skills I have recently acquired. At the least, I have a few new spells ideas I need to research and put the finishing touches on. And with the Vulpinal that approached me the other day with a favorable response from Mystra, I feel the need to return home and introduce Nisha to my family. I doubt they'll be too happy with it, given how traditional everything is, and it might even be considered unlawful to an extent. However, I'm not asking them to consider my permanent residence there, but merely think of me as a future guest of Halruaa. I seem to have taken a liking to Sigil and can't think of living anywhere else. Yes, I'll lose my tower and likely my name, but at least I'll have my friends and Nisha. Perhaps even in

due time, all that can be remedied, or who knows, they might even prove to be insightful into the matter and somewhat accepting, although I'm rather doubting that. I wonder what Nisha will think when I propose? But how to do it? I think I'll make it wait until when we travel to Halruaa. At the very least, I can uphold some even older traditions and perform the rite under Mystra's sky where I can feel the weave between my hands. Nisha might even enjoy that.

I will do my best to update this log of my life as often as possible during the coming weeks, but I'm not sure how dedicated I will be or how informative it will be either. At the least, I might take it upon myself to explain my view of Mystra's art. It might prove informative for those new mages out there. Until next time, dear reader, may Mystra's stars twinkle brightly for you.

ABAT IS TABA SPELLED BACKWARDS

It was hoped that I wouldn't have to include the recent details of our encounters with Taba, or that I would have to say much at all about him, but in light of recent happenings, I deemed it worthy of noting.

First, Taba was originally a creature that Green had sent us on an errand to do away with. Normally, we wouldn't set ourselves low enough to simply murder someone in cold blood without due cause. Green conveniently provided this cause which produced the expected result from the majority of our party. Admittedly, I lean towards doing good deeds once in a while, which is why I agreed to go on this errand, but I'm not sure I can play a god here and decide that one person should die to save a whole prime of people. Apparently, this Taba fellow, who was under an alias I don't recall, was responsible for the death of a prime world. It's not every day that people cause such a drastic change in the balance of the cosmos, and it was certainly in the nature of the rest of my party to do something about it. Myself, I would have liked to have left well enough alone, but when my friends do something I support them in their efforts.

Either way, we ended up in Bayator, hiding out under a false name I provided, one of the few times I actively deceived someone intentionally. We tracked this fellow for a short time, making sure that he did indeed reside in a particular house, and kept an eye on him. Originally the plan was to wait until he left the plane and then take care of him, but it became apparent that if we waited that long, we might have a solid chance of losing him. He hadn't left the house in several days and we were beginning to wonder if he'd already left. Taking a chance, we decided to go ahead and deal with him, and his high ranking host if it become necessary. We made ourselves apparent at the front gates of the manor and knocked on the door politely. A servant answered the door and led us along into the main chamber of the house, or at least one of the larger areas, where we noticed two dead fiends, likely servants or occupants of the house. As we approached, our guide began to transform, showing us another of his many shapes.

After some short banter that honestly didn't convince anyone that he wasn't the murdering type, we began what we came to do, eliminate him. He proved no easy task and was smart enough to realize when he wasn't fairing well that he needed to run away, but not before polymorphing Nisha into a blue crab. I was decided unimpressed and hurled countless powerful spells after his retreating form, following on his heels as quick as I could, intent on making him pay for the insult. As we launched ourselves around the

corner into the next room, the extent of his treachery was becoming quite apparent. He was in the midst of dealing with a pit fiend, of all creatures, when we walked in. Not wasting time, we began to hurl both spell and weapon at Taba, watching as he apparently suffered the same wounds all over again, before plane shifting out.

Never one to be left behind, I quickly scryed on him, while Florian cast a locate person. Within moments, we at least had the plane and general location of his whereabouts. Hopping out faster than we had arrived, I began one of my more powerful scrying spells and quickly located the forest in which he was hiding. Teleporting the rest of us there, we set to work on his next form, only to find out that it had been a decoy. Felling Clueless in a single attack, he quickly teleported away. Toras tossed Clueless over his shoulder, and I quickly recalled my scrying mirror and found his location again, teleporting us there just in time to see a portal shimmering as he stepped through. Wasting no time, Fyrehowl stepped through, followed by Alex, whom had apparently followed us after being released by Taba. It's not like we trusted him, but he wasn't posing a threat either, so we didn't bother. As he stepped through, the world exploded as an astral rift split the portal in two, nearly sucking us inside. As it closed, both Fyrehowl and Alex were gone, sucked into an extra-dimensional space, which caused Alex's bag of holding to explode violently.

Apparently, in order to successfully make it through the portal, you needed to have the correct portal key. After taking a few moments to analyze it, we found out that that the key was the blood of a greater yugoloth. For some reason, I doubted Taba had any on himself, so he must be one. Not having any blood of our own in the part, Fyrehowl and I teleported to the portal back to Sigil and got ourselves to A'kin's shop within a matter of minutes. We must have seemed crazy to come into his shop, demanding blood, without offering much of an explanation. However, asking him for his blood was bound to be easier than asking Shemeska for her own. A'kin didn't volunteer his own blood but provided us with some blood at least that did the trick. Upon returning after having wasted valuable time, we used the portal key to activate the portal and stepped through, only to find ourselves drowning in a room full of acid. I've got a minute tolerance to the stuff, but air is one thing I needed to breath. Casting a teleport spell, I tried to get us out of the enclosure into dry air, but couldn't manage to find any. Doing the next best thing, I crafted a force bubble between the wall and the floor, and then teleported the liquid outside.

Obviously, doing this every time we needed to move somewhere wasn't going to work. Fortunately, I constructed the bubble around two doorways fashioned to be portals. The portal we decided on taking, and the one we could get the key to, was a portal to Mechanus. I etched a quick symbol into an inconspicuous spot on the glass wall and we stepped through the portal, ending up on the next leg of our journey. Unfortunately, Taba was long gone, if this was indeed where he had ended up. In frustration and not having an outlet for my revenge, I got us all back to the inn and had a stiff drink to think some other things over.

In the time after that little adventure a lot of my plans to return home fell into place. I had obtained permission for guests to accompany me to Halruaah, had informed my parents of my impending visit, and had procured a place for my companions to stay. I wasn't going to impress upon my parents for a place to stay when I had news that would upset at least my mother. The news of course, being that I was dating Nisha, and would

likely be proposing to her. In fact, I had planned to tell her that we were engaged after I had proposed, but events upon our arrival sort of complicated things.

The scenery upon arriving in Halarah, the capital of Halruaah, was much more impressive than that of Sigil. The buildings were all decorated and of varied colors and spoke of the magic that was held within the walls of each of the mage towers situated there. Even the air had a charge to it and the weave's presence could be felt all the stronger. Mystra's hand was decidedly involved in this place, and I had returned once again to feel its presence. I managed to teleport us into the city right at the foot of my mother's tower. My father was obviously a wizard as well, but my mother was the one who had the greatest talent for Mystra's art. With that power came arrogance and the presumption that she still controlled my life.

I was certainly glad to see my parents and my father was certainly glad to say hello again, but he didn't get to express this emotion much as my mother was constantly frowning and looking quite concerned. She was at least very civil and kept her comments to herself until we were in private. Once we were in private though, I was given an earful.

Her first complaint was about not having told her sooner of my arrival. I would have given her a longer warning, but I didn't anticipate needing to house my compatriots at her tower, and thus didn't think it was worth troubling her with the news. Apparently that was the furthest from her mind though and only the initial ice breaker. Somehow, she had gotten wind through one of my 'friends' about my involvement with Nisha. I was all prepared to answer questions regarding Nisha and my involvement with her, but hadn't necessarily worked the thoughts and emotions into words yet. I had planned on doing that when I told them myself. The most perplexing part of all this was that someone had already told them. I hadn't told anyone else really, and there was no one from this area that I had seen at all recently that could have told her. Pressing her for more information, she handed me a letter from one Lord Abat, who resided in the High Forest. As far as I could remember, there was no Lord Abat anywhere out there.

I didn't have time to think about that matter though, as I was then lead down a long line of questioning, and guilt trips that almost had me convinced that I should leave well enough along, but my heart told me otherwise. My mother even went as far to tell me that I wouldn't be inheriting the tower if I went against tradition like this. I had resigned myself to the fate of not having a tower some time ago when I settled myself in Sigil, but she didn't have to remind me. Needless to say, illusionists purple wasn't my color anyway. The only thing I hadn't considered was the effect that it would have on them. I was under the assumption that my own actions wouldn't reflect poorly on them, but she made it seem like it would cost them their livelihood. Admittedly, I was prepared to do anything to ensure that they didn't suffer, but the social awkwardness was nothing I could prevent. Legal action and such were possible to get around, but the social aspect of their lives would have to adjust. I was honestly taken aback by this shocking news, but my heart kept me moving forward with my plans, despite her nagging and concerns. At long last, I was allowed to return to my companions, and on my way out the door, it occurred to me who Abat was. It was Taba, spelled backwards.

The rest of that evening was at least somewhat eventful. I managed to show my friends around the town, let them do a little shopping, and ended up taking Nisha to dinner at my parents place. All things considered, it went rather well. I got to show Nisha the wand I bought her, and was rather happy at the unique gift of a wand of fireballs

dressed up to look like a wand of flaming pumpkins. The next day saw us out at the edge of a forest full of wild magic.

It was apparently Taba's intention that we make our way out there to visit him, otherwise he wouldn't have given his location away that easily. Certainly he had picked the right place to meet us: A place where my magic would be just as likely to affect me as it was to affect him. Why did he have to go and ruin my plans anyway? It wasn't like we inconvenienced him any by tossing meteor swarms at him, was it? Regardless, we were on the edge of a forest of white albino trees only a few lengths deep before it switched into cold dark petrified trees. This was the forest that surrounded the city of Karse, home of the now dead god that robbed Mystral of her power and forced her to be reborn into Mystra, the new goddess of magic. For miles around the city, the trees and the landscape had grown cold and icy, nearly sucking the life out of any who ventured within. Creatures thought to be long extinct and live nowhere near the are randomly popped up to impede travelers and often did away with them before they knew what had found them. And somewhere, deep within the cursed forest was Jingleshod, the axeman that was forced to live in the forest until Wulgreth was destroyed. Few people knew the tale, and those that did, often wouldn't venture into the forest, particularly if Wulgreth of Jingleshod resided there.

Regardless of the history of the place, we found ourselves there, meeting Jingleshod and committing our lives to some unspoken promise in order to gain his permission and assistance in getting through the forest. After a few close calls, and my refusal to use magic, we ended up at the red rock butte of the dead god that stole Mystral's power. This was apparently where Taba wanted us to be as we found him there in the form of a huge fang dragon. Directing us into the temple built onto the dead god we worked our way through the traps left by Wulgreth, and in fact, even made our way past at least once lich, Wulgreth or not, down to the lower layers of pyramid. Once there, what we found surprised me immensely. A pool of near colorless grey liquid. In the center of the room were a series of marks and circles that looked like there was some sort of apparatus here attached to the floor. Then it struck me. The liquid we were standing in was once heavy magic. The heart of this once-god was supposed to be still pour the liquid out. However, the heart wasn't here any more, and all the magic that was in this room was drained entirely. I knew of only one thing that could do something like that, and that was the divinity leech.

After I was given a few moments to contemplate that, Taba informed us that casting a Legend Lore on the pool itself would provide some unique insight to the reason he brought us here. I was hesitant at the prospect of casting magic in such a wild-zone, but I was eager to know. What I was I was completely and totally unprepared for. It showed the entire scene of Karsus' development of the heavy magic and his ascension to god, and subsequent fall. Normally, that wouldn't have surprised me as it was stuff that was common knowledge. What did surprise me however, was the image I got in the midst of that. Sitting there with his head cocked to the side and writing at a feverish pace was Karsus. Soft whispers filled the room, and in the shadows, just beyond the made archwizard, was the ebon. The damnable fiend was leading him down the road to the destruction of the weave and the change of the world! As the image faded from my mind and my senses returned to my own, I wanted to collapse to the ground and cry, but at the same time, I wanted to strangle the Ebon with my own hands, and demand to know why.

Fighting the urge to both throw myself into a portal and start the job now, and the urge to weep, I calmed my nerves and let reason return. This one fiend surely couldn't have been the one responsible for doing away with Mystral, could he? After all, Karsus would have figured it all out eventually. I'm thinking that perhaps the fiend was the one who just pushed him down that road. If he was though, what's to stop him from doing it again? Damn! He knows too much. Why didn't someone stop him? Make him pay for his crimes? All those innocent people and cities. All the years of magical research and hard work, down the drain thanks to the helpful push of some arcanaloth he didn't even deserve the power he found himself in now.

While these emotions were playing with both my head and my spirit, Taba came in and asked us to leave him to his business, which is to take out the Ebon. I was quite ready to grant his wish then and there. In fact, I was all set to join his cause and help him with his work. Then I felt the ring in my pocket. I had other things to do. More important things that wouldn't wait a lifetime. Having no need to remain there longer, and having fulfilled our obligation to Jinglehrod to remove Taba from the are, I teleported us back to my parents tower. We spent the rest of the evening, watching skyship races, and competing in fireball tossing contests. Pleasant enough distractions that served to clear my mind for what else I would be doing that evening.

After all the festivities were over, and people were on their way home, I took Nisha out to a picnic dinner beneath the stars on the edge of town. We talked and chatted for a while, and then I uttered the ancient Netherese syllables for the spell of marriage proposal. It was a simple spell, a cantrip at most, that surrounded the person proposing in a dull blue aura. Once I had explained the spell's effects to Nisha, I produced the ring from my pocket and handed it to her, as I recited the more traditional solicitation of marriage. She looked quite shocked and surprised for a moment, and then all at once she practically leapt on me, accepting the proposal without batting an eye. I breathed a heavy sigh of relieve and kissed her back happily, sharing in the moment as the blue aura slowly surrounded us both, confirming us to be officially engaged. We laid there on the picnic blanket, and looked up at the stars, talking for a while, and just enjoying each other's company. Before too long had passed though, we decided to head back before anyone suspected us of doing things that we shouldn't.

That evening, Nisha was more playful and giddy than I think I can remember her ever being. I was half tempted to let everyone guess at the smile on my face in the morning, but it was my parent's house, and doing something like that under their roof would likely irk them, well, my mom at least, more than anything else up until this point. I promised Nisha that we would play when we got back to Sigil in a few days. For now, we needed to enjoy the vacation and see if we could plan our wedding. A wedding in Halarah would certainly be interesting. There hadn't been one in a long many generations. What would people think if we had one now? I knew at least one person wouldn't have been happy, and that was my mother.

The next few days passed by fairly uneventfully. We waited for merchandise to be made and I gathered details on the next Lady Day, when I planned for our wedding to be held. If on any day the people of Halruaah would be forgiving, it would be one of those days. Besides, if we got married on that day, and Mystra's stars continued to shine brightly on us during the ceremony, the people would have to know we had Mystra's blessing. With Mystra's blessing, there's not much wrong we could be faulted, except

being reckless and young. Two things which we probably both fit into quite well. Beyond that, the only other things we did were to identify the things we picked up from Wulgreth's lair. There was some interesting stuff there, and some of it I questioned using. But if it helped regain any lost pieces of Mystra's art, I was all for risking it, just to see the secrets it unlocked.

Now I find myself back in Sigil, preparing myself for Shylara's inevitable return. And when she does come back, she won't be happy, that's for sure. I'll reward the avid reader with more details as they become available. Until then, may Mystra's arts grace your thoughts and soul.

RIDDLES AND TOWERS

The arrival of Shylara passed with no really big fanfare. She was surprisingly curt and straightforward with her speech, although I'm sure she was less the willing to work with her demands. The short of the story was that we were told to stay put. We could do what we wanted, but if she or those she served were involved then we had to leave well enough alone. Of course, she wasn't going to give us a laundry list of things she was involved in, even though we did try to ask for one. I think we ended up leaving each other with no real firm agreement outside of *we'll try not to be a nuisance*.

Around this time, we had learned of some amusing activity on mimicry involving yugoloths and some rather important trade routes. Apparently, the planet is some sort of massive trading town and provides a path for a lot of Planar Trade Consortium routes. With the planet, or moon, whichever is more appropriate, closed in access to their trading caravans the prices of goods into and out of sigil started a steady climb. A rather wonderful man decided that he actually dared to claim ownership of The Lady's portals and added an *inspection fee* to all goods that passed through him. Admittedly, we as inn could have survived, but I'm all about fairness in business. Just because we have access to a rather unique set of talent for getting goods into and out of Sigil doesn't mean we should take advantage of that. After all, if all our competitors were forced to suffer through the slump and we didn't appear to feel it, then we'd be looked at as having an unfair advantage. Sure, we do, but I'm not one to exercise it. The challenge is in keeping ahead of the game fairly.

So, in order to combat this economic downturn, my party and I decided to pay a visit to Ramander The Wise. Personally, I've never met a more stuck up and condescending wizard in all my years. I thought people in Halruaah were bad, but at least they have the decency to say up front that they aren't willing to help and then shoo you away. I get the feeling this berk liked to watch people complain and squirm underneath his control. I'm doubting that he's all that wise if he pretends to own the portals that people pass through every day. The Lady should have something to say about it, and I'm not one to want to be around when She does.

Upon visiting the nutcase wizard, we were greeted to a spectacular view of his tower, the two stone golems, and every other ritzy and fancy magical device you could ask for. Honestly, I was impressed, but I think he was likely compensating for something. Perhaps a lack of talent, or something a bit more personal. Either way, he was about as difficult as training a behir to follow on leash. His mysterious benefactor, which he refuses to name, obviously has him under her grimy little claw. I'm thinking that she

likely set him up to watch him fall at some point. I was tempted to do her the favor and end the tyrant's reign over Sigil's portals. Little talent indeed.

Not finding much of a solution there, we decided to go to the other side of the bargaining table and visit with the planar trade consortium. These people were surprisingly helpful, even though I got the distinct impression that they weren't on the up and up. Even Clueless seemed to shun their presence, but I'm suspecting a different reason there. Old wounds maybe? After a little debating with the head of the Sigil office I agreed to loan my services as an arcane caster to get a small party to Mimicry to find out what was going on. In addition, the rest of my party would travel along for safety and anything we could do to help restore the city's trade routes would be accomplished. I received a copy of a gate spell, which wasn't too difficult to master once I had the proper time to study the arcane symbols.

After a short wait, the designated group met and we traveled to Mimicry. What we found there I will leave for a later telling, but suffice it to say, Nilesia seems to have returned from the death of a flaying. No one but no one returns from the lands of the Lady's shadow, yet somehow this particular barmy did. Apparently, the whole deepspawn and cloning process is enough to evade the wrath of the Lady's shadow, at least in some strange form or another. She certainly wasn't a willing participant in the process and we were more than happy to rescue her from that predicament, with some caveats of course.

Upon our return to Sigil, we also learned of the solution to a puzzle that Vorkanis had apparently been working on a solution for. At least in some degree. In addition, I had received a cryptic letter to meet with Elminster, one of Mystra's chosen, to discuss matters pertaining to her will. But, there will be more on that shortly. We were fortunate enough to have made the acquaintance of a gem dragon during the intervening time and we able to get guidance and assistance in finding the Tower of Lead, or at least in getting remotely close to it without putting our lives on the line. Unfortunately, Shylara and her minions had learned of our findings and saw fit to take out their frustrations on Lady Facetflame, the gem dragon who would provide us help. We still owe her a debt of gratitude and some sort of infinite repayment for her services and the trouble we caused her. I have ideas on how to repay her for her kindness, but it would certainly take much longer than I have free right now.

Suffice it to say, with some promises to help her on our part, she agreed to lead the way, as far as she could anyway, to the Tower of Lead. More on why we were destined there shortly, but suffice it to say that the Ebon's plans were leading him there and we had intentions of arriving before he did. Anything to get ahead of the fiend and stop him from putting together what could only be describe as a plane shifting event that would likely involve the city of Sigil and all of the planes. An end to the bloodwar and not necessarily in favor of the forces of good.

On the way to the Tower of Lead we ran into a rather interesting set of Mephits. One particular one, their leader, deigned to call himself a great archmage. I found amusement in this, but never one to throw caution to the wind, I decided to heed his request to stop, just in case he had some way to actually prevent us from leaving. After all, these were the inner planes and things are much, much stranger here. Taking physical form we bantered with the mephit for a while before he decided that we were to pay some exorbitant toll for crossing his cave. I wanted to show him up of course, pride being what

it is among all of those Mystra has gifted with her powers, but not in a way that would actually cause physical harm. And of course, it had to be an impressive display of power as well, just to add to the effect. I checked my components and found that I had the requisite supplies for a force cage and promptly cast it on him, and then reformed into mist and left, leaving his companions with sharp sticks to poke at him if they wished. I wasn't quite satisfied with the results, but it at least provided some much needed amusement on the way to the tower.

Also during our travels, we approached a slaving caravan that apparently had various slaves for sale. I've seen the likes of such things before, sometimes even in Halruaah, but I wasn't one to actually claim ownership over a person. I was content to let the slavers travel on their merry way, but a few select people in my party decided that it'd be worthwhile to purchase those within the caravan and set them free. I'm not quite sure where the money keeps coming from to be so free with it, but if they've got the gold to spend, then I'm more than willing to let the fools part with it. Once the purchases were made, I thought we were all set to go, but Nilesia had other plans. The leader of the caravan was apparently someone evading her idea of justice and she was going to take his head for it, quite literally in fact. With a few quick sweeps he was dead and the stunned caravan just stared on in shocked silence. I can't quite recall who jumped forward and presented ownership of the caravan to someone else, but it was a smart tactic none-the-less. They blinked a few times, shrugged their shoulders, and moved on like there was nothing else to see. Finally, a combat that ended without the need for more than necessary violence.

There were a few other encounters along the way, most of which were rather inconsequential to the greater whole and don't bear retelling here. Then again, there always is another time to recount the tellings.

As we approached the final leg of our journey, we were certain that we had the Ebon by his nonexistent tail, but he apparently knew this and set up a welcoming party on the other side of a collapsed rock wall. To say the surprise was a little unfair is putting it mildly, but when you're as powerful as the ebon, anything is quite possible. What troubles me though, is that he didn't see fit to kill us right there. We were in his grasp, yet he continually taunts us with threats and offers of power, and then lets us go to continue to attempt to foil his plans. If we pose enough of a threat to him, that warrants a welcoming party of that magnitude then you'd think he'd finish us off. Of course, he might also enjoy watching us squirm too, the bastard. Whatever his reasons, we were allowed to live but we were unfortunately delayed by a day and kept in stasis while he presumably ventured further into the tower to claim his prize.

Once we were released from our capture, we hurried to the tower and ventured inside. The lower levels were empty and devoid of any living things, and the other parts of the tower remained unexplored. Venturing deeper inside we received our quest and descended the stairs into light, continually following the path that seemed best and traipsing our way around the tower in search of some puzzle piece and the next riddle.

Room after room greeted us with choices, decisions, puzzles, information, clues, and battles. The things never seemed to stop coming, and eventually, we reached the pinnacle of our quest, an elderly Tsing, that wished to impart his wisdom on us, if we would take it. His wisdom came with a price though, and that was the blood within our veins. My gods did that hurt! Having the majority of your blood crystallize inside you is

certainly not a good feeling, even if it is only temporary. Fortunately, he was much weaker than his primal companions that littered the tower. With a few quick moves we had finished him off and received the location of the next puzzle, the tower in the quasi-elemental plane of lightning. I was beginning to sense a theme here. The Tower of Lead was on the border of earth and positive, lightning on air and positive, and of course, there were two more elements that contained towers as well. These locations must have been the key and we had two weeks to prepare ourselves for the next travel.

Returning to our home, we found out that the world around has aged nearly four weeks while we had spent only a week or so during our travels. Obviously time behaves different on the inner planes than it does anywhere else and caused things to change a little more slowly for us. Maybe one of the other towers will return the lost time to us, or perhaps make it worse. Upon our return, we did our typical shopping and relaxing, gathering research and other bits of information that accrued while we were out. I of course, had a meeting to attend. The less you keep Elminster waiting, the better things turned out for you.

For company, I decided to take Nisha along with me, and introduce him to the archmage that you typically only hear of in histories and stories. Halruaah doesn't particularly look on him with a fond light all of the time, but he serves our Lady of Mysteries and therefore deserves at least respect from them. I personally hadn't been anywhere near ShadowDale before and had only read of the towns there several years ago. Planeshifts being the unreliable method of transportation that they are, ended up leaving us out in the middle of the desert, likely hundreds of miles from where we wanted to be. Within a the span of a few breaths, something started making an approach. If we were as close to Evereska as I thought we were, then there was no way I was going to stay around to find out what it was. With the recent battle not too long ago that waged between the elves and Shade, I didn't want to get caught on the wrong side of the peace line. Quickly I teleported Nisha and myself to Old Skull, the town where Elminster's tower resides, and was quickly scryed upon by some strange manner of creature, likely the one we escaped back in the desert. I held my place for a few moments, and waited to see if it was indeed on his way, but the thing kept its distance. For that I was thankful. The high pitched wind-like voice sent shivers down my spine and if it could scry on me, then it obviously has some magical ability.

Without waiting further, I sent Elminster a sending, informing him of my arrival in Old Skull, and proceeded to walk across town to his tower. When I saw what passed as a great archmage's tower, I was both surprised and humbled. Instead of an infinitely tall stone building, it was a simple windmill that turned in the breeze. I had always imagined it to be such a huge and wondrous building that it would put all the wizards in Halruaah to shame, but I was wrong. This was more along my ideas of a tower. Despite how flashy and showy I like to be in my practicing, my home should be simple and welcoming. He lived in a way that I honestly appreciated and gave him major credit for.

The old man, who honestly doesn't look as old as he is, was quite kind and understanding when he lead us inside, offering both Nisha and I a chair and some refreshments as well. We talked for a short while about the planes and some other random matters, small talk essentially to ease the nervousness quelling up in my stomach at talking to someone who was obviously a hundred times my better. As our conversation became more focused, he started to question my service to Mystra, asking me what

lengths I would go through to do her will and let her work through my powers. I was overjoyed at the prospect at being able to return the favors she had so graciously offered me. When it comes down to it, your god does an awful lot for you, but there really isn't much one can do in return for your god except offer your life and services. For once, in all my thanks, I was being allowed the chance to show my eternal appreciation for the gifts My Lady had given me. Apparently, she required someone outside of Toril to keep an eye on things, as it were. The Ebon had obviously caused problems before by helping out the demented Karsus, and if he was up to no good again, he could possibly effect Toril once more. While I was more than willing to offer her my life and services, I was unsure of exactly how to perform my duties. Elminster took out a small version of the Holy Symbol of Mystra, and handed it to me. I retrieved a silver chain from my pouch and threaded it through the moniker and placed it around my neck.

As the weight of the piece settled down, I could feel all the nervousness and confusion wash away, almost as if a sixth sense had been bestowed upon me to give me guidance and direction. I took a deep breath and continued to talk with Elminster for a short while more before I decided I should leave him to his work and return to mine. We shook hands and parted, heading back towards Sigil so that a good night's rest could be had.

However, as I entered Sigil, I got this uneasy feeling. I guess you could say it was more of an instinct than a feeling. One that essentially made me feel as though I were being watched and that I should keep my affairs in order. Concentrating on the feeling only made it worse, so I decided to heed this warning and let it guide my actions in the proper direction. As the evening wore on, I found that the feeling gradually lessened, or perhaps I became used to it, but it still nagged at the back of my mind when I wasn't concentrating, almost as if reminding me that I should be careful.

After a few days, I had finally recrafted one of the gem golems we found in the Tower of Lead. This one a huge and spectacular diamond golem. Certainly one of enough worth and power to put any golem current in Sigil to shame, and I knew just the place to use it: Ramander the Wise. While we were out during our four week run through the tower, a lettered was delivered fining us 6 gold for unpaid inspection fees. I had no intention of paying it, and the golem and I would pose enough of a deterrent to ward him off of trying a similar tactic in the future. Just to be safe, I invited the rest of the inn owners with me, as their input would be valuable here as well. The golem certainly did make an impression with Ramander, but that was hardly the end of our deals with him. Apparently it had gotten into Toras' head to actually pay the man, but with style. Taking out a platinum piece, he practically threw it at the man's head, knocking him out cold on the ground. Not having much in the way of conversation, I retrieved his rubber stamp of payment from the table and placed a big red mark on his forehead, and placed the platinum piece and the letter on his chest before leaving. Hopefully, that got the point across to him without leaving room to question our motives.

The later hours draw near, and I can hear dinner downstairs in the bar beginning, so I shall close this chapter in my life and open the next. Food, friends, and much more research await me in the coming pages. May the sacred flames of Lady Mystra's magic burn brightly and shed the light of the sun and stars down upon you.

TOWERS, DRAGONS, AND WEDDINGS

Each time I sit down to write these, I always ask myself *what do they want to know?* Of course, you'd like to know everything I'm sure, but there's a lot that's just omitted in favor of some of the more important things. So, I've come to realize that the best way to write this is just to pick a major event and start writing. What follows will follow and the berks who want more can follow me around with a sensory stone.

Before going to the next tower, there was a lot of time that we spent preparing ourselves, or at least something akin to that. Most of the time was filled with practical jokes on Nisha's part, as well as Fyrehowl running for office, Toras being thrown in jail for assaulting Ramander, and a trip on my part to temple of Mystra. The practical jokes can usually explain themselves. It's what Nisha's good at, and Fyrehowl soon figured out that pranking the master prankster is not an easy task. One of the projects that did consume a lot of our time was keeping track of Toras. Admittedly, when he's behind bars, it's sort of hard to loose track of him, but keeping up with his barmy tiefling lawyer was another matter all together. Still, the end of Toras' incarceration was fairly swift and ended up with Ramander taking another blow to his pride, if you want to call what the harlot was paying attention to pride.

Despite that strange sequence of events, another small thing worthy of note was Fyrehowl's attempt at running for a council position. I personally think she would have made an excellent choice for a council member, if she hadn't already obligated her time elsewhere. Without her help, I'm positive there'd be some situations we, as a party, would not be able to face. I'm all for her to have a position on the council, but I have that feeling that if she did, we'd end up coming behind her in that respect. One can't neglect an entire city for the needs of a few. But on the flipside, some of what we're involved in could effect the multiverse. Would it be right to neglect a city in favor of the multiverse, and would they understand? It's a hard choice and her incumbency, as much as it would be welcomed in this city, would put too much strain on the projects we have going for us now. In the hopes of at least deterring her from running, I penned the following letter to a fairly reputable newspaper in Sigil. *[Attached using a bit of sovereign glue to the pages is a cutout of a newspaper article that reads as follows:]*

Dear Editor,

Recently there has been a lot of commotion regarding the candidates for the now open seat on the council. An issue regarding the lupinal candidate has come to my attention that all Sigil residents should be aware of. As you know, being a council member is a very demanding and time consuming job that requires the utmost care and attention of the participant. The majority of council members have spent a good portion of their lives as residents here and have come to understand the intricacies of the city. Our lupinal candidate has neither the time nor the experience in politics to hold such a position. While a fresh young scent would be welcome in the stagnant must that has cluttered the politics of our city for so long, it still requires basic knowledge that this and other candidates do not possess. In addition to the long vacations that the lupinal seems to take

from our city, the most recent of which lasted several weeks, she also still retains her title as an adventurer. This puts her in more danger than any of our other candidates and may pollute her ideals to favor her current endeavors instead of the best interests of the city. There are other more well suited candidates for this position, and I think that in order to be fair to Sigil and all its residents that our vote would be best suited elsewhere.

Sincerely,

A Concerned Resident

I must admit, that I didn't meant to sound as harsh as I did in that letter, but in order to ensure that she didn't suspect me of writing that letter, I had to put it in a style and manner in which I don't normally write. Fortunately, the news never seemed to make it out and she lost to none other than A'kin himself. I personally cast my vote for him, and if he had a chance at winning it, then I was going to promote him for all he was worth. A'kin, being the nice person he was, respectfully declined the position, and offered it to the next placing person in the votes, a quite capable seeming person, if not a bit wealthy for my tastes. Still, he had competency and a good outlook that I agreed with, so I had no qualms with this substitution, particularly if it kept Shemeska out of the running.

Even though that consumed most of our time, there was still one other event that took place before our visit to the tower of Storms, and that would be my visit to the temple of Mystra. Apparently the whole visit started one afternoon in the Portal Jammer while I was serving things at the bar. Some of the others were upstairs discussing plans for Nisha's wedding dress and my ears started to tingle a little bit. I reached a hand up to scratch at them, and as I did so, I found that I could hear every word that was being said about me. About a dozen or so words later, I lost it again, and all was back to being as normal as it was before the event had happened. I was under the impression someone was playing tricks on me, so I sent someone upstairs to tell them to keep it down, just so they'd know I was listening. A few moments later, there was a repeat of the same event, but with different words. I'll be the first to admit that I can hear quite a number of things, but hearing a conversation a floor up through thick wood planks and stone beams is a little out of the ordinary, even for me. After some experimentation and the refusal on my part to believe that it was anything but a joke (I was figuring that Nisha had finally deemed it my turn for some of her practical jokes), they convinced me to head to the Mystran Temple and speak with someone there.

Upon arriving, I was immediately greeted by several of the more ranking members there at the temple. All they'd tell me was that they were told to I was coming. Funny, I had no idea I was coming until after I started walking there. Perhaps this was a big joke after all.

As it turns out, that was the furthest thing from the truth as possible. After talking with the priest at the temple for quite some time, I learned that I was given a special *gift*, as it were, from Mystra. The symbol that Elminster had given me, which I constantly wore around my neck, was my proof of office. This touch, or essence of magic was granted to only a few select individuals that Mystra believed would benefit her cause, the

promotion and teaching of magic. In addition to that, I suspected that Mystra wanted me to keep an eye on planar events for her. If the Ebon was gaining power, there's no telling what damage he could do, even to the prime of Toril. He'd been there once before, it'd stand to reason that he'd be back. The priest couldn't really tell me any more other than the basic effects of being chosen, which included not needing to sleep, immunity to diseases, and other similar things. The individual powers of each chosen would manifest themselves in some way until I understood what all of them were. I was personally mystified at the chances of this happening, but none-the-less pleased. Hopefully this gift for my faithful years of service to Mystra would afford my parents some comfort in their social standings within the city, but somehow I doubted it. Nisha, who was standing right next to me for the whole explanation seemed rather pleased at the idea of needing no sleep. I'm not sure what she was thinking when she said that, but telling the rest of the party was out of the question. I'd be running the graveyard shifts at the bar all the time if they knew. Even if I didn't need sleep, I was going to get some, if only to keep up appearances.

Time passed and eventually we found our way to the plane of air, nestled into a small town in the center of a gigantic storm. The small buildings that resided scattered about the hunk of ear floating in the plane looked to be fairly small and quaint. There was nothing large or especially interesting, but enough for a small community to form. We made our way into the local tavern, and spoke with the people who ran the bar, ordering a few drinks and chatting them up to learn all we could of the area. In the course of our talking, we sampled a peculiar drink that even managed to knock clueless on his ass which was rather impressive. Apparently the introduction of glacial ice from one of the bordering areas had lent it some interesting properties. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity to bring in a new drink to our bar, I agreed to sign a contract with the bar owners here, after a small trial period to see if our customers were receptive to the new addition.

After wasting a little time getting to know the owners of the bar, we were directed to speak to someone named Jack, who was the local guide to all things on this plane. We waited around at the stables for his return, which didn't really seem to take too long. He landed his flying beast at the tower on the north side of town and approached us, obviously a little concerned that we were looking for him. He seemed skeptical at first, but we convinced him that we had very little to do with the people that came before us. His price was a little steep, but there was no way we were going to find this place on our own. So, we paid the man his fee and started out right away.

Despite having run into a Yugoloth welcoming party, a plasma bubble, and tons of storms, we made it to the tower in one piece. The tower however, had its own welcoming committee and they certainly didn't look happy to see us given the size of the crew they had left behind. Four groups of dragons and riders, astroloths, a greater astroloth, and an arcanaloth were the majority of the forces, but certainly not all of them. It looked like they were prepared for an all out war. Fortunately, we had come prepared and managed to distract the patrolling parties long enough to make a direct assault on the main gate of the tower. We took some serious hits ourselves thanks to the greater astroloth, but in the end we managed to scurry inside the tower before the rest of the crews could show up.

Once inside, it was much like the previous tower, except that it was of air and positive, and not earth and positive. Slight difference, but not enough to really do much aside from change the décor around a bit. The most interesting note about this tower was the rather large dragon that sat poised in the middle of the central chamber. The good news for us is that he wasn't hostile, and seemed to be fairly good natured, for the most part anyway. He informed us that we were to follow the rule of three and disperse in groups through each of three portals in the room. The odd thing was, we didn't have nine people, only seven. Nilesia apparently counted as three because her two clones were waiting beyond the gate for her. Toras, Nisha, and myself split up into one group, while Fyrehowl, Aidan, and Clueless went into the other. Our group was the first to travel through.

Beyond the portal was a wooded area, with trees scattered about and a small path running between them. We followed this path until we saw a tree house in the branches of some trees just off the path. We could hear the sounds of children inside, and Toras instinctively had the feeling that someone was wrong. Compelled by some unseen desire to fix wrongs done to children, we clambered up the ladder and convinced the kids to let us inside. After much searching, we found the cause of Toras's distress. Some child had been beaten up by his comrades and thrown in the closet to suffer further. His friend however, had been convinced by some rather evil creature that things he was doing were normal and warranted. No amount of convincing could teach the child otherwise, so Toras dispatched the creature and took the child with him on his way out, intent on turning him over to his order so they could deal with him appropriately.

Outside, we found another sparkling black portal. Assuming we had passed the first challenge the tower had to offer us, we stepped through and were immersed in total darkness. Up ahead, the stench of death and decay greeted our noses, and we prepared ourselves for battle. Toras went ahead of us and started to cleave the waiting party into pieces while Nisha and I hung to the back. Before I even had a chance to react, I was lifted up through an enclosure in the ceiling and immediately grappled by something with long tentacles and horrific stench. I managed to get off a warning yell and a single fireball spell before it all went black. Judging the from the pain in the back of my head just before the darkness had overtaken me, I would have figured that I was dead, but I imagined death being a bit more, bright or at least interesting than nothing at all.

The next thing I remember was waking up in Nisha's arms with a horrendous headache, still in the same cavern, and a glowing portal opened ahead of us. Seeing, that I was alive, Nisha promptly assaulted me with kisses and hugs, practically killing me again in the process. Once she recovered we stepped through the last portal into a dry arid wasteland. The smell was oddly familiar and the mountain ranges seemed to strike a familiar chord within my memories. Before I had a chance to do much more than ready a spell, a Phaerimm appeared on the sand ahead of us. I could feel the muscles in my body turn to goo as I realized what these creatures were. I had only seen one during a recent scrying attempt, and had only heard tales of them otherwise. I knew them to be formidable casters with a strange resistance to magic. Most of the people who dealt with these creatures used either sheer physical force or magic that one couldn't hide from. Toras seemed like our best bet for the moment so we let him deal with the one Phaerimm, who was quickly joined by a second a short few moments later. Before Toras could do away with them, he was subject to an imprisonment spell. I knew of the spell, but I didn't

typically use it myself. Fortunately, I had a recently studied the Freedom spell, just in case something like this happened. I would need time to cast it though, and time was something we didn't have. A moment later, Nisha was turned into stone, and I was left standing there, alone. Not knowing what else to do, I used some of my most powerful spells in the hopes that it would eliminate them. Within the spaces of a few heartbeats, they were nothing more than scorch marks on the ground. Relieved, I turned toward my stature and the small black bead that represented Toras and freed them both from the spell prisons. At last, we saw a black yawning portal and stepped through.

On the other side, was a large round room with several portals leading back into the places we had just came. Several portals I recognized as being distinctly Yugoloth in nature, and others were a complete mystery to me. A few minutes later, Clueless, Fyrehowl, and Aidan popped out of one of the portals and soon after that, we found Nilesia, or at least one of her clones. Fyrehowl had a little help from the cadence about determining the true identity and we threw the escaping one back into the portal, where the other, real Nilesia finally finished her off. Gathering all together, we continued out of the room via the final portal and stepped into a large chamber with a throne of sorts at the center of it. Various lines of text dotted a far wall that spoke of the next tower, and the failure of the dead corpse that was in the chair.

The next words I put down on this paper will likely scare the pants off any cutter who knows what this means, but in the interest of being fair to everyone, I must write them. The body in the chair, who was to greet us and give us our next goal, the one who had failed at his task, was that of a daubus. There's no easy way to look upon the form of a dead daubus, the last rebus above his head still showing the symbol of Vornalthrinx. Standing next to body, and just behind, was the form of Loebtav himself! As if a dead daubus didn't scare you enough, the bastard we had killed several times over was back again! Not wanting to deal with an immortal, we kept our conversation the rational level, but he wasn't interested in spilling his secrets, so he left. Even Marvent Green had more clarity in his words than this guy did. Fortunately for us, we were left alone, and with a clue as to the next tower.

Not knowing exactly how long we had until the next tower, we decided to take a vacation, or at least as much of a vacation as Toras will let you. For the record, if you read this, and he's still alive, be sure to slap him a few times for suggesting such a stupid endeavor as going to kill The Howling. Sure, he's a fairly rich dragon, but he's also completely and utterly insane. Aside from not really liking us too much, I had no wish the thing ill, but Nisha was going along, and if she was going, I was covering her back. So, it happened that we all prepared our very best for this and went off on an expedition to take the dragon's hoard from him. Because the means in which one battles are not necessarily important to the overall detail of the tale, I will omit them from the recollection. But, I will go as far to say that we had quite a time defeating the dragon. We had everything we needed to deal with him, but the coward wouldn't come down from the shadows and the roof of the cave above. He continued to pick at us from above, before Toras finally managed to anger him enough that he came down to deal with him personally. This is when we all showed our preparation by laying into the dragon. Within a moment or two, both he and Toras were on the ground, and we were left with the task of taking care of him and removing the treasure from the cave. The corpse of the dragon had other ideas though. Apparently powered by some sort of artifact buried in the dragon's skull, he was

resurrected and ran from the room. As we were grabbing what we could, and darting out of the cave, a large explosion for all the magical warding rocked the room, nearly killing me, and the others. Thank Mystra for her blessings and continued eye over me that the blast didn't kill me. As much as I'd like to meet her, I don't wish it to be this soon, nor for such a frivolous reason as this. Fortunately, we made it out of the cavern alive, only to have unleashed some horrible creature upon the planes. I have a feeling that this will not be the last we see of that creature.

Now that we were truly at ease in our life, something else came along to shake things up: the wedding. These towers seem to rob more and more of your time when you're not really paying attention to it. Of course, you don't see me complaining about it much. It got the wedding closer so I could finally get over the nervous anticipation I've had since I proposed.

The grounds of the wedding were done up something spectacular. Nearly everything you looked at in terms of decoration was an illusion. Of course my mom had a hand in the creation, I'm sure. The only downside to all of that is that it left much less for keepsakes and memorabilia. The illusions made it easier to clean up when it's all said and done, and easier to setup too, but far less impressive in terms of staying power. Still, I don't think this particular wedding will be leaving the minds of any in Haluraah soon. It's not every day you see an archmage getting married to someone from off plane, who barely has the scarcest touch of Mystra's blessing in her. Still, she qualified as a wizard, and that would in turn at least garner her some respect. The whole tiefling aspect, well, we'd just have to wait and see how that turned out.

As if to impress upon the people more, I had apparently managed to procure both the High Priestess of Mystra and the High Priest of Azuth as well to preside over the wedding. In addition to the notable guests running the show, there was Elminster, and his Star Snake companion in attendance as well, which I'm sure impressed several people. Outside the realm of Toril inhabitants though, we had several other attendants, ranging from Shemeska and A'kin, who were both extremely well behaved, to Jeremo, Kylie, and Alluvius Ruskin. Everyone seemed to be on their best behavior for the entire time, except of course my mother, who seemed more interested in her local guests than she did in any of the company I had invited along. The security was quite tight, but not enough that it posed an inconveniences, and it added a sort of air of importance to the whole gathering.

Upon arrival, Nisha was whisked away to one side of my parents tower with my mom, while I was taken with my dad to the other side. I gathered that I was far easier to groom than Nisha was, as I was out and about long before she was. I ran into familiar faces, welcomed everyone, thanked them for coming, and made sure those guests that I didn't know, knew me know. After all, I don't spend a lot of time in Halruaah, so the more people I got to know while I was around, the better.

After a good deal of talking, and mingling the ceremonies began and I couldn't have been any more impressed with Nisha's dress. The colors and the overall look bespoke of Clueless's wings and his handy work. I'd have to thank him for that later as it got quite a reaction from the crowd. The most interesting reaction however, was the clip-clop of Nisha's hooves as she walked up the isle. I don't imagine she would have removed them herself, but that she did. I could feel the inside of my ears turning a little red as everyone who wasn't in the know looked around in a confused manner. Then I remembered that Nisha was just how I wanted her, and I wouldn't change that regardless

of the curious glances it got. Swallowing my nervousness I held out my hand and helped her up onto the stage where the priests read the ancient, yet still traditional, marriage vows. I thought for sure the Priest of Azuth's eyes would fall out of his head the way he was rolling them around at the mention of love knowing no bounds to tradition and custom. Still, I was determined to marry Nisha, regardless of the consequences if brought to me or my family. They'd recover, at least my dad would, and he was the one I was worried about hurting the most.

While the ritual bonding spells were cast, a curious silver glimmer, almost like that of liquid silvery fire spread over the spell and flashed before disappearing. I must admit that I was a bit perplexed, but Mystra has her ways of showing off. After the ceremony we returned to the reception hall for dinner and gifts. Rather than listing the gifts out and making people jealous of a stroke of good fortune, suffice it to say that we received a lot of interesting gifts ranging from magical mirrors, to plots of lands and instant towers. Everyone who gave things, and even those who didn't were forever in my debt for the kind thoughts and words.

In due time, the wedding ran down, and the guests started wandering off to enjoy the Lady Day festival, which Nisha and I took part in soon after. The fireworks at the apex of the celebration were by far the best part of the whole festival. As the little motes of light flit down from the sky, the cover and stick to everyone standing in the fields, leaving intricate and interesting patterns that diviners can then read and decipher. Some fortunes tell of wealth, love, and happiness, others tell of lesser things and curious troubles. Nisha, of course, had a fun time confusing the diviner, showing off her chaotic nature and leaving it to the minds of those around us to figure it out. I had my own ideas to tell the truth. My fortune was a little less positive, but at least optimistic, saying I had much to look forward to in the service to the Lady of Mysteries. I couldn't agree with her more.

The rest of the evening passed by in pretty much a blur. We enjoyed wine, food, and entertainment, and had the most pleasant time I could ever recall having at the Lady Day festival. Things are so much more different when you have reason to be giddy and happy. At some point in the evening, Nisha and I decided to retire, if not from being sleepy, then just from lack of energy. We returned to my parent's tower to collect our things, where we found the High Priest of Azuth waiting for us with the formal disownment papers. I was expecting such a thing from my mom, but not on the evening of our wedding. Talk about timing. Assuming she didn't know about my recent good graces with our Lady, I asked her to reconsider what she was doing to her social ties before she had me sign the documents.

She bantered on for a while about how I'd come to my senses eventually, and how she could make everything right once I realized my mistakes. She certainly wasn't paying attention to the prestige and power of the people there, nor was she paying much attention to how much I actually cared for Nisha. Sighing, I signed the papers and severed my connection with my family, so that I could start a new one with Nisha. I had no ties any more to Halruaah, except my childhood. Before leaving, I asked her to reconsider one last time, and she said that I could only dream to achieve such an honor as to be chosen by the Lady herself. I smirked and looked to the priest of Azuth, who leaned over to whisper something in her ear. I've never seen her go from confident, sure, and snide, to confused, puzzled and surprised, and finally to enraged in such a short amount of time. She stalked

out of the room and slammed the door to a room upstairs somewhere, my dad visibly wincing at the thought of having to deal with that later. I apologized and welcomed him at my tower whenever he needed to get away from things. I picked up Nisha and we departed for the plane of Ysgard, where our plot of land, and our tower were to be located.

I leave the telling of this tale a little short for now. I felt compelled to pen down a few things before I forgot, and to tell you how much I enjoy Nisha's company. There's nothing quite as wonderful as the feeling of two wizards bonded by their vows to each other for eternity. I'm still rather nervous about what we're going to do with our honeymoon. Certainly there's decoration, and planning, and detailing to do with our new tower, but what of other things. I know of things that go on during honeymoons, after all, we used to hear them all the time next door to the Portal Jammer, but I'm unsure of how to approach the topic with Nisha. I sense a similar hesitation on her part as well, but I imagine it'll be her random nature that leads us to wherever we end up in that regard. Only time will tell what sort of adventures we shall find with each other.

I shall pick up the recollection of our honeymoon at a later time, however. I can hear Nisha calling me away to put down this stupid book and to come pay her some attention. I'd best heed her calling. Mystra's blessings upon you all.

BEING USED BY BITTERNESS

As with all good things, they come to end eventually. I suppose it is for the better. If everything were always good then good would become normal, and bad would become horrific. So, I'll take the time I'm given and work with it.

Nisha and I certainly did enjoy our time together. The initial awkwardness and newness of the feelings we had towards each other eventually gave way to passion. It's not the purpose of this journal to go into those sorts of details, so I won't. I'm sure your imaginations can conjure up images to keep you satisfied in that regard. I will say that there are still a few things I need to learn about myself as well. Anatomy can be a rather, surprising thing, at times.

Suffice it to say that we had a good time. Between playing around and just generally relaxing we got a chance to explore the new tower we were gifted with, and the grounds which the Jester had so graciously given to us. In addition, we spent time decorating the rooms, organizing things, and generally making it a rather simple, if not happy place. Hopefully at some point in the near future I can have some of my friends over to visit.

At some point during our time together, Fyrehowl decided it was wise to interrupt us. I personally didn't mind all that much, and Nisha made a show of minding, but I have a feeling she really didn't. Friends are important after all. I hopped out to the random plane she happened to be exploring and broke the seal on a particular portal for her. I tried to ask questions about why she wanted in, but she kept her muzzle shut. I'm beginning to wonder if I shouldn't harbor some secrets just to fit in. I opened the portal, wished her luck, and then promptly spied on the portal location, just because curiosity was getting the better of me. Besides, if she was getting into trouble, I had a few wands and potions I could loan her to keep her out of it. It seemed pleasant enough though, so I let matters be and went back to Nisha.

Once our honeymoon was officially over we went back to Sigil, only to face a barrage of questions from our compatriots on what we did, if we enjoyed ourselves, and how good the other one was. I wasn't letting in on any secrets, but I'm sure my ears and tail gave away all the details they were interested in having. Not more than a day or two after we got back, Fyrehowl returned from her plane jumping trip and asked us to accompany her. Again, the details were a bit on the shy side. She claimed she wasn't allowed to tell us. Being on a need to know basis seems to be somewhat hazardous to your health. Usually you find out what you needed to know after you needed to know it. Being friends though, we all agreed to help her out the best we could.

What we found there was, to say the least, strange. Apparently, part of what Fyrehowl was doing was exploring the Ebon's past. I must admit I'm curious, but not enough to go poking into things people have long since buried and left behind. On the other side portal I let Fyrehowl through to begin with, was a forest and a path. A bit deeper into the forest was a clearing, and just beyond the clearing was a small house. However, in order to get to the house, you had to get beyond the Ebon. It wasn't exactly the Ebon, at least not physically, but it certainly had a sample of the expertise I'm sure that craft 'loth possesses. The odd thing was, the boulder on which he was sitting when we approached shared the same magical energy our simulacrum possessed. Rather than attacking the Ebon directly, I took my anger out on the rock, just to see what would happen. Sure enough, it got his attention. Fortunately the battle didn't last long and we managed to destroy the copy before it could do anything more sinister.

Beyond the clearing, we entered into a little cottage, owned by a lupinal who's name I don't recall at the moment. She had some relation to someone named Vorkmeal, which sounds an awful lot like the Ebon's name, but different enough that it could have been two people. Fyrehowl and this lady talked for some time, the discussion becoming heated for a moment or two every so often, before eventually calming down to a normal level again. What passed between the two I'm going to leave out of the diary, primarily for her privacy's sake. Simply put, Vorkanis and Vorkmeal were not the same people. This seemed to at least put an end to Fyrehowl's speculation for the time being, and we hopped back to Sigil.

Within the days that followed, it was relatively quiet. We asked some questions of the Rock Father, which he answered in his usual slow mannered way. Apparently, the loth's and our group weren't the only two seeking out the puzzle pieces the towers held. There was an Asura by the name of Aris Sellis of the Crimson wings, the keepers of secrets (better known as the Primals), and someone we know, have known, and will know again (we figure this was an alias for the Ash Singer). Sensing a kindred spirit in the Asura, we decided to alert her to our presence. At the very least, we might be able to gain a little more knowledge and help in the matter; anything to prevent the Ebon from getting what he wants out of this endeavor.

Time eventually drew near for us to leave for the tower of ice. I prepared in my usual way by spending some time in the library, researching the plane of steam and finding out about its inhabitants and the tower itself. It would appear that I would have been right at home in the tower had it not been infested with Arcanaloths and other creatures seeking the key within the tower. We knew people would be looking for us this time, or so we suspected, so we all decided to go disguised. Fyrehowl and Clueless went as Tiedfling siblings, or something like that. Nisha went as a Lyland and I as a vulpinal.

Toras changed his look to some degree, but still retained that rough and ready appearance. We were going to send for Nylisia, but as it turned out she was occupied with other things to begin with. Just as well I suppose. I doubt her and the Asura would be getting along very well. Once we had everything we needed, and were adequately disguised, we left to start our venture to the tower.

We took the time to start out in the only major establishment on the plane. It seemed to be much larger than the last place we visited, but it wasn't too hard to find our way around. At the docks, we found a ship captain who was willing to sail us to the tower, if we managed to garner permission from one of the local city officials. A Keelay Harshaveth if I remember correctly. While we were on our way to go and speak with her, I got a familiar twitching in my ears, followed by a stream of words. I listened for a moment and then stopped the others. Apparently the ex-factol that escaped back in Sigil had been returned and was looking to speak with us. It seemed a bit urgent, or at least I thought it did. And if there was information regarding the tower to be had, then I'd want to collect it before we went there. Making a slight detour we popped back into Sigil and went to the Gatehouse to speak with Talisaman.

The ex-factol was as nutty as she ever was. She warned us to watch what doors we opened, and rambled on about things that shouldn't be there but were, and things that don't exist, but do. Senseless prattle that had some sort of meaning that was eluding us for the time being. Before we left, she told us not to trust the Baern, which we already knew, and to "watch your words, you'll only make it worse". Wanting to beat the loths to the tower, we decided it was to leave. As parting words, she said to return when she had someone else to join him. Apparently the voices would be clearer then.

Getting back to the plane of water, we entered Keelay's office and asked for her permission to charter a vessel to take us to the tower. Like any official would, she asked us her business and I made up some pretense of using the vast arcane labs to help me in my studies. Apparently she was a bit of an artificer herself, and I had to think quickly to turn out a believable story. She asked to speak with me in private, and the rest of my friends begrudgingly stepped outside. Closing the doors, she told me to drop the disguise and tell her my real purpose for going to the tower. I held the pretense up for a little while longer before it became apparent that I was either going to have to accept her challenge of power, or tell her the truth. Explaining that we were after the secrets of the tower, I told her we didn't want them for ourselves. We were content enough in life to leave the secrets alone. However, the fiends thought otherwise. If they were to get a hold of whatever power the towers provided the planes certainly would not be safe. Keelay agreed to let us go under one condition. This condition was that we not take the secrets the tower held. I assented to her conditions on behalf of the party, with a single proviso: if possessing the secrets of the tower were the only way to keep them safe from the fiends, then we would have to. But, if possessing them was the only way, we would keep them safe, or die trying. This seemed to appease her and so we were granted permission to leave on the boat to the tower. As a parting token, she showed me the tower and the fiends that were already encamped around it. In addition, she gave me a small drop of water that would expedite our voyage. I thanked her and returned to my companions.

On board the Jade Mist Runner, we paid our captain his fee and set off towards the tower, making quite excellent time. Along the journey through the straights we ran into a group of pirates that wished to board our ship. The captain of our own vessel was

certainly less interested in staying around to fight, but we convinced him that it wouldn't be a bad idea. I handed Nisha a scroll of great shout, and we delivered surrender terms to them. It took them a few minutes to respond, perhaps from the shock that we would dare attempt to attack them, or just from their lack of preparedness. A battle raged on for a few minutes, their side taking heavy damage, and our ship with barely a scratch or scorch mark. We boarded the other ship, and took a few supplies that we might find useful and continued along our merry way, talking like pirates the entire voyage.

A few other encounters were to be had along the way, including a fiendish welcoming party that was attacking another ship off in the distance. We dealt with all we came up against accordingly until we reached the tower. Once there, we had our own group of trouble to worry about. Arcanloths guarded the door, and yet more were riding a hybrid styx dragon around the perimeter in a defensive pattern. Making a few plans, we rushed the Arcanloths at the door and quickly had them succumb to our magic and power. In the process, we managed to turn one of them into stone, and sicken another to the power where we could take both of them with us. We quickly dodged inside, protecting ourselves from the astroloth that also wanted a piece of us. A few short spells later, we wandered in and found the Asura hiding in one of the back labs. We spoke with her for a while and she agreed to help our cause, or at least tag along for the moment.

Not wasting any time, we made our way to the inside door of the tower that would lead to the secrets deep within. Once we arrived, we discovered that the door was already open. Perhaps time was playing tricks on us again, but we thought we had another few hours before the next day started. We hurried inside and read about our challenges in words written on the floor and above various doors.

The first challenge we had to face was an individual challenge. Each of us had to choose an individual object that represented a different adversary. I picked one that sounded distinctly like a rakshasha. As much as I didn't like those creatures, I now had access to magics greater than they could protect themselves against. My particular combat was a bit more than I expected it to be. Instead of one of these creatures, there were three in the husk of one body. I vaguely recalled reading about these upper-ranking rakshasha's, and was at least glad they were normal and not enhanced in some way. The only thing that disturbed me was that each time I thought I had killed it, only one of its three heads would die. By the time I had finished the battle I had gone through all of my 9th sphere spells, and a blessed crossbow bolt. The thing even managed to disjunct my spell void, spilling out all the spells it had stored onto me in the form of raw magical energy. That certainly did sting. As a last resort I cast a black blade of disaster that got a lucky swing in and killed the remaining head. Without a chance for rest, there was a brief flash and I was back in the same room with the rest of my friends. Everyone seemed to fair a little better than I, or at least it seemed that way.

Having passed the first test, we journeyed on. There were other challenges and combats along the way, but we managed to pass them without much hindrance. At some point, we added a third arcanaloth to our stature collection. He was occupied with a Primal at the time, and we weren't about to let the opportunity to collection another one slip by. Perhaps if he had been with the Ebon during the other towers, he might have some choice information we could pry out of him.

Finally, we arrived at our destination, a room that contained our three separate groups in a single location that could see each other, but not interact. In front of each

group, there was a lady, presumably the keeper of the tower that had been imprisoned here. Each figure was of a varying age, from child all the way to senior. Our particular figure was in her late thirties we guessed. Each of the figures asked their respective group why they came seeking the tower's secrets. The primals obviously did not answer to her liking and were summarily teleported from the tower. The loths and our group remained the longest, bantering back and forth with the guardian, learning of her plight, and her past. Part of her incarceration here was because she searched for a small piece of Vornalthrinx. In finding just a small portion of it, she had created and enslaved a race to serve her. They were tasked of finding the pieces of the word and to bring it to her. Their curse was linked with hers. In order to redeem herself, she must set them free. However, her revenge on the thirteen brothers (the Baern) was stronger than her resolve to save herself. Because of our very nature, we didn't enjoy the prospect of making anyone suffer, least of all the Baern. Apparently Vorkanis had much better luck dealing with them and had no qualms about making them suffer. Our persuasion tactics seemed to have a small effect, but not enough to garner us the key to this tower. The moment the 'loth learned the secret he sought, he killed the representative of the tower, making our own shiver and nearly collapse.

We were all set to leave her there to die, feeling rather defeated that she would damn herself yet again to seek revenge. She pleaded with us to have us set her children free, but we didn't relish the idea of them waging war with the ice mephits. The only perceivable way to stop them from doing so was let them have their revenge on her. Reluctantly she agreed and we gathered what remained of the tower's information and set out.

In order to break the spell that she had placed on the Immoth, they would need the final frozen word of the counterspell. We knew this existed in Pitiless so that's where we set off to. Before we got there though, Green's gift to Nisha and I appeared in my hands outside the tower. It's time to be opened had finally arrived. Inside, was Green's death notice. He explained that he suffered a curse of sorts that kept him achieving what the dustmen would term *The True Death*. He also spoke of a place called the chamber of mirrored shadows, a book called the Book of Derelict Magics, and its successor, the Book of Inverted Darkness. He also gave us a map, of sorts, to find our way through this particular location. It wasn't a drawing, but a sequence of doors to take. They make no sense now, but they should when the time arises.

At pitiless we met with the guardian of the prison, who happened to be in the process of imprisoning a book, of all things, within one of its cells. The book had a legend, but not one that matched either that I knew to be the book of derelict magics, or the book of inverted darkness. Leaving it alone, we claimed our block of ice and set out to release the Immoth from their curse. Taking the necklace that held the tower keeper's essence within it, we journeyed our way to the frozen wasteland.

Once there, we presented them with their frozen words, the final portion of their salvation. They regarded us with a certain awe and respect, and we were allowed to journey deep within their city to see the figure they had constructed out of all the spell words they needed to end their curse. The block we had brought with us was their final piece. Just as they were about to place it where it belonged, Fyrehowl flew up there and stood between the block and its final resting place, prompting a gasp from everyone around. In almost the same instant, I got the feeling I shouldn't be there at all, lest I want

to suffer the consequences of those actions. Fyrehowl was yelling at Clueless to get the necklace out of her, and in the best manner I could, plane shifted us away. Normally I pride myself on being level headed enough to cast a spell correctly, but this time I wasn't necessarily thinking. The roar of the Immoths, Clueless fighting with the necklace, and the insistent nagging of the foresight spell to run while I still could all wore on my concentration. In casting the spell, I failed to have an adequate destination in mind. We went from one frozen wasteland to another, ending up on the fourth mount of Ghenna. Not wanting to spend more than a few seconds there, I plane shifted us away again, this time to Ysgard, where I knew we would be safe for the moment. Fyrehowl made some erratic comments over the sending stone and then all went quiet for a few minutes. A short time later, we agreed to meet her in Trade Gate, yet she seemed to take even longer to end up there.

We got back to Sigil and she explained the last few minutes of the confrontation to us. The tower's keeper had appeared to stop her from interfering with the placement of that final word. I'm supposing she had some sort of divine inspiration from the multiverse itself that she shouldn't let it happen. Doing the only thing she could to stop them from putting the block in place she destroyed it and immediately plane shifted out. I for one, don't blame her for leaving, but it still makes me curious what they did with the tower's keeper for cursing them. As she left, she heard the final word that would complete the spell, uttered by itself. The way it sounded, it wasn't the conclusion to a release spell, but the final word of yet another curse. She must have blamed them for her imprisonment, and sought yet more revenge. This certainly wasn't the first time we were used, but it was the first time we believed someone was sincere. Played for fools yet again. On the plus side, Fyrehowl did the right thing, and stopped them. Even if they can't release their curse now, they at least don't have a second one placed upon their heads.

I'm sure there's much more to be said regarding these events, but I'm feeling quite hungry, and in the mood for something sweet. Perhaps Nisha and I will take the night off and go out and have dinner. It'll help make the last few days much more a part of history. It may be a few days before I have a chance to update this log more. I have some things to research, and some new talents to explore. Mystra's blessing has given me the ability to cast selective spells without the need to memorize them; in particular a variant of a polymorph spell, and teleport. I know this because as I think of the spell, it just pops into existence in my head. No need to remember the words, or motions, and no need for the material components. It just sort of persists there until I cast it, without so much as a flicker of thought. To add to the abilities as well, I'm apparently resistant to petrification spells as well. This particular gift came in handy over the course of venturing through the tower. I'm suspecting that there are more gifts I can look forward to, but when I will discover them is a mystery to me. Perhaps this is why they call her the Lady of Mysteries?

Until next time, may Mystra's blessings upon your head be plentiful, and may the Lady's shadow pass you by.

INFLECTIONS

This particular entry in my diary shall be somewhat short as there wasn't a lot of intervening activity in the past few days. It should also be noted that a good majority of this is speculation, and collected from the random bits of information I could find laying around, as well as my own personal insight into the matter. For that reason, take what you read in this entry as a grain of salt and certainly don't use it as a definitive answer for anything, but more as a starting point for your own thoughts.

One of the things I've done in the past few days is to research the plane of radiance in order to guide our travels there in the coming weeks. Much is already known about the particular place, but there is also much that's left to speculation. To start with, the plane contains random vortices, or portals if you will, to other locations not within the plane itself. These links to the material primes usually end up being the centers of stars and suns, or other bright and uncomfortable places. I suppose if one wanted to start producing diamonds in large amounts, the plane of radiance is where you might want to visit. The method of travel on the plane is much like several of the other places we've been to. There is no gravity, or particular direction you could call down, so you choose to orient yourself in the direction that makes the most sense. From there, you just freefall until you've gotten where you want to be, and stop. As with the other planes, it has 6 borders to the various other elements, and each has its own distinctive name.

For all intents and purposes the plane does seem mostly harmless. Of course you have to worry about going blind from the brightness, and the occasional stupid mephit that gets in the way, but beyond that, there's really only two major dangers to worry about. The first items of danger are the color storms. Described in one of the books I read as a large swirling clouds of random colors flashing and sparkling, they typically reach one mile wide and grow larger. Travelers not wary of what they are, or how to avoid them, are thrown off course and face the pain of such a quick change of direction. The second thing to watch out for are the Varaso. Descriptions of them are hard to come by, but they are planar inhabitants that do see to do harm. The majority of them can be found in the Refuge of Color, which is a solid chunk of color that floats in core radiance. The area is ruled by a King and Queen, one being black, the other white. Both of these creatures are said to have a god-like status attributed to them, and seldom hear from visitors. I'm not entirely sure why a plane of color and light would be ruled by two creatures that don't exhibit any of its characteristics. I'm suspecting that it might have to do with white being the presence of all colors, at least in the prismatic spectrum, and black being the lack of color. If they are creatures of the flesh, then perhaps the rules regarding pigments and their combinations might apply. In which case, Mystra knows what they might represent.

Of course, researching the plane of radiance wasn't my only task in the intervening time. I also did some of my own research into the books that Green mentioned in his parting letter. I still can't quite get over why he'd give us a death notice as a wedding gift, but everyone is strange in their own way. The first book I decided to research on was the Book of Derelict Magic. I had no hope of really finding even a partial copy, but I thought I might be able to at least learn a few things about the book. Apparently, the thing was written by the scum of the multiverse, the yugoloths. Those people that have seen the copies of the book itself describe it as a mix of some very

powerful magic and propaganda. A good portion of the book details the early origin of the lower planes, or at least describes a good portion of it anyway. Yugoloths either seem to have a propensity for enjoying the myth that they wrote it, or know something more than they're willing to tell. I'm not sure A'kin knows about it or not, but I've suspicions he wouldn't smile about it when I asked. It'd be more like him to either clam up and not speak of it, or apologize for his race and what they did. Either way, it might not be a bad idea to approach him, at least in the hopes of seeing his reaction. As a side note, the book itself is rumored to be bound in Yugoloth flesh itself. I'm not entirely sure which subspecies of yugoloth, but I suspect it has its bits and pieces of them all.

Of course, one can't research the book of Derelict Magic without running into references of the book of Inverted Darkness. This particular book seems to be at least a bit less speculative in its nature. Most people claim that it does exist, and have seen at least partial copies or know of people that have seen copies. I myself have been unable to locate a copy as of yet, but I have my suspicions on where to look. Given that Vecna was the one responsible for its creation, and that he presumably used the book of Derelict Magic to write it, I'd wager that some of the cults worshipping the evil lich would still have a copy. The dark of this book however is what it was used for. Vecna supposedly created the book and then used its magics in the construction of spells to escape a place called Raven Loft. Likely another of those backwater primes everyone keeps talking about. I suspect not if it spawned a demon like Vecna. The interesting part of this is not that the lich escaped, or that he was imprisoned there (while that certainly is a mystery to me), it's more of where he ended up. I've seen a few references to him appearing in Sigil, in fact nearly seven years ago. However, no one has written anything about him, why such an evil and powerful presence was allowed into Sigil in the first place, or what he did there. I suspect The Lady had her reasons for allowing it, or perhaps it simply didn't matter. The speculation has likely died down because of the uncertainties in this matter. I can understand no one wanting to get mazed. Personally though, I'm of the persuasion that if I'm doing something wrong, I'll be told. The Lady can't expect us to read her mind or always guess correctly when trying to interpret her rules. So, it's just a matter of paying attention to the signs she provides. If a berk is blind enough not to heed the warnings then he deserves what he gets. Mystra knows The Lady is already watching over my shoulder.

I digress however. The third and final book I researched wasn't one Green had mentioned to us. This was the single book that was placed in the cells at pitiless. I'm not for getting it out of there any time soon, but I'm at least curious to know of its contents, and perhaps who might own the thing. Apparently though, every source I've come across says the book doesn't exist, or is all a lie of one group or another. I don't know why exactly, but if both the yugoloths and the guardinals seem to claim falsehood when the book is mentioned, it must have some importance. Perhaps it's a balance point between the two? In fact, because of its speculative nature, its rumored to be a creation of the Rilmani. I doubt that myself, but it's not entirely impossible that it worked out that way.

As for where I speculate I might find a copy of the book of Inverted Darkness. Some time ago, while reading some text on a while, or listening to some dark agent prattle on about things, we were told of Vecna's involvement in the plane of ash. I don't recall the exact nature of the words, or what they said exactly, but it's a starting place to look. Supposedly, there's also several towers that Vecna has claimed residence in at once

point. One of these towers is in ruins after an encounter with a living ship, but the other, to the best of my knowledge still exists. Perhaps looking into the Tower of Darkness, or the Tower of Shadows might not be a bad idea. After all, we are visiting towers, maybe these have something to offer up as well.

The next task I set before myself was scrying on the gears of the oblivion compass. Surprisingly enough, the scry spell actually worked. I suspected it to be heavily warded against such things, but apparently looking at it isn't necessarily a bad thing. The last time we were there, the Moiness nearly chased us off, at least with her words and what was going on. This of course was the reason I decided to scry this time instead of paying it an actual visit. She was there, as she was before, but at least this time she didn't seem as worried about our safety, or insist upon something or another. Staring at the clock for a short while didn't offer me any immediately insight, and the books at the library were nothing more than speculation on how to tell time using it. I gave up after a short while, having no desire to spend my entire life studying the vile contraption. Shortly after I stopped my viewing attempts, I was scryed on by three others. The first was a pair of reddish pink eyes which I can't recall having seen before. I suspect they belong to a loth of somesort, but I could be entirely wrong with that one. The second focus was a pearly white glass eye, with streaks of grey and flecks of red in it. The eye itself looked somewhat sickly, and I was sure I didn't want to mean someone who had such odd tastes in scrying manifestations. The last scry didn't have a focus. It just let me with a cold watched feeling that eventually faded away.

I stayed outside of Sigil for a while after scrying on the compass. One of Mystra's many gifts to me was the ability to hear what others were speaking of when they mentioned my name. I've mentioned this before, but this was the first time I actually decided to use it to my advantage. Either my interest in the compass wasn't worth talking about, or they used phrases to refer to me which I am unfamiliar with. In any event, I left Tradegate and went back into Sigil. As I was sitting down to right this, I received a most disturbing message. In a sickly voice, which I assumed matched the owner of the sickly looking scry focus, I received the following words: While you watch, be aware that what you see can kill you – Don't be late. I'm not sure which scares me more; hearing that message in Sigil, or the actual warning the message provided. I'm going to place my bets with hearing it in Sigil. Either whoever spoke it is in Sigil, or the Lady is allowing it to happen. Both of those possibilities are not favorable if you ask me.

The last thing I did was to research some of Green's aliases. From the list he gave us, I could glean that he's been around quite a while. Each of the people he claims he was, were separated by a 500 year gap. All of them were rumored to be prophets of some kind, often telling of things so outlandish and horrible that no one believed them. They all had their fame though, and they all ended in some sort of disaster. If Green was seeking to leave a lasting mark on the world, he's done it. In the histories of the squires, he will be remembered. Monuments will fall, cities will be consumed by newer and bigger cities, and the gates at which they sit may even reclaim the land as well. He has made a lasting impression on us though, and I for one am helping immortalize him here in this journal. Perhaps in another 500 years, he will find it and see what was said of him.

This more or less covers my research. I also did some poking at the Immoth stronghold, but there was nothing less than what you'd expect; disaster. Lunch with A'kin also occurred in there, and he certainly seemed to enjoy the company. I doubt my

answer to hearing my name spoken was what he wanted to hear, but we exchanged a few secrets and tactics none the less and had a generally good time. I will have to make sure to do so again, if only to ask him about the books I need to research. Maybe he'll have some unique insight into the manner.

Apparently Clueless has some urgent matter to discuss with me, or at least that's how it sounds over the sending stones. So, this seems like as good a place as any to end for the moment. Mystra's blessings upon you.

AN ERRAND FOR A BAERN

I remember a while back that we swore we'd never do another favor for a Baernaloth again. Unfortunately, the only key we had to telling when the clock strikes eleven was with the blind clock maker. I get ahead of the story though, so I'll start where it began.

Clueless had apparently been talking to one of the servants of the Ash Singer, or at least trying to speak to him. During their discussion, he began to cry and opened a portal to none other than the demi-plane of time. Fortunately, Clueless didn't step through the portal and leave us all behind, and decided to wait for us. Before his conversation companion wasted away to nothing, he stuffed him back in the bag of holding he was being kept in, hopefully to open the portal a bit later. Clueless had apparently also been down into undersigil, speaking with the rock father. I personally wish he'd at least let people know where he was going, even if in a sending or a simple letter. If he disappears while down there, I'm doubting that any manner of scrying, teleporting, or plane shifting will bring him back. Hopefully he'll tell us, if not for his own sake, then at least for the sake of our nerves in having to worry about him.

Some of the information he managed to gather from the rock father dealt with the trackless sea and a castle at times edge. According to some of my research, there is a castle that sits on the edge of the demi-plane of time, home to a sapphire mage. I wasn't sure at the time why they called him a sapphire mage, but I have been informed since then. Apparently, it's a position, or ranking, within the mageocracy that he used to live in. Exactly what position it is, I'm unsure of, but I imagine it was some highly esteemed position, given his wealth of knowledge and ability. This particular mage was supposed to be able to provide us with information on when the oblivion compass would strike eleven. Not wanting to waste too much time in discovering this important bit of information, we decided to visit him post haste. We got together our group of people, and went to edge of the plane of time and paid this sapphire mage a visit.

I can honestly say that he is a very pleasant person, and certainly a likable fellow. I'm sure there was a lot I could have talked with him about, and a good deal that we could have shared with each other. Unfortunately, time was a bit limited, despite being right next to the plane that embodied the concept. We queried him a for a few moments, hoping to learn a bit about the compass and how to interpret it, but he didn't even have a clue what it was. It turned out that he wasn't the one to provide us with the information at all. The only thing he seemed to be able to tell us about was the demi-plane of time, so we learned all that we could from him on that particular subject, or at least all we could in

a few minutes. It was slowly becoming apparent that we would need to go into the demi-plane of time itself and hunt down the clockmaker, asking him personally.

We were all set to walk through the curtain of the plane, but we had no idea exactly where on the plane we were going. It likely had to do with the center of a large storm, at least if precedent was holding true, but exactly how to get there and how to avoid the planar dangers was beyond us. Then I remembered that we had a particular person in a bag of holding that opened a portal to which held some important status. We got back to Sigil and got him out of the bag, and within a few minutes he began to cry. Sure enough, as the tears formed a puddle on the ground a portal activated and small pieces of him began to tear away from his body and float through into the portal. Within a matter of minutes he would no longer exist and would have withered away to nothing. We spread the small puddle of water out into a larger circle, forming a portal big enough for a person to fit through. The first person through was our conversation piece, followed a moment later by myself, Nisha, and the rest of the party. As we stepped out of the portal onto the plane of time, I could feel years of my life being stripped away from me, almost as if I was aging, without actually doing so. It was an odd sensation to say the least, one that I never wanted to repeat.

On the other side of the portal, we stood at the entrance to the hedge maze and at the back of the maze was a large tower. The dust that was once our portal key floated around us and a small breeze directed into the hedge maze. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity to have a guide through a maze, I went after it rather than trying to fly over it, or just cut my way through it. Following the dust, we were eventually dumped into a small courtyard with a pedestal, and a statue that stood on top of it. The statue seemed to look like myself, dressed exactly the same and with the exact same expression I had seen in the mirror hundreds of times. In one of its hands was a dagger, standing outright for the moment, held in a classic pose. As we watched, the statue smiled and drew the dagger to itself, pressing the sharp point against its chest and dragging it through fabric and across flesh. Everyone around me cringed and started yell in pain. For some reason though, I was left unscathed by any of it. Perhaps it was just my resistance to illusions, which it most certainly was, or some other of Mystra's gifts. As we continued to watch, the statue started to press the dagger further into its chest, making the others writhe in pain, their realities linked to the illusion. I decided that casting a disintegrate at the statue wouldn't be the brightest of ideas, so I mazed it. Along with the statue, the others disappeared as well, leaving me alone in the court yard for a minute or two. When they reappeared, so did the statue, intent on finishing its job. Desperate, for some way to stop this thing, I cast a dispel illusion, which shattered it entirely, causing it to disappear in the space of a heartbeat. The rest of my companions immediately looked less worried and much happier about the disappearance of the statue.

As we started to leave, a key dropped to the ground where the statue used to be, and I picked it up, taking it with us. Following the dust yet again, we were led to a courtyard with a large red dragon sitting in the middle of it. Looking around, it was apparent we needed to get through the courtyard, but he was a bit big to just ask to move. Not to mention, red dragons aren't exactly known for being cooperative. As we discussed exactly what to do about this particular obstacle, it opened one eye and turned to regard us curiously. In a droll manner it asked us some questions, and in order to buy us passage, I offered it a pound of mithril. It picked up the solid bar, tossed it into its mouth, and

swallowed it. According to legend, dragons gave up their life by eating their hoards and disappearing. Apparently this dragon didn't have a hoard and by offering him such a trinket, he was able to finally end his internment there. As we walked through the newly formed archway, a key dropped from the mouth of a dragon statue, landing neatly between my ears and causing a small lump to form them. Muttering a curse under my breath I leaned down and picked up the key, adding it to my slowly growing collection. As I stood back up, the dust continued by us again, leading us to the final courtyard in our journey.

This last courtyard had a distinctly familiar look to it. Encased in a wall of flames, were the Succubus, and Alex the Carver, two of our former acquaintances. Both were locked into poses in the landscape and the fire that covered them blocked the exit from the clearing as well. We talked with them for a few moment, and learned that they were thirsty. Spraying water directly onto them seemed to have no real effect except soaking the plants behind the fire. This was another case of illusion becoming reality. As much as I hate to admit it, this is one of those instances where illusion magic would have come in handy, but I didn't know any. Or at least, I had forsaken it in my studies of evocation. Nisha on the other hand though, had a scroll or two of various illusions. I had her dig through the bag of holding she carried and find an image spell. Instructing her to cast the illusion of a fountain, she read from the scroll and conjured into being a small fountain with a naked statue of myself on top of it. I could already feel the inside of my ears turning a bright red color, and my tail hugging my leg in embarrassment. Fortunately, the statue was at least tasteful and unlike where my tail currently was, it covered the more private areas of my anatomy. The comments about the statue withstanding, we were able to splash some of the illusory water into the mouths of the waiting images. Upon contact with the illusion made real, the vanished, leaving the clearing open to us, and a third and final key on the ground. I picked up the key and we continued following the dust.

Finally, having worked our way through the maze, we stood at the entrance to the castle, three locks hovering in midair before us. I looked down at the keys and then up at the locks, trying to figure out which one went into which lock. Each of the keys had various properties, one being real, the other illusion, and the third a mixture of them both. Being paranoid, we all bickered about which key went into which lock, and eventually I just threw my hands up, and picked a key and a lock and opened it. Either I had guessed correctly, or it didn't matter at all. I tried the next key, and as luck would have it, the lock opened and fell away. The third and final pair matched and the doors of the castle opened slightly, standing ajar for us to enter.

We stepped through the large wooden portals into the hallway and proceeded to walk further into the castle. Several rooms were full of gears, springs, cogs, and other mechanical contraptions to the brim. Putting a finger inside likely would have resulted in loosing the finger without any apparent hindrance to the inner workings of the machine. Another room was a sort of biology lab, showing dissections of various yugoloths and dragon type creatures. Yet another room appeared to be a prison of some sort, or at least an extension to the lab where they kept live animals. At the end of the long hall was a room with planar compasses, or some contraption of that type that showed scenes on various planes. Most of them seemed to be focused on the grey waste itself, but others were focused on the ethereal and showed various pictures of the rooms we were just in. The odd thing about these scenes though, is that we were still in them, doing things we

hadn't even thought of doing. Apparently these devices not only saw the planes as they are, but as they were, and possibly could be. I wanted to reach out and focus the lens on various places, but kept my hand from acting out my wishes, at least for the moment anyway. The last and final room is where we met the blind clockmaker. As with any other Baern, an aura of uneasiness permeated the entire area around him. I found it manifesting as sickening sensation deep within my gut, begging me to wretch on the floor in front of him. Still, I held back my instincts and faced him with a false sense of courage.

He stood there a few moments, obviously still engrossed in what images the giant ethereal gap were showing him in the device in front of him. As we watched, I could hear the voices of the Ash City filtering up from the brim of the void. The noises drew my attention, and as I looked out over the contraption, I could see Loebtav on the other side, sitting down and look quite peeved at something. Hopefully the clockmaker had refused him whatever it was that he wanted. We stood there a few moments, and eventually he made his way over and acknowledged us, the sickening feeling increasing as he came nearer. Speaking with him, it became quite apparent that we weren't going to get something for nothing from him. As with the previous Baern we had encountered, he wanted something done for him. Why creatures that are so close to gods need simple mortals to perform errands for them is beyond me. I suspect they take some perverse pleasure in watching their *puppets* dance for them. While I bow to no string of anyone's calling, except her Lady of Mysteries, and of course Nisha's, he had something we needed, and if it was a task we had to perform, then so be it. At some point, he claimed the task could even be construed as good, although good is a relative term in most cases. Still, we agreed, needing the information he possessed.

The task seemed simple enough: take a vial of some liquid and pour it at the base of Ygdrasil, without being seen. Once that is complete, following the urgings of the vial until we reached a ratatask village, and once there take what they give us and return it to him. We didn't necessarily believe that pouring any concoction that an evil creature could brew, at the base of the world tree was a good act, but we had no choice. We, or more specifically, I on behalf of the party, agreed to do his task, in return for information on how to read the clock and determine when it was going to strike eleven. He agreed as well, and we stepped back outside, taking his vial which would protect us from the effects of the plane of time. Rather than waiting much longer to accomplish this task, unsure of exactly how much time we had to begin with, we thought it best to get it done and over with as quickly as possible.

Once outside the castle doors, I opened a gate to gray waste, picking a location about two miles from the base of the tree. This we figured was far enough to keep us from being spotted, but close enough for us to assess the approach. We stepped out onto the plane, feeling that familiar crushing depression seep into our bodies. Fortunately, our attunement items kept most of the negative effects from harming us. We took close to a half hour to examine the approach to the tree, spotting a few of the great worm-like creature's offspring, but fortunately Sidhog was nowhere in sight. I teleported us closer to the base of the tree and we looked around, taking a few samples of the sap before we were to do the deed. If anything happened to the tree that was not a positive effect, then at least we'd have some measure of what it was before we had gotten there. As I was about to pour the contents of the vial onto the tree, one of the offspring looked down from the

tree at us. Fortunately, we were invisible, scentless, and noiseless, so it was a bit difficult for it to focus on us specifically. Not wanting to chance it, I teleported us away to another location a few hundred feet down the tree, where there'd hopefully be less interest in what we were doing. I quickly poured the contents into a wound that had gnawed into one of the roots, and within the space of a few breaths, the tree began healing itself. A diffuse red glow spread out across the tree, and all the little nicks and cuts that were there healed up and disappeared.

Not more than an instant after this effect began to take place, Sidhog shrieked and came into view, still a good ways off. Not wanting to take the time to acquaint ourselves with the wyrm-creature, we began to fly straight up the trunk of the tree, intent on making it away from that spot as quick as possible. Within a few minutes, its anguished cries were off in the distance and we felt safe enough to slow down and relax for a moment or two. On the plus side, we had done something good. Healing the tree and preventing it from the corruption of the wyrmling on the ground, was indeed an admirable cause. At least the Baern had been partially right. The rest of the trip up the tree was rather uneventful. It took a little over a day to complete the journey, and there were a few encounters, but none that actually amounted to anything spectacular. They were more of an amusement to us than they were a real threat.

At about mid-day the following day, the vial's tuggings were growing stronger, and we knew that we must be getting closer to our goal. As we approached a particularly wide limb, we met a contingent of four ratatask guards, stationed all around it at the major axes. As we approached, one of them told us to stop and informed us that we couldn't go beyond this point. Clearly the vial had other ideas, as it was still tugging beyond them. We asked them what we had to do to gain permission to enter, and were told that we needed to live with the tribe for several years and praise the mother tree. Seeing as how we had already helped to heal the tree, I thought it was the best sort of praise you could offer, and explained to them that we had helped cure the tree of its cuts below. All of them stopped their chattering and looked rather nervous and apprehensive. Hopefully we hadn't offended them by saying such a thing, but given that they didn't look like they were going to kill us, I assumed that it was something else. The main guard told us to wait and scampered off, returning a few minutes later with an elderly gray furred gentleman of their own kind. He looked us over, that same apprehensive look showing quite easily in his own eyes. After the examination, he asked us what we had brought. I pulled out the vial and showed it to him. This drew a gasp from the creatures, and an even more worried look than before. Judging from the type of emotion that was pouring off of these creatures, I could tell this wasn't awe, but almost a fear. The elderly creature, told us to followed and we did, being led along the try and into a small knothole in part of the branch.

Inside this little alcove, there were several huts and a small clearing with a bit of the tree growing in the center of it. As we entered, we gathered quite a crowd, all of them sharing that same nervous and scared feeling. The entire feeling was intense and I just wanted to crawl into a hole and hide there. After what appeared to be the majority of the village showed up, the elderly one turned and addressed us again, telling us that he was ready, and that each of us must choose one. I was a bit confused at this sort of reaction. We had certainly come to pick up an object, or perhaps return with the chief of the tribe or something, but what was this business about choosing? Certainly if the elderly one

were the chief of the tribe, I could understand his willingness to go, but what were choosing? Perhaps strips of bark, leaves of the plant that grew in the center, or maybe even questions.

Not having been told prior to this meeting, we asked for an explanation from the creature, and what we got in response sickened me to my very core. My tail went back between my legs, and my ears lay back against my head. Had I been able to disappear and never think of doing this again, I would have at that moment, but the Baern still had information we needed. In order to get that information, we needed to return with the elder of the village, and one child for each member in our party. Toras, was on the verge of breaking into a mad rage, and even Aidan who normally showed no real emotion to things, was obviously disturbed by this. Nisha, was playing with one of the children, and just shook her head, unable to complete the task. Fyrehowl, looked disturbed, but behind those fuzzy whiskers I couldn't detect much sign of emotion. Fortunately, the barenaloth had offered us a reprieve. He had said that we could quit at any time and go away without incident. Fortunately, he didn't say that it had to be a group effort. Those of us that had moral objections to the action, I offered a free passage home. Toras, who stepped out to seek the advice of his god, muttered some curses over the sending stone and disappeared himself.

Clueless and I spoke with each other regarding the options we had, while Fyrehowl and Aidan asked their own respective powers, or beliefs in the cast of the former, what they should do. Apparently Clueless and I were in the same situation. We both had listened to the elder's story, and knew they sacrificed themselves for their own future, but neither one of us could bear the thought of having to choose a family that would lose their child. My guts wanted to spill themselves every time I thought of the pain and agony that they would feel when we made our choice. It took every ounce of will that I had to keep from bursting into tears and giving up as well. Clueless was willing to go through with it, if only for the greater good and the chance to have questions answered. He was apparently putting on a bit more of a calm front than I felt I could project, as he almost seemed content with their decision and way of life. I could accept their decision, but I wasn't willing to take part in it, especially if a vile creature such as the Baern were going to be taking pleasure in torturing these children. I swallowed my pride, my pain, and everything I felt that was right, and opened the gate to send Fyrehowl and Nisha to Ysgard. Once they were gone, that left Aidan, Clueless and myself.

I spoke with the elder a few moments, asking him if they had been told what they were going to do, making absolutely sure they understood what they were getting themselves into. He sensed the same dread and sick that I was feeling I believe, and offered me some advice: don't take only children, and don't separate twins. For some reason, his advice, made me feel slightly better about what I was doing, or at least more accepting. If some of their own kind were willing to do this, then perhaps it wouldn't be all that bad. Even though it helped me accept what I was doing, it couldn't silence all the voices that told me it was wrong. Speaking for the rest of the group, I sent all the only children and twins away, having them take their families with them. At least they would be spared the rest. This left nearly a third of the village and I could feel the tension rising up within all of those gathered there. I looked around the crowd, and found one of the children that looked the most sure of itself, the one who seemed calm and accepting of his fate. I asked him if he knew what he was doing, and he nodded. I brought his family

over as well, spoke with them for a few moments and gathered their names. Their names are the ones this diary is dedicated to, and it is the child's name that lives on, carved into the back of this book. It was the least I could..

[Here the words are blotted out by small circular drops of water that smeared the ink into the lines around it. Every so often a large blot of ink can be seen and the paper appears wrinkled and dried out. Upon a closer inspection, the page itself feels as if it has a small coating of salt right there where the smears are located.]

Emotions are funny things, and as much as I like to think I'm in control of them, I'm not. I've never had difficulty expressing my thoughts and opinions, but for some reason, this just unsettles me to the core. I feel not only rage, but anguish as well. I feel disgrace, and most of all, I feel as though I could have prevented it. I know it's wrong to think such a thing, and I realize that my ultimate goal in stopping the fiends from reaching their goals takes precedence over the lives of individuals. Had it been an older member of the community, or had it been someone who was near to death, I could have accepted it more. But it had to be children, and it had to be us. Mystra hopefully forgives me for my choice, as I'm not sure I would have ever.

In the end, we each made our choices, and set off with haste, if only to quell our own nerves and sick stomachs. I left them a large quantity of wealth, more than enough to sustain the village for a generation or two, and vowed to return and atone for my decisions. We gated back to the tower and hurried through into the central chamber where he waited, obviously expecting us. The children were more than frightened at the things within the tower, and certainly the baern who stood before us. I returned the vial to him and he grabbed the elderly gentleman from before us and held him aloft in the sky with a simple spell. Then, he began to wither and twist, bones snapping, and appendages bending at wrong angles, the screams lost on my deaf ears. I would have been fine accepting his death, but he forced the children to watch. The sick bastard actually made the children look at their death of the elder, their own future in a quicker less grisly detail. I felt the need to throw myself at him and strike him down in front of me, but my sense of self preservation kept me from doing so. All I could do was watch in horror until he had finished his actions and filled his vial a quarter full of the creature's spiritual essence.

He then sent the kids over into a corner, and began to devour the body of the creature in front of us. He answered the question we had asked earlier, giving us the precise time down to the second when the clock would strike eleven. We had what needed, and hopefully, for the sake of the children, we would succeed in this tower. If we were to fail, I doubt I could continue on much further. My conscience wouldn't let me. Somewhere, I found the gall to ask him for instructions on reading the oblivion compass, or at least using it to tell time. He didn't seem to think it was part of our original bargain, but he agreed none the less. Stepping forward as he instructed, he took a bite from the dead creature's corpse and chew on it a few times, before spitting it out into his hand and offering it to me, telling me to eat it. If my stomach didn't want to wretch before, it certainly did now. I could feel my insides churning at the thought, and the fur on my tail getting spiked out, betraying my true emotions. Somehow, I managed to reach out my hand, pick up the flesh, and place it in my mouth. Chewing it twice, I swallowed, and my senses nearly vanished on me. Still, I stared on, stealing my jaw and trying to look as

calm as I possibly could. The vile creature chuckled and said “You’re as foolish as I thought.”

Instantly I began to regret my actions, even if they weren’t related to achieving my goal. I could feel a sickness seeping into my blood, but Mystra apparently thought to save me whatever horrible curse or disease I was being infused with. The nasty taste of both the vile creature’s spittle and the raw taste of the ratatask’s flesh lingered in my mouth, made my head swim. Then, without warning, I could feel a sharp stab in my mind, as the blind clockmaker forced his way into it. Images of modrons being welded into place at the site of the compass, huge gears, random equations, and numbers, all flashed before my mind’s eye, filling me with even more disgust and loathing for the creature before me. Then, as he let go, my mind still numb from the event, the numbers of the clock and the wheels and the rotations all seemed to make a funny sort of sense. I wasn’t sure how, but I could understand the figures on the clock and how to read it. It had only cost us the lives of three children, and the elder, and a village full of agony and pain. The baren’s words regarding that, echoed in my ears: blood and terror are required to elicit any sort of change, in particular self sacrifice.

As a parting request, I asked that he spare the children the agony and the pain, and he just smiled at me, considering my elaborately phrased request that appealed to his vanity. He would agree to spare one child, but only if I snapped its neck. Again, the feelings of revulsion and hate seemed to seep into my thoughts, and my fear and regret returned in full. I shook my head and told him that I could do no such thing. As with all of the delusional bastards, he said I had a promising future, and there was much in store for me. It was a pity that I had wasted it being a god’s slave. I for one do not consider myself a slave to Mystra’s will. She has given me much, in addition the freedom to make my own choices in life, and that is far from being any sort of slave. I owe her much, but she seems to demand nothing back from me. Still, the baren denied my request at my refusal to kill one of the children and we left with as much haste as we could muster, a soft scream echoing down the hall behind us.

Just a short while ago, not long before I started to write this, words began to reach my ears, filtering through the sands of time a bit late seeming as how they were reaching me in Sigil. I thought I had been done with it, and that I would be able to put the treachery of the baern behind me, and think of how to help the family cope with their loss, but I was wrong. Fragments of the story he was telling the children found their ways into my thoughts, forcing me to pay attention to them and focus on them, much like some of the sleepless nights I’ve had before in Sigil. I’m sure there must be a way to stifle the ability to hear one’s own name mentioned, but I have yet to learn it and so was cursed with the having to listen to the stories he baited the children with. All throughout he delighted in knowing that I was listening, extending my torture that just much more. If nothing else, I learned that the tree had not always produced sterile fruit. In the beginning, before the guardians of the tree sacrificed of themselves to the baern, it produced acorns that would indeed grow new trees. It was their sacrifice and apparent self-love for the tree that brought about their entrapment into this vicious cycle.

The last words I got from the message were the most damning and pain bringing words of the whole ordeal. They will forever be etched into my memory and thus shall be immortalized here as well: The weak say that hope can move mountains. What then of

despair? What might works might shattered dreams, broken faith, tortured souls, and harrow lives bring forth? Let me show you...

I'm unsure of exactly what to make of them, but I sense the edge of oblivion coming, now more so than ever. With the deaths of these children, I can feel the edge of a great precipice coming into view, and the heights at which we all could fall are dizzying. The very fates of the planes themselves hang in the balance, and everyone knows something they won't tell. Secrets and treachery shall bring about the ruin of us. I wonder why we seek to know that which would undo us.

May Mystra save us all.

TILL DEATH DO US PART

These last few days have been tragic, in more way than one. I couldn't even really bring myself to write this entry, but it's therapeutic in a strange way. Even though no one listens directly, I can at least get my thoughts out on paper, and make more sense of what I'm going to do. Hopefully, it'll work for me this time.

The journey to the 5th tower was fairly typical. We prepared ourselves, got things together, did our research, and set off towards our next destination: Vecna's old home. Getting there was a trick as it was currently the center of a warzone. Various clans of undead and dustmen, yugoloths taking advantage of the situation, mercenaries hired by the yugoloths, and a whole slew of other people who had a vested interest in the locale. We took the back way into the city, opting to go through the sewers and approach allies that were already within the city. Once we found someone we could trust, the idea was to get to Vecna's temple, scrounge around for a book of derelict magic, and get into the palace where the tower was. Life never seems to be nearly that easy for us. Upon exiting the sewers, we were escorted to a council meeting of some sort. The last thing I was expecting to see there were yugoloths, but see them we did, and familiar ones at that. Alpthis and his silent brother were both there, giving an elaborate speech detailing the amount of help the yugoloths could provide to those within the city, if free passage were given to them to get to the tower. It would appear that we arrived just in time to toss a wrench into their plans. We started to tell the council of what the yugoloths were after, and explain away their half truths in an effort to keep Vorkanis and his associates outside the safety of the city wards.

Our explanation seemed to impress upon the undead and dustmen of the party, and reconfirm their own suspicions of the yugoloth intentions. The entropy champion, who obviously had the last choice in the matter, seemed far less amused and more obstinate and closed-minded than someone dealing with fiends should be. Glancing quickly around the room, I felt that something wasn't right. Someone, or something else was in the room with us. I couldn't identify what it was precisely, but I had no doubt it was meant to influence the decision of the council. Previously, while we were in the sewers, we had wandered through several dead magic zones. I for one loathed those areas as they always made me feel trapped, confined, and utterly vulnerable. However, they serve a very useful function in keeping mind influencing effects from working on those within. With little effort, I managed to convince the council to reconvene in some place safer from arcane intrusion. We teleported away to a crossroads in the catacombs below

the city and stepped into the dead magic zone. I felt all of my abilities and existing spells snuffed in a heartbeat, leaving me easily vulnerable to any attack tossed my way. We explained our situation again, confident the influence was gone on the entropy champion, and he seemed more interested in my words. Taking me aside, we bantered a moment or two about politics and faith, just out of range of listening ears. Whatever I said obviously convinced him that the yugoloths were more of a threat to the greater multiverse than aide in this battle would provide.

Next, he took Alpthis aside, down the same hallway, just before his brother and certain members of the council disappeared to attend to some urgent business. Walking down the corridor, there was some light discussion, and then with a gut wrenching gurgle, the arcanoloth no longer had the ability to speak, let alone defend himself. Most fiends have the ability to regenerate, or at least heal themselves to prevent death. This was about all that was keeping him alive as the council head stood over him with his blade buried in his stomach. He pinned the fiend to the ground with another sword and walked back towards us, collapsing the tunnel on top of him with a small gesture. For now, we seemed to have won. We pledged whatever help we could offer him, but expressed a need to get into the temple and the palace before the fiends had breached the walls themselves. He provided us with an escort to the temple, and we quickly made our way there, not wanting to waste what precious time we had.

As we were about to enter the temple itself, Loebtav, and that familiar shadowy creature strode right up to the wards on the city, and began to carefully pick their way through them, making short work. Clueless, sensing an opportunity to eliminate a possible problem from our future, grabbed the god-killing dagger from his bag of holding, and shadow jumped towards the entrance. The moment he stepped through the barriers, Clueless plunged the dagger into his back. It all happened so quickly, I'm not exactly sure what happened next. A large explosion rocked the temple, perhaps a contingency, or the dagger itself exerting its power over Loebtav. When the light faded, Clueless was next to us again, singed from the fire, but looking none the worse for wear. The area in front of the gate though, was entirely picked clean. There wasn't a single body or scorch mark left by the hundreds of people that filled both sides of the entry into the city. In a few seconds, what probably would have taken many years to weave into protections, all the wards were gone, including the gates themselves. The army on the outside, realized their opportunity to gain entry to the well-defended city and quickly started to surge forward. With a wave of my hand, I kept them at bay with a forcewall. It wouldn't last for long, particularly if they had anyone adept with magic out there, but it provided us with a few minutes to get ahead of the fighting and into the temple.

Inside the temple, we pillaged anything that looked remotely important or significant. Books, stones, everything. As we were about to leave, Clueless got that funny feeling in his ankle again. Vorkanis had to be close if it was stinging the way he said it was. We delayed them with a few spells and quickly took the back exit to the temple, feeling into the catacombs again before he could track us down himself. Running quickly to keep ahead of him, we encountered more than our share of undead horrors and dead magic. Some of the undead obviously weren't controlled by those we had met previously. These were more unique and much more powerful than any we had encountered. Fighting in a dead magic zone certainly didn't help us either, as we were nearly destroyed several times by these creatures. Fortunately, both Toras and Fyrehowl were doing a number of

them, stripped of magic as they were. With barely breath in our bodies, we retreated down the halls of the catacombs towards the palace, letting Aidan work his god's healing touch on us as we went. Curious about how the battle was progressing outside, I remember that I had some of my prying eyes still floating back in the temple. I concentrated on them for a moment and sent a few of them out to the roof to look around and assess the situation. Things had gotten much worse. The army of the Flesh Sculptor had started to storm the walls, and Vorkanis was working his way through the various crowds as well, intent on reaching the palace. As I finished scanning the area, I got a sickly feeling and found myself looking into the eyes of the mute baern. A shiver ran through my body and I could feel some sort of enfeeblement spell taking hold. With a soft thud, I hit the ground and went unconscious.

When I was woken back up, I took care of my mental wounds with the staff of healing we brought with us, and explained what I saw outside to the others. With renewed vigor, and understanding the Vorkanis and two baern were now after us, we redoubled our efforts to reach the palace. It didn't take too terribly long, and within a short amount of time we found ourselves standing the grand landing of the palace itself. Still short a book of derelict magic, we needed to find a library and the book's whereabouts. As we were contemplating whether or not to journey up the stairs or chance the public libraries of the first floor, a loud knocking shook the castle. Vorkanis was likely at the door dealing with the wards on the palace. If Vecna was anything, it was thorough. It would take even the archfiend a long time to break through them without expending massive resources. Sensing another presence in the room, I looked up and saw a skull with red pinpricks for eyes floating halfway up the stairs. I could see illusion magic covering the entire thing, giving away its true nature, although I doubted anyone else could see it in the manner I could. Taking the stairs quickly I addressed the mirage as though it were real, telling it of our intentions, just in case it had some mental connection to its creator, hopefully one of the bonetappers. It threatened me and cast some sort of scorching illusion spell at me, which missed entirely. Continuing to approach, Clueless raced up the stairs to stop me, not having realized yet that it was harmless. It spat another illusory spell at me, and then promptly vanished, telling us that we had been warned. The others were slightly peeved at me for not telling them it was an illusion, but there's no real fun in that. I'm not usually a fool, so had I even a doubt that it were real, I would have approached the situation in a much more careful manner.

Figuring we had the time, we made a cursory search of the library downstairs but found nothing of real interest down there. Some histories and other things were around, but nothing immediately useful to our task. Scrambling back upstairs amid the rumblings of the tower as Vorkanis continued to breach the wardings, we quickly looked around. Not more than a few minutes into the place, we encountered the first, and likely weakest of the four bonetappers. Again, I was elected to speak with him, and it didn't seem like he was going to let us just continue up the tower, regardless of what we told him about the fiend behind us. He was quite confident that he and the rest of the circle could hold off the fiend, particularly since Vecna favored them, and it was his palace. I managed to at least convince him to watch the fiend assail the tower, watch his tactics, and if he didn't see that was indeed more of a threat than we were, that we would leave. Taking us to a separate room, we all watched as Vorkanis continue to assail the tower from outside, one of the rumbles even knocking the lich to the ground as well, testifying to his power.

While we were watching the battle and keeping an eye on the palace's defenses, I heard the raspy voice of Baern echoing in my head. Apparently my other companions weren't privy to this conversation. He warned that he would be lenient and let us leave, without harm, if we did so now. If we remained, his generosity would come to an end and our lives would be his to do with as he pleased. Even though I was ready to bolt and leave, the power of the voice echoing in my head and having already experienced their power first hand, my companions weren't. Looking at them, I saw resolve and strength in their goals. It was then that I realized that if I gave up now, the past several months were all for naught. I could give up after we had come so far. I got back a resigned, yet agitated threat from the Baern and his presence left my mind. With all the battles going on, and the lich finally realizing what they were up against, we managed to convince him to let us continue up the palace to the tower. Each level had its own guardian and we would have to convince all of them if we wanted to continue, but at least we would have leave to pass freely through this place.

Thanking him for his wise decision, we quickly ascended the stairs to the next level, and were confronted by a few vampires. It wasn't difficult to deal with them, at least not given what we had been fighting outside. The next event however, still leaves me with much agony and hatred. As we turned to ascend the next set of stairs, Nisha screamed aloud, and then... exploded. With all of the magic Mystra had granted me, and with all of the power at my finger tips, there was nothing I could do to stop it. Rising from her remains, was the Flesh Sculptor, a malicious grin on his face as he licked my wife's blood from himself. Anger welling up inside me, overpowering the disbelief, I lashed out with everything I had. Spell after spell poured from my palms and fingers, the raw energy of the weave coursing through my blood and manifesting itself in some strange and destructive spell. I wasn't even in control of what I was doing. All my most powerful destructive spells raced from my fingertips and exploded into blood and gore on the Baern attacking us. The battle went on for far longer than I cared for it to, expending nearly all of my higher abilities. As a desperate last attempt at clinging to life, he leapt at me, knocking me into unconsciousness as he tore flesh from my body. When I came to, all my personal wards had expended themselves, meant to deal a last devastating blow to whomever might have killed me. But, I wasn't dead, and I hadn't felt my soul traveling to another realm, or being whisked away from my body. I was likely so close, that I was hanging on to life by a thread, the wish to exact revenge on the one who destroyed my wife likely the only thing keeping me passing into the abyss. Waking up, I blinked a few times, and saw clueless standing over me, the staff of healing the words of a heal prayer dying from his lips. Feeling the life return to my body, he pointed me in the direction of the near dead baern, and I let loose with the last of my potent spells. In a spatter of sizzling gore, he expired, falling limp to the ground. There was no way he wasn't dead, but his body was slowly starting to reform. I stood there, covered from head to tail in gore and blood. I could barely lift my arms to move them, the weight of all that had happened crashing down upon my shoulders. We had killed a Baern, a god in their own right, and Nisha was gone, destroyed utterly by that abomination. Aidan did what he could for her, but there was no way of retrieving her from the hell he had sent her to, at least not without much work. I at least took solace in knowing that there was still a chance.

Not even bothering to clean myself off, we started toward the stairs. Several undead, including the bonetapper of that level approached us. All of them had seen the

epic battle that had just been waged not more than minutes ago. Giving us a wide berth, and even offering us assistance in the form of directions we were allowed to continue. I had no real wish to continue any more. My motivation and the life had been sapped out of me. Still, I blundered on, being the only completely arcane caster in our party. They would surely need my spells at some point in the near future, even if they had no need of me. The next level of the tower was much the same as the first, except that it was more decorated. I prayed to Mystra that we wouldn't have to deal with the bonetapper on this level, but like the first lich, he was arrogant and could see no further than a blind person. We ended up sitting in a chamber that was devoted to the worship of Vecna. There wasn't a door in the room, but we knew for certain that we were going the right way, given the information the previous lich had provided us with. I could see dweomers on the altar and on the benches in the chamber. Vecna, being the god of secrets, obviously would appreciate the donation of one. And, seeing an opportunity to at least provide the demi god with our intentions I briefly summarized our plight and our intentions. Folding it up, and placing it on the altar, I sat down at the bench and cleared my mind, focusing on the letter itself and willing it to Vecna. While I was sitting there, a voice whispered near my ear the phrase 'Vecna is eternal.' Swallowing hard, I whispered the prayer to Vecna, feeling dirty and outcast, like I was betraying my trust in Mystra. Certainly the day couldn't have gotten any worse. Boy was I wrong. With a fluttering sound, an apparition dropped from the rear of the chamber and washed through me. I could feel my form turn a sort of incorporeal as I passed straight through the rear of the chamber wall.

Appearing on the other side, I was deposited in the middle of a large chamber, lush carpeting all around. Standing directly in front of me was the third bonetapper and two lava wights. A tremble of fear washed over me as I realized I was alone as well, having finally done something very irrational. Taking the few moments I had while he looked me over, I quickly vanished to the top of the stairs, hiding behind a pillar to keep from sight. One of the wights bounded after me and immediately started laying into me with its claws, catching me on one or two of its swings. Below me, my companions started popping into existence, carried by the same specters that I was. The lich, as well as his accompaniment of body guards, all started attacking, leaving me to deal with the single wight who took a keen interest in me. Fortunately, he was on the stairs, and I had a wind spell memorized. Calling forth a gust of wind, I sent him tumbling down the stairs through the lich's newly created prismatic sphere. If he survived that, I would be surprised. Fortunately, he didn't. Retreating down the stairs I started helping my companions by disjuncting the lich's defenses, and turning his own spells back on him. If I could at least keep him busy, my friends could take care of things. Within a minute or two, the situation was over, and they were no more. By this point, I had expended all the spells of the 9th sphere that I chosen to memorize that day. I had a few spells in reserve that were altered with metamagic, and plenty of spells that were 6th sphere and below, but none that would do the amount of damage needed to deal with some of these creatures.

Finally, we reached the last set of stairs to the fourth level. If we could get past this bone tapper, the demi lich, and most obstinate member of the circle, then we would finally get into the tower. As we entered the chamber and saw the spheres of annihilation, and the demi-lich floating in front of a throne, we felt the palace rock for the final time, Vorkanis finally having broken through all of the wards. He would make quick work of the two remaining liches, likely before we managed to bargain or force our way past this

one. The demi lich launched into a tirade of how we weren't worthy, and how Vecna would stop all of this, and how little we knew of what was going on. The same pompous and arrogant attitude we had encountered before. He at least claimed he would let us leave before he had to deal with us. While we were explaining ourselves to him, and our need to continue, he started attack us silently with spells. Illusions already bother me when they're used in certain ways, and this bothered me just as much, if not more. Just as I was about to start retaliating, the Jester, not Jeremo, but the original and first Jester, steps out from one of the spheres. I was too stunned by this occurrence to do much more than blink. Fortunately, he drew at least some of the lich's attention from us and focused it on himself and his slowly growing conjuration, or perhaps pet. As the battle continued on, it was quite apparent that our new friend knew more about battling demi liches than I did. And the large black creature growing out of the floor could pack quite a wallop, much more so than we were managing to do. Fortunately for us, we had their help, as I only had two shatter spells committed to memory, not having intended on fighting anything crystalline in nature. These were about the only spells that could affect the thing however, and everything else I was casting at it, had little or no effect at all. This battle was over much quicker than our battle with the Baern, but I still felt drained, despite having protected myself and my companions from the lich's spells.

Even now, we're not sure why the Jester bothered to help us out. He claims it was because we amused him, but I find it hard to believe that he'd go through the trouble of claiming the afterlife of a demi lich just because he found us amusing. I think there's something more going on here than he's telling us. Of course, if we had the whole picture we might have given up by now. As it is, we still plug along, hoping someone will guide us in the right direction. Before we left, the Jester promised to keep Vorkanis busy while we made our way through the tower. Bolting up the final set of stairs, we found ourselves in a maze of rooms and doors, each leading to different areas and sections. One room in particular, seemed like Vecna's personal laboratory, and we wandered inside hoping to find the passage to the chamber of mirrored shadows. Venturing down a short hallway, we found a wall of mirrors with etchings on them. Clueless recognized the symbols as being the same as the ones on stones we had picked up in the temple. Matching them up, we heard a loud hiss from the serpent stature behind us, and we tested the mirrors for a passage. Sure enough, stepping through, we found ourselves standing in a replica of the past. Everything around us was covered in a strange haze, almost as if it wasn't real. We could touch and look at things, but it all seemed to distant and fake. Sitting off on a podium toward the front of this room was a book, looking much more real than even ourselves. Almost a hyper-realistic I suppose you could say. This had to be the book of derelict magic. Each of us picked it up in turn, said our names with the blood of an outsider held in a vial, and placed it down. As each person said their name, the haze around us began to lift and turn the room dark. When the final person had done their part of the ritual, we saw a doorway, standing off to the side of the room, flanked by moving and swirling blades, like that of razor fine. These sent a shiver down my spine, but it at least appeared we could pass through them without fear of touching them. We passed through into a room with two statues, one of a daubus, and the other of a very similar creature which looked to the descendants, or possibly the progenitors of the daubus. Neither of the statues seemed animate in any way, and they didn't seem to be providing us with any further clues. Another archway, just beyond the statues was sealed, like a

portal of some sort that hadn't become active yet. As we pondered what to do, Vorkanis and his consort stepped up to the portal we had just walked through. They bantered a moment or two, Shylara professing her love for the other fiend, Vorkanis barely registering a flicker of emotion. She disappeared, leaving him to fend for himself, and he stepped through into the room with us.

As if on cue, the world fell away into darkness, the statues and the archways disappearing. Apparently it didn't matter who got here first, as it was going to wait for everyone present before allowing passage anyway. So, we had wasted all our time and resources beating him here, just to clear the way for him. What bloody damn luck. And now, we were in a room with the ebon himself. This was not someone we had the means or ability to deal with at this point and time. While we watched the blackness for some indication of what was going on, a display of the birth of the multiverse started before us. The elements of good and evil, law and chaos split off to form planes. From these planes birthed the progenitors and each alignment. From the progenitors were spawned further races, some manufactured from the planes themselves, and some just spontaneously existing. We watched as the forces of evil slaughtered and wreaked havoc on the peaceful good, often too convinced in their ways to fight back and defend. The Baern had their hands in more than one downfall, their power seeming to usurp and overcome anything the forces of good could dish out. I felt a cold sickly feeling, almost as if good was too passive to defend itself, and evil was so powerful that it dwarfed all. I couldn't align myself with either side, although I could feel pity for those who were obliterated. As the show drew to a conclusion, the statues returned to view and the doorway behind them was open. Written above the heads of both the dabus and other creature was the phrase "Not balance but existence. Not belief nor substance, but potential and stasis." I think it was talking about Sigil, the one constant in the evolution of the planes, but exactly what it refers to or what it means is still a mystery.

We walked up to the new door exiting this room, and Vorkanis starts to examine it warily, almost as if he's unsure if he wants to proceed. With more courage, and perhaps stupidity than I can ever lay claim to, Toras pushes him through the door! As the arcanaloth stumbles across the threshold, looking quite agitated, but none-the-worse for the journey, he turns around and casts some sort of spell at Toras, which seems to have no effect. A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I realized that the tower was protecting us from each other's spells. At least if he wanted to kill us, he'd have to do it by hand. As we walked down the hallway to whatever destination the tower had in mind for us, Vorkanis decided to rub salt in a very fresh, and tender, open wound. A snide comment about Nisha and her death, was all it took to ruin my calm composure. I knew in my head that I was no match for the hell spawn, but my emotions had control over me and rational thought was the last thing from my mind. My mind flipped through its store of spells, seeking the most damaging and powerful spell it contained, but it came upon not a spell, but a wellspring of power, hidden deep within the recesses of mind. I could feel a surge of energy rise from the tip of my toes all the way up to the points of my ears, making the fur on my tail stand up on end as the energy coursed through me. The power felt like home, almost as if Toril and the weave itself were in my blood. The awe and the tremendousness of the power shocked my now dormant mind, but I wasn't in control of my body. I thrust my hands out toward the Ebon, and a crackle of silvery-white fire arced from me toward the ebon. The pure magical energy of Mystra herself pooled in a heated

white fury around him. For the briefest instant, I thought I saw him cringe unexpectedly, and then the energy bled away, deflected by the power magical charms in place within the tower. A sort of serene calm came over me, and I just stood there, hands outstretched for a moment, before Vorkanis' snide remarks continued, barely missing a beat. I drop my hands, and relished in the contentment for a moment, completely ignoring my surroundings, until the soft touch of Mystra's grace faded my body, leaving me feeling cold and empty again.

The teasing continued, directed at my companions now that I seemed to be uninterested, or at least uncaring. Perhaps even a certain degree of respect, or awe had kept him from pressing the issue further, but for some reason I doubted that was the case. He believed in his own lies too much to think that someone could have a power that he couldn't possess. After a few minutes of journeying we ended up in a room, with two figures sitting in thrones on a dais. One of them was Shylara, but the other lifted my hopes just enough that I could feel the pain of loss again when my conscious mind told me that she wasn't real. There in front of me was Nisha. Even though it acted and talked like her, I knew it wasn't her, regardless of how warm her touch made me feel. She asked us each a series of three questions, which I answered as truthfully and honestly as I could. Some of them seemed silly and pointless, but they were answered none the less. The rest of my group answered in the same manner, each sharing a similarity in the answers, before Vorkanis got his chance to Answer his consort. His answers were full of greed and arrogance, completely different than the truth and honesty we were showing. I had a doubt that the planes intended it for him, and that he deserved it any more than anyone else. At the end of the questions, Vorkanis kissed the illusory Shylara, and snapped her neck, killing her instantly. Even though I knew Nisha wasn't real, I felt the need to protect her from the fiend. However, he realized that without her, there was no chance of proceeding through the tower. Opening the last and final three doors for us, I kissed the faux Nisha deeply, feeling slightly better, and hoping that the real one would forgive me.

This room now contained three other doors, and each of them had a phrase above them. Figuring that this was our maze to the map Marvent Green had provided us, we let Vorkanis have the first step. Following our directions, and seeing that the door we wished to take had blue squares surrounding the white door frame, we took the path we believed to be correct. When we stepped through the doorway we found ourselves in the same chamber, standing there with a stone statue of the Lady of Pain. This room was a replica of the one below Sigil that we had seen quite some time ago, except that the statue was holding out its hands, and the exposed skin was cut and bleeding, a pained expression on its face. In its hands, there was a hazy indistinct object, looking more real than the world around it. The thought nagging at the back of my mind was that we hadn't finished following the sequence of doors yet, and that taking this object would result in our destruction. Before we had a chance to even think that part over, a door opened and out stepped a black figure we knew to be the ash singer, but as we watched, he seemed to appear more and more like Marvent Green. He shouted "Get it, you fool!" to the Ebon as the fiend and Clueless lunged after it at the same instant. Both hands connected on it at the same instant, and it vanished, sending them hurtling backwards. The Ebon looked quite confused for a few moments, as the Ash Singer pestered him about it, before the both ran out the door the Ash Singer had entered through. Clueless seemed to have the

same confused look, but at least a glimmer of hope spread across his face. Wasting no time, we darted out the door behind them.

Outside the door, we stood a dozen feet behind the Ebon, who was looking directly up at an Avatar of Ra. The Ebon made short work of the avatar, his consort not more than a few steps behind him the whole time. It's not every day that you see an Avatar slain by a fiend whom you had just been pushing around not more than a short while ago. Not wanting to be part of that fight, we invested the rest of our resources in assisting the side we promised help to clean up what was left of the main armies. I wasn't in the mood to really help, but I had given my word, and I never go back on my word. When we felt confident that there was little left we could do, we returned to Sigil, but I only stayed long enough to see everyone safely home before I went to my castle in Ysgard.

Once there, I just sat and cried my eyes out in the large lonely bed that still smelled like Nisha. Falling into a deep sleep, I awoke many hours later, well into the next afternoon. I went to the libraries I knew of and started researching Baern and their victims. If I was to be lucky, then I'd find some lead, or at least a clue, but those were scarce and almost non-existent. The most connection I had was the negative Energy plane and some obscure references to death on the inner planes. It wasn't going to be easy. Returning to Sigil to further my research, and at least check up on people there, I stopped by the inn and received a package. Carefully unwrapping it, Fyrehowl walked down the stairs in a robe, followed closely by A'kin who as similarly dressed and smelled heavily of alcohol. Inside the box was a doll of Nisha. I thought A'kin had made it, and thought that perhaps it was a little out of taste, but it was cute, and at least seemed to have her personality down quite well. A'kin however, was as confused as I was as to the dolls origin. Then, without so much as a blink, it exploded and out stepped the figure of a small baern, making me relive my previous days memories all over again. I could feel the fur on my tail standing up on end again as my ears laid back against my head. A sort of strange angered calmness slipped over my body as the baern's voice echoed in my head, speaking of a way to rescue Nisha, while at the same time offering up solutions as to the doll's origin. I was set to kill whoever had made the thing, all I needed was the slightest inkling. As the doll concluded it's tirade, it placed a razor vine tiara on its head, and suggested I go and pay the price for the information.

Somehow, I managed to calm myself, and stifled the teleport spell that was coming to my lips. That serene calmness returned and I vanished to the library to research more on the "wheels within wheels" phrase the doll had given me. It wasn't a clue, but it was at least something to distract my attention. The references were vague and nothing jumped out at me as helping the situation. Just as I was about to leave the library and visit Ruskin and A'kin, two of the oldest resident of Sigil I could think of, a package was delivered to me from the runner's guild. The tag said it would help me in my search, and for some stupid reason I believed it. Opening the book, I stared in slack jawed anger at a pair of cloven hooves, cut off at the ankle. Again, the anger and hatred welled up with me and I could feel the conscious control of my body slipping again. Putting the lid back on the box, I had it disposed of and had a library aide organize the books I was looking at and store them for later.

Then, with the blink of an eye, I teleported myself to the doorstep of the fortune's wheel. My mind was already reeling with threats, and massive spells of destruction. With

all the pent up rage coursing through my body, I was likely to take out a whole block of Sigil and still not feel satisfied. As I made my way through the tavern and upstairs I saw a line of one standing at the door, waiting patiently to be admitted to the fiend's office. I told him to leave, and he flustered a bit, starting to argue with me that he had the right to see her first. I just stared at the man, and told him to leave again, if he knew what was good for him. He huffed a bit and stalked off. The two guards at the door, smiled like jackals themselves as they looked at me. Obviously they were amused. One of them went in to interrupt Shemeska's dining experience to announce my presence, while the other stayed outside to smirk at me. There was little I felt they could do to stop me, if I wanted to get in the door, but I was going to play it nice for the moment. A few seconds later, the guard returned and opened the door, admitting me into *her wondrous presence*. She could see the anger on my face as I stared her down, and she asked me what I wanted, although with a bit more malice in her voice than simple words can provide. I told her not to play games with me and tell me what it is that I needed to know. She claimed ignorance, and my only response was *are you responsible?*

Without a bit of warning, the entire building exploded, sending me flying through a wall and Shemeska out of window next to me. When I stood back up, the scene around me was horrendous. Bodies lay in pieces all over the street, and the entire building, minus a few bits of the stone foundation, was gone. I thought back and tried to recall exactly what had happened and if I was responsible for it, but I couldn't remember uttering the single word of a spell. Even Shemeska seemed surprised at the sudden attack that was triggered by my arrival. In that instant, I knew that she wasn't the responsible party, but I had a hunch that she did know. Coaxing assistance from her, and vowing to help her find the responsible soul for the destruction of her office, I returned to the Portal Jammer to make sure it was safe. While there, a member of the city watch came by and escorted me to the city barracks, or at least, they thought they were escorting me. In order to make the journey more quickly, I had teleported us all. If I was going to be detained for this atrocity then I was going to get to the bottom of it quickly. I wanted Nisha back, and I wasn't about to wait for it because some court thought I was responsible. Hopefully no one else thought the same. I had reason to hate Shemeska, and given the recent deliveries that appeared to be from her, I could see where someone might make that conclusion. I waited in the barracks politely, figuring that cooperation would get better results than just teleporting away. It'd be my luck that they'd call in a mage hound from Toril and send them after me.

After all the suspects were rounded up, including the rest of my party, they asked us standard questions and we were allowed to leave. Rhys must have convinced them of the futility of it, or had some inkling that we weren't responsible, as they still seemed a bit reluctant to let us leave. Once free, I went back to the scene of the crime, and started poking my nose around in the ruins of the tavern. As I was sifting through the ashes of the place, I came across the residual dweomer of a series of concentric rings, wheels within wheels. I sent Shemeska a sending, calling her to the site like one would call a pet. She wasn't too terribly happy with the treatment, but I wasn't in the mood to bicker, and she knew that a spell dual between us would not end well for either side. I pointed out the symbol on the ground and she immediately disjuncted it, sending the magics to whatever oblivion they go to. She tried to convince me that I didn't see it, but I wasn't going to have any of that. Either she needed to keep it secret, or something frightened her. As I

pressed for more information, she teleported us off to some safe location within Sigil. I let the spell succeed, despite my better judgment, and found myself in what I suppose would be her personal residence, or at least proper office. We talked about things for some time, and I explained my dilemma to her, even though she already knew all the details. I had a feeling she just wanted to watch me relive all of those painful moments in my mind. But by this point, I was numb with rage, hatred, anger, sorrow, and futility. There wasn't much that was going to change my mood any more. She possessed the knowledge I needed to get moving in the right direction and she charged a hefty price for it. Sometime, within the next decade, she wanted the use of my magic, for whatever purpose she deemed fit. I agreed on the conditions that the use didn't violate my beliefs or cause harm to my friends. I know I'll regret the decision, but if it helps get me Nisha back, then it's worth the price.

She explained the place that I needed to go was Death Heart, some iron sphere in the plane of negative energy. From there, I would find references to something called Eternity's Doorstep, a holding place for souls either destroyed by the baern, or possibly a place where souls destroyed on the inner planes vanish to when caught in turmoil. At least now I had a place to start. I vowed my service again, and then made my way back to my tower in Ysgard.

That's where I am now, sitting here, trying to decide exactly what to do. Lothar recommends I bring a sun cleric along with me to deal with the undead, and I think it's a wise idea. But I don't want to be entirely useless. I'm an evoker, not a necromancer. The most powerful necromancer I know of is Ahklar, and he's supposedly dead, or at least remanifesting. If anyone knows the wizards of Toril, it'd be Elminster, or perhaps the magister to the north. One of them should be able to provide me with some guidance on seeking spells to devastate the undead.

I feel that this has helped, or at least steeled my nerves for what has yet come. I have a lot to do to prepare, and hopefully there will be more to fill the pages of this diary in the days to come. Mystra save us.

THE THINGS I GO THROUGH

I doubt Nisha will ever really know the extent of what I went through for her, but in some respects that's a good thing. There's stuff that happened there that even I'm ashamed of doing and will likely regret for the rest of my life. But still, the ends justified the means in my opinion as I now have my treasure back, and no dragon hoard could possibly top the riches and wonders of my beloved.

The journey we embarked upon to get Nisha back from the unjust death she suffered started at Death Hart, some hollow iron sphere floating in the plane of negative energy. Obviously we needed someone who had been there before to guide us there, or at least point us in the right direction. I suppose the Dustmen felt sorry for me, or at least deemed it within their interests to keep on the good side of an aggrieved archmage, because they gave us a guide who seemed, for lack of a better word, pleased to help us. It was probably more along the lines of indifference, but dustmen don't really show emotion all that much. In addition to our dustmen counterpart, we also managed to procure the services of a cleric of Ra. No doubt a sun cleric would come in handy dealing with the undead. Just as we were about to go and start our trek into the unknown, the

Asura showed back up on our doorstep. I hadn't expected to see her there, but she was Nisha's friend as well and had every right to assist in the journey. That, and I was glad for the like-minded company.

With our party all gathered and ready to go, we made our necessary preparations for the journey: healing potions, amulets of attunement, extra arrows, the usual sorts of things you'd want to bring if you were going to start a war, or wade into one. From what the dusty had told us, there were four different sections to this particular city, none of them really aligned with either of the others, and one that was run by so many different people wanting power that it was a struggle within itself. Each of these sections had its own door leading into the sphere, whereupon our guide would recognize which city section we were in and make a recommendation from there. He had little to worry about, what with the undead pact and all, but the rest of us were fair game for whatever horrors the inhabitants could dream up.

The first section we learned about was run by a lich under the name of Zzarkatuzarr. For some odd reason the name sounded familiar. Rather archaic, but definitely familiar. As I was thinking about it, the answer suddenly dawned on me: the name was Thayan. Of all the lousy luck, we were going to be stuck in the same city with centuries old lich, dating back from the first red wizards of Thay. In fact, if my memory served me correctly, this particular lich was the apprentice to Thayed himself, the very first red wizard that started it all. Despite breaking with tradition on so many levels, I could feel my own blood boiling at the thought of having to deal with a red wizard, let alone the potential to rely on one for information. Clearly we were going to have to find another section of the city, or one of us would likely end up starting something. Two capable wizards blasting each other to pieces would likely result very poorly for the city and get us nowhere fast.

The next section was the White Conclave. The dusty could tell us little about this section itself, except that it was run by one Muresh, who seemed to be an enigma in himself. The rumor was, that this section of the city dated back to its original inhabitants. A fortunate stroke of luck if this happened to be true. Finding notes to the origin of a city would require some old knowledge, and if we were to find it anywhere, that'd be the most likely place.

The third area of the city took up approximately one third of the total sphere, and was run by various people seeking to make a name for themselves in their small world. Between vampires, T'nari, and other random undead, it would likely be a very poor choice to find anyone willing to help us there.

The last place in the city was run by three Sooloese liches, and was called Soolan of the Undying. From what I remember in my research of various planar wizards, Sool was rumored to be the Netheril of a prime called Greyhawk. If that was the case, I certainly didn't want to meet up with them. Despite being lazy and quick to anger, Netherese wizards had a nasty habit of blowing things to pieces for their amusement. If Sooloese wizards behaved in a similar manner, it wouldn't bode well. The notion that made this section of the city less of a choice for us, was the rumor that these three liches feasted on souls. For some reason, no one in the party really wanted to test this rumor out and find the truth that might be buried within it. Besides, I had seen, and fought, enough liches in the past few days to sicken me, so I was looking for a change of pace.

Considering all of our options, Muresh seemed like the most likely candidate. He was an unknown to the dusty, likely ascended into power by might and ability, rather than station, while keeping his mystery. In addition, he was a member of what was supposed to be the oldest people in the city. That'd come in handy when we started to talk business. Which left one question unanswered: why exactly would they help us? We needed something to trade, some reason for this guy to help us out. I doubt my plight and current goals would impress the undead too much. Then I remembered what we had picked up the last time we were on Toril. While in the temple of Karsus, we recovered a few quasi-magical wands and items. I had a general idea of what they did, but without a mythallar present, there was little chance of getting to use them. This city though, happened to have one built at its center to power all the magical protections keeping them safe from the abuse of the negative energy plane. We at least now had something to barter with. And if an unlimited charge magical item didn't impress Muresh, I was sure a red wizard would love to get her hands on some ancient Netherese artifacts.

Having both the knowledge, the motivation, and the ability to get what we intended to do done, we set out to Death Heart. A quick planar hop, skip, and a jump later we were standing in front of the sphere itself as it slowly traversed its way around the plane. The place was exactly as the dusty had described, a giant metal sphere, presumably with four different doors set into the intersecting lattice work of plates that composed the sphere. It looked like it had seen better days, but it was still standing, which was a testament to the architecture of the place; nothing withstood the constant assault of the negative energy plane for long.

We scoured the surface of the sphere facing us for a few minutes before we found a large metal door set into the outside of it. Placing a hand onto the metal pad opened the door up with a sort of hissing and grinding sound. Behind this door was a long corridor warded with all sorts of various protections against undead creatures. It seemed to me to be more of a prison than a warding device. After all, the occupants were undead. Our dustmen companion had a few spells prepped and ready for these wards and made it through them with little more than a few pained grimaces and tattered clothes. At the other end of the corridor was another door, similar in purpose to the outside door. Pressing a palm up against it, the door slid open and revealed a sprawling city to us. For all the wonders in the world, it seemed like a rather dark Sigil. The curve of the walls and the buildings on the ceiling, it all matched. The only thing different was that it was spread out over a sphere, instead of a torus.

The four different sections of the city were fairly easy to identify, or at least separate apart from each other. Along each of the borders of the city, there was rubble and debris, obviously the front of some sort of war. The section we were in seemed a bit older and more elaborate, while the other portions had different themes and architectures, or in the case of the unclaimed land, none at all. From what the dusty could tell, we had gotten rather lucky and made it into our desired section on the first try. The next thing we needed to do was see Muresh, and I had a feeling that wouldn't be easy. Fortunately, we didn't have to wait long to make our attempt at finding him.

As we got out of the entryway to the sphere we were confronted by a contingent of guards, all armed to the teeth. I convinced the leader to come forward and managed to convince him that we had a purpose here, and that Muresh was likely the only one who could help us. Leading us on a short tour through this section of the city, we were kept

under close guard and watch. I doubted they'd fair well if we really wanted to escape, but our best bet at asking an official for help would likely work better if we cooperated. Before too much longer we found ourselves in close proximity to an elaborate state building, where we again made our claim to yet another of the local hierarchy. He deemed us worthy of speaking with High Councilor and proceeded to fetch him. Some time later, he arrived and looked us over, and proceeded to tell us what he knew of the information we sought. He wasn't all that knowledgeable himself, but he at least seemed to know where we could find what we were looking for, which was a plus.

Of course, you can't get something for nothing, or at least I was suspecting, so I inquired about his reason for helping us. Aside from wanting us gone from the city as quickly as possible, supposedly to alleviate unrest (imagine that, unrest in a city of undead, who'd have thought), there was a particular book he wanted retrieved as well. Not entirely sure why a religious and prominent leader would want a book that held no real power or knowledge, he let us in on his little secret. Putting up walls of illusion, and bubbles of silence all around us, he transformed from the Muresh we had met into a Raksasha. I was all for killing him right then and there, the evil bastard, but he did provide us with what needed, so in a way we did owe him one. We agreed to return with a book for him, in the same building that held the knowledge we sought, as a sort of gesture of good faith, to show that we meant no harm to those in the city. When we completed that task, we'd be allowed to leave without being harmed, almost as a sort of penance I guess. Turning back into his undead form, he pointed us in the direction of the building we were after, which was strangely in the focal point of the dispute between the four city sections. Muresh had told us that the building wasn't the reason for dispute, but I imagine someone construed it that way somewhere along the line.

Setting out to the tower, we made quick work of some forces that were laying in wait, not for us, but for anyone who happened to come by that way. The outside of the tower was only warded with a single alarm spell, set to alert the Sooloese liches when someone had entered it. Bypassing the spell, we made our way inside and proceeded to make our way up the levels quickly. At the topmost level of the tower, we found what appeared to be an old personal library and chambers. We flipped through the books and found the one Muresh was interested in and kept it with us. The very last book on the shelf, had what I needed, but was protected by some sort of trap the soul spell, obviously meant to keep the book protected. Using a cantrip I floated the book out onto a table, and examined it a bit more closely. The gem itself was large enough and certainly of a high enough quality that it could contain quite a few souls. On closer inspection, it already had a few within it. I was all for leaving the poor sods in the gem and getting on with things, but Clueless was much too interested in getting them out for me to argue with him. Taking my time, I examined the dweomers and was able to pull all of them out of the book. Of note, there was an illithid who claimed that he would owe us one, and a yugoloth who didn't live much past a few seconds. We weren't about to take chances that he was going to clue unsuspecting people into our actions.

After freeing the inhabitants from the gem, I disarmed the trap on the book and proceeded to read all about the origins of the city and its creators. The idea they had was noble, but based off something flawed and evil to begin with it was doomed to failure. At least the original architects were thoughtful enough to leave the location of their inspiration written down within the pages of a book. Surprisingly enough, they even

noted that the place was full of petitioners who were seemed to be leading normal lives in a place that was constructed specifically for them. The inhabitants of the doorstep even had their own religions, and nations, and governing bodies. It was like a miniature planar cosmology, all packed into one location. From what was written, it seemed like the place was much too large to search without knowing where your goal was, which was a problem we had, but I was determined to not let that stop us.

Gleaning any immediate useful information we could from the book, I took it with me when we left. Shemeska had expressed interest in knowing this place's location, and this would certainly whet that appetite. Returning to Muresh, we gave him his book, and he immediately held it aloft, showing his command and power over his assembled peoples. While they were all groveling and he was relishing in the newfound power he had over them, we quietly made our exit, having what we came for. On our way out, I left a little a present to detonate in the skies over the white conclave. It wasn't meant to destroy anything, but to get the attention of the red wizard who'd surely be keeping an eye on goings on in this part of town. If it worked the way I wanted it to, the Thayan would suspect someone in that part of town of putting up a fiery Halruaan skyship. If it sparked a war that deposed the Raksasha, all the better. It didn't quite work out that way though.

Once outside, the explosion detonated in the skies over the city, and I was immediately scryed upon by none other than the red wizard herself. I rolled my eyes and listened to the illusory image she had present herself to us. I was less inclined to sit around and wait for her babel on about how wrong it was, so I disjuncted the image and the scrying device and proceeded to open a gate to the next leg in our journey. While I was opening the gate, her image reappeared and she cast some sort of necromantic spell at us. Just from the feel of the spell hitting our death wards and other protections, it was powerful enough to make life quite miserable for us. We quickly hopped through to the other side and took a breather for a few hours to let everyone recover and replenish their spells and prayers. The giant sphere that was eternity's doorstep hovered a mile off in the distance, taking up the whole horizon as far as the eye could see. Once inside, we'd likely end up talking a baern. If things went sour, the more preparation we had the better. Besides, while everyone was resting, I spent my time conversing with the Red Wizard back in Death Heart. She was a formidable opponent, and I wasn't hesitant to let her know that. Besides, I doubted Mystra would look favorably on her servants trying to provoke other practitioners of the art into a fight.

After having sufficiently rested and prepared for the next event in our journey, we got closer to the doorstep of eternity, the resting place of lost souls, and the playground of the baernaloth. Entering through the outside of the sphere, we stepped into a room with three doors. Each door seemed to hold a different locale on the plane, ranging from cities to jungle forests. The sphere itself seemed to have separated me from all of Mystra's might, but the weave still existed, even if I couldn't feel Mystra's presence in it. Aidan and Toras felt the same way, and we knew we were in for a lot of trouble if this turned into a series of battles. Fyrehowl, much like I could still feel the weave, was still able to sense the planes whispering to her. Fortunately they were in the mood to help and directed us into the door with the city.

As we approached the gates the city, there were several armed groups of guards standing at regular intervals around the walls. One of them stopped us and told us that the

city was under quarantine until *the gods* lifted the curse from them. Not entirely sure why they didn't have their own clerics cure these people who were sick, we pressed for more information, but he was reluctant to say. After much debate and talking, we were able to get the name of a priestess within the city we could speak with if we decided to enter inside. On a hunch that they didn't know of magic or the arcane and divine powers those in our party possessed, I sent a sending to the priest, knowing that if he responded he'd likely be it the know. If I didn't get a response, it was quite likely and very possible that that wouldn't know what to think. I'm not one to play at being a god, but if it ends up getting Nisha back to me, I'd be willing to put myself through an awful lot. Fortunately, that wasn't necessary as the priestess did respond, although he claimed I was a priest from over the seas, as he hadn't heard my voice before. A priest, huh? I guess I could play at being a priest. I served Mystra, not exactly as a priest, but I could fake it if I had to. She told us to meet her at the temple after evening service, and he would explain everything to us.

Informing the guards of our intentions, they let us proceed into the city, swearing an oath to shoot us down if we tried to leave the city before the curse was lifted. As we entered into the city, a few people tried to run out behind us, intent on escaping while the guards were occupied with us, but they had prepared for that contingency. Arrows thudded hollowly into bodies as they were pinned to the door behind us. I did my best to ignore what was going on, unable to take much more senseless death until I had Nisha back in my arms, safe and sound. Proceeding through the city, we made our way up to the temple in the center of town, by the statue of the Shepards that guarded its entrance, and inside. The place made me feel rather queasy, but I was able to withstand the intense feeling of evil that washed over the place. The Asura and our dustmen companions were looking a bit pale, which for a dusty says a lot, and so decided to remain outside, where people seemed to pay them no attention at all.

Inside the temple, we waited patiently at the back for the service to come to a conclusion. As we waited, we watched the high priestess of the temple mark an individual or two with a blue smudge on their foreheads. Each person marked, fell to their knees in what appeared to be apology and depression, and mumbled prayers under their breath as the rest of the congregation left. Outside, the Asura continued to examine the temple itself, and told us of the statues that were hiding under illusions outside that covered the majority of the building. This only seemed to cement our idea that the Baern were somehow using this place in some sort of unholy act.

Once everyone had left the building, the high priest came over and introduced herself to us. Seeing that we had no place to stay, and that we were here to help, she made arrangements for us to stay at the house of one of the recently chosen people. Seeing as how they were chosen to placate the gods as a sacrifice they would likely have a free bed for the evening. I cringed a bit, obviously a little disconcerted at the idea of sleeping in a condemned person's bed, but accepted the offer graciously none the less. After all, being caught outside in the streets after dark wasn't a good idea unless you wanted to join the ranks of those chosen.

We picked up the Asura and the Dustmen from outside and made our way over to the room we'd be using as residence for the evening. The man who answered the door was expecting us and welcomed us as though nothing was amiss and a member of his family wasn't going to be sacrificed this very evening. We spent some time talking with

the little boy and his father, telling him made up fanciful stories of the land across the sea, while at the same time remaining very neutral on matters of religious or political importance. This kid seemed to have a certain knowledgeable spark about him, and he could even see the Asura, which was a bit of a change. No one else could see her, why could he? In the pits of our stomachs, we knew this kid was next on the list to be sacrificed. He was abnormally inquisitive and just seemed too bright and attentive to really belong here.

Going to our room, everyone but Aidan stayed up the night, listening to or scrying on the scenes outside, trying to get a glimpse of the monsters that were taking these people apart. At some point, both Clueless and I scryed on Nisha, Clueless managing to get a little bit more of an image out of the attempt due to the surreptitious way in which he scryed on her. Apparently some place with large glassy black walls. It wasn't much to go on, but it was at least something. Perhaps it was the same temple that various traitors who believed in other gods were sent to from the city. It wouldn't be that farfetched for the Baern or someone similar to have taken an interest in torturing my wife, just to get under my skin.

The next morning, we found that there was an addition to the family, another young child, about the same as the boy we met the previous evening. Everyone there seemed to think that she had always been there. We didn't really question this, as if Baernaloth were involved here, then there was sure to be something wicked going on. We told the father that we'd take them both to services that morning while he opened the shop. Going back to the temple, we left them sitting in a row near the front with a few members of our own party, just for protection. I took a seat in the front with the other priests, noticeably standing out from the rest of them, as the services began.

As they progressed, the high priestess decided it would be a nice touch to have the priest from across the seas perform a small sacrifice for them, to illustrate that he was here to help. Not wanting to upset anyone there, or to blow my cover, I consented reluctantly. Glancing at the alter where I was to sacrifice the goat they had brought, I saw the four statues from yesterday staring back at me. Mumbling an apology to Mystra, which I hoped she heard, I turned around to address the audience. In a loud voice I told them "In my service to the gods, I have seen this rite performed many different ways. What I shall show you is just one of the many ways we praise the gods in our land." Turning around again, and bowing to the statues, as I got down on one knee, I felt another of those sickly sensations washing over me, making me cringe and my tail hug my leg. Raising the ceremonial dagger an assistant handed me, I held it aloft before the statues and continued, "In honor of the gods, in the hopes that we may be forgiven."

Standing up, I slit the goat's throat, and shuddered as the warm blood sprayed forth onto my hands, making me feel queasy. I closed my eyes and finished the sacrifice, leaving the bloody corpse of the goat sitting on the alter, my hands and the dagger coated in its blood. The high priestess came over to me, and following her lead, I cupped my hands and took some of the blood spilled on the alter. Raising it up, I put it before the muzzle of one of the statues, closing my eyes and sobbing inwardly as I felt totally vile and robbed. As some sort of phantom started to lap at the blood cupped there, I felt a long thing tongue extend and curl around my hand, holding it in place while it drank its fill, even though the statue hadn't moved in the least. Fighting back the urge to wretch, the tongue finally let go, flicking a few drops of blood across my face as it retreated. I

breathed a heavy sigh of relief and continued to follow the high priestesses examples. Taking yet more blood in her hand, we ventured out to the front of the temple, smearing the blood across the outstretched hands of the shepherdess that guarded the temple.

Once back inside, I cleaned my hands and proceeded to light the candles as I was asked to, while the priestess began marking people in the audience for sacrifice. My heart practically jumped out of its chest as she picked the child we knew to have a gift. It was inevitable that the Baern would do something like this. They love to see people suffer in agony, or vent their rage. I was already doing both, so what more they expected to bleed out of me was beyond my ability to predict. As the service drew to a close, the condemned people were gathered up and left to pray in the temple, while the high priestess gave us leave to venture around the city. I asked her a few questions about the other temple outside the city where the sick minds were sent, and she described it for me. Sure enough, black glassy walls. We now knew where we needed to go, but first, we needed to destroy this belief in the faux-gods the Baern had set themselves up as. At the very least, we needed to offer them a chance, and if possible save the boy.

Taking our time, we waited until the evening, when we returned to the temple, intent on picking up the child and gating out of the city a few miles. As we got there though, we learned that the child had already run away along with one of the other condemned. The high priestess asked me to help, and I agreed to do what I could. She reached out and put a small gray mark on my forehead. Presumably that would keep me safe the horrors that sought out the condemned, but somehow I doubted it. As a group, we looked to Fyrehowl for a bit of guidance, and asking the planes she gave us a direction to go. Running off in that direction, the rest of the party turned themselves invisible to hopefully avoid being seen by the creatures that would soon be stalking those still on the streets. As we were running, it became known to us that we were being followed. The high priestess obviously didn't trust me, or wanted to see my actions when I found the child and his co-conspirator. As we ran, I darted in and out of buildings and alleys, changing my shape numerous times to confuse them. Eventually, the scry singled me out and I changed back into my normal form, still running through the city behind the rest of my party, intent on getting to the child and getting us out of the city.

As I emerged in the courtyard where everyone had gathered, I could see the fiends attacking the child and his accomplice from the sky and the ground, guarded closes by my friends. As the others continued to attack from invisibility and the servants of the gods fell to the ground, I looked at the scene in mock horror. Turning towards the priestess and her companions who had just run up behind me, I said "Run! I shall sacrifice myself to placate the new gods that have come to declare ware. Run, for the sake of your gods!" Apparently she believed me and stopped dead in her tracks, mumbling something about the god wars as her and her companions turned around and ran towards the temples. As the last of the fiends fell, I opened a gate to the outside of the city, a few miles distant in case the guards happened to investigate further. Once that was complete, I summoned a meteor swarm to scour the rest of the fiends in the area from the sky and the ground, leaving all the building untouched, but the road scorched as though a might battle had been fought there. On the edge of the fountain, I left a copy of the book that led us here, in the hopes it would enlighten a few, and stepped through the gate. Once outside, Clueless conjured up a storm of unbelievable size and magnitude. I was all for showing off the power of the gods to cover our tracks, but destroying the city wasn't

exactly my intent. I suppose clueless just didn't realize the extent of power that spell would provide. Going into a mist form, we all floated along the road toward the black glass tower way off in the distance. Even at our rate, it would take six hours to get there. At least in that amount of time we'd know what were planning on doing when we arrived.

The tower itself was guarded by a force wall, which I dared not breach with magic, knowing who lived there. Instead, I teleported us inside, and fortunately for us, we made it without incident. On the door was the phrase "Touch the door and speak your name. Ask permission to enter, and at the sufferance of the father you will meet the son or the servants of the father." Knowing this was the last leg of our journey, I pondered the possibility of this all being a trap, and a voice spoke in my head, which sounded much like the child's voice from the bag. I turned and looked at everyone else, who had apparently heard the same thing. Clueless reached inside to the bag of holding to find the child inside, but came up empty handed. It was at that moment we realized that the child was someone who found amusement in our antics, and someone with a good deal more power than we suspected to begin with. With a sigh at having been fooled yet again, I pressed my hand to the door and spoke my name, before the barrier became intangible and I stepped inside.

The furnishings inside were elaborate, much like we expected to find in any upscale home of evil. We waited around a few moments, and just as we were about to try our luck with one of the many doors exiting this foyer, an ancient looking arcanaloth stepped out from a different door. The good news for the moment was that it wasn't a Baern, even though these creatures were the next most distasteful. We took the time to explain to him what our purpose here was, and how much we knew of the outside world, in the hopes that we could trade this information for Nisha. Apparently the 'loth had been kept here in the castle, at the behest of both the baern and the rest of his kind, to watch after *junior*, the littlest baernaloth. It was a matter of training him to understand the planes and their connections, and to amuse him with new toys and feelings so that he could grow into the vile monsters that we had seen before. The only exception being that this one was a sick attempt at progeny and breeding, while the others were spawned from unholy depths of evil in the planes.

Eventually it all came down to one question, one that we asked the arcanaloth, and the same question asked to us in return: what do you want? I spelled it out for him in detail, the one time I would ever answer that question to anyone in such a position to abuse my answer. In return for Nisha, I had to leave something. Specifically what was up to me, but it had to be of value, or importance. I had left so many things here, from the time robbed to me, expectations, naivety, you name it. Apparently some of my rambling pleased him for he accepted the deal if we would also provide him with news of the outside.

As he brought us into the room where he was keeping Nisha, I was abhorred. She was in small pieces, glued into a tree of sorts. I don't pretend to understand petitioners and death, but that had to hurt. I closed my eyes and looked away as the 'loth began the process of reassembling her from the tree, which protested angrily as he did so. All the while, we told the stories of the towers, Vorkanis' rise to power, and of his return. Leaving out key details about ourselves, we painted the picture he wanted to see of Vorkanis, offering up everything we could think to tell him.

When it was finally over, I had Nisha's petitioner unconscious in my arms. Now that I had her, I was ready to leave, and hopefully we wouldn't have a problem with that. The 'loth excused himself for a moment to ask his charge for permission to let us leave. When he returned a few moments later, he nodded and said we could leave. Exactly how was left to question. As we were pondering this in our heads, Nisha and I were teleported outside the sphere into the negative energy plane. I leaned Nisha up against me and quickly cast a protection spell over us to keep us safe, while I looked around and tried to figure out where the rest of my friends were. I waited a few minutes, just in case Clueless was being his usual difficult self and bartering for more information, before I began to get worried. Pacing around nervously, I started steeling my nerves to march back into that sphere and retrieve them, hopefully with a bit more of an idea on where the exit would be. As I was recalling the spells necessary for this trip, I got a message over the sending stones, finding out that everyone else was okay, if not a bit miffed at having to deal with the 'loth, yet again. I let out a sigh and got Nisha and myself to Tradegate, where we then went to Ysgard, and my tower. Relaxing there until Nisha's petitioner could recover the strength to be resurrected, we waited patiently.

As we were waiting for Nisha to recover, Fyrehowl went back to Sigil, paranoid that someone would summon her using that book of derelict magic she had entrusted her true name to. The following day, she apparently stepped through a portal and was whisked away to some prime material plane, the subject of some sort of summoning and binding spell. While I was waiting by Nisha's side, my ear twitched as she called out my name. A string of words, followed by her true name spilled into my mind. As my dazed mind parsed them, I realized what needed to be done, and we all set out to find her. Fortunately, before we managed to get very far, she was returned, although understandably nervous, and told us to meet her in Sigil. We still had a Nisha to revive before we could do that though.

When the time came to bring her back, I was trembling nervously, waiting for the 'loth to have renigged on his deal. Fortunately, everything worked as planned. Nisha's petitioner disappeared in a flash and a heartbeat later was replaced with the real Nisha. I let out a heavy sigh as Nisha immediately latched herself on my neck, hugging me fiercely and nearly breaking me in two. I continued to hold her softly, and just sat there, basking in her presence, as he recovered from the shock and memory of all that happened to her. When she was calm enough to let go of me, I told her of our trip to get her back, leaving out only the details that would upset her. Once we had finished our respective stories, we all decided we should get back to Sigil and see what disasters had befallen in who knows how much time had passed. Stepping back outside, we made our way to Tradegate, and then back to the Portal Jammer.

I had a letter waiting for me, apparently from Shemeska, who was off on business and would be stopping by in the next day or so. In the meantime, Fyrehowl desperately wanted to tell us something, but appeared as though she were under some for Gaes and unable to do so. Suspecting the worst, we proceeded to get her drunk on fey wine, and read her thoughts, so she wouldn't have to tell us. The creature that had summoned her was not a second rate wizard, but one of the Baernaloth who wanted to see that Shemeska was protected. Exactly from what didn't make sense, but having no choice but to agree to her terms of service, she did so. At least now that we knew she needed protecting, we could provide it.

While getting Fyrehowl drunk, Nisha decided that alcohol would be a fun thing to play around with. Given her recent experiences, I didn't begrudge her that, but the fey wine was probably the wrong thing to start with. After taking a shot, she came over and kissed me. The next thing I remember, aside from the taste of the wine splashing against the back of my throat, was waking up naked with Nisha on the roof of the inn, right in the middle of the deck of the spell jamming ship. Fortunately, we were covered up in a blanket, and judging from the pounding of my head, I doubted that either one of us was coherent enough to think of such a thing, so it had to have been someone else in the party. Either Clueless, or Aidan, as Fyrehowl was too drunk to think much of it either.

As I was sitting down to write this after returning from the gatehouse and a talk with its occupants there, I came across a sensory stone in my pocket. I picked it up, needing a distraction from having dealt with Shemeska's moving into our inn earlier that afternoon. I rubbed my thumb over to the smooth surface and watched as various scenes and things flooded into my mind. Skipping over the minor details, I got to what had happened last night. Curiosity got the better of me I suppose. I watched as images, feelings, and sensations washed over me from the previous night, and I could feel the edge of being tipsy returning as I drank the wine Nisha had forced on me. After that unwitting drink, we both for some reason decided it was a good idea to use the catapult on top of the inn to throw pies at people. I suspect it was all Nisha's idea, but we both seemed equally at blame in the chaos that ensued. Lacking the actual parts to make the catapult work like a normal one, I substituted a telekinesis spell in their place. Between us, we managed to deck Toras with two pies as he wandered off somewhere, and also got Fyrehowl as well as she leaned out a window to watch. I think I managed to get Clueless at some point as well, but whoever it was, was trying to be sneaky and invisible. I'm sure there were some innocent bystanders who got hit as well, but most of it was lost to a kiss Nisha planted on me as we ran out of pies. Within the span of a few moments, we were both wearing nothing at all and making passionate love on the deck of the ship, in plain view of anyone able to get up that high. Nisha's legs were and tail were curled around me, as my tail reciprocated the action, affording us a little bit of privacy, but not enough. Even now as I write this, a warm blush returns to my cheeks at the thought of such careless audacity, but I regret none of it. The whole act ended in a fit of laughter, as we tried to get up, but found ourselves stuck together, tumbling back to the ground. We kissed and hugged, laughing and generally enjoying each other's presence before we both fell asleep in that pose.

I'm thinking I'll have to share this particular sensory stone with Nisha, I think she'd enjoy it. For one in a long time I end on a much happier note. I have Nisha back, and my world is complete once again. Let's hope it remains that way. May Mystra's smile looking lovingly upon you.