

The Abridged Story of "Betrayal In Antara"
Compiled by Goatmeal (2012–2023)
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INTRODUCTION

When Sierra On-Line released "Betrayal At Krondor" on diskette in 1993, sales didn't warrant a sequel; in early 1994, they returned the gaming rights back to Raymond E. Feist, creator of the literary world of Midkemia and its Riftwar Cycle. Upon release of the CD-ROM version of the game in the latter half of 1994, however, Krondor sold tremendously well—well enough to revive Sierra's interest in creating a sequel. Unfortunately for Sierra, they lost out on reacquiring the rights to gaming company 7th Level. Undeterred, Sierra set about making a second Krondor-like game that used a wholly-new gaming world...

The spiritual successor "Betrayal In Antara" was the result.

While Krondor used a modified version of Dynamix's flight sim engine, Antara incorporated elements of Sierra's SCI engine. Using one of the various fan-made SCI programs (such as SCI Resource Viewer) allows one to view and/or export many of the game's assets, including the text. Unfortunately, the resulting SCI msg files containing the text are mostly a jumble of game code: variables and trigger conditions structured in column format. Here's an example:

41100.msg

```
0 0 0 1 99 IF GETSTATE[BFLAG[69]] == TRUE AND GETSTATE[CFLAG[10]] == 4 THEN
      IF GETSTATE[BFLAG[250]] == FALSE THEN
        RUNINSET[41100, 1, 14, 1, 0, 0, 0]
      ELSE IF GETSTATE[KEYWORD[173]] == DISCUSSED THEN
        RUNINTERROG[10855]
      ELSE
        RUNINSET[41100, 1, 14, 2, 0, 0, 0]
      ELSE
        RUNSCRIPT[41995, 0, 0, 0, 0]
1 14 2 1 97 Aren rapped on the door. After waiting a few minutes, he said, "This house matches the
      description Naomi gave us, but I guess Noal isn't home. Good thing I already added the
      nutrients to the garden. If we had hung around waiting for Noal's permission, the plants
      might have died."
1 14 1 1 97 Aren knocked and waited. "No one's answering. From Naomi's description, I'd guess this
      is her cousin Noal's house. Naomi said we should go ahead and add the nutrients to his
      garden even if he wasn't home. I'm sure he won't mind..."
```

Next came ordering the text to match events as they happen during each of the game's nine chapters. This was made all the more difficult because the msg files are not divided by chapter; instead, each individual msg file contains all the text pertaining to one unique character or individual event for the entire game. While some msg files contain text for only one chapter, others contain several chapters' worth of text within their file.

For example, the player can encounter the character of Scott Gratsi in five of the game's nine chapters. There are not five separate msg files for each chapter. Instead, the text for all five chapters relating to this character is located within a single file, 10845.msg. Because you can select topics from previous chapters, or ignore earlier topics then select them later in the game, this makes sense from a programming perspective—but it certainly can be quite confusing to interpret!

Add to that, unused text lurks hidden within the files as well. While some text messages are merely alternate versions (similar to what was eventually used), in other cases entire concepts and ideas were completely discarded. I also created an "ultimate walkthrough" during this project to ensure the chronology/timeline of this document was accurate to the finished game.

In short, the extracted game text wasn't easy to read or collate. Much time was spent deciphering, translating, reorganizing, and formatting it into some semblance of a comprehensive, yet readable, document.

This PDF document is the result.

— The Abridged Story —

As presented here, this is an abridged compilation of the game's overarching main story and various side/"fetch" quests. The following types of text have been omitted:

- *Repetitive text relating to in-game chores and tasks (hunger/eating, fatigue/sleeping, buying/selling, fast travel, playing cards, etc.)*
- *Repetitive text relating to battles and fights (preparation, winning, losing, dying, etc.)*
- *Any text that does not inform or advance the storyline (places that cannot be revisited, locations closed due to nighttime, etc.)*

— For the Video Cutscenes that Bookend each Chapter —

The video cutscenes in the finished game consist of digitized paintings by artist Don Hazeltine combined with voiceovers, sound effects, and music; an occasional zoom-in/zoom-out was added for dramatic effect. Relying only on the in-game text as presented would have reduced the video portions to dry transcripts containing little-to-none of the context the artwork and audio components added to the experience.

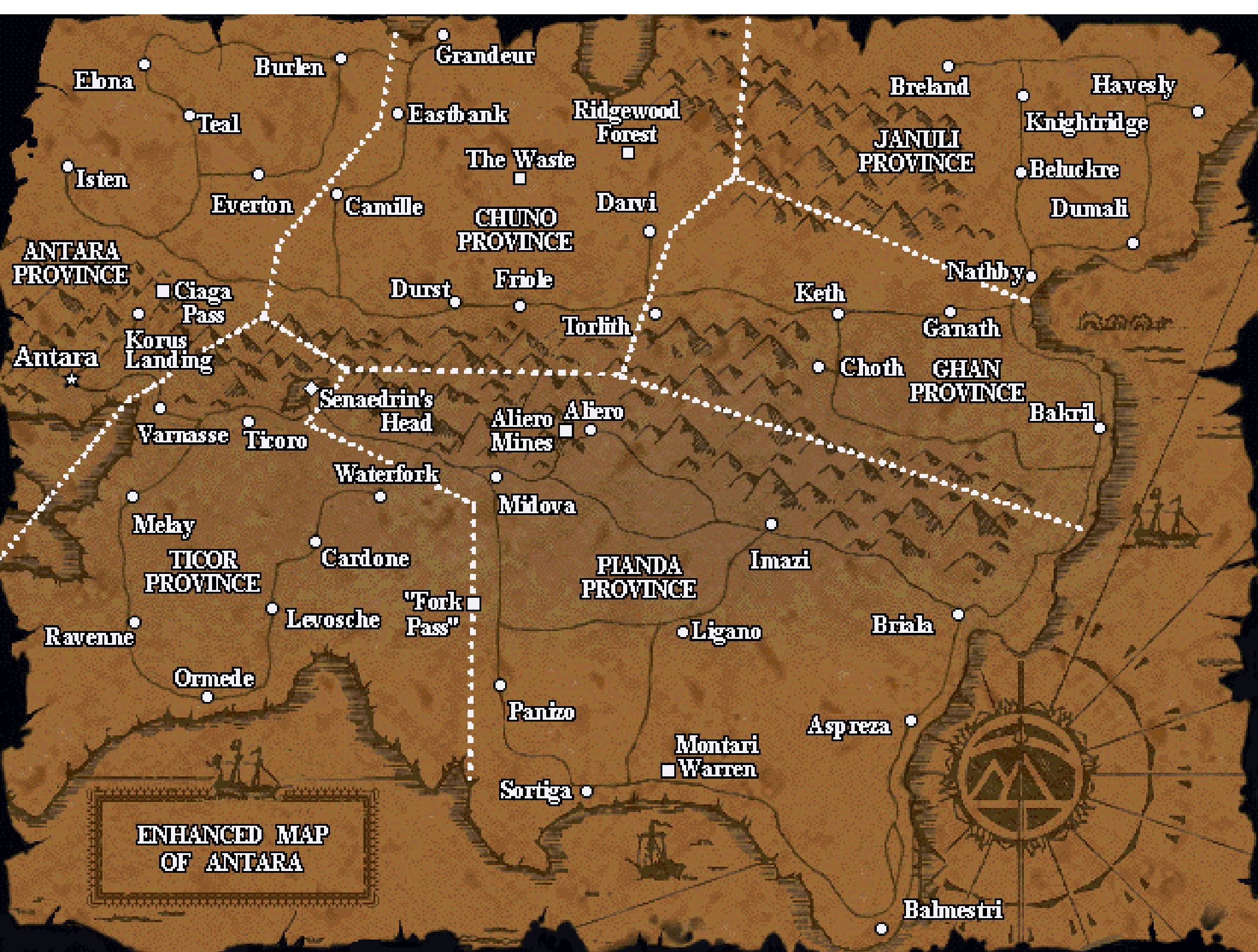
In order to better convey the narratives expressed through these static images and audio cues, I have taken it upon myself to describe the sights and sounds of the video for the reader. By elaborating upon the story and concepts presented therein, my contributions can rightly be considered "expanded" fan-fiction. However, I believe I've done a fair job of keeping it accurate and true to the world of Antara and the game's writing style...

Raal the Grrrlf's voice actor extended his consonant r's as a guttural "r-r-r" trill sound, much like a cat's purr. While this speech pattern is not reflected anywhere in the game's text for Raal, I have chosen to include it in my expanded cutscenes for his speech.

In the Epilogue, I have also formatted the text to match the Wraith voice actor's unusual speech pattern to demonstrate the creature's alien origins.

— Choice of Typeface —

The font used for "Betrayal In Antara – The Official Strategy Guide" by Joe Grant Bell [Prima Publishing, 1997] was Garamond, and I have chosen to continue the tradition with this document.



ENHANCED MAP
OF ANTARA

"Betrayal In Antara" (Game Manual, pg 42)
Writing Credits

Betrayal In Antara
Sierra
(C) 1997

Peter Sarrett
– Designer, Game Programmer, Dialogue Writer/Voice Direction
Susan Frischer
– Dialogue Writer/Voice Direction
Cynthia Vanous
– Manual and Supplementary Game Text Writer
Jennifer Gibbs and Robert Apsel
– Additional Lore Writers

"Betrayal In Antara" (Game Manual, pgs 40–41)
"A Brief History of Antara"

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTARA

Sit a while, traveler, and share a cup of ale with us. How can it be that you have not heard the tale of how our Empire came to be the fine place of civilization and ease that it is today? No matter. If you are to journey through the heart of the Empire, there are many things you will need to know...

Many, many generations ago, more years than a man can count, our ancestors held this land. They farmed here, fished here, hunted here, and lived peacefully with each other. But then the Grrrlf fell upon us. The furred monsters swept across the land, killing without discrimination and without mercy. They drove us from our homes, across the deserts and mountains and oceans to safety.

And so we lived for many years, exiled from our homeland, until the day that we discovered that the magical forces of the world could be tamed and used. Armed with this knowledge, the new mages joined with massive human armies, and they marched upon the Grrrlf and regained their lands. The Grrrlf were driven into the mountains, and the Shepherds were set to watch them.

Many more generations passed, and the mages grew in power and stature, some ruling as kings in their own right. But a great magical disaster brought the golden age of magic to a halt. Seeing the destruction that a capricious mage could wreak, the common people began to fear them, and drove all mages from the cities and towns.

The provinces, now governing themselves by mundane means, set to bickering and warring amongst themselves. This continued for decades, until the ruler of the Antaran province offered the banished mages amnesty. He gathered them to his side, and (thus well-armed) declared himself Emperor. The surrounding provinces were soon subdued, increasing the fledgling Empire's lands.

And so the Empire has flourished through the careful guidance of Emperors and Empresses, ever since that day. The day-to-day governing of the Empire has been relegated to representatives and councils, since no one man or woman could possibly oversee the entire realm without assistance. The Jaegars, the oldest families of the Empire, provide all of the necessary administrative and managerial functions of the royal house. The grand council – called the Shira – creates the laws of the Empire and resolves trade disagreements. Lest they become too powerful, the Shira is closely watched by the Jaegars.

The Imperial Consuls act as the Emperor's eyes, ears, and voice in every major city of the Empire. The Governors of each city manage the day-to-day affairs and make certain that the laws of the Empire are heeded. The Guilds manage the tradesmen of the realm; therefore, the Guilds are powerful indeed. And the Church of the Triune watches over all, each of its branches representing a different aspect of the three-faced god: Kor (the champion of justice, knowledge, and duty), Senaedrin (the lady of compassion, simplicity, and healing), and Henne (the true child of innocence, creativity, laughter, and wonder).

But know this also, traveler: the Empire is not as it used to be. Bribery and corruption are rife at every level of government and trade. The common man has little voice in the land today. And matters have become even worse since the Feeblepox descended upon us. Two neighboring lands saw the decimation of Imperial troops by the disease, and they mounted a fierce offensive which claimed an entire province of Antaran land. With few troops to defend against them, pirates have also made an appearance, becoming a very real danger upon the seas. And their land-bound cousins the bandits now stalk the woods between villages.

This is a dangerous time to be journeying, traveler. Best of luck to you in your quest, and perhaps one day you will return to this inn to tell us tales of your own.

— Prologue —

The attack was brutal, without provocation.

William Escobar, youngest son of Pianda's House Escobar, had just fallen asleep in his hammock when warnings sounded from above: pirates were boarding the 'Fair Current.' Racing up to the main deck, he saw the pirate ship 'Bloody Dirk' already docked with their vessel and the fight was well underway. Despite their best efforts at repelling the invaders, however, the crew of the 'Fair Current' were sailors, not swordsmen.

William grabbed the hilt of his sword and prepared to fight for his life when a firebomb ignited. The explosion rocked the ship, knocking everyone to the deck. The use of an incendiary surprised William, as most of the recent pirate activity in the area usually left the ships intact. After all, it's far easier to steal from ships again if they are seaworthy; sunken ships can carry no more cargo.

But this was no typical firebomb: covered with gourds of Silvertale fish oil, a liquid known for being both highly flammable and highly viscous, the force of the explosion sent the deadly containers in all directions. Upon impact with parts of the ship—as well as unfortunate sailors and pirates—they broke open, coating all nearby surfaces with the thick, clinging oil. The oil promptly ignited, and within moments, the ship—along with those unfortunate sailors and pirates—became a raging inferno. Once the stunned pirates realized what had happened, they scrambled to their feet and began a hasty retreat. Not expecting this turn of events, they made getting off the burning ship as their top priority; along the way, the pirates gathered whatever cargo, treasure, and burlas they could.

As the fire continued to spread, some of the sailors tried dousing the flames with bottles of Senwater, but to no avail. While others were using much of the ship's precious Senwater reserves to tend to sword wounds and burn victims, there just wasn't enough of the magical healing fluid aboard the ship to combat a fire this size.

Acknowledging the futility of their fight, the crew abandoned their ship to a thirsty blaze. The crew... and two passengers. Strangers tossed by fate into the same small lifeboat.

Though the air was heavy with thick, black smoke and the heat from scorching flames, William managed to make his way to one of the few functioning lifeboats. There, he found a fellow passenger struggling to release it: a shorter, rotund joyman named Gregor who often performed for House Sheffield. While visiting his fiancée over the last few weeks, William occasionally saw Gregor around Castle Sheffield, but had never spoken to the man beyond a few polite and customary acknowledgements. 'Well, it looks like we're going to get to know each other real fast,' William thought as they quickly prepared the lifeboat, climbed aboard, and released it from the burning vessel.

With Gregor in the forward position and William in the aft, the lifeboat hit the water and bobbed a few times before stabilizing. Each grabbed their oars and began rowing as fast

and as hard as they could—anything to put distance between themselves and the burning ship. Though William was in much better physical condition than his portly companion, he was amazed that Gregor could hold his own; William figured that when staring death in the face, people can do amazing things.

After a few minutes, William looked up to see the wolf-like karn figurehead on the ship's bow bathed in red flames and surrounded in black smoke, giving it an otherworldly appearance. The remaining survivors grabbed onto any floating debris they could, trying desperately to stay above water and swim towards shore. William thought he saw a few other lifeboats escaping the ship, but with the smoke billowing across the water's surface, he couldn't have been certain. He gave a quick prayer to each of the Three Faces of the Triune for the sailors to make it to safety. In the distance, the 'Bloody Dirk' was moving further away from the Brialan coastline and heading north towards Ghan Province.

From his position at the back of the tiny boat, William kept looking over his right shoulder and past his furiously-rowing companion toward land—anything to avoid watching the 'Fair Current' going down in flames. With the pirate ship moving on, William thought there was a chance that the two would actually survive this ordeal.

Desperately rowing toward safety...

With as much confidence in his voice as he could muster, William called out to Gregor, "We're gonna make it."

...and pursued by something out of a nightmare.

A large shadow passed overhead; William thought it odd, since the winds were blowing the thick smoke of the sinking vessel away from them towards the south. Turning away from the Brialan shoreline, he began searching the sky to find its source. Any confidence William had of surviving immediately drained from his body; a sense of dread overtook him as his blood chilled. Having frequented enough taverns and inns throughout Antara during his short life to have heard every tall tale told by joymen, sailors, and adventurers several times over, nothing prepared William for what he saw looming high above them.

A massive flying beast, the likes of which William had never seen before, was circling back around, focusing on the small lifeboat. The closest thing to which he could compare it was a TrKaa, but this creature was far more fearsome: its large beak had the sharp hook common to other predatory birds, as well as imposing ear tufts on either side of its head; however, the torso had features that were more human-like. Each of the massive wings had a large, single claw halfway down, while its feet were long claws ending in sharp talons the size of daggers. How such a creature like that could even get off the ground was a question best left for scholars, but at the moment, that was the least of William's concerns.

When the creature let out an unnatural screech, William's already racing heart began to beat even faster. Just as the thought of imminent death mere minutes before had inspired Gregor to row faster than he ever thought he could, now it was William's turn.

— Chapter 1 – Start —

A rocky shore near the village of Briala.

Aren Cordelaine came here to fish many a balmy summer afternoon away. Here Aren found the peace and quiet to dream of distant lands, mighty heroes, and exploits far more daring than those told over mugs of ale at the Spitting Lion. Yet...

Having already dozed off for the third time that afternoon atop a rocky outcrop east of Briala, Aren began gathering his belongings from his favorite fishing spot. Catching fish certainly wasn't keeping him awake today, he thought to himself. As seagulls continued to squawk overhead, Aren had nothing to show for the day's efforts except a tired casting arm.

Climbing down from his perch, he was startled to hear an unnatural screech coming from somewhere down the beach—almost like a feral beast, but yet somehow... not?—along with the metallic clank of a sword.

"Hey, what was that?" *Aren asked himself.*

...this very afternoon, the first great adventure of his life was leaping toward him.

With knife in hand, he ran down the path leading to the beach to investigate whatever he might find. Startled by what he saw, Aren let out a gasp:

One man was sprawled motionless on the beach, while a young noble tried to fend off an enormous flying beast, the likes of which Aren had never seen.

The noble held his weapon in the stance of a skilled swordsman, but it was obvious to Aren that he was tired and fatigued. The creature swooped down again, this time knocking the young man to the ground; his sword now lay in the sand a foot or two away from him.

Aren could see that the man was losing.

Drawing his scaling knife, Aren charged forward. "Aaaaahhhhhhh!"

Aren's yell and sudden appearance startled the beast, but its surprise was only momentary.

The nobleman lifted his head up from the sand and tried to wave away the newcomer. "Get back!" *William said.* "It'll kill you too!"

Aren ignored the warning. As he bent to support the wounded stranger, the beast swooped upon him. A swipe from its massive foreleg sent Aren sailing across the sand. Dazed, Aren looked for an escape from the beast's attack—but there was nowhere to run. *The beast was circling back to finish him off.*

Aren turned away, shielding his head with his arms as terror overwhelmed him. Terror—and something else.

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!" Aren shouted in fear, holding both hands in front of him in a futile attempt shield the impending attack. In those precious moments between life and death, something awakened inside Aren: his hands began to glow a dull green, then a bright-white green, like pieces of iron heated in a smithy's forge. An ear-piercing sound shattered all of the noises around him, and a magical blast of green energy shot forth from his hands.

The beam of magical energy hit the flying creature, and it, too, started to glow green before disintegrating in a flash before Aren's eyes.

Still breathing heavily, he looked down at his shaking hands as the green glow began to dissipate. Startled by what had just occurred, Aren asked himself, "What happened?" Then, seeing the wide trench of scorched beach ahead of him, he gasped. He did that? Aren looked back down at his hands again, which had returned to their normal color.

Nearby, the stranger knelt by his dying companion.

Though he was about to meet the Triune, Gregor was desperately trying to speak. "Con... Con..."

"Don't talk," William said, doing his best to reassure the dying man. "We'll get help."

But the prone man knew it was too late. With his last strength, he pressed a medallion into the noble's hand. ***Gregor got out, "The Consort..." with his final breath before finally succumbing to his injuries.***

Holding up the medallion, William gave it a careful inspection. "Hmm..." he thought to himself, flipping it over in his palm to inspected the other side.

"Is this worth a man's life?" William wondered to himself as he stood up. Adjusting his regal attire as best he could, it was a natural reflex from years of childhood training. Tradition, not to mention his father, would expect nothing less of an Escobar.

Pocketing the medallion, the young noble walked to where Aren stood, still stunned, near a glassy trough in the sand. ***"That was some trick," he told Aren.***

Aren remained dumfounded. "How... what did I do?"

"For one thing, you probably saved my life!" William said.

"What was that thing?" Aren asked, even more confused.

"I don't know," William replied. "But it dropped some kind of firebomb on our ship. We had to take to the lifeboats. It seemed to take a particular interest in Gregor, and I had the bad luck to share a boat with him."

Aren motioned to the dead man lying on the beach. "That was Gregor?"

"Yes. He gave me this before he died." ***William pulled the bronze medallion out of his pocket to show Aren. "Any idea what it is? If it's a thing of magic, I thought you might recognize it."***

"Me?" ***Aren asked. "I'm just a steward and stablehand at my father's inn!"***

William said, "Then how do you account for..."

Aren cut him off. "I don't know!"

William thought for a moment. "Hmmm. I've heard that the gift of magic can come on strong, without warning..."

"Magic?" ***Aren asked. "Me?" In a hundred lifetimes, Aren would never have thought the Triune had a life planned for him as a magic user.***

"What's your name?" ***William asked the young man.***

Aren, remembering his place, promptly bowed. "I am Aren Cordelaine of Briala, milord."

William smiled warmly. "Well, Aren, my name is William Escobar of Panizo, and I am in your debt." Now it was William's turn to bow to Aren. "I consider it my duty as the fourth son of the house of Escobar to help you with this... this... latent talent of yours."

"Uh, that's all right," ***Aren did his best to politely decline, still trying to understand what had just happened a few minutes ago. If he ignored it, he could go back to being the old, non-magic using Aren Cordelaine that he was before... couldn't he?*** "I really should be getting back to the inn now..."

William wouldn't take no for an answer. "Don't be silly. You can return with me to my father's house and I'll introduce you to our mage. He will teach you to harness and control your magic... before you hurt yourself," he said with a little laugh.

Feeling as if he had just stepped in a larger world, Aren relented. "As you wish, milord. Though, if you please, I'd like to go home first to tell my parents."

"Of course," ***William said as the two new friends shook hands. "But stop with this 'milord' business, Aren. I make it a policy to dispense with such formalities when someone has just saved my life!"***

Gathering Aren's fishing pole and other belongings, the two headed west towards Briala, eager to reach town before the sun set upon the day.

100.msg – *Chapter 1\The Adventure Begins*

Topic: The Adventure Begins

William: "Panizo it is then. All set?"

Aren: "(OVERWHELMED) It's all so much, so fast! I... I think I should talk to my parents first."

William: "I'm sorry, I should have thought... of course. Let's go see them. I'd like to meet them."

Aren: "(RELIEVED) Thanks. They're not going to believe this..."

9100.msg – *Chapter 1\East of Briala – Searching Gregor*

Topic: Searching Gregor

Aren: "I don't know, William. I never thought I'd be stealing from a dead man. That's no better than what a common cutthroat would do."

William: "We're just being practical, Aren. Look at it this way. Nothing he's carrying can help him anymore, but it might be able to help us."

100.msg – *Chapter 1\Entering Ghan Province*

Topic: Entering Ghan Province

William: "Sorry to put a damper on your spirit of adventure, but I really need to report to my father in Panizo."

10853.msg – *Chapter 1\Briala – Outside The Spitting Lion Inn – Tyre Cordelaine, Aren's Father*

Tyre Cordelaine, Aren's Father and Proprietor of The Spitting Lion Inn

Topic: Greeting #1

Tyre: "Aren! You're back early. No bites, eh lad?"

Aren: "I wouldn't exactly say that, Dad."

Topic: William

Aren: "Dad, this is William, youngest son of the House Escobar."

Tyre: "(TAKING IN WILLIAM'S GARB) Well, well, well. This is an honor, Squire. We don't get highborn folk around here often."

William: "A pleasure to meet you, Master Cordelaine."

Topic: Attack

Aren: "You'll never believe what just happened, Dad! I was fishing on the rocks, same spot as always, and I heard a terrible noise coming from the beach. I ran down and saw a giant, flying... (ITALICS) thing attacking two men!"

Tyre: "(INCREDULOUSLY) A TrKaa attacked them?!"

Aren: "No, not a TrKaa... A monster! I ran to help! It swatted me like a Ghan gnat! But I got its attention because it turned away from William and went after me!"

Topic: Magic

Aren: "I thought it was going to kill me for sure. I covered my face and braced for the attack, but it didn't hit me. All of a sudden, I felt kind of tingly and warm. I heard the thing shrieking. That made me look up... Dad, I killed it! Destroyed it! But I don't know how. William says I blasted it with magic!"

Tyre: "(CHUCKLING) That's not bad, Son. Jazz it up a little and you might get a coin or two from the supper crowd."

Topic: Truth

Aren: "I'm not making it up! It really happened!"

William: "Master Cordelaine, every word Aren has said is true. Had he not come to my aid when he did, surely I would be dead. Look to our clothes and wounds for proof."

Tyre: "Well, I'll be a Ghanish swineherd! Once word of this gets around, folks'll be packed in the Lion like field worms in a thunderstorm. This is the most excitement we've had around here since Lonzo's cow birthed twin calves last year!"

Topic: Panizo

Aren: "The thing of it is, Dad... if I really can do magic, William thinks I should come with him back to Panizo."

Tyre: "Panizo? That's halfway 'cross the world, lad."

William: "Master Cordelaine, if Aren doesn't learn to use his magic properly, he could well be a danger to himself and everyone around him."

Tyre: "But your mother... and Laura Miller. Think of how they'll feel if you just up and left. Henne, think of how I'll feel! You know I depend on you to keep things straight around this place. Why, who would tally up the books and make sure the butcher and tallowman get paid? Who's going to tell me when the serving wenches are planning to elope with the dairymen? No, Aren, I'm sorry but you're needed here at home. (CONDESCENDING) Now I know how it is when you reach that age where the town starts feeling two sizes too small. I'll not be having you think that your old man doesn't remember what it's like to be young. If you want to plan a trip to Imazi when we're not in our busy season... maybe even as a honeymoon, if you like..."

Aren: "Dad, this is my chance. I need to go with William. I've never been to a big town before... Think of the stories, the people, the adventures!"

Tyre: "(SIGH) You always were a dreamer, boy, always looking up at the sky instead of down at the road in front of you."

William: "I'll recommend him to my father. Aren will study with the best mage and tutor in Panizo."

Tyre: "At least wait until your mother gets back from the marketplace. She'll kill me if I let you leave without saying goodbye."

Aren: "We can't, Dad. The governor is expecting William home."

Topic: Goodbye #1

William: "Don't worry about Aren, Master Cordelaine. He can come home to visit soon, and you're always welcome at our estate."

Tyre: "(GRUFFLY) Can't say as I hold with this gallivanting off when there's work to be done at home, but I guess you're old enough now to decide for yourself. Take care, Aren, and remember there's more to life than a joyman's tales."

Aren: "I will, Dad. Say goodbye to Momma for me. Tell her I love her and I'll write when I get to Panizo."

10831.msg – ***Chapter 1\Briala – Briala's Fountain – Laura Miller, Aren's Fiancée***

Laura Miller, Aren's Fiancée

Topic: Greeting #1

Aren: "Hi, Laura. How are you?"

Laura: "(SWEET) Aren! How nice to see you!"

Topic: Leaving #1

Aren: "Laura, I won't be around here for a while..."

Laura: "(CHATTERS) Oh, really? Is your dad sending you to Imazi for supplies? I wish we were married so I could go with you. I've never been to Imazi... (INTERRUPTED BY AREN)"

Aren: "(INTERRUPTING) No, Laura. I'm not going to Imazi. And I don't know when I'll be back."

Topic: Magic

Aren: "This is going to be hard for you to understand, Laura... Kor, it's hard for me to understand!"

Laura: "(BY ROTE) Don't take Kor's name in vain, Aren."

Aren: "Sorry. Anyhow, Laura, it looks like I can... that I have this gift... (DEEP BREATH) I think I can do magic."

Laura: "Whatever are you talking about, Aren Cordelaine?"

Aren: "(SHEEPISH) I think I have magical abilities. I'm not sure but I've got to find out, and I can't do that if I stay in Briala."

Laura: "But what am I supposed to do if you leave?"

Aren: "(HELPLESS) I don't know... Stay with your mother and father... Help out with the children... It's not that I don't care about you, Laura, because I do!"

Topic: Goodbye #1

Laura: "(SAD) When am I going to see you again?"

Aren: "(QUICKLY, HATING THIS) I don't know. Soon. Don't worry, things will work out for the best. Look, I gotta go now. Take care of yourself, Laura. I'll miss you."

Laura: "(TEARFUL) Come home soon, Aren. I'll be waiting for you."

40700.msg – ***Chapter 1\Briala – Mrs. Miller, Laura's Mother***

Topic: Mrs. Miller – Before Breaking up with Laura

A familiar voice called through the open door. "Aren! What are you doing out on the steps? Come in! Come in!"

Aren entered the kitchen. Through billowing clouds of flour he could dimly make out the billowing form of Mrs. Miller, kneading a small mountain of dough. She spoke rapidly, keeping time with her vigorous movements.

"I'd give you a hug, but you'd probably wind up in the oven with this week's loaves. Besides, if I know young men in love, you didn't come to see me at all. Laura is down at the well, gathering water. That girl is a marvel. Such a beauty, yet so eager to help out around the house. You're a lucky fellow to catch her eye. Why, all the men in the village..."

Aren murmured "Thank you kindly and good day to you, Mrs. Miller" and slipped out the door. The clouds of flour hid his escape. As he headed down the path, Aren heard Mrs. Miller continue the song of her daughter's virtues.

Topic: Mrs. Derkins

The yard was littered with rubbish and broken bottles. Spokeless cart wheels grinned up through the weeds like toothless mouths. As the party picked their way toward the door, it burst open, a half-dressed woman flying like a cannon ball in their direction.

Aren stepped forward bravely. "Mrs. Derkins, I'd like to introduce..."

"I don't want to meet none of your low-life friends, Aren Cordelaine! You kids are nothing but a bad influence on my poor Bo, always getting him drunk and in trouble."

"Mrs. D, Bo's the one who forced his way into our wine cellar. True, my little brother gave him the key, but only after Bo threatened him. Bo is seven years older and thrice as big, after all."

Mrs. Derkins grabbed a wheel spoke off the ground and brandished it like a sword. "I don't need to listen to a bunch of lies about my sweet, gentle Bo-Bo. Get off my property! Now! Or I'll have your mother take the strap to the lot of you!"

Topic: Eugene the Chicken Farmer #1

Aren walked up the path to the mastercooper's residence, the largest house in Briala. The mastercooper's son, Eugene, answered the door. He was a strapping youth, a bit loud but good-hearted. Aren had known him since the two boys were babes.

Aren introduced William to Eugene, who eyed his noble garb in a speculative fashion before offering his hand. Eugene's handshake was so hearty that William winced.

"It's good to meet you too, Eugene. Now would you mind giving me that back while there's still something left of it?"

Eugene guffawed. "I'm glad you showed up, Aren. There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. And you should listen to this too, m'lord. It'll no doubt be of great interest to one such as yourself. I'll say it once, and once only. The word is 'chickens.' That's right. Chickens. And what is it about chickens, you ask."

Aren, having heard many of Eugene's get-rich-quick schemes before, tried to pull William away, but William's interest seemed to be aroused. "Do tell, my good friend, just what is it about chickens?"

Eugene took a deep breath. "They're economical. You feed them table scraps and a handful of corn and they produce eggs, meat, and best of all, chicken manure... or as I call it, white gold. Now I have a friend, he's a real genius with chicken manure. Even as we speak he's experimenting with seventeen new uses for the stuff, things no one's ever thought of before."

William's enthusiasm seemed to know no bounds. "Really?! Oh, do go on! What does your friend the genius do with it?"

"Why, practically everything! He makes candles out of it, and soap. In concentrated form, it's full of vitamins and minerals..."

Aren cut in, disgusted. "You don't mean he suggests eating it?!"

"Of course not! You feed it to catfish. They'll eat anything. The most exciting experiments involve collecting the gas from the stuff and using it to make controlled explosions which then can... well, I don't understand all that complicated stuff myself, but my friend says all he needs is a paltry contribution from a few understanding investors such as yourselves.

"That joyman Scott Gratsi was in town a day or so ago, telling tales of magic and a mage he saw in Midova. To hear him tell the story you almost think he could cast magic. Well anyway... before he headed south, I mentioned my proposal and he said he might be interested in a small investment."

William laughed and Aren sighed loudly. "Eugene, it sounds like a fascinating experiment, but we don't have the money to back you. Maybe some other time. It was great seeing you, but we've got to get going..."

As he closed the door, Aren reflected on Eugene's statement about his old friend Scott knowing magic.

40715.msg – *Chapter 1\Briala – The Female Pig Farmer*

Topic: The Female Pig Farmer

No one answered Aren's knock. However, a cacophony of squeals and curses issuing from the back yard indicated the presence of someone... or something. Stepping gingerly through the mud and garbage, the party walked to the rear of the house to find a monster writhing about in a pit of mire and dung. A limb of the monster rose up, detached itself, and came toward them.

"Bristles and lard, what the sow-tail do you want?" the muck-covered blob grunted.

Aren hesitated. "What with all the noise, we thought maybe someone was being murdered back here. But we won't bother you. You seem to have your hands full, sir."

"Sir, is it? Don't truffle with me, boy! Can't you tell a sow from a boar?" The lump of dirt wiped a hand across its face, revealing beady black eyes and a few wisps of hair.

Aren blushed. "I'm sorry, ma'am. No insult intended."

"And none there'll be if you'll lend a trotter and help me gather up these piglets."

Choice: All Right

Disregarding their clothes and their dignity, the heroes stumbled and lunged after the piglets. Finally, they rounded up all the squealing, wriggling creatures and stuck them back in their pen.

"Lard love ya, let me give you a great big hog!" The pig farmer threw her arms around Aren in an embrace that left a lasting impression on his clothes if not his emotions.

The party rinsed off as best as they could in the pigs' watering trough, laughing at each other's altered appearance. "Well, at least that wasn't 'boaring,'" William quipped as they hit the road again.

Choice: No Thanks

"And get our clothes all filthy? I don't think so! Thanks just the same." Aren turned to go.

"Fine, don't let me boar you with my troubles." Mumbling something under her breath about silk purses and sow's ears, the pig farmer dove back into the primordial ooze from whence she emerged.

40705.msg – *Chapter 1\Briala – Lonzo the Cow Farmer*

Topic: *Lonzo the Cow Farmer*

A man cleaned out milking pails in a well-swept, tidy farmyard. At Aren's greeting, he looked up from his chore. A sun-burned, worried face looked out from beneath a broad-brimmed straw hat. A brown, calloused hand clasped Aren's.

"Hello, Lonzo. My father says you haven't dropped into the Spitting Lion for several weeks. Got another two-headed calf keeping you up nights?"

Lonzo pulled a straw out of his hat and sucked on it meditatively. "All my calves is actin' like they got two heads, Aren. First they go one way, then they go t'other, then they fall down in a heap. It's a pitiful sight."

Aren took a look inside the barn to see the calves for himself. The little creatures tried to stand but lost their balance and fell to their knees. The worried cows nuzzled their babies and looked to the humans for help.

"What can we do?"

"I've run through all I know 'bout bovine diseases, Aren. Doc Myers in Balmestri might be able to save 'em though. If you know of anyone going down that way..." The farmer's voice trailed off as he looked at his stricken herd.

Aren promised to try to get the message to Doc Myers. After wishing Lonzo luck, Aren turned away from the sunny farmyard, the bleats of the stricken creatures loud in his ears.

1000.msg – *Chapter 1\Meeting Kaelyn Usher*

Meeting Kaelyn Usher

Topic: Trouble – Bandits Harassing a Young Woman

Kaelyn: "(VO FROM FAR OFF, SHOUTS ANGRILY) Keep your hands off of me!"

Bandit: "(VO, LAUGHS) And just what are you going to do about it?"

William: "Did you hear that? Someone's in trouble!"

Aren: "It came from over there!"

Topic: Intervention

William: "(LIGHTLY) Don't you just hate it when a friendly little picnic in the woods turns ugly? What happened, did she put too much mayonnaise in the chicken salad again?"

Bandit: "Huh! Why don't you mind your own business? Don't interfere and maybe we'll give you a turn when we're done."

Aren: "(SOTTO VOCE, WORRIED) William, we've got to do something."

William: "(NORMAL VOICE) You know what? I was just thinking the same thing."

Topic: Meeting Kaelyn after Defeating the Bandits

- William: "(OUT OF BREATH) Are you all right? They didn't hurt you, did they?"
- Kaelyn: "(OUT OF BREATH) I'm fine. Thanks."
- William: "(TURNING ON THE CHARM) Think nothing of it. What's a pretty young woman like you doing traveling off the roads by herself?"
- Kaelyn: "(ANGRY) I don't see how that's any of your business, you... you... (INTERRUPTED)"
- William: "(GALLANTLY INTERRUPTING) William Escobar of House Escobar, at your service. And this is my friend Aren Cordelaine."
- Kaelyn: "(SARCASTIC) Pleased to meet you, I'm sure. Now if you'll just stand aside, I'll be on my way. I've got to get to Balmestri with these animal skins."
- William: "(PROLONGING THE CONVERSATION) I could tell those bandits were interested in skin all right, and I know whose. It's a good thing we came along when we did."
- Kaelyn: "(CLENCHED TEETH) I had the situation under control."
- William: "(SARCASTIC) You know, that was my first thought when I saw one lone woman fending off an entire band of armed men... 'No need to stop here, William my boy, she obviously has the situation well under control.' How foolish of me to expect any gratitude."
- Kaelyn: "(THINKING AND COOLING DOWN) I could have taught those cretins quite a lesson, without any help from you two! But whether I needed it or not, you did come to my assistance, so I guess I owe you one. (THINKING OUT LOUD) I was going to sell these skins and be home with Dad before month's end but... It would appear I am beholden to you, 'William Escobar of House Escobar and his friend Aren Cordelaine.' Where are we bound?"
- William: "(SURPRISED) Just what do you mean by 'we'?"
- Kaelyn: "(SHOWING HER TRUE SPIRIT AND HUMOR) I am a woman of honor. I prefer to repay my debts promptly. I'll not have you showing up in a few months, claiming I owe you a favor."
- William: "We wouldn't..."
- Kaelyn: "(INTERRUPTING) I'm coming with you until we even up the score."
- William: "But..."

Aren: "(INTERRUPTING) A pleasure to have you along, Miss...?"

Kaelyn: "Kaelyn. Kaelyn Usher. Now let's get going. With the way you meddle in other people's affairs, shouldn't be too long before someone tries to kill the pair of you. (CHEERFULLY) With any luck, I'll still make it home by month's end."

10845.msg – *Chapter 1\Aspreza – The Riper Wheel Tavern – Scott Gratsi, Joyman*

Scott Gratsi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Greeting #1

Scott: "Have I blacked out? Have I been whisked across field and stream by some arcane force? For if my eyes tell me true then I must be in Briala, for its most inquisitive son stands before me!"

Aren: "Scott! It's great to see you! You haven't been to the Lion in months."

Scott: "And the good people of Briala are so distraught by my absence that they've gone scouring the countryside to court me back for an encore! I'm flattered."

Aren: "(LAUGHS) I'm happy to find you here, but nobody's out hunting for you."

Scott: "Not even an irate husband or two? I must be losing my touch. But their loss is your gain, my lad, for you have my undivided attention."

Topic: Introductions

William: "I take it you two know each other."

Scott: "I'm afraid Master Cordelaine's manners are not what they should be. I am Scott Gratsi, teller of tales, singer of songs..."

Aren: "(INTERRUPTING) ...drinker of drinks..."

Scott: "(IGNORING AREN) ...lifter of spirits..."

Aren: "(CUTTING IN) ...and women's skirts..."

Scott: "(CONT) ...and master showman par excellence."

Aren: "Scott comes to my father's inn every now and then."
Scott: "And Aren keeps me up the whole night, forcing me against my will..."
Aren: "(INTERRUPTING) ...by keeping his glass full..."
Scott: "(CONT) ...to tell him tales of foreign kings and magic spells."
William: "Well, my loquacious and thirsty friend, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Topic: Hat

Aren: "Is that a new feather in your hat?"
Scott: "(PROUD) Yes, a courier gave it to me just a few days ago. He'd never before heard the story of the malachite cat."
Aren: "That old chestnut? That TrKaa must have been a hatchling. You're getting quite a headful of feathers there."
Scott: "Well, TrKaa make for the toughest audience, but the rewards are worth it. When I make an appearance in all my glorious colors, people know they are in the presence of a master joyman."

Topic: Magic

Aren: "Guess what, Scott. It looks like I have magical abilities!"
Scott: "You don't say. What can you do? Make women disappear just by looking at them?"
Aren: "No, really! A flying creature attacked me and William, and I blasted it to ash with just my bare hands!"
William: "As unbelievable as that sounds, it's true. He's untrained and dangerous though, which is why I have to kill him."
Aren: "What?!"
William: "Joking! I'm joking! Lighten up, will you? (EXPLAINING TO SCOTT) I'm taking him to Panizo for training."
Scott: "Aren, you're apprenticing with a mage? That's a good thing. Say, maybe I can help you get an early start on your lessons."

Topic: Help

- Aren: "Any kind of help would be appreciated."
- Scott: "As I've told you time and again, the most important skills for a joyman to cultivate are watching and listening. That, and being in the wrong place at the right time. In a courtyard in Midova I overheard a mage teaching a new pupil. You interested in what he had to say, Aren?"
- Aren: "(EAGERLY) Sure, if you're not too busy to tell me."
- Scott: "Well, the crowd has thinned out, possibly because they saw what disreputable company I keep, so I guess I have time to go over it. Of course you realize that I don't have (SPOOKY VOICE) magic powers, so I can't sense the forces myself. But as my memory is excellent, I'm pretty sure I recall the exact words and gestures."
- William: "If not, and you happen to turn Aren into a frog, I'll be sure to find him a nice cozy pond to live in."
- Narrator: The joyman takes Aren aside to a table in the corner. Scott recalls the words he overheard, then he makes Aren repeat them until they are memorized. As Aren practices the incantations, he can feel the magical forces combining and interacting. His sense of control is incomplete, yet decidedly present. When the lesson is finished, Aren and Scott return to the others.
- William: "Well?"
- Aren: "(TRYING TO EXPLAIN) It's amazing. I never felt anything like that before. It was like reaching out in the dark to some unseen force. I couldn't see much, yet I felt it out there, a great presence like a mountain or a storm... There's so much I have to learn!"
- Scott: "The knowledge I just passed along will do little more than keep Aren from accidentally killing himself. He needs a mage to teach him more."

Topic: Spells

- Aren: "Won't it be great when I learn some spells and can actually do something useful with my magic? (GOOFING AROUND) Abracadabra Alakazam, Artemin Heximus, the King of Quivain!"
- Scott: "Hey, I just remembered something. Wait, I know it's in my pack somewhere. Ah, here!"

Aren: "Some crumpled pages? What are they, pictures of your favorite dancing girls?"

Scott: "No, I think they're spells. Of course if you don't want them..."

Aren: "Oh, I do! I want them!"

Scott: "Then keep a civil tongue in your mouth when addressing your elders and betters. I, uh, found these somewhere, but since I haven't got your (SPOOKY VOICE AGAIN) magic powers, I can't do anything with them."

Aren: "Thanks, Scott, thanks a lot. So where did you say you found these?"

Scott: "(LAUGHS) That, my friend, is a story for another day, if I decide to tell you at all."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "May your roads be dry and cool, and your ale sweet and warm."

Scott: "(COUNTERING) May your wit be dry and cool, and your women sweet and warm."

Aren: "Bravo, but you're a pair well met!"

Scott: "(LAUGHING) And well parted, though I'm sure we'll meet again."

40300.msg – *Chapter 1\Aspreza – Belora, Mickel's mother*

Topic: *Belora Greeting #1A – Mickel is Missing*

The door was opened immediately by a faded woman in a faded dress. A babe in arms clutched her hair in his fist and a toddler clung to her knees.

"Oh, I thought it was Mickel." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "You haven't seen a ten-year-old boy, stands about this high, looks rather small for his size and young for his age?"

Aren told the woman that no, they haven't seen a lad fitting that rather cryptic description, then asked if he'd run away from home.

"Oh no, not Mickel. He's a good boy, he is, only mischievous and overly given to adventuring. But he's always home by this time and, what with the pox 'n all, I'm starting to worry."

"Any idea of where he may be?" asked Aren.

"In the caves. I'm almost certain he's in the caves, even though I've told him time and again not to go there alone. The things I tell him go in one eye and out his mouth."

"Uh huh," said Kaelyn, looking pointedly at William. "They just don't listen, do they?"

William looked pointedly not at Kaelyn. "We'll keep an eye out for little Mickel, ma'am."

"Belora. Please call me Belora. I'd go out looking myself but..." She bounced the baby in her arms. "If he's not home by dark, I'll be twins with anxiety."

William promised they'd do what they could to help. Belora's thanks followed them down the path to the main road.

Topic: Mickel not yet Found

William's knock went unheard due to the baby's crying. "Perhaps it's best if we don't disturb her now. If we tell her we haven't found Mickel yet, she'll be triplets with uneasiness."

"Or quadruplets with fear," said Kaelyn.

"Or quintts with fits," said Aren, "though I really don't think this situation is one to joke about."

Topic: Mickel Found but Trapped

Kaelyn grabbed William's fist just as he raised it to knock on the door. "I don't think we should tell Belora that we left her son trapped in a cave. She's already got enough problems. Let's figure out a way to rescue him first."

Topic: Belora Greeting #1B – Mickel Found but Trapped

The door was opened immediately by a faded woman in a faded dress. A babe in arms clutched her hair in his fist and a toddler clung to her knees.

"Oh, I thought it was Mickel." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "You haven't seen a ten-year-old boy, stands about this high, looks rather small for his size and young for his age?"

William broke the news as gently as possible. "As a matter of fact, we have. Well, we haven't seen him exactly, but we heard him. He's trapped in the caves."

"Oh no, my poor Mickel! I've told him time and again not to go there alone. The things I tell him go in one eye and out his mouth."

"Uh huh," said Kaelyn, looking pointedly at William. "They just don't listen, do they?"

William looked pointedly not at Kaelyn. "We'll do our best to rescue him, ma'am."

"Belora. Please call me Belora. I'd go out with you myself but..." She bounced the baby in her arms. "Oh, do hurry! I'm practically twins with anxiety!"

William promised they'd do what they could to help. Belora's thanks followed them down the path to the main road.

Topic: Mickel Rescued

"You found him!" Belora flung open the door and threw her arms around William's neck. "How can I ever thank you all enough?"

Choking, William disentangled himself from Belora's grip. "No further thanks are necessary. Really."

"I put Mickel in the tub straight away so's he could soak off some of the grime before supper. We'd be happy to have you join us. It's nothing fancy, just some squidoroni in octopus ink sauce."

Choice: Accept

William looked at his friends. Kaelyn's nose crinkled and Aren's face turned faintly green. "We'd be delighted," he said, shoving the other two into the house before him.

After the meal, the party regrouped on the front steps. "That wasn't so bad, now was it?" William said, picking something black and oily from between his teeth.

Kaelyn moaned. "Ugh, I'll be tasting squid for a week."

Belora joined them and handed William a fishy-smelling bundle. "Just some leftovers for later in case you feel peckish. Here, and thank you again for all your trouble. Kor's sake, but that boy do get himself into scrapes. If I've told him once, I haven't told him enough that if he grows up to be dead and buried, it won't come as no shock to me."

On that parting note, the companions grimly accepted the bundle and got on their way.

Choice: Decline

William looked at his friends. Kaelyn's nose crinkled and Aren's face turned faintly green. "I think we'd best be going," William said.

"Well, let me at least give you something for when you do feel peckish."

She handed them a bundle. "Here, and thank you again for all your trouble. Kor's sake, but that boy do get himself into scrapes. If I've told him once, I haven't told him enough that if he grows up to be dead and buried, it won't come as no shock to me."

On that parting note, the companions accepted the fishy-smelling bundle and got on their way.

Topic: Belora Greeting #1C – Mickel already Rescued

The door was opened immediately by a faded woman in a faded dress. A babe in arms clutched her hair in his fist and a toddler clung to her knees.

"Yes, can I help you?" She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

Kaelyn whispered to William. "It looks like she has her hands full. I don't think we should bother her."

The woman smiled wanly. "Normally, I'd ask you in for a cup of tea but today has been as worrisome as a kitten in the yarn basket. My son Mickel was missing for ever so long, then he comes home as dirty as a Montari, telling some tale of how he had to fight an army of giant newts on his way."

"Would your Mickel happen to be about ten years old, and stand about yea-high?" William indicated the height with his hand.

"Rather small for his size and young for his age? Yes, that'd be him. Why?"

William grinned. "Well, I don't want to get him in any more trouble, but there wasn't any army of giant newts."

The woman didn't seem too surprised to hear this. "You don't say."

"In fact," continued William, "just a short while ago, we pulled him up out of a hole in the ground. He was trapped in the caves."

40305.msg – ***Chapter 1\Aspreza Caves – Mickel***

Topic: Mickel – Boy Found

Aren peered down into the gloom. "Anybody down there?"

"Yes!" a squeak of a voice replied.

"Hang on! We'll think of a way to get you out."

Topic: Mickel Rescued #1A – After Meeting Belora

The boy caught one end of the rope. With a firm grip, the party hauled him up and out of the pit.

William brushed the boy off and took a look at him. "Your name's Mickel, isn't it?"

"None of your business!" The lad took off in a dash for the cave entrance.

"Come to think of it," mused William as he brushed off his hands, "he did look rather small for his size at that."

Topic: Boy Rescued #1B – Before Meeting Belora

The boy caught one end of the rope. With a firm grip, the party hauled him up and out of the pit.

William brushed the boy off. "What's your name, fella?"

"None of your business!" The lad took off in a dash for the cave entrance.

"Strange things they name their kids around here," William mused.

40310.msg – ***Chapter 1\Aspreza – Pox – Man with Chest***

Topic: Pox – Man with Chest – Before Rescuing the Senaadrin Sisters near Ligano

A red ribbon was tacked on the door frame. William was about to knock when he heard sobbing through the door. "I think there's been a death here. Let's leave them in peace."

40315.msg – ***Chapter 1\Aspreza – Pox – Daughter***

Topic: Pox – Daughter – Senaadrin Sisters near Ligano not Rescued

A ribbon on the door indicated that the Feeblepox raged within. The travelers went on their way.

Topic: Pox – Children – Senaedin Sisters near Ligano not Rescued

Six red ribbons fluttered on the door frame, indicating there was plague within. William knocked. The door opened a crack, revealing a jaundiced eye.

"You're not the Sisters! Get away!" The door slammed shut.

Topic: Pox – Tinker – Senaedin Sisters near Ligano not Rescued

William knocked on the door. A faint, strained voice from within warned the party away.

Puzzled, Aren asked, "Why do you insist on knocking on doors marked with warnings?"

"I guess I'm hoping there will be something I can do to help these poor people," William sighed.

Topic: Temple of Kor / Brotherhood of Kor

The Brother of Kor paused in his meditations to greet the party. He spoke quietly, both in reverence to the Face he served and respect for the others seeking Kor's guidance.

"You are welcome here, my friends. We of the Brotherhood hone the twin edges of knowledge and vigilance, and their blade can never harm you. How may we be of service?"

Choice: Blessing

"Actually, we had a different blade in mind."

The priest smiled. "Ah... you seek a blessing. Yes, Kor can invest a blade with the tiniest fraction of himself. I count myself a shrewd judge of character, and I believe you'd use such a weapon justly."

"Acting as a conduit for Kor's essence is taxing on the Brethren, and regretfully we must ask for donations to offset the costs of recuperation: 250 burlas for armor, 150 for swords. Now, if you'll show me what you'd like blessed...?"

Choice: Blessing Armor

The priest cleansed his hands from a nearby basin and set them upon the armor. In a stentorian voice he called upon Kor to imbue the armor with His vigilance, that its wearer might be better protected in His service.

The priest's litany continued, a golden aura flaring around the armor. As the last echoes of the Brother's voice faded to silence, so too did the aura dwindle to nothingness. The priest smiled and handed the blessed armor back, sweeping the party's donation into a coffer emblazoned with the seal of Kor.

Choice: Blessing Sword

The priest cleansed his hands from a nearby basin and set them upon the sword. In a stentorian voice he called upon Kor to imbue the sword with His divine guidance, that its wielder might be more righteous in His service.

The priest's litany continued, a golden aura flaring around the sword. As the last echoes of the Brother's voice faded to silence, so too did the aura dwindle to nothingness. The priest smiled and handed the blessed weapon back, sweeping the party's donation into a coffer emblazoned with the seal of Kor.

Choice: Not Enough Money

The party's available funds didn't quite meet the donation fee. Noting their discomfort, the priest apologized. "I'm sorry, but for the Arm to support itself, I'm afraid our fee structure is rigid. Perhaps some other time..."

Choice: Leave

"Thank for your time, Brother. I'm afraid we must be going."

"As you wish. Remember that to improve yourself, you must first know yourself. Farewell."

Topic: Doc Meyers – Lonzo's Sick Calves

Aren called through the open door. "Doc Myers! Are you in, Doc?"

At least four and probably seven dogs came racing out of the house, leaping on Aren and scrubbing his face with their tongues. Aren dissolved in a fit of giggles.

"Get off the boy before you wash him down to a nub!"

Strong, hairy arms pulled the dogs off. Aren looked into a grizzled face and calm grey eyes. "Are you Doc Myers?"

"Of course. What's the problem?"

"I'm from Briala. A farmer there, Lonzo by name, has some very sick calves. He's hoping you can pay him a barn call."

"What are the symptoms?"

Aren described the calves' condition. Doc Myers looked concerned. "Sounds serious. I'll get up there immediately. Thanks for passing along the message."

Topic: Doc Meyers – Before Meeting Lonzo

Aren called through the open door. "Hello! Is anybody home?"

At least four and probably seven dogs came racing out of the house, leaping on Aren and scrubbing his face with their tongues. Aren dissolved in a fit of giggles.

Strong, hairy arms pulled the dogs off. Aren looked into a grizzled face and calm grey eyes. "I'm Doc Myers, son. What's the problem? Horse?"

Aren swallowed. "No, Doc. My throat feels fine."

Doc Myers guffawed. "What I mean is what's wrong with your horse? Or is it a cow that's ailing? A chicken maybe?"

Aren looked sheepish. "Oh, you're an animal doctor! Now I understand. No, we don't have any sick animals... but it was nice to meet you and your dogs just the same."

Topic: Greeting #1

Crates stacked to the ceiling transformed the entryway into a narrow maze. Sealed barrels dotted the floor, with much of the remaining space filled by heaps of furs and animal skins.

"Whose warehouse is this?" William asked.

"It's not a warehouse," Kaelyn answered, her brow wrinkled in confusion. "At least, it didn't used to be."

A voice boomed from the labyrinth. "Is that my razorcup I hear? Kaelyn!" A barrel-chested man with dark skin and darker hair engulfed Kaelyn in a bear hug. "Let me look at you!" The man held her at arm's length, beaming with delight. "Ah, as ravishing as ever. If only you were a few years older," he joked, tousling her hair familiarly. William and Aren shared a bemused smile.

Kaelyn laughed at the familiar lament. "If only you were a few years younger, Nikki. What's with all this?" She flicked her eyes toward the warehoused goods.

Nikki shrugged. "It's the shipping strike. I get all my materials locally, but my biggest customers are overseas. Without ships to carry them, my warehouse is overflowing with goods waiting to get delivered. I had to start stockpiling them here."

Kaelyn's eyes softened with concern. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. I suppose you've got no need for more skins, then."

Nikki bathed her in a warm smile. "From you, razorcup? If I was buried in beaver and fox, I'd still have room for whatever you bring me."

Choice: Sell Animal Pelts

Nikki inspected the pelts with approval. "Top quality, as always." He counted out 35 burlas and handed them to Kaelyn.

Topic: Greeting #2 – Haven't Sold Pelts Yet

"Kaelyn!" Nikki boomed, favoring the group with a smile clearly intended for only one of them. "Back so soon? If you've got skins to sell, you know I'm always happy to buy them from you."

Farmer Mattai Brunia of Imazi

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "(JOVIAL) We need some ale to wash the road dust from our mouths! Send out the serving girl, my man!"

Brunia: "(GRUFFLY) I'll take yer order, sir."

William: "Surely you jest! You look as likely a tavern boy as I do!"

Brunia: "I'm a wheat farmer by nature, m'lord. But things being what they is..."

Topic: Farmer

William: "Wheat? In Balmestri? I thought the soil was too sandy to grow wheat here."

Brunia: "Aye, that's true enough. I'm Mattai. My farm is in Imazi. (SNORTS) Should be saying Lord Garson's farm, I s'pose, but old habits die hard. Since last season, it's his now."

Topic: Last Season

William: "What happened last season?"

Brunia: "'Twas like I sowed stones instead of seed. Not a single sprout came up. I've lived through bad seasons afore, times o' drought, times o' the killing frost, but never a season so barren there was naught to harvest at all."

Topic: Lord Garson

Aren: "Did Lord Garson buy your farm?"

Brunia: "Not rightly. Last season's barren harvest cost me my lands. Things is gen'rally tight as new boots for farmers, livin' from season to season as we do. No crop meant no money for the taxmen so Lord Garson took the farm instead. Wouldn't even let me stay on to work it."

Topic: Goodbye #1

William: "Maybe we can help you get back your farm, Farmer Brunia. In the meantime, good health to you."

Brunia: "Good health to you as well, sir."

Topic: Greeting #2

Brunia: "Ah, my friends. How wonderful to see you."

Kaelyn: "What ho, Farmer Brunia?"

Brunia: "Good day, m'lady. Let me know if there's aught I can bring you."

40215.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – Boy Fights Pirates*

Topic: Boy Fights Pirates

William tapped politely. He heard a sudden burst of children's shouts and cries, then harsh whispers, then silence. A window curtain lifted aside, then fell back into place. The door opened a crack.

A man whispered, "What do you want? Go away."

Aren stepped forward. "We mean you no harm. What are you afraid of?"

"Pirates. They been here once. Said they'd be back again. Stole the wife's jewelry, the silver, nearly all our food."

A 12-year-old boy shoved into view. "Are you pirates? If you are, then I'll fight you, even if my old man's chicken!"

Choice: Fight

William drew his sword. "All right, if that's how you want it."

Aren grabbed William's arm. "Are you crazy? He's just a boy!"

An arm reached out and yanked the boy back inside.

Choice: Surrender

Aren tried not to laugh as he raised his hands into the air. "We surrender!"

An arm reached out and yanked the boy back inside. "Sorry, m'lord. My young un's a hot-head. Gotta keep him in the house or he's liable to get himself killed. Apologies for our lack of hospitality, but you see how it is."

40205.msg – ***Chapter 1\Balmestri – Matthew and the Shipmaster***

Topic: Matthew and the Shipmaster #1 – Before Meeting the Mayor

A man wearing coveralls opened the door. "Yes, do you have business with me?"

"We were passing through your town and..." William was interrupted by a shout from inside the house.

40206.msg – ***Chapter 1\Balmestri – Matthew and the Shipmaster***

Topic: Matthew and the Shipmaster #1 – Before Meeting the Mayor

"Hey, I recognize that voice! It's my kid brother!" William was grabbed in a bear hug that lifted him off his feet.

"Matthew! What are you doing here?"

After some confusion, introductions were made. Matthew was in Balmestri on his father's business, negotiating to end the Shipmasters' Guild strike.

"The situation is far more complicated than Father thought," Matthew explained. "We're dead in the water. The Guild refuses to listen."

"That's because we haven't heard anything worth listening to!" growled the shipmaster.

Matthew shrugged as if to say, "See what I mean?"

The shipmaster continued. "The situation is unbelievably bad. Ships that dock in our harbor are subject to unwarranted searches, their cargos confiscated on the least excuse. Town guards beat my

men or throw them in jail for taking a few drinks too many. And not only that, but no sooner does a ship sail, then it's set upon by pirates! The violations of our rights are too numerous to count!"

Matthew shook his head. "I'm sure we can work this all out if we're patient with each other..."

The shipmaster scoffed, "Yes, and while we're playing patty cakes and having tea, my men are risking their lives to protect cargo that winds up in the hold of a pirate's ship!"

40220.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – The Mayor of Balmestri*

Topic: The Mayor of Balmestri – Shipping Strike

A servant showed the party into the mayor's study. A few minutes later, the mayor bustled in. "Yes, yes, yes. What is it? I'm a very busy man."

William towered over the short, rotund official. "I'm Lord Escobar's son."

"What! Another one? Does your father have to send you all to Balmestri?"

William ignored this crass remark. "Though I've been here but a short while, it's apparent that living conditions are somewhat less than they should be. Pirates plague your town which is already crippled by the shipping strike."

The mayor bristled. "As you say, you just got here. How can you possibly comprehend the situation? I have everything under control, believe me. Now I have a very important meeting to attend. You'll have to excuse me."

40210.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – Penwhite the Scrivner*

Topic: Penwhite the Scrivner – Trapped by Rough Scoundrels

The travelers approached the house. A group of rough scoundrels stood and confronted them. "You can leave peaceably or in pieces, such as you please."

Choice: Fight

William drew his sword. "I'll leave you in peace-- resting in peace that is!"

Choice: Flight

"Peaceably, I think." William backed off cautiously, vowing to return when he felt up to a fight.

40211.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – Penwhite the Scrivner*

Topic: *Penwhite the Scrivner – Rough Scoundrels Defeated*

With the riff-raff cleared away, William opened the cottage door-- an easy task since it had already been forced. He found himself face to face with a little man who hopped angrily from foot to foot. "What right do you have holding me hostage in my own house? I'll see the lot of you hanged!"

William held out a hand to keep the little man at arm's length. "Simmer down. We've rescued you."

Gradually the man understood he was no longer a captive. In gratitude, he explained how he came to be in such a predicament.

"I'm Penwhite, the town scrivener. I was working late one night at the hall. A puff of wind blew my candle out. While I was trying to rekindle it in the dark, two men came. I recognized the mayor's voice of course, and the other man's speech soon identified him as a pirate captain. What I overheard shocked me beyond belief."

The little man wiped his forehead. "Our mayor is accepting bribes from the pirates to turn his back on what's going on under his very nose! The pirates have free course to pillage our town and the ships that put out from our harbor!"

"That's unbelievable! Did you have a chance to tell anyone before they locked you up?"

"Yes. I told the First Shipmaster. The pirates jumped me just as I left his house."

"Best if you stay out of sight until we take care of this."

"After dark, I'll go to my sister's house in Sortiga. Belated thanks for my freedom."

40205.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – Matthew and the Shipmaster*

Topic: *Matthew and the Shipmaster #2 – After Meeting Penwhite the Scrivner*

The shipmaster looked tired and vexed. "I suppose you want to speak with your brother? I'll bring him out."

William pushed past him into the house. "No, we want to talk to you too. Let us in and bolt the door."

40206.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – Matthew and the Shipmaster*

Topic: Matthew and the Shipmaster #2 – After Meeting Penwhite the Scrivner

Matthew sat at the table, his head in his hands. "We don't have time for interruptions. This had better be important, William."

William told of the fight with the pirates, and Penwhite's release. Then he described the overheard conversation between the mayor and the pirate.

Turning toward the shipmaster, William concluded, "And you knew about it all along. Why didn't you do something?"

"I did! I called this strike to protect my ships, the cargo, and my men from attacks at sea as well as in port. How could I confide in any nobles or officials when I had no way of knowing who was on the take?"

Matthew looked disgruntled. "You could have trusted me. Hasn't the Escobar family always proved honorable and trustworthy?"

The shipmaster shrugged. "It only takes one bad apple..."

Matthew promised to take care of the corrupt local government and bring in his father's troops to clean out the pirates. He looked at William with respect and pride shining in his eyes. "You've done well, brother. I'll make certain Father knows of your part in this affair."

40220.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – The Mayor of Balmestri*

Topic: The Mayor of Balmestri – Corruption Discovered

Shoving their way past the servants, the party discovered the mayor in his sitting room. William brusquely informed the official that they were onto his corrupt dealings with the pirates. The mayor blustered, then retreated into his bedroom.

William followed to find the mayor pulling an empty trunk from the closet. Jabbering something about a mayors' conclave in Ghan, he threw a haphazard heap of clothes and papers into the trunk.

William turned away in disgust. "You can run, Mayor, but you can't hide. My brother and father will send men to track you down and bring you to justice."

Topic: The Groom, Benje's Brother and Cherise's Fiancée

The closed shutters and barred door did not invite visitors. Nonetheless, William knocked boldly. After the sound of many bolts being drawn, the door opened. A beefy, pale man blocked the doorway. He wiped his muttonchop whiskers with a dirty napkin. "I'm eating. What do you want?"

William decided flattery was the best approach. "In our travels throughout the land, we have never seen such a well-protected, secure house as this. We just wanted to compliment the owner on his vigilance."

William's judgment paid off. The man was obviously pleased. "Yes, well, I figure that as one of the most important businessmen in Sortiga, it behooves me to keep up a good appearance... in my house, my friends, and my wife. In fact, I am just about to marry a woman perfectly suited to that particular role."

William muttered, "Lucky girl."

"Yes, indeed she is. Cherise's father is one of the wealthiest merchants in Pianda. An alliance with him will provide me with the contacts and products I need to build my business. What could any girl want more than to see her husband succeed?"

"A little love and affection might come in handy."

The man laughed. "Now you sound like my kid brother, Benje. Dang fool's gone off his head with puppy love. Made him absent-minded. Lost the wedding rings! Well, the wedding will happen soon enough, even if I have to buy new rings myself. I can get them at cost, you know. Got good connections in the jewelry market."

Topic: Cherise's Friend – Before the Wedding

William paused at the sound of sobs, then tapped gently on the wood. A young woman answered. Her hazel eyes were free of tears, though concern wrinkled her brow. "Yes, can I help you?"

"We're strangers in this town and..."

The woman interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I'm not interested in buying anything. I'm taking care of a sick friend right now. I have to go. Goodbye."

Topic: Benje, Brother of the Groom – Lost Wedding Rings

The door was opened by a young man who would be considered handsome but for the dark circles of fatigue around his eyes. "Oh, hello. Did my brother send you to beat me up?" he said despondently.

"No. Why would he do that?"

"Because I'm such an idiot. Benje the idiot, that's me. My brother gave me the three rings for his wedding. He's supposed to marry Cherise, the merchant's daughter. She's beautiful, wonderful..." Benje trailed off, his eyes filling with tears.

Benje struggled to pull it together. "I didn't think the rings would be safe in the house, what with the recent Montari raids. I hid them near the coast. Then I started thinking that pirates might find them, so I went back. But I couldn't remember exactly where I'd hidden them!"

Topic: Offer to Help

Aren felt sympathetic. "We might have a look around if we go out that way. Would that help?"

"Yes, I guess so. Since the wedding will go on whether the rings are found or not, I guess having them would make Cherise feel a little better... and that's the important thing."

Topic: Return without Wedding Rings

"Oh, it's you." Benje greeted them apathetically. "Unless YOU'VE found the rings, nothing's changed since we last talked."

Topic: Wedding Rings Found

Aren burst in the cottage without knocking. Benje looked up in surprise.

"We found the rings!"

Choice: Return Rings to Benje

Benje looked at the rings in amazement. "You did find them! Thank you so much!"

"Now the wedding can go on as planned," Aren's smile died when he saw the look of sorrow on Benje's face.

"You don't seem too thrilled about that."

"Well, I guess that's my problem. At first I thought that if the rings stayed lost, then... But now I realize I was fooling myself. If I'm going to do anything, it's got to be soon..."

Aren looked at William in confusion. William shrugged. "Sounds like you've got things on your mind. We'd best be going."

"Oh, sorry. Yes, you're right. A lot to think about. But let me give you this for your help. It's a copy of 'Acute Senses and Perception.' I've never had time to read it."

Choice: Hold Rings for Bride's Father

William, about to hand over the rings to Benje, had second thoughts. "I think I'll give these rings to the bride's father for safe-keeping. Hope you don't mind. Hey, why the sad face? I thought you'd be happy we found them."

"I thought I would be too. But, well, I've got a lot to think about. Anyhow, I'm sure Cherise will be glad to get the family heirlooms back. On her behalf, please accept this copy of 'Acute Senses and Perception.' I never had time to read it."

Topic: Rings Already Given to Cherise's Father

"Oh, we already stumbled onto them!" Aren said cheerfully. "We found them on the beach and gave them back to the bride's father for safekeeping."

"Oh, that's great," Benje said with a slight frown. "That's terrific. Thanks so much." He waved distractedly and retreated back inside.

40125.msg – ***Chapter 1\Sortiga – Aren Spies Something Buried in the Sand***

Topic: Finding the Lost Wedding Rings

Something caught Aren's eye. Kneeling down to investigate, he discovered something buried in the sand.

Topic: Wealthy Merchant/Bride Cherise's Father

A well-dressed older gentleman gave orders to a number of servants, chefs, and workmen. He turned toward the party as they approached.

"Are you from the livery stables?"

William brushed some of the road dust from his clothes. "No, sir. Just travelers passing through. Looks like you're planning a party."

"My daughter's wedding, confound the girl! Now you'd think that if you were a young woman on the verge of matrimony, and your father was throwing the biggest wedding banquet this side of the Waste, you'd be deliriously happy, right?"

William reflected, "I suppose it would depend on whom I was marrying."

"He's a fine man, a good friend of mine and a good businessman. Well, I'm sure Cherise will settle down once she's married. Just a case of nerves, no doubt."

"When does the wedding take place?"

"That's the blasted question! Never, if the priest of Henne won't make the journey from Liganol! Those damn Montari attack anyone who sets foot on the road. And on top of that, the groom's brother has lost the wedding rings! Thank Kor Cherise is marrying the eldest son... the youngest hasn't sense to stuff a goose!"

Topic: Montari not yet Defeated

The father of the bride came to the door, no calmer than when they'd last seen him.

"Any news on the wedding?" Aren asked.

"There won't be a wedding if something isn't done about all the Montari prowling the roads. The priest can't get through from Liganol to perform the ceremony!"

Topic: Montari Defeated

William stepped up to the merchant. "Sir, we've defeated the Montari between here and Liganol. Now the priest can come officiate at the ceremony."

"That's the best news I've had all day! One worry gone at least." The merchant showed his gratitude by bestowing a gift on the party.

Topic: Montari Defeat, but Wedding Rings Lost

The father of the bride didn't look happy. "What's wrong?" Aren asked. "With the roads cleared, your daughter's wedding should be ready to go."

The man snorted. "It would be, if the groom's fool brother could remember where he put the blasted wedding rings. We can't very well hold the wedding without them."

Topic: Return Rings to Bride's Father

"I think you'd better hold onto these. The groom's brother didn't do such a good job of that last time."

The bride's father pocketed the rings. "Good point. Well, now I can see about setting this wedding into motion. My thanks, gentlemen. Good day!"

40100.msg – *Chapter 1\Sortiga – The Black Sheep Inn – Klemn the Farmer*

Topic: Klemn the Farmer

At the next table, a farmer deep in his cups was entertaining his drinking companions with a story told in such a loud, surly voice that it was impossible not to overhear him.

"Went out to milk the cows t'other night and what do you think I found lurking out in the barn? T'was an old crow of a woman with a face guaranteed to curdle milk in the udder. She had the gall to ask me for food, she did!"

"Whadya do then, Klemn?" a cloddish lout asked.

"What'd I do? Why, I kicked her behind down the road, I did!"

The men's ugly laughter made Kaelyn's neck hairs rise.

When the guffaws died down, Klemn dropped his voice to a mere shout and continued.

"But then, after dark, I went out to, uh, check on my sheep... and what do you think I see? That hag had come back and was dancin' around in my new-planted field like a possessed scarecrow!"

Well, if I kicked her butt down the road once, I did it again, I did! She'll be wearing the imprint o' my boot for a good many weeks, she will!"

The loutish clod grinned, revealing a mouth of blackened stumps. "Hope you give her the boot a'fore she finished her witching, Klemn."

"What in Kor's name d'you mean?" The farmer now looked less surly and more anxious.

"Just that she was doin' a crop dance on your field, a-hexing the ground to suck the life clean out of it. My pa's fields was once crop danced. Not even a weed grewed 'til he paid off the witch what done it."

"Well, guess I got to her in time then," the farmer said with relief, "because my sorghum come up just fine. But if she comes poking her face 'round these parts again, I'll know to go after her with a pitchfork instead of my boot!"

The men roared with laughter and pounded the table with approval.

10829.msg – *Chapter 1\North of Sortiga – Korellyn the Healer*

Korellyn the Healer

Topic: Greeting

Korellyn: "Spare a crust of bread or a turnip for a harmless old woman what the cruel fates done left to die?"

Kaelyn: "I don't think so."

Topic: Herblore

Aren: "Do you know any herblore?"

Korellyn: "No, but if you hum a few bars... (CACKLES) I always get 'em with that one! Young fella, I knew more about herbs by the time you were born..."

Aren: "I've heard tell of something called a nudberry. What is that?"

Korellyn: "Nudberries, is it? Well, that's an easy one! Used 'em all the time to make med'cines, I did. A nudberry don't taste so good but if you eat it, your mouth gets numb, then your chest, then your arms and legs. Sets your mind at rest too. Makes sleep come easy and deep. The nud root's not so sharp on the tongue, but then again, it don't work so well neither."

Topic: Home

Aren: "Don't you have a home, old woman?"

Korellyn: "(LAUGHS BITTERLY) Don't have a home, nor no kinfolk neither. They was all done in by the pox. Towners burnt down my house to scourge the plague, may weevils infest their eye sockets and eat out their brains!"

Kaelyn: "Well, at least you're not bitter about it."

Korellyn: "You take care, young missy. There's nought protecting you, or any of your loved ones, from just the same. The fates does as they does, and no mortal, not even one with youth and looks like what you got, can stare 'em down once they cast the eye on you."

Kaelyn: "Uh, can we go now?"

William: "No, wait a minute. She's made me curious. Elder, I'm sorry your life has been so hard. What do they call you?"

Korellyn: "(TITTERS) Ooh, ain't he the charmer? Once I was called Korellyn the Healer, but nowadays the names they throw ain't nearly so becomin'."

Topic: Healing

William: "(SURPRISED) You're a healer?"

Korellyn: "Well, you needn't sound so surprised. I can heal you up as good as what a flask of Senwater can, if you've got the price."

Choice: Heal (15 burlas)

Choice: Forget It

Topic: Witch

William: "I don't mean to sound insulting, but is there any truth to what I hear about your, uh, talents in the field of witchcraft?"

Korellyn: "(TTTTERS) Field of witchcraft? More like witchcraft in the fields. That's why folks call me the Black Thumb. With a look, I can wither the pears on the bough. A word and kernels of wheat shrivel to sand. A few steps on new-sown soil and the seeds become lifeless husks. It's not much, but it's a living 'cuz folks give me stuff to stay away."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "Well, uh, I guess we'll be going. Look after yourself, Korellyn."

Korellyn: "If I don't, there won't be none to miss me."

40400.msg – *Chapter 1\Ligano – The Shady Vale Inn – Bartender*

Topic: *The Shady Vale Inn needs Ale*

William called to the innkeeper. "Fetch us some ale, my good man!"

The innkeeper came to the table, empty-handed but for a half-filled basket of stale crackers. "Sorry, sir, but we're right out of ale. Wine too. What with the Montari raiders blocking the roads, the town's cut off."

The innkeeper sighed. "Ligano produces dry goods, not wet ones. We drained my last keg ten days ago. Didn't you notice the gloom and despair on the faces around you? They've been making due with lemonade and ginger beer. Tempers are getting mighty short. Say, you're not from around here, are you?"

William suddenly noticed that all eyes in the room were fixed on their little group. "Just passing through. Why?"

The innkeeper said slyly, "You must've found a way 'round the Montari. Now I'm not asking no questions..."

He leaned in closer and whispered, "It's all the same to me whether you flew or magicked yourselves into town. All's I'm saying is if on your next visit you can fly or magic some ale in with you, I'll pay a handsome sum."

Topic: Sell Ale

William showed the ale to the innkeeper. "What will you give me for this lot?"

"More than triple the going rate, m'lord, and glad to do it!" Burlas and booze exchanged hands. The innkeeper suddenly disappeared behind a crowd of thirsty customers clamoring for a drop or a dram.

Topic: After Selling Ale or Montari Defeated

The Bartender was smiling broadly, as the Shady Vale inn was crowded with happy patrons, each with a full mug in front of him and at least three inside. "I've finally got enough ale to stay in business," he yelled to them over the din.

40425.msg – ***Chapter 1\Ligano – Vacant House – Montari Attack***

Topic: Vacant House – Montari Attack

The broken windows and unhinged door indicated the house's vacancy. William stepped across the threshold into the gutted wreck. Broken furniture, slashed bedding, and smashed crockery littered the floor.

William turned over a headless doll with his foot. "Looks like the Montari hit this place pretty hard. I wonder what happened to the family who lived here?"

Aren grunted. "This gives me the creeps, like walking into a tomb. Let's go."

40410.msg – ***Chapter 1\Ligano – Sergeant Kalyx***

Topic: Kalyx not Answering

No one responded to William's knock. "I'm pretty sure someone lives here. Look how tidy everything is. The grass is trimmed, the windows sparkle, and the whitewash is as fresh as if it was applied yesterday. Why, even the pebbles on the path are perfectly aligned."

Topic: Montari Defeated #1A – Before Meeting Rosie

A gruff voice shouted through the closed door. "Go away! I'm on leave!"

William shouted back. "But we just want to ask you about..."

"Listen! I've done my tour of duty. The Montari are gone. Now leave me in peace and quiet. That's an order!"

Topic: Montari Defeated #1B – After Meeting Rosie

William knocked repeatedly. "Hello! Anybody home? Sergeant Kalyx, are you there?"

The door opened so suddenly that William almost fell on his face. "Who are you? What do you want?"

William improvised. "We're, uh, friends of your neighbor... uh, roses..."

"Rosie? What about her?"

"Umm... She said we should pay you a visit to, uh, thank you for defeating the Montari."

William was surprised to see the sergeant blushing like a peach. "Oh, well, it was nothing really. So Rosie sent you over, eh?"

William laid it on thick. "She said that without your courage, the entire town would have been wiped out... or starved to death."

Kalyx's stomach growled. "Yes, we've all been on quarter rations. It'll be a while before supplies start coming in. In the meantime, I guess belts will be worn tighter this season."

Topic: Not Enough Food Given

Kalyx declined the food with a wan smile. "You're a trooper, but I couldn't go off quarter rations with just that. You keep it."

Topic: Enough Food Given

William handed over a week's worth of food. "It's not much, but hopefully it will tide you over until fresh supplies come in."

"Much appreciated, son. Is there anything I can do for you in return?"

William considered. "Sir, with your years of experience in the military, you must know a lot about self-defense. Perhaps you could give us some pointers?"

Sergeant Kalyx grinned. "Right you are. I know a few tricks that would make even a jaeger think twice."

Kalyx led them to a clearing behind his house. He demonstrated a series of throws, blocks, and feints, simple to master yet quite effective. The heroes barely kept up with the grizzled old soldier, but at the end of the hour, though sweaty and tired, they felt their defensive skills greatly improved.

After they had rested from the workout, William ventured a suggestion. "You know, Rosie was saying something about not having much to put on the table. You could..."

Kalyx rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "You don't think she'd mind if I offered to share my rations with her?"

"No, especially if you called it a picnic and included a bottle of wine..."

"I think I have a bottle hidden away somewhere... that might not be such a bad idea. Think I'll wash up a bit, then launch the campaign."

"Or rather, lunch the campaign," quipped William.

40405.msg – *Chapter 1\Ligano – Rosie the Flower Lady*

Topic: Rosie the Flower Lady

The house was practically invisible beneath great swelling banks of roses climbing up the walls and overhanging the eaves. William found the door knocker hidden amongst the boughs. They were greeted warmly by a middle-aged woman wearing a pleasant expression and a dress as flowery as her house. Her perfume battled the roses for olfactory supremacy.

William questioned her politely. "How fare you during these difficult times?"

"What a polite young man you are. How thoughtful of you to ask. Well, of course most of our troubles stem from the Montari blockade. Life certainly hasn't been a bed of roses. Getting enough to eat is a thorny problem. Oh, if only those Montari would simply leave us alone!"

"Isn't anyone doing anything about the Montari raids?"

"Only my dear friend and neighbor, retired Sergeant Kalyx. He truly rose to the occasion. He's organized many of the townsmen in a defense. They're off fighting even as we speak. I'm sure that without Sergeant Kalyx we all would have been mowed down in our own beds by now."

Topic: Already met Sergeant Kalyx

Aren sniffed a large yellow rose, disturbing a bumblebee that almost flew up his nose. "Yikes! I mean... we already tried to visit Kalyx. Kind of a prickly gentleman, isn't he?"

The flower lady laughed. "I suppose so, but if he's not careful, one of these days I'm going to trim those thorns of his."

Topic: Montari Defeated

As the party approached, the flower lady rose from a flower bed, startling Aren. "Oh, excuse me! I didn't see you. You blended in so well..."

"That's all right, my dear. Now that it's safe to come outdoors, I have so much catching up to do in the yard. My poor babies have been quite neglected!"

"The Montari have retreated?"

"Yes, indeed. Sergeant Kalyx and the townsmen defeated them! I am so very proud of him. You should pay a visit to him. He lives right next door."

40415.msg – *Chapter 1\Ligano – Pox House – Den of Thieves*

Topic: Pox House – Den Of Thieves – Attempt #1

The house appeared deserted, windows and door boarded over. The party was about to turn away when William noticed a wisp of smoke coming from the chimney. "I think there's someone home."

William banged on the door. He thought he heard a whisper and a scurry. "Could be mice, but I rather doubt it."

Topic: Pox House – Den Of Thieves – Attempt #2

William pounded on the door until his fist ached. Finally, his efforts were rewarded with a hoarse shout. "Get away! We have the pox here!"

William turned toward his companions. "Odd, there's no ribbon on the door. The rest of the town seems fine. What do you think?"

Topic: Leave

Aren shrugged. "Maybe we shouldn't risk it..."

William nodded. "All right, we'll leave... but something's not right here."

Topic: Force Entry

The heroes circled the house, looking for the best point of entry. The boards covering a rear window were loose and gave way to a cautious tug. "All right, on the count of three..."

William rushed the window, followed closely by his companions. They tumbled into the house, then jumped to their feet to confront the occupants.

"Kor's teeth..." William gasped. Stacks of boxes and heaps of bags covered the floor. "We've stumbled into a den of thieves!"

"And they don't look too thrilled to have uninvited guests!" William drew his sword as the party was rushed out the door by the horde of hoarders.

40420.msg – *Chapter 1\Ligano – Healer*

Topic: Healer

"This looks bad." Kaelyn surveyed the rows of wounded laid out on makeshift cots.

A woman passed by, her arms loaded with sheets and bandages. Kaelyn touched her sleeve. "Excuse me, is there anything we can do to help?"

"No, dear, we've got hands a'plenty. What we lack are medicines and salves. The Montari keep supplies from coming in."

Topic: Not Enough Medicine Given

"I'm sorry, but these are all we can spare."

The woman smiled in gratitude. "Thank you. In a drought, even a drop of rain is welcome."

Topic: Enough Medicine Given (from Pox House – Den of Thieves)

The healer stared in amazement. "Where in Senaedin's name did you get all this?"

Kaelyn looked at the adjoining house in disgust. "Your neighbors were dealing in stolen goods, hoarding supplies until need drove prices sky-high. We, er, convinced them of the error of their ways..."

The woman looked at the wounded townsmen, tears starting in her eyes. "Your deed will save many lives. On behalf of the wives and children of Ligano, I thank you."

40430.msg – ***Chapter 1\South of Ligano – Children of Henne Priest***

Topic: Henne Priest – Before the Wedding

The priest welcomed them. "Greetings, my children. You are not from this town. Are you on a journey of the body or of the soul?"

Aren replied respectfully, "Of the body, I guess. We're adventuring."

"Adventures of the spirit can be every bit as exciting and twice as rewarding. But there is time in a man's life for both. I myself am supposed to be on an adventure of sorts, but one I dare not risk."

"Why is that, Brother? We know the roads. Perhaps we can be of service."

"I promised to officiate at a wedding in Sortiga. However, the Montari bands make the journey far too dangerous for one such as I."

Topic: Montari not yet Defeated

The heroes assured the priest that they would do all they could to clear the road of Montari. He blessed them. "Walk in Henne's light, children. Remember that His is the path of peace and love. If you must resort to violence, do so with mercy for the fallen in your heart."

Aren felt a pang of guilt, recalling their adventures thus far. "We will try, Brother, but sometimes..."

The priest smiled. "Just do the best you can. Henne understands."

Topic: Montari Defeated

Aren proudly addressed the priest. "Brother, my companions and I have cleared the road between Ligano and Sortiga. No Montari will dare bother you after the lesson we taught them!"

The priest gathered his robes. "Then I must hurry! The merchant is eager to have his daughter wed. My delayed arrival has made him most impatient. However, because of your brave deed, I will soon be able to perform my Gods-given duty, uniting two loving hearts together in a life of joy."

10833.msg – *Chapter 1\Northeast of Ligano – Liselle, Sister of Senaedrin*

Liselle, Sister of Senaedrin

Topic: Greeting #1 – After Defeating Montari

Liselle: "Fellow travelers, Senaedrin has indeed sent you to us in our hour of need. We couldn't have stood against the Montari much longer, weak as we are with hunger and fatigue."

William: "By grace of the goddess or good fortune, I'm glad we came along when we did."

Liselle: "Oh, but you are wounded. I would not have it said that one of Senaedrin's Circle did not have the strength to heal those who rescued her."

William: "Thank you, Revered Sister. We would be grateful."

Liselle: "<GASP>"

William: "What's the matter? Are you all right?"

Liselle: "I'm... fine. I just did not expect... You survived the pox. I can sense its shadow within you."

William: "Yes, but I was lucky. Your sisters healed me while it was still in its early stage. My eldest brother was not as fortunate."

Liselle: "I am sorry. May your memory of him live on in Senaedrin's love."

Topic: Montari

Aren: "Why did the Montari attack you?"

Liselle: "The Sisters received word of a Feeblepox outbreak in Aspreza. At this point in our journey, we were surrounded by a band of Montari. They were desperate with hunger, poor creatures. To keep them at bay, we threw them all our food. They fell on it like crazed wolverines, fighting each other viciously for every scrap. A short while ago, the food ran out and they turned their savage eyes back in our direction. If you hadn't appeared just when you did..."

Topic: Feeblepox

Aren: "(SINCERE) Revered Sister, when will we be free of this plague?"

Liselle: "I do not know, child. The pox erupted from nowhere, sweeping over the land like a prairie fire. Perhaps it will extinguish itself just as quickly."

Topic: Chail

Aren: "Has Chail been spared from the pox?"

Liselle: "Not entirely. I suspect smugglers or pirates evading the blockades were responsible for the outbreak in Phorlia last season. It seems to have been contained now, thanks to an effective border watch. But restraining the plague is like trying to capture quicksilver... It slips through your fingers to spread its poison elsewhere."

Topic: Glassrock Ridge

Aren: "There is no pox west of the Ridge?"

Liselle: "Oddly enough, no. When the Mehrat crossed the Ridge to fight, we feared they would carry the pox with them, but my Sisters have seen no sign of it there."

Topic: Aspreza

Kaelyn: "We passed through Aspreza not long ago. Many of the townsfolk were already afflicted. I hope your journey is not made in vain."

Liselle: "(SIGH) I pray that it is not. We can't afford to waste any more time. But now that we have no food..."

Topic: Food

William: "Do you think finding food along the way will be a problem, Revered Sister?"

Liselle: "It may be. The Montari have scoured the land clean everywhere but to the north. In this weakened state, we cannot go more than a day without food, yet we can't afford the time to travel to towns off the direct path. Wasting hours in search of food may well mean arriving in Aspreza only to shepherd souls rather than heal bodies."

Kaelyn: "How much food do you think you'll need to make it to Aspreza?"

Liselle: "If we hurry, we can reach Aspreza in ten to twelve days. With Senaedrin's grace we can make do with half rations. For the four of us, we'll need twenty-four rations altogether."

Topic: Not Enough Food Given

Liselle: "Thank you, child."

Topic: Enough Food Given

William: "Here, Sister. Take this food to speed you on your way."

Liselle: "May Senaedrin caress you with her love! We will set out at once. Now that food is no longer a concern, I have faith that we will arrive in time. Please, in gratitude, take this Senwater, though I pray that by Her grace you will have no need of it."

Topic: Goodbye #1

Liselle: "We must be on our way, and quickly. Goddess speed."

William: "And to you as well. Perhaps we will have the fortune to cross paths again on the road or in Aspreza."

Topic: Greeting #2 – Rations Still Needed

William: "How fares your journey, Revered Sister?"

Liselle: "We travel as quickly as we can."

Topic: Brunia Farm House #1 – Before Obtaining the Deed

The party approached the building with caution. The crooked shutters and weed-choked walkway gave the place a forlorn, abandoned look. A notice posted to the door caught their attention:

"NOTICE: This house and all property on these lands are hereby claimed by Lord Garson in lieu of payment of taxes owed. No trespassing."

Topic: Brunia Farm Field – Before Obtaining the Deed

A pair of burly men stepped forward to block the party's way.

"Nice day," Aren tried. The men just glared at them, arms crossed in front of them. "I don't suppose we might..." Aren's voice trailed off as the pair took a menacing step toward the group.

"...go somewhere else." Aren finished, backing away and silencing William's snicker with a glare.

Topic: Man who Bribe Lord Garson #1

The short, bald man eagerly answered the door on the first knock. "You must have... please, tell me you have... do you have a message for me from Lord Garson?"

William tried to look contrite. "No, sir. I'm sorry. Were you expecting one?"

The man wiped his brow. "Yes... yes... indeed I am. Great things are in store for this family... great things... for at least one member of this family. Lord Garson has promised... I have his own word on it... to see to it... personally, mind you... that my eldest son... a brilliant boy... is appointed to the Shira as a page! Not a dramatic step perhaps... but not too ambitious either... merely a sensible step to what I... and my wife... hope will be... feel assured will be a dazzling career."

William chewed the inside of his mouth thoughtfully. "You must be close friends of Garson's to receive such personal attention."

The little man blushed. "Well... No... no... not really. I went to see him... my wife told me to go... He was very gracious... the perfect host... most friendly... most accommodating."

"How much?"

"Beg pardon?"

"How much money did you give him?"

The man's blush deepened. "Oh, not that much... a trifle really... possibly two... maybe three... or five hundred burlas... A pittance when you think of the boy... a brilliant boy... when you consider his future... in business... in politics..."

"I see," said William.

40600.msg – *Chapter 1\Imazi – Trey Matchi, Drum Maker*

Topic: Trey Matchi #1

A sign above the cottage door read "Trey Matchi: Drum Maker". William timed his knock to counterpoint the rapid, rhythmic drumming coming from inside.

Trey was thin and dark, shirtless and dripping sweat. Assuming he had new customers, he quickly dried off with a towel, donned a shirt, and invited the party into his workshop. Trey showed them the few drums he had available, apologizing for the humble offering.

"Are you friends of Lord Garson's?" Trey asked.

William's responded enigmatically. "Why?"

"There's a special discount if he recommended me."

"No, we aren't friends of his. Nor are we liable to become so in the future."

Trey relaxed. He begins to beat on a tiny finger drum, a light, rapid rhythm imitating rain on a thatched roof.

"In truth, I am no friend of Garson's either. He charged all craftsmen in Imazi with an exorbitant licensing fee. I and several of my fellow guildsmen refused to pay. Shortly thereafter, my skin man sent me a message. Garson's men had intercepted him on the road to Imazi. They threatened him with a beating or worse if he continued to supply me with skins for my drums. He ran home in a panic, losing his pack somewhere in the hills."

William remarked, "They scared him out of his skins, eh?"

Trey did not smile. "It's no joke to me. Without a steady supply of skins, I'm out of business."

Topic: Trey Matchi #2 – No Skins

"Sorry, I'm closed--" Trey cut himself off when he recognized the party. "Oh, hello again."

Aren frowned at the man's demeanor. "You're closing up shop?"

The drummer threw up his hands in a shrug. "Until I get skins, I'm out of business."

Topic: Give Skins

They showed the skins to Trey. "Can you make use of these?"

"Yes, I think so. I can make enough drum heads from these to last out the year. Please won't you accept this drum for your trouble?"

Kaelyn took the drum gingerly. "That's very kind of you. I guess I'll have to learn to play it now."

10823.msg – ***Chapter 1\Imazi – Lord Garson***

Lord Garson of Imazi

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "I don't know if you recall meeting me. I am William... (INTERRUPTED)"

Garson: "(INTERRUPTING) ...the eldest son of my oldest friend, Lord Calistoga? Why of course I remember you, boy!"

William: "Not exactly, sir. I'm the youngest son of Lord Escobar."

Garson: "Oh yes, of course. Know you anywhere, I would. Welcome to my estate."

Topic: Drought

William: "(LEADING QUESTION) How about this drought, Garson. Are things as bad up here as they are in the south of Pianda?"

Garson: "Oh worse, much worse. Your father must do something about these conditions. I hear that even the Montari are swarming up from their caves to raid. And the drought has rained havoc... (LAUGHS) ...if you'll forgive the unsuitable choice of words... on the farmers. Worst yields I've ever seen. But does that give them the right to welsh on their taxes?"

Topic: Taxes

Garson: "I must confess, I am all too lenient with my tenants. But to hear them complain about taxes, they must believe this district runs on no more than toothpicks and whey! I'm expected to fill up the Empire's coffers with a full share. If I come up short, the Council would pounce on me like jackals. Why should I make up for the farmers' laziness out of my own pocket? Answer me that!"

Aren: "Perhaps you could start..."

Garson: "(INTERRUPTING) Hmmm? Yes, well, and how did you become so knowledgeable in the affairs of government?"

Topic: Montari

Garson: "Montari! (SNIFFS) Filthy beasts. It's a wonder they haven't stirred up trouble before this. Perhaps now the Emperor will realize how foolish it is to let one's sweet tooth dictate domestic policy."

Topic: Sweets

Kaelyn: "True, the Montari do make the best chocolate in the Empire."

Garson: "And their sugared figs are exquisite... But does that mean we have to stand idly by while they steal us blind?"

Topic: Goodbye #1

Garson: "If there's nothing further, I'm afraid I must ask you to leave. Some rather pressing business... Pay my respects to your father, William."

William: "(DOOR SHUTS) Pressing business, eh? Pressing his handkerchief is more likely. Wonder how many of those things he goes through in a day?"

Kaelyn: "Wonder if he has to wring them out before he presses them..."

Topic: Greeting #2

Garson: "So you're back, young Escobar. What do you want now?"

William: "We just had a few more questions for you, sir."

10829.msg – ***Chapter 1\North of Sortiga – Korellyn the Healer***

Korellyn the Healer

Topic: Farmer Brunia

Aren: "Does anyone ever pay you to make sure crops don't grow? Anyone up near Imazi, for instance?"

Korellyn: "Yes, sometimes they'll give me something to work my knack on an enemy. Nothing really important... Family feuds, neighborly spats, that sort of thing. Imazi? Think I did at that. I recall an uppity fella, acting superior-like, as if being a noble's bootlick made him one up on me. Hmmmph."

Kaelyn: "Do you remember the noble's name?"

Korellyn: "Oh, going to be civil now, are we, missy? No, can't think of a name, but the herbs he paid me was decent."

Lord Garson of Imazi

Topic: Sabotage

William: "Garson, I believe that you arranged to have Farmer Brunia's land cursed to make it barren. I demand you return the Brunia farm to its rightful owner!"

Garson: "Impudent pup! On what grounds do you make such wild accusations?"

Topic: Goodbye #2

Garson: "Unless you can support your accusations with some proof, I'm afraid I must ask you to leave. (DOOR SLAMMING)"

Kaelyn: "And he didn't even say goodbye..."

Korellyn the Healer

Topic: Kerchief

William: "I couldn't help but notice that fine kerchief you're wearing."

Korellyn: "Lovely, ain't it? A finer piece of linen you'll never see. That highborn sod what I cursed the field for done give it to me. Wrapping for the herbs it was."

William: "I'd like to buy your kerchief, if you don't mind."

Topic: Give Money – Not Enough

Korellyn: "Well, if you can spare a little more, I'll consider it a fair exchange."

Topic: Give Enough Money

Korellyn: "It's yours, young master. Use it in health and prosperity."

10823.msg – ***Chapter 1\Imazi – Lord Garson***

Lord Garson of Imazi

Topic: Kerchief

Garson: "Why are you waving that filthy thing in my face?"

William: "Don't you recognize this, Garson?"

Garson: "Well, it looks like it used to be one of my handkerchiefs. What of it?"

William: "There's a curious woman named Korellyn... Do you know her?"

Garson: "No, I've never heard of her."

William: "Really? She gave us this handkerchief... A handkerchief you gave her in partial payment for her services."

Garson: "You believe the lying tongue of a witch over the word of a nobleman?"

Kaelyn: "Ah, but William never said she was a witch. Gotcha, m'lord."

William: "I wonder what my father and the rest of the council would think of such underhanded dealings?"

Garson: "(RESIGNED) Very well. I assume you have a proposition in mind?"

William: "I would be more than happy to conveniently forget the entire matter... IF..."

Garson: "(IMPATIENT) Yes?"

William: "...IF you return Brunia's lands and release him from any past tax obligations. Then I suppose I could manage a case of selective amnesia."

Garson: "(FEIGNING INDIFFERENCE) Is that all? Consider it done."

Topic: Goodbye #3

William: "A pleasure doing business with you, Garson. (SARCASTIC) Have a nice day."

Garson: "(ANGER UNDER WRAPS) Get off of my land."

10812.msg – *Chapter 1\Balmestri – The Safe Harbor Inn – Farmer Mattai Brunia*

Farmer Mattai Brunia of Imazi

Topic: Deed

William: "Greetings, Farmer Brunia!"

Brunia: "Not a farmer without a farm. Just plain old Brunia now."

Aren: "But you are a farmer again! We have the deed to your land!"

Brunia: "You wouldn't be pulling my plow now, would you, son?"

Topic: Give Deed

Brunia: "(STUNNED) Mother Senaedrin! The deed to the land! Is it truly mine again?"

Kaelyn: "Yes, truly. Yours to return to, to farm, and to pass on to your children."

Brunia: "(CHOKING UP A LITTLE) I... I... I thank you. I must show my gratitude somehow. What do I have? Here, take these bottles. Someone left them behind weeks ago and hasn't come back to claim them. It's not much, I know, but maybe you can use them."

Topic: Goodbye #2 – After Giving the Deed

William: "We will see you in Imazi."

Brunia: "Yes, in Imazi, at MY farm!"

Topic: Miner

An old miner sat at a table near the door, nursing an ale. William offered to top off his drink, but the miner declined. "I knows when I've had enough... and so does my wife. If I come home smelling of two ales instead o' one, she'll be at me like a pickaxe to ore. But have a seat, if you like. Since the pox took Seth and Thom there's been plenty o' room at my table."

"We're travelers, just arrived in Aliero," William began. "Could you tell us about the mines?"

"Aye, that I could, from now until you petrify right where you sit. Been working in the shafts since I was big enough to lift a shovel. Anything in particular you want to know?"

"Sounds like the pox hit this town pretty hard."

"Aye, that it did. Killed near 'bout two out of every three... Men, women, children. My wife and I lost both our sons. We didn't even know what to call it then. Wasn't 'til the rest of the Empire was afflicted that it got the name Feeblepox."

Kaelyn patted the miner's arm sympathetically. "Those must have been hard times for everyone."

"Yep. The mine works closed down for months. But life goes on, don't it." The miner sighed and stared into his ale. The companions departed quietly, leaving him to his thoughts.

Topic: Vacant Pox House

After no one answered his knock, William looked through the uncurtained window. "It's vacant... completely bare. The Sisters of Senaedin often burn the pox victims' belongings and scrub down the walls and floor with boiling Senwater. Otherwise the locals might set fire to the house to be rid of it, sometimes sending the entire town up in flames by accident."

Topic: Pox Widow

Weeds surrounded the shabby cottage. A gentle tap on the door brought no answer. William knocked louder. A feeble old woman opened the door. "Yes? Do I know you?" She peered at the companions through bleary eyes.

"We're travelers seeking information about this town."

The woman cupped a hand to her ear. "What's that you say? Speak up!"

William repeated loudly, "We want information."

"There's no one here by that name."

William shouted, "Is your husband home?"

The woman bobs her head. "Yes, he's gone, gone, gone. Taken at the start of the plague he was."

"Oh, sorry to hear that!"

"Yes, I thought so too. One day he was complaining of hot flashes and icy chills, then the next he broke out in blisters all over his body. Bumpy as a bad stretch of road."

"How horrible!"

"No, not so's you'd notice. After that, he just faded away... Funeral was lovely. My sister Doraleen sang 'From Dust to Dawn'."

William yelled, "Condolences on your loss! We really must be going!"

"Yes, a horrible way to die. But you know what they say... They can kill you, and they can eat you, but they can only do it once. Nice chatting with you. Stop by any time."

Topic: Makeshift Rope Bridge

After a few tries, Kaelyn looped the rope around a sturdy outcropping on the far side and staked it down, forming a tenuous bridge. One at a time, the threesome pulled themselves across hand-over-hand. By the time they were done, the rope was too frayed to support them again.

Topic: Aren detects Minerals

Aren paused as an odd sensation tickled his mind. "I can feel something..." he trailed off, grasping for words. "I think there are mineral deposits nearby. There may be something valuable close to the surface."

Topic: Midova – City Overview

The crossroads of Piandan commerce bustled with traders, craftsmen, travelers, and farmers moving intently-- but always with a wave and friendly smile to passersby.

Marketplace: The focus of much of the town's activity, the shops and open-air stalls of the market filled the air with sounds and smells to attract traffic.

Second Skins: While the armory specialized in leatherwork, it occasionally stocked items of other descriptions.

Peerless Imports: A dizzying palette of aromas surrounded the shop, where exotic spices from across Ramar tantalized passersby.

Greener Pasture Inn: The constant tide of travelers through Midova put sleeping space at a premium. Common rooms, rather than private accommodations, were the norm.

City Financier: With the amount of money changing hands in Midova, it was hardly surprising to find a Burlene banker offering his services.

Topic: Drummer

The drummer sat cross legged on a colorful mat. Rising from a basket, a young field worm undulated to the beat of the man's tom-tom drum. Aren stared at the worm for several minutes, then he too began to sway. William snapped his fingers in front of Aren's face. With a start, Aren re-entered the present. "Whew. For a second there, I knew exactly how that worm must feel. I wonder how that works."

The man stopped playing the drum. The field worm sank slowly into the basket. "You have an interest in my worm, young man? I will tell you how I coax him to raise his little head. Field worms

are naturally in tune to the vibrations of the earth, the harmonics of the air. When I play the drum, the worm cannot help but dance, enraptured by the pulsating beat."

"Does it matter what rhythm you play?"

"Oh, yes. If you just started banging away on the drum, chances are you'd disturb the natural vibrations and anger the worm into attacking. However, for you, my friend, for the sum of 75 burlas I can show you the correct rhythm. Of course, you must promise not to go into competition with me. The Midova marketplace has room only for one field worm charmer, and I am he."

Choice: Pay Drummer

Aren handed over the money and assured the drummer that he had no intent of setting up his own worm-charming stall. The man played the tom-tom, then handed it to Aren. After a few false starts, the field worm began to wriggle to the beat of Aren's drumming.

As the companions turned away from the stall, the drummer gave Aren a final piece of advice. "Just remember that the most important thing for a novice worm-charmer to do is to keep practicing his scales..."

Choice: Pay Drummer – *Not Enough Money*

The companions looked at each other uncomfortably. The drummer smiled. "I see. Do not worry, my friends, I will still be here if your finances improve."

Choice: Leave

William pulled Aren away. "You're a real mage, Aren. Don't waste your talent on common parlor tricks."

40805.msg – **Chapter 1** | *Midova – Midova Marketplace – Chocolatier*

Topic: *Chocolatier*

Kaelyn lingered over the goods at the merchant's stall. "Mmmm. Chocolate..."

William picked up a neatly wrapped package of sugared dates. "Got a sweet tooth? Maybe I'll buy you... Yikes! These are expensive!"

The merchant approached, chewing on a sour pickle. "Forgive me while I finish my snack. At this time of day, I need a little something-- anything-- that isn't sweet."

"Understandable. Though what I don't understand is why everything in your booth costs so much."

The merchant wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "These are the finest chocolates and sweetmeats in the Empire. Everything handmade by Montari confectioners. I have a special connection with the Montari by way of an old friend of mine from our home town in Ghan. The candies are costly because connections do not come without their price. Also, the Montari are having a difficult time getting raw materials, cocoa, sugar, and the like, because of the drought."

William replaced the dates on the table. "I see. Well, maybe some other time."

As the party turned away, the merchant tried one last pitch. "I guarantee, the price is truly worth it. These Montari chocolates are the finest!"

Kaelyn gave a small cube of fudge to each of her companions, then popped one in her own mouth. "I noticed a plate of free samples. That merchant was right... this Montari chocolate is definitely well worth the price."

40810.msg – *Chapter 1\Midova – Midova Marketplace – Food Merchant*

Topic: Food Merchant

The merchant dozed in his stall. "Guess he's not worried about anyone making off with his goods," Aren said.

Kaelyn looked at the meager assortment of food stuffs on the counter. "Well, would you be? Pretty sorry merchandise."

"Must be the drought," William observed, disdainfully waving a limp carrot for emphasis.

The merchant came awake with a start. "Please, sir, do not disdainfully wave my carrots, not even for emphasis."

Topic: Shadowy Conman

"Hey! Yeah, you! Come on over here. I got something for you." The man in the alley beckoned to Aren. Aren slipped into the shadows which hid the man's features. All Aren could really see was the twinkle of red gemstones set into a shiny bracelet.

"Hey, kid, do you know what this is?" the man asked.

"It looks like a bracelet to me."

The man snorted. "Not just a bracelet... a magic bracelet! Wear it into battle and it'll increase your, uh, your prowess. Yeah, that's right, your prowess."

Aren started to back away. The man grabbed his arm. "Wait a second. I haven't told you the best part yet. This here beauty will only cost you 30 burlas."

"Why so cheap? And why are you doing business in a dark alley instead of in the marketplace?"

The man's teeth flashed in the gloom. "Ah, you're a shrewd one, aren't you? Tell you the honest truth, it's because if people-- certain people-- knew what I was selling, they'd be all over me. See, magic jewelry is a special commodity what the general public aren't supposed to have access to, especially not at these prices, if you see what I mean."

Aren nodded sagely. "Ah..."

"So what's it going to be, bright boy? You interested or do I take my magic bracelet elsewhere?"

Choice: Buy Bracelet

Aren handed over the money in exchange for the bracelet. Slipping back into the shadows, the man advised, "Got yourself a genuine bargain, kid. Take good care of that bracelet now, you hear?"

Aren studied his purchase, trying to sense a magical presence. "Hmmp. I wonder if I've just been had. Something tells me I shouldn't mention this little adventure to William or Kaelyn. I'm sure I'd never hear the end of it."

Choice: Buy Bracelet – Not Enough Money

Aren looked sheepish. "I guess I don't have 30 burlas to give you."

The man threw up his hands in disgust and slipped back into the shadows.

Choice: Leave

Aren turned to go. "Thirty burlas seems like a lot of money for a bit of glass and gilt. Go peddle it somewhere else, friend."

"Well, I said you were a bright boy. Have a nice day." The man silently slipped back into the shadows.

100.msg – **Chapter 1\Entering Ticor Province**

Topic: Entering Ticor Province

William: "Sorry to put a damper on your spirit of adventure, but I really need to report to my father in Panizo."

11510.msg – **Chapter 1\Panizo – City Overview**

Topic: Panizo – City Overview

The capital of Pianda still clung to its countryside charms. Amidst the low buildings and open spaces smiling people strolled about their business in no particular hurry.

The Escobar Estate: The home of William's family for generations and seat of gubernatorial authority.

Scribner's Alcove: The most respected stationer in the province.

Bandera's Gift: Named for a popular joyman's tale, the inn known for its good cheer and better ale was a favorite haunt of William's.

The Anvil: The building had no sign, but the ringing peals of metal on metal proclaimed it a smithy more surely than any slab of wood might.

Topic: Pizzi the Barmaid

The barmaid caught William's eye. She sashayed over to the table, flashing her petticoat with every swing of her hips. "M'lord, so very kind of you to do us the honor of your presence. This humble establishment welcomes so great a noble."

William laughed. He grabbed the girl by the waist and plopped her onto his knee, planting a kiss on her cheek. "Pizzi! You act as if you don't remember me!"

Pizzi dropped the act, snuggling into William's shoulder with a sigh. "But you've been gone so long, my crumb."

Kaelyn snorted. She crossed the room to the bar, Aren at her heels. Pizzi watched her go, then turned toward William. She pummeled his chest and covered his face with kisses, demanding the reason for his absence.

William's grin broadened. "I'll tell you the truth, you minx, but you won't like it. I've been in Januli, visiting the family of my future wife. Now what do you think of that, eh?"

Pizzi jumped off William's lap and grabbed both his hands. Pulling him toward the back rooms, she laughed with delight. "Oh, is that all! I thought you'd found yourself another girl."

William protested, "But Pizzi, I'm engaged to be married..."

Pizzi cut him off with a kiss. "But you're not married yet, now are you?"

Resource\1500.vmd

— Chapter 1 – End —

The trio walked up the long path to the Escobar Estate, and Aren was astounded by what he saw. Perfectly manicured trees trimmed to the same size and shape. Bountiful gardens overflowing with flowers the likes of which he had never seen. Tall marble statues and large flowing fountains leading to the sprawling three-story mansion. All the opulence befitting the position of Pianda's governor. Panizo was the seat of power for the province, and Lord Nathan Escobar could trace his noble lineage back for generations.

If Kaelyn was similarly impressed with the surroundings, she did her best to hide it with sarcasm. "Not a bad-looking shack... A trifle small, perhaps, but one can't have everything..."

William, Kaelyn, and Aren reached the front of the mansion and climbed the steps of the grand perron up to the main entrance. When the old servant opened the door, a large smile

crossed his wrinkled face as he enthusiastically greeted the youngest Escobar. "Ah, the young master!" Janson said. "Welcome home sir!"

Happy to be home, William placed his hands on Janson's shoulders warmly. "Hello, Janson," he said, returning the smile.

"Your father is at dinner, m'lord," Janson said. "However, if you'd like to..."

William waved his hand as he stepped past the doorman. "Don't trouble yourself, Janson, my man. I'll surprise him!" he said, walking down the main hallway. Kaelyn and Aren, uncertain of protocol, simply nodded at Janson and quickly fell in step behind William.

In the dining hall, Lord Escobar was going over shipping contracts while his dinner grew cold. It was not the first night that provincial affairs took priority over a hot meal, nor would it be the last. At the far end of the long dining table, Mrs. Escobar quietly ate her meal.

An advisor entered and held yet another document for Lord Escobar to inspect. Insulted by the offer made by the shipping guild, he muttered aloud, "If the shipmasters think they're going to get anywhere by striking, they've been mixing too much seawater into their ale."

The door at the far end of the dining hall opened, interrupting Lord Escobar's concentration. Looking up from his paperwork, he saw his youngest son enter the room and proclaim, "Just when you thought you were rid of me for good..."

Mrs. Escobar turned to look over her shoulder, delighted that her son had finally returned home. "Willy!"

Upon hearing her pet name for her youngest child, Kaelyn and Aren both looked at each other and exclaimed, "Willy?!?" as they, too, entered the dining hall behind William.

"Miss me?" William asked his mother, holding out his arms.

Mrs. Escobar smiled. "Oh, not much. Come here and give your mother a hug, you rascal."

She stood up and embraced her son in a long, maternal hug. As she returned to her seat, William introduced his two companions. "Mama, this is Aren. If not for his bravery, you would be minus one son. And this is Kaelyn, our resident damsel in distress."

Mrs. Escobar greeted both of them with a large, warm smile. "Welcome. It sounds like you've had some adventures. You can tell us over supper." Calling out to a nearby servant, she said, "Linaya, please set three more places at table."

The three took their seats at the long dining table: William next to his father, Aren opposite William, and Kaelyn between Aren and Mrs. Escobar. Kaelyn leaned over to Aren and muttered under her breath, "Damsel in distress indeed. I'll damsel him."

As Lord Escobar continued to sift through documents and contracts, William attempted a greeting. "Hello, father."

Lord Escobar, too focused on his work, said, "Just a moment, son."

Sensing William's chagrin—unfortunately a common occurrence as of late—Mrs. Escobar changed the subject. "So, start at the beginning. What did you think of Selana Sheffield?"

Three plates of food were placed in front of the new diners as William replied, "Oh, she was pretty. But she seemed to bear me a grudge." Frowning for a moment, he continued. "Perhaps she doesn't care for the idea of arranged marriages any more than I do."

Upon hearing that, Lord Escobar finally looked up from his paperwork. "William, you are well aware of the benefits that an alliance with Lord Sheffield would bring to our house."

Looking down at his plate, William simply replied, "Yes, father."

Wishing to spare their guests a long lecture about the duties and responsibilities the Escobar family had to their House and the people of Pianda, Mrs. Escobar quickly changed the subject again. "Now is no time for this discussion. Tell us of your travels. We weren't expecting you to be gone this long."

William told his parents of his journey. Angered by news of the marauding Montari, Nathan vowed to send troops to push them back into their caverns. However, he showed but a marginal interest in the attack at sea until William told of Aren's use of magic to defeat the enormous creature.

"...and I thought that Finch could teach Aren to use his power," William concluded.

Lord Escobar agreed. "To be sure, an untrained mage is a hazard to himself and everyone around him." Resting his head in his hand, he continued. "Unfortunately our illustrious court magician has gone off to his rabbit hole north of Midova, damn his eyes." Pointing to his son, Lord Escobar said, "William, take Aren to Finch. Do it tomorrow morning, early, before he has the chance to accidentally turn someone into stone."

Aren blushed at Lord Escobar's words. To help hide his friend's embarrassment, William continued his tale, relating Gregor's cryptic last words. After pressing his son for details, William's father leaned back to reflect on the information.

"The Imperial Consort is scheduled to pass through Tícoro on his way to the Palace," said Lord Escobar, stroking his beard. "This Gregor's message could mean that the Consort is in danger or that he poses a threat. Either case would be quite embarrassing to Lord Caverton." A frown crept across his face. "Much as I'd like to see Caverton squirm, having him in my debt would be much more satisfying. I need to discover the meaning of that message."

William spoke up. "As the one to whom Gregor entrusted his last words, I feel it is my duty to..."

Ignoring his son, Lord Escobar continued musing. "Graham is away and Matthew is negotiating with the Shipmasters' Guild..."

William again tried to assert himself. "Father, I really think that I..."

Before William could even begin his thought, however, Lord Escobar rose from the table and motioned to his advisor. "Have Chancellor Garek meet me in the study." *Walking out of the room through the door behind him, Lord Escobar left the others to finish dinner without him.*

After a few moments of awkward silence, William pushed away his half-eaten plate. Having lost his appetite, he told Kaelyn and Aren, "We'd best turn in. We have a long journey ahead of us in the morning."

"You're going to take me to find the mage Finch?" *asked Aren.*

"Of course," *he replied, pushing his chair back from the dining table.* "That is what my father wishes, is it not?"

William stood up in silence and walked around his father's empty chair. His friends watched him leave through the same door his father had used. After the door closed behind him, Aren and Kaelyn hurriedly finished their meals to retire for the evening, giving each other furtive glances as they ate.

— Chapter 2 – Start —

The next morning, Lord Nathan Escobar returned from his daily ride.

Guiding his horse towards the far corner of the stables, an awaiting stable hand took the reins and steadied the beast as he dismounted. Giving his favorite steed a gentle pat, Lord Escobar told the stable master, "Rub him down and make sure he drinks plenty of fresh water. And keep him isolated from the other horses!"

"Yes, your grace," the stable master. He motioned to the stable hand, who led the horse to a separate trough. The thirsty horse began to drink its fill while another stable hand appeared with a pair of brushes.

Unfortunately, this was becoming a common practice as more and more horses at the Escobar Estate fell ill over the last few weeks. Having run the Escobar stables for years, the stable master had never seen anything like it. Walking with Lord Escobar across the courtyard, they discussed the problem. "I will not have Zephyr coming down with this damned sickness plaguing my stables," vowed Lord Escobar.

From his room on the second floor, William watched his father and the stable master walk from the stables, through the courtyard, and out of view into the Escobar Estate. Still smarting from his father's dismissal the night before, William was lost in thought—so much so, he failed to hear Kaelyn approach. Standing in the doorway to his room, she tried to get his attention. "William!"

Getting no response, she playfully tried a different tactic. "Oh, Willy!" Aren came up behind her as she leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Are we going or do you intend to daydream like a moon-calf all day?" she asked.

William stared at her blankly, then snapped from his reverie... and stalked out the door, leaving Kaelyn and Aren to follow.

When they reached the bottom of the grand marble staircase, Williams told them the bad news: "All of the horses except Zephyr have the sickness. We have to walk to Ticoro."

Aren was confused. "Ticoro? I thought I was to meet you court mage..."

Stepping out of the mansion and into the bright morning sunlight, the trio descended the steps. "Yes," William agreed. "I will take you to Finch before I depart for Ticoro. Even with the delay, I should get there before the Consort arrives."

Reaching the bottom the grand perron, Kaelyn reminded him, "Your father—"

"—never actually forbade me from going," William countered as they walked by the fountains and statues. "I feel I owe it to Gregor—"

Kaelyn interrupted his interruption. "—and you want to show your father that you're good for more than just acting as his glorified messenger boy."

William came to a halt, irritated that she saw right through him. "I don't recall anyone inviting you along," ***he retorted.***

Kaelyn closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and held the back of her hand to her forehead, as if about to faint. "But you rescued me from those wicked, wicked men!" ***she said in her most dramatic voice.*** "You saved me from a fate worse than death!"

Aren burst out laughing. It appeared that the great thespians of the Antaran Empire had nothing to fear from Kaelyn's acting—or rather, over-acting—abilities. William took another step, but was stopped when Kaelyn blocked his path. "Seriously, you did come to my aid," ***she said with all sincerity.*** "I only think it fair that I hang around in case I can return the favor."

William thought for a moment but relented; he certainly couldn't argue with her loyalty, and she was good in a fight—really good. Not wanting to tip his hand as to what he really thought of her just yet, he instead said, "Well, humph. All right, I guess you can come along to do the cooking... but keep the editorial comments to yourself, you hear?"

Kaelyn laughed, as William and Aren knew she was the worst cook of the three. "You are too kind, my liege," ***she said. As William walked past, she bent down, sweeping her arm in front of her in a mocking grand gesture.***

Kaelyn's exaggerated bow was lost on William, who walked determinedly away from his home.

It was a long way to Midova, and they needed to make up for lost time.

40910.msg – Chapter 2 | *Panizo – The Escobar Estate*

Topic: Return to Escobar Estate

William gazed impassively toward his family's estate. "No reason to go back there," he murmured. "Let's press on."

High Mage Finch, Court Mage for House Escobar

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "High Mage Finch! You're a difficult man to find."

Finch: "And yet, Master Escobar, you have found me. Now be a good lad and fetch me some Chailan tea. My pouch is not so full as I had thought."

William: "Finch, my father sent me to... (INTERRUPTED)"

Finch: "(INTERRUPTING) The Maposa beetle mates only once a year, abandoning her eggs to the whims of fate. Finding a clutch undisturbed is rare indeed, and this group should hatch at any time. The larvae are extremely sensitive to disturbances of any kind. (PAUSE) You might say I feel a certain kinship to the Maposa beetle, if you get my meaning."

William: "Yes, but..."

Finch: "(INTERRUPTING) Chailan tea relaxes me, Master Escobar. I'm much better company when I'm relaxed."

William: "Right. Chailan tea." (SIGH)

Topic: Greeting #2 – No Tea Yet

William: "Greetings, High Mage."

Finch: "And to you, Master Escobar. Do you have my tea?"

William: "Well, not exactly but..."

Finch: "(INTERRUPTING) Then I'm sure you're doing your best to locate some. Be sure to let me know when you've been successful."

Paolo Verazza, Proprietor of Peerless Imports

Topic: Greeting #1

Paolo: "Greetings and salutations! Welcome to Verazza's Peerless Imports! How may I help you?"

William: "Oh, we're just browsing."

Paolo: "(EXPANSIVELY) May the offerings of my humble shop serve to delight your eyes and tickle your nostrils."

William: "Is that Antaran saffron? And these rugs, they are from Januli, are they not? You sell an impressive variety of goods."

Paolo: "And you have a discerning eye, my lord. Allow me the pleasure of an introduction. I am Paolo Verazza, the owner, manager, and stock boy of this establishment."

Topic: Chailan Tea #1

William: "Perhaps you can help us with something. We're looking for Chailan tea."

Paolo: "Ah yes, it is delightful. Though too dear to keep in stock on a regular basis, I can order it for you. It should be here in about a week."

Topic: Goodbye #1

William: "Thank you very kindly. It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Paolo."

Topic: Greeting #2 – One Week has not Passed

Paolo: "Welcome! I was not expecting you back so soon."

Topic: Chailan Tea ***#2 – One Week has not Passed***

Paolo: "I am sorry but I have not yet received the shipment. Your tea will be in at the week's end."

Topic: Greeting ***#3 – One Week has Passed***

William: "(SURPRISED) What happened here?"

Paolo: "(INCOHERENT) Why would they do this? I paid back the money!"

Topic: Messy Shop

William: "Try to calm down and tell us about it. Maybe we can help."

Paolo: "When I came to open the shop this morning, I found the door forced and this... this catastrophe!"

William: "Do you know who did it?"

Paolo: "I can guess... but it doesn't make any sense! I borrowed some money to start my business..."

William: "...and the collectors decided to pay you a friendly little visit, eh? What's the matter? Broke?"

Paolo: "(CONFUSED) No."

Topic: Loan

William: "Why did you take out a loan?"

Paolo: "To explain that, I will first have to tax your patience with a brief background. The Verazza family is quite prominent. My father is head of one of the wealthiest Houses in Midova, if not in all of Pianda. To him, politics and big business are meat and drink. But I have no stomach for such insidious maneuvering. I want a simpler life, surrounded by objects of beauty."

William: "Hence, this shop."

Paolo: "Yes, this shop. Of course my father was furious when I told him. He cut me off completely. My mother came to me in secret and offered me the money, but I have my pride. That is why I took out a loan from Antoni."

William: "I know exactly what you mean. It sounds like we have much in common, Paolo... or at least our fathers do."

Topic: Antoni

Paolo: "Antoni is a Burlene moneylender who lives here in Midova. Over two weeks ago I sent a courier to Antoni bearing the balance of the loan."

Topic: Chailan Tea ***#3 – One Week has Passed***

William: "I hope this doesn't sound too selfish under the circumstances, but did the Chailan tea come in?"

Paolo: "Sadly, it did. The bastards ruined only what they did not confiscate. Much of my merchandise is gone including, it grieves me to say, your tea."

William: "It seems to me that had Antoni the decency to come talk to you first, he could have made a much better return on his investment."

Topic: Goodbye ***#2***

William: "Will you be all right if those collection goons return?"

Paolo: "Don't concern yourself with me, my lord. I am not without friends. If those men return, we will be ready to offer them our (SARCASTIC) 'hospitality'."

William: "Offer them some 'hospitality' for me too. Perhaps on our travels we can help clear up this mystery. Goodbye and good luck."

Topic: Greeting ***#4 – Before Meeting Leon the Mehrat Courier***

Paolo: "I'm sorry but as you can see, I've been too busy cleaning up to put in any orders. Perhaps in a few days..."

Leon the Mehrat Courier

Topic: Greeting

William: "Good day! Mind if we join you?"

Leon: "S'all right with me so long as you don't jostle this arm none."

Topic: Bandages

Kaelyn: "Not a very skilled job with the bandages, friend. If you don't mind my saying so, you're a mess."

Leon: "(FLIRTS) Handsome girl like you can say whatever she likes to me. Yeah, I reckon I've looked prettier. (LAUGHS) My name's Leon."

Kaelyn: "I'm Kaelyn. How did you come by your injuries?"

Leon: "I'm a message runner, a courier. Least I was up until a fortnight ago. The boss didn't believe I was robbed, and me what come in bleeding and with my arm dangling askew like it belonged to another man! He said I was drunk, that I must have lost the package and tumbled into a well. I've heard him call me a dirty Mehrat once too often to know that he didn't sack me for losing that package. Aye, getting the gate was just snow on the mountain after those bastard nobles almost took the life of me."

Topic: Nobles

William: "(STARTLED) Did I hear right? You were attacked by nobles?"

Leon: "(LAUGHS BITTERLY) Aye, nobles, unless being a cutpurse pays a whole lot better than it used to. They was wearing velvet capes and talking that highbrow lingo. One of 'em hit me cross the face and sliced my cheek open with a ruby the size of a sparrow egg."

William: "(INDIGNANT) Why haven't you gone to the magistrate? These men must be caught and punished."

Leon: "(LAUGHS AGAIN) Yeah, right. They all wore masks so's I got no way to identify them. And even if I could, it's my word against theirs. What magistrate's gonna convict gentry on the word of a working man, and one with Mehrat blood in 'im at that!"

Topic: Mehrats

Kaelyn: "You're a Mehrat?"

Leon: "(DEFENSIVE) Aye, and what of it? Kor knows I didn't start the border conflict. I was born and raised in Midova proper, but try explaining that to these damn Antarans who call themselves patriots!"

Topic: Goodbye

Kaelyn: "Well, Leon, take care of yourself."

Leon: "I'll try, Miss. Thanks for your concern."

10810.msg – *Chapter 2\Midova – City Financiers – Antoni Octomont*

Antoni Octomont, Proprietor of City Financiers

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "Are you Antoni, the moneylender?"

Antoni: "(PRECISELY) I am Mr. Octomont, the financier. How may I help you, business-wise?"

Topic: Loan

William: "I'm interested in boosting my cash supply."

Antoni: "Aren't we all? Perhaps I can provide some assistance, money-wise. I am prepared to offer you 500 burlas for a period of sixty days, after which I would appreciate prompt reimbursement with an additional 200 burlas to cover my... overhead."

William: "200 burlas? That seems a trifle excessive."

Antoni: "I assure you it is quite normal, interest-wise. However, no one holds a blade to your throat. That is, assuming your reimbursement is made promptly. Shall we do business?"

William: "On second thought, I'm sure I can make do with what I have."

Antoni: "As you choose."

Topic: Paolo Verazza

William: "(EXAGGERATE MR'S) We've come to talk to you, Mr. Octomont, about a client of yours, Mr. Paolo Verazza."

Antoni: "I do not make it a practice to discuss my clients with strangers."

William: "(CAREFULLY, MATCHING ANTONI'S TONE) I am William Escobar... (INSINUATING) The governor's son. If you do not discuss this matter with me, perhaps you'd prefer to discuss your financial records with the tax officials."

Antoni: "(MAINTAINING DIGNITY) I do not respond well to threats, veiled or otherwise. However, since you may have some political influence (POINTEDLY) when you get older, I will answer your questions."

William: "Why did you send men to wreck Paolo's shop when he paid off his debt?"

Antoni: "I did not receive the money. Therefore, the only fact of which I am sure is that he did not meet his contract, payment-wise. Situations such as this are bad for business. I am a businessman, therefore situations such as this are bad for me. I sent my representatives to Mr. Verazza's place of business to remind him of his obligations."

Topic: Chailan Tea

William: "I can't help but think that it would have been to your advantage to talk to the man before you wrecked his shop, but of course I'm not a businessman. What I do know is that along with everything else, you confiscated a special order of Chailan tea."

Antoni: "I will be more than happy to return the confiscated merchandise when the Verazza debt is rendered in full. I do not care who provides payment, but it must be paid in the near future. Otherwise, my associates will have to visit Mr. Verazza again, which might not be so beneficial to him, health-wise."

Topic: Repaying Debt

William: "We don't have that kind of money. Is there any other way we can cancel the debt?"

Antoni: "Hmmm. I may have something. I loaned money to a Ghanish mystic named Enkudi. Not a wise decision, profit-wise. Several of my agents have tried to collect, but none have been successful. Two have failed to return. I have blacklisted the name of Enkudi so that he cannot take advantage of my colleagues as well. Pursuing this matter is no longer a viable option for my corporation. However, if you can collect Enkudi's debt, I will cancel that of Paolo Verazza."

William: "I think we'd like to make the attempt, collection-wise. Where is this mystic typically found?"

Antoni: "The most recent report put him somewhere near Montari territory."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "A real pleasure doing business, Mr. Octomont. We'll now be on our way, leaving-wise."

10841.msg – *Chapter 2\Midova – Peerless Imports – Paolo Verazza*

Paolo Verazza, Proprietor of Peerless Imports

Topic: *Greeting #4 – After Meeting Leon the Mehrat Courier and Antoni Octomont*

William: "Good day, Paolo. We have news for you."

Paolo: "You have my undivided attention."

Topic: Courier

William: "Antoni never received your money. The courier you entrusted with it was ambushed and robbed! We found him at the Greener Pasture Inn, drowning his sorrows in ale."

Paolo: "Didn't he tell Antoni that thieves got the money?"

William: "Antoni didn't care. All he knew was that you owed him and he hadn't been paid. Funny thing is, the courier said he'd been jumped and robbed by noblemen."

Paolo: "Henne's ears! The Contuso family!"

Topic: Contuso Family

Paolo: "In the time of my great grandfather, the House of Verazza suffered a devastating tragedy. For many generations we had been close friends with the Contuso family. We did business together, drank together, married and made babies together. One fateful day, two Verazza infants were left in the care of a daughter of the Contuso family. A young man, her suitor, came to call. She abandoned her charges to go off with him to a dance. A candle fell over in some straw bedding. The house went up in an instant and the babies were lost. The two families have been at each other's throats ever since."

Aren: "That's horrible. So you believe it was the Contusos that robbed the courier?"

Paolo: "I am almost certain of it. The hatred runs so deep that neither side misses a chance to try to ruin the other."

40510.msg – *Chapter 2\Aliero – Miner*

Topic: Miner – Greeting #1

The party stared in amazement. The house sparkled from a thousand facets in a hundred different colors. Rock fragments, crystals, and polished stones covered every inch of wall and roof. The yard was decorated with a chaotic array of marble slabs and granite boulders. Halved geodes bordered the path to the door.

"Welcome to Quigley Castle!" The man with the fiery red beard spread his arms to encompass his small but impressive domain.

"Let me guess... You're a miner," were the last words William said for the next half hour.

"You got that right, son! Been a miner near twenty years. Not only here, mind you, but all over the Empire. I've dug chrysocolla in Elona, galena in Antara, chalcedony in Balmestri, ruby in Nathby, tungsten in Everton, phosphorous in Varnasse, gold in Burlen, fluorite in Friole, beryl in Breland, mercury in Darvi, obsidian in Cardone, silica in Sortiga, talc in Ticor, gabbro in Chuno, diamonds in Durst, rutile in Teal and Camille, mica in Midova, and lapis lazuli in Januli."

William tried to break in. "That's really quite a..."

"There ain't a thing I don't know about the highest mountain or the lowest valley. I could tell you tales of a blue-eyed glacier that moves like gnashing teeth, of a molten lava flow boiling inland seas to dust. I could take you down to the blackest pit to search for diamonds clear as a mountain spring. I could show you a pinnacle of ice with a heart of burning coal.

"I'll share all my tips, everything I know for just 120 burlas."

Choice: Pay Miner

William held out a handful of burlas. "Do you think that you could teach us some tricks of the mining trade? Nothing too extensive, but anything that might come in handy on our travels."

The miner pocketed the money. "Sure. I'll teach you the ways of pick and shovel, and how to shore up a shaft so it don't cave in on top of you."

After an hour or so, the companions had dirt on their clothes, blisters on their hands, and new knowledge in their heads.

Choice: Pay Miner – *Not Enough Money*

William reached into his pocket but came up short. "I was going to offer you some money to teach us your craft, but I seem to be running low on funds."

"Mining skills can come in handy, but if your vein's played out we'll do it another day. The world's heart beats much slower than yours or mine... she'll wait."

Choice: Leave

"It all sounds fascinating... Maybe some other time. Thanks for showing us around your... unique home." The group slipped away before the miner could get rolling again.

Topic: Miner – *Greeting #2*

The red-bearded miner pumped their hands warmly. "Good to see you again, friends! Change your mind about mining my mind? I'll share all my tips, everything I know for just 120 burlas.

Topic: Brunia Farm House #2 – After Giving the Deed

"Looks like Farmer Brunia's been busy," Kaelyn noted approvingly. The grass was neatly trimmed, the shutters fixed firmly in place, and colorful drapes hung in the windows. There was no answer to their knock, though. "He must be out in the fields."

Topic: Brunia Farm House #3 – No Answer

William knocked loudly, but nobody answered the door.

Farmer Mattai Brunia of Imazi

Topic: Greeting #3 – Imazi Farm

William: "Farmer Brunia, good to see you back in the traces."

Brunia: "Oh, my good friends! Welcome!"

Topic: Fields

William: "Your farm looks to be in excellent shape, Farmer Brunia. The fields so nicely plowed and planted... Except we couldn't help but notice one that's been left to run to weeds and cow-thorn."

Brunia: "And without it, I'm barely growin' enough to keep my head above ground. Ach, that field will be the ruin of me!"

Kaelyn: "Well, why not plant it?"

Brunia: "I'd have t'do all the work myself. My field hands won't go near it. The danderheads believe it's haunted!"

Topic: Haunted Field #1

Brunia: "(DRAMATIC) In that field, my best field, mind ye, the men say they've seen weird lights a'dancin' by night. Heard things too. And one of them swears he's seen a ghost! The shade of Garson's farm hand what died last year in a threshing accident. I can't get my men to step foot on that soil... I tell ya, that piece o' land could well be the ruination of me."

Kaelyn: "We'll keep our eyes and ears open. If we learn anything about this hectare specter, we'll let you know."

Topic: Goodbye #3

Aren: "Good luck to you, Farmer Brunia."

Brunia: "May fortune smile upon you, young master."

40626.msg – ***Chapter 2\Imazi – Brunia Farm Field***

Topic: Brunia Farm Field – Terror Staff

A growing anxiety turned to abject terror as the party moved toward the field. By tacit agreement, they moved no further in that direction.

40430.msg – ***Chapter 2\South of Ligano – Children of Henne Priest***

Topic: Henne Priest – After the Wedding

The priest approached from the altar. "Ah, my friends. As you see, I am safe returned from Sortiga. The wedding was beautiful, though things didn't turn out quite as expected. I had to take matters somewhat into my own hands."

William decided to be diplomatically vague. "Yes, I did have the impression that the situation was a bit more complicated than it seemed..."

The priest nodded. "It most certainly was. The intended marriage was meant to forge a business alliance rather than an emotional bond. The bride was actually in love with the groom's youngest brother, and he with her. Against my nature, but with Henne's blessing, I helped spirit the two young lovers off, marrying them secretly in the woods. Oh my, it was quite an escapade for a quiet servant of the Gods such as myself. But in my heart, I know I did as Henne wished."

Topic: Greeting

The Child of Henne practically danced toward them, the enthusiasm and good cheer so common among the Children streaming from every pore.

"Henne's smile upon you, my friends! You've arrived just in time-- we're just preparing for the daily chorale. There's always room for a few more voices!"

Choice: Blessing

"I'm afraid we have to return to the road and can't stay. In fact, our traveling is why we came. We hoped you could confer a blessing to ease our journey."

The priest's face glowed with new enthusiasm. "You're travelers? How exciting! I'd love to hear of your adventures-- but I can see you're in a hurry, so perhaps some other time. Yes, Henne's eye can make your journey safer and less tiring, letting you enjoy the countryside and all of the Triune's creations."

The priest shuffled his feet, as if embarrassed. "Of course, there is the small matter of the fee. We never seem to have enough hymnals, you know. If you can part with 125 burlas, Henne will smile upon you in gratitude."

Choice: Pay Fee

The priest's smile widened, though that hardly seemed possible. Spreading his arms to encompass the party, he tilted his head back and sang of Henne's glory. He walked before each of the companions and, as they bowed their heads, touched his finger to their temples. A golden nimbus surrounded the group, fading as the last notes of the Child's song echoed in the chamber.

"You have Henne's blessing. But The Child's attention is fleeting, my friends, and within a few days his gaze will have moved on. Bask in it while it lasts."

Choice: Pay Fee – Not Enough Money

The party counted their coins, dismayed that the total was not enough. The Child smiled understandingly. "The road is taxing on the body, spirit, and pocket. We will be here should your travels bring you better fortune."

Choice: Decline

"I think we'll be fine on our own. Thank you."

"The priest laughed gaily. "As you wish."

Choice: Leave

Topic: *Henne's Blessing Fades (Seven Days Later)*

The party's heads swam as a veil of warmth they'd grown accustomed to was unexpectedly lifted. Henne's protection no longer embraced them.

40626.msg – **Chapter 2\Imazi – Brunia Farm Field**

Topic: *Brunia Farm Field – With Henne's Blessing*

Aren yanked the staff out of the ground. The party relaxed immediately, as their subconscious anxiety dissipated. "This must be why people wouldn't come near this area," Aren suggested. "If we hadn't been protected by Henne's blessing, I doubt we'd have made it this far."

43990.msg – **General Message – Caves/Mines – Aren detects Minerals**

Topic: *Aren detects Minerals*

Aren paused as an odd sensation tickled his mind. "I can feel something..." he trailed off, grasping for words. "I think there are mineral deposits nearby. There may be something valuable close to the surface."

Farmer Mattai Brunia of Imazi

Topic: Greeting #4 – Haunted Farm

Brunia: "Ah, my friends. I'm afraid you may have returned my farm to me just so's I can lose it all over again."

Topic: Haunted Field #2

William: "Don't despair, Farmer Brunia. We have news! Your field wasn't really haunted -- It was a trick! Lord Garson had good reason to keep you out of that field."

Brunia: "Why would Lord Garson play such strange tricks on the likes of me?"

Topic: Gold Mine

Aren: "Lord Garson discovered a gold mine on your property! Naturally he wants to keep it a secret, not only from you, the legal owner, but from the Imperial tax collectors as well."

Brunia: "Well, knock me down and call me a fence post! I'm fixed for sure now. Even though that mine IS mine, I don't dare go up against a lord in a court of law."

William: "No need, my friend. We've already handed Lord Garson's miners their eviction notice. The gold mine is yours to do with as you see fit."

Topic: Goodbye #4 – Goldmine

Brunia: "Once again I'm in your debt. Please return soon so I can repay you with my hospitality if nothing more."

Topic: Greeting #5

William: "Land Baron Brunia, how fare you?"

Brunia: "(JOVIAL) Good morrow and welcome! Thanks to you and your friends, m'lord, we're ticking along right as clockwork. This season's crop is a bumper. My men and the other folk from the village are working the mine and that crop looks most promising as well."

10845.msg – *Chapter 2\Imazi – Flowing Flagon Inn – Scott Gratsi, Joyman*

Scott Gratsi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Greeting #2

Aren: "Scott! What are you doing here in Imazi?"

Scott: "Imazi'ing what there is to a-see."

Topic: Locks

Aren: "We've been seeing these old locks lately..."

Scott: "(INTERRUPTING WITH A GROUCHO ASIDE) ...said the man to the seller of last week's fish."

Aren: "(GOING ON) Yeah, whatever. These locks have levers and letters on them. Do you know anything about them?"

Scott: "(GOSSIP COLUMNIST, FAKE SERIOUS) Why yes, yes I do. Aren, those locks were made by the lockcrafter's guild. Quite popular a few years ago before the Feeblepox epidemic, they're now considered too, too passé by those in the know. I understand that the current rage on the lock fashion scene is for some kind of bead contraption."

Topic: Feeblepox

Aren: "Why did the old lock style go out of fashion when the Feeblepox hit?"

Scott: "(SERIOUS NOW) Many people fled from the cities and towns to get away from the Pox. Sadly enough, most died before they could get to their destinations. Their locked belongings lie where they were dropped, scattered across the countryside. No one touches them for fear of the plague. Since people are naturally superstitious, even newly crafted trivia locks seem to carry the taint of the disease so the lockcrafters left off making them altogether."

Topic: Beads

Aren: "We haven't seen any of those bead locks you mentioned. What are they like?"

Scott: "(SPEAKING AS AN EXPERT) They're intricate and colorful, appealing to the affluent clientele the lockcrafters are after. A bead lock has an exchange mechanism that lets you make a series of trades until you hit upon the right combination of beads to open the lock. Bead locks are more of a novelty item than a security device. Among the ladies of the Imperial Court, chastity belt bead locks are more of a fashion accessory than guardians of virtue. Once you've got the knack, it doesn't take more than a few minutes to pick one... not that I would know from personal experience, of course!"

William: "(SARCASTIC) No, of course not!"

40605.msg – ***Chapter 2\Imazi – Man who Bribed Lord Garson***

Topic: Man who Bribed Lord Garson #2 – Bribe Failed

The bald man looked as wilted as last week's celery. Aren ventured a guess. "The appointment for your son didn't come through."

"No... no... it didn't. Lord Garson sent regrets... apologies... reassurances for the future..."

"But not a reimbursement for the bribe money."

"No... no money. He tried... he spoke with this one... and that one... a burla here... a burla there. This one opened a door... that one looked the other way... Finally Lord Garson saw the pagemaster... an honorable man, he assures me... a most worthy man... Humble apologies... sincere regrets... no openings. Perhaps next year..."

"We're sorry to hear that. Though perhaps it's for the best. The Shira... Well, let's just say perhaps your son will find a more honorable career elsewhere."

The man sighed deeply. "Perhaps... My wife says... she supposes it's possible... she accuses Lord Garson of keeping the money... never going to the Shira at all... flattering us... lying to us..."

Aren looked at William, who shrugged. "Stranger things have been known to happen..."

40610.msg – *Chapter 2\Imazi – Lizbeth's Father*

Topic: Lizbeth's Father #1

The door flew open. A ruddy, brawny man yelled in their faces. "Come for her again, have you? I let him have her once, and that was my mistake. But let you take her again? That's your mistake!"

William held up his hands away from his weapons. "What are you talking about? Calm down. Maybe we can help."

The man caught on slowly. "Garson didn't send you?"

"No."

"You haven't come for my daughter?"

"No."

The man's anger subsided. "Oh. Well, that's a different pot of stew. Come in."

William renewed his offer of assistance. "What did Lord Garson do to your daughter?"

The man slammed his fist down on a table. "It's my own damn fault. Garson threatened to seize my land if I didn't pay off the back taxes. I've got a wife, three younger children..."

"Oh, I see. Garson promised to forget about the unpaid taxes... if he were paid in a different coin."

"Yes, that's how it was. My eldest daughter always was an obedient girl. I asked and she said for the sake of the family she would go. Curse my eyes! She didn't know what I was asking of her!"

The man wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "She came home the next day, crying. Her dress torn most clear off her back. Bruises around her wrists. I swear to Kor I'll lose my land and see my family starve on the road before I let Garson so much as look at her again!"

Topic: Prometheus Scruggs, Mortician

A sign over the door proclaimed 'Prometheus Scruggs – Funeral Parlor'. As there didn't appear to be a funeral in progress at the moment, the party entered. A tall, thin man with sunken cheeks greeted them at the door. "My dear friends, what can I do for you this day?" he asked dolefully.

"You are Mr. Scruggs, I take it?" William asked.

"Yes." The man bowed from the waist. When he straightened up, he held a tape measure. He proceeded to measure William from head to toe.

William protested. "I'm not in the market for a coffin just now, thank you kindly!"

The man turned to Aren with the tape measure. Aren backed off. "Nor am I!"

The mortician looked like he would start shedding tears. "That is most unfortunate, gentlemen, because today I happen to be having a special two-for-one sale for the finest ebonywood coffins, each including its own trapdoor in case of accidental internment pending resurrection."

William backed toward the door. "I think we'll take a pass on your special. I really don't like the thought of having my coffin already made and waiting for me just in case. Good day!"

Topic: Insurance Broker – Greeting

A burly man jovially greeted the party. "I'm so glad to see some new faces around this town! You must be travelers. It's lucky for you that you stopped by... In fact, this might just be the luckiest day in your young lives!"

"And why is that?" William asked cautiously.

The big man thumped William between the shoulder blades. "You're young, you're healthy, you're strong. Am I right?"

"I suppose so..."

"Your whole life lies before you like a vast plain of opportunity and adventure, right?"

"I hope so..."

The man wagged his finger in William's face. "Ah, but suppose tomorrow a runaway milk wagon mows you down like a stalk of wheat in that field of opportunity? Suppose you trip over a rock in that field and fall off a cliff? Suppose a jaeger sleeping in that oh-so-opportunistic field decides to have you for his mid-morning snack? What then?"

William furrowed his brow. "Well, I suppose I'm dead."

The man jabbed William's shoulder. "Exactly! Dead, dead, and dead! However, I repeat, however, if you spend two and a half minutes right now, right here, with me, then you will live on in the hearts and minds of your family."

William thought he could see where the conversation was leading. "How so? And how much will it cost me?"

The man brought forth a stack of papers. "For someone with your youth and vigor, a mere 250 burlas for the most comprehensive adventurers' accidental death and dismemberment insurance this side of the Waste."

William skeptically asked, "And what do I get for my money?"

"The peace and security of knowing that your family will be amply reimbursed for your tragic loss. Of course, this policy doesn't cover death if followed by resurrection after the claim's been paid. Oh yes, don't think that one hasn't been tried before..."

Choice: Buy Insurance

The insurance broker had William sign the forms in quadruplicate. "There, don't you feel more peaceful and secure?"

"Not really, I just feel poorer. But I suppose it was the smart thing to do. I think."

"Of course it was, son!" The burly man pounded William's back until he gasped for breath.

"Sir, could you please stop pounding me?" William wheezed. "Otherwise I fear I may be cashing my policy in immediately, which is a great deal sooner than I intended."

Choice: Buy Insurance – ***Not Enough Money***

William looked disapprovingly at his pouch. "I seem to be temporarily low on funds."

"Ah, well, hurry back when your finances improve. Danger doesn't take a holiday."

Choice: Leave

William counted the coins in his pouch and considered. "I think I'd just as soon spend that money on things to help me sustain life, rather than something which will only pay off if I die."

The insurance broker shook his head sorrowfully. "Ah, youth. They always think they're immortal until one day they wake up dead."

9350.msg – **Chapter 2\Imazi – Insurance Policy**

Topic: Insurance Policy

With this endorsement, your policy is amended to provide Death and Dismemberment coverage (including Loss of Sight and Loss of Sword Hand). The insurance afforded by this endorsement is only with respect to the person carrying this endorsement.

Benefit: The Company will pay the Death or Dismemberment Benefit stated in the Schedule under the following circumstances:

1. The insured must have been injured or killed as a result of bodily injury incurred while engaged in the duties of a soldier, officer, mercenary, swordsman, archer, pikeman, guard, bodyguard, rabble-router, or man-at-arms, or while attempting to preserve life, limb, goods, or social standing in a combat situation.
2. The death or bodily injury must be independent of all other causes.

Example: If a tree falls on the Insured while in battle, and an enemy did not fell the tree, this Company will not pay benefits (unless the Insured also holds a Forester, Carpenter, or Woodcrafter Insurance policy, in which case the benefit will be paid in full).

Coverage in this endorsement does NOT apply to:

1. Any soldiering duties the insured performs while in the gainful employ of an enemy nation, any organization which does not hold to Imperial law, any army less than 1/8 the size of the opposing army, an independent mage, or a rival insurance company.
2. Any duties the Insured performs relating to the repair or servicing of siege machinery, particularly if it is loaded.
3. Suicide or attempted suicide. This includes but is not limited to non-payment of debts to anyone of higher social standing, starting a bar fight, running while carrying a drawn dagger, going unarmed and/or unescorted to parlay with the commander of an enemy army, or attempting to cancel this Policy without paying all missed premiums in full.

4. Bodily injury or death resulting from any act of pacifism or cowardice.

5. Loss resulting from any disease, including infection resulting from covered bodily injury (Healers and priestesses are common-- if the insured can't be bothered to seek one out, the Company cannot be held responsible. If the wounded bit falls off three weeks later, that is the Insured's fault).

6. Any duties the insured performs while occupying a seat on the Shira, or while engaged in any form of politics whatsoever, unless covered by an additional policy. Politics is a considerably more dangerous occupation than soldiering, and insurance coverage is correspondingly more expensive.

7. Acts of the Triune.

10853.msg – *Chapter 2\Briala – Outside The Spitting Lion Inn –
Tyre Cordelaine, Aren's Father*

Tyre Cordelaine, Aren's Father and Proprietor of "The Spitting Lion Inn"

Topic: Greeting #2

Aren: "Hey, Dad!"

Tyre: "Well, if it isn't the wizard of Briala! Good to see you, Son."

Topic: Studies

Tyre: "How's the training going, Son? Is Panizo all you thought it would be?"

Aren: "Actually, I've barely spent any time there yet. I've been doing a lot of traveling."

Tyre: "Traveling? Aren, you went away to learn, not to gallivant around the Empire."

Aren: "Oh, believe me, Dad... I'm learning a lot."

Topic: Mother

Aren: "How's Mom?"

Tyre: "She's fine. She's off pulling your brother out of another mess with Bo Derkin's boy."

Aren: "They got into the wine again?"

Tyre: "I don't know why he does it. He knows it boils your mother for sure and she's just simmered down. She was spitting bricks for days after you left, you know. I was eating cold gruel for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Aren: "Ouch. Why didn't you grab yourself something else from the kitchen?"

Tyre: "With her always in there, chopping at the meat or potatoes with a butcher knife? I didn't dare!"

Aren: "(WINCING) Sorry, Dad. And now she's going to be upset all over again because she missed me."

Tyre: "(SIGH) Well, I'm overdue for a trip down to Balmestri for supplies. This might not be a bad time for it at that."

Topic: Goodbye #2

Tyre: "Take care, Son. I'm sure your mother will be sorry she missed you again."

10831.msg – *Chapter 2\Briala – Briala's Fountain – Laura Miller, Aren's Fiancée*

Laura Miller, Aren's Fiancée

Topic: Greeting #2

Laura: "Aren! You're back! I'm so glad. Mother was just asking me when I thought you'd be home again. She was saying if you were here soon, there'd still be time to plan a Spring wedding."

Aren: "Hi, Laura. It's nice to see you too."

Topic: Local News

Laura: "(BREATHLESS) Oh Aren, I have the most exciting news! You remember Gertrude Roselle who lives in the cute little cottage by the stream? Well, she's getting on in years, you know, and can't do for herself as well as she used to. Well, last week her daughter came to visit from Aspreza. You remember her daughter Lorelei? Well, I saw Lorelei on market day and she said she was appalled at the condition of the house. She said there was nothing she could do but take her mother back with her to Aspreza where she can look after her proper like a daughter should. You know what that means, don't you, Aren?"

Aren: "Uh, no. Not exactly..."

Laura: "We could buy Gertrude Roselle's cottage! It needs a lot of fixing up but that means we could get it for a song. Oh, Aren, can't you just picture that sweet little place with a fresh coat of whitewash? You could put up new shutters and mend the chimney. I would make some flowered curtains for the windows and plant rose bushes along the fence. Wouldn't that be heavenly, Aren? Aren, are you listening?"

Topic: Leaving #2

Aren: "Laura, I'm not back for good."

Laura: "(CRESTFALLEN) Oh, I thought you were. When do you have to leave?"

Aren: "Very soon. Listen, Laura, I don't know how long it will be before I come home to stay. I don't want you to have to wait for me."

Laura: "(TEARFUL) But Aren, I thought we loved each other."

Aren: "Things change... I've changed. (ENTHUSIASM SHOWING) Laura, there's so much out there that I've seen, so much that I still don't know. I now realize that it's impossible for me to be content as an innkeeper in this little town, listening to adventures second-hand instead of living them for myself."

Laura: "(SNIFF) Then you must not love me anymore."

Aren: "I... I don't know. But I do know that I can't make you happy now, that I can't be the kind of husband you deserve. I'm sorry."

Topic: Goodbye #2

Aren: "You know I wish for nothing but your happiness, Laura."

Laura: "(HURT AND TEARFUL) That's easy to say. You just don't want to have anything to do with making that happiness. Well, someday I hope you realize how much you're giving up."

Aren: "I'm really sorry. If there was any way..."

Laura: "(TEARFUL) Goodbye, Aren."

40700.msg – *Chapter 2\Briala – Mrs. Miller, Laura's Mother*

Topic: Mrs. Miller – After Breaking up with Laura

Mrs. Miller came to the door in response to Aren's hesitant knock. Her smile froze when she recognized him.

"Unless you've come to apologize, there's no welcome for you here. My poor girl's been crying her eyes out. Can't eat more than a bowl of soup and a mite of bread and cheese for her supper, and a single chicken leg and one small potato for her dinner."

Aren looked at the ample form of his once-intended mother-in-law and wisely refrained from comment.

"Aren, unless you come back with flowers, candy, and three rings, you'd better not come back at all. You'll just make Laura upset, and no young man, especially not the guildmaster's son, wants to look at a girl with her eyes all red from weeping."

40720.msg – *Chapter 2\Briala – Eugene the Chicken Farmer*

Topic: Eugene the Chicken Farmer #2

Eugene invited the party into the main parlor and gave them fresh fruit ices.

William sank down into a comfy armchair. "How goes the great chicken manure experiment?"

"Sadly, there's been a bit of a set-back. My friend had an accident... Blew up himself and the chicken coop. He'll be all right, but he refused to go near anything with feathers. He's got an idea about catfish now..."

Aren looked around the parlor, considering the fine furnishings and beautiful paintings. "Eugene, I was hoping I could beg a small favor of you. You know Mrs. Miller, the widow? Well, I used to do odd chores for her, things it takes a man to do... Since I'm not in Briala all that often, I was wondering..."

Eugene picked up the thread eagerly. "You'd like me to help her out? Sure! That's the least I can do for poor old Widow Miller. By the way," Eugene added, casually nonchalant, "Are you and Laura Miller still engaged?"

Aren set the hook. "No, Eugene. Much to my sorrow, Laura has cast me adrift. She deserves far better than anything I can offer her."

Eugene smirked. "Nothing personal, but I can't help but agree with that. I think I'll go pay her, I mean Widow Miller, a visit this very afternoon... to see how I may be of assistance."

Topic: Eugene the Chicken Farmer #3

"Nobody's answering," Aren said. "Eugene must have gone out."

"Probably off chasing chickens-- or pigeons," William chuckled.

40705.msg – ***Chapter 2\Briala – Lonzo the Cow Farmer***

Topic: Lonzo's Calves Saved

Aren turned in at Lonzo's farm just in time to witness a happy sight... two calves frolicking in the yard. Lonzo came up with a wave and a grin.

"I owe you thanks, young Cordelaine! Doc Myers came as soon as you told him. 'Parently it was tainted oats. Serves me right for buying Ghanish! The oats don't hurt the cows none, but the bug or whatever passes into their milk and affects the calves. Fatal, Doc says, and contagious too. Called Fall-Down Cow disease."

Aren scratched a calf behind the ears and received a slimy lick on the arm in return. "Well, I just happened to be in Balmestri..."

Lonzo awkwardly scuffed some dirt with his boot. "Oh yeah, we all heard about your... travels. Your pa's been talking. 'Parently you got some magic in you?"

"'Parently."

Lonzo asked Aren to wait, then went into the farmhouse. In a few minutes he returned carrying several bottles. Thrusting them into Aren's arms, he explained that he won them in a card game a few years before.

"'Parently they're magic potions. I ain't got no use for 'em, but perhaps you might. Anyhow, it's the least I can do, seeing as how you had a hand in saving my calves."

Topic: Doc Myers Was Too Late –or– Never Notified

A pall of greasy, foul-smelling smoke hung over the deserted farmyard. Lonzo raked up ashes and small bits of bone. He greeted the party with a nod and a shrug.

"Calves died. All t'other night they wailed like newborns, then toward morning, they couldn't breathe. Did all I could to open their windpipes, but t'weren't no use. Afraid to bury the bodies in case whatever it was could get into the soil. Had to burn them instead."

Aren shook Lonzo's hand in mute sympathy and consolation, then turned away, wishing there was something he could have done to help.

200.msg – ***Chapter 2\Entering Ticor Province or Ghan Province***

Topic: Entering Ticor Province or Ghan Province

Aren: "I don't think we should leave Pianda until I've had a chance to talk with Finch."

10833.msg – ***Chapter 2\Aspreza – Liselle, Sister of Senaedrin***

Liselle, Sister of Senaedrin

Topic: Greeting #3A – Meeting Again in Aspreza: Success

William: "I am happy to see you and the Sisters safe in Aspreza. You are well?"

Liselle: "Yes, much thanks to you. We arrived just in time to save the lives of many people."

Topic: Greeting #3B – Meeting Again in Aspreza: Too Late

William: "You made it safely to Aspreza. That's good."

Liselle: "(SADLY) Yes, we are safe though weary through and through. Sadly, our long journey was in vain. We arrived too late to do much more than care for the souls of the departed, Senaedrin rest their mortal remains."

Topic: Goodbye #2

Liselle: "Goddess speed."

William: "And to you as well."

40310.msg – *Chapter 2\Aspreza – Pox – Man with Chest*

Topic: *Pox – Man with Chest – Post-Senaedrin Sisters (Success)*

Aren's gentle tap was answered by a man old before his time. Bent with sorrow, he invited the party in and told them of his wife's recent death from the Feeblepox. Glad of their company, he eagerly shared his memories from happier times. As he reminisced, he cradled a small chest in his arms.

"This contains the tokens of my marriage, the letters, the dried flowers, all that's left after thirty years. I would show them to you but I can't remember where I put the key-- my mind is still addled from the pox."

William studied the box. "Perhaps we can open it for you. We have some small talent for this sort of thing."

Topic: *Chest Opened*

The lock was refreshingly simple and sprang open with just a bit of careful probing.

The man bent over the fragile remnants in the opened chest. "How can I thank you? In happier days, I was a traveling merchant. Perhaps something from my remaining goods..."

After hunting around in a bag, the man produced a small vial. "I'll tell you a secret," he said with a conspiratorial air as he handed over the vial. "I sometimes used a bit of Tonguecoat before major transactions. It may help you get the best in a haggling match."

Topic: *Failed to Open Chest*

Despite their best efforts, the box refused to give up its secrets. The man tried to hide his disappointment as he waved them goodbye.

Topic: Pox – Daughter – Post-Senaedrin Sisters (Success)

The door was opened by a 10-year-old girl with 40-year-old eyes. "My parents are now well enough for visitors. Won't you please come in?"

The party entered the dimly lit cottage. The girl's mother and father lay on cots in the main room, close to the fire.

Aren bent down to speak to the little girl. "Did you take care of your parents while they were sick?"

"Yes. It wasn't too hard. I'm just glad they're better."

Aren looked at the two sleeping adults. "There's no need to wake them. Is there anything you need? Some food perhaps?"

The girl smiled a shadow of a smile. "No thank you, though it's very kind of you, I'm sure."

Aren decided to see if he can coax some laughter from the girl. "Well then, how about a trick? Do you like card tricks or magic tricks?"

Choice: Cards

Aren took a battered deck of playing cards from his pack. Shuffling deftly, he fanned the cards and had the girl select one. "The Emperor of Cymbals!" Aren proclaimed triumphantly.

"No!" said the girl, keeping the card hidden.

"The Duke of Artichokes?" Aren acted less sure of himself.

The girl smiled. "No!"

Aren grinned with renewed confidence. "Why then, it must be the Prince of Pomegranates!"

The little girl squealed with laughter. "No! You don't know what it is! It's the Jester and he looks just like you!"

A weak voice drew Aren's attention to one of the cots. The father raised his arm and beckoned Aren to him. "It has been many weeks since I have heard my child laugh. In caring for us, I feared she had grown out of childish ways and into an adult far too soon. Thank you for showing me that she is to be a child again, once we can resume our duties as parents."

The man reached for something by the hearthside. "I see you are travelers. As a small token of my gratitude, please take this bow and rosin as it appears my hunting days are over."

Choice: Magic

Aren gathered magical forces, not channeling them into any spell but letting them weave thin threads of energy between his fingers like a cat's cradle. The girl watched the colorful threads sparkle and twist with a life of their own. Her face lit up with a smile. "That's beautiful. Can I touch it?"

"Yes, but very gently and only in the middle where the threads come together." Aren held out the rainbow-hued nest between his hands. The girl touched it gingerly. Aren shifted his focus and the threads twisted up and around the girl's finger.

"It's warm! And so pretty!"

Suddenly, Aren clapped his hands and the cat's cradle disappeared in a burst of silver sparks. The little girl laughed with delight.

A weak voice drew Aren's attention to one of the cots. The mother raised her arm and beckoned Aren to her. "Not since we fell sick have I heard my child laugh. In caring for us, I feared she'd replaced the joys of childhood for the worries of an adult. Thank you for showing me I was wrong, that she is a child still."

The woman handed Aren a large gemstone. "I see you have some ability with magic. While we were ill, a mage sold my daughter a gem he said might help magically heal us. It had no effect, but you may find a use for it. Take it, please."

40320.msg – *Chapter 2\Aspreza – Pox – Children*

Topic: *Pox – Children – Post-Senaedrin Sisters (Success)*

William heard shouts and laughter behind the door. "Well, at least they sound healthy in here!"

Repeated loud knocking brought an enthusiastic answer. Four tousled heads of various ages peered eagerly at the strangers. Four high-pitched voices vied for attention. "Who are you?" "What do you want?" "Will you tell us a story?" "Can you come in and play?"

William whistled for silence. "Where are your parents?"

The biggest lad looked behind him for reassurance. "Oh, they're here. They're not feeling so good yet, but they're getting better. My aunt was staying with us before, taking care of us all. She ran away yesterday."

"Yes, I think I can see why. We should go now too. Try to be quiet and let your parents get some rest, you hear? Be good now." William and company backed down the path and made for the open road, the chorus of clamoring voices sinking to a low roar behind them.

40325.msg – *Chapter 2\Aspreza – Pox – Tinker*

Topic: Pox – Tinker #1 – Post-Senaedrin Sisters (Success)

The door was answered by a swarthy man in a leather apron. "Yes, I am open for business... barely. This morning was the first I felt strong enough to lift my hammer."

"Are you a tinker?" Aren ventured.

"Indeed, that is my trade. Though lately I thought I'd be mending the pots and pans of the Gods before long. You look like you've been on the road a spell. Got anything in need of mending? Won't cost you a burla."

William looked over his gear. "Well, there may be one item here... but I insist we pay for your labor."

"No, I insist. Think of it as doing me a favor, to satisfy myself that I'm as hale and hearty as I ever was."

William shrugged. "All right, but I wouldn't be surprised if you still have a touch of the fever. Services rendered for free... and to strangers yet. You must be delirious."

Choice: Give Weapon / Armor (Free)

The tinker set to work immediately. "Here you are," he said at last. "Good as new."

Topic: Pox / Tinker #2 – Post-Senaedrin Sisters (Success)

The tinker greeted the party at the door. "Yes, I'm back up to scratch again. Business is booming now that the plague is over. A brush with death gives men a new lease on life, it does. Seems everyone is bustling about, cleaning and repairing their belongings."

"I don't suppose you're still repairing things for free, are you?" Aren asked, a bit embarrassed by the question.

The tinker laughed. "No, lad, I'm afraid my generosity was merely a symptom of post-pox relief. But I'll be glad to make any repairs you need... for my usual, reasonable fees: 120 for bows, 150 for swords, 200 for armor."

Choice: Give Weapon / Armor (Pay)

The tinker set to work immediately. "Here you are," he said at last. "Good as new."

Topic: Not Enough Money

Their money purse lighter than they thought, the companions shrugged at the tinker, embarrassed.

The tinker chuckled with understanding. "Don't fret it, friends. You know where to find me if your fortunes change."

40105.msg – ***Chapter 2\Sortiga – Wealthy Merchant/Bride Cherise's Father***

Topic: Wealthy Merchant/Bride Cherise's Father – After the Wedding

William surveyed the yard littered with streamers, crushed flowers, and plates of half-eaten food. "Looks like there was a party, all right."

The merchant, looking quite hung over, came out to greet them. "Yes, we had the party. Cost me a fortune, and all for nothing."

"Why? What happened?" William asked.

"The ceremony began without a hitch, and it ended that way too. The priest of Henne arrived and blessed the rings. The bride and groom were exchanging vows when suddenly the groom's youngest brother ran forward, clasped Cherise in his arms, and asked her to run away with him!"

The merchant continued, his face reddening with remembered embarrassment and anger. "In front of all the guests, my daughter and that wastrel leapt on waiting horses and galloped off to Kor knows where! If I ever get my hands on those two..."

Topic: Cherise's Friend – After the Wedding

The sweet sound of singing encouraged William to knock. The woman with hazel eyes opened the door and smiled at the party. "Wasn't it you who returned the rings to Benje? Let me tell you what happened..."

"After Benje misplaced the rings, he realized that would only postpone, not cancel, his brother's wedding. When you returned the rings and cleared the road of Montari, it gave him the courage to do what he should have done from the first..."

William understood. "He declared his love for Cherise and ran off with her?"

"Yes! Isn't it romantic? Of course his brother and Cherise's father are livid. They've gone after the two in hopes of bringing them back before they're wed. But I know something they don't know..."

"The priest of Henne has already performed the ceremony! He doesn't believe in arranged marriages where there is no love. Cherise said she wouldn't have married Benje without the rings which are family heirlooms. She said it would have been a sign that the gods didn't want her disobeying her father. But seeing as you found the rings... She told me to thank you and give you these potions as a token of her affection if I ever saw you again."

***Enkudi the Ghanish Mystic, First Mage of the House of Makka and
Friend to the Montari***

Topic: Greeting

William: "You certainly aren't an easy man to see. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were downright unsociable."

Enkudi: "Well, you're seeing me now. What do you want?"

Topic: Debt

William: "Does the name Antoni Octomont mean anything to you?"

Enkudi: "Ah, yes. (IMPERSONATING ANTONI) The lender, money-wise. I suppose you're here to collect. Very well. These gems have served their purpose. They will be more than adequate to cover the debt. Make sure these get to that Burlene money grubber or... Well, just get them there."

Topic: Gems

Enkudi: "Lovely, aren't they? And useful too. I needed these gems to make a dowsing rod. The drought has hit the Montari hard. My plan is to tap into an underground wellspring for them."

William: "You're Ghanish, aren't you? Why such concern for the Montari?"

Enkudi: "(GRUFFLY) A Montari risked his life to come to my aid once, a long time ago. He died saving me. I figure this helps even the score."

Topic: Dowsing Rod

Aren: "How are you drawing forth the water?"

Enkudi: "Some complicated magic is involved. You wouldn't understand."

Aren: "Don't be too sure about that. I'm an apprentice mage. Well, I'm going to be. In any case, I'd like to learn."

Enkudi: "(HUMORING AREN) An apprentice mage, huh? I'm impressed. All right, boy, you can help me finish the job."

Aren: "What can I do to help?"

Enkudi: "The wellspring is deep in the Montari warren. The rod needs to be planted in the ground near the spring, then activated."

Aren: "How will I know the right spot?"

Enkudi: "The rod will lead you. I would go myself but there is much to be done here. Your assistance will help end this drought all the sooner. My thanks."

Topic: Goodbye

Aren: "You can rely on us to do as we have promised."

Enkudi: "Good. See that you do."

10816.msg – *Chapter 2\East of Sortiga – Montari Warren – Chee, Montari Chief*

Chee, Montari Chief of the Warren East of Sortiga

Topic: Greeting #1

Kaelyn: "Good day, Montari. Do you mind if we ask you a couple of questions?"

Chee: "(POLITELY) I don't talk to humans of inferior station."

William: "Please forgive my companion's (POINTEDLY) limited social graces. I am Squire William Escobar, fourth heir to the House of Escobar, son of the governor of Pianda. I am deeply honored that you have received us."

Chee: "I see. Yes, that's quite an adequate social rank. I am Chee, the leader of this colony. Please continue."

Topic: Tunnels

William: "Your city is most impressive. How long did it take to build?"

Chee: "We do not build, we dig. Kyree's innermost tunnels were dug by our ancestors. We continue the expansion. Through loam or sand, several Black Montari can dig 500 feet a day if under close supervision. Through shale or river deposits, not so far."

Topic: Drought

William: "Is the drought causing problems for the Montari?"

Chee: "Yes. Over the course of several sleep cycles, our river dropped until it was no more than mud and puddles. Scouts went above and discovered that a noble in Imazi had diverted the river to water his fields and fill his moat. Water is now scarce. What we get is dirty and carries disease."

William: "Is that why the Montari are attacking villages?"

Chee: "Yes, I'd heard that some undisciplined Blacks and Browns have been raiding human towns and also other Montari settlements. This is not the way of the upper castes, the Greys and Golds, but desperate times lead to desperate measures."

Topic: Lord Garson

William: "Do you know who Lord Garson is?"

Chee: "(RATLIKE SQUEEK OF DISGUST) I know he's the sun-lover who stole our water. Formal Montari complaints to your human councils have been ignored. I suggested we dig a channel and take our river back from the one who stole it. That plan was buried by those who believe the wetlander will live up to his promise to locate a new source of water for us."

Topic: Wetlander

William: "By wetlander do you mean Enkudi?"

Chee: "Yes. Enkudi, first mage of the House of Makka, is the human of whom I speak. His plan has not yet succeeded."

Topic: Castes

Aren: "I didn't know there were other kinds of Montari."

Chee: "Then you have not been well educated about us. There are three... no, four castes in our society: the worker caste, the caste of Fifakree, or what you would call craftsmen, the warrior caste, and of course, the ruling caste."

Aren: "The Gold Montari are the ruling caste, right? Why don't we ever see the other castes?"

Chee: "It is not befitting that they leave the colony. We of the ruling caste are the only ones meant to mingle with toplanders."

Topic: Masliths

William: "There are a lot of masliths in these tunnels. I suppose it's a real problem getting rid of them."

Chee: "Get rid of them? Why under earth would we want to do that?"

William: "Aren't they a nuisance?"

Chee: "No, they're delicious!"

Aren: "(WITH DISTASTE) Ewww."

Chee: "I suppose you prefer eating unhatched chicken embryos..."

Aren: "(FLUSTERED) Not when you put it that way."

Topic: Goodbye

Chee: "It was good to talk with such a worthy human, but there's much work to be done. I bid you good cycle."

William: "We'll be on our way then. Have a nice, uh, cycle."

40960.msg – ***Chapter 2\Montari Warren East of Sortiga – The Underground River***

Topic: *Divining Rod Quest Complete*

Aren pulled up short. The low rumble echoing through the tunnel had been getting louder as they walked, and Aren realized what it was. "I think this is as far as we should go."

William turned back to face him. "What's up?"

"That sound we've been hearing? It's rushing water, and it's coming from up ahead. That underground creek is becoming a river. I don't think we want to get caught in it."

10810.msg – ***Chapter 2\Midova – City Financiers – Antoni Octomont***

Antoni Octomont, Financier of Midova

Topic: *Greeting #2*

Antoni: "(BUSY) Yes?"

Topic: Give Enkudi's Gems to Octomont

William: "Hey, Antoni, brought you a present."

Antoni: "Where did you get these?"

William: "From Enkudi himself. Have we cleared the table now?"

Antoni: "(LOOSENING UP) Yes indeed, cleared and sealed. I will cancel Paolo's debt and return his merchandise immediately."

10841.msg – ***Chapter 2\Midova – Peerless Imports – Paolo Verazza***

Paolo Verazza, Merchant in Midova

Topic: Greeting #6 – Debt Paid

Paolo: "Oh, my dear friends and benefactors! I am overwhelmed! Such an act of kindness for a stranger! Whatever can I do to repay you?"

Kaelyn: "Well, there was the matter of some Chailan tea..."

Paolo: "It has arrived, and naturally I will give you a full refund. Let me see what else I can give you... (PAUSE) Ah, here is a curiosity, a powder of reputed magic powers. I know nothing of its nature or origins, just that the woman who gave it to me said I would know when to pass it along. I think that of all the objects in my shop, this is the one that will serve you best."

10821.msg – ***Chapter 2\North of Midova – High Mage Finch***

High Mage Finch, Court Mage for the House of Escobar

Topic: Greeting #3 – Have the Tea

William: "Greetings, High Mage. I've brought your Chailan tea."

Finch: "(SNIFFS IT) Seems perfectly acceptable. Thank you. Now let me just put it away in my robe and... Well, what do you know about that? Here's another full pouch of tea I didn't realize I had. Ah well, one can't have too much Chailan tea on hand."

Topic: Aren

William: "Finch, this is Aren. My father says he is to be your new apprentice."

Finch: "(TO AREN) You think you have magical abilities?"

Aren: "(VERY NERVOUS) Yes... Yes.. Yes, sir. That is... William seems to think so."

Finch: "Hmmp. (SLIGHT SARCASTIC EDGE) Well, if William says so, then it must be so. However, I am much too preoccupied at this time to take on a novice apprentice. These Maposa larvae. I'm sure you understand. Come back... oh, sometime later on... I don't know when... and then we'll see."

Topic: Beetles

William: "Why do you need to give the beetles your full attention?"

Finch: "Properly harvested and processed, Maposa beetle larvae are a key ingredient in several potent elixirs."

William: "(DISGUSTED NOISE) I'm sorry I asked."

Topic: Pointers *#1*

Aren: "(NERVOUS) I know you're very busy, High Mage Finch, but I was wondering... hoping that you could give me a few moments of your time. You see, I'm new at all this and I really need to learn at least enough to control my powers, such as they are. I'm afraid I might accidentally hurt someone."

Finch: "I'm glad to see you realize the importance of control. Magic is a gift not to be taken lightly. Yes, I can spare a few hours to teach you some rudimentary knowledge, if William will agree to watch the beetle eggs and give a whisper at the first sign of movement. Will you promise me that, Master Escobar?"

Topic: No – William Refuses

Aren: "(NERVOUS) I hate to inconvenience you, High Mage. Now might not be the best time after all."

Finch: "(A TOUCH EXASPERATED) William, why bring me a boy who doesn't know his own mind. I don't have time for this."

Topic: Yes – William Watches

Narrator: Finch takes Aren aside, well away from the beetle eggs and out of earshot. William and Kaelyn sit quietly, staring at the eggs and feeling more than a little silly. The two mages return several hours later, Aren's mind racing with new knowledge. William and Kaelyn happily relinquish their duty to Finch, who resumes his vigil over the eggs.

Topic: Pointers #2

Aren: "High Mage, can you give me some more pointers?"

Finch: "I've taught you the basics. Anything more would take up more time than I can spare just now."

Topic: Goodbye

Finch: "I need to get back to my work now. But you're welcome to visit anytime, as long as you bring some Chailan tea with you."

Aren: "I look forward to the time when you're not so busy, High Mage Finch. It would be a great honor to serve as your apprentice."

40900.msg – ***General Message – Ticor–Pianda Bridge Closed***

Topic: Ticor–Pianda Bridge Closed

The bridge ahead was crawling with Imperial soldiers. A pair of them motioned the party to a halt.

"This bridge is closed. You'll have to turn back."

William's face darkened. "Closed? On whose authority? My father's governor of Pianda, and he won't look kindly on having our roads blocked."

"The Empire maintains the roads and bridges, m'lord, not Pianda. We've received reports of possible sabotage by the Mehrat, and our orders are to make sure the bridge is secure."

"The Mehrat? Out here?" William's tone was dismissive. "You can't be serious."
The soldier remained firm. "I have my orders, sir."

William threw up his hands and turned to his companions. "Terrific. We'll have to head back south and cross the river somewhere else. There's another bridge west of where the road forks north of Panizo."

Kaelyn grabbed William's arm. "I don't think you're going to win this one, William. Let's just forget the bridge and cross where you suggested, west of the fork north of Panizo."

43530.msg – *Chapter 2\Waterfork – Marnia Contuso's Sons*

Topic: Marnia Contuso's Sons

Two gentlemen in fencing garb feinted and parried on the villa's lawn. They broke off their practice when the strangers approached.

"What business do you have with the Contuso family?" one of the men drawled indifferently.

Topic: Give Contuso Family Scroll

"We found this scroll with your family crest on it."

"Found it? Stole it is more likely! Prepare to defend yourself!" The men stood en garde, preparing to attack.

Choice: Fight

Choice: Don't Fight

William held out his hand, palm up. "I don't want to fight you. I just want to talk."

"Talking is for mamas' boys! What's the matter? Is your sword as limp as your manhood?"

William bared his teeth at the insult and drew his blade. "Don't say I didn't warn you!"

The combatants circled like wolves around a kill. Suddenly, a moon-faced woman with thick black hair charged out the front door and into their midst. "Boys! I told you! No fighting!"

"But, Mama..." the young men lowered their swords.

The woman stood with her arms akimbo. "Are they Verazzas?"

"Then no fighting!" The men slinked off across the lawn toward the stables.

43531.msg – *Chapter 2\Waterfork – Marnia Contuso*

Topic: Marnia Contuso – Greeting #1

The woman turned to William. "Please forgive my hot-tempered sons. I am Marnia Contuso. Please tell me if there's something you wished to talk to me about."

Topic: Give Contuso Family Scroll

"Is this scroll of any interest to you?" William asked, handing Marnia the scroll. She gave it a glance.

"Why, this is a record of all the births and deaths in the Contuso family for the past five generations! I recognize several of the names as being Verazzas by birth. Before the falling out, marriages were common between the two families."

Suddenly Marnia's brow wrinkled and she began to read in earnest. "I don't believe it! Here is a baby born six months after the feud began. A Verazza man is listed as the father! And the mother is the girl who was responsible for the deaths of the two Verazza babies! What does this mean?"

Kaelyn thought for a moment and then said, "Paolo told us that the babies were left alone in the house because the Contuso girl ran off to a dance with her suitor. Is it possible that this suitor was a Verazza?"

"And not just any Verazza, but the grandfather of Paolo himself! Then the responsibility for the deaths must be shared equally between the two Houses... So all these years of blood feud have been for nothing! I really need to go have a talk with my boar-headed husband!"

Marnia took a ring off her finger and handed it to William. "Here, please take this emerald in return for your help in putting an end to this stupid little war between two who are actually cousins."

With apologies for her abruptness, Marnia went back into the house to confront her husband.

Topic: Greeting #2 – Didn't Give Contuso Scroll

The woman greeted them. "Hello again. Please tell me if there's something you wished to talk to me about."

43500.msg – ***Chapter 2\Waterfork – Father and His Sick Son, Josh***

Topic: Father and His Sick Son, Josh

The man was talking as he opened the door. "Thank the Gods you've come..." He trailed off when he saw who it was. "Oh, you're not from Senaedrin's Circle."

William saw worry lines on the man's brow and dark circles beneath his eyes. "What's the trouble?"

The man reached out and clutched William's arm, pulling him into the house. He led him to a bed in which lay a boy just a few years younger than William. The boy was sleeping or unconscious, tossing his head from side to side. His face was flushed, his lips dark with a bluish tinge.

"He was swimming in the river two days ago. Got stung by a spineray on his foot. He made it to shore, but just barely. Passed out on the beach and his friends carried him home. We've sent word to the Circle..."

Topic: Give Fidali Paste

The man held his son in a sitting position and forced the paste between his lips. The boy coughed, but swallowed. The man gently set the boy back down. He smoothed the hair off his forehead. "I'm not sure, but it seems he feels a bit cooler already. If you hadn't come along when you did..."

William interrupted to save the man the embarrassment of searching for words to express his gratitude. "Just luck that we happened to pass by. Anyone would have done the same."

"I have nothing to pay you... but maybe you can use this. It's just an old shield I found washed up on the riverbank. No use to me, but..."

William accepted the battered shield with a show of enthusiasm. "Oh, this is just what we need. It'll definitely come in handy. Thanks so much!"

As the door closed behind them, Kaelyn raised her eyebrows. "That was laying it on a bit thick, wasn't it?"

William shrugged and looked at Kaelyn pointedly. "I didn't want him to feel he was in our debt. Our group's big enough already."

Topic: Return Visit #1A – After Fidali Paste

A smile lit up the man's face when he recognized the travelers. "Oh, come in. Come in. Look who's up and feeling much better!"

The son sat at the table eating a bowl of soup. He looked at the strangers in bewilderment. "Josh, these are the people who saved your life."

The boy tried to stand, but he was still a little weak and needed to clutch the table for support. "Thank you, sirs. Guess I don't remember. After that spinneray got me, everything's pretty much a blur."

Aren put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm sure you'd do the same for me."

Topic: Return Visit #1B – Didn't Give Fidali Paste

The man paused, trying to recall their faces. "Oh yes, you're the travelers. You'll be happy to know that the Sisters of Senaedin arrived the night after you left. They gave my boy the anti-poison and he's doing well. He'll probably have a bit of a limp, but the Sisters said that's to be expected when the poison is in the body for that long. Thanks for stopping in to inquire."

43505.msg – ***Chapter 2 | Waterfork – Waterfork Fisherman***

Topic: Waterfork Fisherman

A fisherman tanned and tough as smoked jackfish sat on a barrel. His fingers deftly spliced together pieces of rope as he talked. "You're not from around here, I kin tell. Got kind of a soft look that Waterfork folk lose a'fore they kin walk. Eh yup, farmin' the water's a hard way to make a livin'."

The fisherman took a plug of something black and hard from his pants pocket. He took a bite and offered it to William. "What is it? Tobacco?"

The fisherman laughed. "Now I know you're not from around here! This here's fresh-water tarfy... dried fish, sugar, and tar pounded into a paste and left out in the sun for a month. Try some?"

William swallowed hard. "Uh, no, not right now... but thanks just the same."

"Don't know what you're missing." The fisherman neatly spat a black gob into a conveniently placed bucket.

"Not doing much fishing these days?" Aren observed shrewdly.

"Nobody is. Masliths been scaring all the fish away. They're not usually a problem this far inland, but the water's lower than usual due to the drought. P'raps the lizards came farther upriver looking for food."

Topic: Local Masliths Defeated

Aren greeted the fisherman. "You can put your boat back in the water now. We've gotten rid of all the masliths on this part of the river."

The fisherman grinned, showing a mouthful of tarfy-blackened teeth. "You don't say! That's good news. Lots of folks 'round here were starting to feel the pinch."

"Let me give you something for your trouble." The fisherman took a chain from around his neck. Aren saw it was a Henne's Horn.

"Thanks! Being on the road as much as we are, we never know where our next meal is coming from. This will keep our bellies from complaining quite so loudly." Aren accepted the talisman.

43515.msg – ***Chapter 2\ Waterfork – Waterfork Trapper***

Topic: Waterfork Trapper

A bear of a man answered the door with a gruff "I don't give handouts. Go to the tavern if you want a meal."

"We're not looking for food. We're just travelers interested in meeting people and learning about the towns we pass through."

"Oh, well in that case come on in. Have a seat. Make yourselves right at home."

The group complied and shortly found themselves warming their hands before a roaring fire.

Kaelyn surveyed the room. Animal furs covered the walls, including a jaeger skin hanging over the fireplace. "Let me guess... You're a trapper."

"Mostly, but I like to keep my hand in with bigger game."

The trapper passed round a loaf and a round of cheese. "Have some bread to tide you over till your dinner. Young folk are always hungry. Sure know I was when I was your age."

Toasting a thick hunk of bread over the fire, the trapper reminisced. "Yep, I remember one winter out in the Harkune Mountains... I was holed up in a cave, caught by a freak snowstorm. All the animals were either in hibernation or had moved down to warmer climes. Couldn't catch a rabbit or a pika to save my soul... and I mean that literally."

Aren got caught up in the tale. "So what did you do?"

"Well, first I nearly starved to death. Then I remembered something from back when I was a kid. I found me a flexible branch and fashioned a sort of a fishing pole. Cut a hole in a lake with my axe, baited my hook with a frozen bug, and had me some fish for supper."

The trapper laughed. "I stayed in that cave till the spring thaw, eating so much fish that I thought I grewed gills."

"Bet you hate fish now, huh?"

"No, actually it's my favorite. I never eat meat now at all. Got an exchange deal worked out with a fisherman friend of mine who can't stand the taste of anything with scales. I trade him my catch for his, and we both wind up full and happy."

43210.msg – *Chapter 2\Cardone – Mage Chilblain, Proprietor*

Topic: Mage Chilblain – Greeting #1

The sign over the door read 'Rings and Things. Mage Chilblain, Proprietor'.

"Sounds intriguing." Aren led the way into the shop.

Mage Chilblain was a wizened creature with more wrinkles than an unmade bed. He introduced himself as a specialist in magic rings. To demonstrate his art, he passed his hand over a silver ring set with a once-in-a-blue-moon sapphire. A swarm of ice bees buzzed briefly around his head, then melted one by one into a puddle at his feet.

"Cool!" Aren exclaimed, impressed.

"No, cold. You are not from Cardone. I wonder if on your travels you've heard the answer to a riddle that's been puzzling me. I would be willing to part with one of my magic rings for the correct solution."

Aren looked longingly at the moon sapphire. "What is the riddle?"

"If the third man is a hunter and the first one is a smith, ask a child what the second should be given as a gift."

"If you know the answer, tell me now." The mage looked at Aren with perhaps more intensity than the situation warranted.

Topic: Don't Know Answer

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't know the answer to your riddle." Aren tore his gaze away from the coveted silver ring.

Irritated, Mage Chilblain snapped, "Then don't waste any more of my time! Come back if you solve the riddle, but otherwise don't bother!"

Topic: Mage Chilblain – Greeting #2

Chilblain pivoted to face them. "Have you solved that riddle?"

"If you know the answer, tell me now." The mage looked at Aren with perhaps more intensity than the situation warranted.

Choice: Give Answer

"I know that one!" Aren said excitedly. "Glass!"

"Ah ha! I should have known. You've done me a great service. And now, to show my thanks..." Mage Chilblain smiled wickedly and rubbed an onyx ring. A blast of wind hurled the group out the door. Chilblain descended upon them.

Choice: Don't Give Answer

William stepped on Aren's foot to keep him quiet. "I'm sorry, sir, but we don't know the answer to that riddle."

The party bade the mage a good day. Confused, Aren asked, "Why did you lie? We could have had a magic ring!"

William shrugged. "I'm not sure. I just got a bad feeling about that guy."

Topic: Ostang and LeGrande

Two hunters sat at a table, flirting with the tavern wench. One of them leaned down the bar in a not-so-subtle attempt to look up her dress. She backed away. "Just as subtle as ever, Ostang. What do you want?"

"Only you, Karillon, only you," the burly man replied with a leer.

"You'll get ale or rye or nothing, same as usual." Showing genuine disgust, the barmaid slammed down a glass and a bottle.

"You'll change your tune when you're on your way home one night and the beast gets you! Then you'll be clinging to me right enough."

"And what beast is that, oh mighty hunter?"

"The one that me and LeGrande shot in the woods day before yesterday. Isn't that right, LeGrande?"

The hairy man snorted. "Yeah. Somethin' in the wood, it move. We shoot it. It scream and run. Run on two leg though, not four. Could be beast... or monster."

Ostang shoved his friend. "It's not a monster, LeGrande. If it was, would it be howling in the woods these past two nights? Tell you what we'll do. We'll organize a hunting party to track down and kill this beast good and dead. For who else but Ostang and LeGrande are man enough to face such danger?"

Topic: Jean Baudet, Chicken Farmer

The big, raw-boned man introduced himself as Jean Baudet. He invited the party into his house. They tried to relax on the hard chairs, but the room had obviously been furnished with an eye to economy and utility rather than comfort. Jean was a friendly sort though, talkative and agreeable. "You must have heard about the beast in the woods?"

"Have you seen him yourself?" asked William.

"No, I haven't. But last night I awoke to a terrible ruckus coming from my chicken coop. I lit a lantern and went out there to discover that six of my best layers had vanished!"

"Was there evidence of foul play?" William asked.

"No, but something had broken through the fence and made off with them."

"How do you know it was the beast and not a deranged chicken thief?"

Jean scratched his ear. "Reckon I can't be sure since whatever it was took the hens with him instead of eating them in the coop. Either way, I'm still out six chickens... or maybe five. But definitely no less than three..."

43200.msg – *Chapter 2\Cardone – Woman Frightened of The Beast of Cardone*

Topic: Woman Frightened of The Beast of Cardone

From behind the door, a reedy voice told the party to go away. William said they meant her no harm. The door opened a crack. "You shouldn't be out on the road. There's danger!"

"What are you afraid of?" William asked in his gentlest tone.

The woman trembled. "The beast, of course. Haven't you heard? It took six chickens from Jean Baudet's coop last night. Blood and feathers everywhere. And Mrs. Romaste heard something snuffling around outside the twins' bedroom window. Next morning her husband found paw tracks in the mud and claw marks on the sill!"

"Has anyone actually seen this beast?"

"Well, no, not exactly, but I'm staying inside until it's caught and killed! If you had any sense, you all'd do the same!" The door slammed shut.

10822.msg – *Chapter 2\Northwest of Cardone – Flaar the Grrrlf ("The Beast of Cardone")*

Flaar the Grrrlf ("The Beast of Cardone")

Topic: Greeting #1

Aren: "Look there! It's a beast of some sort."

Kaelyn: "Wait! It's not an animal, it's a Grrrlf!"

Aren: "(DUBIOUS) He looks pretty wild to me."

Kaelyn: "Something's wrong here. Grrrlf abhor violence."

William: "Apparently not everyone shares that viewpoint. Looks like he's been shot."

Kaelyn: "That doesn't explain... Oh no, it must be krrrshkuf! Wound madness. I've seen it once before!"

"The Grrrlf have spent the last few centuries fighting to conquer their bestial nature, but a serious injury or intense pain can ignite a primal rage that shatters self-control in an instant. It's completely beyond their control, like trying not to be ticklish, only the Grrrlf's loss of restraint is no laughing matter."

Aren: "How can we help him?"

Kaelyn: "Adrenaline worsens the condition. Somehow we've got to calm him down, give him a chance to regain control."

Topic: Greeting #2 – After Giving Nudration

Kaelyn: "How are you feeling now, fur brother?"

Flaar: "Almost Grrrlf again thanks to you, skin sister."

Topic: Wound

Aren: "How did you come by your injuries?"

Flaar: "I was hunting for my evening meal. I flushed a partridge from the undergrowth but it escaped. The noise alerted two hunters downwind of me. I sought no trouble but many humans still fear us. Suddenly I had arrows whizzing past my ears. I dove for cover but a pair of shots found their mark. The hunters searched for me. I covered my wounds so they could not follow the trail of blood, and crawled deep into a thicket. That is the last I can recall."

Kaelyn: "From what I know about Grrrlf, you suffered the typical reaction to severe shock and pain."

Flaar: "(UPSET) Krrrshkuf? All I can remember is bites and pieces... running, crying... Did I hurt anyone?"

Kaelyn: "(KINDLY) No, you harmed no one. Your ka is clear. And now your wounds are healed and you can return home."

Topic: Pack

Kaelyn: "Where is your home? What is your pack?"

Flaar: "My name is Flaar. I run with Grrrfalag. He sent me to deliver a message to the other packs around Pianda. Only when I have finished this task will I be able to go home again."

Kaelyn: "As a friend, may I ask what message you carry?"

Flaar: "My bound wounds are proof of that friendship. My message is that all packs are to return to the Den immediately. Why I do not know. I ask that you pass on this message to any other Grrrlf you meet on your travels."

Topic: Goodbye

Flaar: "Now I must take to my path once more. Please take this token of my gratitude."

Kaelyn: "Thank you, Flaar. May you sniff your home-scent on the wind before long."

43305.msg – ***Chapter 2\Levosche – Irene and Miel Ampersand***

Topic: Irene and Miel Ampersand – Dinner

A white-haired, handsome woman greeted the travelers. "Welcome. I am Irene Ampersand. Miel, come here and meet some newcomers to our town."

The stately, bald gentleman joined his wife at the door. "Why don't you all come in? We were just about to sit down to our supper. You are more than welcome to join us."

The next two hours passed quickly. Irene and Miel were kind and gracious, offering simple yet delicious food and lively conversation. They listened eagerly to their guests, asking a myriad of questions about their travels, the people they'd met, and the things they'd seen and done. The travelers sighed contently over ginger crisps and dessert wine, thanking their hosts for a most delightful evening.

Topic: Joyman of Levosche – Question #1

A fair-haired joyman sat strumming a lute and singing softly to himself. Aren asked if he'd mind if they listened in on his song. "Oh, I'm not really singing anything... I'm trying to work out the lyrics for a ballad about the Cyrilan."

"Is that the ship that went down a long time ago?" Aren asked.

"Yes, it is. A hundred years ago, the Emperor Benarren built the Cyrilan as a wedding gift for his daughter and her intended groom. It was wrecked on its maiden voyage. The princess and her beloved drowned."

"A tragic tale indeed."

"Yes, it could be quite moving. If only I can finish it in time to perform it at the festival in Ticoro. I seem to be stuck on this one verse..."

Aren leaned over his shoulder to look at the sheets of music. "Maybe we can help you. I've written a few songs in my time..."

"I can't seem to remember the name of the shipwright who built the Cyrilan. I'm sure it will come to me eventually..."

Topic: Answer #1 – Cyrilan's Shipwright

"Oh, I know that! His name was Cavotte. At the museum in Ravenne we saw a painting of him christening the Cyrilan."

The songwriter smiled in relief. "Thank you so very much. I hate it when I can't remember something I know I know. Would you like to hear the song so far?"

Choice: Yes

Topic: Ballad of the Cyrilan, First Verse

Once there was a vessel as proud as she was tall.
Many hands of men did toil to build the graceful yawl.
Her bow was arced, her belly lean, her sails were clean and white.
There was nothing in her form to lend a shadow of her plight.

The Emperor Benarren's fair daughter Isabelle,
Was pledged to wed the prince of Fain, of whom the stories tell,
He sought Cavotte to build a boat, and said, "A vessel gay
That's fit to give as wedding gift to bear us both away!"

The songwriter stopped singing. "That's all I have so far, but I hope to have the ballad finished in good time thanks to your help."

Choice: No

"If it's all the same to you, I think I'd like to wait until I can hear the entire song."

"I know what you mean... Ballad interruptus can be rather unsettling. Look for me at the festival in Ticoro. Thanks to your help, I know I'll have my song finished in time."

Topic: *Joyman of Levosche – Question #2*

The songwriter looked up, delighted at the company. "Ah! I'm glad you're here! You were so helpful the first time, I was hoping perhaps you might be able to jog my memory again."

Aren smiled back. "We can try. What do you need?"

"I've reached the part of the song where the ship is named and sets sail, but I can't remember where that happened. I think it was one of the Chinese towns destroyed when the Waste was created."

Topic: *Answer #2 – Cyrilan's Launch Site*

"Wait a second, I know that..." Aren looked skyward, perhaps seeking divine help in pulling forth the information. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Riva. It was named and launched in Riva."

The songwriter beamed. "Marvelous! Henne bless you, friend. That should let me finish off these verses-- want to hear what I've got so far?"

Choice: Yes

Topic: *Ballad of the Cyrilan, Second Verse*

For her mast they felled an ell tree, for weight and flex and strength,
To the forest of Januli went to harvest planks of length.
Her lines they made of silk to trim her rig and tie her wales,
Set the greatest weavers in the land to labor for her sails.

On a summer day in Riva, the Cyrilan was named.
The Triune's three did come in peace to bless this vessel famed.
On her maiden sail to the Isle of Fain, her bearing filled with pride,
For aboard this day the honored pair: the handsome prince and bride.

Choice: No

"If it's all the same to you, I think I'd like to wait until I can hear the entire song."

"I know what you mean... Ballad interruptus can be rather unsettling. Look for me at the festival in Ticoro. Thanks to your help, I know I'll have my song finished in time."

Topic: *Joyman of Levosche – Question #3*

The songwriter looked up from his lute. "Hello again! I'm afraid I'm not making much progress with this ballad. I hate to impose on you again, but I wonder if you happen to remember the name of the ship's boy? He was the only one to survive the wreck."

Topic: *Answer #3 – Ship's Boy Name*

Aren grinned. "We know that one too! The ship boy was named Derek! Now can you finish your song?"

"Yes, I think so, but it may take some time to get it just right. Look for me in Ticoro at the festival and I'll give you a special performance!"

Topic: *Joyman of Levosche – Any Answer still Unknown*

"How goes the ballad of the Cyrilan?" Aren asked. "Did you ever remember that thing you were stuck on?"

The songwriter sighed. "No, I didn't. And I know it's right on the tip of my tongue. At this rate, I won't finish the song before the festival!"

43300.msg – *Chapter 2\Levosche – Apprentice Swordsmith, Trusted Arms*

Topic: Apprentice Swordsmith

William was just about to knock when he heard thumps and hollers coming from the back. The party circled around the house to discover a man about their own age, practicing feints and parries against a stuffed dummy. The man saw them and lifted his epee in a salute.

"Greetings, Master Swordsman!" William called out cheerfully.

"Not a master by a long shot! Just a 'prentice swordsmith at the Trusted Arms. On my days off, I practice the art. Got to know how to fence if you're going to craft weapons for a living. Today I'm working on my attack styles."

Aren stepped forward and studied the hanging dummy, stuffing coming out of it in several vital regions. "I didn't realize there were different ways of attacking."

The apprentice eagerly filled him in. "Sure there are! Different swords are best suited for different attacks. A long sword is good for swinging slashes, broadswords have the weight for hacking, and rapiers provide the reach for thrusts. Hey, if you have the time, why don't we train together for a few hours?"

Choice: Practice

Aren's companions nodded encouragement. "All right, you're on! I'm sure I can learn a lot from you."

The apprentice gave Aren some pointers on how to block with his staff. Then the two young men squared off. After a long while, Aren was hot and tired but well pleased with his increased skill in the art of defense.

Choice: Leave

Aren looked at his companions who in turn glanced over at the road suggestively. "Uh, well, I'd like to, but I don't think we have the time. Thanks for the offer though."

Topic: Levosche Jail – Empty

The barred windows and reinforced door suggested this was a jail cell. Apparently, nobody was currently serving time.

Mackey the Traveling Merchant

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "Greetings, fellow traveler!"

Mackey: "Good day, m'lords. The name's Mackey. The contents of the wagon before you comprise the sum total of my roving emporium of exotic merchandise."

Topic: Merchandise

Aren: "Do you mind if we have a look at your wares?"

Mackey: "My sole purpose in life is to provide you with the opportunity to do just that, young sir. Browse all you like and sing out if something suits your fancy."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "Safe journey, Mackey."

Mackey: "May the roads be kind to your feet, m'lords."

Topic: The Mage of Ormede – Greeting #1

An eerie glow lit the cottage from within. Aren tapped cautiously. The light blinked out, then came back on, then gradually died away. Aren heard a high-pitched voice swearing vigorously, then the door opened to reveal a scrawny old man in a white robe. "Why do people always disturb me when I'm working?"

Aren ventured a guess. "Excuse me, sir, but are you a mage?"

"Well, what else do I look like? A Chailan otter spaniel? What do you want? I haven't got all day."

"I'm a mage too, sir. Or at least, I will be."

The crabby old man was not impressed. "Oh really. My stars, isn't that fascinating. And did you come all the way from wherever you're from just to tell me that, hmmm?"

Aren made one more attempt. "There's so much I don't know, sir. I'd sure like to learn from an experienced mage, someone who has control of the magical forces, someone with vast skill and power... someone like you, for instance."

The old mage preened under Aren's flattery. "Yes, no doubt you would. But it takes years... dedication... sacrifices..."

Aren cut in. "I can pay you well for your time."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place, young man?" The mage rubbed his hands together. "Let's get started."

"What will it cost me to learn to raise the dead? Also, I'd like to know how to walk on rainbows and become invisible." Aren asked, counting his money.

The mage arched his eyebrow. "Perhaps you'd like me to teach you how to turn lead into gold as well."

Aren caught the man's tone just before eagerly agreeing. "Oh. What CAN you teach me?"

"I can train you in the application of illuminescence, the non-localization of forces, or the primordial act of creation itself. Any of them will stand you in good stead throughout your career, but I only have time to train you in one, and it'll cost you 100 burlas."

Choice: Train

Choice: Light

The mage spent the next hour enlightening Aren on how to manipulate the spectrum of visible light. When they were through, Aren's eyes glinted with excitement.

Choice: Area

The mage spent the next hour refining Aren's knowledge of how to affect the area around him. Aren felt his horizons broaden.

Choice: Create

The mage spent the next hour teaching Aren how to use magic to create tangible objects and effects. When they finished, Aren felt more confident in that area of his knowledge.

Choice: Train – *Not Enough Money*

Aren frowned as he inspected his money pouch. "I'm afraid I spoke too soon-- I'll have to come back later when I have enough money to pay you."

The mage rolled his eyes and spun on his heels. "Why do I bother?" he spat as he slammed the door."

Choice: Forget It

Aren reconsidered. "I don't really feel like spending the money on such fundamental skills."

"Fundamental skills, is it? I'll show you fundamental skills!" The mage drew himself up to his full height, shouted some ominous phrases, and clapped his hands. A tiny puff of bluish smoke blew into Aren's face. He coughed... and waited.

The mage swirled his robe around him, stormed inside, and slammed the door.

"Guess I must have offended him," Aren remarked as they went on their way.

Topic: The Mage of Ormede – Greeting #2

The mage answered the door and held up his hand when he saw Aren. "Yes, yes, I remember you. If it'll get you to stop disturbing me, I'll teach you a skill."

"I can train you in the application of illuminescence, the non-localization of forces, or the primordial act of creation itself. Any of them will stand you in good stead throughout your career, but I only have time to train you in one, and it'll cost you 100 burlas."

43410.msg – ***Chapter 2\Ormede – Woman Gardener***

Topic: Woman Gardener – Preserves Food

The sign over the door read 'Fresh Fruits and Vegetables. Home Grown. Natural and Organic'.

Kaelyn's mouth watered. "Let's check this out. I'd love some food that doesn't taste like it's been packed next to my socks for a week."

The cottage was set up as a combination shop and greenhouse. Potted flowers and herbs filled the countertops. A woman puttered among the pots, planting seedlings in rich, moist soil. She looked up, pleased to see new customers. "Yes? May I help you?"

"We'd like to purchase some produce, please," Kaelyn said eagerly, her mouth already watering for a ripe tomato or luscious peach.

"Oh, I'm sorry to disappoint you, dear. Nothing's ripe just now. It's been a simply terrible season, what with the drought and all."

Kaelyn tried to ignore the disappointed grumbling in her belly. "I see. We're traveling and need to keep replenishing our supplies before they spoil. Do you have any food to sell at all?"

"Honestly, no. But I can treat your fresh food to make it last longer. I only charge two burlas per day's worth of food."

Topic: Give Food for Preservation

The woman took the bundles of food. "I'll have to dry these in the sun to preserve them. You can come back tomorrow afternoon to pick them up."

Topic: Rations not yet Ready

The woman smiled when she saw Kaelyn. "I'm sorry, dear, but the preservation process takes time. Come back later."

Topic: Pick up Rations

The woman handed over the bundles. Kaelyn noticed they were much lighter than before. "Here are your dried food rations. Enjoy!"

Kaelyn tasted a bit of meat. "Tough," she grumbled, then seeing the look on the woman's face, she added, "But well-preserved. Thanks."

Topic: Not Enough Money

Kaelyn checked their cash supply. "Hmm... we don't seem to have enough to get all those rations preserved. Maybe we should give her fewer of them."

43415.msg – ***Chapter 2\Ormede – The Cyrilan Expedition***

Topic: The Cyrilan Expedition

A skinny man with a nervous twitch was delighted to see them. "Step right inside, my friends. You showed up just in time. I've just become privy to some special information, some very special information."

"We're definitely interested in very special information," said Aren. William rolled his eyes.

"Then you'll want to listen closely to what I have to say. Now here is a map of the coast around Ormede. I've lived here all my life and I know every inch of it like the back of my head..."

William interrupted. "Don't you mean the back of your hand?"

"Exactly. Now I've received confidential information from a high-ranking official in the Antaran navy..."

William interrupted again. "If it's so confidential, why are you telling us?"

"I have special clearance. Now if you'll let me continue... I'm putting together an expedition to recover the wreck of the Cyrilan. As you know, its treasures are legendary, its worth incalculable. All those people who searched near Riva, where the ship was named and launched? Way off. If I

told you the names of the people who are interested, very interested, in funding this project, you would be amazed..."

William interrupted. "So amaze me."

"At this point, those parties wish to remain anonymous. We're only offering this chance to a select few to keep profits high, you understand. Now for a mere 150 burlas I can give you a 10% share in whatever we find, after taxes and the overhead are deducted of course..."

"Oh, of course," said William.

Aren was annoyed. "Why do you always have to be so cynical, William? Aren't you excited about the possibility of recovering the Cyrilan after all these years? There could be anything down there... gold, jewels, maybe even the skeleton of the Emperor's daughter!"

The man looked around nervously. "The only thing is, I need an answer right away. The others are quite anxious to begin. We only have space for a few more investors. Are you in or out?"

Choice: Buy In

Aren reached into the money pouch before William could stop him. He handed over 150 burlas, saying, "Now how should we contact you to collect..."

The man stuffed the coins into his bag. "Oh, don't worry about that, lad. We'll know how to find you all right. You just go on about your business and leave it all to me."

The man left the cottage without so much as a handshake or a by-your-leave. William turned on Aren. "That's the last we'll see of that 150 burlas, Aren. Nice going."

Aren looked puzzled. "But he said he'd tell us when they raised the ship. Don't you trust him?"

William grunted. "Might trust him just a bit more if he'd remembered to ask our names before he took off with our money. Best let this be a lesson to you, Aren. A lesson I hope you learn quickly."

Choice: Buy In – *Not Enough Money*

Aren prepared to hand over the money, but found he came up short. "I'm afraid I don't have 150 burlas."

The man snatched the burlas from Aren's hand. "I like you, son, and I can see how much you want to be a part of this. My partners won't like it, but I'll cut you into the deal anyway."

"Really? That's great--"

The man cut Aren off. "I'm going to have to do some quick talking to my partners, so if you'll excuse me, I'd better go find them. I'll be in touch."

The man whirled out of the cottage. "Somehow, I don't think quick talking will be a problem for him," William observed. "That's money we'll never see again. Good going, Aren."

Choice: Leave

Aren looked to William, who was vigorously shaking his head. "150 burlas seems a bit steep. I'll talk it over with my co-investors and we'll get back to you if we're interested."

As the party left the cottage, William pat his friend on the back. "Aren, I think we've finally got the Briala dust out of your eyes. Well done."

43430.msg – *Chapter 2\Ormede – Children Playing "Soldier and Grrrlf"*

Topic: *Children Playing "Soldier and Grrrlf"*

As the party stepped into the yard, they suddenly found themselves set upon by a horde of small children. The kids raced past and dove into the bushes. Two seconds later, three more children came into the yard, obviously looking for their playmates. Kaelyn grabbed the arm of the largest boy to get his attention. "Are you playing Hide and Search?"

"Nah, that's for babies." The boy brandished his child-sized bow. "We're playing Soldier and Grrrlf! When we find 'em, we're gonna kill 'em dead!"

"I take it that you're a soldier?"

"You bet! We make the little kids play the Grrrlf. Let them sneak through the bushes all they want... We can find 'em no matter where they hide. Hey! Ouch! That hurt!" The boy rubs his arm where Kaelyn pinched him.

"Oh, sorry. Guess I just got caught up in the excitement."

Kaelyn turned to her companions. "If that's what the kids are like, maybe I shouldn't meet the parents. Don't think I could be held accountable..."

William nodded. "All right. We'll take a pass on this house, for their sakes. I don't want to be responsible for making any orphans."

Topic: Nahm, Storyteller and Three-Card Monte Hustler

The jolly man with the round face introduced himself. "Nahm's the name. I'm right pleased to meet you. I see you've noticed the Henne's Breath's claim to fame, hung right here on the wall. These are the very same cards used by the Brothers Lyne when they stopped for refreshment at this very inn!"

William edged toward a vacant table on the other side of the room. "Isn't that interesting. Now if you'll just excuse us..."

Nahm didn't even a pause to draw breath. "Seeing as I'm what you might call the local historian 'round these parts, I feel it behooves me to tell you newcomers the tale."

William sat down. "We might as well make ourselves comfortable. This could go on all night."

"As you no doubt already know, the Lyne brothers were adventurers, heroes of the Golden Age of the Empire. They spent one night in Ormede, planning to set sail the next morning for parts unknown.

"A local cardwolf suggested a friendly game of cards. They played well into the night. The brothers' money flowed across the table like it was sloping downhill. Finally the cardwolf drained the brothers' purses. He was standing to take his leave when the cleverest of the three, Mirl, challenged him to one last game.

"Mirl staked all the gold on the table against his bejeweled dagger, his brother Vax's diamond ring, and his brother Fontaine's sword with emeralds on the hilt. The cardwolf was interested, but first he wanted to know just what kind of game Mirl proposed.

"Mirl took three cards from the deck, the exact same three cards that you see there on the wall. He said, 'This is a game of skill. I will shuffle the cards, then lay them on the table face down. You tell me which is the Empress and our belongings are yours.' Well, the cardwolf eagerly agreed, confident of his sharp eyes and keen wits.

"After a few practice hands, Mirl shuffled for the final deciding game. The cards moved faster and faster, sliding across the table in a blur of color. The cardwolf's eyes twitched in a frenzy as he followed the motion, but when Mirl's hands stopped, the cardwolf smiled.

"'Good try, my friend. There were a couple of tricks that almost threw me. However, the Empress is right here!' The cardwolf victoriously flipped the card on the far left. His triumph was short lived... It was the Jester. The cardwolf jumped back, his hand falling to the hilt of his sword. Before it cleared the scabbard, Fontaine's blade pressed into his gullet.

"Mirl pulled his dagger and cut open the cardwolf's sleeve. Cards fluttered from the slit fabric. 'I am so disappointed. My game was entirely fair, but I figured you for a cheat since the third hand.'

The brothers scooped the gold into their pouches and left the inn. Tomorrow they'd be on the high seas in search of excitement. Just as well, for Ormede was beginning to bore them."

Aren's eyes shone. "And those cards are the same ones Mirl tricked the cardwolf with. Wow!"

Nahm pulled a deck of cards from his bag. "Yes, indeed. And now if you'd like, I can demonstrate the very same game for only ten burlas a round."

Choice: Play

"Just lay down your burlas and we'll begin."

Aren put ten burlas on the table. Nahm shuffled, laid out the cards, and waited for Aren to pick the Empress.

Choice: Left

Choice: Middle

Choice: Right

Topic: Win

Nahm flipped over one of the other cards, revealing the Empress. "Care to try again?"

Topic: Lose #1

"Sorry, son, that's the Prince."

Topic: Lose #2

"Sorry, son, that's the Jester."

Choice: Play – *Not Enough Money*

Aren reached into his pouch, but he came up with less than 10 burlas. William shot a dark look in his direction. "I think you've played quite enough, Aren," he said, pulling Aren away from a chuckling Nahm.

Choice: Leave

Aren dug into the money bag, but William prudently stayed his hand. "Not a good idea, Aren. You might as well toss our money into the sea. Thank the nice man for his story and let's be on our way."

43115.msg – *Chapter 2\Ravenne – Del the Stained Glassmaker*

Topic: *Del the Stained Glassmaker*

The sunlight hit the sign, splintering into a myriad of rainbows. "Del's Stained Glass," read William. "But of course."

The party entered to see Del working at a long table, arranging blue and green glass on a paper pattern. They watched as he etched a curve, then gently tapped the glass until it cracked along the mark.

William moved in closer. "This is beautiful. Are you making a window?"

Del looked up, pleased. "Yes, for the new Chapel of Henne. This is the center panel in a triptych representing the three basic tenets of the Children's philosophy: destiny, luck, and inspiration. As you can see, luck is symbolized by the fisherman who casts into unknown waters in the hope of catching his supper."

William admired the work in progress. "You've made the water look so realistic. I practically expect it to move."

Del grinned. "Thank you. This one is turning out rather well, isn't it? I'm glad I got this commission. The Children have been fun to work for. They're allowing me lots of artistic freedom, and Kor, do they have money to spend!"

"We look forward to seeing your windows once they're installed."

Del waved farewell. "Thanks for stopping by."

43105.msg – *Chapter 2\Ravenne – Henne Zealot*

Topic: *Henne Zealot*

A gaunt man with intense eyes opened the door. "Are you collecting donations for the Chapel?"

Kaelyn eyed the money bag in the man's hand. "Why, yes. Yes, we are."

William interrupted. "No, sir. Not really. That's just her little joke."

The man glared at Kaelyn. "That the Hand of Henne has chosen Ravenne for the new Chapel of Henne is nothing to joke about!"

Kaelyn looked past the man into his house. A cheap though not small portrait of the Revered Hand hung in a prominent spot on the wall.

Aren dubiously looked over the man's dirty clothes and unkempt hair. "You aren't a Child of Henne yourself, are you?"

"No. I know I am not worthy to join their enlightened ranks. But I practice Henne's teachings carefully, striving each day to follow the example set by the exalted Hand. If only I had always done so..."

"If I may ask, as a fellow searcher, what brought about your recent devotion?"

"The realization that my lack of faith caused my wife's death." The man beat his chest in penitence. "She was a devout believer, but I scoffed and called it nonsense, nothing more than bedtime stories for children. Then she took sick with the Pox. More than anything she wished to travel to the Chapel in Ticoro for a blessing. She was convinced that would make her well again."

The man drew a deep, ragged breath. "Damn fool that I am, I didn't listen. I insisted she stay home where I could care for her... Care for her body, yes, but not for her soul. She died... along with dozens of other nonbelievers in this town."

Kaelyn was blunt. "Do you truly believe your wife would be alive if you had allowed her to travel for miles in the cold and rain, sleep in drafty inns, and eat the coarse food of the road?"

"Henne's grace is infinite, beyond such trivial considerations! Didn't the High Brother Shoan, Revered Hand of Henne before High Brother Marr, sacrifice himself, dying of the Pox so that we would understand the disease is drawn to the impurities in even the most pious among us?"

Kaelyn retorted, "But why would Shoan choose to die if he had the power to cure himself as well as his believers?"

The man's face reddened. "Blasphemy, girl! Be gone from this house, nonbelievers!" The door slammed.

William laughed. "That's our Kaelyn. Always making friends and influencing people."

Kaelyn snorted. "I just have no patience for those who choose to rationalize reality with a cause-and-effect God."

Cynthia Vanous, Ravenne Museum Curator

Topic: *Greeting*

Aren: "Excuse me, is the museum open?"

Cynthia: "Yes, we're open. Come in, come in."

Topic: *Acquisitions*

Aren: "How did the museum get all this old stuff?"

Cynthia: "Most of it was donated by lords and ladies of the Empire. Over the years we've had many generous patrons, including the Imperial family. When Empress Corlene first founded the Museum of Antiquities, becoming a patron was a mark of prestige. Jaegers competed to best each other's contributions to Corlene's gift to posterity. Back then the museum was staffed with docents by the dozens... (SIGH) Now there's just a handful of us, and only a few of our treasures remain."

Topic: *Artwork*

Aren: "This is a very impressive collection. I don't know much about art, but these paintings look very old."

Cynthia: "Oh my, yes. These are all originals, some dating all the way back before the Migration. When the Grrrlf forced the humans to flee, saving artwork wasn't a high priority. Not much from that period survived, but we have a representative collection. We also have a number of pieces from Chail and Mehrat. A few are from even further away than that, from lands across the sea."

Topic: *Originals*

Aren: "How did these originals survive the centuries?"

Cynthia: "They were preserved against the elements in burial tombs where the air is cool and dry. In ancient times, chiefs and princes were buried with paintings and other belongings to recall the world left behind in death. Sometimes miners break through the rock into these caverns, discovering a window, as it were, into our past. Our prize is that piece over there, the only known portrait of Byra Maden. We believe it dates back to before the Uprisings."

Topic: Byra Maden

Aren: "(SENSING A GOOD STORY) Who was Byra Maden?"

Cynthia: "(STORYTELLING VOICE) Byra Maden was a great mage during the First Wave. For decades his legendary feats of magic brought him abundant renown and fortune. Now a mage of such power shouldn't be able to simply vanish off the face of the earth, but that's what Byra Maden did. During the Uprisings, he disappeared without a trace. The people created a remarkable tomb as a memorial to his name. It was filled with many of Maden's possessions, items of incalculable value and power."

Aren: "(AMAZED) Where is this fabulous tomb?"

Cynthia: "That no one has ever discovered. Legend has it that shortly after its completion, the tomb itself vanished into thin air. Many over the centuries have sought for it in vain. A few even claim to have found it, but when they attempt to return with others, the exact location eludes them."

Aren: "(EMPHASIZE "YOU") Where do you think it is?"

Cynthia: "Though my research has uncovered no evidence to support this, I somehow sense that Byra Maden and his tomb lie at the heart of the Waste. It is a land of strange and awesome mystery, created by a convergence of magical forces that no one has ever been able to explain. (SNAPS OUT OF STORYTELLING MODE) Of course, I could be wrong. In reality, Byra Maden's tomb could be in this very neighborhood, covered by a mud slide or submerged beneath a swamp."

Topic: Jaeger

Cynthia: "That jaeger is a featured exhibit in our natural history collection. You should see the children's mouths drop open when they come across it for the first time."

Topic: Fire Wolf

Cynthia: "The fire wolf is an impressive creature, isn't it? It's a magical hybrid resulting from the mating of an Antaran wolf with an Etherean creature. I hear they can actually breathe fireballs, though I'm relieved to say I never saw this for myself."

Topic: Instruments

Cynthia: "This drum and the other instruments are used in a Grrrlf dance."

Kaelyn: "That dance is called the Karrruf."

Cynthia: "(INTERESTED) Oh, is it really? That's 'Karrruf' with an 'f'? Thank you so much. I'll be sure to update my reference material immediately. There's so little we know about the Grrrlf, and with this current atmosphere of distrust, it's so difficult to learn more."

Topic: Shard

Cynthia: "This is a shard from the Mirror of Smoke and Dreams, one of the most amazing creations in the magical world. During the Age of Mages, seven of the greatest practitioners came together to spell the Mirror into being."

"Our research shows that the original Mirror was oval, approximately six feet tall and four feet wide. It was made from smoky crystal and set in a silver frame. Appearing dark and dim to the typical human, it had an affinity for users of magical energy."

Aren: "(FASCINATED) What was it used for?"

Cynthia: "By looking into the Mirror, a mage could mentally contact another mage anywhere in the world. And with some expenditure of power, he could also send physical items through the glass to the contacted mage."

Topic: Bust

Cynthia: "As you no doubt recognize, this is a bust of Emperor Valorian I, the founder of the Antaran Empire. Sculpted during his lifetime, it is said to be a remarkable likeness, though as you can see, it suffered damage before coming into the museum's care."

Topic: Goodbye

Aren: "Thank you for all the information. It was very interesting."

Cynthia: "We're having a lecture series on the artistry of TrKaa nest building, starting next week. You and your friends would be more than welcome."

Aren: "I think we're busy then, but we'll see."

43340.msg – *Chapter 2\Ravenne – Museum – Emperor Valorian Bust*

Topic: *Using Emerald with Emperor Valorian Bust*

The emerald slid into the empty eye socket with a soft click. A tiny compartment on the front of the bust popped open, revealing a shiny ring. Aren picked up the ring and hastily closed the compartment. As he jarred the bust, the emerald slipped loose and fell from the socket. Aren watched in dismay as it skittered across the floor and vanished into a drainage pipe.

43110.msg – *Chapter 2\Ravenne – Children's Rhyming Song*

Topic: *"A Coin for the Beggar"*

Inside, children tossed a potato around a circle. With each toss, they sang a rhyme, then took a step backwards. The ring continued to grow until someone dropped the potato, then all the children laughed and started again. The companions stopped to watch for a while.

Aren reminisced. "I used to play this when I was a child..."

William shushed him. "I want to hear what they're singing."

"A coin for the beggar
A jewel for the thief
A sword for the soldier
A robe for the priest

A pen for the poet
A ring for the Jaeger
A snare for the trapper
A pan for the baker

A forge for the blacksmith
A glass for the barman
A bow for the hunter
A plow for the farmhand

A shop for the merchant
A ship for the sailor
A bribe for the Shiran
A pin for the tailor

A coach for the noble
A drink for the joyman
A post for the Consul
A game to begin again."

The children tossed the potato and started over again, as excited as they were the last time.

43610.msg – *Chapter 2\Melay – Gunther Yyp, Jeweler Mage*

Topic: Greeting #1

Aren read the sign over the door. "'Gunther Yyp – Jeweler Mage'."

A man sat at a workbench. He looked at William over the tops of his magnifying spectacles.
"Yes, can I help you?"

"I'm not sure," William began. "What exactly does a jeweler mage do?"

"I fashion magical objects from the metals and minerals of the earth. Look around you and you'll see."

The companions examined the intricate jewelry and dazzling cut gems that filled the cases on either side of them.

"You do beautiful work."

43600.msg – *Chapter 2\Melay – Sculptress – The Malachite Cat Story*

Topic: Sculptress – The Malachite Cat Story

A gentle tapping came from the workshop's open door. The party looked in. Blocks of granite and marble proclaimed this to be a sculptor's studio. A young woman stood on a ladder, rounding

the edges of a huge grey column. Waste flakes covered the floor. The woman saw the strangers and came down the ladder, wiping the stone dust from her hands.

She greeted them with a smile. "Good day to you. Are you here to commission a great work of art or are you just browsing?"

Aren looked around at the statues of men, beasts, and abstract shapes. "Just browsing, though your work is quite impressive."

The sculptress gestured toward a realistic statue of a jaeger ready to pounce. "The more representational pieces were done by my father. I work in the abstract, trying to capture intangibles such as an emotion or philosophy. This piece, for example..." she points at a half dome perched precariously on a pedestal, "I call 'Sea Air Align' because to me it represents the interface between those elements."

"I see," said Aren, not at all sure that he did. "What is your father working on now?"

The woman ran her hand through her straight brown hair. "Not much. He's dead."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. He died when I was quite young, twenty years ago. I don't remember much about him, but I feel a strong sense of connection to him because of our shared love for this art. That passion is actually what killed him, in a way."

"What do you mean?"

"I remember only some of what happened. The rest I pieced together from what others have told me. When I was little, I used to love playing in this studio. The stones towered so high over my head that it was like being in a canyon.

"One day I came in to play and I saw a man yelling at my father. That frightened me so I hid behind a statue of a hunter standing over a fallen stag. Funny, but I can still recall how the stag stared up at me with its frozen gaze. Anyhow, I heard a strange noise, then swearing, then footsteps leaving the studio. When I dared to peek out, I saw my father lying at the foot of a slab. There was blood on his hair. He must have died as soon as his head hit the rock."

William followed the sculptress's eyes to a dusty block of uncut marble in one corner of the room. "Did they catch the murderer?"

"Oh yes. Actually, he turned himself in. The case went before a triunal but since he was a lord and I, a mere toddler, was the only witness, he was let off with a fine."

"Why did he kill your father?"

"It had something to do with a statue the lord commissioned. Apparently my father didn't want to give it up once he'd created it. I thought it best not to try to find out the details as the lord's family is still quite powerful in this region."

"Did the lord get his statue?"

The woman shook her head. "No one knows. He says he did not. My father's friend tells me it was a small piece, a malachite cat. I've never seen anything like that around here."

"Very mysterious..."

The sculptress looked puzzled. "Do you really think so? I always just assumed the lord had it. Well, I've chatted enough of the light away. Time to get back to my work in progress."

William studied the massive grey stone carved into intricate curves and hollows. "What do you call it?"

"I'm not sure yet. I was thinking of 'Life, Love, and Liver.' What does it suggest to you?"

"Uh, I'm not very artistic. I really think we should be on our way. As you observed, the light's fading fast..." William hurried out the door before he was forced to give an opinion he'd just as soon have kept to himself.

43610.msg – *Chapter 2\Melay – Gunther Yyp, Jeweler Mage*

Topic: Greeting #2 – After Meeting the Sculptress

"Mage Yyp, did you happen to know the sculptress's father?"

The jeweler mage put down his spectacles and scratched his forehead. "Yes, I did. In fact, he was my best friend. I'll always feel a bit guilty that he died as he did."

"Why? Didn't a lord kill him?"

"Yes, but I can't help but feel indirectly responsible. It's rather a long story..."

"You have our undivided attention. Please, go on."

"I had a flawless piece of malachite and an exquisite torchite stone in my possession. I sold them to the lord who claimed that the torchite glowed with the same light as his wife's eyes. The lord then commissioned my friend to carve a cat in profile, using the gem for its eye. My friend labored for weeks, coaxing the cat out of the stone, capturing it in an eternal moment of mischief."

Yyp wiped his spectacles with a soft cloth. "My friend brought over the finished statue. The figure seemed so real. Its torchite eye glowed with such an inner light that my friend said he realized he'd put too much of himself into the little cat to possibly part with it. That was the last time I saw him alive."

"The sculptor's daughter thinks the lord has the statue. What do you think?"

"I don't know. Before the lord passed away last year, I had been to his estate many times to show jewelry to his wife and daughters. I've never seen the malachite cat out on display, but that doesn't prove anything."

Topic: Greeting #3

The mage looked up from his workbench. "I'm afraid I don't have any more ancient history to tell you about, but do let me know if you find anything interesting."

43605.msg – ***Chapter 2\Melay – Old Woman***

Topic: Old Woman – Won't use Well Water

A stooped elderly woman appeared from around the back of the house, carrying a yoke with two full buckets. Aren ran to help her with her heavy load. Shouldering the burden, he said, "You had to carry this water all the way from the town well? That's no task for a woman of your age."

The woman grinned, showing toothless gums. Her eyes wrinkled into a million laugh lines. "The well! Phhht! I carried the water from the river! Done it every day for over twenty years."

Aren put the buckets down on the cottage floor. "What's wrong with the well water?"

"It's tainted, tastes like vinegar. Gives the cramp something awful. At least that's what I remember. No one's drunk from that well for years."

"So the entire town has to fetch water from the river? Why doesn't the mayor build a ditch into town?"

"They say they aim to, every year. Somehow it always gets forgotten. I don't mind the fetchin' though. The exercise keeps me young and spunky!" The old woman cackled, her gums flapping.

43615.msg – ***Chapter 2\Melay – Melay Well***

Topic: Melay Well

The well had water in it, but scum floated on its surface.

Topic: Get Malachite Cat Torchite Gem – After Talking with Townsfolk

William lowered the bucket into the murky water. He let all the rope out, then dragged the bucket along the well bottom. Then he pulled up the bucket, scum dripping from the rope. Gingerly William fished around in the sludge. He felt a stone in the bottom of the bucket. After rinsing it as best he could in the muddy water, he discovered that the stone was a faceted torchite crystal.

Topic: Using the Melay Well – Before and After Torchite Gem Removed

The scummy well water didn't appear inviting.

43610.msg – *Chapter 2\Melay – Gunther Yyp, Jeweler Mage*

Topic: Give Torchite Gem

"Look what we found in the town well." William handed the torchite gem to Gunther Yyp, who was speechless with astonishment.

"It's rather a long story..." William continued.

"You have my undivided attention. Please, go on."

William related how he pieced together the puzzle of the malachite cat, concluding, "We thought you should have the torchite stone back."

With some difficulty, the jeweler mage looked away from the gem. "Let me give you something for your trouble. Here's a diamond shieldstone... no extra charge. The gem quality isn't as fine, of course, but it's still quite potent."

The jeweler mage weighed the gem in his palm, turning it to reveal its glowing depths and highlights. "I think I will set them into a pendant for the lord's widow. She is a good woman who has waited a long time for her husband's gift. And the stone actually does resemble her eyes..."

Topic: Scroll – Halder's Tale

After the Grrrlf War, before the First Wave of mages ascended to power, there stood in what would become the province of Tigor a small farming town called Larran. And though the town is now many generations gone and even the stone fireplaces are dust in the fields, it will always be remembered as the place where Halder the blacksmith worked his forge.

The people of the town regarded Halder with affection, and it must also be said that they regarded him with a certain awe. The many years of pounding iron into horseshoes and plowshares had given him the strength of a cart-horse and arms like a trerang. And so his business prospered.

Now, there came one day to the town of Larran a traveling show, with dancers and joymen, fire-eaters and tricksters, and even a tame jaeger who watched the crowd through half-shut eyes. And they swept into town with a laugh and the jingle of cart-trappings, and suddenly the world seemed brighter and full of wonder. And even Halder was drawn from his shop by the sound of the merry procession.

That night, they performed in their encampment by the edge of town. Bright lanterns and streamers festooned the trees, their flickering colors making the woods look even darker outside of the ring of firelight. And fully a third of the townsfolk gathered to watch their show. The dancers juggled scarves and knives, the tricksters turned apples into birds, and the jaeger permitted the beast-handler to rub its belly.

But the festive crowd grew quiet as the show's end drew near, for the last act was always the most improbable. As it happened, the last performer to enter the clearing that night was a lanky, thin man with a nose like a hawk's beak and a diffident smile. He gestured, and four burly horse-handlers carefully carried a full-sized anvil to the center of the clearing.

Still smiling, and with great flourish, the thin man bent and, astoundingly, lifted the anvil clear off the ground! And Halder, intrigued, determined to ask the man the secret of his great strength, for he looked no more muscled than a boy.

After the performance, as the townsfolk reluctantly abandoned the clearing to return to their homes, Halder the blacksmith circled the clearing in the hopes of getting a word with the strongman. But before he could step from the trees, he heard a man's voice in low tones, whispering unwelcome words.

The voice said the town had been scouted and would be simple to rob, so long as most of the townsfolk were present at the following night's performance. Another voice replied scornfully that they could not help but come, since word would sweep through the town of a man who could lift anvils. Curiosity would bring them. The first man replied placatingly, saying the potion was the second man's finest creation yet.

Halder controlled his temper-- an essential skill for a man of his size. Hidden just inside the woods, he pondered and waited. Late that night, when the performers were well into their cups, he crept forth and let himself into the strongman's tent. He emerged a few minutes later with a smile on his face and a sheaf of hastily-gathered notes.

Then as now, mages made their own way in the world. Some sought power, others solitude. And some clung to the simple life of the village where they grew up. Larran had one such mage, and it was to this woman that Halder brought his purloined recipe.

Next he stopped at the Laughing Cat tavern, where he dropped a terse word in the ears of the few people he trusted most. By the following evening, all was ready.

Almost every man, woman, and child in town attended that evening's performance. As the trailmaster prepared to begin the show, Halder stepped to the edge of the clearing and called for the strongman to perform. His friends throughout the crowd took up the call, and soon the entire audience clamored to see the strongman.

Anxious to calm the crowd so his men could slip away to begin their thievery, the trailmaster called the strongman forth. Surprised but confident, he took a swig from his wineskin and stepped into the firelight. When his anvil was brought before him, he awed the crowd by lifting it completely off the ground.

Halder took a drink from his own aleskin and stepped forward. He laughed and said that, as a smith, he should be able to lift the anvil. The amused strongman stood back and motioned Halder to the anvil. His smile turned to puzzlement when Halder hefted the anvil with ease.

"A trick!" cried Halder. "This anvil is no heavier than a small boy! Why, my own sister could lift it!"

The audience muttered, and when Halder's sister did in fact emerge from the crowd and lift the anvil, the mutters turned to curses and well-aimed rocks. Outraged at the trickery, they drove the panicked performers and would-be thieves from their town and lands.

As for Halder, he and his sister brought the anvil to his smithy before the potion wore off. What smith could turn down that much high-quality iron? Many years later, he gave the whole story to his friends at the Laughing Cat. And as they laughingly passed the tale on to others, the potion which made it possible acquired its name.

Topic: Joel and Honey – Second Honeymoon

A nicely dressed man and woman came up the walk just as William was about to knock on their door. "Have you come to see us?" the woman asked. "I'm afraid we're in no condition to receive visitors... We've been out of town this week."

The man set down their traveling cases on the path. "We've been in Isten. Quite a distance but well worth the trip. Had ourselves something of a second honeymoon, didn't we, Honey?"

The woman giggled. "Oh, Joel, you're such a silly."

Joel responded in mock sorrow. "Aye, that I am, Honey. It's the curse of my life. But you knew that when you married me, so you've only yourself to blame."

Honey rolled her eyes. Then she turned to William. "He'll go on all day if he's encouraged... Seriously, if you've got the time, I sincerely recommend a trip to Isten."

Joel added, "The inn is comfortable and serves a terrific breakfast. Shopping's good too, for a town so close to the border, that is. And the entertainment... There's as much culture there as in Antara itself. We saw a play starring Maria Liana at the amphitheater. What was the name of that play again, Honey?"

"I've got the playbill right here. Let me see... Oh, of course. It was a historical romance called 'Academy of Broken Hearts.' Madame Liana played Empress Corlene. She was fabulous, of course, though I think I liked 'The Mana of Love' even better. Then again, her singing was remarkable in the musical, 'Meet Me In Januli.' Not to mention her brilliant performance several years ago in that sensational play about the Bakril tornado, 'Ghan with the Wind.'"

William stifled a yawn. "Well, you must be tired from your journey. We'll let you go in and get unpacked. Thanks for the vacation tips. We'll keep them in mind when we get up Isten way."

Topic: Mason Jaimie's Wife – Masons Blocking Antara-Varnasse Bridge

The sign of the Masons' Guild hung over the door. A nervous, pale woman responded to William's knock. "It's Jaimie, isn't it? He's been hurt... killed..."

William hurried to reassure her that as far as he knew, her Jaimie was fine.

The woman calmed down and invited them in. "I really must apologize. It's just that I've been so nervous lately. Jaimie, that's my husband... well, it's like he's a different man. See, none of the

masons got paid for repairing the bridge. They took it up with the council, but you know what they're like."

William muttered, "Apparently much the same in Varnasse as in the rest of the Empire."

"The men have talked about taking matters into their own hands." The woman shook her head sorrowfully. "They're all good men at heart, you understand. They're just so frustrated..."

"What are they doing?"

"They've talked about making people pay to cross. They figure what with all the traffic going to the festival, the officials will have their hands full. But I'm worried, sir. I'm afraid something will happen to Jaimie... and the others too."

"I think you're right to be concerned, ma'am. It's doubtful that the guildmaster in Ticoro would approve of their... initiative."

43730.msg – *Chapter 2\North of Varnasse – Masons Fixing Antara-Varnasse Bridge*

Topic: Masons Fixing Antara-Varnasse Bridge

A gang of men worked with bricks and mortar, repairing the bridge. One of the masons came over to the party. "Can't go this way, sir."

"What happened to the bridge?" asked William.

"I was a trader's son what come into his magic. A horse spooked and pitched him right over the edge into the river. People watching said it was like the water went mad. Great plumes erupted right up into the air. One of 'em caught the lad and put him down on the riverbank gentle as a hen lays an egg."

"That trader's son must have been surprised!" said Aren, remembering his own magical awakening.

"I suppose so. The way I heard it, it was all beyond his control. The waves got bigger and bigger. They crashed against the bridge what was never meant to take that kind of force. Broke it all to pieces."

"When do you think you'll finish rebuilding it?"

"We're just about finished, but it'll be done when it's done. 'Til then, there's no way through 'less you're a duck or a fish."

Topic: Entering Antara Province or Ghan Province

William: "I really think we should go to Ticoro to investigate Gregor's last words."

Resource\2500.vmd

— Chapter 2 – End —

As the trio neared Ticoro, their pace had definitely slowed. Cursing the plague affecting his family's stables with every step, William thought how much quicker the journey would have been with three of the Escobar's prized horses under them.

Trudging behind Kaelyn, Aren tried to think about something—anything—other than putting one foot in front of the other again and again and again, when a wondrous aroma suddenly made its presence known. "Mmmmmm," he said. "Something smells good."

"Roast lamb," Kaelyn said, nodding her head. "It's been making my mouth water for the last quarter mile." When they could scrape together the burlas, they would eagerly order a meal from an inn or tavern; sometimes a generous family would even invite the weary travelers into their home for dinner. However, burlas were hard to come by lately, and the urgency to reach Ticoro ahead of the Consort didn't allow for time spent making many new friends. This left William, Aren, and Kaelyn reduced to eating ration packs for the better part of two weeks. Though the packs certainly kept them alive, it just wasn't the same as a warm cooked meal.

Rounding another of what seemed like an endless number of bends in the road, William stopped and pointed ahead of him.

"Well, tell your bellies they need wait no longer," he said with a large grin. "We're there. Welcome to Ticoro."

The great walled city of Ticoro spread out below them, their destination finally within sight. Hearing the raucous laughter and commotion of thousands of Spring Festival-goers, they somehow found the energy to quicken their pace. William led them down the long path and into the crowd of revelers, performers, and merchants along Ticoro's eastern wall.

— Chapter 3 – Start —

Ticoro's Spring Festival was the last and—outside of the Emperor's in the Antaran capital—largest festival of the season. The various festivals around Antara celebrated the Goddess Senaedrin's blessings upon Ramar's inhabitants by turning the cold, harsh winter months of Kor into ones of reawakening, rebirth, and renewal. Because of the calendar, sometimes Ticoro's festival started early into the first month of Henne; this was one of those years.

However, not everyone came to celebrate good-naturedly or with the best of intentions. Handling the massive flow of people in attendance was of utmost concern to Ticoro's City Guard—especially since they were expecting a 'special guest' to pass through on his way to the Imperial Palace in Antara. Their answer was to close the northern and western gates until the festival was over; the southern gate was currently the only way into or out of Ticoro. That way, they could more easily control who entered the city, especially during high-volume gatherings like this. 'More holes, more rats' was their motto, and if they could plug holes as large as a city gate, all the better.

Looking up ahead through the throngs of people along the eastern wall, Kaelyn saw something that piqued her interest. Always looking to add something to her quiver, she said, "Oh, look! An archery stall. I could use some new arrows."

Instead, William grabbed her arm and guided her to a table beset with various fine fabrics and necklaces. "Wouldn't you rather have a silk ribbon for your hair?" he asked, lifting a delicate strand from the one of the displays. Holding it up to her face, he said, "I'll buy you one... green, I think, to match your eyes."

Those same green eyes narrowed ever so slightly upon hearing William's offer. Kaelyn search William's face for any sign of mockery, but finding none, decided to change the subject. "Hey, we lost someone." Aren was nowhere to be seen. Kaelyn, never more thankful that Aren had chosen that particular moment to wander off, left William alone at the table to search for him. Thanking the merchant for her time, William paid for the green ribbon. Putting it in his pocket for safe keeping, he followed Kaelyn into the crowd.

They finally caught sight of Aren moving quickly from merchant tables to merchant stalls, from live performances to food stands. Finally catching up to him, Kaelyn asked, "Don't they have Spring festivals in your part of the world, Aren?"

"Not like this one," Aren said. "I hardly know what to look at first." This was quite the experience for the young man: until recently, he had never been much beyond Briala, and certainly had never seen so many people all at once. Trying to absorb all the sights and sounds around him, he kept moving his head in all directions; Kaelyn smiled to herself, as his movements reminded her of a TrKaa searching for its next meal.

Seeing the various food merchants, William said, "Let's take care of the inner man, then we'll walk around."

Kaelyn's stomach chose that particular moment to growl. "I'd say the inner woman agrees with that idea!" she laughed.

With all the marvelous cooking around them, they hardly knew where to begin—until a heavenly garlic and herb aroma pulled them to a Ravenne cook's stall.

William bought three large meat-and-breadcrumb patties for the group, handing Kaelyn hers first. "Thanks!" she said. "I love Ravenne lambcakes."

Aren took a large bite of his. "Mmmm. Good," he said with a full mouth. The savory flavors were just what the road-weary travelers needed.

The lambcakes were quickly eaten by the ravenous trio, quelling their hunger for the time being. Stomachs satisfied, they continued to explore.

Kaelyn returned to the archery stall. Grabbing an arrow with brightly-colored fletching, she looked down its shaft with her critical eye as a seasoned archer. "Are these genuine starhawk feathers?" she asked.

"The finest in all Ticor," the merchant replied, eager to make a sale.

Had he claimed they were 'the finest in all of Antara,' Kaelyn would certainly have argued, but all of his arrows did seem to be of high quality. She handed over enough burlas to fill her quiver.

Eventually, the three friends found themselves standing in front of the massive southern entrance to Ticoro. Reaching the city gates brought William back to business. "I almost forgot..." he said, holding up Gregor's medallion. "We're here for a reason. Come on."

Walking through the large South Gate, the recent hours of carefree enjoyment gave way to the sobering task at hand: saving the Consort from a harm as-yet unknown.

300.msg – Chapter 3 | Ticoro – Getting a Room

Topic: Getting a Room

Kaelyn: "In a city like this, the streets are no place to spend the night. Let's find a warm room. Even with the festival going on, they can't all be taken."

Raal the Grrrlf, Kaelyn's Friend

Topic: Greeting #1

Raal: "A familiar scent among all these strangers! Little archer, it's you!"

Kaelyn: "(EXCITED) Raal! I can't believe it! I never expected to see you here. How are you? How's your pack? I've missed hunting with you."

Topic: Ahem!

William: "(CLEARS THROAT NOISILY) Ahem! Kaelyn, aren't you going to introduce us to your shaggy friend?"

Kaelyn: "Oh, sorry. Guess in all the excitement I forgot about you two."

William: "Glad to hear we make such a lasting impression."

Kaelyn: "(FORMALLY, TOO FORMALLY) Aren Cordelaine and Squire William of the high and lofty House of Escobar, this is my dear, longtime friend, Raal of the pack of Krrrrrrlaak. (SWITCHING TO INFORMAL) Raal, this tall, strapping lad is Aren; this dark and dour but oh so refined gentleman is William."

Raal: "(SNIFFS THE AIR TWICE) You are the friends of my skin-sister. I am pleased to recognize your scent."

William: "(DRYLY) Well, we did just bathe last night. Sniff us after a week on the road and I'm sure you won't find it such a pleasurable experience."

Topic: Festival

Kaelyn: "What are you doing so far from the den, Raal? I didn't think Grrrlf liked human festivals."

Raal: "The pack was invited to perform the Karrruf at the Feast of Kor. I was chosen as the Ears, a small yet significant role."

Kaelyn: "I'm not surprised, Raal. You have a lovely voice and graceful movements. To perform at the Feast is quite an honor for the pack."

Raal: "Yes, and Krrrrrrlaak thought it might increase understanding between Grrrlf and Human, at least among those who see the Karrruf."

Topic: Karrruf

Aren: "I haven't heard of this... how do you say it? Karrruf?"

Kaelyn: "That's close enough. The Karrruf is a combination of music and dance. It evolved from ancient fertility rituals."

Raal: "(CONT) The Karrruf is a deeply spiritual experience for all Grrrlf."

Kaelyn: "(IMPISH) What he means is that it's erotic."

Raal: "(SERIOUSLY) No, Kaelyn, as I said, the Karrruf is deeply spiritual. I know you understand for I saw how it affected you two summer seasons ago when you danced it for the first time."

William: "I always suspected you'd make a lovely erotic dancer, Kaelyn."

Kaelyn: "(MIFFED) The Karrruf isn't erotic, it's deeply spiritual."

Topic: Recall

Kaelyn: "Listen, Raal, we came across a Grrrlf messenger, Flaar of Grrrfalag's pack. He'd been sent to tell all Grrrlf they must return to the Den immediately. Do you know anything about this?"

Raal: "(PUZZLED) No, little archer, this is the first I've heard. I'll have to return home and tell Krrrrrrlaak as soon as the festival is over."

Topic: Goodbye #1

Raal: "I must go get ready for the Karrruf. Will you come see it?"

William: "I'm afraid we can't. The special performances are restricted to high-ranking officials and those to whom they owe favors."

Raal: "Then join me for dinner sometime in the next few days. Leave a message at festival headquarters if we don't run into each other tomorrow."

Kaelyn: "I hope we get to spend some time together, Raal. I've missed you."

Raal: "And I you, skin sister. Keep well until our paths cross again."

43820.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southwest – Innkeeper of The Green And The White Inn*

Topic: Innkeeper of The Green And The White Inn

William strode forward. "We'd like rooms, please."

"I'm terribly sorry sir, but all of our rooms are taken."

Kaelyn surveyed the almost vacant common room. "Taken?" she asked incredulously. "There's nobody here!"

The innkeeper replied haughtily, "Each and every room is accounted for throughout the festival, and you're taking up my valuable time. Try the eastern district." He nodded toward the door, and the group turned at a rustling sound behind them. A pair of men who reminded Kaelyn of nothing so much as tree trunks loomed on either side of the entrance. The pair advanced meaningfully, convincing the party that a swift exit might be prudent.

43860.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – Northeast – Innkeeper of The Knight's Promise Inn*

Topic: Innkeeper of The Knight's Promise Inn #1

The innkeeper greeted the group politely. "Welcome to the Knight's Promise, my friends. How may I help you?"

Kaelyn put on her warmest smile. "Please tell me you've got a pair-- or even one!-- room available."

The innkeeper held up his hands apologetically. "Alas, I regret that my humble establishment is already hosting more visitors than it can bear-- none of whom, to my eternal sorrow, brighten the room as you do, my lady. I am sorry. Perhaps you might try Henne's Shadow in the eastern district of the city."

William stepped forward, trying a different tack. "I understand, but we're close personal friends of Lord Sheffield. He's going to be my father-in-law. Surely you could find us something?"

The innkeeper smiled at William. "My friend, you could be the Emperor's own brother and my inn would still have no more rooms with which to house you. Now, if you were the Emperor..." Chuckling lightly, the man turned his attention elsewhere.

Topic: Innkeeper of The Knight's Promise Inn #2

The innkeeper preempted them. "I'm sorry, my friends, but there is still no more room."

43815.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southeast – Liam, Innkeeper of Henne's Shadow Inn***

Topic: Liam, Innkeeper of Henne's Shadow Inn – Greeting #1

The bustling innkeeper cut Kaelyn off before she could get a word out. "I'm sorry, we're full."

"We'll take spare cots in your common room."

"And if I had them, I'd give them to you. They're all taken. Every room. Every bed. Every inch of free space. The festival's always busy, and we're overflowing as it is. I'm sorry."

Topic: Liam, Innkeeper of Henne's Shadow Inn – Greeting #2

The innkeeper didn't even give them a chance to speak. "I've already told you, we're full."

10845.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – Henne's Shadow Inn – Scott Gratsi, Joyman***

Scott Gratsi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Rooms

Aren: "What with the crowd of people here for the festival, we can't find rooms anywhere."

Scott: "Have you talked to Liam, the innkeeper here at Henne's Shadow?"

Aren: "(DEJECTED) Yes. He says he's got nothing for us."

Scott: "(GOOD HUMORED) Oh, he did, did he? Just wait here a minute. I'll be right back. (SOUND EFFECT OF SCOTT LEAVING THE ROOM)"

Aren: "What do you think he's up to?"

William: "At festival time, a joyman can have a lot of pull. Or perhaps Scott has an in with the innkeeper."

Scott: "(SOUND EFFECT OF RETURNING) Done and done. When I explained your pitiful situation to Liam, he suddenly discovered a vacancy... two vacancies, in fact, because we were certain the young lady would like a room of her own."

Kaelyn: "(EXAGGERATED RELIEF) Oh, how can I ever thank you enough? I'll be so grateful for at least one night free from William's snoring!"

William: "(INDIGNANT) I do not snore!"

Aren: "(IN CHORUS WITH KAELYN) Oh yeah?"

Kaelyn: "(IN CHORUS WITH AREN) Oh yeah?"

William: "(EMBARRASSED) Well, a fellow's got to breathe, doesn't he? No, don't answer that. Scott, my man, what say we treat you to an ale or three for rescuing us from a night on the streets?"

Topic: Shepherds

Aren: "What's your opinion of the Shepherds?"

Scott: "They're an odd lot, a mix of spoiled rich kids and misguided fools seeking a purpose. They want to start a war with the Grrrlf again, and anyone picking a fight with a Grrrlf is an idiot."

10815.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southwest – Caverton Palace – Lord Daryl Caverton*

Lord Daryl Caverton, Governor of Ticor Province

Topic: Greeting

Caverton: "Well, young Escobar, to what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

William: "I'm surprised you know who I am, Lord Caverton."

Caverton: "Are you really? Given the past misunderstandings between our provinces, I expect your father has educated himself about my family as well."

Topic: Consort

- William: "Lord Caverton, I need to speak to the Imperial Consort. Can you arrange a meeting?"
- Caverton: "I'm afraid that won't be possible. The Consort's busy schedule won't allow him time to meet with every backwater representative."
- William: "Then tell me where he's staying and I'll schedule a meeting with him myself."
- Caverton: "You don't take no for an answer, do you, Escobar. I'm telling you it's out of the question. I've guaranteed the Consort his privacy and I'll not be made a liar by the likes of you. Do we understand each other?"
- William: "(THROUGH GRITTED TEETH) Perfectly, m'lord."

Topic: Amulet

- William: "Do you recognize this, Lord Caverton?"
- Caverton: "A Shepherd amulet? What kind of a game are you playing, Escobar?"
- William: "I don't follow you, sir."
- Caverton: "Tell your father his money has been well-spent. His damned Shepherds cause me no end of headaches."

Topic: Shepherds

- William: "My father has nothing to do with the Shepherds! Until recently I'd never even heard of them."
- Caverton: "Now why do I find that hard to believe? Don't play me for a fool, boy. You can't tell me it's a coincidence that those fanatics started causing trouble just at the time I crushed your father's tax proposal in Shira."
- William: "I'm sure there's no connection between the two, m'lord."
- Caverton: "You seem sincere enough, but all that proves is that your father doesn't take you into his confidence on provincial affairs."

Topic: Gregor

William: "By any chance, do you know of Gregor the joyman?"

Caverton: "(CURTLY) No, of course not."

William: "Are you sure? He's a short man, about..."

Caverton: "(OUT OF PATIENCE) I said no! As governor of this province and director of the new salt mine trade, I have little time for joymen!"

Topic: Business

William: "Salt trade, eh? I didn't know there were salt mines in Ticor."

Caverton: "(IMPATIENT, THEN GLOATING) A recent discovery. Sheffield never expected competition and I've moved quickly. He'll have no time to counter my aggressive positioning. By the way, Escobar, that reminds me that congratulations are in order. I'm delighted to learn of your impending marriage to Sheffield's daughter. His bankruptcy will make House Sheffield dependent upon your father for the very bread upon their table. It pleases me to think that by ruining House Sheffield, I will tax the coffers of House Escobar as well."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "(SARCASTIC) Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Caverton. I'll be sure to mention it to my father."

Caverton: "(OFF-HAND, SNEERING) Anytime, young Escobar. Anytime."

10849.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – South of Henne Tabernacle – Lord Cameron Sheffield***

***Lord Cameron Sheffield, Governor of Januli Province and
William's Future Father-In-Law***

Topic: Greeting #1

Sheffield: "(JOVIAL) William, my boy! I am delighted to see you! Not as delighted as Selana will be, of course, but delighted nonetheless! How's your father?"

William: "Both he and my mother are well, sir. Father is over his ears with work as usual..."

Sheffield: "(JOVIAL BUT WITH AN UNDERCURRENT) As am I. As are all such important men of state. Well, there'll be time enough for rest when we're dead."

Topic: Festival

William: "Are you enjoying the festival, sir?"

Sheffield: "I manage to catch a glimpse of it between business meetings. Tell you what, William, you must sign up for the dueling tournament!"

William: "Who me, sir? I'm not much of a fencer..."

Sheffield: "False humility, boy! It would be an honor to challenge the Brothers of Kor. Their swordsmanship is renowned throughout the empire. Besides, it's a great way to impress the ladies, in particular, my daughter."

Topic: Business

William: "I'm sorry to hear that your business engagements must take the place of pleasure on this trip."

Sheffield: "Well, I take my enjoyment from the pleasure of my wife and daughter. They adore this sort of thing, you know. As for me, I'll be more than satisfied if our trade agreements and business contracts are signed and sealed by the week's end. The salt from our mines won't go anywhere by itself, you know. And it won't get sold if I'm nibbling pastries and gawking at joymen."

Topic: Selana

Sheffield: "I've taken up much too much of your time, my boy. I'm sure you're anxious to pay your respects to my lovely daughter. We're staying at the Knight's Promise in the northeast quarter. Join us for dinner this evening!"

William: "(UNENTHUSIASTIC BUT POLITE) I'd really like to, sir, but you see, I'm here with some people... They may have made other plans."

Sheffield: "But William, we're talking about your fiancée here! Give your friends the slip and join us."

William: "Um, I'll try, sir, but I can't make any promises."

Topic: Goodbye #1

William: "Well, Lord Sheffield, I really should be going."

Sheffield: "I'll tell Selana you're in town. Now don't be a stranger, boy!"

10846.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – The Knight's Promise Inn – Selana Sheffield*

Selana Sheffield, Daughter of Lord Sheffield and William's Fiancée

Topic: Greeting #1

Selana: "(MORE SURPRISED THAN PLEASED) William! I didn't expect to see you here!"

William: "I suspect this festival will be full of surprises, Selana."

Topic: Festival

William: "Are you enjoying the festival?"

Selana: "It's my favorite time of year. I haven't missed one since my first during my time with the Children of Henne."

William: "I didn't know you fostered in Ticoro. I spent my time here too."

Topic: Fostering

Kaelyn: "Fostered? What's that?"

Selana: "(CAT'Y) No, I don't suppose someone like you would know about fostering. The better Houses foster their children to the Triune for a time, for schooling and spiritual indoctrination. All the children spend time with the priests of Henne. Then the girls join the Sisters of Senaedin, while the boys study with the Brothers of Kor."

William: "(GENTLY) It's a tradition that goes back to the founding of the Empire. Selana, I heard High Brother Marr wanted to extend the tradition beyond the noble Houses."

Selana: "Yes, the Emperor had all but agreed to it until High Brother Vaughn stepped in."

Kaelyn: "High Brother Vaughn?"

Aren: "(IN A TONE THAT SUGGESTS SHE SHOULD KNOW THIS) The Hand of Kor, Kaelyn."

William: "In addition to their spiritual roles, the Hands of the Triune often advise the Emperor on other matters. The Brothers of Kor in particular have great influence on Emperor Valorian."

Selana: "From what I heard, High Brother Vaughn didn't think expanding the fostering tradition beyond the Houses was wise, and the Emperor ultimately refused the idea."

Topic: Tícoro

William: "When did you foster?"

Selana: "I finished a few years ago at the height of the Feeblepox plague."

William: "Around the time High Brother Shoan died?"

Selana: "Yes. The feast celebrating Fellich Marr's elevation to Hand was just weeks before my time ended."

William: "I heard that was some party."

Selana: "Henne's Children know how to celebrate."

Topic: Amulet

William: "I don't suppose you've seen an amulet like this one before."

Selana: "(LAUGHS NERVOUSLY) This? You've got to be kidding. I could find better metal work at just about any stall in the marketplace. Really, William, I thought you had better taste."

Kaelyn: "(SOTTO VOCE) Funny, so did I."

Topic: Business

William: "Selana, how is your father?"

Selana: "(GUARDED) What do you mean?"

William: "I hear Caverton is cutting into his salt trade business. I thought..."

Selana: "(INTERRUPTING COLDLY) Don't worry about House Sheffield, William. I assure you, everything is well under control."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "Well, I'm sure you have many things to do so we won't keep you any longer, Selana."

Selana: "Yes, I really must be going. So sorry to tear myself away from your charming company."

Topic: Greeting #2

Selana: "(FLATLY) William. So good to see you again."

William: "(EQUALLY FLAT) The pleasure is all mine, Selana."

43885.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – The Knight's Promise Inn – The Ballad of the Cyrilan***

Topic: The Ballad of the Cyrilan (Complete)

Once there was a vessel as proud as she was tall.
Many hands of men did toil to build the graceful yawl.
Her bow was arced, her belly lean, her sails were clean and white.
There was nothing in her form to lend a shadow of her plight.

The Emperor Benarren's fair daughter Isabelle,
Was pledged to wed the prince of Fain, of whom the stories tell,
He sought Cavotte to build a boat, and said, "A vessel gay
That's fit to give as wedding gift to bear them both away!"

For her mast they felled an ell tree, for weight and flex and strength,
To the forests of Januli went to harvest planks of length.
Her lines they made of silk to trim her rig and tie her wales,
Set the greatest weavers in the land to labor for her sails.

On a summer day in Riva, the Cyrilan was named.
The Triune's Three did come in peace to bless this vessel famed.
On her maiden sail to the Isle of Fain, her bearing filled with pride,
For aboard this day the honored pair: the handsome prince and bride.

The sea was gaily dancing in indigo and green.
The crew all swore this was the finest day they'd ever seen.
The sun shone bright, the wind blew strong, the wingfish jumped and played.
In the evening breeze the Cyrilan was steady on her way.

In a night sky torn asunder, the sudden maelstrom came,
The darkness pierced by spears of lightning, thundering hail of flame!
The boat began to spin and sink, the crew fled to a man
When the captain cried, "Abandon ship! Save all that ye can!"

Young Derek was the ship's boy, he jumped atop a float.
And with luck and speed was tossed away from 'round the burning boat.
A mighty beast of legend rose to kill the sailors brave.
The prince and Isabelle embraced to share a watery grave.

For weeks the ship's boy drifted to land in sea unknown,
And eleven years it took for him to find his way home.
When Derek finally crossed from Chail, he sought the Emperor great
To lay to rest the mystery of fair Cyrilan's fate.

43825.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southwest – Nervous Man*

Topic: Nervous Man – Meal Interrupted

"Yes? What is it?" The stubby-fingered man at the door seemed a mite peeved. If the bits in his beard were any indicator, Aren guessed they'd interrupted his meal.

"Sorry to interrupt you, sir," William began. He fished out Gregor's medallion and showed it to the man. "We found this and thought someone around here might have lost it. Any idea whose this might be?"

The man's face blanched at the sight of the medallion. "N-n-no," he stammered, "I-- I've never seen it before. I don't know anything about it." With a furtive look up and down the street, he spat out a curse and slammed the door.

Topic: Master Mason – Antara-Varnasse Bridge Blocked (Triggered in Ch 2)

The knotted cord hung outside marked the occupant as a guildmaster. The burly man who answered the door was obviously not just a paper-pusher, although a mass of diagrams and notes were weighted down on the table behind him. Spying the tools scattered about, Aren made a connection.

"Excuse me," he opened, "are you the master mason?"

The man nodded. "Going on five years now. What can I do for you?"

"Well, sir, there's something I think you should know." Aren told the man about the unusual activities of the masons at the bridge near Varnasse. The guildmaster's eyes turned steely as he listened.

"Well then. It looks like I'll be taking a little trip." The mason's tone was far heavier than his words. Aren did not envy the builders who'd be facing him. "I appreciate you bringing this to my attention."

Aren suddenly felt more sympathetic toward the bridgeworkers. "Don't be too hard on them, sir. It didn't sound like they had much choice."

William chimed in. "I'm sure the master mason will give them only the discipline they deserve, Aren."

The guildmaster's eyebrows rose. "What makes you think I'm going to the bridge? The Empire's obligated to pay those men for their work on Imperial bridges, and some Jaeger's likely lined his own pockets instead. As guildmaster, I can't allow that. Don't concern yourself with this anymore, gentlemen. It's a guild matter now. If you'll excuse me, I need to finish some things up before I leave."

The master mason herded his visitors out the door.

Topic: Master Mason – Shepherd Medallion (Ch 2 Bridge Problem not Triggered)

A burly man in weathered overalls came to the door. He didn't have the build of a smith, but his well-toned muscles spoke of a life of manual labor.

William gave a complete description of Gregor, but the man didn't recognize him. The medallion didn't hold any significance for him either.

William was about to press the man to think harder when Aren jumped in to thank the man for his help and excuse themselves. When the door closed behind them, William cast a puzzled look at his companion.

"You got us out of there in a hurry. Who dropped a torch down your britches?"

Aren gave William a disbelieving stare. "Didn't you see the knotted cord out front? That was a guildmaster, William! The master mason, I'd wager from the tools and diagrams I saw lying about. I didn't want to annoy him."

"Now Aren," Kaelyn teased, "how could William possibly annoy him? All he did was interrupt the man's work, break his train of thought, and ask him about someone he didn't know. I think he was charmed."

William set his jaw and pressed onward. "Come on. We may be running out of time."

43855.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – Northwest – Camille Farray*

Topic: Camille Farray #1

The woman answering the door greeted the party politely. She didn't introduce herself, but somehow Aren knew. "Excuse me," he asked, "are you Camille Farray?"

The woman smiled and gave Aren a brief, elegant curtsy. "My reputation precedes me. But I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage."

Aren's brow wrinkled in consternation. "I do? I'm sorry, I didn't mean--"

"William Escobar, Madame," William inserted smoothly. With eloquence born of a childhood surrounded by noblemen and affairs of state, he finished the introductions.

Camille swept her gaze across them. Although her eyes never lingered on any one of the threesome, Aren suspected she'd caught details he would have missed. "Well," she said, "now that that's out of the way, why don't you tell me why you've sought me out. You're obviously not here to sell me cookies."

Aren looked a little flustered, so William continued. "Aren here has recently discovered his magical talents and wants to learn to master them. Our House mage thought you might need an apprentice."

"Apprentice?" Her airy chuckle filled the street with the tinkle of wind chimes. "Young man, I haven't coddled an apprentice in years. They're always asking questions, getting underfoot, and are usually more trouble than they're worth. Nothing personal," she added to Aren, "but I'm afraid you'd just cramp my style."

Aren's shoulders sagged. "I understand. I guess I'll just have to wait until High Mage Finch is ready for me."

Camille raised her eyebrow inquisitively, a smile tugging at her lips. "Boodgy? How is the old dear?"

Aren answered carefully. "He... seemed fine... He was watching over some bugs when we left him."

"Let me guess. Mariposa beetles." Aren's look told her she was correct. Her expression lost focus and she seemed to go somewhere, or perhaps somewhere, else for a time. A discreetly cleared throat from William snapped her back. "Well. I can't very well send you away empty handed after Boodgy sent you to the trouble of finding me."

"If you've got time," Camille offered, "I can give you a pointer or two."

Choice: Accept

Aren nodded eagerly. "I'll make time."

Camille seemed amused. "You are an earnest one. I can help you with some of the basics--shaping magic at a distance, creating forces from the ether, that sort of thing. Or if you feel you've mastered those, I could show you how to bend water to your will."

Choice: Range

Choice: Create

Choice: Water

Camille escorted the companions into her home, taking Aren to a private room in the rear. She spent the next few hours opening Aren's eyes to some of the mysteries of the arcane. Aren finally emerged aglow with excitement, mind reeling with new possibilities.

"Do tell Boodgy I said hello," she called after them as the party walked away.

"Don't worry," William answered, relishing the thought of springing that little nickname on High Mage Finch. "We will."

Choice: Decline

Aren shook his head ruefully. "Now's not a good time, I'm afraid. Perhaps another day?"

Camille smiled warmly. "Of course. If I'm not otherwise... occupied." The chime of her laughter filled the air as the door clicked shut.

Topic: Camille Farray #2

Camille didn't look at all surprised to see Aren at the door. "Have time after all?"

10842.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – Henne Tabernacle – Petrov***

Petrov

Topic: Conversation Interrupted

Marr: "(FELLICH VO, MUFFLED) ...and don't ever come here again!"

Aren: "(BUMPING SOUND) Oh! Excuse me..."

Petrov: "(INTERRUPTING) Get out of my way!"

Aren: "I'm sorry, I just didn't see you..."

Petrov: "(INTERRUPTING) All right, all right! Next time watch where you're going."

Kaelyn: "(MUTTERED) Hmph. Who pissed in his oatmeal?"

10820.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – Henne Tabernacle – High Brother Fellich Marr***

High Brother Fellich Marr, Leader/Revered Hand of the Children of Henne

Topic: Greeting

William: "Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, High Brother."

Marr: "How can I help you, my children?"

Topic: Consort

William: "High Brother, do you know anything about the Imperial Consort?"

Marr: "Though I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him personally, I understand that the daughter-heir has. Apparently Henne has smiled upon the two young people and now this is more than merely a marriage of state."

Topic: Daughter-Heir

Aren: "Are you saying that the Chailan Consort and the daughter-heir of the Empire are in love?"

Marr: "So I am told. Henne walks where he wills, and his is the face of serendipity. How joyous that a marriage of political intent is also a marriage of the heart. Aurora deserves as much."

Aren: "Of course, you would know the daughter-heir personally."

Marr: "Indeed. She fostered here in Ticoro shortly after my elevation. We spent a great deal of time together. Delightful child. With proper guidance, she'll make an extraordinary Empress someday."

Topic: Danger

William: "I fear the Consort may be in danger."

Marr: "(WITH AN EDGE AND FORCED CASUALNESS) Really? What makes you say that?"

William: "A dying man gave me a cryptic message, along with a Shepherd medallion. The more I learn about the Shepherds, the more I think the message was a warning about danger threatening the Consort."

Marr: "If the Consort's safety is in jeopardy, perhaps you should alert the governor."

William: "The governor and I don't exactly see eye-to-eye. Perhaps you might talk with him, High Brother?"

Marr: "So he wouldn't take the time to see you, eh? Well, the governor is a very busy man. I can't use my authority to trouble him with a mysterious message from a dead man, especially not now at the height of the festival. I'm sorry, son."

William: "I understand, High Brother. I just hope we won't regret it."

Marr: "We can regret nothing that is part of the Triune's plan, son."

Topic: Blessing

Aren: "(FLUSTERED) Your servant, revered Hand. To think that I, a mere innkeeper's son, should be permitted audience with the leader of the Children of Henne. I've always felt... (STUMBLING) so much more... for Henne than any of the other Faces."

Marr: "(SECRETLY AMUSED, THOUGH HE RESPONDS HUMBLY) I am so pleased. Though I admit that my administrative duties take up much of my time, I believe my true calling is to spread the touch of Henne to the people. It gratifies my soul to witness your faith, my boy."

Aren: "(TIMID) May I... Would it be too much... Could I please ask for your blessing?"

Marr: "(WARMLY) But of course. (PRAYING) May Henne watch over your dreams, sing in your thoughts, and always smile upon you. Walk in Henne's light."

Aren: "(AWED, MOVED, HUSHED VOICE) Thank you, revered Hand."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "We have taken up enough of your time. Thank you."

Marr: "Walk with Henne, my children."

43830.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – East – Woman, Harried with Children*

Topic: *Woman, Harried with Children*

The harried woman who answered the door barely had a moment to say hello before a girl ran screeching across her feet. As she turned to scold her, a boy pulled at her dress plaintively. "Just a minute, Robby. Yes, milord?" She looked at William expectantly.

William felt a little uncomfortable about intruding on the woman. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but we're trying to track down a friend of ours, a joyman named Gregor. He's about five feet nine--"

"Your pardon for interrupting, milord," she said, raising her voice a little to be heard over the din of children shouting behind her, "but with this lot I don't have time for joymen."

"Ah. I see." William fumbled awkwardly. "I guess... Well, we... I'm sorry to have troubled you. Good day." He winced as something crashed behind her.

"Good day, milord." The woman returned to her brood. "Gerta, get down from there! How many times have I told you--" The closed door cut off her litany.

43835.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – North Gatehouse*

Topic: North Gatehouse #1

William cleared his throat. "Excuse me," he tried, getting the guard's attention. Setting aside his whetstone, the guard greeted William cheerfully.

"Good day, m'lord," he offered cheerfully. "Enjoying the festival?"

William flashed a broad smile. "Yes, it's quite impressive. I have to admit, nothing we do in Pianda can compare."

The guard puffed a bit at the compliment. "There's a reason Ticoro hosts the last fair of the season, milord."

"And rightly so," William agreed smoothly. "Why, I understand the chosen Consort of the heir to the Empire has even come to witness it. Word of Ticatoran hospitality has spread all the way to Chail."

"The way I heard it," the guard corrected, "he's only visiting on his way to the official presentation ceremony in Antara."

William reeled him in a little more. "I'm sure he specifically planned his route so he could see the festival. In fact, he cut short his stay in Pianda to do so. Speaking of which, I have a gift I'm supposed to deliver to him from the Governor of Pianda. I just missed the Consort in Pianda, and it'll be my hide if I miss him again. Where can I find him?"

The guard shook his head ruefully. "I'm sorry, milord, but Lord Caverton has insisted that the Consort's location remain private, for security reasons."

William turned his charm up a notch. "Of course. I'm sure with the Ticatoran Guard in charge the Consort's safety is guaranteed. I wouldn't want to jeopardize that safety. I'll just deliver my Lord Governor's gift and leave immediately."

"I'm sorry, milord. If you'd like to leave your gift with me, I'll see to it that it gets delivered. I give you my word on that."

His bluff called, William demurred. "A kind offer, but I'm required to deliver it personally. Thank you for your time, you've been most kind."

"My pleasure, milord. Enjoy the festival." The guard gave them a friendly wave and returned to his whetstone.

Topic: North Gatehouse #2

The guard smiled up at William. "Hello again, milord. Have you decided to give me your package?"

William shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. But if you'll tell me where he's staying...?"

The guard just smiled and shook his head.

Topic: Leaving the North Gatehouse

Back on the street, William was less pleasant. "Kor's teeth, I thought we almost had it!"

"We may be closer than you think," Kaelyn answered slyly. "Did you see the hole in the roof of the guardroom? With the lack of rain lately, I guess they haven't bothered to patch it. If we can get up to the ramparts, we might be able to eavesdrop on them and learn where they're hiding the Consort."

"Great idea, Kaelyn!" Aren enthused, beaming at her broadly. "Don't you think so, William?"

William nodded reluctantly. "Yes, it might work-- if we can get onto the ramparts. Let's go."

10818.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – East – Keys and Bolts – Coulaine the Locksmith*

Coulaine, Locksmith and Proprietor of Keys and Bolts

Topic: Greeting #1

Coulaine: "Yes, can I help you? I'm running a festival special on chastity belts today, guaranteed both pick- and hacksaw-proof."

Topic: Festival

Aren: "Is the festival keeping you busy?"
Coulaine: "Indeed it is. Thieves and pickpockets swarm to a festival like wasps to rotten fruit. Suddenly everyone is quite concerned about protecting their valuables."

Topic: Chests

Aren: "We were wondering if you could help us open some chests."
Coulaine: "Do they have keyed locks?"
Aren: "No, they have the most curious mechanisms..."
Coulaine: "(INTERRUPTING WITH A DISGUSTED SNORT) I don't deal in crafted locks! You might as well leave your gold on the doorstep for all the protection they provide. Being one who takes pride in my work, I only make and sell sturdy locks with unique keying. Now if there's nothing in that line that I can help you with..."

Topic: Rampart Gates – *After Visiting the North Gatehouse*

Aren: "Have you ever taken a look at the locks on the rampart gates?"
Coulaine: "Looked at 'em? Henne's ears, who do you think replaced 'em, let's see, going on two winters ago it was. Would you believe that up 'til then, they were still using warded locks? Incredible."
Aren: "Then you're the man to help us. We need a key."
Coulaine: "A key. To the city ramparts. Son, what kind of stone idiot do you take me for?"
Kaelyn: "You can tell we're not thieves or traitors, can't you? We're trying to help the city."
Coulaine: "Right. And I'm the Queen of the Festival. Go away, I'm busy."
William: "Listen, this is very important. Someone's life... the safety of all Ticoro itself... is at risk. We need to get up onto the ramparts."
Coulaine: "You're persistent, I'll give you that. You may even be earnest. Still, if it got out that I'm making duplicate keys to other people's locks, I'd be ruined. I'm not risking my livelihood for nothing. Hmmm... I'll make your key... IF you do something for me first."

Topic: Favor

Coulaine: "Someone has been picking my locks. I want to know who it is."

Aren: "You want us to catch a thief?"

Coulaine: "Not a thief. A picklock, and a selective one at that. He's been springing locks all over Ticoro, but only locks of my making!"

Aren: "I thought your locks were the best."

Coulaine: "They are! They should be unpickable, yet someone is consistently picking them. He's ruining my reputation. Find this lockpicking fatherless son and discover why he's targeted my locks. Do that, then you'll get your key."

Topic: Goodbye

Coulaine: "If there's nothing more you want, I'll get back to my work."

Topic: Greeting #2 – Lockpicker Not Found

Aren: "Have you had a chance to make our key yet?"

Coulaine: "The deal was you'd find the lockpicker first, then I'd make the key. Well, have you found him yet?"

Aren: "No, but..."

Coulaine: "No but nothing! I'm busy!"

43845.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southeast – Storeroom #1***

Topic: Lock #1 Picked

"That's odd," Aren said, pointing to the open padlock dangling from what looked like a storeroom door. "Someone must have left the lock open. I don't think I've ever seen one like this." The lock was sturdy and seemed formidable.

Topic: Lock #2 Picked

"That's odd," Aren said, pointing to the open padlock dangling from what looked like a storeroom door. "Someone must have left the lock open. I don't think I've ever seen one like this." The lock was sturdy and seemed formidable.

Topic: Cloth Merchant – Lock Picked

A dealer of cloth stood in the doorway. He ran his stubby fingers through a shock of wavy brown hair, his face crinkled in puzzlement.

"Hello there!" Aren called. "You seem preoccupied with something."

The merchant barely even looked at Aren. "It's the strangest thing," he answered distantly. "I locked up the warehouse last night, just as I always do. This morning I found the lock hanging open."

Aren winced. "Ooh. You were robbed."

Now the man did turn to look at Aren, his face a mask of perplexity. "No, I wasn't! Nothing is missing. As far as I can tell, the warehouse wasn't even entered."

"That is odd," Aren agreed, eyebrows raised. "Maybe they broke into the wrong warehouse?"

The dealer continued. "Perhaps. But what bothers me is that the lock isn't even broken. It was picked. I got it from a master locksmith who said it was his own, unpickable design."

"Are you sure you didn't leave it unlocked last night?"

The merchant nodded vehemently. "Positive. The festival brings all sorts of rogues into the city and the Guard's never around when you need it. This lock was picked. I'll have a few words for master Couline when I see him next, let me assure you."

Aren didn't see how he could help the fellow. "Well, at least nothing was taken. Enjoy the day!"

Torrance Pasege, Coulaïne's Former Apprentice Locksmith

Topic: Lockpicking

William: "What's your name?"

Torrance: "Torrance Pasege."

William: "You're obviously the one who's been picking all Coulaïne's locks. How come?"

Topic: Motive

Torrance: "The pledge that bound me to Master Coulaïne as apprentice bound him to me as master. When out of jealousy he betrayed our pact and turned me out, my life was ruined. It's a small form of justice, more like revenge I suppose, but picking his locks was the only way I could get back at him for what he did to me."

Topic: Betrayal

Aren: "How is that betrayal? Couldn't you just go work for someone else?"

Torrance: "You must not be from Ticoro. A master is bound to teach and care for his apprentice so long as that apprentice performs his duties. The pledge is broken only by the most severe circumstances. Coulaïne made a mockery of this promise but because of his reputation, the fault is seen as mine and no master will take me on. I was supposed to be a locksmith. Now I have no trade at all."

Topic: Jealousy

Aren: "Why was Coulaïne jealous of you, a mere apprentice?"

Torrance: "Simply because I was becoming as skilled a locksmith as himself. I should have been made a journeyman long ago, but he held me back. Then one day I caught him taking credit for my work, accepting a merchant's compliments with no word as to who had actually done the job. I confronted him and he threw me out."

Aren: "Did you take your grievance before the guild?"
Torrance: "(SNORTS) Coulaïne owns the guild! I'm not foolish enough to ask for that kind of trouble."

Topic: Revenge

Aren: "And so your revenge is to ruin Master Coulaïne's reputation?"
Torrance: "Yes, and what of it? I helped make those locks. I know how to pick them. If word gets around that Coulaïne's locks aren't secure, he'll soon feel it where it hurts him most, in his pocket."

Topic: Reconciliation

William: "If Master Coulaïne offered to take you back, would you accept?"
Torrance: "What choice would I have? Can't get another position in Ticoro, can't afford to start over in another town."
William: "I'll see what I can do for you."
Torrance: "All right, but I think you stand better odds of getting a TrKaa to swim. Hey, if by chance he does agree to have me back, tell him it's as a journeyman or nothing, understand?"

Topic: Goodbye

Aren: "Well, goodbye and good luck, Torrance."
Torrance: "Like I haven't heard that one before."

10818.msg – ***Chapter 3\ Ticoro – East – Keys and Bolts – Coulaïne the Locksmith***

Coulaïne, Locksmith and Proprietor of Keys and Bolts

Topic: Torrance

Aren: "We found the culprit."
Coulaine: "Who is it? Tell me so I can turn him over to the constable."

Aren: "I'm not so sure that would be in your best interest. The lockpicker is Torrance, your former apprentice."

Coulaine: "Torrance? Ungrateful bastard. Why shouldn't the constable have him?"

Aren: "The man's got talent. That much is obvious from the ease with which he picked your locks. Since he never stole anything, he probably wouldn't go to prison. Do you really want his skill up for grabs to the highest bidder -- say, one of your competitors?"

Coulaine: "No other master would take him in."

Aren: "What makes you so sure of that? Anyone who apprenticed him would learn how to pick your locks. To me that sounds like a definite plus in the previous experience column. Why don't you pledge him back here? He's willing, and it looks like you have more than enough work for two."

Coulaine: "Sounds a bit like blackmail, but you make a good point. He's caused me enough trouble, but as his master, I'm sure I'll find ways for him to make it up to me."

Topic: Key

Aren: "We lived up to our end of the bargain. How about giving us the key now?"

Coulaine: "Very well. I have one left over from when I replaced the locks. If anyone asks, you don't know me and I never gave you that key, right?"

Aren: "Right. Thank you."

10851.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southeast – Torrance Pasege*

Torrance Pasege, Coulaine's Former Apprentice Locksmith

Topic: Coulaine

Aren: "Master Coulaine has agreed to take you back."

Torrance: "I don't believe it. How did you manage that?"

Aren: "I merely pointed out the potential impact on his business if you pledged to another master."

Torrance: "But no other master will have me."

Aren: "I think you're wrong about that. As Coulaire's ex-apprentice, you know all his trade secrets. In future, if you feel he's not being a good master, just think out loud about going to a competitor. That should keep him in line."

Topic: Training

Aren: "Since we helped you get your job back, would you mind showing us how to pick those locks?"

Torrance: "Well, seeing how I'm an apprentice... I mean a journeyman now, I hardly think that would be appropriate. But for fifty burlas I'll give you some pointers you can use on other locks."

Choice: Yes

Aren: "Sounds like a fair deal."

Torrance: "All right. Here's a standard lock. Watch me closely now. See how I insert the picks here, and here?"

Aren: "Yes, I'm with you so far."

Torrance: "Now you just probe along here until you feel it catch... (AHH OF CONCENTRATION) Press like this... All right... Turn and... (SOUND EFFECT: CLICK) presto."

Aren: "I think I followed that."

Torrance: "Patience is the key, you might say."

Choice: Yes – *Not Enough Money*

Aren: "Sounds fair enough, but I don't have as much money as I thought I did."

Torrance: "No problem."

Aren: "You mean you'll teach us for free?"
Torrance: "No, I mean you can find me when you have enough money. Then I'll teach you."

Aren: "(SARCASTIC) Great. Thanks."

Choice: No

Aren: "Fifty burlas, huh? I thought you'd teach us out of gratitude."

Torrance: "It's not that I'm ungrateful, but I do have to eat."

300.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – On the Ramparts – Near the North Gatehouse Roof*

Topic: *Hole in the North Gatehouse Roof*

William: "I think we're over the guard's office now. That hole I saw should be around here somewhere."

43840.msg – *Chapter 3\Ticoro – North Gatehouse Roof*

Topic: *Hole in the North Gatehouse Roof #1*

The trio crowded around the hole and settled in. They could hear the voices of the guards talking below them. Judging by the number of stolen purses, drunken brawls, and lost articles reported to the guards, it was a fairly normal day.

The chaos of the festival kept the Guard too busy to patrol the ramparts, so the party was able to listen for hours without being discovered. Aren was about to suggest they grab some food when William waved him to silence. An argument between two of the guards below had caught his attention.

"...don't yell at *me*, all right?"

"I thought we already had the place covered."

"So the captain's being cautious. Can you blame him? I sure wouldn't want to be in his shoes if anything happened to the Consort."

"So I've gotta haul my tail all the way to the southwest quarter to pull an extra shift at the Green and White just to cover that jackass's back."

"Keep it down, will you?"

"He's married to my cousin, Alex. What's he gonna do to me? You haven't seen him at family parties. Trust me, he's a jackass."

William straightened-- he'd heard enough. "The Green and White, eh?" Now that they knew where the Consort was staying, it was time to pay him a visit and warn him. He just wished they knew exactly what they were warning him about.

Topic: Hole in the North Gatehouse Roof #2

Aren bent down to listen at the hole, but William stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "I don't think we'll learn anything else here. Let's go."

43821.msg – ***Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southwest – The Green And The White Inn***

Topic: The Green And The White Inn – Consort

The inn was surprisingly empty, in sharp contrast to the packed common rooms they'd seen at every other place in the city. A bare handful of men nursed ales, each at a separate table, and each trying a little too hard to appear casual. William guessed their tankards hadn't lost an inch of ale all day.

William picked one of the men at random. "I need to see the Prince. It's urgent." He felt every set of eyes in the room lock onto him. The hairs on his neck rose-- he was certain a hidden bowman had an arrow trained on him.

The man scowled up at him. "Prince? I think you're lost, friend. This isn't some Jaeger's ballroom."

"Look," William pressed, "I know the Imperial Consort is staying here, and I've got reason to believe he may be in danger. The Shepherds--"

The man cut him off. "And I've got reason to believe you've worn out your welcome here, friend. I suggest you go, enjoy the festival, and don't come back."

"We're trying to help!" Aren burst out. "Won't you at least--"

The man stood. Aren's words died in his throat as he looked up... and up... and up at the hulk looming over him. "I've asked nicely," the man cautioned. "Don't make me ask again."

Kaelyn glided between William and Aren, grabbing an arm of each and pulling them gently but firmly toward the door. "Now that you mention it," she said hastily, "I think we **are** lost. Sorry to disturb you." In a low voice she hissed to her companions, "Come on, boys," steering them back to the street.

Resource\3500.vmd

— Chapter 3 – End —

Upon returning to the Henne's Shadow Inn, William was quiet; when their meals arrived, he merely picked at his food. He was angry no one believed their warning and frustrated that he didn't know whom he should talk to next. Somehow he had to get someone—anyone—to believe to them! Having finally lost his appetite, William pushed away his plate and stepped away from the table. He began to plan their next move as he ascended the stairs to the room he shared with Aren, leaving Kaelyn and Aren behind to quietly finish their meals. After the plates were removed, the two made small talk for a while before they, too, turned in for the evening.

Frustrated in their attempts to see and warn the Consort, the party slept fitfully. And, as it turned out, only briefly.

William had finally just drifted off. Aren, already fast asleep, was snoring in the other bed. A noise—or rather, several noises—outside of their room woke William up: the floor in the hallway creaked several times. Uncertain whether he had dreamt it, he wondered, "Did I hear some..."

At that moment, the wooden door of their room crashed open, and four large City Guardsmen rushed into the tiny space from the cramped hallway. With swords drawn, two guards grabbed William while the other two moved towards Aren's sleeping form.

The Captain of Ticoro's City Guard step into the room. "On your feet, vermin," he ordered.

Aren, the heaviest sleeper of the three, woke to find himself held upright with his upper arms firmly in the grasp of two guardsmen. "What-?! Hey! What's going on?"

William, similarly held, gave an order of his own as he struggled to break free. "Unhand me!"

Instead of being released, William received a punch to the stomach. "Aaaahh! Karn bitch!" he cursed as he doubled over in pain.

From the hallway, Kaelyn was brought into their room. She struggled as best she could against her captors, yelling, "Let me go!"

Regaining his breath—and as much composure as he could—the youngest son of House Escobar again tried to give an order. "I demand to know what this is all about!"

Pointing his sword at William's chest, the Captain replied sternly, "What this is about is you're all under arrest. Lord Caverton has some questions to ask you."

"Arrest?" William was incredulous. "What for?"

"For the abduction of the Consort," said the Captain. He turned and left the room without saying another word. The guards marched the three prisoners down the stairs, through the inn's dining tavern, and out into the warm Ticornan night.

— Chapter 4 – Start —

...Drip. ...Drip. ...Drip.

Endless trickles of water somehow found their way down into Ticoro's jail cells, forming a constant pattern of droplets that fell from cracks in the stone ceiling blocks and collected on the floors in small puddles. A thin vertical gap cut in the masonry allowed in a narrow beam of sunlight, yet it somehow failed to illuminate the rest of the cell, keeping its occupants in near total darkness.

While jails were not expected to be palaces or mansion, this one was closer to a dungeon on the comfort scale. It wasn't due to any particular planning or design, but with Ticoro being the oldest city in Ticor Province, it was modified from the time when dungeons were the norm. It was obvious to anyone unlucky enough to find themselves in one of these dank cells over the last few centuries that upkeep wasn't first and foremost on the minds of House Caverton.

Most large town and cities also had enchantments and wards cast on their prisons to prevent mages from using their powers. As this was his first arrest, Aren was unaware of this fact and tried to illuminate their cell. The counterspell immediately forced a violent biological reaction upon the young mage, rendering him dizzy and nauseous. The resulting disorientation interferes with a magic user's ability to concentrate, and without focus, they can't properly cast spells.

After lying on the stone bench for the better part of an hour, Aren finally felt well enough to sit up. "Ohhh..." he groaned softly as his felt his strength slowly return. His head was still spinning, though.

"Well, I've seen worse places," William said dryly.

Matching his sarcasm, Kaelyn replied, "Oh, you've GOT to show them to me sometime."

Off in the distance, they could hear a large door opening. Footsteps grew louder. The dark hallway grew brighter as two guards holding torches led the way for Lord Daryl Caverton. No other prisoners appeared to be in the cells around them, so William surmised that this was their welcoming party. Looking out through the metal bars, he angrily muttered, "It's about time."

The imposing frame of Lord Caverton suddenly appeared before their cell. "Where is he?!" he furiously demanded.

William looked back at Kaelyn and Aren. "Better let me handle this." Turning to face Caverton, he protested, "We don't know, we weren't involved."

"Liar!" Caverton barked.

William tried his best to explain. "We didn't even know the Consort had been kidnapped until we were roused from bed in the dead of night! But I've got reason to believe a cult called the Shepherds might be involved."

Caverton leaned in to face William. "Don't play games with me, Escobar whelp!" **he said with a menacing tone.** "You've been asking a lot of questions since you arrived in town. Questions about the Shepherds, the Consort, my agent Gregor. You've been showing a Shepherd medallion to everyone in Ticoro! And someone with such a medallion was seen near the Consort's inn shortly before his abduction. I want answers!"

"So do we!" **William said indignantly.** "We knew there was a plot involving the Consort, and we wanted to stop it! But first we had to find out what it was. The only clue we had was the medallion Gregor gave me before he died."

Now it was all beginning to make sense to Caverton. "So! You admit you were involved in Gregor's death!" **he accused.** "Your father is in league with the Shepherds, isn't he? I'll bet Sheffield's in on it too, probably bankrolling them to disrupt Ticoran affairs and weaken my position in the Shira."

Caverton's demeanor turned haughty. "Well, this kidnapping, a transparent effort to embarrass me and bring me out of favor with the Emperor, will backfire against Pianda when you're brought before the Imperial Shadows and the Grand Tribunal!"

Aren had gathered enough strength to stagger behind William and tug at his sleeve. "The Grand Tribunal?!" **he asked with true fear in his voice.**

"I'd have preferred to handle this... privately," **Caverton said, stroking his beard,** "but word has spread through the city like pox in the summer. Imperial soldiers are already coming to escort you to the palace for... questioning." **His voice then turned dramatic.** "The Shadows' magic can pierce your mind and divine your true thoughts. A painful process, I hear, especially if you resist. Draining, too—they rarely use it. But in your case, I'm sure they'll make an exception."

Caverton laughed as he left the cell, with the two guards following behind him. As the torchlight grew dimmer and dimmer, it finally disappeared with the closing of the large door at the end of the hallway.

Aren returned to bench, praying to the Triune that the magically-induced nausea would finally pass. After a few moments, Kaelyn broke the silence. "I'd say that went rather well, wouldn't you?" **she said, her comment belying the seriousness of their circumstance.**

In the darkness, William's deadly glare went unnoticed.

Later that day, Imperial soldiers loaded the trio onto a wagon for the trip to the capital. **Several horsemen were positioned ahead and behind the prisoner transport; no chances were being taken with these prisoners.** That night, the column called a halt to set camp, posting a pair of guards to watch over the captives.

Eric and Jonn were the unlucky two pulling guard duty that night. Around the campfire, the other soldiers were already fast asleep; their horses were tied-up in the nearby trees. A little further away, the three sleeping prisoners remained securely chained to the wagon, and the two soldiers stood guard at either end: Eric at the front, and Jonn at the back.

Over his shoulder, Jonn heard Eric slap his neck.

"Damn bugs," Eric said under his breath. He hated guard duty out in the countryside, though smoke from the fire usually kept the insects away. Not so tonight, however. Based on the pain from the sting, it felt like quite a large insect, too.

Jonn asked, "Did you say something, Eric?" Now it was Jonn's turn to get stung. "OW!" he exclaimed. "Lousy bugs. They get you too? Eric?" Hearing no reply, Jonn turned to see Eric lying on the ground at the wagon's front.

Before Jonn could sound an alarm, he was overcome by a wave of crippling paralysis and nausea. "Ohhh..." he moaned as he, too, fell to the ground unconscious.

Ensuring not to wake any of the nearby soldiers, a large figure quietly reached into the prisoner wagon. A huge hand, or rather, paw covered Kaelyn's mouth as her rescuer gently shook her awake. As quietly as he could, her rescuer asked, "Have rrrroom in that wagon forrr one morrrre, little arrrcherrr?"

Between the dwindling campfire and the spotty moonlight, Kaelyn could just make out the large, furry frame of her childhood friend.

"Raal!" she whispered with great relief.

10844.msg – Chapter 4 | East of Varnasse – Raal the Grrrlf, Kaelyn's Friend

Raal the Grrrlf, Kaelyn's Friend

Topic: Greeting #2

William: "(WHISPER) Are we glad to see you!"

Topic: Soldiers

Raal: "No need to whisper. Those soldiers won't be waking up for hours."

Kaelyn: "What did you do to them, Raal?"

Raal: "Just a little nudberry extract on a dart... Nothing permanent."

Topic: Rescue

Aren: "Thanks for coming to the rescue. How did you know what happened to us?"

Raal: "I was concerned when you didn't leave me a message. I asked around and learned the name of your inn, but the innkeeper hadn't seen you for days. She said that one of Caverton's men had settled your bill. That's when I really started to worry."

Aren: "But how did you find us?"

Raal: "When I heard that two men and a woman had been arrested for the abduction of the Consort, the facts gathered upwind. I couldn't get close to Caverton's dungeons, but a wagon flanked by Imperial soldiers isn't difficult to track."

Topic: Escape

Kaelyn: "Thanks, fur brother, but I think we'd better leave this neighborhood, and quickly. These soldiers aren't going to be in any mood to play 'a coin for the beggar' when they wake up."

William: "Not only should we escape, but we need to find the real culprits. Caverton is all too eager to blame this kidnapping on the House of Escobar. That's the last thing my father needs to worry about. Are you with me?"

Aren: "Count me in. I don't need the Emperor's Shadows dogging my tail -- one natural shadow is enough for me!"

William: "From the hints Caverton dropped, it sounds like the Shepherds are involved in this conspiracy. I'd say our first step is to find them."

Topic: Ridgewood

Raal: "Kaelyn, there's another reason I went looking for you. After the Feast of Kor, a runner brought word that something strange is happening in the Ridgewood. He had few details, and could only say that ghosts are wandering the wood, killing people with a mere touch."

Topic: Garvin

Kaelyn: "My father?"

Raal: "I don't know. No one has heard from him since the ghosts first appeared."

Kaelyn: "(TORN) I've got to find him. But I can't just leave William and Aren..."

William: "(WARMLY) Don't worry about us. You should go to your father. We can find the Shepherds without you."

Kaelyn: "I doubt you could find your own shadow without me... but thanks."

Topic: Goodbye #2

Raal: "Those of my pack in Ticoro have been called back to protect the Ancestral Den. They will be waiting for me near the edge of the woods. Kaelyn, I will travel that far with you."

Kaelyn: "Thanks, Raal. I'll be grateful for your company. William, there's an inn in Grandeur on the Street of the Sparrows. After I've seen my father, I'll meet you or leave word there."

William: "Good plan. One more thing. On the road it's common for traveling companions to share the load, regardless of who owns what. We should probably get our gear in order before you go."

Aren: "Kaelyn, I hope your father is all right."

Kaelyn: "(STIFF UPPER LIP) I'm sure he is, Aren. I just need to see him."

10835.msg – *Chapter 4\ West of Ticoro – Mackey the Traveling Merchant*

Mackey the Traveling Merchant

Topic: Greeting #2

Mackey: "Hello again, fellow wanderers. What can I do for you today? As you can see, my little shop on wheels is always open come rain or shine, fair road or foul."

Topic: Grrrlf

William: "Do you trade with the Grrrlf?"

Mackey: "Yes, as oft' as I can. For woodwork you'll not find the like anywhere in the Empire. I know some folk blame them for the pox, but I've seen them risk their own hides to help humans what has the disease. If you ask me, most Grrrlf are better people than most people."

Topic: Shepherds

William: "I'll wager you've traveled all over 'Ticor."

Mackey: "And then some, m'lord, from the Glassrock Mountains in the west to the Chailan bazaars in the east."

William: "Have you seen much of the Shepherds on your travels?"

Mackey: "(SCOWLING) Such as you's not likely to be in league with such as them so I'll tell you true. Yes, I've seen 'em but I'd just as soon spit on 'em. 'The Shepherds call the Grrrlf 'dogs' and they hunt them down for no reason. I've no use for scum like that."

Topic: Contacts

William: "I share your low opinion of the Shepherds, but I need to contact them. Would you happen to have any ideas on how to do that?"

Mackey: "(SNORTS) Hmmmph. Youngsters nowadays don't have enough sense to light the right end of a torch. Let me give you a piece of advice, m'lord, one which has stood me in good stead o'er many a mile. Stay away from loonies, losers, freaks, and fakes. The Shepherds cover all four corners."

William: "We're not as green as we look, Mackey. We know what we're doing. If you hate the Shepherds as much as you say, there's reason enough for you to help us."

Mackey: "(SIGH) Well, I don't know. Information is merchandise of a sort too..."

William: "How much?"

Mackey: "Ten burlas."

Choice: Deal

William: "Deal. What have you got for us?"

Mackey: "Over in Isten there's an actress, Maria something or other. A few months back she bought a whole case of Linagan apple brandy from me."

William: "(WHISTLES) That's expensive stuff. But what's the connection?"

Mackey: "The connection is that this actress said she was giving the brandy to her son as a going away present, and guess where he was going."

William: "To join the Shepherds. I see."

Choice: Deal – *Not Enough Money*

William: "All right, let me just get the... hmmm. Uh, looks like my purse isn't as fat as I thought."

Mackey: "No problem. I'm not likely to forget what I know. Catch up with me after you've fed your purse and we'll talk then."

Choice: No Deal

William: "(IRRITATED) Henne's bells, Mackey! What could you possibly have to say that's worth that much?"

Mackey: "(MILDLY) That's for me to know and you to find out, if you change your mind that is. My price stands."

43710.msg – *Chapter 4\ Varnasse – Mason Jaimie's Wife*

Topic: *Mason Jaime's Wife – Ticoro Master Mason Notified (Ch 3)*

The mason's wife had a smile on her face and some color in her cheeks. "I heard what you did, sir, and I want to thank you. Jaimie got a busted arm, but otherwise he's home and safe. The guildmaster saw to it that the men got what was owed them, and he's promised they'll start working again too, even if it's on projects in other towns. 'Course with his arm, Jaimie'll be home for awhile. But that suits me just fine."

Topic: Injured Gardener

The door was answered by a woman with a broken leg and dirty hands. "I'd shake hands, but you caught me in the middle of some transplanting. I'm moving my seedlings to bigger pots, hoping they'll survive until I can get them into the ground."

Aren examined one of the seedlings. "This is a nudberry bush, isn't it?"

The woman smiled, pleased to recognize a fellow botanist. "Why, yes, it is. I've been trying to figure out what kind of soil the little fellow likes. My own garden is much too sandy for anything but carrots."

Aren handed back the potted plant. "Have you tested the soil in the woods? It seems quite loamy to me."

"As a matter of fact, I have. I found three spots I thought would be ideal. I dug the holes for the plants, but on my way back home to pick up the seedlings, I had the misfortune to run into the Imperial guard."

William was outraged. "What did they do to you?"

The woman pointed to the splint on her leg. "It wasn't intentional. I wasn't watching where I was going. They came marching down the road just as I was crossing over to my house. I got in the way. Maybe I was pushed, I really don't remember. Somehow I stumbled and hit a boulder the wrong way. It's a simple fracture, but I'm afraid I won't be going on any planting expeditions for quite some time."

Sympathetically, Aren asked, "Would you like us to plant the nudberries for you?"

"Oh, I don't want to inconvenience you, but if you don't mind... I'm not sure they'll live in pots for much longer. Their little roots need nutrients. Their little leaves need air and sunshine."

Choice: Take Plants

William nodded. "Then it's a deal. Give us the plants and we'll see to it that they get safely settled in their new homes."

The woman handed over the pots. "I truly appreciate this. Come back when you've planted them so that I can thank you properly."

Topic: Not All Seedlings Planted yet

The woman hobbled outside. Her friendly greeting turned to disappointment when she saw the nudberry plant that they had. "Oh, you haven't planted them all yet. That's a shame. Plants won't last long in this sun. See, this one's already starting to wilt."

Topic: All Seedlings Planted

The woman hobbled outside to greet William and Aren. "Oh, you've planted all the seedlings! That's wonderful."

William brushed the dirt off his hands. "They all seem quite happy in their new homes."

The woman handed William a round object. "I'm not sure what this is, but I found it in a box buried at one of my planting sites. You can have it if you think it might come in handy on your travels."

William thanked the woman, wishing her a rapid healing. As the companions walked down the path, William showed Aren the object. "A Dervish Disk. Not bad compensation for just getting one's hands a bit muddy."

Choice: Don't Take Plants

William cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, ma'am. My friend spoke out of turn. I'm afraid we don't have the time to plant the nudberry bushes for you. Perhaps we can come back later..."

43721.msg – ***Chapter 4\ Varnasse – Planting the Nudberry Seedlings***

Topic: Planting the Nudberry Seedlings

The nudberry plant fit snugly into the hole, its leaves open to the sun and ready to grow.

43725.msg – ***Chapter 4\ Varnasse – Smith's Forgery***

Topic: Smith's Forgery

William read the sign hanging over the open door. "'Smith's Forgery.' Hmmp. Looks like the real thing to me..."

The companions entered the smithy. A shower of sparks and the loud clang of metal on metal indicated the smith was at work at his forge. Aren's nose crinkled at the strong smell of hot iron and sweat.

William yelled to make himself heard over the banging, the roar of the fire, and the whoosh of the bellows. "Ho, the smith!"

The smith looked up from the kettle he was patching. "Yes? What can I do you for?"

William asked if he could do some repairs. The smith examined the party's damaged equipment. Then he went back to his anvil and continued hammering on the kettle.

"As <clang> you <clang> can <clang> see, I'm <clang> too <clang> busy <clang> right <clang> now. But <clang> for <clang> 80 <clang> burlas, I <clang> can <clang> show <clang> you <clang> how <clang> to <clang> make <clang> some <clang> simple <clang> repairs <clang> yourselves. <clang>"

Choice: Pay Smith

"Sounds like a fair deal." William counted out the coins into the smith's calloused hand. After tapping a burla with his hammer to insure himself of its authenticity, the smith demonstrated his craft for the party. They quickly learned a few simple mending techniques and some light metal work.

Choice: Pay Smith – *Not Enough Money*

William checked their funds. "Sorry, but I don't think we can afford to pay 80 burlas for mere advice just now. Maybe some other time."

"Fine <clang> with <clang> me. My <clang> shop <clang> is <clang> always <clang> open. <clang>"

Choice: Leave

Naomi at the Conservatory in Varnasse

Topic: *Greeting*

Naomi: "(SINGING SOFTLY AS SHE GARDENS) Seed to leaf, leaf to bud. Sun and rain coax life from mud... (SEES PARTY) Oh, hello. I didn't see you at first."

Topic: *Garden*

Aren: "This garden is beautiful!"

Naomi: "Thank you, young man. It's very much a part of me after all these years."

Aren: "Are you the caretaker?"

Naomi: "Planter, harvester, sower, reaper, breeder, pruner, weeder, keeper. The trees hear my song and return in kind. Their symphony is eternal, if you only know how to listen."

Topic: *Symphony*

Aren: "You speak as one who loves music."

Naomi: "(LAUGHS) I was speaking figuratively, I suppose. (THOUGHTFUL) Though I did just see a Grrrlf performance that combined music and dance in such a way as to represent natural forces... Oh, it was most stimulating. What was it called? The marruk? Or karful?"

Aren: "The karruf."

Naomi: "Yes, that's it. You're familiar with it then?"

Aren: "(A LITTLE EMBARRASSED) I've heard of it, but I haven't seen it."

Naomi: "Believe me, if you get the chance, don't pass it up. A young man like yourself with such a keen interest in nature would find it most... educational. (LAUGHS BRIEFLY AT HER EUPHEMISM)"

Topic: Plants

Aren: "Have you devoted your whole life to your plants?"

Naomi: "(LAUGHS) I find they have more to offer than most humans. Plants are complex yet honest, predictable yet fascinating. Take the fidala tree for instance. Most people see only a scrawny, chalky thing. But take the time to look beyond the obvious, and you'll discover the fidala's secret. Mix the leaves with alcohol into a poultice and you'll have a cure for almost any poison. That is the fidala tree's gift to man in return for a little respect and manure."

Topic: Magic

Aren: "Naomi, your talent with the magic of nature is legendary. I was wondering... no, forgive me. I... I presume too much."

Naomi: "Go on, lad. I don't bite."

Aren: "I was wondering... I'd hoped you might be willing to share the smallest part of your wisdom... but someone of your importance is surely too busy to waste time with a novice like me."

Naomi: "(AMUSED) What's your name?"

Aren: "Aren Cordelaine, ma'am."

Naomi: "Aren, that was the sorriest excuse for flattery this side of a Ghanish compliment. The art of manipulation requires subtlety, and you've got all the guile of a mare in heat. But as it happens, I need someone to deliver something to my cousin in Elona. Take care of it for me, and I will share the 'smallest part of my wisdom' with you."

Topic: Delivery *#1 – Initial Request*

Naomi: "I just learned that my cousin Noal is having trouble with his garden. I want to get this calcicum powder to him immediately. Time is of the essence if the poor fellow's vegetables are to be saved. If he's not home, just sprinkle the powder over the garden. Nature should do the rest. Will you do it?"

Aren: "Elona is a little out of our way..."

Naomi: "If it were right next door, I wouldn't need you, now would I?"

Aren: "No, I suppose not."

Choice: Yes

Aren: "That sounds like a simple enough task. We'd be glad to do this good deed on your behalf."

Naomi: "That's a good boy. Return after you've run this little errand for me."

Choice: No

Aren: "I'm sorry, but we just don't have time to run errands right now."

Naomi: "That's a pity. Quite probably more your loss than mine."

Topic: Delivery #2 – Follow-up Request

Naomi: "I don't think it's too late. If you hurry, you might still be able to save my cousin's garden."

Topic: Goodbye

Naomi: "You're good company, but I must get back to my garden."

Aren: "It was a true honor to meet someone so gifted."

Naomi: "(LAUGHS) Better work on those compliments if you want to get anywhere with the ladies. We can see through false flattery quicker than soil passes through a field worm."

43730.msg – **Chapter 4\North of Varnasse – Masons Fixing Antara-Varnasse Bridge**

Topic: Masons Fixing Antara-Varnasse Bridge – Master Mason not Notified (Ch 3)

A group of stern masons blocked their path. "Fraid you can't use the bridge unless you pay the toll."

William folded his arms across his chest. "Toll?"

"To pay for repairs and maintenance to the bridge. Fifty burlas."

Choice: Pay

"I don't have time to argue with you," William grumbled, handing over the coins. "Here."

The masons cleared a path for them, looking distinctly uncomfortable but with firm resolve.

Choice: Pay – *Not Enough Money*

William's anger increased when he found he didn't have enough money. The masons remained firm, insisting on 50 burlas and not letting the party pass.

Choice: Don't Pay

William was outraged. "This is a public bridge, maintained by the Empire! You have no right to extort money for passage."

The lead mason regarded him grimly. "And had the Empire paid us for our repair work, we wouldn't be. But they haven't, so we are."

41625.msg – *Chapter 4\Korus Landing – Andy and Arielle*

Topic: *Andy and Arielle #1*

Aren knocked, getting his knuckles sticky with fresh varnish in the process. The door was answered by a young man not much older than Aren. "Oh, sorry about that, friend. We just moved in and have to spruce the place up a bit... new paint, curtains, that sort of thing."

Aren peered around the man into the cheery cottage. He saw a table set with brightly colored crockery. A young woman with thick blond braids hummed to herself as she stirred a pot on the hearth. "Let me guess... You're newlyweds."

The man grinned broadly. "Oh no. Arielle and I have been married for a long, long time... a full Moon in four days. But enough about us. You are...?"

"Travelers."

The man's eyes lit up. "Have you been all the way to Camille?"

Aren boasted, "We've been much further than that! I'm from Briala."

"Where is that?" the man asked.

"Pianda. But we've traveled all over the Empire, and where we haven't gone yet, we'll get to before we're through."

"Kor's teeth!" the man exclaimed, impressed.

"Don't take Kor's name in vain, Andy." Arielle gently reproved him.

"Sorry, punkin. Say, honey cake, do we have enough soup for two more bowls?"

"I suppose so," came the unenthusiastic response.

Andy asked Aren, "You will join us at table, won't you? Please? I'd truly enjoy hearing about your adventures."

Choice: Stay

Aren shifted his heavy pack, feeling every inch the bold explorer. "Sure. We'd be grateful for a hot meal."

The companions sat down at the table. Arielle served the soup, slamming the bowls down in front of them, her lips tight with suppressed hostility. Aren chose to ignore her obvious dislike in favor of her husband's rapt attention.

For the next hour, Aren basked in the warmth of his captive audience. In great detail, he recalled the beast's attack on the beach near Briala and then proceeded to tell of their travels, embellishing only as necessary for the good of the tale. Occasionally William interrupted with a guffaw at a particularly bold exaggeration, but he seemed content to concentrate his attention on the home-cooked food.

After the meal, Arielle cleared the dishes and wiped down the table. Then she handed her husband an empty bucket. "Sweets, I think it's time to say goodbye to your friends now. There's still a number of chores to be done this day."

"You're right, cookie." Andy stood up, sighing. "Got to fetch water, then mend the fence so the rabbits can't get at the garden. Thanks for the stories."

Andy walked them down the path. Making sure that his wife was out of earshot, he said wistfully, "Someday I'd like to have a few adventures of my own instead of only hearing them second-hand."

Aren glanced back through the cottage door at Arielle's sturdy hips and matronly bosom, then back into Andy's hopeful eyes. "Uh, yeah. I'm sure you will... someday."

Choice: Leave

Aren took another look inside the cottage. Arielle sliced a loaf of bread with a vigor bordering on violence, her jaw set with suppressed annoyance. "Uh, perhaps it's not such a good idea. Thanks for the invite, but we really need to be on our way."

Andy's face sagged with disappointment. "Oh. Well. Maybe someday I'll have a few adventures of my own instead of hearing them second-hand."

Aren glanced at Arielle's sturdy hips and matronly bosom, then back into Andy's hopeful eyes. "Uh, yeah. I'm sure you will... someday."

41600.msg – *Chapter 4\Korus Landing – The "Cheese" Jaeger*

Topic: The "Cheese" Jaeger #1

A servant ushered the party into the Jaeger's study. The fat, bald man bounced up to them. "Well, well, well! It took you long enough! Do you have it? Well, let me see!"

William looked at Aren with raised eyebrows. "Excuse us, m'lord, but we don't know what you're talking about."

"The cheese, the cheese, the cheese! Surely you've come about the cheese?" The little man bounced excitedly. "How can I, Jaeger Forest Meister, have a wine and cheese party without the cheese?! Silvie, I mean Miss Ashwood, promised she'd send some over just as soon as her shop received a shipment, but I don't believe her!"

"Why not?"

"Well, you've no doubt heard of the woman scorned? That's Miss Ashwood. She's thrown herself at me for years, but I continually tell her, 'Now, Miss Ashwood, I'm a happily married man. Your charms, considerable though they may be, have no effect on me whatsoever!'"

The Jaeger smoothed his tunic. "No matter how fervently that girl beseeches, nor how sincere her vows of undying affection, I'm a happily married man, sir, a happily married man."

William studied the short, fat, balding, pompous noble and came to the conclusion that Korus Landing must have far less than its share of eligible bachelors.

The study door opened and in pranced a small, round woman wearing a wig as tall as she was. Indeed, Aren was hard-pressed to tell whether the Jaeger's wife wore the wig for a headpiece or the wig wore her as its pedestal. "Forest," she squealed in a voice like nails on slate, "Please tell me they come bearing cheese."

"No, my pet. So sorry, my pet. All will be remedied immediately, my pet." The Jaeger's wife stormed out of the room, the wig barely clearing the door jamb.

The Jaeger explained the gravity of the situation. "We're having a party, you see, to unveil the latest addition to our art collection. It's a Chinese tree idol, very rare, very precious. So few are seen outside of Chuno and this one is in perfect condition."

The Jaeger mopped his brow with a monogrammed kerchief. "Sylvie, Miss Ashwood, has her little ways... secret connections that she could use to my advantage if she so chose. Ah yes, that little minx has me over a barrel and she knows it. Though it gives me the horrors to admit, I may have to sacrifice the sanctity of my wedding bed and succumb to her wanton desires just to make this party a success. Ah me..."

The little man looked so decidedly worried over this possibility that William couldn't hold back a chuckle. To cover this rudeness, he said, "Jaeger Meister, my friend and I will attempt to assist you in your hour of need. Give us a moment to confer amongst ourselves..."

In a corner of the room, Aren asked William, "Do you really think we should help him out?"

William scratched his chin thoughtfully, "We could... Of course this is only one side of the story."

Topic: The "Cheese" Jaeger #2 – No Cheese yet

Jaeger Meister greeted them eagerly. "You mentioned being able to help me with my cheese dilemma..." He left the implied question hanging in the air.

Topic: Give Cheese to the "Cheese" Jaeger

Jaeger Meister looked at the bundle with suspicion. "What's this? What's this? What's this?"

William said seriously, "Cheese, sir. It's cheese."

The Jaeger opened the bundle, sniffed, and tasted. "By Kor! It is cheese! Martha, come here, my pet! Our party is saved!"

The Jaeger's wife entered, examined the cheese and pronounced it excellent.

William cleared his throat, drawing the Jaeger's attention. "Oh yes, of course. The boy who brought the cheese. Well, you tell Miss Ashwood we're much obliged, much obliged indeed. Tell her it could have greener veins, it could be more pungent... but you know how it is... any Port Salut in a storm. Just have her send us the bill."

William began, "But..."

The Jaeger fumbled in his vest pocket. "Oh, of course. Here's two burlas for your trouble. Now scoot! We have much to do before our guests arrive."

41605.msg – *Chapter 4\Korus Landing – Germaine's Outfitter's – Sylvie Ashwood*

Topic: Sylvie Ashwood #1

A little bell tinkled pleasantly as the companions entered the shop. They were greeted by the proprietress, Sylvie Ashwood. She apologized for her lack of merchandise. "What with the shipmasters' strike and the masons blocking commerce near Varnasse, it's been nearly impossible for me to keep my shelves stocked."

William sympathized, "Not to mention the drought."

Sylvie sighed. "Right. It's unfortunate too, because just now I could get top prices for any luxury items that come my way. Jaeger Forest Meister, that fat old buffoon, is throwing one of his hoity-toity parties for his influential friends..."

Sylvie stuck her nose up in the air and spoke in a high, excited voice. "Miss Ashwood, I simply must have cheese! How can I possibly hope to make a favorable impression on the Emperor's cousin's laundress's brother-in-law without cheese?" Lapsing into her normal husky tones, she concluded, "Wouldn't I just love to stick it to that imbecile. I'd charge him ten times my cost."

Topic: Give Cheese

Sylvie's eyes widened with delight. Crowing with laughter, she exclaimed, "Cheese! And just when the Jaeger needs it the most! Oh, won't I make him pay through the nose for this! I'll probably get at least 100 burlas... As my supplier, you deserve a cut. Here's 50 burlas and some rations to replace the cheese. And my undying gratitude for the chance to make that fat little piggy squeal to my tune!"

41531.msg – *Chapter 4\South of Isten – Alethea and Ciaran Letters*

Topic: Alethea and Ciaran Letters

Thirteenth day of the Fourth Moon of Henne
in the Third Year of the reign of Justin Valorian

My dearest Ciaran,

No longer can I remain silent. When you and your Brothers defended Isten from the Montari raiders, the wounded were brought to our Temple. You were among them. Unbeknownst to you, I was one of the Sisters who healed you.

You did not know me, yet you touched my hand daily. When the bandages were to come off your eyes, I no longer tended you. I feared what I might see in those eyes I have so often dreamed of. Yes, I am a coward.

These past seven years I thought you were dead, yet you were living. Marcus, who called himself your best friend, told me you had died, killed by a wild beast after leaving the city that terrible night. Why would Marcus lie? Was he protecting me from the truth... that you had forsaken me? Or was he hoping that in my grief I would agree to be his wife? These questions have haunted me since I watched you ride away from the Temple. My need for answers has finally won over my fear.

You are a Brother of Kor, sworn to His service. I know you would not lie to me. Why did you not search for me after leaving the city? Did my father somehow convince you to forget me? Or did Marcus tell you the same lie -- that I was dead. Please, Ciaran, for the sake of what we once were to each other, write and tell me what happened after my father took you from your... our home.

Your wife,

Alethea
Sister of Senaedrin

Twentieth day of the First Moon of Senaedrin
in the Fourth Year of the reign of Justin Valorian

Best beloved,

A new year begins and with it my new life. Fortunately in the midst of the Spring rejoicing at the Temple, my private exultation is easily overlooked. I cannot explain to these holy women that your letter brings me more joy than Senaedrin's annual rebirth.

It is as I hardly dared hope. You love me still. You did not search for me because you believed me dead, not because you had forsaken me.

You have told me your story, now I must tell you mine. Many lies have separated us. That night my father told me that you and he talked for hours. He said that he did not threaten you, but that you had accepted a sum of money (an insultingly small sum, I might add!) and sworn never to see me again.

When I protested that you would never consent to such an arrangement, my father had me beaten until I lost consciousness. When I awoke I knew I must leave the House of my childhood, for I had two secrets to protect.

The first secret you know... Our clandestine marriage earlier that year. The second... That within the year, I would bear your child. I knew that if I stayed, our baby would be in grave danger, so I took what little jewelry and money I had, and crept away in the night.

I made my way here, to the Temple of Senaedrin where I fostered as a child. The kind Sisters granted my request for refuge and I bore our child safely. In gratitude, I took the vows soon after Anna's birth. Our daughter is seven years old. She is well-loved by all. Indeed, I can barely keep everyone from doting on her too much!

Now, my love, you know all. Though we are bound by our vows to the Triune and cannot live as man and wife, I am content. I pray for you every day and thank Senaedrin that you have found happiness with the Brothers. Pray for your daughter and me, and think of us often as I think of you.

Alethea
Sister of Senaedrin

Fourth day of the Third Moon of Henne
in the Tenth Year of the reign of Justin Valorian

My dearest Ciaran,

How long it takes for letters to come over the pass! I cannot afford a TrKaa messenger or I would send you a letter every week!

I write this time with more news than usual... my father has died. I must therefore ask your advice. Should I send our daughter to my mother? Since I was an only child, little Anna is the heir to our family lands and fortune. I told my mother about her several years ago. She kept my secret from my father, but was able to visit last summer when Father was away with his army. She loves the girl and would raise her willingly.

I am torn between giving Anna the advantages that I had as a child and the trauma of taking her from the only home she has ever known. Please write and advise me as I cannot make this decision without knowing your thoughts.

Here is more news: Last week I was named Sister of the Novices. I have suddenly gained a dozen more daughters! The responsibility is heavy and affects my health. I find that the slightest labor exhausts me and some nights my head aches so I cannot sleep for the pain. I hope this malady is temporary and merely a result of unaccustomed duties. Be well, my love, and remember our one year of true happiness.

Alethea
Sister of Senaedrin

Tenth day of the Third Moon of Henne
in the Tenth Year of the reign of Justin Valorian

Brother Ciaran,

I fear this letter brings sad news. Last night, Alethea, our beloved Sister and you wife, was taken from us and reunited with Senaedrin. Before she died, she asked for my assistance, which I gladly promised.

I enclose her last letter to you. I will aid you regarding the matter mentioned therein. I assure you that Anna will always be welcome in the Temple, yet I think it best for the child that she go to her grandmother. I will, of course, abide by any decision you make. I know that with the help of the Triune, you will make the best choice for the child. Brother Ciaran, I pray for you and your daughter daily. May Senaedrin keep you in health.

Sister Senena
Temple of Senaedrin

Fifth day of the Fourth Moon of Kor
in the Tenth Year of the reign of Justin Valorian

Brother Ciaran,

I approve of your decision to send Anna to her grandmother, though I am somewhat surprised that you propose taking her yourself. We will expect you in the third week of the next Moon. For Sister Alethea's sake, you will be welcome in our Temple.

As you requested, I shall not mention this to Anna. I await our meeting with anticipation. May Senaedrin keep you in health.

Sister Senena
Temple of Senaedrin

46005.msg – *Chapter 4\Isten – Temple of Senaedrin*

Topic: Temple of Senaedrin / Sisterhood of Senaedrin

The Sister of Senaedrin welcomed the party with outstretched hands and a tender smile.

"Senaedrin's heart is warmed by your presence, good people. How may the Sisterhood help you today?"

Choice: Heal

Choice: Cure Poison

Choice: Leave

Choice: Heal

Topic: *Choose Party Member*

"Now please, tell me which of you needs our help."

Choice: William

Choice: Aren

Topic: *Length of Healing Session*

The priestess' eyes softened with concern. "Please understand that although Senaedrin's touch performs the healing, it is the Sisters' strength which makes it possible. It takes a terrible toll on us, and our circle must rely on donations from those we help to sustain us."

"The amount of the donation is commensurate with the length of the healing session. Minor scrapes and bruises heal quickly, while serious injuries take longer and sometimes require multiple sessions."

"How long a healing session do you require?"

Choice: Brief (70 b)

Choice: Medium (120 b)

Choice: Long (200 b)

Choice: Forget It

Topic: *Party Member Healed*

The priestess placed her hands upon the wounds and closed her eyes. One not of the Sisterhood could only guess at what she did next. There was no flash of light, no unearthly glow to signal the healing. Only the silent closure of the wounds and ragged gasps from both parties.

Choice: Cure Poison

Topic: *Choose Party Member*

"Now please, tell me which of you needs our help."

Choice: William

Choice: Aren

Topic: *Amount of Poison Cure*

The Sister examined each of them with a clinical eye. "Extracting poison is a painful process--for us, as well as you. The toxins must first be absorbed into our own bodies before Senaedin can neutralize them. It tires us greatly, and I'm afraid we must rely on donations to keep recuperative facilities operating. The size of the donation depends on the extent of poison we absorb."

"By how much would you like the toxins neutralized?"

Choice: 30 (50 burlas)

Choice: 60 (85 burlas)

Choice: 100 (150 burlas)

Choice: Forget It

Topic: *Poison is Neutralized*

The Sister clasped her patient's arms, matching up their wrists so that their pulse points touched. Both people shuddered as Senaedin's touch ushered the toxins from one body to another. At length the tremors subsided and the Sister stepped back.

"It will take some hours for the toxins to be neutralized within me, but you'll be fine. Now, I must rest."

With a weak smile, the Sister disappeared into a private chamber. Before too long, another came forward.

"Now please, tell me which of you needs our help."

Topic: *Party Member Not Poisoned*

The Sister closed her eyes. After a few moments her relaxed features wrinkled into a perplexed frown. When she opened her eyes, they held a glint of steel. "You are not poisoned. I don't know what kind of game you think this is, but I don't have time for it. There are genuinely sick people who need my attention."

With a regal swirl of her cloak, the Sister turned her back on them and retreated through a doorway. Within moments, another woman came forward to attend to the party.

"Now please, tell me which of you needs our help."

Topic: Heal ~~–or–~~ Cure Poison – *Not Enough Money*

The party members murmured with dismay at their lower-than-expected financial resources. The Sister smiled wanly. "Normally I'd help you even without the donation, but the Sisterhood's strength has been sorely taxed of late and I'm afraid we cannot spare the resources. I'm so sorry."

Choice: Forget It

The priestess arched her eyebrows inquisitively, but without any hint of impatience. "How else may I assist you?"

41530.msg – *Chapter 4\Isten – Temple of Senaedrin – Sister Senena*

Topic: *Sister Senena of Isten*

Sister Senena greeted them. "Welcome, friends. This is a sanctuary for travelers, a way station to rest, pray, and restore your spirits and bodies for the journey ahead. If you need healing, one of the other sisters will assist you."

Topic: *Give Sister Senena the Packet of Letters from Alethea to Ciaran*

Sister Senena took the bloodstained packet of letters. "What's this?" she asked."

"We found these letters on the body of a Brother of Kor. He was killed by jaegers."

The Sister glanced at the writing. "Oh dear Senaedrin, Mother of us all! Tragedy has befallen this poor family in triple-fold. I awaited Brother Ciaran's coming with much sorrow in my heart, as poor little Anna was taken from us at the beginning of this Moon. The Pox swept through the Temple, claiming many from our ranks even as we fought to heal others."

William shook his head sorrowfully. "Perhaps it's best Ciaran died as he did, rather than have the joy of reunion drowned in tears."

Sister Senena sighed. "Perhaps. Who are we to judge the Triune's will? It was good of you to return these letters. Let me repay your kindness. Anna's grandmother sent this gem to pay for supplies for Anna's journey. Please accept it."

Despite his protests, the Sister pressed the stone into William's hand. "I will pray for your safe travels."

"Thank you, Sister."

41505.msg – *Chapter 4\Isten – The Town Gossip of Isten*

Topic: The Town Gossip of Isten

A long-nosed, short-sighted woman rocked and knitted on her front porch. William examined her face. "Does she look familiar to you, Aren?"

Aren took a closer look. "I think so. But I can't place where."

William approached the porch. "Excuse me, ma'am, but you look familiar. Have we met?"

The woman spoke in time with the rapid clicking of her knitting needles. "I don't recognize you, but now that my eyes are going, sometimes I don't even recognize my cat. If we were in Waterfork, I'd say I was my sister, but we aren't so I suppose I'm not."

"Uh huh." William worked around his confusion. "We're travelers passing through town..."

The woman interrupted, her needles gathering speed until they moved in a blur of light. "Oh, strangers, is it? Well, you've come to the right place to learn everything you need to know about Isten. Yes, indeed, the stories I could tell..."

"Such as?" Aren prompted.

"I'm sure you're not interested in the doings of common folk such as myself, but let me tell you, Isten has its fair share of nobles. Lord Lighton, for instance... Now he's always up to something... Balls, parties, casino nights at the club..."

The woman dropped a stitch, cursed, and picked it up again. "Even as we speak, Lord Lighton is planning a special performance at the amphitheater, by invitation only of course. Everyone who's anyone will be there, as well as a quite a few who probably aren't anyone but who happen to know the right people."

"I myself received a ticket, you know. Oh, yes-- I have plenty of influence in my own ways. Locked up the ticket nice and safe inside the chest Lord Axton gave me. It's probably still there, too-- I doubt the thieves who took my chest have the wit to open it."

William interrupted the continuous flow of chatter by putting his foot down on the chair's rocker. The motion stopped abruptly, as did the woman's knitting. Speechless for the moment, she stared up at him in surprise and expectation. "That's all quite fascinating. We were wondering if perhaps you knew anything about a... uh... a... club called the Shepherds."

The knitting began again, the needles clicking like a couple of bad-tempered click-beetles. "Oh, it's the latest rage among the young men of wealth and social standing. I see them swaggering about the town in their capes and swords. Quite dashing they look. Why, I understand that even Maria Liana's son has taken up with them. Of course you know who she is, just the most famous actress in all of Antara, that's all."

"Yes I've heard of her." William motioned to Aren to prepare for a quick exit. Pointing across the street, he exclaimed, "Say, aren't those Shepherds over there? It looks like they're about to duel!"

As the gossip cried, "Where? Where?" and twisted her neck to see, Aren and William made good their escape.

41520.msg – *Chapter 4\Isten – A Confused Jaeger*

Topic: A Confused Jaeger

The man's jeweled pin identified him as a Jaeger. He looked down his nose at the dusty, ragged pair on his doorstep. William began, "Excuse me, m'lord. Do you have--"

The Jaeger interrupted, calling to his wife inside the house. "Melinda, darling, it's another peasant at the door. Do we have any... Oh, thank you, dear. You've got such a soft heart."

Turning back to William, he said, "Here you are. I'm afraid it's the best we can do for you."

William protested. "But, m'lord..."

"Now take it and be off with you! Oh, and next time, use the back door, would you mind? Ta." The Jaeger closed the door.

William looked down at the leg of lamb in his hand. He turned to Aren, speechless.

Aren's suppressed giggles bubbled over into gales of laughter. "Come on, William. I think we've loitered on his lordship's doorstep long enough. After all, we don't want him to think we peasants are ungrateful."

Topic: Lord Ben Stafford

The coat of arms on the door panel signified it was a Jaeger house. William's knock was answered by a disheveled man in his shirtsleeves. He blinked in the sunlight, running his hand through his thick curly hair. William asked, "Excuse me, but is your master at home?"

The man smiled. "I am the master here, young sir. Ben Stafford, at your service."

William blushed and returned the noble's smile with one of his own. "Oops, sorry. It's just that one doesn't expect a lord to answer his own door..."

"...especially not one who looks like he's just been polishing the silver, is that it? But this is how I work."

Lord Stafford laughed. "Well, you're a welcome distraction from my writing. I confess I'm a terrible procrastinator who welcomes any excuse to put aside my treatise for even a few minutes."

The noble escorted them into his study, a book-lined, leather-bound room smelling pleasantly of pipe tobacco and single malt scotch.

Aren glanced at the pile of papers and open books on the desk. "What are you working on, m'lord?"

"It's a treatise on the Antaran political system. Have you an interest in government affairs?"

Aren was trying to think of a polite way to say "Not really" when William cut in. "Oh, yes. My father, the governor of Pianda--"

"You're a son of the House of Escobar?"

"The youngest son, yes."

Lord Stafford thrust a sheaf of papers at William. "Then read this. I think you'll find it fascinating."

Choice: Read Treatise

William perused the treatise. "The Shira: Its Structure and Inner Workings... Policies regarding bribes and services rendered. Favors... Dealings and double-dealings... Triple-dealings... Diplomacy, negotiating tactics, and blackmail..."

William raised his eyebrows. "You're not pulling your punches here. Aren't you afraid of getting into hot water?"

The noble took the papers back, squaring the stack before replacing it on his desk. "I'll be publishing anonymously, if I can find someone to print it, that is."

"Thanks for letting me look it over. I have to admit it doesn't surprise me, but it did fill me in on some details. Good luck finding a publisher. Especially now that we seem to be on the brink of war, everyone should know what the Shira is up to behind our backs."

"I agree. And now I suppose I should get back to work, though I'm reminded of the words of the famous geologist and author, John Moraine. He compared the task of writing to the progress of a glacier... just one eternal grind."

Choice: Leave

William begged off, saying they had a long journey ahead of them. The noble looked disappointed. "Well, I suppose I should get back to work anyhow, though I'm reminded of the words of the famous geologist and author, John Moraine. He compared the task of writing to the progress of a glacier... just one eternal grind."

41515.msg – **Chapter 4** | *Isten – Mage Darvostan*

Topic: *Mage Darvostan*

Aren's knock was answered by a charming man, literally. He introduced himself. "I am the mage Darvostan. Let me guess..." He smirked at Aren. "I know, you want me to use my powers of persuasion to influence a woman. That's it, isn't it? A beautiful woman who has caught your eye and bewitched your heart."

Aren blushed. "No, sir."

Darvostan turned his attention to William. "Hmmm... I see you don't need any help in that department. Then perhaps you have a father whose stern disapproval you wish to temper."

William's interest was aroused. "You can do that?"

The mage preened his moustache. "But of course. Did I not already tell you that I am Darvostan?"

Suddenly uneasy, Aren asked, "Are you saying you can control people with magic?"

"Not exactly. I merely suggest to a certain person that he or she responds favorably to my client. I admit my suggestions can be most persuasive. The effect is temporary, but it usually lasts long enough to achieve the desired result." The mage winked and leered.

"I'm usually busy dawn to dusk when the Shira is in session, but now is my slow season. I'm sure there must be something I can do for you two."

Aren swallowed hard. "I'm a mage myself, of sorts. I'd very much like to learn your charming power. Will you teach it to me?"

The mage dazzled Aren with his smile. "Of course-- and it will only cost you 200 burlas."

Aren broke out in a cold sweat. He heard himself saying, "Only 200 burlas? You can't expect to survive if you charge such outrageously low prices!"

The mage shrugged agreeably. "Well, if it will make you feel better, how about 300 burlas?"

Aren felt nauseous. "What? And know I was cheating you? I wouldn't dream of insulting your talents by paying any less than 400 burlas. Take it or leave it!"

The mage surrendered gracefully. "All right, if you insist. 400 burlas, but not a penny more."

Choice: Pay Mage

The mage cheerfully accepted the money. In no time, he showed Aren the secret of his charm. As the companions departed, William noted that Aren looked a little woozy.

Aren shook his head to clear it. "I'm not sure exactly what happened back there, but my head's still ringing."

Choice: Pay Mage – **Not Enough Money**

Aren reached automatically for their money pouch. William took it out of his hand. "Darvostan, I'm afraid there's not enough in here to cover your 'reasonable' charge. Come on, Aren, let's go."

As they departed, William asked Aren if he was all right. "You still look a little woozy."

Aren shook his head to clear it. "I'm not sure exactly what happened back there, but I don't think I liked it."

Choice: Leave

William noticed the glazed expression in his friend's eyes. Pulling on Aren's arm, he said, "Uh, excuse me, sir mage, but I just remembered an important engagement. Come on, Aren. Let's get out of here while we still have the clothes on our backs."

As the companions departed, William asked Aren if he was all right. "You still look a little woozy."

Aren shook his head to clear it. "I'm not sure exactly what happened in there, but I don't think I liked it."

41535.msg – *Chapter 4\Isten – Backstage Club – Lord Lighton, Card Shark*

Topic: Lord Lighton, Card Shark – Greeting #1

William approached the nobleman. "Excuse me, m'lord. Are you Lord Lighton?"

The lord lit a cheroot and affirmed his identity. William and Aren sat down at the card table. "My friend and I would very much like to attend the play this evening. Could you perchance spare a pair of tickets?"

Lord Lighton deftly shuffled a deck of cards. "No, perchance I could not. I have many friends, each of whom wishes to see Maria Liana at her finest. Why should I give you two strangers preferential treatment over my cherished confidants, most of whom owe me money? No, I enjoy the spectacle of watching my debtors squirm in their seats far too much to relinquish even a pair of tickets."

William looked at the card table littered with glasses, sandwich plates, and cigar butts. He saw the neat stacks of burlas by the lord's elbow and changed tactics. "I see you've cleaned everyone out," he said, nodding toward the coins.

"Do you play, sir?" The lord's eyes lit with interest. "Fancy yourself lucky? The stake's 75 burlas a hand."

Choice: Yes

Lord Lighton looked at each of them in turn. "I only play the two-handed game. Which of you will it be?"

Choice: William

Topic: William Wins

William looked over his hand. The men cycled through a few cards until William, satisfied, knocked and revealed his cards. Lord Lighton winced and slid his stake across the table, then checked his stack for more coins.

Topic: William Loses

William looked over his hand. The men cycled through a few cards until Lord Lighton knocked and revealed his hand with a flourish. William tossed in his cards and graciously ceded the hand. The lord collected his winnings and suggested another hand for the same stakes.

Choice: Aren

Topic: Aren Wins

Aren looked over his hand. The men cycled through a few cards until Aren, satisfied, knocked and revealed his cards. Lord Lighton winced and slid his stake across the table. "I won!" Aren crowed.

The lord smiled thinly. "Indeed." He looked to his stack for more coins.

Topic: Aren Loses

Aren looked over his hand. The men cycled through a few cards until Aren, satisfied, knocked and revealed his cards.

Lord Lighton smiled. "Not good enough, my boy," he said, showing his cards. Aren watched, crestfallen, as the lord collected his winnings. "Well, I'm enjoying this! Another hand, same stakes?"

Topic: Lord Lighton Defeated

Twin smiles of victory seeped onto the companions' faces. "Looks like we've cleaned you out, m'lord."

Lord Lighton bowed graciously. "A trifling sum, yet I'm afraid it's all I brought with me and acquiring more would be a bit... inconvenient at the moment. Perhaps a deal...?"

William inclined his head. "You've read my mind. We'll happily return that last wager in exchange for a pair of tickets to this evening's show."

Lord Lighton fished a pair of tickets from his breast pocket. "How could I possibly deny such avid devotees of the theatre?" he answered with irony, sliding the tickets across the table. William nodded his head in acknowledgement, exchanging the tickets for the winnings.

"A pleasure, Lord Lighton. Enjoy the show."

Topic: Yes – Not Enough Money

The party's purse was not up to the task. "Well, it'd be shame to let a temporary cash flow problem get in the way of our game," the lord mused. "I'd be happy to extend you a loan to keep playing."

William and Aren stood. "A most generous offer, m'lord, but one which I rather think I'd come to regret. Perhaps some other time."

Lord Lighton smiled graciously. "As you wish. I look forward to it."

Choice: No

"I think Kor's wisdom overshadows the luck of Henne today, m'lord. You'll excuse us, please."

Lord Lighton chuckled. "I like you, young lord. I do hope we'll meet again."

Topic: Lord Lighton, Card Shark – Greeting #2

Lord Lighton cocked an eyebrow. "What do you say, shall we invite Henne's smile?"

Topic: Lord Lighton Cleaned-Out

Lord Lighton warily watched the pair's approach.

"Well, my lord Lighton," William began innocently, "care for another game?"

The Jaeger shook his head and crooked his mouth into a smile. "I don't think so, gentlemen. Your play is serviceable and I suppose your style has a certain country charm, but I prefer opponents with a more... cosmopolitan flair."

William stood as if he'd been slapped in the face. Aren saw William's face reddening. "As you wish, milord," he tossed in hastily, guiding William away from the table.

"He-- he-- as much as called me a bumpkin!" William fumed when they were out of earshot.

Aren suppressed a smile. "You get used to it."

41500.msg – *Chapter 4\North of Isten – Amphitheater Box Office*

Topic: Amphitheater Box Office #1 – Don't have Tickets

William and Aren tried to enter the locked amphitheater. Their attempts were interrupted by a man behind the ticket window. "Can't get in without a ticket. Do you have one?"

"No, but we just want to--"

"Can't get in without a ticket," the man repeated.

"Yes, we heard you the first time," William replied impatiently. "Can you sell us two tickets, then?"

"Got to step up to the ticket window in order to be served. But you're in luck... The box office just opened." The man turned his 'Closed' sign around to read 'Open'.

The party stepped up to the window. "Two, please," William said through gritted teeth.

"Sorry, all sold out. Lord Lighton bought up all our remaining tickets." The man hung a 'Sold Out' sign over the window, turned the 'Open' sign around to read 'Closed', stepped out of the ticket box, and walked away.

Topic: Amphitheater Box Office – Have Tickets

The ticket-taker snapped aside the box office curtain in response to William's insistent knock. "You're early-- the show's not for a while yet."

"We like to get good seats," William replied dryly.

"Let me see your tickets, please." The man waited expectantly.

Topic: Amphitheater Box Office – Give Tickets

The man took the tickets and snapped the curtain closed again. Moments later William and Aren heard the amphitheater door unlock.

10836.msg – *Chapter 4\North of Isten – Isten Amphitheater – Maria Liana, Famed Actress and Simon's Mother*

Madame Maria Liana, Famed Actress and Simon's Mother

Topic: Greeting

Maria: "Oh, my dears! So sweet of you to come to see me! (TO WILLIAM) By the three faces, but you're a gorgeous young man, aren't you? I'll bet the young women cling to you like moss to a boulder."

William: "(EMBARRASSED) Uh, I do all right, I guess. We just wanted to tell you how much we admire your work."

Topic: Shepherds

William: "We met another admirer of yours recently. He said you might be able to tell us something about the Shepherds."

Maria: "My son Simon... Do you know Simon? No? Pity, he's a charming boy. You'd like him... Where was I? Oh yes. Simon ran around with the Shepherds for a while. They're a bunch of young idealists, full of romantic notions about changing the world. Ah, youth!"

Topic: Simon

William: "You say Simon is no longer with the Shepherds?"

Maria: "My Simon is such a passionate boy. Never toes the water, just plunges in head first. He gets his impulsive nature from me, of course. (GIGGLES) I thought he'd really found his niche with the Shepherds, but no, eventually he grew bored with even those charming free spirits."

William: "Where is he now?"

Maria: "He's up and joined the Children of all things! Now he's dedicated his life (at least this year of it) to the divine patron of the Theatrical Arts. Isn't that just too, too deliciously ironic? His last letter was addressed from Durst, in Old Chuno. He said he was delighted to be on the frontier, and that being so close to the Waste was one big adventure."

Topic: The Waste

Maria: "I can't believe Simon is a son of mine! To be happy out there in the middle of nowhere at all! There's not a proper theater in all of Chuno! Although I suppose I do understand the mystique, the aura if you will, of living so close to the Waste. I did a play about that just last season. It was entitled 'The Mana of Love'."

William: "(BORED) Sounds, uh, fascinating."

Maria: "(QUOTING) They said of my performance: 'Maria Liana plays the tragic part of Siarrah the mage to perfection. I laughed, I sighed, I wept real tears as she...' Oh, never mind that. I wasn't at my best for that one even though the critics raved. It's a lovely story though... Siarrah summons up a beast from Etherea and falls in love with him. Since Ethereans don't survive long in our world, the beast soon begins to die. As a pledge of her love, Siarrah opens a rift into Etherea and takes the beast back to his universe. This noble act is too much for her, and I die, quite beautifully, in the third act. My farewell speech ran fifteen minutes and brought the house down every time."

William: "Well, Madame Maria Liana, it has been a great honor to meet you, but we really must be going."

Maria: "Farewell, my dear friends, but let us not say goodbye, for t'is too sad a word on which to part."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "We must be on our way now, Madame Maria Liana. Thank you for the pleasure of your company."

Maria: "Oh my dear young man, the pleasure was all mine. If you happen to be in Durst, please give my love to my son Simon. No, that won't do... Tell him he has my enduring affection and undying love, a thousand kisses and twice as many hugs. With that, he'll have no doubt that the message is genuine."

Topic: Allie Renee and Her Father #1 – The Late Brian Castere

The door opened. William looked down at a girl swathed up to her eyes in a black cloak. "Hello, little one. What's your name?"

"I'm Allie Renee. I'm three years old. Today I'm sad."

"Why is that, Allie Renee?"

The little girl fidgeted shyly. "Brian's gone. I want him to show me more magic, but Dada says he's not coming back."

The girl's father scooped her up in his arms, pushing the cloak away from her delicate face. "It's all right, baby. We'll always remember our special friend, won't we?"

The father's eyes got misty as he explained, "Brian Castere was my best friend. He used to do magic tricks for Allie, not that he was a true mage, you understand, but he had apprenticed with a Mehrat mage until the border conflict heated up again. Hard to say what he might have become, given half a chance. As it was, he used what magic skills he had to help his business."

Aren was curious. "How did he do that?"

"Brian was a trader. He'd cast a spell to speed his wagons on their way. He'd bind magic to the wheels to keep them sound. When he was in town, he'd also entertain the children with simple tricks. He was a gentle, sweet man. We'll miss him, won't we, Allie Renee?"

Aren bent down to look the girl in the eye. "I'm sorry your friend is gone. Maybe this will help..."

Aren made a fist and said a few words. When he opened his hand, a cascade of light erupted in all colors of the rainbow. The girl's face shone with delight. "There's still magic in the world, Allie Renee."

"Thank you," said her father, and gently closed the door.

Topic: Teal Bakery #1

The smell of fresh-baked bread wafted from the open door. The companions entered to see the baker removing loaves from the oven. "I'm sorry, the bakery is closed today."

Aren sniffed. "It certainly smells like you're doing business..."

"These loaves are not for sale. I baked them for the funeral party. In fact, I rather doubt you'll find any of the shops open today. The whole town is in mourning over Brian Castere's tragic death."

William asked, "Do you know how he died?"

"I heard it was a riding accident. Most unfortunate. He was my neighbor, you know. A trader. I didn't see him much. He was always on the road, traveling from the port to marketplace selling his merchandise..."

"What did he trade in?"

The baker put the loaves on a rack to cool. "Cotton, silk, cloth of all kinds, dyes, ribbons, that sort of thing. Yes, I'm going to miss Brian. He was a friendly fellow, kind to children, and when he was home, a good neighbor."

41320.msg – *Chapter 4\ Teal – Boy who Kept Brian Castere's Secret*

Topic: Boy who Kept Brian Castere's Secret

The door opened abruptly. William saw the shining knife clutched in the boy's hand. Automatically, he drew his sword.

"I was just polishing it!" the boy cried in alarm.

William sheathed his weapon. "Greeting strangers with that Mehrat-sticker in your hand is a good way to get yourself killed, especially this close to the border!"

"Sorry, sir," the boy mumbled.

William sought to make amends for his harsh words. "Here, lad, let me see that knife of yours... Yes, you're keeping it in excellent shape."

"I wanted it to be extra shiny for Brian's funeral."

"Isn't a knife a rather odd sign of mourning?"

"Brian gave it to me... It was supposed to be a secret, but now that he's dead I guess it doesn't matter."

William was puzzled. "But a boy your age is certainly old enough to keep a knife."

"It's not that I have it... It's how I got it. One day I happened to be following Brian's wagons. A bump in the road knocked a crate off the back of one of them. It split open and out came a bunch of swords."

William frowned. "Did Brian trade in weapons?"

"That's just it... He dealt in cloth and linen. Brian came back to fix the trouble. He got mad when he saw me, but I swore an oath I wouldn't tell anyone. We packed up the swords, then he gave me this knife to remind me of my promise, he said."

"Where were Brian's wagons bound?"

"I don't know exactly. We were on the road heading west. I can't believe I won't see him again." The boy shrugged tears from his eyes. "Kor damn the horse that killed him! I'd slit its throat if I knew which one it was!"

William touched the boy's shoulder. "After what you've told us, perhaps we should think twice before blaming the horse."

41300.msg – *Chapter 4\South of Teal – Brian Castere's Gravesite*

Topic: Brian Castere's Gravesite – Pre-Burial

A newly-prepared burial plot lay at their feet, an unpleasant reminder of their own mortality. Aren shivered. William examined a cloth-covered object. Moving the cloth aside, he saw a white granite tombstone so new that stone dust still clung to the carved epitaph.

Aren came up beside him and examined the grave marker. "Doesn't sound like anyone knew him too well, does it?"

41305.msg – *Chapter 4\Teal – Brian Castere's House – Brother Alexi*

Topic: Brian Castere's House – Brother Alexi

The door was opened by a man whose robes identified him as a priest of Kor. "Are you friends of the deceased?"

William was intentionally vague. "I'm not quite sure who you mean."

The priest beckoned them inside the cottage. "I hope this doesn't come as a shock, but Brian Castere has passed away. This is his house. I am Brother Alexi, from the monastery near Burlen. I've come to officiate at tomorrow's funeral."

William affected a woeful countenance. "How did poor Brian die?"

The priest sighed dolefully. "It was an accident. He was thrown from his horse. I didn't know him personally, but I understand he was a good man, cut down in the prime of life. I take it that you were acquainted with the deceased?"

William decided it might be bad ka to lie to a priest. "No, not actually."

Alexi shook his head. "I can't claim to understand the motivation behind such a despicable deed."

The priest straightened a stack of papers on the desk. "I'm staying in the house to keep the vultures at a distance, at least until the deceased has been properly laid to rest."

"We'll keep our ears open in case we hear something about the break-in."

"May Kor watch over you," the priest offered them in farewell.

41301.msg – *Chapter 4\South of Teal – Brian Castere's Gravesite*

Topic: Brian Castere's Gravesite – Post-Funeral

A simple headstone marked the newly-filled grave of Brian Castere. "I wonder how many of the townsfolk showed up for the service," William wondered.

Aren noticed the many bunches of flowers strewn upon the grave. "Seems like he must have been a well-liked fellow."

41331.msg – *Chapter 4\Teal – The Watering Hole Tavern – Man Bumped*

Topic: Man Bumped in Tavern #1

The man huddled over his ale like it was his long-lost son. When William accidentally bumped into him, he growled, "Lately this town's been overrun by strangers what don't know how to walk proper." He jerked his head toward the fireplace. "First that one come in bothering everyone about Castere... Kor's teeth, the man's only just died!"

William apologized and offered to buy the man another ale. The man declined with a curt "Buy me a drink and next thing I know you'll want the story of my life. No, sir. The price of an ale ain't worth the price of your company. Please, go away and let a man drink in peace."

Topic: Gerard Fayle

The Watering Hole was fairly crowded. William saw a few vacant chairs near the fireplace. He asked a squinty-eyed man if he minded sharing his table. The man grunted and waved them to sit. The party ordered applejack brandy, a little nip to go against the nip in the air.

When the drinks came, Aren was disappointed. "I thought these would be warmed... That's how we do it at the Spitting Lion. Perhaps I can remedy this chilling situation."

Aren cupped his glass between his hands. After a few well-chosen words, the brandy began to swirl gently and give off wisps of steam. Aren took a sip. "Ah, now that's more like it. William, do you want me to do yours?"

The squinty man followed these proceedings with more interest than was warranted by simple tavern magic. "You're a mage?" he asked gruffly.

Aren affirmed that he was, and glared at William before his friend could say otherwise.

"Did you know Brian Castere then?"

"No. Why?"

"Just that he was a mage too."

The party sat in silence, letting the warmth of the fire soak into their bones. Suddenly, the squinty man smiled a squinty smile. No doubt meant as a gesture of good will, the smile came across as friendly as a cornered maslith.

"So, you're a mage. Maybe you can give me some advice then. With things such as they is, lately I've been thinking a lot about security... How to keep my goods safe from marauding Mehrats. Mages always seem to keep secrets. How would you hide something so's it wouldn't be found?"

Though Aren would have preferred moving to another table over answering, he was brought up to be polite to his elders, if not his betters. "I suppose if something was really important to me, I wouldn't let it out of my sight for a minute."

William chimed in to keep Aren from bearing the brunt of the conversation. "I certainly wouldn't leave it in my home. That's the first place a thief would look."

The squinty man pondered their words, then finished his drink in one gulp and rose from the table. "Thanks. You've given me something to think about then."

Aren rolled his eyes. "Thank Henne, I thought he'd never leave. William, next time would you mind picking our drinking companions with an eye toward their personalities and not their dazzling good looks alone?"

Topic: Brian Castere's House – Brother Alexi Gone

There was no answer to William's knock. "I guess Brother Alexi went back to the monastery after the funeral."

William tried the door and was surprised to find it unlocked.

Topic: Letter – Gerard Fayle to Brian Castere

Castere: The contact was pleased with the merchandise. His superiors agreed that the quality was excellent-- but it had better be, considering the price you charged him. That's right, Castere-- the Mehrat told me the stuff cost him twice what you told me he paid, you double-crossing carlith kisser. I'll be in town next week, and you'd better have the rest of my money ready and waiting.

G.F.

Topic: Brian Castere's Gravesite – Grave Desecrated

Aren and William stared in astonishment at the desecrated grave. The funeral flowers lay crushed beneath haphazard piles of dirt, apparently shoveled out in great haste. The grave marker leaned on its side, its corners chipped. Aren gasped, "Why would anyone do this?"

"I think I'll try to find out." Grimly, William scrabbled around in the dirt, striking something solid. Aren drew near with trepidation.

"Is the coffin...?"

"Yes, it's broken open. But what was the grave robber hoping to find? I'm going to have a look at the corpse..."

Aren looked around nervously. "I'll... I'll keep watch."

After a few anxious minutes, William pulled himself out of the grave and wiped off his hands.
"Kor, I hope I never have to do that again!"

"What did you find?" Gingerly, Aren took the stained and seamed scrap of paper from William.
"A map... with Teal clearly marked... and another location a bit south of here. Looks like something's buried nearby."

William verified Aren's findings. "All right, let's see where this gets us. But give me a hand here first."

Together, they sealed and reburied the coffin, tidying the site to a respectful state of order.

41325.msg – *Chapter 4\Teal – Children's Counting Game*

Topic: Children's Counting Game

The door was open. The companions peeked inside to see two lines of children sitting on the floor. They were playing a common counting game, dealing out pebbles one by one until they ran out. The child with the most pebbles wins all the pebbles from the child sitting across from her. The game continued until one child had all the pebbles or it was time for bed, whichever came first.

The companions watched as the children played.

"1 is for the Emperor, the one the Cloak has graced.
2 is for the mages who in battle made the Waste.

3 is for the Triune, for they are always near.
4 is for the seasons as they turn throughout the year.

5 is for the years in which a priest of Kor must train.
6 is for the countries over which our Emperor reigns.

7's for the books of law which make Antara great.
8 is for the Harvest Days that we all celebrate.

9 is for the pirate clans who sail upon the sea.
And 10 is for the fingers that I count on, 1, 2, 3!"

As they turned away from the door, the companions smiled and remarked that it was good to see the recent events in Teal hadn't had much effect on the children's cheerful moods.

Topic: Noal's House – Before Adding Naomi's Nutrients to Garden

Aren knocked and waited. "No one's answering. From Naomi's description, I'd guess this is her cousin Noal's house. Naomi said we should go ahead and add the nutrients to his garden even if he wasn't home. I'm sure he won't mind..."

Topic: Noal's Garden

It seemed to be a fairly ordinary garden. Aren recognized the green leafy tops of beets, radishes, and carrots, though of course he wasn't willing to vouch for what lay beneath the surface.

Topic: Adding Naomi's Nutrients

Aren opened the container. "Whew! These crystals smell awful! Well, I guess garlic does too, yet that's good for you."

Aren sprinkled the container's contents in wide arcs, spreading nutrients evenly throughout the garden. Then he stepped back and watched expectantly. Nothing happened.

After a few minutes, Aren laughed at his own foolishness. "I'm not sure what I was expecting... Leaves to go shooting up into the sky or the fruit to ripen before my eyes, I suppose. Guess this is a less dramatic form of magic."

Topic: Noal's House – After Adding Naomi's Nutrients to Garden

Aren rapped on the door. After waiting a few minutes, he said, "This house matches the description Naomi gave us, but I guess Noal isn't home. Good thing I already added the nutrients to the garden. If we had hung around waiting for Noal's permission, the plants might have died."

Naomi at the Conservatory in Varnasse

Topic: Payment

Aren: "Good day, Naomi. Your cousin wasn't home, so we sprinkled the powder over the garden just like you told us to."

Naomi: "(GIGGLES, SEEMS TO BE OVER-REACTING JUST A BIT) You did? Oh, that's wonderful! Thank you so much!"

Aren: "(CLEARS HIS THROAT) Ur, um... You said something about teaching me some magic..."

Naomi: "(ACTS LIKE IT SLIPPED HER MIND) Oh, did I? Well, I suppose it's a small enough price to pay."

Narrator: Naomi takes Aren aside and teaches him some useful tips of the trade. Aren is a quick and eager pupil. His new abilities come so naturally that he wonders he didn't sense these forces before.

Noal the Gardener, Naomi's Cousin in Elona

Topic: Greeting

Aren: "Oh, you're home. You are Noal, aren't you?"

Noal: "Yes, that is my name. Do I know you?"

Topic: Naomi

Aren: "We're friends of your cousin Naomi. We delivered a present from her but you weren't home so we just put it in the garden."

Noal: "(CONFUSED) You put it in the garden? I saw no present in the garden. What was it?"

Topic: Nutrients

Aren: "We brought some nutrients to save your dying plants..."

Noal: "(FIGURING IT OUT – FURIOUSLY INTERRUPTING) Oh, so you're the ones! I can't believe you dare show your faces around here again!"

Aren: "What did we do?"

Noal: "(SPUTTERING) What did you do? I can't believe the nerve, the audacity... I'll tell you what you did. You believed Naomi's blather about the 'eternal symphony of nature' and all that touchy-feely nonsense. You let her use you, boy! Tell me, what exactly did you do to my garden?"

Aren: "(STUTTERING) We, uh, I just added some nutrients to the soil. Naomi said your vegetables were dying and needed..."

Noal: "That's enough! You obviously had no idea what you were doing. You poured methanene crystals into my garden! Do you know the effect those have on vegetables?"

Topic: Effect

Aren: "(FAINTLY) No, sir, I don't know what effect the crystals have on vegetables."

Noal: "The vegetables bloat with gas... And do you know what happens to people who eat those vegetables?"

Aren: "(FAINTLY) No sir, I don't."

Noal: "(ROARING) The exact same thing! Now that wouldn't be so bad except Naomi knew I had been invited to a very important dinner party at Jaeger Fulbag's estate. High ranking officials, their wives... It was the event of the season. As is customary, guests were expected to bring gifts from their particular region. Since I am but a poor mage with little to offer such nobility, I brought the first harvest from my garden for the banquet. Well, you can imagine the uproar... the confusion... the smell! I am completely discredited with the Antaran gentry. This disgrace will follow me to my grave! And all thanks to you!"

Topic: Goodbye

Aren: "(EMBARRASSED) I guess we'll be leaving now... Let's get out of here!"

41110.msg – *Chapter 4\Elona – Vacant House*

Topic: *Vacant House*

When no one responded to William's knock, he took a peek through an uncurtained window. "There's furniture inside, but no sign of anyone actually living here. Maybe they're hoping to return once things settle down with the Mehrat."

41105.msg – *Chapter 4\Elona – Paranoid Man*

Topic: *Paranoid Man – Bead Chest Location*

"Who is it?" a nervous voice asked through the door.

"Just a couple of ravenous jaegers looking for a handout," William said.

The door opened a crack and an eye peered out as if the man inside actually expected to see the starving beasts on his front porch. Then the door opened all the way. "Who are you really?" the man asked suspiciously.

"We're from Pianda, traveling to see what life is like way out here in Elona."

The man snorted. "Life in Elona reeks. First there was the Feeblepox, now the Mehrat invasion."

Aren gasped. "The Mehrat have invaded?"

"It's only a matter of time, what with scouts and spies being seen as far east as Burlen," the man sighed. "Isolated as we are, Elona will be easily overrun. That's why so many of the townsfolk are packing up and moving south."

"But the Imperial army will protect you," Aren protested.

"Better to protect ones' self. Now me, I have a friend who knows where to find protection. His information led me to a bead chest, probably stolen and dumped. Only problem is the rain wiped the conversion key off it. If you think you'd have better luck opening the damn thing, I'll sell the location to you for what I paid -- 150 burlas."

Choice: Buy Chest

William handed over the money. "It's a bit of a risky investment, but whatever's in that chest could be quite valuable..."

"Or quite worthless," Aren added, having learned as much from previous experience.

The man pocketed the money. "Follow the road out of town a bit to the northwest. I moved the chest into a hollow tree and marked the tree with a star. I wish you more luck with the chest than I had."

Choice: Buy Chest – *Not Enough Money*

William frowned as he counted his coins. "I'd take the deal, but I seem to be low on cash right now."

The man's face darkened. "Well, if you're not going to bargain in good faith, just forget the whole thing. Goodbye."

Choice: Leave

William considered the deal. "I think I've decided I don't want the chest at any price."

The man blustered. "Well, thanks for wasting my time! Just don't come running to me when the Mehrat are at your heels!"

41120.msg – *Chapter 4\Elona – Marcus's Fiancée*

Topic: *Marcus's Fiancée*

As the companions turned onto the path, the door flew open and a young woman ran to meet them. As she approached, her pace slowed to a walk. "Oh, I thought you were Marcus."

William tried not to feel offended. "Sorry to disappoint you. Is Marcus your husband?"

The young woman sounded sad. "No, not yet. We were about to be married, but he got called away to fight the Mehrat in the west. Have you any word from the border?"

"Sorry to disappoint you again, but no."

"It's not fair. The men get to go off and have all the adventures, while we women sit at home, waiting and worrying. It would serve Marcus right if I did take up with another fellow!" She eyed William speculatively.

Quickly, William turned to go, dragging Aren along with him. "Sorry to disappoint you yet a third time, but I'm no home wrecker, especially not when the man involved is a trained soldier. For the sake of all the single men in Elona, I hope your boyfriend comes home safe, sound, and soon!"

41115.msg – *Chapter 4\Elona – Sister and Her "Dog" Brother, Freddy*

Topic: Sister and Her "Dog" Brother, Freddy

As the party neared this house, a dog lurking behind the front door began to bark. They took another step forward. The dog's bark got louder and meaner. They took one more step. The dog sounded like it was about to make toothpicks out of the wooden door. The companions looked at each other. In silent agreement, they decided to back off and move on.

As soon as they rounded the bend in the road, the front door opened, revealing a small girl and an even smaller boy. Giggling, the girl patted her brother on the head. "Good dog, Freddy! Good dog!"

The little boy growled and wagged his rump happily.

41415.msg – *Chapter 4\Everton – Natalie's House – Natalie's Sister*

Topic: Natalie's Sister

A thin, anxious woman opened the door. "No, you can't come in. We have the Pox here."

William heard moaning from within. "Is there anything we can do?"

The woman stepped outside, closing the door behind her. "Oh yes, there is! It's my sister Natalie. She has the Pox and she's pregnant. She'll have the baby within the month. It's been so rough for her... Natalie's husband and I are sick with fear for her and the child. If you could carry a message to the Sisters near Isten... We would go ourselves but we can't leave Natalie's side. Tell the Sisters the time is almost here... "

William assured the distraught woman that they'd do the best they could. She gripped his arm. "Please, sir, go quickly. Without the Sisters' care, I doubt poor Natalie will survive, and I feel most certain the infant will die."

Topic: Natalie's Sister – Sisters of Senaedin not yet Notified

Natalie's sister met them at the front door. "Oh, thank Senaedin you're here. Natalie is getting worse. Are the Sisters on their way?"

William fidgeted. "Uh, oh, well, we haven't exactly had the time to go to Isten yet..."

Tears welled up in the woman's eyes. "Oh, sir. No one else in Everton will come near this house because of the Pox. You're our only hope. Please find the goodness in your heart to carry the message to the Sisters."

41420.msg – ***Chapter 4\Everton – Natalie's Sister's House***

Topic: Natalie's Sister's House – No Key

Even with a solid tug, the door refused to open. A closer examination revealed it was locked.

41530.msg – ***Chapter 4\Isten – Temple of Senaedin – Sister Senena***

Topic: Warn of Natalie's Condition

William touched his braid in a gesture of courtesy and acknowledgment. "That is kind of you, revered Sister, but before availing ourselves of your hospitality, we must deliver an urgent message. There is an Everton woman, Natalie by name, inflicted with the Pox and expecting a baby at any time. Her sister begs you or one of your sisters to go to Everton to help with the birth."

Sister Senena grasped William's hand. "I will send our most skilled healers to her bedside immediately. You have performed a good deed in a cruel world. Senaedin blesses you."

41415.msg – ***Chapter 4\Everton – Natalie's Sister's House – Natalie's Sister***

Topic: Sisters of Senaedin Notified

Natalie's sister came outside when she saw who was at the door. "I cannot begin to tell you how grateful I am. The Sisters are with her now... It's too early to tell, but they've managed to bring her fever down at least. We can only pray that the birth will be easy and the baby healthy."

Aren said, "We will add our prayers to yours."

The sister handed him a key. "Without you, my sister and her child would have died. I want to give you something for your kindness. This is the key to my house, just down the road. I don't have much, but what's there is yours."

Embarrassed, Aren protested. "No, that's quite all right. We don't need--"

The woman shushed him. "I insist."

Topic: Sisters of Senaedrin not Notified in Time – Natalie's Baby Died

Dressed in mourning, the sister answered their knock. "Oh, it's you. Just so you know, Natalie's baby was stillborn. She is delirious with fever... She may not survive. I know you did the best you could... You'll have to excuse me now. I need to go back in to help my brother-in-law."

Topic: Sisters of Senaedrin not Notified in Time – Both Natalie and Baby Died

A grief-stricken woman scurried through the door, closing it quietly behind her. "Haven't you two done enough damage already? My brother-in-law is a broken man. The death of his wife and son has destroyed him. Try to understand and simply leave us alone to grieve."

41420.msg – ***Chapter 4\Everton – Natalie's Sister's House***

Topic: Natalie's Sister's House (Use Blue Key to Enter House)

The key turned smoothly in the lock. As Aren opened the door, he muttered, "I can't help but feel like a thief."

William entered the home of Natalie's sister. "We don't have to take everything, Aren, just enough to make her feel like she's repaid us for our trouble."

41405.msg – ***Chapter 4\Everton – Gerard Fayle's House***

Topic: Gerard Fayle's House – No One Home

Nobody answered their knock. The door was locked tight, and the reddish lock appeared sturdy. A name plate on the door read 'G. Fayle'.

Topic: Letter – Brian Castere to Gerard Fayle (Use Red Key to Enter House)

Gerard, this is not the first time you have accused me unjustly. Your contact's information was incorrect. Let me hasten to assure you that after accounting for transportation costs and payments to officials and information brokers, your share is exactly as we agreed... 50-50. I'll be happy to go over the particulars when you arrive to prove once and for all, I would never cheat a partner.

Brian

Topic: Exiting Gerard Fayle's House

Gerard Fayle glared at them from the path. "I trust you found everything you were looking for?"

"No--" Aren began. "I mean--"

William stepped in smoothly. "We just came by to return your key. We found it--"

William broke off as Fayle drew his sword and advanced. "You should learn to mind your own business."

William drew his own weapon, muttering, "People keep telling me that."

Topic: Soldier's Paradise Shopkeep #1

The merchant bustled around in the back of his shop. At William's hello, he turned and welcomed the party back. "I'll be with you in a minute. You caught me right in the middle of taking inventory... As you can see, things are still pretty unorganized around here. If I ever see my aunt again, you can bet she'll hear an earful!"

After a few minutes, the shopkeeper trotted out to greet his customers. "Sorry to keep you waiting, good folk, but things are all at sixes and sevens just now. My assistant, or should I say, my

ex-assistant has left me. It's only just now that I've discovered she took a great deal of my stock with her! Oh, I knew I never should have hired a relative!"

Choice: Give Fayle's Burlas

William gave 500 burlas to the shopkeeper. "Will this help you restock?"

The shopkeeper was speechless. "I... What... Where did this come from? And why are you giving it to me?"

"This money doesn't really belong to us," William explained. "We found it in Fayle's house. We're pretty sure he was selling weapons to the Mehrat. He probably murdered his partner who was cheating him out of his fair share."

The shopkeeper stared down at the pile of gold coins in his hands. "I used to see Fayle with Brian Castere from Teal. Was that his partner?"

"I'm afraid so. It looks like Fayle killed him and made it look like a riding accident."

"Poor Brian." The shopkeeper shook his head. "I traded with him often. Why would such a nice fellow get mixed up in a dirty business like that?"

"I guess we'll never know."

Sighing, the shopkeeper said, "Well, I'll do everything I can-- within limits, you understand-- to bring Gerald Fayle to justice."

William cleared his throat. "Er, that won't be necessary. Fayle has already reaped his, uh, just reward."

The shopkeeper eyed the companions shrewdly for a moment. "I see... Then you have done me a double service. Please accept this in gratitude."

Choice: Soldier's Paradise Shopkeep #2

The merchant bustled around in the back of his shop. At William's hello, he turned and welcomed the party back. "I'll be with you in a minute. You caught me right in the middle of taking inventory... As you can see, things are still pretty unorganized around here. If I ever see my aunt again, you can bet she'll hear an earful!"

Topic: Invitation to Dinner

The flower boxes and curtained windows invited the party to approach the house. The door was soon opened by plump, apple-cheeked man wearing a checked napkin in place of a cravat. A chorus of children's voices sang out, "Who is it, Daddy? Who's at the door?"

Before the travelers could get out a word, the man was joined by his wife, every bit as round and pleasant as her husband. "Oh, my dear! Don't keep these youngsters standing in the door. Invite them in, my pet... Invite them in!"

The husband complied with his wife's hospitable wishes. Before they knew what happened, the companions found themselves seated at the head of a long table, staring into the scrubbed faces of ten or twelve children. Ten or twelve pairs of shining blue eyes stared back.

Someone managed to stammer, "Oh, but we couldn't intrude on your meal..." before the rumbling in their stomachs drowned out the words. They surveyed the table groaning under the weight of platters filled with carrots and yams, roast meat, savory pudding, and tender greens. "Well, all right, maybe just a mouthful..."

An hour later, feeling as stuffed as goose down pillows, the companions bid farewell to their hosts.

Topic: Burlen – City Overview

Tales spoke of gold-lined streets. Though no coins dressed the cobblestones, the marble buildings and dapper people bespoke the city's legendary wealth.

Pernath Academy: The oldest and largest repository of knowledge in the Empire, the Academy played host to scholars from across Ramar.

Defenders of the Empire: An imposing emporium with a generations-old reputation for trafficking in only the finest protective equipment.

Bailey's: Discretion was the watchword at Baileys, where secluded booths and secure rooms provided merchants and politicians a measure of privacy.

Maxwell's: The oldest financial institution in the economic center of Antara. All the great noble Houses were on a first-name basis with Maxwell's, whose holdings stretched across the Empire.

Topic: Bailey's Tavern – Overheard Conversation #1

William leaned in to eavesdrop on a neighboring table.

"Caverton's in hot water over this whole Consort fiasco," the first was saying. "People are moving against him in the Shira-- I hear he's been calling in years' worth of favors just to hold onto his interests."

The second man nodded agreement. "There's talk in the palace that the Emperor might transfer the governorship of T'icor to another House. Requests from major Houses for Imperial audiences have tripled already. It's quite a bee's nest."

William lost interest as the conversation moved on to other topics. Aren didn't understand the bit about transferring the governorship, so William explained.

"Most governorships remain in the same family for generations-- the Escobars have overseen Pianda almost since the Empire began. But officially, provincial governors are custodians for the Emperor. It hasn't happened in decades, but the Emperor is free to revoke the position and reassign it to another House."

"Ah. So that's why Caverton was so upset."

William smiled at the memory. "Yep. Almost makes you feel sorry for the guy. Almost."

Topic: Greeting #1 – Pass Needed

The matron stood from the desk. "May I see your pass, please?"

Aren looked at her blankly. "Pass?"

The woman's expression didn't change, yet Aren suddenly felt like an idiot. "Your Academy authorization pass. I'm afraid you can't go in until I've seen your pass."

Topic: Show Pass

The matron inspected the pass before handing it back. "Thank you. Go right in."

Topic: Greeting #2 – Pass Already Shown

The matron smiled up at them. Aren thought he heard ice cracking. "I've already seen your pass. Go right in."

9380.msg – ***Chapter 4\Book – Luerdan's Essays on Ancient History, Volume 1***

Topic: Book – Luerdan's Essays on Ancient History, Volume 1

Luerdan's Essays on Ancient History, Volume 1

I have argued this point for many years, and I have finally come to accept that since there can never be proof, my theory will never be given the consideration it deserves. And so I write it here, that at least it shall be preserved for future generations.

Perhaps someday there will come a like-minded scholar who will bring my theory before an enlightened academic community, one less interested in internal politics than in the findings of the few serious scholars we have left in these dark times.

I am speaking, of course, of my theory of the dawn of magic. Before the Empire, before the Grrrlf War, before the Exile, we were a peaceful, agrarian people. We tilled these lands, and tended the crops and the herds, and we mined the earth for jewels and useful metals, and we traded amongst ourselves. Some few scraps of records remain, documenting all of these things.

We know that human lands extended even further than the boundaries of the Antaran holdings today. We know that there were TrKaa seen in the skies, and our villages were home to scribes and herbalists, merchants and innkeepers, fishers and hunters, much as they are today. But there is one thing which is lacking completely from these records. There is not one mention of spells or spellcasters.

It is clear to anyone who studies the historical evidence that this was a time without magic. A time before magic.

Topic: Book – Luerdan's Essays on Ancient History, Volume 2

Luerdan's Essays on Ancient History, Volume 2

The Grrrlf came upon us like a flash flood. They had hunted out their own lands, driven the TrKaa from theirs, and still hungered for fresh territory. They struck without warning or mercy, killing thousands in their initial push. We had no choice but to run, fleeing across mountains, desert, and ocean. The lands we settled were harsh, but they gave us a place to gather our people, nurse our wounds, and plan for the future.

It was difficult enough to eke out an existence over the next century, let alone dream of conquest and the reclamation of our homelands. But the taste of defeat was bitter in our mouths. To our children we taught not the finer crafts and skills, but the skills of the warrior. We taught them how to mine vital metals, and to forge weapons and armor.

It was sometime during this period that magic was discovered. Details of this period are sketchy, but evidence suggests this was not an individual achievement, but rather nearly simultaneous manifestations of power throughout the human population. I speculate it was like the opening of a door, or the bursting of a dam.

The first mages were feared, hunted down as unnatural and evil. But as their powers brought unexpected and unaccustomed ease to the lives of the exiles, mages rose in stature to become the leaders of the people. With a new weapon in its arsenal, the human army returned to their homeland and descended upon the Grrrlf without warning.

Topic: Book – Luerdan's Essays on Ancient History, Volume 3

Luerdan's Essays on Ancient History, Volume 3

The Grrrlf War was brutal. The Grrrlf, fierce and skilled fighters, greatly outnumbered us. But with no central leadership coordinating their packs, their forces were divided. Human mages called the very elements themselves down upon the enemy and reclaimed our homeland one piece at a time.

We drove them back, pack by pack, until finally they massed at the foot of the Ulrich Mountains. The casualties on both sides in that final battle were staggering. Ultimately the Grrrlf were forced to surrender and retreat over the mountains to the north. The Shepherds were set to watch for any hint of a fresh Grrrlf offensive, and humanity turned to the task of rebuilding civilization.

All of these facts are well-known by the Academy, and I do not dispute them. My theory is simply this: men and women who have an unsuspected and untapped potential for magic have been known to manifest it for the first time when their lives were threatened. Might this not also happen to an entire race?

Perhaps humanity discovered magic because we desperately needed a weapon against the Grrrlf. Perhaps the Exile was not tragic, but the finest blessing in human history. The loss of a few thousand lives pales in significance to a racial advance of magic's magnitude.

If the overbearing herd beasts who call themselves the finest scholars in the civilized world were not desperately trying to discredit me by propounding the idiotic notion that the dawn of magic was a completely coincidental event, they would have to admit that I am correct in this.

9410.msg – *Chapter 4\Book – Humanity's Homecoming, Volume 1*

Topic: Humanity's Homecoming, Volume 1

Humanity's Homecoming, Volume 1

There are, among my colleagues, many who believe that the passing of the age of magic from this land is a tragic happening. I disagree. Our ancestors were foolish to allow the mages, self-important and drunk with the victory over the Grrrlf, to consolidate their power. But I get ahead of myself, and will allow history to tell its own tale.

After our great victory, we turned our attentions to the rebuilding of our lands. Very little of our architecture or agriculture has survived the attentions of the Grrrlf, so we started over. We quickly found that it was much easier to employ the assistance of a mage than to rebuild everything without magical help, and so the mages became indispensable.

Some among the mages truly wished to help mankind, and these few did not take advantage of their stature. Most others embraced a lifestyle of ease, often at the expense of the common folk around them, and put their free time to the pursuit of magical knowledge.

The abilities of these mages grew, and they crafted spells and artifacts of astounding power and subtlety. And then, of course, there were those who felt that their innate talents placed them far

above the masses, and who focused their power on conquest and domination regardless of the consequences to others.

9420.msg – *Chapter 4\Book – Humanity's Homecoming, Volume 2*

Topic: Humanity's Homecoming, Volume 2

Humanity's Homecoming, Volume 2

As petty men and women built their fortunes and fates of magic, an historic event occurred at the garrison of the Shepherds. Those brave souls, left to guard the pass against the return of the Grrrlf, had grown contemplative in their solitude. It was to this isolated group that the three faces of the Triune first appeared.

As the mages carved their petty empires out of the civilized lands, the Shepherds formed the temples of the Triune and sent forth missionaries to bring their message to the people.

The mages, caught up in their own power, dismissed the Triune as lunatic ravings. Such intense self-absorption typified the magely mindset and paved the way for disaster. For all their power and trickery, all their knowledge and research, they were still human. And it was that very humanity which touched off the argument which ended their age of influence.

Two angry men, prideful and jealous, loosed the full force of their power in a violent duel. The resulting maelstrom of raw magic annihilated both combatants as well as a vast portion of the surrounding countryside, creating the area now known as the Waste. Witnesses to this duel were obliterated along with the rest of Chuno, but there can be no other explanation for the disaster.

And so I put to you this question: were we not justified in driving them out and destroying their works? Their own decadence and pride drove them to increase their power rather than learn to control it. If the Triune smiles upon us, as certainly they must, may we never again become dependent upon such as they.

Topic: The Founding of Antara, Part 1

The Founding of Antara, Part 1
by Lar Teredal, Imperial Scribe

By the whims of fate and my lord Emperor's sheer cunning brilliance, we are triumphant-- and without a drop of blood upon the battlefield. Who would have thought, 25 years ago, that any of this could be accomplished? None but my lord Emperor, and I now wish I could take back my doubts of so many years past; they shame me. Looking back, I see now that our success was destined once Emperor Valorian started us on our journey.

Then a king, not an emperor, lord Valorian was not satisfied with merely the Antaran kingdom. He had a grander vision, and the key lay with the neighboring state of Burlen. As rich as Antara was, Burlen was far richer.

While Antara had build great armies to fight hostile neighbors to the east and south, Burlen had applied itself to mining and metalcraft. Coins minted from Burlene gold became the standard of currency throughout the continent, and King Valorian desired that wealth and prestige for Antara.

Despite their small standing army, Burlen was not an easy target. Antara bought all its weapons and armor from Burlen, which had even finer armaments in reserve. And an invasion could destroy the very confidence in its currency which His Majesty sought to possess.

King Valorian was not dissuaded. He once said to me, "If you take risks, history will either remember you as a brilliant leader or an utter fool. But at least you will be remembered." With little hope of a quick military victory, and lacking the resources necessary for a prolonged campaign, His Majesty took a gamble.

He sent his agents out into the towns and villages, the forests the woods, to spread word that Antara would give sanctuary to any mage willing to accept it.

Topic: Founding of the Empire, Part 2

Founding of the Empire, Part 2
by Lar Teredal, Imperial Scribe

King Valorian's offer of sanctuary was heard throughout the continent. But at first, nobody came. And who could blame them? Only a few generations ago, mages were driven from cities and slaughtered on sight. They'd learned to hide their talents, and themselves. Paranoia came easily. Trust did not.

Finally, one man weighed the possibility of betrayal and death against the chance to end the fear and practice his abilities openly. When others heard how well he was treated by His Majesty, why, we were up to our necks in grateful mages. When King Valorian asked them to go into hiding once again, this time as his agents, most agreed and slipped quietly into Burlen. Over the next twenty years, they slowly rose to influential and powerful positions.

While His Majesty pretended peace and goodwill towards Burlen, thereby becoming their strongest supposed ally, his magical agents within its borders used their arcane abilities and political influence to keep Burlen in a constant state of internal upheaval and unrest. After two decades of bribery, assassination, rumormongering, and detrimental legislation, Burlen's political and social climate tottered on the edge of chaos.

When King Valorian annexed Burlen and brought it under the Antaran banner, the people welcomed him with cheers of adulation.

He moved quickly to extend his influence, but the master coup was convincing the three branches of the Triune to support his cause under the proposition that spreading the faith would be easier with safe passage guaranteed throughout his domain.

And so, having secured Triunal support, King Valorian declared himself Emperor.

With the combined armies of Antara and Burlen, Emperor Valorian swept eastward. Some provinces offered token resistance at first, but a brief demonstration of power from Antaran mages convinced them of the wisdom of my lord Emperor's sovereignty.

And so it that the plan Emperor Valorian set into motion 25 years ago has come to fruition. Citizens, delivered from generations of violent border conflicts, food shortages, and political uncertainty, are prosperous and happy.

Each of the mages seeking sanctuary within the Empire is required to swear fealty to the empire, which they do gladly in appreciation for the Imperial amnesty. And now those mages are being sent out among the people to help build and improve this new Antaran Empire.

I suspect that history will indeed remember Emperor Valorian.

9450.msg – *Chapter 4\Book – Founding of Antaran Political Structure*

Topic: Antaran Political Structure

Antaran Political Structure
by Academy Staff

The Emperor is the cornerstone of our civilization, the very heart of Antara. Upon the ruler's death, the Imperial Cloak seeks out the most suitable living descendent of the Valorian bloodline to become the new Emperor or Empress.

The Emperor manages all foreign affairs, relations between the sentient races, and the taxation of the Empire. He also commands the Imperial army through the appointed Marshall. The Emperor is the champion and embodiment of Imperial Law, and an audience with him is the last possible resort of a wronged citizen.

The Jaegers are the highest of noble Houses. These families supported the Emperor before there was an Empire, when Valorian was merely King of a province. They support him still today, forming the administrative staff of the Empire and the managers of the Imperial Palace. They oversee the Shira and monitor adherence to Imperial edict and law.

The Grand Council, also called the Shira, is comprised of representatives from every guild, province, and House. Each representative serves a set term; 3 months for guild members, 6 months for prominent Houses, and 12 months for provincial representatives. The Shira is responsible for public spending, creation of laws, and the resolution of disputes between provinces, guilds, or Houses.

Imperial Consuls are appointed by the Emperor himself, representing him in every major Imperial city. The Consul is the Emperor's eyes and ears within a city, and so the office of the Consul is also usually the center for that city's Imperial intelligence efforts. The Consul speaks with the voice of the Emperor, so any order which he might give is assumed to be the order of the Emperor himself.

Each province is overseen by a hereditary governor who handles all tasks associated with running a large piece of the Empire. Although governors do not create laws for their provinces, they are charged with enforcing them and dispensing justice for all crimes not handled by the Triunal. Since the Triunal only deals with the worst of crimes (rape, murder, and the like), the governor handles most of the judiciary load.

The guilds are organizations of the skilled craftsmen of Antara. Guilds regulate the quality of goods and set prices for their work. They also lobby on behalf of their members and interests. Although some guilds have a chapter in each city, all organized under a single Empire-spanning administration, others are organized locally. Guild membership is mandatory for anyone wishing to practice that craft.

10854.msg – *Chapter 4\Burlen – Pernath Academy – Walston Moore*

Walston Moore, Director of the Vell Studies Department at Pernath Academy

Topic: Greeting

Aren: "(COUGHING FROM THE DUST) Hello, is anyone at home?"

Walston: "I'm over here. What do you want?"

Topic: Museum

Aren: "Are you the curator of this museum?"

Walston: "Museum? This is my office, boy! I'm Walston Moore, the new director of the Vell Studies Department now that Burns has passed on, Kor guard his soul."

Topic: Vell

Aren: "I thought the Vell were just a legend."

Walston: "(GRUFFLY) Legend? They lived, son, sure as you or I. Sure as I, anyway... I'm not so sure about you. Let me tell you, they were a damn sight more advanced than our so-called Empire, and that's without any magic! (HE ALMOST SPITS THE WORD "MAGIC")"

Aren: "More advanced but without magic? That doesn't make any sense."

Walston: "What would you know about sense, hmmm? I tell you the Vell were more advanced. Magic's a fluke, an unpredictable lot of hocus-pocus. You can't rely on it. Kor's blood, most people can't even use it! But the Vell... the Vell used something within everybody's reach -- Science!"

Topic: Science

Aren: "Meaning no disrespect, but I've never seen the need for science."

Walston: "Hmmp. Everybody could use science, boy. They just don't realize it. Come here, let me show you something. See the object in that glass case?"

Aren: "(INTERESTED) What is it?"

Walston: "(PASSIONATELY) That, my boy, is a piece of Vell science! Only a few artifacts have ever been found. Of those, only a scant handful make any sort of sense to us. But this one... this one still works!"

Topic: Artifact

Aren: "What does this artifact do?"

Walston: "Ah, a logical question. This wondrous contraption synthesizes a cohesive polymer from petro-chemical sources."

"(CONT) It then applies that polymer in a wide dispersal pattern to... (FADING OUT AS REALIZES HE'S LOST HIS AUDIENCE)"

"(A TRIFLE IRRITATED) Well, it sprays a substance that makes whatever it touches ultra-hard and durable."

Aren: "Aren't there potions to do the same thing?"

Walston: "To a lesser extent, yes, but you're missing the point. The liquid happens without any magic whatsoever! True, magic was responsible for many wonders during the First Wave, before the uprisings... but even then only a relative few were able to use the power. Science can be used by anyone... by everyone! Think of the possibilities once we master the principles involved!"

Topic: Writing

Aren: "What are all these markings on the wall?"

Walston: "Those are the three languages of the Vell. As near as we can determine, the Vell actually used completely different written languages for different purposes. We understand most of their common language, and bits and pieces of the one they used for verse. But the last one -- their scientific language -- has confounded us."

Topic: Languages

Aren: "Three languages? How strange."

Walston: "To us perhaps, but it would have seemed natural to them, of course."

Aren: "If you figured out the first two, why can't you get the last one?"

Walston: "Each language is highly specialized, with little overlap between them. Without some way to put things into context, we can only guess at their meaning. Vell scholars dream of finding that missing piece of the puzzle which will unlock the scientific language."

Topic: Goodbye #1

Aren: "I think we've taken up enough of your time."

Walston: "Yes, I agree. I need to get back to my work."

11540.msg – **Chapter 4\ Grandeur – City Overview**

Topic: *Grandeur – City Overview*

In the wake of Chuno's devastation, Grandeur evolved into the center of Chinese government. Planners strove to expand the town in celebration of nature rather than in conflict with it, resulting in an organic and peaceful coastal haven.

Temple of Senaedrin: Priestesses of Senaedrin have been central to Chinese life ever since the Waste disaster, becoming the soul around which Chuno was reconstructed.

Arcana: With the close proximity of the Waste, this shop found little difficulty in keeping well stocked with unusual items and curiosities.

Inn By the Sea: Travelers often chose the northern route through Chuno solely so they could stop at this idyllic seaside retreat.

Topic: Sumner's Ancestral Tree Chopped Down

The door opened as William and Aren approached the house. "You're not from around here. What do you want?" the elderly man asked suspiciously.

William put on his friendliest smile. "We're just passing through. Aren't travelers welcome around here?"

"No. Not since someone chopped down my family's ancestral tree. I know it wasn't anyone from around here. No Chinese would commit such a sacrilegious act."

Aren said he understood, though he was actually somewhat confused.

The man continued, his voice tight and angry. "House Sumner has tended that tree for six generations. Six. Some son of a Wasterel chopped it down one night. The wood's probably already been carved into a curio. Lay you odds it's setting on some Jaeger's mantle even as we speak."

Aren tried a few words of sympathy, but the man was too angry to pay heed. Barely able to contain his rage, he slammed the door in their faces.

Topic: Woman with the "Cheese" Jaeger's Green Key

The short, round woman held her finger up beside her nose in a gesture meant to convey shrewd deduction. "Say, you're not from around here, are you? I'll bet you've come for your key, right?"

William's brow furrowed. "Right on one, wrong on two."

The woman argued persuasively, "Are you sure you haven't lost a key? I found one while out picking flowers at the edge of the woods to the north. It's much too fancy to belong to any locks around here, and you're the only strangers I've seen in weeks. It must belong to you."

William tried again. "No, truly, ma'am. It's not our key."

The woman pressed the key into William's hand. "Oh, I'm sure you're wrong. A young man so far from home can't be expected to keep track of everything. Take your key back, please."

William gave up. "All right, if you insist."

The woman smiled brightly, pleased to have done her good deed for the day. William suppressed the urge to ask if she happened to find a bag of burlas they recently misplaced. Instead he bade her thanks and good day.

41601.msg – *Chapter 4\Korus Landing – 'The 'Cheese' Jaeger has Sumner's Idol*

Topic: The "Cheese" Jaeger's Back Door is Locked #1

The back door to the house wouldn't budge. William noticed the keyhole below the door's handle. "The door's locked."

Topic: Using the "Cheese" Jaeger's Green Key to Enter Back Door

The key turned in the lock with a soft click. William cautiously opened the door. "Come on, Aren."

The room was dark and quiet, though the companions could hear party noise in the rest of the house. Opening the adjoining door a crack, William peeked out.

The party was in full swing. Nobles and wealthy merchants guzzled wine and munched cheese with pickles and enthusiasm. William quickly closed the door. Now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, he saw that he and Aren were in the Jaeger's art gallery. "We've got to work fast. They could come in here at any second."

42015.msg – *Chapter 4\Eastbank – Sumner and his Ancestral Tree*

Topic: Returning Sumner's Idol to Sumner

William tried to hand the statue to Sumner, who barely caught a glimpse of it before turning away in disgust. "I don't want that abomination! How dare you bring it to me?"

Now Aren was completely confused. "But we thought..."

"I can't even look at it without feeling sick to my stomach. Please, for the sake of my House, go to the woods to the north. Find the stump of our ancestral tree and bury that... that thing as deep as you can."

Topic: Idol not yet Buried

Sumner asked, "Well, have you buried that monstrosity?"

"No," answered William. "We haven't had the time."

"Then get out of my sight! Just knowing that you carry that thing in your pack..." Sumner trailed off in anger and disgust. With a curse, he slammed the door.

42016.msg – ***Chapter 4\North of Eastbank – Chunese Ancestral Tree Stump***

Topic: Chunese Ancestral Tree Stump

From the enormity of the stump, they surmised it had been a Chunese ancestral tree. Axe marks made it clear that the tree hadn't been felled by lightning or other natural occurrence.

Topic: Digging a Hole

The ground was soft and easily dug. Soon a gaping hole beckoned beside the stump of the Sumner ancestral tree.

Topic: Depositing the Idol

William and Aren gingerly laid the idol at the bottom of the hole. "There's half the job," Aren said, glancing at the shovel with a sigh.

Topic: Burying the Idol

William and Aren buried the statue deep, refilling the hole with dirt. After tamping down the soil with the shovel, they sat back for a moment's rest. "Let's hope that's a proper end to it," said William, wiping his brow.

Topic: Digging up the Buried Idol

Aren surveyed the recently-dug patch of ground. "Now that we've buried it, I don't think we should dig the idol up again."

Topic: Idol Buried

"Have you buried that repulsive object?" Sumner asked with no preamble.

"Yes," said William. "We did exactly as you requested."

Sumner's face softened from anger to sorrow. "You've helped right a grievous wrong, lads. I will ask a Sister of Senaedrin to bless the site and with that, perhaps it will rest in peace. You troubled yourselves with a favor for a stranger. For that, I wish to give you this sapphire. It too has belonged to House Sumner for generations. Because you retrieved the fragment of ancestral tree, it is right that you receive another family keepsake in return."

Topic: A Fan of Camille's Prophet

A middle-aged woman greeted the travelers, offering them a drink of well water. They accepted gratefully, washing the road dust out of their mouths. As they drank, she apologized for the quality of her water. "Of course, you couldn't expect it to taste like water drawn from the Prophet's Well in Camille, now would you?"

The woman continued. "I've actually seen the Prophet, you know. I always go to him when there's a crisis or I have a difficult decision to make. The Triune speaks through him, pointing out the correct path. I always come away with a calm heart and a clear head."

The woman's eyes glowed fervently. "I've talked to folk who he's cured of stiff joints, warts, diarrhea..."

"Yes, I think we get the idea..."

"I heard that the Prophet even cured a boy of the Pox!"

The companions looked at each other skeptically. "The Sisters of Senaedrin have healing gifts. Sometimes they cure the Pox."

The true believer looked smug. "Perhaps, but in this case they tried to cure the boy, and they failed. The Prophet succeeded."

The companions thanked the woman for her hospitality.

Topic: The Blind Prophet of Camille #1

William bowed as the door opened. He heard a deep voice say, "Ah, good day to you, noble Piandan, and to you as well, young mage." William straightened to find himself staring into the blank white gaze of a man with no irises.

"I don't mean to be rude, but how can you see us if your eyes..."

The man answered simply, "One does not require eyes to see. Have you come for a blessing?"

"Which Arm of the Triune do you represent?"

The man's voice took on deep, ringing tones that made the air vibrate. "I represent all, or none, as you see fit. I do not split my faith into three and then decide between the parts. I open myself fully to whichever Face wishes to speak through me."

"Then a blessing from you would be three times as potent."

The prophet frowned. "Mine is the faith of peace; my blessings are not gifts of power. To receive a blessing, you must relinquish a sword, pristine and unmarred by battle."

Topic: Give Used Weapon – Not 100%

The prophet was dismayed. "This weapon has been used in combat. You will receive no blessing for that which is stained with blood."

Topic: Give Unused Weapon – 100%

The prophet examined the weapon with his sightless eyes. "Yes, this metal is pure, unstained by blood. I will give you my blessing."

The companions knelt before the prophet who set his hands on their heads.

In a voice so low as to be almost unintelligible, he said, "Man lives but once, though in that life is a thousand lives. Man dies but once, though in that death is all eternity. Blood, breath, and bone. Ocean, air, and earth. The fire that binds is the fire that burns. May your flame burn clear and still in the winds of the world."

Topic: Imazi Insurance Policy is Blessed

The companions rose to their feet and noticed that one of their packs was glowing. Looking inside, they discovered the source to be the insurance policy bought in Imazi, which shone with a warm, blue light. Pleased, the prophet told them, "You have been touched... granted a great gift. Do not squander it. Now you must leave."

The glow faded as the prophet ushered the companions out. "Gift? What kind of gift? I don't understand."

The prophet smiled enigmatically as he closed the door.

Topic: Party doesn't Possess Imazi Insurance Policy

The companions rose to their feet. "That's funny. I didn't feel a thing."

The prophet shrugged. "I can cast the hook into the waters, but I cannot make the fish bite. Go in peace and may the Triune's wisdom come to you in time."

42220.msg – ***Chapter 4\Camille – The Blessed Well***

Topic: The Blessed Well #1

William noticed a sign by the well. "Sixty burlas per sip? That's outrageous!"

A short, husky man approached and launched into his sales pitch. "Camille's very own prophet once drank from this well, blessing it with wondrous restorative powers. Sixty burlas per sip, but you might say it's well worth it." The man laughed loudly at his joke.

Choice: Pay 60 burlas

"It's rather a steep price, but we're in need of restoration."

They each took a sip of the water. Sure enough, there was an immediate healing effect.

After a moment, a realization occurred. "I think all he's done is dump some Senwater and anti-poison in the water. Well, that was an expensive lesson, but not totally worthless."

Choice: Pay 60 burlas – *Not Enough Money*

William patted his purse regretfully. "I'm afraid my well's a little dry."

The man shrugged. "This one won't be when yours gets refilled."

Choice: Leave

"For that kind of money, we'd rather find our restoration in a barrel of ale, thank you," William replied, walking away. "Kor, that fellow must think we just fell off the rhubarb wagon."

42300.msg – *Chapter 4\Durst – Phoebe and Her Smelly Cat, Louie*

Topic: *Phoebe and Her Smelly Cat, Louie #1*

A willowy young woman answered the door, welcoming the strangers with a warm smile. "Won't you come in? I'm just about to eat. You look like you could do with some food."

William and Aren gladly took her up on the invitation. Soon they were seated at the table, digging into a large bowl of greens, tomatoes, and cheese.

Suddenly, William jumped. "I felt something wrap around my leg!"

The woman reached down and picked up an enormous orange cat. "This is Louie," she said, waving the cat's paw at William. "Oh, and I'm Phoebe."

William reached out and gently shook the cat's paw. "Pleased to meet you, Louie."

Louie jumped onto William's lap. "Oof!" William grunted under the heavy load, then "Mmmmmfff" as the cat's tail went into his mouth.

William reached around the huge furball in his lap, attempting a bite of salad. But his fork stopped half-way to his mouth. "Uh, Phoebe, I don't mean to be rude, but does your cat have a problem?"

Louie jumped off, offended. Aren's nose wrinkled. "He smells like rotten eggs at low tide. Are you sure he's all right?"

Phoebe patted the cat, who bumped his head against her hand. "Don't you listen to them, Louie. They don't mean to hurt your feelings."

The stench worsened. William and Aren pushed their chairs away from the table. "We're really sorry to eat and run, but we've got to go."

Phoebe looked vaguely apologetic. "He's always like that. It's not his fault."

"Maybe you should change his diet," Aren suggested as the companions headed for some fresh air.

10826.msg – *Chapter 4\Durst – Temple of Henne – Jhana, Child of Henne*

Jhana, Child of Henne

Topic: Greeting #1

Jhana: "(CHEERFUL) Welcome to Henne's Chapel, my friends. I am Jhana. What a lovely day it is!"

Aren: "(WARMS TO JHANA, SHY) Yes. Why, yes, it is a lovely day!"

Topic: Simon

Aren: "We were hoping you could help us find another Child of Henne. His name is Simon."

Jhana: "I haven't met him, but a stranger is just a friend whose name you do not know."

William: "(MUTTERS) Unless it happens to be a stranger with a knife at your throat..."

Aren: "(QUICKLY TO COVER WILLIAM) Maybe you've heard tell of him, then. He serves somewhere in this area."

Jhana: "Oh, now I recollect. The Child Simon was reassigned by the Revered Hand. I was honored to replace him at this chapel."

Topic: Hand

Aren: "Who is the Revered Hand?"

Jhana: "(ELATED) Fellich Marr, the Revered Hand of the Children. He lives in the glorious cathedral of Ticoro. He is the eye that watches o'er us. He is the heart that beats for us. He is the voice that commands us. He is the Hand."

Topic: Trees

- Aren: "I'm surprised to see a chapel of Henne in Chuno. From what I've seen, it looks like the people around here worship trees, not the Triune."
- Jhana: "(LAUGHS) Oh no, the people of Chuno believe in the Triune as do all the people of Antara. Chinese tree reverence is a matter of long-standing tradition and respect, but they do not worship them as deities."

Topic: Respect

- Aren: "How do the Chinese show their respect for the trees?"
- Jhana: "To the Chinese, the trees represent links to their past. When children grow to adulthood, they take a cutting from their parents' tree. Thus the propagation of the trees maintains a genealogical record of the family. Some of the oldest families have great groves, each identified by its own lineage. By tending the trees, the Chinese show their respect for their ancestors, and for nature itself."

Topic: Tradition

- Aren: "How old is this tradition?"
- Jhana: "I'm not from Chuno but when I was assigned to this chapel, I did some research. The tradition is quite ancient, dating back hundreds of years to after the disaster that created the Waste. That catastrophe destroyed the previous Chinese civilization, leaving a shattered, dispirited people. The process of renewal began with the creation of the ancestral tree tradition. It has since come to symbolize the cycle of nature, the strength of these people, and their ties to the past. If you'd like to know more, ask the Sisters of Senaedin. Their healing efforts had much to do with the Chinese resurgence."

Topic: Goodbye #1

- Jhana: "Join me in a song of joy! (SINGS) Dewdrops on the spider web, sparkling in the morning sun..."
- William: "Come on, Aren. We should go."

Aren: "Maybe sometime we could come back? I'd like very much to hear how that song ends."

Topic: Greeting #2

Jhana: "(SINGING) Dewdrops on the spider web, sparkling in the morning sun,
A fawn peeks out from leaves of green, a bird takes wing.
Henne's light shines on the world, bringing hope and joy to the hearts of men...
Bringing hope and joy to the hearts of men."

42315.msg – ***Chapter 4 | Durst – Adrian the Mercenary***

Topic: Adrian the Mercenary #1

The bearded, burly man sat on his front steps, polishing a sword hilt with a cloth. He held it up for inspection, then set it down in a row next to its gleaming brothers. Picking up a dull hilt from another pile, he began the process again.

The companions approached. "You're a swordsmith?"

"I make hilts and handguards for witless fops likely to pierce their toes showing off their fancy blades. But it's more of a hobby than a vocation, a useful way to spend my retirement. I was a mercenary. The name's Adrian." The man held out a thick hand in greeting.

"I've never met a retired mercenary before."

Adrian's smile was rueful. "Most of them don't live long enough to retire. I'm one of the exceptions."

"You must have been good."

"Lucky is more like it. No, you're right... Come to think of it, I was good."

They examined a handguard. "Looks to me like you're good at this as well."

"Thank you. I am rather proud of that piece. I'm doing it on commission for a young noble in Antara. It's complete except for a pearl I want for embellishment. If you come across one... well, I've not been paid yet, but I could give you some combat pointers that will stand you in good stead."

Topic: Adrian the Mercenary #2

"Ho there," Adrian waved with an easy smile. "Can't spare much time to chat right now, but remember-- if you find a pearl, I'll find the time to run some maneuvers with you."

Topic: Give Pearl

Adrian examined the pearl. "Yes, this will do quite nicely. My thanks. And now for that lesson I promised you."

The next few hours were spent practicing attacks and defenses. The companions added several advanced moves to their repertoire.

42305.msg – ***Chapter 4\Durst – Kraw the Chuman***

Topic: Kraw the Chuman

The companions took an involuntary step backward when the door opened. "Weren't expecting to see a Chuman, were you? I'm used to that reaction from strangers," said the deformed man.

"It's just that we've never seen one in a human village before."

"There's reason enough for that. Most Chumen don't like to live among the Normals... It reminds us of what we can never be. And most Normals are uncomfortable around us too, because it reminds them of what they could all too easily become."

"Isn't it strange being the only Chuman living in town?"

"No, this is my home. As far back as we can remember, my family has lived in this village. When the Disaster happened, my great great great great... oh, I don't know how great she was... Let's just say my ancestor was returning from a visit to the Temple of Senaedin near Grandeur. She caught the edge of the blast that made the Waste. It changed her and her unborn child, but she was fortunate and her family took them back. Over many years, the town accepted the family too."

"It sounds like everything worked out all right."

The man shrugged and gestured down at his misshapen body. "Guess that all depends on how you look at it."

Topic: Kraw's Neighbor #1

William greeted the woman of the house. Two children, a boy and a girl, watch the strangers with their big dark eyes. "What pretty children you have," William remarked.

"Why, thank you. They're always a little shy around people they don't know. But normally, they're as lively as two lambs in a dandelion patch."

"Are they shy with your Chuman neighbor?" William asked.

The woman shook her head, laughing. "My goodness, no. If I let them, they'd be over there all day, plaguing the poor man with demands for stories and piggyback rides."

"So he doesn't make you nervous?"

"Not at all. Why, whenever I have to go to Burlen for supplies, Kraw watches the kids for me. He's great with them, and I think the children should experience the... well, the cultural diversity."

A small frown crossed the woman's face. "Now I know the stories they tell about how Chumen are a little... unbalanced, but I've never heard a word against Kraw or his family. They are as much a part of Durst as me and my children."

"If only all villages were so open-minded," William said, and bade the woman good day.

Topic: Benje and Cherise – Sortiga Wedding Quest Completed #1

A handsome young man opened the door. "Don't I know you?" he said, a quizzical look on his face. Then suddenly, recognition dawned. He grabbed William's hand and pumped it vigorously. Then he called to someone inside the cottage. "Cherise, my angel, come here!"

A beautiful girl with thick auburn hair appeared at his side. "Who is it, Benje?"

"Do you remember me telling you how I lost the rings in a foolish attempt to keep you from marrying my brother?"

"Yes, but what...?" The girl looked puzzled. William tried to help out. "We merely cleared the road of Montari and found the rings. Benje did all the rest himself. After hearing so much about you from other sources, I am very pleased to meet you, Cherise."

Cherise profusely thanked William and Aren for aiding their elopement in Sortiga.

Aren asked, "So you ran off to Friole? Isn't it a rather depressing village to live in?"

Benje put his arm around Cherise, drawing her close. "We don't think so. Sure, the town went through bad times, but it's exciting have the chance to build something up from scratch, the Triune willing."

"I can see how it would be at that. Did your father ever forgive you, Cherise?"

Cherise sighed. "No, not yet. But he may when his first grandchild comes along." She laughed. "Of course, Benje's brother is still furious. I'm afraid I proved a bad return on his investment."

With just a trace of wistfulness, William wished the newlyweds Henne's blessing on their new life together. "I'm sure you two will be blissfully happy together."

Cherise looked up at her husband. He met her gaze with love and a tinge of amazement at his good fortune. "Yes, I'm sure we will."

Topic: Benje and Cherise – Sortiga Wedding Quest not Completed #1

A handsome young man opened the door. "Don't I know you?" he said, a quizzical look on his face.

William pondered, then answered, "No, I don't think so. Are you from Chuno?"

"No, Sortiga." Just then a beautiful girl with thick auburn hair appeared at his side. "Who is it, Benje?"

William introduced himself and his companion. Benje shook his hand, saying, "This is Cherise. My brother didn't send you by any chance, did he?"

William assured him to the contrary, then asked, "Why? Is he after you?"

Benje explained that his brother was supposed to marry Cherise, but it was a marriage without love. At the last possible moment, Benje and Cherise eloped and were married by a sympathetic priest of Henne.

William asked, "So you ran off to Friole? Isn't it a rather depressing village to live in?"

Benje put his arm around Cherise, drawing her close. "We don't think so. Sure, the town went through bad times, but the chance to build something up from scratch is exciting. The Triune willing, Friole will soon regain its life."

With just a trace of wistfulness, William wished the newlyweds Henne's blessing on their new life together. "I'm sure you two will be blissfully happy together."

Cherise looked up at her husband. He met her gaze with love and a tinge of amazement at his good fortune. "Yes, I'm sure we will."

42400.msg – *Chapter 4\Friole – Friole Farmer*

Topic: Friole Farmer

The farmer greeted the companions. "We don't see many strangers in Friole. You're welcome to sleep in my barn if you like."

The party thanked him for this kindness, then noticed his deeply pocked face and arms. "I don't mean to be rude, but I couldn't help notice you've had the Pox."

The farmer rubbed his face sadly. "I'm one of the few survivors in Friole. Damn near the whole town was wiped out. This was one of the first places hit. The Feeblepox came through, striking people down before the disease even had itself a name. The village is only now just beginning to get itself back on its feet."

"I'm sorry. All of Antara was hit hard, but it sounds like Friole got more than its fair share."

The farmer swallowed hard. "Ain't nothing fair about Feeblepox. It carried off my wife and children like they were twigs in a windstorm."

42401.msg – *Chapter 4\Friole – Friole Barn*

Topic: Friole Barn Locked – Not yet Invited

The locked door wouldn't budge.

Topic: Friole Barn Unlocked – Spend the Night

The companions entered the barn to decide if they wanted to spend the night there. Moving aside some straw, they discovered a worn leather satchel. "This looks like it's been here for quite some time."

Topic: Reading the Satchel Note

William brushed aside the cobwebs and unhooked the clasp. Gingerly reaching inside the satchel, he pulled out a piece of paper. "It's a letter from a Pernath researcher named Marston. He writes, 'Having received no reply to my first letter, I am writing again to strongly urge the Academy to send an expedition to the Aliero mines as soon as possible. My discovery of ancient caverns, probably dating back to the Vell, necessitate the resources of a full research team. This could well be the discovery of the century. Marston.'"

William turned over the letter. "Oh, there's also a postscript: 'I would like to request that Walston be excluded from the research team. Ever since our little disagreement on TrKaa mating rituals, he has been absolutely impossible to work with.'"

Topic: Letter – Vell Expedition

To: Master Burns, First Rector, Pernath Academy

I am almost afraid to write these words, lest the commission of them to paper cause them to become merely the dream that they seem to be! And what could they be but a dream; the vision of every scholar since the Academy's founding!

I apologize if I sound distracted, my thoughts are scattered like rikka-stones and I cannot find a way to make this scrap of parchment convey the excitement and awe that we all feel at this moment.

The expedition is a success! The few Vell artifacts unearthed by the miners are only the smallest fraction of the treasure we have uncovered. Although we have only barely begun to explore, we have already discovered carvings in all three Vell languages. It is my dearest wish that this might be the key that we have all been seeking for so long, the means by which we can finally unlock the ancient writings of this most mysterious race!

We have several needs, which we hope you see fit to grant us. More pairs of hands to help shift rock and copy these ancient carvings. Parchment and ink. Supplies for an extended investigation.

I suspect you will have no lack of volunteers for this expedition. Perhaps it is time for even you, my friend, to stir from your scholarly duties and venture forth into the world. For how could you possibly miss this opportunity to walk the buried halls of the Vell and help to decipher the secrets that this incredible place might hold?

For myself, I shall steal a few hours of sleep now, as we have been working day and night to secure this find. The mystery of the Vell has remained opaque for many thousands of years. A single night more will make no difference.

— Jarston

42400.msg – *Chapter 4\Friole – Friole Farmer*

Topic: Satchel Note Found in Barn

The farmer read the note. "You found this in my barn? Must have belonged to that courier, Kor damn his soul."

"What courier?"

"He was the cursed bastard who brought the Feeblepox to my home, to the entire village. Several years ago, he asked to spend the night in my barn. I went to rouse him the next morning and found him burning with fever and covered with red blisters. Four days later he was dead. No sooner did we bury him than my eldest started complaining of hot and cold flashes. You can well imagine the rest..."

400.msg – *Chapter 4\Entering Ghan Province*

Topic: Entering Ghan Province

Aren: "Something tells me we don't want to go this way. Let's turn around."

400.msg – *Chapter 4\Entering Ticoro*

Topic: Entering Ticoro

Aren: "We can't just waltz in through the main gate! I'm sure every guard in the city is looking for us."

High Brother Fellich Marr, Leader and Revered Hand of the Children of Henne

Topic: Simon

William: "We are looking for Simon, a Child of Henne. He used to serve in Durst."

Marr: "Hmmm. I remember him. Young, enthusiastic, with faith as clear as bells on a frosty morn. After the recent events in Durst, I thought it best to reassign him."

Topic: Durst

William: "What happened in Durst?"

Marr: "Simon was a Shepherd before he found Henne's light. Some of his former acquaintances passing through Durst recognized him and burned down his house. He was lucky to escape without harm. Apparently the Shepherds do not take kindly to being abandoned by one they consider their own. I moved him south to avoid further trouble."

Topic: South

William: "Where in the South?"

Marr: "The Children are building a new chapel in Ravenne. I knew that a young, energetic man like Simon would be useful to that effort."

Naku the TrKaa Courier

Topic: *Greeting #1*

Naku: "Kaa-ku! What exciting adventure are you on?"

William: "What makes you think we're on an adventure?"

Naku: "Humans are always on an adventure!"

Topic: Adventure

William: "But you're a courier, aren't you? Don't you have a lot of adventures yourself?"

Naku: "Yes sir, I'm a courier. Naku is my name. But as for adventures, none have come my way of late. This last run to Levosche was as dull as eggshells... Not a single Mantis attack or anything!"

Topic: Ravenne

William: "What's the news from Ravenne? That's where we're headed."

Naku: "Really? Are you going to help them build the new temple? That doesn't sound very exciting. When I left Ticoro, I hoped something interesting would be happening in Ravenne. I should have known better. Deliveries to priests are almost always dull. I hope I get a Grrrlfland run next."

Topic: Ticoro

William: "You came from Ticoro?"

Naku: "Yes! Haven't you heard? The Imperial Consort has been kidnapped!"

William: "(AWKWARDLY) I, uh, think we heard something about that, yes."

Naku: "They captured the kidnappers, but they escaped! Soldiers are looking everywhere for them. Have you heard if they caught them yet?"

William: "(WITH IRONY) I'm fairly certain they have not."

Naku: "I hope I'm around when they do... Now that would be exciting!"

Topic: Courier

William: "I've always wondered about something, Naku. Most TrKaa seem to be isolationists, keeping to their own villages... "

Naku: "(INTERRUPTING) Wicks."

William: "Sorry. ...keeping to their own wicks, but the few TrKaa humans do see are couriers. Why is that?"

Naku: "(CHIRRUPS) The excitement, the stories... Whenever something interesting happens, someone wants to send a message to someone else about it. We get to be there! I've always wondered why more humans don't carry the messages themselves instead of missing all the excitement!"

Topic: Goodbye

William: "I think we'd best be on our way now. We want to get to Cardone before night fall."

Naku: "Cardone? I thought you said you were going to Ravenne."

William: "Oh, did I? What a silly mistake. Well, goodbye, Naku. Have an exciting day... (SOTTO VOCE) but not too exciting."

10845.msg – *Chapter 4\|Ravenne – Berjon's Tavern – Scott Gratsi, Joyman*

Scott Gratsi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Greeting #3

Aren: "Scott! What are you doing here in Ravenne?"

Scott: "I developed a ravenous appetite for Ravenne lambcakes, and where better to eat them but in Ravenne?"

43125.msg – *Chapter 4\|Ravenne – Thomas and Stuart Aquivar*

Topic: *Thomas and Stuart Aquivar #1*

The door was opened by a middle-aged man with gentle brown eyes. He smiled. A voice from inside called out, "Well? Who is it, Stuart?"

Stuart grinned, gesturing the party inside. In a clear voice, he said, "Don't know, don't care. Enough to have, enough to share."

A handsome silver-bearded man rose from an armchair and approached the visitors. In resonant tones, he explained, "My brother is a bit slow. You see how it is. I am the mage, Thomas Aquivar. How may I be of service to you?"

Aren introduced himself and asked whether the mage would be willing to teach him some spells for a reasonable sum. Thomas shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, my lad, but that I cannot do. You see, my talents are vast and profound. I'm afraid that if I showed you even the smallest part of my powers, it would be too much for you to handle."

Disappointed, Aren turned to go. As he and William left the cottage, Stuart rhymed, "If magic comes as magic goes, we'd all have fingers instead of toes."

William laughed and waved. "Goodbye to you too, Stuart!"

Aren paused outside in the yard. "That was odd. I think there's more to this Thomas Aquivar than first meets the eye. There was a strange feeling in that room... nothing I can quite put a name to."

Topic: Secret Discovered

Aren cautiously peered inside the mage's window. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw Thomas and Stuart standing side by side. Thomas read from a book while Stuart gestured with his hands. A paperweight on the other side of the room slid across the table upon which it sat.

"Ah, now I see!" Aren turned from the window, angrier than William had ever seen him before.

Topic: Thomas and Stuart Aquivar #2

Heading toward the front door, Aren snapped at William. "Come with me!"

Bewildered, William followed Aren back into the mage's house. Disturbed by the sudden interruption, Thomas shouted, "What do you mean by barging in here! Leave this instant!"

Aren shouted back. "I could tell something felt wrong in here, I just didn't know what it was. But now I know! You're no mage! All the magic is in your brother! You're using him!"

Thomas Aquivar sighed and sat down in the armchair, suddenly calm. "You are right. But you are also wrong. We use each other. I am the voice that gives his power shape and substance. My knowledge and guidance insure that Stuart uses his gift to benefit the townsfolk, not do them harm."

The mage continued. "I am indeed guilty of perpetrating the myth that I am a great mage. But I know how these people treated my brother as a child... the harsh words, the thrown stones. If they knew he had the gift, their contempt would be replaced by fear. I might not be able to protect him."

Aren looked at Stuart, who stroked a kitten and smiled back benignly. "I see... I'm sorry. We won't tell anyone... We promise."

Thomas smiled. "For that you have my thanks. Perhaps, now that you know our little secret, you would be interested in a little magical study after all."

Aren nodded vigorously. "Yes, I'd like that."

Together, Thomas and Stuart showed Aren how to speak the words and manipulate the forces. He learned quickly and after only an hour had much to show for his efforts.

Aren was about to follow William out the door when Stuart set a hand on his shoulder. Looking into the mild brown eyes, Aren heard, "Deep and strong the currents flow. Float like a leaf or be pulled below."

Stuart turned his attention back to the playful kitten. Aren looked at Thomas who shook his head slowly. "Many of the things he says, I don't understand either. Good luck, lad."

43120.msg – *Chapter 4\Ravenne – Eustace the Pompous Merchant*

Topic: Eustace the Pompous Merchant

A well-dressed man answered William's knock. He looked at William's travel-stained garments. "No thanks, not interested."

"But we'd just like a moment of your time, sir."

The man started to close the door. "I said, I'm not interested."

"Would it make a difference if I told you that I'm William Escobar, the son of the governor of Pianda?"

The man looked dubious. "And I suppose next you'll be telling me that you've also found the wreck of the Cyrilan?"

William smiled his second-most beguiling smile. "No, sir! I would never try to trick a man so obviously distinguished and intelligent. We just want to hear your opinions on the, uh, recent developments."

The man opened the door wide. He inhaled deeply in oratorical preparation. "Well, I can see why you'd be interested... and why you'd come to me for information. I am, after all, a successful merchant, quite possibly the most successful merchant, in all of Ravenne."

"Yes, precisely."

"The new Chapel marks a turning point for this sleepy little town, a real awakening. Why, when Fellich Marr himself agreed to officiate at the dedication ceremony, I said to myself, 'Eustace, this is just what Ravenne needs. A real blow-out occasion. And you're just the man to pull it all together!'"

"When is the dedication to take place?"

Eustace blustered. "Don't know exactly, but we've already been told to expect an entourage of at least thirty priests, minor officials, security forces, and I don't know who all else. It's quite an honor, yes sir, quite an honor!"

William's brow wrinkled. "If you don't mind my asking, have you thought about where you're going to put all these people? And how are you going to feed them? The drought must have caused a food shortage in this town too..."

"Oh, don't you worry about that. We haven't given it much thought yet, but I'm sure that when the townsfolk understand how important it is to put on a good face and our best foot forward, they'll join together with hands outstretched..."

"...holding tar and feathers," William muttered under his breath. "Thanks for condescending to speak with us, sir. I'll be sure to give your greetings to my father."

The merchant visibly shivered with delight. "Oh, you are too, too generous, Master Escobar. It has been a real pleasure meeting you. I only wish you had been able to spend more time..."

"Well, even these few minutes seemed like an eternity to me."

"Oh, that is so kind of you to say..." Thinking twice, the man paused. Then shrugging, he closed the door.

43100.msg – *Chapter 4\|Ravenne – Simon's House*

Topic: Simon's House #1 – Imperial Ambush

"This must be Simon's house," Aren said. William nodded. "Funny how you can always tell where a Child lives, but you're never quite sure how."

The pair approached casually, and so were completely unprepared when Imperial soldiers sprang upon them from the back.

Topic: Simon's House #2 – After the Imperial Ambush

William and Aren peered through the windows, but the house looked empty. There was no sign of any more soldiers, or a priest of Henne.

"Do you think they hurt him?" Aren asked, concerned.

William shook his head. "No, they wouldn't dare. Besides, it's us they're after. I'd love to know how they knew where to find us."

9490.msg – ***Chapter 4\Letter – Priest Needed in Levosche***

Topic: Letter – Priest Needed in Levosche

Brother Simon,

Rachel and I cannot bear waiting any longer. We want to be wed and begin our lives together--every day we are apart is agony. Please make haste to Levosche where we await your blessing.

Sincerely,

Georges

43425.msg – ***Chapter 4\Ormede – Arlena, Museum Researcher***

Topic: Arlena, Museum Researcher #1

The party was greeted by a disheveled woman with hair that looked like sparrows had been using it for housing. "My name is Arlena. I'm a researcher for the museum in Ravenne. Would you like to come in?"

The companions followed the woman into her cottage, stopping dead in their tracks in amazement. The room was crammed from floor to roof beams with curiosities, objects of art, and stuffed animals, birds, and reptiles. Display cases of pinned insects vied for wall space with tapestries and masks. The air was heavy with the scent of dust and musk and aging leather.

"Things are a bit chaotic around here. My cottage serves as a warehouse for the museum's acquisitions. Everything needs to be identified, researched, and catalogued to ensure the correct installation in the museum." Arlena shoved her hand through her hair, dislodging a spool of thread and a quill pen. "Oh dear."

Aren found his voice. "It looks like you've got one of everything in the world here."

Arlena laughed. "Oh no, not by half. In fact, there's a very particular item I'm searching for right now. I'm supposed to finish up an exhibit on mechanical locks, but I'm missing a lever chest. The display won't be complete without one."

Topic: Lever Chest Found

Aren recalled a lever chest they found nearby. He told Arlena its location. As she thanked him, Aren the title of a volume atop a pile of books caught his eye. "Locking Mechanisms'... hmm..."

The researcher noticed Aren's interest. "Fascinating reading. I'm afraid I can't let you borrow it-- it's part of the museum's collection-- but you're welcome to stay and read it."

Aren took her up on the offer, and the companions huddled around the book. When the last page was turned a few hours later, everyone had gained a greater understanding of the inner workings of lock mechanisms.

Topic: Lever Chest not yet Found

Aren thought for a moment. "I don't think we've found a lever chest around here. But we'll keep our eyes open for one."

Arlena sighed. "That would be nice, dear. Be sure to come back if you find one. I really must finish that exhibit sometime soon."

Topic: Arlena, Museum Researcher #2 – Lever Chest not yet Found

Arlena smiled at the party's return. "I don't suppose in your travels you've found any lever chests in the vicinity?"

Topic: Teacher Indoctrinating Bigotry

A look through the open doorway revealed a teacher sitting on the floor in the center of a ring of children. William noticed that the teacher was young and pretty. He sidled into the cottage. The teacher welcomed the guest to the classroom, inviting him to listen to the history lesson for the day.

Blushing a bit under William's appreciative gaze, the teacher continued. "Now children, you remember that yesterday I told you about the war against the Grrrlf, before the founding of the Antaran Empire. Humans won that war at the Battle of Ulrich where the Grrrlf finally surrendered.

"To ensure the peace, we established a garrison of soldiers in the Harkune Mountains. Can anyone tell me what those soldiers were called?"

A half-dozen hands flew into the air. The teacher pointed at one little girl. "Yes, Dorona?"

"They were called Shepherds, ma'am, because they had to watch for the wolves."

"Very good, Dorona, but we call them Grrrlf, not wolves. Has anyone ever seen a Grrrlf?" No hands raised.

William lifted his hand tentatively. The teacher hesitated, then smiled. "I see our new student would like to add something. Your name, sir?"

"I'm William, ma'am, and I've seen a Grrrlf. In fact, I've seen several."

The teacher played along. "Well, William, can you tell us what your Grrrlf looked like? Was he fierce and ferocious? Did he growl and try to bite you?"

"Oh no, that's not what Grrrlf are like at all. They're peaceful and friendly!"

The teacher stopped smiling. "That must have been a tame Grrrlf, children. The wild Grrrlf live like animals up in the mountains much the same as they did in the old days, when the Shepherds had to protect the Empire against their return."

William left the classroom in disgust. "I can't believe the nonsense about the Grrrlf she was filling their heads with."

Aren shook his head ruefully. "They start the indoctrination process early 'round these parts. Good thing Kaelyn wasn't here."

William smiled. "Actually, I think it'd be fun to put Kaelyn and that teacher in a room together for a little while."

Topic: Magistrate Reichter #1

A handsome brass plaque read "Magistrate Reichter: Justice of Levosche." A butler showed the party into the library. Magistrate Reichter asked their names, then inquired after the health of William's father, whom he had met on several occasions. The conversation turned to their travels.

Wishing to be gracious, William said, "In all the towns we've visited, I don't think we've ever met a more charming, generous couple than the Ampersands. They invited us, complete strangers, in for supper and conversation. I can't recall a more pleasant evening."

The magistrate swirled his brandy, studying the liquid as if to see the future in the depths. "The Ampersands. Yes. Let me tell you about the Ampersands. They only recently arrived in Levosche. We haven't been able to find out much about them, only that they're ostensibly from Isten. I say ostensibly because none of my... friends there have ever heard of them."

William leaned forward in his chair. "What are you saying? Do you actually suspect those lovely people of being Mehrat spies?"

"I say nothing until I have positive proof. I'm only telling you what little I know so that in future you will be more circumspect around strangers, young Escobar."

Topic: Magistrate Reichter #2

The butler led the party back to the library. He stopped dead in the doorway, blocking the view. William pushed past him to witness the Ampersands wrestling around on the ground with the magistrate of Levosche.

Choice: Fight Magistrate –or– Fight Ampersands, then Help Them Escape Custody

With the party's aid, the Ampersands soon had the magistrate down on his knees, hands tied behind his back. He glared at William. "What in Henne's name do you think you're doing? Your father shall hear of this! I'll have you all hung for treason!"

Irene caught her breath. "You're the one who will most likely wind up at the end of a rope, Igdorf. We've been on your trail for quite some time."

Aren looked confused. "Will someone please tell us what's going on here?"

Miel Ampersand picked up a parchment from the floor. "This is a warrant for the arrest of Igdorf Langley, a Mehrat spy. The Antaran government has been after him for years."

"Then you and Irene are government agents?" Aren asked in disbelief.

Miel ran his hand over his head, smoothing down the few remaining hairs. "Not after this case. I think we've done enough undercover work to provide our grandchildren with a lifetime of bedtime stories. Wouldn't you agree, my dear?"

Irene took her husband's hand. "Yes, love. It's time to retire. Oh, and I almost forgot. There's a reward for Igdorf's arrest. Please take it as a token of the Emperor's thanks. And now I really think we should be going. We need to see to it that this rascal gets safely to the trial. We wouldn't want him to be late for his own hanging, now would we?"

The elderly couple smiled sweetly at each other over the head of their captive.

Choice: Fight Ampersands

After a brief struggle, the Ampersands were bound and gagged. The magistrate thanked the party. "You have done the Empire a great service. These two approached me under some pretext or other. Before I could cry for help, they attacked me! I shall personally see to it that they're hanged as spies first thing tomorrow!"

The magistrate called for guards to escort the prisoners to the town jail to await trial and execution, not necessarily in that order. After shaking William's hand profusely, the magistrate escorted the party to the door.

Aren looked guilt-stricken. "Did you see the way the Ampersands looked at us as the soldiers dragged them away?"

"There's something strange going on here. Something I don't like one bit."

After a pause, William grimly added, "And I just realized what it is. The magistrate said he was going to try the Ampersands as spies first thing in the morning. But a regional magistrate doesn't have the jurisdiction to try a charge of treason. They would need to be brought up before a grand trial. We need to find the Ampersands before it's too late!"

43305.msg – ***Chapter 4 | Levosche – Irene and Miel Ampersand***

Topic: Fight Ampersands – Ampersands Arrested

Aren read the proclamation tacked to the Ampersands' door. "By order of the magistrate of Levosche, and in accordance with the law regarding property rights of convicted criminals, this house and all belongings are to be auctioned off at a date to be announced later."

Topic: Fight Ampersands – Ampersands in Jail

Aren tugged at the door to the small cell but it was locked.

"Hello? Is someone there?" Miel Ampersand called through the door.

"It's Aren Cordelaine."

"Oh, thank goodness!" They could barely make out Irene's muffled voice. "You've got to get us out of here. The magistrate's the spy, not us!"

Aren looked at William, who shrugged. "I'm not sure who to believe, Aren, but we don't have a key to the cell anyway. Unless we can pick the lock, it's a moot point."

Topic: Group Helps Ampersands Escape

Miel Ampersand walked from the cell, his arm around his wife's shoulders. "You have done the right thing, my friends. Irene and I are Antaran agents. There's no time to waste. We must get to the magistrate's office before he can escape!"

Topic: Jail Lock Picked – Ampersands Gone

The door to the cell swung open easily. Except for a pair of spartan cots, the room was empty.

Topic: The Seductive Enchantress

The door was answered by a black-haired woman in a low-cut dress. Her startling green eyes took in the motley crew on her doorstep, finally coming to rest on Aren. Under her intense gaze, Aren stuttered. "We, uh... We're looking for... Do you know where..."

The woman laughed at Aren's confusion. "You're not looking for a wedding too, are you?"

William came to Aren's rescue. "Actually, we're looking for the priest who's performing the wedding."

"Then I'll tell you the same thing I told him just a short while ago... As far as I know, nobody in Levosche is getting married. I don't know how these rumors get started. Perhaps someone is playing a practical joke."

The woman turned her attention back to Aren. "Now if you'd like to continue our conversation about weddings... and all that follows... perhaps you'd care to come in for a while?"

William cut in. "No, thanks. We really have to go."

The woman lightly ran her hand down Aren's arm. "Well, young man, why don't you go off on your business, and leave this one here with me?"

William grabbed Aren and bolted down the path. "Whew! Almost lost you there, pal."

William waved her *[sic]* hand in front of Aren's glassy eyes. "Aren? Aren! Wake up!"

Aren snapped to and his eyes regained their focus. "That was odd. I slipped away for a moment. She must have been an enchantress of some kind."

William looked back at the house. "Well, that would explain all the bones and skulls in her yard. Wonder why we didn't notice them before?"

The companions shuddered, then walked quickly down the road without looking back.

43320.msg – *Chapter 4\Levosche – Levosche Farmer*

Topic: Levosche Farmer

William knocked on the farmhouse door. The farmer came out of the barn. "Travelers are ye? Looking for a bed for the night?"

"We may be, but this doesn't look like an inn to me."

The farmer gestured toward the barn. "You can stay in there for 20 burlas a night. Plenty of clean straw and fresh well water. Only thing I ask is that you don't spook my cows. Also that you take your belongings with you when you leave."

"Why would we want to leave our packs behind?" William asked.

"My calling is animals. I don't claim to know people or their ways. All I know is the last fella who stayed left his things. Don't want folks making a habit out of that behavior."

"You have nothing to fear, my man. I promise you that when we go, if we decide to stay at all that is, we will take not only our stuff but possibly his as well."

"It'd suit me fine if you did. Now, do you want to stay or don't ye?"

Choice: Spend Night

"Clean straw and fresh water? Sounds like an offer we can't refuse. Thanks for your hospitality, friend."

Choice: Spend Night – *Not Enough Money*

William peeked in his pouch and smiled wanly at the farmer.

The farmer held up his hand. "Don't give me no sob story, it's tough for everyone. The barn will be there when you get the burlas."

Choice: Leave

William looked up at the sky, then down at the road. "I think we'll press on and get a bit farther before dark. Thanks just the same for the offer."

43321.msg – *Chapter 4\Levosche – Levosche Barn*

Topic: *Levosche Barn Locked – Haven't yet Paid*

The locked barn door wouldn't budge.

9300.msg – *Chapter 4\Letter – The Levosche Witch*

Topic: *Letter – The Levosche Witch*

I think I have finally found a way to stop her. Or perhaps it is just my desperation which makes me think so. But if any mage is to survive her terrible hunger for raw magic, I cannot fail in this. Otherwise she will take my power and my life with it, as she did to my cousin and so many others, until there are none left to feed her.

Simon, Maria Liana's Son, Child of Henne, and Former Shepherd

Topic: Greeting

William: "You're Simon, aren't you?"

Simon: "Yes, that is my name."

Topic: Chapel

William: "We were granted an audience with High Brother Marr in Ticoro. He said we'd find you working on the new chapel in Ravenne. What are you doing in Levosche?"

Simon: "A few days ago, a TrKaa delivered a message, requesting that I come east to perform a marriage ceremony. Since weddings are Henne's delight, I made haste to Levosche."

William: "I wonder why someone would go to the expense of hiring a TrKaa messenger when the distance between Levosche and Ravenne is no more than a day's walk at most."

Simon: "Stranger yet is that I haven't been able to discover who sent the message. Unless someone got cold feet at the crucial moment, no one in Levosche was planning to get married!"

Topic: Ambush

William: "We went to your house in Ravenne. Caverton's guards were swarming all over the place! How did you escape capture?"

Simon: "Guards? At my house? I know nothing about that!"

Topic: Maria

William: "We had a chance to meet your mother at the Isten Amphitheater. She made us swear we'd pass along her (STAGE VOICE) "enduring affection and undying love, a thousand kisses and twice as many hugs"."

Simon: "(EMBARRASSED) That's my mother, all right. Is there something else you wished from me?"

William: "Your mother told us that you used to belong to the Shepherds. I assure you we have nothing to do with them personally. We're just trying to find out more about them. Can you tell us why you left their organization?"

Simon: "Henne tells me you mean no harm, so I will answer your questions. When my friends first joined the Shepherds, I went along just to see what they were like. (SHEEPISH) I guess I got carried away by the feeling of brotherhood and enthusiasm for the cause. But then, after what we did to that poor Grrrlf... (VOICE DIES AWAY IN SHAME)."

Topic: Grrrlf

William: "Yes, go on. What happened to the Grrrlf?"

Simon: "The Shepherds believe that the Grrrlf brought the Pox to the humans. The Shepherd credo calls for the extraction, by force if necessary, of all Grrrlf in human-held territory. Well, one day we learned that a pack of Grrrlf was camped close by. After drinking a potion that enhanced our ability to move stealthily, we crept up on the camp and waited. (ASHAMED) I'm sorry, this is still very hard for me to talk about. Give me a moment..."

William: "(UNDERSTANDING) You were caught up in the excitement. You didn't understand the secret agenda."

Simon: "Yes, you understand. If I had suspected... Well, let me tell it and be done. A young Grrrlf ventured beyond the fire ring to fetch water. We rushed him, all of us against one who was barely more than a pup. We had him down before he could call to the others. He had no chance. (CHOKING UP) After that night, I could not sleep but to see the Grrrlf's bloody corpse in dreams. I left the Shepherds, turning away from the hatred and fear to find comfort and hope with the Children. My days are now filled with the grace of Henne's love, though the murdered Grrrlf still haunts my sleep."

Topic: Headquarters

William: "We have reason to believe that the Shepherds are now involved in more than Grrrlf-bashing. They may be responsible for the kidnapping of the Imperial Consort. Can you tell us the location of Shepherd headquarters?"

Simon: "Considering what's at risk, I'm surprised High Brother Marr didn't tell you himself. I told him all I knew about the Shepherds during my indoctrination to the Arm of Henne."

William: "If it was a private conversation, I suspect he didn't want to break your confidence. Besides, we didn't think to ask him. Will you tell us?"

Simon: "(AMAZED) The two of you plan to confront the Shepherds at their home base? That's madness! It goes against Henne's teachings for me to aid and abet a suicide mission."

William: "Fear not, Simon, we have too great a love for life to throw it away needlessly. We will use your information to try to save the Consort, for his is a life that must not be lost."

Aren: "(UNDER HIS BREATH) Not if we want to keep ours, anyway."

Simon: "Very well, though I don't see how you'll manage it, I will tell you all I know. The Shepherds make their headquarters in a cave system near Senaedrin's Head, the lake northeast of Ticoro. You need a talisman to enter the caves. I buried mine in my garden in Ravenne -- a symbolic gesture, that good things might grow from my past mistakes. You're welcome to it."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "Thank you for your help."

Simon: "May Henne's light shine on your path."

43150.msg – *Chapter 4\|Ravenne – Simon's Garden*

Topic: *Digging up Simon's Shepherd Medallion*

Not wanting to destroy Simon's carefully planted garden, the companions spent several minutes turning the loose soil between the rows. Finally, their efforts were rewarded with a small glint of metal through the dark earth.

Topic: Jeremiah Krock, Alchemist

"Posh and bother! Henne's bells! Blast!" The fluent string of profanities pouring from the open door caused the party to pause before entering. Looking inside the darkened room, they saw a dim figure standing behind a table filled with beakers, cylinders, burners, and other indefinable equipment.

The figure stepped toward them. When the light hit his face, he blinked and held up a hand to shield his eyes. "Who are you? Step inside so I can see you."

The party entered. When their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, they saw a tall, pale man with black hair, most of it apparently growing out of his nose and ears.

"Welcome to my workshop, strangers. I am Jeremiah Krock, an alchemist." Krock's breath made the party involuntarily step back a few paces.

William asked, "What are you working on, sir?"

Krock gestured toward a grey lump on the work table. "I'm trying to turn lead into gold, of course. Some of the top minds in the Empire are hard at work on this problem. I want to be the first to solve it."

"How's the work coming along?"

The alchemist sighed. "Not so well lately. I know I'm onto the correct alchorhythm, but the resulting coagulants are so corrosive that they eat right through my table! I continually have to stop my experiments to rebuild it. I'm sure the Emperor's mages don't have to deal with such petty annoyances!"

Topic: Give Hardening Fluid

William handed the alchemist a flask of hardening fluid. "Do you think this will protect your table?"

Krock wiped some of the fluid on the table top. "Hmmm. It gives a lovely shine. Nice fresh scent too. Let's see if it reacts with the coagulants..."

Krock put some chunks that resembled a cheese-making by-product on the table. "Well, I'll be pickled! It doesn't react! Now I can continue my experiment. I hypothesize that within a matter of days I'll be turning lead into gold like nobody's business! Thank you so much! Here, take this."

The alchemist picked up a brick-shaped object and tossed it to William. "Uh, thanks. What is it?"

Krock turned his back to the party, anxious to return to his experiment. He waved one hand at them casually. "Oh, just a little something I was working on before I got caught up in this lead to gold thing. It's a shield magnetizer."

"What's it do?" Aren asked.

"I don't have time for long explanations now. Don't worry, you'll figure it out. And I'm sure it will come in handy. Now if you will excuse me." Krock rummaged around on the table. "Oh, pish-tush, where did I put that..."

As they turned away, William said to his companions, "I guess we'll know if Krock ever succeeds with his experiment if the Antaran economy goes belly-up overnight."

43225.msg – *Chapter 4\Cardone – Par's Worried Mother*

Topic: Par's Worried Mother

"Par? Is that you?" A middle-aged woman asked hopefully as she opened the door. Her shoulders sagged upon seeing the strangers standing on the steps.

"Sorry to disappoint you, ma'am. Is Par your son?" William ventured.

"Yes, my only boy. He's enlisted to fight against the Mehrat. I haven't heard a word since he left nearly two months ago. Not a single word. What if they've already sent him to the border? What if he doesn't come back?" Her voice cracked with worry.

"I'm sorry," she continued, struggling to hold back tears. "I've sent letter after letter to the Imperial Consul in Ticoro. If only he'd go to the Emperor and make him see how futile and wasteful another war would be. The Consul is supposed to be the Emperor's liaison, isn't he? His eyes and ears in Ticor, as it were. Why haven't I had a response from him?"

William tried to comfort the distraught mother. "He's probably just very busy. I'm sure the Emperor is doing all he can to stop the fighting."

The woman's control broke down. She sobbed, "I just want my son home again, that's all."

William patted her shoulder awkwardly. "I hate to make this suggestion, but things being what they are... If you have any money set aside, you might consider taking a trip to Ticoro, or better yet, to Antara itself. I hear Emperor Valorian holds open court for petitioners. Maybe if you spoke with him in person..."

The woman dried her tears. With a new look of determination, she said, "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I will go to Antara to speak with the Emperor. Imagine me speaking to the Emperor! Well, why not? I'm as loyal a subject as anyone, with just as much right to an opinion! Thank you for the suggestion, young man. Wish me luck!"

"The best of luck to you!" William continued under his breath to Aren, "Though I think the Emperor is more likely to need it when she shows up."

43510.msg – *Chapter 4\ Waterfork – The Shepherds' Newest Recruit*

Topic: The Shepherds' Newest Recruit

Aren's knock was answered by a fresh-faced man. In the room behind him, Aren heard a woman's voice gently coaxing a baby to take a spoonful of mashed 'nana. The man smiled and held out his hand. "Hello! What can I do for you this fine day?"

As Aren shook the man's hand he noticed the Shepherd medallion hanging around his neck. "I see that you're a Shepherd..."

The man grinned and tapped the amulet proudly. "Yup! Just joined them. They're a great bunch of fellas, good family men, but young and full of energy."

William feigned enthusiasm. "Yes, the Shepherds I've known have definitely had a lot of... energy. What do you do when you all get together?"

"Well, since I just joined, I haven't been to many meetings. But the speakers are really knowledgeable about the state of the Empire. A fellow like me could learn a lot."

William saw an opening. "Where do the Shepherds meet? Where's their headquarters?"

"Around here they just get together at the tavern or someone's house, wherever's convenient. I've never been to any kind of headquarters."

William was disappointed. "Friend, I wasn't going to say anything, but you seem a decent enough fellow. A word of caution. Listen to the Shepherds with both your ears open, then judge for yourself. Or better yet, suggest inviting a Grrrlf along the next time the Shepherds get together for a drink. You'll learn their motives quick enough."

The man frowned. "I don't understand. You're implying there's some sort of a secret agenda."

"Just remember what I said. Hear your own thoughts before you listen to the mob."

43525.msg – *Chapter 4\ Waterfork – Paranoid Man*

Topic: Paranoid Man Buys Weapons

The shuttered windows made the house appear empty, yet a man called to them through the door. "Who are you and what do you want?"

William yelled back. "We're travelers from Piandal!"

The door opened a crack, then wider, revealing a man armed with an oar. "You have Piandan accents all right. Are you going to enlist with the Antaran army?"

"No, sir. Why? Is the Empire in danger?"

The man beckoned them into his house, bolting the door behind them. "Yes, didn't you hear? At any moment, the Mehrats and Chailans could cross our borders. We need to be ready to defend ourselves."

"But Waterfork is nowhere near the border."

The man's eyes gleamed with fear. "But they could attack by sea and come up the river!"

William tried to be reassuring. "They'd have to get past the fleet at Ormede first. I doubt they'd try anything so foolish."

"Who knows how the enemy's mind works? We have to be prepared to defend ourselves." The man's expression went from fearful to crafty. "Say, you wouldn't think of selling me some of your weapons, would you? Nothing you really need, but perhaps an old sword? Or a shield? I'd pay two hundred burlas for either."

Topic: Sell Weapon or Shield

The man acted like a kid with a new toy. "Now let 'em come. I'll be ready for them!"

"I'm sure you will. A pleasure doing business with you." William backed toward the door, leading a quick retreat.

43520.msg – ***Chapter 4\ Waterfork – The Town Gossip of Waterfork***

Topic: The Town Gossip of Waterfork

The long-nosed, short-sighted woman peered through the window. When she saw strangers, she quickly opened the door. "I hope you don't think I was being rude. I thought it might be my neighbor Erma. Once she gets started, there's just no stopping the woman. If I invite her in, I know it will be the next morning before she'll leave. With her it's just talk, talk, talk, talk, talk!"

William said dryly, "Yes, I know the type."

"Besides, if she comes over she'll just want to gossip about the Consort, and some things are just too terrible for words! What? You didn't hear? The Chailan Imperial Consort has been kidnapped!"

William put his hand to his face. "You don't say!"

The woman's voice dropped conspiratorially. "Now Kor knows I don't like to gossip, but I have it on good authority that it was the Mehrats. The Empire is just crawling with spies, you know. They took the Consort in an attempt to coerce Chail into joining Mehrat in the war against Antara!"

William reasoned, "That doesn't make sense. Wouldn't a trick like that be more likely to force Chail into the war on our side? Where did you get your information?"

The gossip sniffed. "I got it first-hand from my cousin who knows well of what he speaks."

"How so?"

"Well, he heard it from his son who ran into a farmer who talked to a trader who was actually in Ticoro when the Consort was kidnapped. It must be true."

400.msg – *Chapter 4\Entering Pianda Province*

Topic: Entering Pianda Province

Aren: "Something tells me we don't want to go this way. Let's turn around."

Resource\4500.vmd

— Chapter 4 – End —

With the click of the medallion in its final position, William and Aren stood back, waiting for something to happen. After a few seconds, a low rumble from the mountain joined the sound of the waterfall rushing into Senaedrin's Head from across the lake.

"Something's happening!" *Aren exclaimed.*

As the sound grew louder and louder, tons of moving rock scraped against unfathomable hundreds of tons of immovable rock. Like a door sliding open, a tunnel leading into the mountain range was slowly revealed.

"It's opening!" *William said.*

The ground shook as a fissure almost a hundred foot tall split the side of the mountain. Once fully opened, the rumbling ceased. The only sounds around them now were from the birds in the trees and the flowing waterfall nearby.

William and Aren looked at each other, then cautiously stepped into the crevasse, not know what to expect. They were a good distance down the passageway when the same low rumble started again: the secret opening began to close behind them.

Aren turned to see it was closing much faster than it had opened. "Hey!" he yelled, as he and William started running back out.

But it was too late; they were simply swallowed up by the mountain, trapped behind hundreds upon hundreds of tons of solid rock. Outside the tunnel, the fissure had closed with such force that Simon's Shepherd Medallion was knocked off the stone peg; it fell silently into the overgrown grass below.

Left alone in the darkness, William scrambled to light a torch from his pack while Aren cast Moonglow. At least they could now see, but what was revealed was disheartening: a cramped, narrow tunnel leading off to the northeast, deeper into the heart of the Harkune mountain range. William searched around the now-closed fissure, looking for a way out. Finding the same 'peg and symbols' carved on the inside of the mountain as the outside, William silently cursed himself for not having the forethought to have taken Simon's medallion with him.

Resigned to the fact they weren't leaving the way they had entered, William and Aren began walking down the long tunnel towards the Shepherd's caves.

— Chapter 5 – Start —

Some time earlier...

'Running through the woods with Raal. Just like old times,' ***Kaelyn thought to herself as she followed behind her friend.*** 'It's a shame his training keeps him too busy to track game with me nowadays. Well, I guess neither one of us are carefree cubs anymore...'

Having entered Chuno Province without Imperial detection, the two weren't far from Ridgewood Forest. As they continued moving through the trees and around large rocks, Kaelyn thought back to the first time she had met Raal...

'Father finally let me go out hunting on my own. I was determined not to come back empty-handed.'

From her position behind a tree, a young Kaelyn Usher slowly took aim with her bow and gently pulled back the string. Her prey, a large hare nibbling on grass, remained blissfully unaware...

'I had the rabbit in my sights. But just as I loosed my arrow...'

A large growl sounded a short distance away, causing the rabbit to bolt. Kaelyn's arrow dug harmlessly into the ground.

'I retrieved my arrow and ran toward the noise but I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw...'

...the bear—and a rather large bear, at that. It was looking up a tree, where Kaelyn saw a helpless young Grrrlf clutching a branch. Hearing her approach, the bear turned its attention to her. The young girls' eyes grew wide.

'I was scared, but the poor Grrrlf cub was trembling. I knew that shooting at the bear would only antagonize it into attacking. There was only one thing I could do.'

As Kaelyn was still a ways off, the bear turned its attention back to the tree and the Grrrlf cub above, who began to whimper. That's when she made her move.

Making herself appear as large as possible, the young girl waved her arms about and yelled, "Raaaahh!!!! Go away, you stupid bear! Agggghhh!"

Not knowing what to make of this new intruder, the bear turned and ran off into the forest. 'Much to my surprise, I scared that bear away. I guess it decided to go look for a meal that didn't make quite so much noise!'

'I had to climb the tree and help Raal down.' ***Kaelyn reached the branch and held her hand out to the small Grrrlf cub. At a little over half her own young height, he cautiously climbed onto her back. Kaelyn, in turn, carefully climbed back down the tree, bringing them both to safety.*** 'I found out later that Grrrlf are afraid of heights. But I suppose Raal was scared of the bear even more.'

'We were inseparable after that. Father treated Raal like a member of the family, and over time Raal's pack accepted me as one of their own.'

Kaelyn's thoughts of the past brought her back to the present. 'I hope nothing's happened to Raal's pack... or my father,' ***she thought to herself, frowning.***

As they stepped out of the brush, Raal cautioned her. "We'll have to follow the rrrroad frrrom herrre," ***he said, pointing ahead. They were far enough away from Ticor and Antara Provinces, so news of Kaelyn's escape and wanted status wouldn't be widely known here. However, there were other dangers...***

"We must be carrreful..." ***Raal warned.*** "Rrroving bands of Shepherrrds have been causing trrrouble for Grrrlf trrravelers." ***A worried look crossed his face.*** "If they see us..."

"...they'll get more than they bargained for," ***Kaelyn reassured him.***

As they walked down the road leading to Durst, Kaelyn commented, "It's been too long since we last saw each other, Raal. How is your brother Gaarrll?"

"He is Faagaarrll now," ***Raal replied.*** "He found his spirrrit song two moons ago."

Kaelyn was surprised how much time had passed. "Gaarrll an adult now! I can't believe it."

"All else is much the same," ***Raal continued.*** "Except Krrrrrrlaak has something to ask of you."

"Your pack leader?" ***Kaelyn was puzzled.*** "What could he want of me?"

Raal remained secretive. "I can only tell you that he wanted to talk to you even beforrrr the crrris in the woods," ***he said.***

Kaelyn stepped in front of Raal and grabbed him by his upper arms. "You know what we wants, don't you? Tell me!" ***she implored.***

Raal only smiled. "It's not my place to ask Krrrrrrlaak's question. I am sorrrry, little arrrcherrr."

It was at that moment four men stepped out of the shadows along the road to confront the two travelers. Though they weren't large in size, they were large in number and carried themselves with the swagger of men looking for trouble. Wearing the Shepherd's garish

brown armor, with its telltale yellow trim and flowing red cape, Kaelyn could tell that theirs were nearly pristine—certainly never having seen any serious combat. But, fighting was seldom necessary when you could bully your way through life...

The apparent leader, a rather ugly fellow, spoke to his three equally unpleasant-looking comrades, "Well, well, well. Look here boys. This animal thinks he can travel on our road."

"I think we should explain to him otherwise," the blonde Shepherd threatened.

Seeing Kaelyn tense up, Raal put his paw on her shoulder. "Kaelyn—"

Kaelyn wasn't having any of it. She shook off his paw and stepped forward. "We have no quarrel with you. Let us pass," she ordered.

"Woman, stand aside," the 'leader' said, drawing his sword up to his face, "so we can dispatch that dog at your heels." Unadulterated menace was behind his smirking offer.

Kaelyn's eyes narrowed as her face became flush. "I said, let us pass," she demanded, as her hand moved to her sword hilt.

The blonde Shepherd had his sword drawn as well. With disgust in his voice, he spat out to his brethren, "The only thing worse than the dogs... are the dog lovers."

Raal, in turn, brought his staff before him. After eschewing centuries as a warlike race, Grrrlf spirituality taught pacifism as a means to connect with their ancestors and for the betterment their people. However, their fearsome nature as vicious fighters had never truly been bred from the species; a force that powerful can only be contained, not eliminated. And these Shepherds were going to find out what happened when it was unleashed.

With that, the fight was on.

500.msg – Chapter 5\Intro – Battle Aftermath

Topic: Intro – Battle Aftermath

Kaelyn: "(OUT OF BREATH) Carlith dung! Their kind should be skewered and roasted at birth! Raal, I'm sorry that these so-called humans..."

Raal: "(INTERRUPTING) It's not the first time something like this has happened and it won't be the last. Such incidents are getting more frequent though. It's dangerous for Grrrlf to travel alone."

Kaelyn: "Well, at least there are a few less Shepherds to worry about now."

Topic: Entering Antara Province

Kaelyn: "We don't have the time for detours, Raal. My father might be in danger. I want to find him as quickly as possible."

Jhana, Child of Henne

Topic: Greeting #3

Jhana: "Come in and welcome to the Chapel of Henne!"

Kaelyn: "(UNCOMFORTABLE) Uh, thanks. We can only stay a few minutes..."

"This is confusing. Why is there a chapel of Henne here amongst all these tree-worshippers?"

Jhana: "(LAUGHS) You're not the only one who wonders about that. But the people of Chuno do not worship trees. Their ways are a cultural sign of respect for the traditions of their ancestors, not a religion."

Kaelyn: "Is this an ancient tradition?"

Jhana: "Yes, dating back centuries. The disaster that caused the devastation known as the Waste also destroyed the Chinese civilization. The people were shattered, spiritless. The Sisters of Senaedin brought their healing arts to this region in an attempt to revitalize the people. The tree traditions were born at that time, and have since come to represent the cycle of nature, the strength of these people, and their ties to the past."

Kaelyn: "What do you mean by respect?"

Jhana: "A Chinese family respects its tree as a tangible link to the family's past. When a young person marries, a cutting is removed and used to propagate a tree at the newlywed's home. By tending saplings started from the trees of their parents, the younger generation shows its reverence for Chinese traditions."

Topic: Goodbye #2

Jhana: "Join me in a song of joy! (SINGS) Dewdrops on the spider web, sparkling in the morning sun..."

Kaelyn: "Uh, we've got to be going. Come on, Raal."

Raal: "But Kaelyn, she's singing..."

Kaelyn: "(CLENCHED TEETH) I know. Now let's go."

Topic: Greeting #4

Jhana: "My dear friends! I am joyful to see you."

Kaelyn: "We were in Durst and just thought we stop by and say hello."

42300.msg – ***Chapter 5\Durst – Phoebe And Her Smelly Cat, Louie***

Topic: Phoebe And Her Smelly Cat, Louie #2

The door was opened by a slender girl with long auburn hair. "Hi, I'm Phoebe."

Kaelyn introduced herself and Raal. A huge orange cat wrapped around Phoebe's legs, meowing loudly for attention. "This is Louie."

Louie raised his eyes and saw Raal for the first time. He hissed, fluffing up defensively until he was as big as a pumpkin. "Guess he's never seen a Grrrlf before," Kaelyn laughed.

"Or maybe he knows that Grrrlf are very fond of cats... for lunch," Raal said. At Phoebe's look of horror, Raal added, "Sorry. Bad joke."

Phoebe was flustered. "I was going to ask you to come in, but now I don't think I will."

Kaelyn sniffed and choked back a cough. "Uh, that's all right. We should be going."

As the companions walked back toward the main road, Raal said, "You smelled it too? That woman's house reeked!"

Phoebe overheard the remark. She picked Louie up and kissed his ears. "It's all right, big boy. You can't help being a smelly cat."

Topic: Adrian the Mercenary #1

The bearded, burly man sat on his front steps, polishing a sword hilt with a cloth. He held it up for inspection, then set it down in a row next to its gleaming brothers. Picking up a dull hilt from another pile, he began the process again.

The companions approached. "You're a swordsmith?"

"I make hilts and handguards for witless fops likely to pierce their toes showing off their fancy blades. But it's more of a hobby than a vocation, a useful way to spend my retirement. I was a mercenary. The name's Adrian." The man held out a thick hand in greeting.

"I've never met a retired mercenary before."

Adrian's smile was rueful. "Most of them don't live long enough to retire. I'm one of the exceptions."

"You must have been good."

"Lucky is more like it. No, you're right... Come to think of it, I was good."

They examined a handguard. "Looks to me like you're good at this as well."

"Thank you. I am rather proud of that piece. I'm doing it on commission for a young noble in Antara. It's complete except for a pearl I want for embellishment. If you come across one... well, I've not been paid yet, but I could give you some combat pointers that will stand you in good stead."

Topic: Adrian the Mercenary #2

"Ho there," Adrian waved with an easy smile. "Can't spare much time to chat right now, but remember-- if you find a pearl, I'll find the time to run some maneuvers with you."

Topic: Give Pearl

Adrian examined the pearl. "Yes, this will do quite nicely. My thanks. And now for that lesson I promised you."

The next few hours were spent practicing attacks and defenses. The companions added several advanced moves to their repertoire.

Topic: Toddy is Missing

A man stood at the end of the path, calling "Toddy! Toddy!" Kaelyn asked him if he's calling a dog. "No, my son. He's gone off somewhere and I'm getting worried."

"Well, why not go after him?"

By way of explanation, the man showed her the stout walking sticks clutched in his hands. She saw that his legs were twisted. "Walking isn't impossible," the man says in a factual manner. "Just down-right difficult. To keep track of that ten year old, I'd have to tie a rope to him."

To cover Kaelyn's embarrassment, Raal offered, "Do you know where he's gone? Maybe we can fetch him back."

"I'm afraid he's exploring the Waste again. No matter how many times I warn him, his head is too full of Simon's nonsense to heed me."

"Simon being...?" Kaelyn asks.

"Simon was Jhana's predecessor at the Temple of Henne. A kind man, but he filled my son's head full of stories from a play his mother was in... 'The Mana of Love' I think it's called. Toddy thinks the Waste is exciting. He doesn't understand how dangerous it is."

Kaelyn promised to keep an eye out for the boy.

"Thanks," said Toddy's father. "If you find him, tell him to come straight home or he'll feel my strap on his backside."

Topic: Toddy Rescued

Kaelyn grabbed the terrified boy. "Are you all right?"

He nodded his head, his eyes round with fear. "I... I guess so. You saved my life."

Raal tousled the boy's hair. "Good thing we came along when we did. Those fire wolves would've been mighty disappointed. There's not enough of you to make more than a mouthful."

The boy started to cry. Raal frowned uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Kaelyn knelt down and took the boy's shoulders in her hands. "I think you should go straight home-- your family must be worried about you."

The boy sniffled, wiped his nose with the back of his hand, and took off running. Raal said, "I didn't mean to make him cry."

Kaelyn reassured him. "You didn't. Those were just tears of relief. Fur brother, if it weren't for you, he'd be doing his crying from inside a fire wolf's belly."

42320.msg – *Chapter 5\Durst – Toddy's Father*

Topic: Toddy Returned

The crippled man greeted them at the door. "Toddy came home in one piece, thanks to you two. After the little talk I had with him, I don't think he'll try that stunt again. Here, maybe you better take this..."

Toddy's father handed Raal a book entitled "The Adventures of Caarl Maston".

"I want this book out of my house. I don't know where he got it, but it's been putting dangerous ideas in his head. You seem like the sort who might be able to put the information to better use."

500.msg – *Chapter 5\Entering Chuno Province*

Topic: Entering Chuno Province

Kaelyn: "We don't have the time for detours, Raal. My father might be in danger. I want to find him as quickly as possible."

42515.msg – *Chapter 5\Darvi – The Feral Duck Inn – Bookworm*

Topic: Bookworm #1

Kaelyn's knock obviously interrupted the man's reading, as he came to the door carrying an open book. Distracted, he asked, "Have you come about my book? I can't seem to find it."

Raal pointed. "Isn't that your book in your hand?"

The man snapped the book closed. "Not this book. 'A Social Analysis of Organisms'. I just purchased it, been waiting to read it for months, and now I can't find it anywhere. If you come across it, please bring it back... unread. I hate it when other people read my books."

In the same motion, the reader opened his book and closed the door.

Topic: Bookworm #2

The near-sighted man peered at his visitors, trying to see their faces well enough to remember them. Finally, recognition dawned. "Well, have you found my book?"

Topic: Book not Found

Kaelyn apologized. "No, sorry. We haven't found it yet."

The man muttered, "Confound it all, now where could I have left it?" Shaking his head, he closed the door.

Topic: Book Found

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we did find your book," said Kaelyn, handing it over. "You left it under a table at the Feral Duck."

The man slapped a hand to his forehead. "But of course! How stupid of me."

Topic: Book is Unread

The reader avidly turned the pages. "I see you followed my wishes and left the book unread. Thank you so much. When I was at the Feral Duck, I must have picked up the wrong bag by mistake. The things in this bag don't do me any good, so you may as well take them."

Thanking the man for his generosity, the companions accept his gift and leave him to his new book.

Topic: Book is Read

Thrilled, the reader took the book and thumbed the pages. Suddenly his smile turned upside down. "You've read this, haven't you? I can see your dirty finger smudges on nearly every page!"

As the door slammed in their faces, Kaelyn remarked, "So much for gratitude. We should have used that book for kindling."

42510.msg – *Chapter 5\Darvi – Archibald Feathersby*

Topic: Archibald Feathersby #1

A brass plaque read 'Archibald Feathersby – Expeditions'. Raal put his knuckles to the door. It opened, revealing a man with glorious muttonchop whiskers. He welcomed them cordially. "Come in, come in. You both look to be seekers of adventure. Well, my friends, you've come to the right place. Archibald Feathersby, at your service."

Feathersby bowed neatly for such a stout gentleman. Kaelyn asked, "What kind of expeditions do you lead?"

"The only kind worth leading... Expeditions into the black heart of the Waste! Only there does one experience the excitement, the danger, the thrill of never knowing what sort of creature one will next encounter."

Raal gestured to the menagerie of animal heads mounted on the walls. "Like these? The fire wolf is the only one I recognize."

Feathersby slapped the Grrrlf on the shoulder. "Yes indeed, my boy. Those and more. Your people are some of the best hunters I've ever seen... Have you come to sign up for a greater challenge?"

The possibility excited Raal. "Sounds interesting, but we don't have the time just now. Maybe some other day."

Feathersby waved his hand. "Never mind."

Turning to Kaelyn, he continued, "A lesson then. You seem comfortable with that bow, but in my years of prowling the Waste, I'll wager I've picked up a trick or two you've never seen. I could pass them along to you in just a few hours.

"For you, just 200 burlas."

Choice: Take Lesson

Kaelyn agreed and paid Feathersby 200 burlas. He approved her decision, noting, "You can never tell when survival skills will come in handy."

The blustery man proved as good as his word. In two hours, he showed Kaelyn some impressive techniques, increasing her skill with the bow.

Choice: Take Lesson – *Not Enough Money*

Kaelyn agreed, but when she reached into the money pouch, she realized she was short of funds. Apologizing, she and Raal took their leave.

Choice: Leave

Defensively, Kaelyn said, "It's possible you know a few things I don't, but I don't feel like spending 200 burlas to find out. Raal, you can come back later if you're interested in hunting big game, but right now we've got other things to do. Come on."

Topic: *Archibald Feathersby #2*

Feathersby shot a questioning gaze at Kaelyn. "Changed your mind about that lesson, Sureshot?"

42525.msg – *Chapter 5\Darvi – Human Musicians Practicing Grrrlf Music*

Topic: *Human Musicians Practicing Grrrlf Music*

The door swung open at Raal's touch. Inside, a group of human musicians practiced a Grrrlf tune on traditional Grrrlf drums. Kaelyn merely winced at the discord, but Raal was enraged. Ears flat, he shouted, "What is the meaning of this?"

A Grrrlf yell can cut through the din of a karn mating ritual. The drumming stopped. Silence.

One of the musicians attempted an explanation. "It's a Grrrlf dance which..."

Raal interrupted. "I know what the Maffurrr is. Why are you attempting to play it?"

Another musician ventured, "We heard a Grrrlf group do it. It was different, exciting. We thought..."

Raal cut him off with a snarl. "So you mangle the Maffurrr because you find it appealing?"

The musician gulped. "I know we don't have it quite right yet but..."

Raal bristled. "The Maffurrr is not yours to perform. It is one of the oldest Grrrlf traditions with more innate power than you can possibly imagine. It is a deeply spiritual experience which humans may share, but only at the invitation of my people. Your pathetic attempt is a dishonor to the Maffurrr and an insult to the Grrrlf spirits who can feel its pull."

The musicians huddled together, terrified. "We didn't know..." "We only thought..."

Raal drew himself up to his full height. "You will swear by the three faces of your God never to attempt this sacrilege again."

The musicians' protests died on their lips when they saw the steely threat in Raal's eyes. As the Grrrlf directed his stare at each in turn, the musicians nodded a wordless promise. Satisfied, Raal turned on his heel and left, Kaelyn trailing behind. Well out of earshot, Kaelyn grabbed the Grrrlf's shoulder, forcing him to halt.

"Raal, isn't the Maffurrr just a song used to pass the time while waiting for meat to cook?"

Raal faced his friend, his yellow eyes twinkling. "Yes. But they were awful at it. There is no excuse for bad music."

42520.msg – *Chapter 5\Darvi – Drunken Mage*

Topic: Drunken Mage

Raal knocked. He knocked again. Then he banged on the door. Finally it opened, the hinges squealing. The man standing before them was obviously intoxicated. His robe hung askew, his hair and beard unkempt. He slurred, "Have you come to see the wizard? He's not avail... not avail... not avail... he's not here!"

"But aren't you the wizard?" Kaelyn asked, seeing traces of arcane paraphernalia in the room behind him.

Tears sprang up in the mage's eyes. "You've found me out, girlie. But it's all gone... my magic's deserted me."

The drunken mage began to sing off-key. "I'm an actor without fame, a moth without a flame. I'm a poet who can't rhyme, I'm a clock without the time..."

Raal's ears flattened at the hideous wailing. The man thankfully stopped and held a finger up to his eye. "But," he whispered, "I've got a secret, a secret, a secret!"

"What's your secret?" Kaelyn asked, a bit impatiently.

The mage appeared not to have heard her. Stumbling over his words, he rambled, "Too much power, not enough control. Burned me out, it did. Left a shell of a mage, a pile of ashes where once stood a man..."

Kaelyn gestured to Raal. "Let's move on. He's in no condition for conversation."

The mage clutched at her sleeve, suddenly coherent with need. "But I've got a secret to sell. Give me some Ticornan wine and I'll tell you. Give me wine and I'll tell you. Otherwise, go away!"

Topic: Give Wine

Raal gave the drunken mage what he craved, a bottle of Ticornan wine. Clutching it to his chest, the man motioned them closer, closer, until they were well within range of his reeking breath. He whispered conspiratorially, "I lost a gem-- a shieldstone-- years ago. In this very town."

The mage leaned too far forward, almost falling against Kaelyn. Raal grabbed him and tilted him upright. "By now it's buried, buried, buried... but its magic will still work. Diamonds are forever."

"That information was worth the price of a bottle of wine," Raal said after bidding the man farewell.

Kaelyn snorted. "Yeah, if he wasn't making it all up to swindle us out of some wine. Now if only I can get the stench of his breath out of my nostrils."

10830.msg – ***Chapter 5\South or Northwest of Ridgewood Forest – Krrrfrllaak the Grrrlf, Raal's Pack Leader***

Krrrfrllaak the Grrrlf, Raal's Pack Leader

Topic: Greeting

Krrrfrllaak: "Kaelyn, my Skin Daughter. It is good to smell your scent again."

Topic: Request

Kaelyn: "You requested my presence, Fur Father?"

Krrrfrrrlaak: "Yes, Kaelyn. I have an invitation of too much consequence to impart by way of messenger. I approach Harrr-Quan, the Time of Passing, when I will add my experience and my essence to the infinite river of Grrrlf Spirit."

Kaelyn: "(SHOCKED) But you are still virile and strong! Surely there are many moons before you would even consider..."

Krrrfrrrlaak: "(INTERRUPTING, GENTLY) Enough, child, enough. You know it is our way to undertake Harrr-Quan well before we become burdensome to the pack. You are like one of our own. It would please me greatly if you return for the ceremony."

Kaelyn: "(MOVED) I am honored by your request, Fur Father. I will be there."

Krrrfrrrlaak: "Please carry this invitation to your father as well. He has always been a friend to the pack, and to all Grrrlf. I will send a message to you at the proper time."

Topic: Father

Kaelyn: "Raal told me the pack has lost contact with my father. Do you know where he is?"

Krrrfrrrlaak: "No, Kaelyn, I don't. He's been missing since the specters first appeared in the wood. My scouts continue to sniff for him, but without success."

Topic: Specters

Krrrfrrrlaak: "I must warn you, there is a serious danger in the wood. They appear to be specters of unnatural origin, capable of stealing a creature's spirit with merely a touch. The body lives on, a mindless husk. I have summoned all the packs to the Ancestral Den. By coming together, hopefully we can protect our people from this evil."

Raal: "Is there any way to defeat or kill a specter?"

Krrrfrrrlaak: "None that we know of. They move quickly and have no scent, so even evasion is difficult."

Topic: Home

Kaelyn: "I don't mean to show ingratitude for your hospitality, Krrrfrrrlaak, but I must return home and find my father."

Krrrfrrrlaak: "I understand. A pup's first duty is to her own pack."

Raal: "(BRAVADO OF THE YOUNG) Pack leader, may I go with Kaelyn? Two warriors stand a better chance than one."

Krrrfrllaak: "(CHUCKLES GENTLY) Yes, Raal, you may go with your skin sister. But have a care and avoid the specters if possible."

Topic: Goodbye

Kaelyn: "(PROTECTIVE) Raal will return to the pack soon, Fur Father. I give you my word on it."

Krrrfrllaak: "Take care of each other. Keep your ears to the ground and your muzzles to the wind."

500.msg – **Chapter 5\ *Fighting the Souless – Aftermath***

Topic: *Fighting the Souless – Aftermath*

Kaelyn: "Killing Shepherds is one thing, but these looked like simple villagers."

Raal: "They might have been villagers once, but they're not anymore. I think there's a connection between these... things and the specters Krrrfrllaak told us about."

Kaelyn: "You think the specters stole their souls?"

Raal: "Why else would they be on the rampage, randomly attacking anything that crosses their path?"

Kaelyn: "That makes sense."

9360.msg – **Chapter 5\ *Ridgewood Forest – Usher Home – Letter – Garvin Usher to Kaelyn***

Topic: *Letter – Garvin Usher to Kaelyn*

Kaelyn,

There are dangerous creatures loose in the Ridgewood. I know you can take care of yourself, but these things aren't flesh and blood-- don't get near one!

I've gone to a cave on the north side of the wood to try to find a way to stop these creatures before they hurt anyone else. I'll explain later.

Love,

Dad

10824.msg – *Chapter 5\Northeast Ridgewood – Garvin Usher's Workshop – Garvin Usher*

Garvin Usher, Kaelyn's Father

Topic: Greeting #1

Kaelyn: "Dad, here you are! You had me worried."

Garvin: "Kaelyn! And Raal! This is a surprise."

Kaelyn: "Don't you know the wood is full of dangers? Why aren't you home?"

Garvin: "(FLATTERED) I can see you were worried. Kaelyn, your dad's a tough old sparrow hawk. Believe it or not, I can take care of myself."

Topic: Health

Kaelyn: "Are you sure you're all right, Dad?"

Garvin: "(CHUCKLING) For the last time, yes, I'm fine! A few weeks ago I went to get some supplies in Breland. On the way there, I saw a horrible thing... A Wraith attacked a villager. Sucked the life right out of him, leaving naught behind but a crumpled shell. Didn't you get my note?"

Kaelyn: "Yes, we got it. How else could we have found you?"

Garvin: "Of course, how foolish of me. This is a dire situation indeed. I had to find some answers. Given the nature of those answers, this seemed the place to go."

Topic: Cave

Kaelyn: "I've never been to this cave before. You've kept it a secret all these years. Why?"

Garvin: "This cave is my old workshop. I never expected to be here again. (DEEP BREATH) Kaelyn, I'm a mage, or at least I used to be. Now I must try to recall what I knew of the magical arts. If I don't succeed, those creatures will soon overrun the forest and invade our villages."

Topic: Mage

Kaelyn: "(STUNNED, FLATLY) You're a mage. How could you hide this from me?"

Garvin: "I was a mage. And due to circumstance and timing, I am again. I haven't practiced the arts for many years, not since your mother died. When you were old enough to ask about her death, I told you she had drowned... That was not the case."

Kaelyn: "(AFRAID YET NEEDING TO KNOW THE TRUTH) What really happened to my mother? The truth, Father."

Garvin: "I killed her. That is to say, I caused her death. I'd found a shard of the Mirror of Smoke and Dreams. I was studying it... No. I was trying to capture its power. I knew that seven mages collaborated to create the mirror, but in my youth and hubris I thought I could master it alone. I was wrong."

"The forces got away from me. It was chaos, a maelstrom warping reality. Safe in the eye of the storm, I struggled to unravel the magic before it unraveled me. Finally, the weave fell apart. In the sudden silence I heard a broken whimper... your mother. She'd come in to bring me lunch. The maelstrom caught her and broke her like a ship dashed upon the rocks."

Kaelyn: "(AGHAST) But she was alive?"

Garvin: "Yes. You see around you the magic's effect on my workshop. Your mother was subject to the same forces. Her mind was twisted as cruelly as her body, except for brief, horrible moments of clarity."

"For three days and nights I tried to undo my terrible mistake. On the morning of the fourth day, your mother ceased her raving. For just a moment, she looked at me with recognition and, unbelievably, with love. I could not prolong her agony. I fed her some calderleaf, and she died in my arms. On that day I renounced magic."

"Kaelyn, my pride and arrogance cost me my... our most precious treasure. Please... forgive me."

Topic: Creatures

Kaelyn: "(STUNNED) A mage. My father. All this time, I never knew."

Garvin: "And you never would have known, but for the current threat."

Raal: "What are these spectral creatures?"

Garvin: "Wraiths. Ethereal entities that feed on souls. Mature Wraiths collect souls to feed their offspring. The Wraiths in our wood seem to be youngsters, capable of feeding on the souls directly. I don't know why they've come through to our world from Etherea, nor how they manage to stay alive for more than a few hours."

Topic: Etherea

Garvin: "Etherea is another dimension that intersects our own at specific fracture lines. It is the source of everything we call magical in our world. Etherean magic energy, called mana, is the life force of the creatures from that world. When they cross into Ramar, whether by mischance or design, their mana gradually leaches away into our atmosphere. Without their mana, they soon suffocate. The further a creature is from a fracture, the faster he deteriorates. Or at least that's what I thought."

Topic: Mana

Raal: "What is mana?"

Garvin: "Mana is to Etherea what air is to our world. It permeates that dimension and enables life. The mana that passes into our world acts as a catalyst by which mages manipulate the forces in our reality. The higher the concentration of mana, the easier to shape these forces to our will. But this power is not without danger. Mana works on a mage like wine. It's all too easy to lose control. And when the magic you're shaping gets out of hand, the consequences are unpredictable and quite often disastrous... as well I know."

Topic: Fractures

Raal: "Where are the fractures located?"

Garvin: "The fractures occur at random. Since these areas have a high concentration of mana, it's easier to harness and use mana for magical purposes near a fracture. That's why most mages build their sanctums around them. A large fracture can generate fierce battles as mages compete for possession."

Raal: "Can't they just make more fractures?"

Garvin: "(CHUCKLING) Don't think it hasn't been tried. More than one mage lost his life in the attempt. But long ago, someone actually figured out a way to pass through into Etherea! Fractures days apart in our world might be right next to each other in Etherea, so a mage who knew what he was doing could, to all intents and purposes, travel instantaneously. If it weren't so dangerous a maneuver, fracture jumping might have become a common mode of transportation."

Topic: Danger

Raal: "Fracture jumping sounds dangerous."

Garvin: "Right you are, Raal. Wraiths are just the tip of the tree. Compared to other Etherean creatures, Wraiths are lap dogs. Getting back to Ramar is also a problem. You can't open a fracture from inside Etherea, so you need a friend, preferably one you trust, to open an exit on our side. But the greatest danger is mana overload. The Etherean atmosphere is pure mana. Prolonged exposure affects a mage more than the strongest narcotic. If the will is weak, the raw magic overwhelms him, washing over and through his body, scorching him from the inside out."

Raal: "Can someone who isn't a mage go into Etherea?"

Garvin: "(THOUGHTFULLY) I suppose it's possible... theoretically. But it's rather a moot point. Ethereal travel has been outlawed for centuries, and the necessary knowledge long lost. The risks were just too great."

Topic: Wraiths

Raal: "How can we protect ourselves from the Wraiths?"

Garvin: "That is what I blew the dust from my books to find out. At first I thought the Wraiths would die within days from lack of mana. But somehow these creatures are shielded so that their mana doesn't dissipate into our atmosphere. Without our intervention, they could devastate the entire region."

Raal: "Tell us what we can do!"

Garvin: "I've been working day and night trying to devise something to defeat the Wraiths. Just last night I created an enchantment that I think will enable common weaponry to cut through the surrounding mana and do injury to the Wraiths. If you two hadn't shown up just when you did, I would've gone out into the woods and tested it out for myself. As it is, I hope you'll take this old man's place on the field of battle."

Raal: "Of course we will! Right, Kaelyn? Kaelyn?"

Kaelyn: "(COLDLY) Just tell us what we need to do."

Topic: Enchant Weapon

Garvin: "Give me a weapon and I'll enchant it for use against the Wraiths. I must warn you that the spell has not been perfected. It will probably weaken with use until it wears off completely."

Narrator: Garvin took the weapon and sprinkled blue powder upon the blade. He muttered a few arcane words, then moved the weapon through the air in a ritualistic sequence of cuts and parries. After a few more words, he returned the weapon.

Topic: Goodbye #1

Garvin: "I wish I could guarantee your victory against the Wraiths. You have courage to go out and fight the unknown. Would that I had the youth and strength to accompany you. (PAUSE) Kaelyn, have you not a word of farewell for your father?"

Kaelyn: "(COLDLY) Goodbye."

Topic: Greeting #2 – Not All Wraiths Defeated

Garvin: "Back so soon? I still sense danger in the forest. Perhaps you should rest a bit and then return to the task at hand."

500.msg – Chapter 5\Leaving the Ridgewood

Topic: Leaving the Ridgewood – Not All Wraiths Defeated

Kaelyn: "I don't see how going this way will help us. Let's stick to the task at hand."

Topic: All Wraiths Defeated

Kaelyn: "The forest should be safe now. I think that's the last of those... things. Let's check with my father to make sure."

Garvin Usher, Kaelyn's Father

Topic: Greeting #3 – All Wraiths Defeated

Garvin: "Oh, I am glad to see you both! Are you unharmed?"

Raal: "(UNINTENTIONAL JOKE) Yes, Garvin. Your enchantment worked like a charm."

Topic: Wraiths Gone

Kaelyn: "I think we've destroyed all the Wraiths."

Garvin: "(PLEASED) Have you now? I knew you could do it. (WORRIED) But I wonder if that's an end to them. They had to come through a fracture, but where? From what you've told me, it sounds like their path backtracks into the mountains to the circle of stones, but I know of no fracture in that area. (SIGH) At least the immediate threat is over, and we'll have some time to mull things over at our leisure."

Topic: Circle of Stones

Kaelyn: "Father, we saw something strange in the mountains... marked stones set in a circle. They looked really old."

Garvin: "It sounds like you came upon a circle of wardstones. They're used to invoke the Triune's protection. They cost a pretty penny so only the wealthiest of priests, merchants, and nobles can afford them. How were they arranged?"

Kaelyn: "The circle was broken, with the markings facing inward."

Garvin: "Hmmm... That's odd. Travelers usually place the stones at the perimeter of their camp, facing the markings outward to protect against peripheral dangers. If the markings pointed inward, then nothing from inside the circle could get out. Perhaps someone tried to trap the Wraiths within, but the circle was broken so they escaped."

Topic: Goodbye #2

Kaelyn: "I just wanted to tell you that we wouldn't have survived without your magic... (PAUSE) Dad."

Garvin: "(LIGHTLY) Oh, so you're back to calling me 'Dad' again, are you? That's good. I'm glad."

Kaelyn: "I... I did a lot of thinking... about Mom... and about your being a mage and all. I'm trying to understand."

Garvin: "(SIMPLY) I can't ask for more than that, Daughter."

Resource\5500.vmd

— Chapter 5 – End —

Leaving Garvin's workshop behind, Garvin, Kaelyn, and Raal traveled southwest towards the Usher cabin. Now that the Ridgewood was safe from Ethereal Wraiths and zombie villagers, the three took a more leisurely pace through the tall trees covering this area of Chuno Province. "Well, now that business is taken care of, it's good to have you home," Garvin said as they stopped for a rest.

Still ambivalent about learning his long-kept secret, Kaelyn blurted out, "Father, I—I can't stay." And it wasn't an excuse; she really did need to rejoin William and Aren.

"But surely you don't have to leave until morning. We'll have dinner together at least," Garvin offered.

"I don't know..." They started walking again. "There are still a few hours of light left in the day," Kaelyn said, now making excuses to spare his feelings. "I could get a good start on my journey."

Garvin stopped to face his daughter. Rubbing the side of his head, he asked, "Is something wrong, Kaelyn? It's not like you to turn down a free meal." He put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm still your father, you know. Being a mage doesn't change that."

"I know, Dad," *Kaelyn said, slightly frowning.* "It might just take me a while to get used to it." *She was still trying to comprehend the idea of it: her own father—a mage! And how had he manage to keep his workshop hidden all these years?! While growing up, Kaelyn had explored every inch of the Ridgewood and knew it like the back of her hand... yet she had never come across it. Was it hidden by magic?*

"I understand," *Garvin said. That was all he could ask for, especially after such a cataclysmic change to the foundation of their relationship. Observing that Kaelyn was still walking with him towards the cabin, Garvin knew she would be staying for dinner.* "Well, I'm not sure what I have to eat, but I'm sure we can scrape up something..."

"We'll figure something out," *Kaelyn said,* "even if we have to cook up ol' Raal here."

Garvin formalized the invitation. "Raal, would you care to join us for dinner?"

"Just so long as I'm not joining you as dinnerrr, I would be honorrrred," *Raal said.*

As they continued walking, Kaelyn hesitated but finally ventured the question, "I don't suppose there are any other little secrets you've been keeping from me, are there?"

Garvin looked down at his daughter. "I'm your father, child. Why should I tell you everything?"

With that, Garvin turned and continued towards home, leaving Kaelyn to look at Raal and wonder what else her father might be hiding from her...

— Chapter 6 – Start —

After walking for hours and squeezing through narrow passageways and crevasses, William and Aren slowly made their way through the Shepherd's system of caves. They had yet to run into any collapses or cave-ins, but by this time, they had travelled so far into the base of the mountain range that there was little chance of that occurring. They also hadn't run into any Shepherds yet, either.

At least the tunnels were being supplied with air from... somewhere, so William and Aren thanked the Triune for that small favor. However, water dripping from the rocks above them turned the still air stale and musty, resulting in a rather unpleasant order.

Oh well, Aren thought to himself. The old Antaran saying came to mind: 'Senaedrin giveth with one hand, and Kor taketh away with another.'

Every so often a split in the tunnels would lead the pair to a dead-end, but they were careful in marking their paths. This allowed them to continue moving forward, even if they had no idea where it was they were actually headed...

Every once in a while passed by a type of rock that had a bluish-white glow to it, almost like a piece of quartzite lit from behind. Upon closer inspection, it wasn't the rock that was illuminated, but rather, something attached to the surface of the rock. Holding his torch aloft, William finally asked Aren, "What is this stuff?"

"Glowmoss. It grows in a lot of sea caves," Aren explained. They had already passed by a number of underground pools and ponds in some of the larger, more spacious areas of the cave system. "The lake must provide a good environment for it too. I did a lot of spelunking in the caves near home." Changing the subject, Aren tried to reassure William. "She'll be all right, you know."

William looked back at Aren. "W-What?!"

"Kaelyn," Aren said. "She'll be fine."

William came to a halt. "Yeah, well, we've got enough problems of our own right now without worrying about her," he retorted. In truth, he was worried about Kaelyn but knew she could take care of herself. At least she was above ground, or so he had hoped. This could easily become the biggest mistake of his short life, and if so, William was grateful that she wasn't there to join him in this folly. And if he was fated to meet his end within these caves, he thought ruefully, at least the mountain above would provide him with the biggest grave marker in all of Ramar.

They continued on, moving around several rock formations and ducking under some areas with low ceiling height.

"We must be dropping below sea level," *Aren observed. He stopped to look at a nearby rock.* "The moss is starting to thin out."

William grabbed Aren by the arm and pointed in front of them. "So why is it getting brighter up ahead?"

10825.msg – *Chapter 6\Shepherds' Caves – Gar Warren, Leader of the Shepherds*

Gar Warren, Leader of the Shepherds

Topic: Greeting

Gar: "Ho there! Treb! Enrie! That's you, isn't it?"

William: "(DISGUIISING VOICE, GRUFFLY) Aye, 'tis us."

Gar: "What's wrong with your voice, man? Catching cavern fever? I'm wondering if anyone has found that Maris wench yet... (SEES THEM CLEARLY – ORDERS) Hey! Who are you? How did you get in... "

William: "(INTERRUPTING) Best say no more, lest you wish my sword to give you a new mouth to say it with."

Gar: "(HUSKY COWARD'S WHISPER) What do you want?"

William: "You seem to be in charge here. What's your name?"

Gar: "(TOO SCARED TO LIE – QUICKLY) Warren. Gar Warren. Leader of the Shepherds."

Topic: Consort

William: "Just answer me this, and you'll live. What have you done with the Consort?"

Gar: "I... I... don't know what you mean."

William: "(TOUGH) If words don't convey meaning, perhaps metal will..."

Gar: "(SHARP, QUIET GASP OF PAIN) Don't! Please, don't! The Consort's gone! Disappeared!"

William: "When? How?"

Gar: "Just a short while ago... As for how..."

William: "(MENACING) Yes?"

Gar: "I think they used a magic portal. My mage is missing as well. That's all I know. Will you release me?"

William: "Makes sense. We didn't see anyone in the tunnels as we came in. Just a few more questions..."

Topic: Clues

William: "Any guesses as to who kidnapped the Consort?"

Gar: "(SURLY) No. (GASP AS WILLIAM NICKS HIM) I mean maybe. I opened the door... rather, one of my men opened the door just in time to see the mage step through the portal, following some others. I thought... I mean, my man thought he heard the mage warn someone to be careful with the Consort or Kahleth would have his head. My man... I mean, I don't know who Kahleth is."

William: "(ASIDE TO AREN) Sounds like our friend here has a bad case of split personality."

Topic: Portal

William: "No trerang business now... Did you actually see the magic portal?"

Gar: "Yes. I went into the room where we were keeping the Consort..."

William: "Go on. (IRONIC) Remember, the truth will set you free."

Gar: "The portal was shaped more like the mouth of a cave than an actual doorway. It floated about a foot above the floor. Armed men, mercenaries, carried the Consort into the portal. Then Maris, curse her hide, waved her hand and the portal closed. I rushed into the room, but she flung a spell at me. Next thing I knew I was flat against the wall."

Topic: Maris

William: "Who is Maris? A mage?"

Gar: "(KIND OF SADLY) Maris. I don't know what she is."

William: "That doesn't answer the question, Gar Warren."

Gar: "She's a Ghanish mage. Been with me... with the Shepherds... for years. Helped pull the operation together right from the start. Maris suggested we use these caves as our headquarters. Kor, to think that I trusted her!"

Topic: Shepherd Motives

William: "Tell me why you kidnapped the Consort."

Gar: "(GOING INTO A MINOR HYSTERICAL RIFF) The Emperor wouldn't give us the support we need to attack the Grrrlf in force. He didn't take us seriously, called us a fringe group, terrorists even. I decided I'd show him. Everyone knows he dotes on his daughter. Couldn't get close to her. Too well guarded. Got her boyfriend instead. Going to swap him for the Emperor's support... and respect."

William: "(SARCASTIC) Great plan. Even if you hadn't let the Consort slip through your fingers, what was to stop the Emperor from going along up to a point, and then sending in his Imperial Forces to wipe the walls with you?"

Gar: "It was a brilliant scheme! Worthy of a general or the Emperor himself! (CASTING ABOUT) They... He... They know we're capable of drastic measures. The Emperor would never risk the Consort's life, especially since he must know our cause is right! (SWITCHING GEARS) It's Maris's fault. She betrayed me! She betrayed the cause! It's Maris's fault..."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "Come on, Aren. I've had it with this human supremacist bilge bag."

44500.msg – *Chapter 6\Shepherds' Caves – Mage Maris*

Topic: *Mage Maris*

As William and Aren prepared to leave Gar Warren behind, a pair of Shepherds prodded Maris in to see him. Each of the men held one of her arms tightly. She held her head high in defiance.

Gar Warren snapped toward her in a rage. "Maris, you backstabbing bitch! You didn't think you'd be able to get away, did you?"

Maris sneered at him. "Actually, yes. I do." With surprising strength she snapped her arms free of the guards and brought them together above her head. Aren sensed something and hurled himself at William, knocking him to the floor as a blinding flash erupted from the woman's palms.

Maris turned toward the door, the guards sprawled in a heap at her feet. "Wait!" Aren cried. "I just want to ask you some questions about the Consort!"

The angry mage raised her hands. "Here are your answers."

William rose to Aren's side, muttering, "Remind me to talk to you about your approach with women."

600.msg – *Chapter 6\Gar Warren Escapes*

Topic: Gar Warren Escapes

Shepherd: "(RUNNING IN, OUT OF BREATH) Guards! In the caves! Caverton's men! And Imperial soldiers!"

William: "(RUSHED, TO GAR) What's all this about? Oh, Kor, he's gone."

Aren: "(URGENT) William, he slipped through a secret door across the room!"

William: "(URGENT) Hurry! If Warren gets away, we can't prove we weren't involved in the kidnapping! And being found here in the thick of things won't help our case!"

Topic: Exiting the Shepherd Caves

Aren: "I don't see Warren anywhere."

William: "He probably took a different route through the tunnels. We'll never find him."

Aren: "So now what do we do?"

William: "Without Warren's confession, we're still suspects. Our only hope is to find the Consort ourselves."

Aren: "(SNAPPISH) Isn't that idea the one that got us into all this trouble in the first place? I hope you have more of a plan than just that. As far as I can tell, our only lead ditched us in the tunnels when he turned left and we turned right."

William: "You're forgetting that we've got a name: Kahleth. With a name like that, it's my bet he's a Ghanish mercenary. And if there's one thing mercenary bands are always on the lookout for, it's new recruits."

Aren: "I don't think I like where you're going with this..."

William: "(REGAINING GOOD SPIRITS) All we have to do is ask around, find out how to contact this Kahleth fellow, and get inside his camp. If he's a part of this, he may know where the Consort is."

Aren: "Sounds like a long shot to me, but what choice do we have?"

William: "You wanted adventure and excitement... Well, here it is!"

44220.msg – *Chapter 6\North of Torlith – Grrrlf Pack Heading to the Ancestral Den*

Topic: Grrrlf Pack Heading to the Ancestral Den

William called to the head of the Grrrlf pack. "Excuse me, venerable leader. May I ask where you're bound?"

The aged Grrrlf turned his grizzled head in William's direction, but didn't slow his pace. "We have no time for idle roadside chats, young man. Please do not detain us."

William and Aren broke into a jog, keeping pace with the Grrrlf. Aren asked, "Are you answering the summons to return to the Ancestral Den?"

The packleader stopped and stared at Aren. "What do you know of this, human?"

Intimidated by the Grrrlf's stern manner, Aren quickly replied, "We heard that ghosts were threatening the Den. Can you tell us more?"

The Grrrlf puffed through his teeth. "Apparently, you are better informed about the situation than are we."

William cut in anxiously. "Look, a friend of ours, a human woman traveling with a Grrrlf, has gone to look for her father. He lives on the way to the Ancestral Den. If you see her, would you mind telling her... tell her..."

Annoyed at being treated like a TrKaa messenger, the Grrrlf growled, "Tell her what, human?"

William blushed beneath his tan. "Ah, just forget it. May you have a safe journey."

"And you."

Topic: Entering Chuno Province

William: "Given what we know, I don't think we'll find the Consort by going this way. We shouldn't stray too far until we figure out where he is."

Topic: Mercenaries Guarding the Consort #1 – Before Meeting Kahleth

A group of grizzled men in patchwork armor lurked near the swamp's edge. They had the air of men feigning idle ambivalence while waiting for something to happen. They eyed William and Aren warily.

Topic: Sir Richard Densmore

A small brass plate read 'Sir Richard Densmore, Provincial Representative'. A butler answered the door. William was just about to introduce himself when he was interrupted by a voice from the hallway. "I'm not taking any callers today, James. Tell them to make an appointment for after I return from Antara."

William looked past the butler to see a bald, hawk-nosed man pulling on his gloves. "Have I the honor of addressing Sir Densmore?"

"Not for long you don't." The man laughed loudly at his own joke.

"I'm on my way out the door. The Shira goes into session in a few days and I've much too much to do to stand about discussing the state of your fields or the taxes on your shop or..." he looked at William with some puzzlement, "... or the condition of your life style, whatever that may be."

"Perhaps just a few minutes of your time..." William began. Densmore stepped up to William, looked down at him, raised his eyebrows, and said, "Excuse me, sir. You are blocking my door."

William stood aside. Densmore swept past him, bestowed a single condescending glance on Aren, and continued down the path to his awaiting carriage.

Topic: Kirith's Father

A hand fumbled at the doorknob, then the door swung open. A man with his arm in a sling apologized. "Sorry for the wait, but it takes me awhile to do things with my left hand."

"What happened to you?" William asked.

"Chumen happened to me. I came home last week to find a pair of them wrecking my house! I tried to fight them off but they knocked me down. Curse my luck to fall on my arm! Fortunately my son wasn't with me. If anything had happened to him..." The man's words trailed off as if he didn't even want to consider the horrid possibilities.

Aren looked around the tidied house. "Looks like they didn't do any permanent damage."

"No, I got here before they had time. But they did make off with something irreplaceable..."

The man sighed. "Maybe this won't sound like much to you, but when Kirith was born a few years ago, I had a special lever chest made with his name as the combination. A Grrrlf crafted it from rare and expensive woods. It didn't have much of value in it, just some keepsakes, but I planned to give it to Kirith on his 16th birthday."

William and Aren promised to keep a lookout for the chest if they happened across any Chumen. The man thanked them. "I'd give you a hand but..." He gestured at his broken arm and shrugged ruefully.

Topic: Chest not yet Found

"How's the arm?" William asked when the man opens the door.

The man adjusted the sling. "Not so good. I don't think the bone is mending properly."

William took a quick look. "It's mending fine. You'll just have to be patient. Take care."

Topic: Chest Found

"How's the arm?" William asked when the man opened the door.

The man adjusted the sling. "Not so good. I don't think the bone is mending properly."

"Sorry to hear that. However, we didn't come by just to pay a house call... We have some good news for you."

"Well, I certainly could use some."

"We ran across the Chumen and guess what they had... Your chest! Not being the brightest lights in the outhouse, the Chumen couldn't figure out how to open it. With the exception of a few minor scratches, it's as good as new."

The man beamed. "Yes, that is good news indeed. Please, tell me where it is so I can fetch it home."

William unrolled his map and pointed to the chest's location. "Better take some friends along to help... You're not in any condition to be lugging a chest through that swamp."

"I will. Thanks very much. Here, maybe you can use this ring. I won it from a guy in a card game. Said it was magical, but I think he was just trying to bump its value."

44210.msg – *Chapter 6\Torlith – Swamp Guide*

Topic: Swamp Guide

Through the open door, the companions saw a man hunched over a cold fireplace, trying to light kindling with a flint. The fluent stream of curses issuing from the man's lips indicated he wasn't having much luck. Aren volunteered his assistance. "I can get that fire going for you, sir."

The scruffy man stood. "Be my guest, but the sodding wood is wet clear through."

Aren knelt by the hearth. Softly singing a fire song, he coaxed a tiny flame with his crooked index finger. Gently, patiently, he guided the flame along the twigs until the smaller branches lit of their own accord.

The fire well started, Aren stood, brushing off his hands. "There you go."

The man snorted. "Huh! I should have known you for a mage... You got that holier-than-thou attitude down square."

William interjected. "That's not the right way to talk to someone who just kept you from freezing this evening. What do you have against mages anyhow?"

"Got my reasons." The man spat on the earthen floor.

"It was a mage what caused me to be squatting in this wretched shack, instead of living it up in a comfortable inn. He come to me last week, well-dressed and high-mannered he was. Told me he'd pay well if I'd protect him in the swamps. He had some notion about collecting the bugs to study their lightning and I was needed to keep him from getting fried in the process.

"I did my job and more than, saved his magic arse several times that day. So when he's got all his damn bugs, what does he do but throw a hex on me! I must have been out for a while because when I come to, the mage was gone. Stiffed me good, sod his hide."

William says, "Guess that would tick me off too. Did he leave any clues behind that might help you track him down and get your due?"

The mercenary scratched his rump. "No, just some buggered books. I almost burned 'em, but then I thought what if he comes back to a pile of ashes? The last thing I need is an angry mage on my tail!"

Aren suggested, "Perhaps one way to get back at that mage would be to tell us where the books are. Then if he comes back to collect his belongings, they'll be gone but he won't be able to blame you."

"Hmm... That'll work. We were on the outer edge of the swamp east of Torlith, south of the road. Not that I'll ever hear of it, but I hope this steams that mage good."

44205.msg – *Chapter 6\ Torlith – Ishmael's Hot Beverage Shop*

Topic: Ishmael's Hot Beverage Shop

Judging from the construction equipment scattered about and the half-painted interior, it was apparent that the shop wasn't quite open yet. William caught the eye of the man who seemed to be in charge of the organized chaos.

"Excuse me, we were just passing by and wondered what's going to be here."

The man scratched his head. "They're going to serve drinks here."

Aren thought he understood. "Oh, a tavern. Kind of small, though."

The man shook his head. "That's 'cause there aren't going to be more'n a couple of tables. The idea is that people are going to buy their drinks here, but drink them somewhere else. And not ale or wine, but hot stuff like tea."

Aren's face showed his puzzlement. "Why wouldn't you just make your own at home instead?"

"I don't get it either," he shrugged. "The owner thinks it'll be big, though. Planning to set up shops all over the Empire. His name's Ishmael, I think."

Thanking the man for his help, William and Aren left him to his work.

Topic: Wilder Mage #1

William and Aren caught their breath after the battle. They watched the man rise up from where he cowered, covering his head with his arms in an attempt to protect himself from the lightening bugs. Acting as if he didn't see them, he turned and strode into the swamp. The companions followed, as curious as to what he'd do next as they were annoyed that he didn't even thank them for rescuing him.

The ground turned marshy beneath their feet. Mud and muck sucked at their boots. Though they chose their steps with care, the going got perilous. William was about to suggest they head back to the road when the man ahead of them stopped and waved his arms. Aren heard words of magic, plus a number of unrecognizable sounds.

Accompanied by a crackling noise, the ground grew firm. William took a step. "It's solid, but slippery. I think he froze it. Walk with care."

"He's a mage? What's he doing out here in the middle of a swamp?"

"I'm just about to ask him." William called up ahead. "Ho, the mage! We want to talk to you."

The mage whirled around, his eyes gleaming and darting from side to side. "Buzz buzz! Zzzzzzz! Zzzzap!"

"William, I think he's in shock from the lightning bug attack."

"I don't know... He looks like a wilder mage to me. Probably went crazy a long time ago and was cast-out by his tribe. He could be dangerous."

"Well, I feel sorry for him. I'm going closer to try to talk to him."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Aren."

Aren shrugged and walked slowly toward the mage, his hands outstretched. William drew his sword and followed a few paces behind.

The mage whirled first in one direction, then another, thrusting his staff out against attackers only he could see. Aren got close, but the mage didn't notice him. Aren clapped his hands. The mage jumped, but his eyes focused for an instant. Taking this as a clue, Aren punctuated his greeting with claps.

"We mean you <clap> no harm. <clap> Speak with us. <clap>"

The trick worked. The mage saw Aren. "Cold..."

Aren prompted, "You're cold?"

The mage raised his staff as if to strike. William rushed in, but Aren held him back. In a voice broken with disuse, the mage uttered, "No! I am Cold! The center of Cold... Here!" The mage pounded his chest with his fist.

"Oh, I see. You control Cold. That's how you froze the swamp. Why don't you freeze the lightning bugs too?"

The mage's attention had started to wander, but it snapped back into focus at the word 'lightning'. He became agitated, waving his staff in a frenzy of parries.

"Swarms! Attacking! Cold makes them angry. Nowhere safe! Pain! Agonyyyyyy!" The mage fell to the ground, protecting his head with his arms, his words trailing off into a high-pitched whine.

Topic: Give Grounding Wire

Aren clapped his hands to draw the mage's attention. Then he held out the wire. "This is a grounding wire. It will protect you from the bugs' lightning. You will be safe."

The mage seemed to understand because he clutched the wire like a drowning sailor grabs at a floating branch. The mage started to walk away, then turned and thrust his staff at Aren. Aren instinctively took it though he protested, "But this is your..."

The mage said, "Staff will teach Cold." Then he strode away into the depths of the swamp.

Topic: Wilder Mage #2

The mage stood where William and Aren had left him, his eyes seemingly focused on airborne attackers only he could see.

44226.msg – ***Chapter 6\Contract – Gerry Barcudi and Richard Densmore***

Topic: Contract – Gerry Barcudi and Richard Densmore

This document acts as a formal contract between Gerry Barcudi and Sir Richard Densmore. Sir Densmore agrees to pay Barcudi the sum of 750 burlas upon proof that Lord B. Stafford of Isten has met his death due to apparently natural causes.

Topic: Gerry Barcudi #1

"Hi, come on in. I just baked a batch of cookies. Want to try one?" The man offered a plate of delicate brown wafers.

Aren sampled a cookie. "Mmmm. These are great. Are you a cook?"

The elderly man chuckled. "You might say that. I'm a mage. Spells are much like recipes. My gift is in the art of poison. Forgive me-- Gerry Barcudi, at your service."

William choked on his last bite of cookie. "These aren't... You haven't..."

"Oh no, of course not! I only make up poisons when I'm paid to do so. And I don't experiment on friendly young men who just drop in for a visit."

"You must work for some very interesting people." William said cautiously.

The mage responded with surprising candor. "Oh yes. Some of the most powerful officials in the Shira, and a few Jaegers as well. Why, there's one Shiran from Torlith..." The mage stopped short, then continued, "You'd be amazed if I told you the names of my clients -- almost everyone has someone they'd prefer to see dead."

Aren tried to talk around a mouthful of cookie. "I'm a mage too... a novice. Do you think you could teach me something about poisons?"

William looked concerned. "Planning on doing anyone in? You know I don't really mean any of those little things I say about you, right?"

Aren responded cryptically, "One never knows when a little poison might come in handy..."

The mage thought it over, then announced that he'd be happy to train Aren for the reasonable sum of 75 burlas.

"Agreed?"

Choice: Pay

Aren paid out the burlas. "It's well worth the money just to think of how nervous William will be from now on whenever he eats my cooking."

The mage sat Aren down at his table. Opening a small compartmentalized chest, he showed Aren the various components of his trade. A short time later, Aren had the knowledge and skill to create and use elementary poisons.

Choice: Pay – *Not Enough Money*

Aren apologized to Barcudi. "I'm afraid I spoke too soon. My funds appear to be a bit limited just now. Perhaps some other time."

Choice: Leave

Aren saw how truly nervous William looked. "On second thought, I don't think William will ever eat my cooking again if I train with you, sir mage. Perhaps some other time."

Topic: *Gerry Barcudi #2*

Barcudi greeted them warmly, a plate of fresh sweetcakes in hand. "Hello again, my friends. Come to learn the tricks of the trade after all? Still only 75 burlas!

"Agreed?"

44305.msg – *Chapter 6\Keth – Lord Dakka*

Topic: *Lord Dakka*

"Lord Dakka will see you now," said the footman, showing the companions into the parlor.

Keeping his velvet-coated back toward them, the lord said brusquely, "You're late. The rest of them are already on their way to Bakril. Go join up with your fellow mercenaries, and don't come back without my wine."

Topic: *Wine not Returned*

"Lord Dakka will see you now," said the footman, showing the companions into the parlor.

"Unless you have my wine, we have nothing to say to each other." The lord glared darkly.

Topic: Wine Returned

Lord Dakka surveyed the wine cases coldly. "It's not all here."

William explained, "The bandits drank a number of bottles before we arrived on the scene. Count yourself lucky you got any of it back at all."

The lord stared haughtily at William. "Then you can count yourself lucky that you're getting off without a beating for your insolence."

William stalked out of the room. Aren wasted no time in following him.

44310.msg – ***Chapter 6\Keth – Swamp Hunter***

Topic: Swamp Hunter #1

The companions smelled a rank, foul odor as they approached the house. When they got closer, they saw the cause of the stench... strips of drying meat and tanned hides on racks in the yard. A man in a skunkskin hat tended a smoking fire. "Howdy, strangers. You in the market for some gator shoes? Belts? How about some snakeskin boots?"

Aren waved his hand in an attempt to dispel the drifting smoke. The man continued his sales pitch. "Got your carlith jerky, your croc jerky, and your field worm jerky. Bet you didn't know field worm is edible, did you? Tastes like..."

William interrupted. "Chicken?"

"Chicken? No, it tastes like carlith. But you know what carlith tastes like?"

"I wouldn't venture to guess..."

"Chicken!" The man guffawed heartily.

William ignored the temptation to ask what chicken tasted like. Instead, he went on. "Actually we're more interested in provisions. Do you sell anything that vaguely resembles food?"

The hunter narrowed his eyes. "You city folk with your refined taste buds don't know good eating when it bites you on the arse. This here cured croc meat is oily and tough, with a flavor like the swamp it come from. But not only is it delicious, it won't go bad no matter what."

"And how would you be able to tell if it did?" Aren muttered.

The hunter folded his arms across his chest. "Listen, I ain't got all day. 30 burlas.

"You interested in buying or not?"

Choice: Buy Meat

William checked their packs. "We're pretty low on supplies and can't afford to be picky. Give us some of that there cured croc meat."

The hunter wrapped up the package. "Can't go wrong with this stuff. Cook it up in a stew with some swamp cabbage and marsh mallow. You'll love it. Here, have a sample on the house."

The swamp hunter dipped a ladle into a vile-smelling kettle hanging over the fire. William and Aren held their noses and took small bites. William coughed. "Delightful." Aren wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Yummy. You can bet we'll be thinking of you come supper time."

Choice: Leave

William checked their packs. "I don't think we're that desperate for supplies after all. Tell you what, if we ever get the hankering for some of that down-home swampy eatin' like grampa never cooked, we'll come on back this way."

The swamp man grunted. "City folk don't know what you're missing..."

As he and Aren walked away, William replied, "Oh yes, I think I do... a long, wretched night of cold sweats, cramps, and dry heaves most likely."

Topic: *Swamp Hunter #2*

The hunter beamed up at them. "I reckoned you'd be back. Still offering the same deal-- 30 burlas for the croc meat.

"You interested in buying or not?"

44315.msg – **Chapter 6** | *Keth – Surly Man*

Topic: *Surly Man*

A surly man answered the door. "Whaddya want?"

"We're trying to find someone--" Aren began.

"I haven't seen 'im," the man declared and slammed the door shut.

Topic: Ganath – City Overview

Squat buildings perched on stilts, embedded in the marshy earth of Ganath where people had carved a home from the swamp. The wet, muddy town seemed a perfect match for the coarse, stubborn Ghanish personality.

The Pearl Spittoon: The enormous inn rested on thick pylons, offering a dry refuge. The booming laughter from within promised good cheer and, perhaps, good food.

Have Blade Will Travel: A province rife with mercenaries maintained a steady trade in weaponry -- steady enough for a sword merchant to grow and prosper.

Khorus Bale, Former Mercenary and Proprietor of The Pearl Spittoon Inn

Topic: Greeting #1

Khorus: "(BOOMING LAUGH) Look, everyone! Strangers! Just what we needed... Some new ears for old tales! I'm Khorus Bale, proprietor."

Topic: Eye

William: "(RESIGNED – FALSE ENTHUSIASM) So tell us, how did you come to lose your eye?"

Khorus: "(LAUGHING) I'm glad you asked because I was just about to tell you! It's a dark and stormy night here at the Pearl Spittoon. Suddenly the door blows open and a stranger stomps in, shaking off water like a Ticornan otter-spaniel. 'I'm wet and cold clear through, barkeep,' says he in a voice like a thunder clap. 'Make me a Januli Julep and go extra heavy on the blister peppers!' (LAUGHS)

"Now Januli Juleps happen to be a specialty of mine, and I make them hotter than any this side of the Waste. In two shakes and a stir, the stranger has one of my finest creations burning a ring in the bar in front of him. Why, the steam alone causes two of my patrons to run screaming from the room, tears streaming down their faces.

"The stranger sniffs, the stranger snorts, then he takes a healthy swig. Well I'll be pickled if he doesn't bat an eyelid. All he says is, 'Barkeep, I do believe you gave me a virgin Julep for the ladies. There's not enough blister pepper in this to stick in your eye.'

"Well, to say I disagree with this opinion is to put it mildly. To prove him wrong, I grab the blister pepper from his Januli Julep and... well, I stick it in my eye. Kor if that thing doesn't live up to its name and burn out my looker quicker than I can say, 'Owwwwweeeeee!' In 20-zero hindsight, I'd have to say that wasn't one of my brighter ideas."

Aren: "(SHAKEN) That's terrible!"

Khorus: "(LAUGHS) Yes, terrible and true. (SHOUTING TO THE STRANGER) Right, stranger?"

Stranger: "Every word of it, ye blasted fool! How about a Januli Julep on the house for old times' sake?"

Khorus: "(YELLING BACK) Stranger, if I didn't know you better, I'd throw you out of here on your raggedy ass! (TO PARTY) Now where was I before I was interrupted by that freeloading, sud-sucking, tanked-up tosspot?"

Topic: Arm

William: "Since it's apparent you like to talk, how about telling us how you lost your arm?"

Khorus: "You'll be sorry you asked, little man! (LAUGHING) It's a dark and stormy night, deep in Mehrat territory. I'm trying to catch some sleep, lying in a dugout half-filled with rain water. My buddy Lon is snoring to wake the dead. I reach over to clamp my hand over his thundering yawp. Suddenly, a Mehrat leaps over the rim of our hole and whacks my arm off with one blow of his battle axe."

Aren: "(FASCINATED) Then what happened?"

Khorus: "(LAUGHING) Well, Lon stops snoring right enough. He kills the Mehrat, binds up my arm, and drags me through mud and blood to a medico. Saves my life, he does. (SHOUTING TO LON) Thanks again, friend!"

Lon: "(DRUNK AND LOUD) Think nothing of it, Khorus! Hey, how about an ale on the house?"

Khorus: "(LAUGHING – TO LON) What do you think I'm running here? A charity institute for destitute drunkards? (TO PARTY) Now where was I before I was interrupted by that guzzling soak of a bar rag? Oh yes... So that's how I lost my arm. Miss that arm, I do. 'Twas even brawnier than this here wrestling champion I got left."

Topic: Wrestle #1 – No Halder's Brew

William: "So, I take it you're considered a fair to middling arm wrestler 'round these parts."

Khorus: "(GUFFAWING) Why, son, am I to take that as a challenge of sorts?"

William: "Yes, and here's a wager to make it interesting."

Narrator: Khorus looks long and hard at William's comparatively puny arm, then he roars with laughter for several minutes. Finally, he regains enough self-control to sit down opposite William and clasp hands. Still chuckling, he waits for the signal, then immediately slams William's hand to the board.

Khorus: "(ROARING) That was fun! And profitable too! Anytime you want a rematch, just let me know."

Topic: Kahleth #1

William: "Do you know a man named Kahleth?"

Khorus: "Yeah, I know him. He wouldn't waste his time on a scrawny pair like you though."

Topic: Goodbye

Khorus: "Come back anytime you get to missing me. (LAUGHS)"

Topic: Greeting #2 – After William Loses

William: "(KIDDING) We got to missing you, Khorus, so we came back."

Khorus: "Ready to lose more money, are you? (LAUGHS)"

Topic: Wrestle #2 – Using Halder's Brew

William: "Khorus, I was feeling a bit tired before, but now I'm refreshed. Here's another wager. Put up your fist."

Khorus: "(LAUGHING) You're a game little man, that much I'll grant. Well, I'm not one to turn my nose at easy cash."

Narrator: Khorus sits down and locks hands with William. At the signal, William puts forth a mighty effort, surprising Khorus with the sudden increase in strength. William struggles valiantly to keep his hand at the midpoint as Khorus pauses to reconsider the situation. After a brief hiatus, Khorus comes to the conclusion that things were still pretty much as they ever were, and William's hand once more discovers itself keeping company with the spoons and saucers.

Khorus: "Well, young squire, I'm impressed by your moxie if not by your brute strength. You know, if you're interested I could put you in the way of some people always on the lookout for an up-and-comer like yourself."

Topic: Kahleth #2 – Khorus Impressed

William: "Do you know of a man named Kahleth?"

Khorus: "Yeah. He might want to talk to someone with your... resourcefulness."

Topic: Employment

William: "My pockets could use some ballast. Tell me about these employment opportunities."

Khorus: "Let's see... Kahleth is always looking for strong arms, or at least what passes for them in general company... (HE ROARS AT HIS JOKE) But I can't rightly say where Kahleth is at these days. Tell you what, go to Chothe and find Lokath. Say I sent you and sure as spit's whistle, he'll hook you up proper."

Topic: Greeting #3 – After Arm Wrestling using Halder's Brew

William: "(KIDDING) We got to missing you, Khorus, so we came back."

Mercenary Sentry Guarding Kahleth's Camp

Topic: Greeting #1 – Before Lokath's Recommendation

Sentry: "Stop where you are. What do you want?"

William: "Just passing through."

Sentry: "Not this way, you're not. Take another path."

Topic: Greeting #2 – Before Lokath's Recommendation

Sentry: "I thought I told you to go around. I won't tell you again."

Topic: Greeting #3 – Never-Ending Fight – Before Lokath's Recommendation

Sentry: "If we wanted your company, we would've invited you. Since you obviously can't take a hint, you best prepare to defend yourselves."

Lokath, Mercenary and Kahleth's Right-Hand Man

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "(TALKING TOUGH) Are you Lokath?"

Lokath: "Yeah, what of it?"

Topic: Employment

William: "(TALKING TOUGH) Khorus Bale of Ganath sent us. He said we'd find our fortune waiting here like an easy-girl with her knees spread."

Lokath: "(LAUGHS) Oh, he did, did he? Well, you tell him that his little joke fell flat. As if I don't remember that Ganath dancing girl he sent me! Kor blind me if that veil didn't cover a three-day stubble!"

Topic: Khorus

William: "(TOUGH) This is no joke, Lokath. Khorus said we're the kind of men you're looking for."

Lokath: "Hmmm... Well, you don't look like much to me, but Khorus is a good judge of men and horse flesh, even if he don't know a good-looking wench from a hole in the wall. Let me call in a few of my colleagues into this here interview process..."

Topic: Escape Fight

Lokath: "(SNORTS DISGUSTEDLY) Listen, boys, why don't you go back to your game of 'a coin for the beggar' and leave the fighting to us men?"

Topic: Rematch

William: "We weren't expecting a fight. Give us another go around."

Lokath: "(GRUNTS) Sure, why not? The fellas can always use the practice."

Topic: Fight Won

Lokath: "(GRUDGING RESPECT) Looks certainly do deceive. All right, I suppose I can use you. But before I commit to anything, I want to test you in the field. We've got a little operation going down in Pianda. It was supposed to be a simple matter of get in, get it over with, and get out. Well, things got complicated and the fellas are running out of provisions."

William: "You want us to bring them additional supplies?"

Lokath: "You catch on right quick. The men are near Imazi. Find Birge, the lieutenant in command. Give him the provisions and take this note. When Birge is done with you, come on back here with a report. Then we'll see what's what."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "Thanks, Lokath. We won't let you down."

Lokath: "See that you don't."

Topic: Greeting #2 – Haven't Left Yet

William: "We thought we'd stop by here again before checking in with Birge."

Lokath: "(MAD) Listen, I didn't send you two off on a pleasure trip! Those men in Imazi need supplies now. Do I have to draw you a map? Get moving!"

44100.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Tapped Barrel Tavern – Tavern Keeper*

Topic: Liar's Festival #1

The tavern keeper came up to the party. "Greetings and welcome to Choth. You are strangers so I will tell you that our village has the most honest, trustworthy inhabitants to be found in all the Empire!"

William set a cautious hand on his belongings, wondering at the tavern keeper's choice of words.

"Today is a special day for us in Choth. If you visit any house in the village, you will be welcomed and invited to join the celebration."

Aren asked, "What are you celebrating?"

The tavern keeper's smile was enigmatic. "Let's just say it's an old Choth tradition, dating back to before the Grrrlf wars. I invite you to explore the town. Introduce yourselves to the locals. And once you feel you know the place like your own home town, come on back for an ale. I'll be expecting you."

Topic: More Contestants to Meet

The tavern keeper intercepted the party. "I don't think you've quite talked to everyone yet. Come back when you have."

44105.msg – ***Chapter 6\Choth – The Soldier (Randolph the Butcher)***

Topic: The Soldier

The tall, muscular man wore leather scale and bore a sword and shield. He greeted the party, jovially inviting them inside. Serving up some meat pies for their refreshment, he related his adventures fighting the Mehrat on the border. "We'd surrounded a Mehrat stronghold, but no matter what we tried, we could not breach their defenses."

"I've heard Mehrat forts are impregnable," mumbled William, his mouth full of pie.

"Not to mention their women," the soldier guffawed. "We were running out of supplies. Unless someone did something soon, we'd have to retreat. After studying their walls, I came up with a plan. I went to our commander. He said it was a desperate measure calling for unmatched bravery, but he gave his permission."

The soldier rubbed the back of his neck. "I brought a few trusted buddies into the scheme. We prepared ourselves, then in the dead of night we made our way to a rear gate. Calling to the guard on the wall, we petitioned for entry. He came down and let us in."

Aren wrinkled his brow. "Why did he do that?"

"Well, our dresses, wigs, and perfume might have had something to do with it. See, I knew the stronghold's camp followers had gone off to the market town just before we besieged the fort. They never had a chance to get back inside. So while the Mehrat had plenty of arms, food, and water, as far as the other "necessities" go, they were left pretty much to their own devices."

"So you pretended to be easy girls?" William asked, torn between admiration and disgust.

"It was our only way through their defenses. Once inside, we strangled the guard. Creeping through the castle in our stocking feet, we dispatched at least a dozen more before reaching the front gate."

"Then you dropped the gate, let in your army, and finished them off?" Aren asked.

"Well, yes. But not right away. The stronghold's commander, in company with at least 20 men, came upon us as we approached the gate.

"There was no place for us to hide, nothing to do but try and bluff it out. Fortunately the light was dim. The captain mistook us for the camp followers, assuming that we'd managed to sneak

back inside. For the rest of the evening, we played the part of giggling wenches, being wined, dined, and teased for our favors."

Aren and William shuddered simultaneously. "I know, I know. But a soldier has to be courageous in the line of duty. After supper, each officer took one of us to his quarters. I'll never forget the look of surprise on the captain's face when he reached into my blouse. That pair of melons was the last thing he ever saw..."

"Each man quickly disposed of his "date" and regrouped in the corridor. We did a headcount and realized that one man, Julian by name, was still missing. We were just about to storm the room he had gone into with a young lieutenant when Julian came out the door, carrying the lieutenant's head and wearing a huge grin. Needless to say, we didn't ask any questions..."

Aren looked pale. "Then did you let your army in the front gate?"

"Yes," said the soldier, wrapping up his tale. "Our men overwhelmed the Mehrat in no time. My buddies and I were the heroes of the day, though it was months before we heard the last of the rude remarks."

44110.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Healer (Miles Canaster the Apothecarist)*

Topic: The Healer

A bell tinkled over the door as the party entered. The little bald man greeted them, a vial of Senwater and a package of herbal powders clutched in his hands. "I am Canaster. Perhaps you have heard of me?"

Aren said that, regretfully, he had not.

Canaster bowed his head humbly. "That is not such a surprise. Even the greatest of us do our task without notice, creeping from sick bed to sick bed, quietly working miracles for the grace of the Triune."

"Are you a healer?"

"Yes, such is my gift. I have called upon it much since the Feeblepox came among us, but fortunately my powers increase rather than diminish with use."

"I thought the Sisters of Senaedrin were the only ones who could cure the Pox," said William.

Canaster laughed lightly. "You have been misinformed. In fact, when the Pox hit the Temple in Isten, they sent for this humble servant in their hour of need. When I arrived, many of the Sisters were stricken, including their leader. I went to her bedside, the only man ever permitted within the inner chambers of that holy sanctuary."

Aren was intrigued. "What was it like?"

Canaster's eyes lit up. "Her chamber was on the roof of the Temple, open to the sun and wind. Huge billowing sheets hung from the walls and ceiling. White doves soared in the dome."

The light dimmed in Canaster's eyes. His voice choked with tears. "The Sister was in a grave state, suffering in the final stage before death. I held some Senwater to her lips but she had not the strength to swallow even a sip. I took her hand in mine. It was as white and cold as marble. I felt despondent, unable to do anything to help. In desperation I lifted my eyes to the dome's vaulted roof."

Canaster lifted his eyes to his low plaster ceiling, obviously envisioning the Temple in his mind's eye. "In my desperation, I said a prayer to Senaedrin. I do not know if it was because of where I was or due to the combination of the Sister's power with my own. I only know what I saw next..."

"Which was?" Aren breathed, hanging on Canaster's every word.

"A swirling mist of rose and silver, coalescing to form the image of a face. It spoke. 'I am Denna Rae, priestess of Senaedrin. Once I walked the earth, seeking to aid mankind as do my Sisters after me. You are a great and good man. I will help you rid my Sister of the cursed plague that now wracks her body.'"

"The vision continued, 'You must make a sacrifice however, as no gift is without its price.' I told the priestess I was willing to give even my life if it would restore health to the Sister. 'Then so be it,' said the spirit of Denna Rae. At that, I fell into a swoon. I do not know how many days I walked outside the world, only that the snows had come before I woke.

"When I opened my eyes, the Sister stood before me, as strong and healthy as before the illness. She said that while she lay in death's grasp, a warmth washed over and through her, and a voice reminded her of a duty to the Gods left unfinished. She sank into a peaceful sleep. Recovery followed soon after. When told of the sacrifice I'd made, she kept me at the Temple and had the Sisters watch over me day and night. For many weeks they thought I would die, but as you can tell, I did not."

"Why aren't you still in Isten?" asked William.

"A Temple of Senaedrin is no place for a man. Besides, the simple life in Choth appeals to me. As soon as I could travel, I came home, my horse laden with gifts of healing abilities such as you see in my hands."

"Do you correspond with the Sister whose life you saved?"

"Yes, though as you can imagine, she is a very busy woman with little time for such as me. She sends a nutcake every year on Emperor's Day."

Topic: The Captive

The red-haired boy unrolled a parchment on the cottage floor. "Oh, you're just in time!" he piped. "Look what I got!"

"What is it?" asked Aren, kneeling down to examine the parchment.

"It's a treasure map! I stole it from the pirates!"

William's hand jumped to his sword. "What pirates?"

"Close the door and I'll tell you all about it," said the boy, pulling the curtains across the windows.

"I went to Bakril to stay with my grandmother for a Moon. One afternoon she sent me on some errands. I started playing with some town kids, so it got pretty dark before I got done. I knew Grandma would be worried so I took a short cut through an alley behind a tavern. Next thing I know, somebody grabbed me and threw me in a sack that smelled like fish and old socks. Gross!"

"You were kidnapped by pirates?" asked Aren in astonishment.

"Yup!" the boy answered proudly. "They threw me in the hold of their ship until we put out to sea. Then the captain sent for me. He was a murderer with a big black moustache and a talking monkey. He told me I was his new cabin boy, that I better act sharp and keep out of trouble or he'd hang me from the tallest jib arm... That's how pirates talk, you know."

"Yes," admitted William, "That's exactly how the pirates I've met talk."

The boy's eyes widened. "You mean you've actually... Oh wait, I'm telling about my adventure now."

"Anyhow, we sailed and sailed and sailed. Every other day or so, we'd come on a ship. The pirates would attack, killing every man, woman, and child on board. Then they'd take all the loot, set the ship on fire, and drink rum until the sun came up the next morning."

The boy pointed to a spot on the map, far out in the sea. "I think it was just about here when I decided I'd had enough. I couldn't stand waiting on the captain, fetching his food and drink at all hours, swabbing decks and polishing brass 'til my knuckles bled. I knew I had to escape."

"But you must have been outnumbered fifty to one. How did you manage to get away?" Aren asked.

"I waited until they attacked a ship. All the pirates boarded her, not trusting each other with the booty. Then I cut the grappling hooks binding the pirate ship to the cargo vessel. It was a job hoisting the sails by myself, but fortunately the pirates were too busy killing and pillaging to notice."

"So you just sailed away and left them there?"

"Yup! And since they'd already started burning the ship, I suspect they all wound up at the bottom of the sea before I was over the horizon. I made it back to the coast of Antara, but the ship broke up on the rocks. Holding onto this treasure map, I swam to shore.

"There's a pirate ship full of gold and jewels somewhere off the coast of Aspreza right now. Someday I'll dive for it, but right now I'm organizing an expedition to go hunt for this treasure." The boy pointed to a large "X" on the map.

Aren sighed. "If I didn't have other important things to do, I'd go with you. Sounds exciting."

"Oh, I'm sure it will be. I probably have to cross the Waste and fight all kinds of horrible monsters. Well, now that I've been captured by pirates, I figure I've got the necessary experience to handle just about any kind of adventure."

44120.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Thief (Beatrice the Numismatist)*

Topic: The Thief

The thin dark woman invited the party in for some wine. While they drank, she manipulated a silver coin on the back of her hand, rolling it from knuckle to knuckle. William watched with admiration. "You must be quite dexterous."

The woman smiled a thin-lipped smile. "It is worth my life if I am not. A thief must be deft of hand, light of foot, and quick of mind to survive in this dangerously over-cautious world. A thief can trust no one, not even his closest friend. Let me tell you a story that will show you what I mean.

"It was about two years ago. There was a man named Jacob. Not only was he my lover, he was my friend, my partner, and my strong right arm. We traveled to Ticor on the trail of an artifact, a priceless gold coin dating from before the Grrrlf Wars. We had bought the information that a certain Jaeger had acquired this coin."

William was surprised. "Not many would dare steal from a Jaeger."

The woman shrugged. "They bleed red when you stick them, and have no more magic than what they can buy from a mage. All they have is lips chapped raw from kissing the Emperor's bottom."

The woman poured more wine. "We spent several days mapping out the Jaeger's estate and timing the sentries' routine. The following night we struck. Wearing this Shadowring," the woman held up her hand to reveal a shiny band, "I climbed the wall, Jacob close behind. Jacob took care of the guard while I ran up the stairs to the treasure room.

"Slipping through the ventilation shaft was a bit of a trick, but I am small and limber. As per our plan, I ran to the door and let Jacob in, then I went out to stand watch. We had been informed that

the coin was kept in a vault with a heavy wooden door. When I heard the door splinter, I knew it had proved no match for Jacob's strength.

"Minutes later he came out and we fled. Back in our room at the inn, I was anxious to see our treasure. Jacob's eyes would not meet mine. He said, 'There was nothing there. The vault was empty. I think maybe that information seller cheated us, or maybe the Jaeger moved the coin somewhere else.'"

The thief drained her glass. "It was that very evening Jacob and I parted company."

William asked, "Do you know what became of him?"

"Yes, that I do. You see, when Jacob told me the coin wasn't there, I did not believe him. We'd recently had an argument over his attentions to a dancing girl. One thing led to another and he'd threatened to leave me. I thought he was lying, hoping to collect the coin's worth and leave me holding the cat.

"I accused him. He denied everything, even shaking out his clothes to prove he hadn't hidden the coin. That's when I realized there are other places to hide such a small object. I bashed Jacob on the head and cut him open from head to toe, searching his entrails for the coin I knew he had swallowed."

One more glass of wine disappeared down the thief's throat. "The sad thing is, Jacob was telling the truth. There was nothing hidden in his carcass. To this day, I still miss him. He was the best partner in the world, and an honest one."

44125.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Hero (Walter Smit)*

Topic: The Hero

Stepping into the cottage, the party saw two flasks on the table. A young, fair man entered the room, drying his hands on a towel. "Oh, hello," he said in a gentle voice.

"We didn't mean to barge in, only the door was open and everyone in this town seems so friendly..." William apologized.

"Don't think twice about it. I see you've noticed my silver flasks. They are my prized possessions, doses of Halder's Brew and Malkere's Serum presented to me by the princess Aurora herself. She said, 'Walter, after the bravery you've shown, I know you have no need of these potions, but take them anyway as a token of my thanks.'"

"What did you do to deserve such gratitude from her royal highness?" asked William.

"Oh, I merely saved her life, that's all," Walter admitted. "She was traveling in a coach when a band of Black Montari jumped the coachman and Imperial guards, killing them all.

"I happened to be on the same road, heading in the opposite direction. I came upon the scene just in time to witness the Montari leader drag the princess from the coach. This mistreatment of royalty made me so furious that I didn't even take the time to realize that there were eight or nine of them and only one of me."

William looked skeptical. "How did you fight off nine Montari raiders?"

"I didn't. I only killed three of them before being rendered unconscious by a blow on the head. When I awoke, the princess and I were at the Montari camp, bound back to back in the shadows."

"By that time in the evening, the Montari were too far in their cups to take much notice of us. Using a sharp rock, I severed the ropes that bound us. I told the princess to run into the woods, that I would find her once I'd dispatched the villains. She begged me not to risk my life on her account, but I was firm. 'Your highness,' I said, 'Far be it from me to ignore the pleas of royalty, but a man's got to do what a man's got to do.'"

"Further discussion was impossible as our conversation had alerted the Montari that their captives were free. The princess took to her heels while I proved to those ruffians they had picked the wrong man with whom to trifle."

Disbelieving, William asked, "You killed six of them?"

Walter reconsidered. "Well, perhaps it was only four. I think two of them had already passed out."

"So you single-handedly defeated four Black Montari in combat?"

"I think one of them tripped and fell over a cliff. So three, yes, it was three."

William shrugged. "All right, you'd already killed three Montari earlier that afternoon. I don't see why you shouldn't kill another three before supper. Then what happened?"

"I went into the woods and found the princess just as she was about to be attacked by a wolf. Making quick work of that creature, I then escorted the princess through the woods, delivering her safely to the palace upon first light of day."

"I see. And I'm sure the Emperor was quick to welcome the man who'd spent the entire night in the woods with his daughter?"

Walter blushed. "Well, yes, after he'd heard the full story and seen for himself the great wounds I had suffered."

"Yes, I'm sure. Well, thank you for the charming story. I'm sure it will make a delightful bedtime yarn for your grandchildren someday." William nodded toward the door. "Come on, Aren. It's time we went back to the real world now."

Topic: The Wizard

If the black robe sprinkled with stars was any indication, then the man standing before them was a mage. His first words confirmed their suspicions. "I am Gordistorini, a wizard of great power and influence. I control the forces of time, and can travel backwards and forwards at will. See this?" Gordistorini held up a thick chain forged of iron links.

William studied the item. "It's a Carluda's Chain, isn't it?"

"Not just a Carluda's Chain... This is THE Carluda's Chain, forged by Carluda himself!"

William protested. "But no one really knows if Carluda existed. He's a legend, a myth!"

The mage replied craftily, "I've met him. I traveled back to before the Waste. Going such a distance, chronologically speaking, was a great strain on my power. I collapsed. A woman found me and realized that only another mage would be able to restore me. She brought me to Carluda's house."

Aren gaped open-mouthed. "You actually met Carluda. What was he like?"

"Awesome. I could see the forces shape themselves around his body, wrapping him in the fold of power. Everything he touched became charged with mana."

Aren was envious. "Did he teach you anything?"

"Yes, much. With his ministrations, I soon regained my strength. He allowed me to stay on as his apprentice in exchange for information about the future world. Of course he was fascinated by my description of the Waste and the story of how it came to be..."

Aren cut in, proud to share his knowledge. "You mean the legend that says it was created by two great mages battling over the love of a woman? That the magic got out of control and destroyed everything for miles around?"

Annoyed by the interruption, the mage continued. "Is that what they teach children these days? It's a lie. The Waste was a magical accident all right, but not over anything as foolish as a woman. It was a battle between good and evil, with Carluda standing as the last bastion against that epitome of wickedness... the Mage Morduse."

"I've never heard of Morduse," Aren confessed.

"Well, of course you never heard of him! Carluda destroyed him! Blasted him into a thousand thousand pieces scattered all over the desolate region now called the Waste. Their battle was terrible to behold..."

Aren interrupted again, "You mean you saw it?"

The mage snorted, "Yes, and if you'll let me finish I'll tell you! The battle, as I said, was terrible to behold. The mages created two towers of power that wrestled with a sound like thunder. Suddenly, Morduse's tower overwhelmed Carluda's, and both it and the mage sank into the earth."

Now it was William's turn to interrupt. "Wait a minute, Carluda didn't lose!"

"Ah, yes he did... the first time. When I saw Carluda vanquished, I knew it would only be a matter of seconds before Morduse annihilated me. There was only one thing I could do..."

The mage glared at Aren, as if daring him to interrupt. Aren wisely kept his lips tightly sealed.

"...And that was to go back in time to before Carluda's destruction. I winked back a few minutes, and flung several of my relatively harmless spells at Morduse, just to see if I could affect the battle's outcome with a diversion. It didn't work. Morduse was still victorious.

"So I did it again, and again, and again. Each time I went back, I'd try something a little different, casting a spell either against Morduse or for Carluda. Finally, when I was just about at the end of my strength, I found a trick that worked. Carluda had given me this chain as a gift. Linking one end of it around Carluda's foot (he was preoccupied and didn't notice me), I took half of the damage from Morduse's next attack.

"As you can imagine, it nearly killed me, but because Carluda wasn't hit with the full power, he had enough time to blast Morduse with everything he had. Morduse exploded, his remains scattering to encompass the area now known as the Waste. Nothing grows there, not even a weed. Pure evil makes terrible compost."

44100.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Tapped Barrel Tavern – Tavern Keeper*

Topic: Liar's Festival #2 – All Contestants Met

The tavern keeper served mugs of thick dark ale. "So, what did you think of the townsfolk?"

"They're fascinating!" Aren exclaimed. "They lead such interesting lives! For a small town, Choth certainly has more than its fair share of accomplished, adventurous people!"

The tavern keeper laughed long and loud. "You mean Choth has more than its fair share of accomplished liars, boy! Yup, today is the Liars' Festival, the one day of the year when our otherwise scrupulously honest population gives in to the natural human urge to prevaricate, embellish, falsify, and otherwise lie through its teeth."

William said, "Ah, that explains a lot. So the whole town went to all that trouble just to make fools out of us?"

"No, no! You're not the fools! You're the judges! The tradition states that the first strangers to enter Choith during the Liars' Festival unknowingly listens to all the stories. Then you decide which liar is the most creative and convincing.

"The one you pick becomes Emperor or Empress for the duration of the festival!"

Choice: Soldier

William and Aren conferred privately for a few minutes. Then William said, "After giving the matter much consideration, we have decided that the soldier's lie was the most convincing."

The tavern keeper clapped his hands. "So be it. Let it be known that Randolph the Butcher is the Emperor of Liars!"

The crowd in the tavern applauded and cheered. "Let it also be known that the Liar's Prop is to be awarded to these two young gentlemen who so most graciously judged our contest!"

Aren wrinkled his brow. "Liar's Prop? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

The tavern keeper explained. "During the year before the Liars' Festival, the townsfolk go to great lengths to obtain suitable objects for inspiration and to illustrate their lies... the proper props, you might say. The winner shows his gratitude to the judges by giving them his prop as a keepsake."

Aren reflected, "If I remember correctly, the soldier's props were..."

"...a sword and shield," the tavern keeper concluded, handing the items to William.

"These should come in handy," William said. "I'm certainly glad we happened by when we did."

"And we'll be back next year too," Aren added. "Now that I know about this tradition of yours, I wouldn't miss it for all the gold in Burlen!"

"Well," laughed the tavern keeper, "Start thinking up your whopper now and perhaps you'll be our Emperor of Liars next time around!"

Choice: Healer

William and Aren conferred privately for a few minutes. Then William said, "After giving the matter much consideration, we have decided that the healer's lie was the most convincing."

The tavern keeper clapped his hands. "So be it. Let it be known that Miles the apothecary is the Emperor of Liars!"

The crowd in the tavern applauded and cheered. "Let it also be known that the Liar's Prop is to be awarded to these two young gentlemen who most graciously judged our contest!"

Aren wrinkled his brow. "Liar's Prop? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

The tavern keeper explained. "During the year between Liars' Festivals, the townsfolk go to great lengths to obtain suitable objects for inspiration and to illustrate their lies... the proper props, you might say. The winner shows his gratitude to the judges by giving them his prop as a keepsake."

Aren reflected, "If I remember correctly, the healer's props were..."

"...Senwater and herbal powders," the tavern keeper concluded, handing the items to William.

"These should come in handy," William said. "I'm certainly glad we happened by when we did."

"And we'll be back next year too," Aren added. "Now that I know about this tradition of yours, I wouldn't miss it for all the gold in Burlen!"

"Well," laughed the tavern keeper, "Start working on your whopper now and perhaps you'll be our Emperor of Liars next time around!"

Choice: Captive

William and Aren conferred privately for a few minutes. Then William says, "After giving the matter much consideration, we have decided that the pirate captive's lie was the most convincing."

The tavern keeper clapped his hands. "So be it. Let it be known that Sandy the Bookworm is the Emperor of Liars!"

The crowd in the tavern applauded and cheered. "Let it also be known that the Liar's Prop is to be awarded to these two young gentlemen who so most graciously judged our contest!"

Aren wrinkled his brow. "Liar's Prop? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

The tavern keeper explained. "During the year before the Liars' Festival, the townsfolk go to great lengths to obtain suitable objects for inspiration and to illustrate their lies... the proper props, you might say. The winner shows his gratitude to the judges by giving them his prop as a keepsake."

Aren reflected, "If I remember correctly, the pirate captive's prop was..."

"...a treasure map," the tavern keeper concluded, handing it to William.

"This should come in handy," William said. "I'm certainly glad we happened by when we did."

"And we'll be back next year too," Aren added. "Now that I know about this tradition of yours, I wouldn't miss it for all the gold in Burlen!"

"Well," laughed the tavern keeper, "Start thinking up your whopper now and perhaps you'll be our Emperor of Liars next time around!"

Choice: Thief

William and Aren conferred privately for a few minutes. Then William said, "After giving the matter much consideration, we have decided that the thief's lie was the most convincing."

The tavern keeper clapped his hands. "So be it. Let it be known that Beatrice the numismatist is the Empress of Liars!"

The crowd in the tavern applauded and cheered. "Let it also be known that the Liar's Prop is to be awarded to these two young gentlemen who so most graciously judged our contest!"

Aren wrinkled his brow. "Liar's Prop? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

The tavern keeper explained. "During the year before the Liars' Festival, the townsfolk go to great lengths to obtain suitable objects for inspiration and to illustrate their lies... the proper props, you might say. The winner shows his gratitude to the judges by giving them his prop as a keepsake."

Aren reflected, "If I remember correctly, the thief's prop was..."

"...a Shadowring," the tavern keeper concluded, handing it to William.

"This should come in handy," William said. "I'm certainly glad we happened by when we did."

"And we'll be back next year too," Aren added. "Now that I know about this tradition of yours, I wouldn't miss it for all the gold in Burlen!"

"Well," laughed the tavern keeper, "Start thinking up your whopper now and perhaps you'll be our Emperor of Liars next time around!"

Choice: Hero

William and Aren conferred privately for a few minutes. Then William said, "After giving the matter much consideration, we have decided that the hero's lie was the most convincing."

The tavern keeper looked puzzled. "Hero? What hero?"

"You know, Walter the Montari killer. His story was so unbelievable that I liked it."

The crowd in the tavern grew restless. The tavern keeper called for quiet. "Walter wasn't entered in the Liar's Festival so he's not eligible. Pick another liar."

Choice: Mage

William and Aren conferred privately for a few minutes. Then William said, "After giving the matter much consideration, we have decided that the mage's lie was the most convincing."

The tavern keeper clapped his hands. "So be it. Let it be known that Gordon the magician is the Emperor of Liars!"

Aren was surprised. "You mean Gordon really is a magician? He wasn't lying?"

The tavern keeper chuckled. "Yes, he's a magician. Ask him later and he'll do a card trick or two and pull a turtledove out of his sleeve. He's great at children's parties... very reasonable rates too."

The crowd in the tavern applauded and cheered. The tavern keeper shouted above the noise, "Let it also be known that the Liar's Prop is to be awarded to these two young gentlemen who so most graciously judged our contest!"

Aren wrinkled his brow. "Liar's Prop? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

The tavern keeper explained. "During the year before the Liars' Festival, the townsfolk go to great lengths to obtain suitable objects for inspiration and to illustrate their lies... the proper props, you might say. The winner shows his gratitude to the judges by giving them his prop as a keepsake."

Aren reflected, "If I remember correctly, the mage's prop was..."

"...Carluda's Chain," the tavern keeper concluded, handing it to William.

"This should come in handy," William said. "I'm certainly glad we happened by when we did."

"And we'll be back next year too," Aren added. "Now that I know about this tradition of yours, I wouldn't miss it for all the gold in Burlen!"

"Well," laughed the tavern keeper, "Start thinking up your whopper now and perhaps you'll be our Emperor of Liars next time around!"

44105.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Soldier (Randolph the Butcher)*

Topic: *Randolph the Butcher – After Liar's Festival*

The butcher now wore a white apron streaked with blood. "Want to buy some of my meat pies? I make them from scratch on a daily basis. I only use the highest quality mutton, the freshest vegetables, and this year's wheat flour in the crust. I can copy out the recipe for you if you'd like. My mother gave it to me. Of course her meat pies always turn out better than mine, but I keep

trying. Just the other day she said to me, 'Son, you know the reason your crusts get soggy? Well, it's because...'"

William and Aren interrupted, politely excusing themselves from the rest of the cooking lesson.

44110.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Healer (Miles Canaster the Apothecarist)*

Topic: Miles Canaster the Apothecarist – After Liar's Festival

There was now a sign over the front door, "Miles Canaster: Apothecary." The bell tinkled as they entered. Miles stepped from behind the counter, adjusting the spectacles perched on his nose. "Yes, may I help you? Oh, it's our honored judges. How nice of you to stop by again. As travelers you must be hard on your feet. Can I tempt you into purchasing some items you might find useful?"

"Such as?" William asked.

"I've got bunion plaster, mole skin, blister ointment, heel lotion, toe jam removal kits, corn oil, boot disks, and shoe flies."

"Uh, I think we're fine for now. Goodbye and good luck at next year's festival."

"Oh, I'm already working on a pip of a fib. Say, you wouldn't happen to know where I might find a fire wolf skeleton, would you?"

44115.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Captive (Sandy the Bookworm)*

Topic: Sandy the Bookworm – After Liar's Festival

The boy sat on the front step, his nose buried in a book.

"So, you made all that up about being captured by pirates?" Aren asked. "That's quite an imagination you've got."

"Yeah, I guess. I read a lot. I copied the map out of a big book on pirates that my mom bought from a traveling tinker."

Aren was disappointed. "So you mean the map isn't real?"

"I don't know. Guess it could be. Lots of other stuff in the book seems to be true."

William sat down beside the boy. "Do you actually want to go looking for the treasure someday?"

"Oh sure, only I have to wait until Mom says I'm old enough. Right now she won't even let me go past the neighbor's yard. I don't mind though. They've got a big dog that barks. He scares me."

44120.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Thief (Beatrice the Numismatist)*

Topic: Beatrice the Numismatist – After Liar's Festival

The thin woman introduced herself as Beatrice. "Won't you come in and have some ginger root tea?"

William swallowed. "Well, I'd rather have some more of that wine if it's not too much trouble."

"Oh no, I only drink wine during the festival. If I have it every day, it muddles my thinking. I'm a numismatist. I need all my concentration when I'm arranging my coin collections."

Aren was relieved. "I'm glad you didn't really cut your friend open. You seem like much too nice a woman to have that on your conscience."

Beatrice laughed. "I probably am, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought about it. I can also imagine how exciting it would be to steal my coins rather than wasting my breath trying to wheedle the best deals out of sour old merchants in the marketplace."

44125.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Hero (Walter Smit)*

Topic: Walter the Hero – After Liar's Festival

Walter opened the door. "Oh, hello. Welcome back to my home. Won't you come in?"

The party entered. Aren saw a framed document on the wall that he didn't notice before. "What's this, Walter? Hey, it's got the Imperial seal on it... and the Emperor's signature! William, come check this out."

William examined the parchment carefully. "It does appear to be authentic... Notice the watermark?" William read, "'The Emperor's citation, awarded this day to Walter Smit for his heroic acts of bravery on behalf of the Imperial family.' Walter, I'm stunned."

Walter was bewildered. "You mean you didn't believe me? But I told you exactly what happened..."

William stuttered. "But what about the Liars' Festival? Everyone else told us much more believable stories than yours!"

Walter shrugged. "Oh, the festival. I never enter that. I'm too shy."

Aren laughed, "Well, you know what they say about truth being stranger than fiction..."

44130.msg – *Chapter 6\Choth – The Wizard (Gordon the Children's Magician)*

Topic: Gordon the Children's Magician – After Liar's Festival

The mage stood in his front yard, surrounded by a circle of laughing children. Aren and William watched as one child picked a card from an over-sized deck. The little girl showed the card to the children, then slipped it back into the deck. The mage waved for silence.

"And now, goys and birls, I mean, boys and girls, I, the great Gordistorini, will cuffle the shards, I mean, shuffle the cards!" With a flourish, the mage threw the deck into the air. The giant cards flew around his head like crazed sparrows, then floated gently to earth, each one stacking neatly on top of the reforming deck. The children burst into shouts and cheers.

Aren was disillusioned. "The Great Gordistorini entertains at children's parties?"

William pat his friend's shoulder. "Apparently so. I also suspect that, like the rest of us, his time travel is limited to 60 minutes an hour in the forward direction."

600.msg – *Chapter 6\Entering Januli Province*

Topic: Entering Januli Province

William: "Given what we know, I don't think we'll find the Consort by going this way. We shouldn't stray too far until we figure out where he is."

44400.msg – *Chapter 6\Bakril – The Bannerman Tavern*

Topic: The Bannerman Tavern Blocked

The entrance to the Bannerman tavern was blocked by a group of coarse, foul-smelling men with weapons. William approached and politely inquired, "Excuse me, gentlemen. My friend and I would like to go into the tavern. Do you have a problem with that?"

The mercenaries guffawed as if William had just repeated the winning story in the Humor category at the annual Joyman Competition.

44401.msg – *Chapter 6\Bakril – The Bannerman Tavern – Tavern Keeper*

Topic: The Bannerman Tavern Keeper

The tavern keeper ran up to the companions and pumped their hands. "Oh, thank you, thank you for dispatching those villainous ruffians!"

William bowed modestly. "We didn't have much choice, I'm afraid."

The tavern keeper continued, his gratitude unabated. "They were driving away all my customers! As if things weren't bad enough already!"

William asked, "They looked like men for hire. Do you have any enemies?"

The tavern keeper nodded vigorously. "Oh my soul, yes! Lord Dakka from Keth wants my head on a platter, served up with my innards as a side dish. But is it my fault that the shipping guilds are on strike? No! Is it my fault that the Bakril frost wine he ordered had to be sent by land? No! Is it my fault that my caravan was raided and the wine lost? No! Is it my fault that I've already spent the money he paid and so I can't reimburse him? No! Well, all right, maybe that last one is my fault. But still..."

William tried to calm the over-excited man. "What with the lesson we taught that gang outside, Dakka will have a hard time recruiting men to replace them. I think your tavern will be safe for a while. Perhaps you should try to hire some mercenaries of your own..."

"And have the Bannerman turn into a war zone? I think not! Maybe I can take out a loan and pay Dakka back that way..."

"And spend the rest of your life paying off the interest."

The tavern keeper whined, "Well, is it my fault if..."

William and Aren walked away before he could finish his sentence.

Topic: Wine not Returned

The tavernkeeper was still wringing his hands as we welcomed the pair back. "Hello, hello. So good to see you again."

Topic: Wine Returned

"My wine! Wherever did you get it?" asked the tavern keeper, beside himself with delight.

"We crashed a little party the bandits were throwing. Sorry it's a case short... We got there late enough to be fashionable, but too late to keep them from polishing off a number of bottles first."

"Not to worry, I've got enough in my cellar to make up the order. Now what can I do for you? I must have something around this place that you can use. Let me check my lost-and-found..." The tavern keeper rummaged around in a back room before emerging with some armor in mint condition.

"A fellow left this in lieu of paying his bill. He never came back to claim it and I've certainly no use for it. Do you want it?"

William took the armor. "Good quality. Sure, we can use it. Thanks. Just next time, make sure you don't spend the money before the order is delivered."

44410.msg – ***Chapter 6\Bakril – Mob Fight***

Topic: Mob Fight

The door crashed open. A man flew through backwards, knocking William and Aren off their feet. William tried to help the man up. "Need some help, friend?"

The man threw a punch. William ducked, coming up just in time to see the rest of the mob surging through the door. He called to Aren, "Watch out!"

44405.msg – ***Chapter 6\Bakril – The Laughing House***

Topic: The Laughing House

As William and Aren approached the house, they heard laughter from inside. "Sounds like someone's having a good time," said Aren.

The laughter went on and on, without a pause for breath. Aren started to look nervous. "I can't tell if it's a man or a woman."

"I think it's a man, but I'm not sure either," said William. The laughter continued, getting higher and more hysterical.

"Perhaps we should pass on this house." William started edging down the path.

"I agree!" Without quite breaking into a run, the two heroes quickly turned back to the main road.

40850.msg – *Chapter 6\Imazi – Human Tunnel to Lord Garson's Estate*

Topic: Human Tunnel to Lord Garson's Estate – Before Meeting Birge

The hole went only a short distance into the earth before ending in a mixture of mud and rocks.

"Well, it's pretty apparent that whoever did this wasn't getting anywhere very quickly," William commented.

10811.msg – *Chapter 6\Imazi – South of Garson Estate – Lieutenant Birge*

Lieutenant Birge, Leading the Overthrow of Lord Garson

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "Are you Lieutenant Birge?"

Lt. Birge: "State your business."

Topic: Supplies #1

William: "Lokath sent us with supplies."

Lt. Birge: "You're couriers. Just in time. We're down to half rations. Let's see what you brought."

Topic: Supplies #2 – Give Provisions

Lt. Birge: "Fine. I'll have these provisions distributed immediately. Tell Lokath thanks on your return."

Topic: Orders **#1**

William: "Do you have additional orders for us?"

Lt. Birge: "What? Oh, still here are you? No, I don't have any use for couriers right now. Best if you get out from underfoot."

Aren: "We're not couriers! (SHOUTS) Hey, I said we're not couriers!"

William: "I know his type, Aren. It's going to take more than shouting to convince him."

Topic: Orders **#2 – Give Note**

William: "Here's a note from Lokath. It explains..."

Lt. Birge: "(READING NOTE, INTERRUPTING) Hmmph. Well then, that's a different foot in the boot, ain't it? New recruits, eh? Still, nothing for you to do just now but wait with the rest of us."

Topic: Situation

William: "What exactly are we waiting for, sir?"

Lt. Birge: "It's a sticky situation, men. Our objective is to take the estate, capture the local lord, and escort him off his lands."

William: "The local lord? That's Lord Garson, isn't it? We've dealt with him before, sir. Had to disinfect ourselves thoroughly afterwards too, if you know what I mean."

Lt. Birge: "Apparently the locals aren't too happy with him either. They're paying us plenty to unseat him. Unfortunately, we weren't quick enough. He had time to drain the moat, pull back the bridge, and drop the gates right in our faces. He's holed up inside with his men."

William: "What's your plan of attack?"

Lt. Birge: "My men could take his, but we can't get in. With the new provisions, we could probably outlast him in a siege, but I don't think we'll get the chance to test that hypothesis. Scouts saw a TrKaa leave the manor a short time ago, no doubt sent for reinforcements. We need to wrap this up quickly and that means finding a way inside."

Topic: TrKaa

William: "Which way did the TrKaa go?"

Lt. Birge: "It flew southwest. The men tried to shoot it down but they weren't expecting it, and you know how fast a TrKaa can move. I'm sure it's carrying a message to Garson's supporters. If additional troops arrive, we'll be caught in the middle. That's more action than we bargained for."

Topic: Inside

William: "Have you tried to get inside, Lieutenant?"

Lt. Birge: "Yes, with no success. We tried digging under, but none of us are engineers and the tunnel collapsed. Building a bridge across is out of the question. The moat is wide and there aren't many trees in the area. I also thought about hiring TrKaa to fly us across, but not only would that cost a small fortune, it would be impractical as well. Burdened with a man's weight, a TrKaa would be slow and a likely target for archers' arrows, if he could get off the ground at all. Frankly, I'm out of ideas."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "If nothing further is needed of us, with your permission we'll be on our way."

Lt. Birge: "Permission granted, recruit."

40850.msg – *Chapter 6\Imazi – Human Tunnel to Lord Garson's Estate*

Topic: *Human Tunnel to Lord Garson's Estate – After Meeting Birge*

"I certainly wouldn't want to try it," Aren stated emphatically as they stared into the stalled-out tunnel. "It looks like it would take weeks," he stopped short when he saw the look on William's face.

"It would take a Montari." William looked over at the puzzled Aren. He forestalled any interruption with a raised hand. "They're not normally violent, Aren – it's the drought that's been causing the unrest." He paused, thinking for a moment. "There's a Montari warren east of Sortiga. Maybe we can talk them into lending a hand or, perhaps I should say, claw."

Topic: Brunia Farm #4 – No Answer/Rebellion

Despite William's insistent knocking, nobody answered the door.

"I wonder if Farmer Brunia has anything to do with what's going on in Imazi."

Aren cocked his head. "You think he's involved?"

William shrugged. "Someone must have hired those mercenaries."

Topic: Man who Bribe Lord Garson #3 – Rebellion

William spied the little man peeking at them through the window. He waved and smiled. The man opened the door a crack. "Can't let you in... strange times... dangerous undertakings..."

"What's going on?"

"Farmer Brunia started it... a good man, though stubborn... too opinionated... Got his land back and started working the gold mine... hired on men from the village too. Lord Garson imposed a mining tax... Brunia wouldn't pay... stubborn, very stubborn... He riled the people up... secret meeting... everybody there. Said the tax was the last straw..."

"He's revolting?"

"No, just opinionated and stubborn... Said he's going to hire mercenaries... pay for them from his own pocket... The gold mine's made him a rich man..."

"And the townsfolk are behind him?"

"Behind him... behind the mercenaries... Most of them won't... can't fight... but they'll feed... hide... protect the ones who will. My wife... don't know what's got into her lately... my wife has gone to the camps... to cook for the men. My son... gone too. My wife says... well, she says it will make him a man... a real man..."

Topic: Trey Matchi #3 – No Answer/Rebellion

The drum maker wasn't home. William surmised that Trey had joined up with the mercenaries. "Military operations use drums to keep marching time. No doubt Trey will make Garson's heart beat to the tune of a different drummer."

Topic: Lizbeth's Father #2 – Rebellion

The red-faced man opened the door. "Oh, it's you again. Come to watch the fireworks or be a part of them?"

"What fireworks?" William asked, feigning ignorance.

The man sat down and rested his elbows on the table. "I've wanted to see Lord Garson get his for years. Others felt the same way, but there was no organization, no weapons. This band of mercenaries may or may not be able to oust Garson. It's still too early to tell. This town would be better without Garson, but I'm waiting to see which way the wind blows before taking any action, you know?"

"Yes, I believe I do." William looked around the vacant kitchen. "How's your daughter?"

"Who, Lizbeth? She's fine now. Bounced back with that legendary resilience of youth, I guess."

William seemed unconvinced, but let the matter drop.

Topic: Lizbeth

A young woman stood oblivious to the party, staring vacantly at the sky. William cleared his throat and she looked down, startled. William started too. Contradicting her figure, her large eyes and small features made her seem more a child than a woman grown.

The girl tensed like a deer about to bolt. William put out his hand to reassure her. She flinched. William spoke very gently. "We mean you no harm. We are friends. We understand and want to help you. Please tell us if there's anything we can do."

Tears sprung to the girl's eyes. "You... you know?"

"Yes, it's all right... you can trust us."

"It must have been all my fault. After all, he's a nobleman. He wouldn't... unless there was a reason. Unless I was... bad."

When William got angry, his voice got husky. It was husky now. "Lizbeth. Listen to me. No man, not a noble, not the Emperor himself, has the right to treat a woman the way Garson treated you. You did nothing, I repeat, nothing wrong. Do you understand?"

Lizbeth stared at the ground for a long time. Finally she met William's gaze. "Yes, I understand."

"Good. Is there anything we can do? Do you need anything?"

"Perhaps. I think there is something..."

Topic: Give Sword

William took a sword from his pack and ceremoniously handed it to the girl. She stared at it in amazement, then with dawning acknowledgment. "Yes, this is what I need. You knew even before I did. Please, let me give you these burlas in exchange." Lizbeth spat in the direction of Lord Garson's estate. "He gave this money to me. I can't think of any way I'd rather spend it."

William let her press the coins into his palm. "There's a garrison of mercenaries stationed near Garson's estate. I don't know if they'll let you fight, but it's worth a try."

Lizbeth hefted the sword. She was much stronger than she looked. "Oh, they'll let me fight all right. I don't see how they can stop me."

Topic: Give Coins

William gave Lizbeth a handful of coins. She stared down at them in disbelief, then hurled the money back in William's face.

William's abject apologies trailed after the girl as she stormed into the house and slammed the door.

Scott Gratisi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Greeting #4

Aren: "Scott! What are you doing here in Ligano?"

Scott: "(SLURS) I Ligano ask you the same question!"

Topic: Recent Events

Aren: "(EXCITED) Scott, you'll never believe what's happened to us!"

Scott: "(DRILY) I think I might. All of Ticoro is buzzing with it. Broadsheets with your descriptions are undoubtedly plastered on every city wall throughout the Empire. Knowing your sterling characters, I assume you had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Am I right?"

Aren: "(EXCITED) Yes, that's exactly how it was!"

Scott: "(SNORTS) I've been in your shoes before, although my 'misunderstandings' were of a more... personal nature."

Aren: "What did you do?"

Scott: "Ran like hell of course... as fast and as far away as possible."

Aren: "You ran?"

Scott: "Courage is overrated, Aren, and often confused with stupidity. If I were you two, I'd seriously consider a long sea voyage. I hear Linaga is lovely this time of year."

Topic: Entering Ticor Province

William: "Given what we know, I don't think we'll find the Consort by going this way. We shouldn't stray too far until we figure out where he is."

Chee, Montari Chief of the Warren East of Sortiga

Topic: *Greeting #2*

Aren: "Hello! You're a gold Montari, aren't you? I've seen others of your kind at my father's inn."

Chee: "<chitter>"

Aren: "Sir?"

William: "I think that's his way of letting you know that as an innkeeper's son, you're not worthy of his conversation."

Aren: "Oh really! Well for his information, my father is in the <hmmff>--"

William: "Please forgive my friend, sir Montari. I am squire William Escobar, fourth heir to the House of Escobar, son of the governor of Pianda. I am deeply honored that you have received us."

Topic: *Mercenaries*

William: "Listen, Chee. We know some, uh, men who don't care for Garson any more than you do. They want to dig under his moat, but they're not skilled and their tunnel keeps caving in. Think you'd like to lend them a claw?"

Chee: "I'll send my work crew out that way immediately! In fact, I'll even go along to supervise. What I wouldn't gamble to see the look on Garson's muzzle as he watches his moat suddenly become as dry as the Waste!"

Lieutenant Birge, Leading the Overthrow of Lord Garson

Topic: Greeting #2

William: "Lieutenant Birge."

Lt. Birge: "The new recruits. How goes it?"

Topic: Tunnel

William: "We talked to Chee, the Montari leader, about helping us dig a tunnel into the manor."

Lt. Birge: "Yes, I know. The Montari digging crew is here and hard at work. As soon as they finish the tunnel, we'll come at them like a ferret through a rat hole. Never could have done it without your intervention. Rather than keep men of your caliber here to mop up, I'm sending you back to Lokath with a report detailing your part in this matter. I'm sure he'll find you a task more suited to your particular talents."

Lokath, Mercenary and Kahleth's Right-Hand Man

Topic: Greeting #3 – Return From Imazi

Lokath: "Mission accomplished? Good. And how did things go down south?"

William: "With all due humility, I think we did quite well."

Lokath: "Hmmph. I'll be the judge of that after I read Birge's report. Hand it over."

Topic: Birge's Report

Lokath: "(READING OUT LOUD) ...resourceful ...creative solution to challenging situation. Hmmph. Good. Very good. Well, men, sounds like you've signed on. And just at the right time too. I'm going to give you a letter of introduction to Kahleth. You'll find his encampment in the Ghanish hills near Choth. You're ready for an important assignment, one that should offer high rewards at low risk. What could be sweeter than that?"

10847.msg – *Chapter 6\South of Choth – Kahleth's Camp – Mercenary Sentry*

Mercenary Sentry Guarding Kahleth's Camp

Topic: *Greeting #4 – After Lokath's Recommendation*

Sentry: "Halt. Who are you?"

William: "We're new recruits, sent by Lokath. Where do we sign up?"

Sentry: "Fresh meat, huh? Well, green boys, step right this way. Kahleth will want to take a look at you."

10827.msg – *Chapter 6\South of Choth – Kahleth's Camp – Captain Kahleth*

Captain Kahleth, Leader of the Mercenaries

Topic: *Greeting*

Sentry: "Some new recruits, sir."

Kahleth: "Very well, sentry. Return to your post."

Topic: Sign Up

William: "We want to sign up, sir."

Kahleth: "We don't take people in right off the road. You got someone to vouch for you?"

William: "Lokath. He put us to the test sure enough."

Kahleth: "(UNCONVINCED) Hmmph. Well, let's see what he has to say about you two."

Topic: Give Lokath's Report

William: "Here's Lokath's report, Captain Kahleth."

Kahleth: "(MUMBLES WHILE READING) Hmmph. All right, listen up. This is a disciplined outfit. Obey your superiors without question. Don't start fights or drink on duty. Stick to your jobs, keep your noses clean, and you'll do all right for yourselves. Understood?"

William: "Yes, sir!"

Kahleth: "(TO AREN) I said, 'Understood?'"

Aren: "(LOUD) Yes, sir!"

Kahleth: "If you're ready for another mission, I've got work for you right away. We just got a top priority job. You've proven you can handle deliveries -- let's see if you're as good with pick-ups. I've sent word to some men to wait for you southeast of Darvi. Take these swampwalking potions to them. You'll find someone waiting in a cabin in the swamp. Bring him back here on the double. And if I hear you stopped for women or ale on the way, I'll have your hides. Do I make myself clear?"

Aren: "Yes sir!"

William: "Yes sir!"

Topic: Goodbye

William: "(TO AREN) We need to watch out for him, Aren. He's a dangerous one."

Topic: Mercenaries Guarding the Consort #2 – After Meeting Kahleth

William called out to the men. "Ho there! I think we've got something you're waiting for. Kahleth sent us."

A bare-chested man came forward. "Then hand it over and beat it."

William shook his head. "Nah, we're supposed to go with you. So there'll be more of us if there's trouble. Kahleth's orders."

The man looked back at his companions, who grumbled. "I don't like it. But I'm also sick of waiting around. Let's go."

William tossed swampwalking potions to the fellow, making sure to keep enough for himself and Aren. The men each took a long swallow and stepped into the swamp, their feet barely making any impressions in the muck.

William and Aren removed the stoppers on the last two potions and slugged them down. It was every bit as vile as they'd feared, but they forced the noxious sludge down their throats. By the time they finished, the stuff was starting to taste good and the air around them smelled fresh and pleasant.

Aren turned to William. "I suppose we'd better follow them."

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— Chapter 6 – End —

When the mercenaries opened the door to the cabin in the swamp, William pushed his way past them, followed by Aren. Seeing the main room empty, William entered the small room in the back. A lone figure dressed in the style of Chailan monarchy lay upon a filthy bed. "He's in here," William called out to Aren.

Aren rushed to the figure and bent down beside him. "Wake up, your Grace," he said, shaking him gently at first, then a little harder. "Your Grace?"

William feared the worst. "Is he—"

Aren checked for signs of life. "No, his skin is warm and his pulse is strong, though rather slow. He just won't wake up."

"He must be drugged," William surmised. "We'll have to find some way to revive him."

The lead mercenary looked at his companions in confusion. "Why bother?" Turning back to William, he explained, "This way he won't cause any more trouble than a sack of turnips. We'll just carry him back to camp." And then they would receive their payment from Kahleth, making them all very rich men.

William stepped up to the lead mercenary. "No," he said firmly, "you won't."

The lead mercenary looked even more perplexed, though to be fair, intelligence wasn't necessarily his strong suit. "What are you talking about? This is the guy we're supposed to bring back, right?" he asked, pointing to Kahleth's note that William had just given him.

"Right," William agreed. "But there's been a change in plans. He's not going back to the camp."

Another mercenary grew suspicious, squinting his one remaining eye. "Hey, I didn't hear anything about a change in plans." Pointing to the Consort, he said, "I say toss the kid over a shoulder and let's beat it,"

William walked up to the mercenaries standing in the main room. "And I say, you leave... now," he ordered. "Turn around and scamper back through the woods like good little mercenaries."

The one-eyed mercenary thought he understood William's motives—and he was none too pleased at the prospect of being double-crossed. "Thinking of dealing us out of the reward, huh?" he snarled. "Well, me and my buddies think you better think again." He withdrew his sword from its scabbard, ready to fight.

William looked back at his young partner. "Aren? Would you care to illuminate these gentlemen?"

Aren's hands started to glow a dull green as he held them outstretched in front of him. He then began speaking nonsense, as if in a trance. "Ee-sah sokk-ay-boo ee-kah-dah!"

William smiled as he watched the mercenaries all take a step or two back. "You see, boys, it doesn't pay to disagree with a mage."

Aren directed a small blast of bright green energy at Kahleth's note, still in the hand of the lead mercenary. The mercenary yelled "Yaaaahh!" in surprise as it caught fire. Quickly dropping the flaming parchment, it was reduced to a pile of ash upon contact with the cabin floor.

"Go," William said, moving towards them with his own sword drawn, "before he decides to turn you into wombats." Behind him, Aren was ready to unleash more energy blasts from his brightly-green glowing hands.

The mercenaries were unprepared and ill-equipped to battle a mage; this was supposed to be a babysitting job, after all. Unable to leave the cabin fast enough, they ran out over the swamp and back onto dry land. Unfortunately for William and Aren, they were likely heading straight to Kahleth's camp south of Choth to warn him.

Now alone in the cabin with just the Consort, the light surrounding Aren's hands quickly dimmed. No longer to contain himself, he finally burst into laughter. Between giggles, Aren asked William, "Wombats?"

"It just popped into my mind," *William said.* "By the way, that chanting was a great touch."

Understanding the gravity of the dangerous enemy they had just made, Aren turned serious, saying, "Kahleth's going to be spitting granite. We'd better be well away from here by the time they get back to the camp."

William wholeheartedly agreed. "Right. Let's try to wake him up."

Aren took a few deep breaths to relax himself. After the excitement of the last few minutes, he needed a clear mind if he had any hopes of deducing exactly how the Consort was drugged. With the only noises coming from the swamp's inhabitants outside the cabin, Aren's heart rate finally slowed. In that moment, something within the cabin triggered his magical senses. Closing his eyes, he reached out with his mind through the magical ether to determine its source. It was in that quiet, peaceful state that Aren was able to sense a tiny, almost imperceptible aura of mana surrounding the Consort himself. "Wait," Aren realized as he opened his eyes, "he's not drugged. This is a spell of some sort."

"Well, can you dis-spell it?" *William asked, looking at the Consort, then back at Aren. He realized he was asking a lot from a novice mage like Aren—something that would likely require the abilities of someone at the level of House Mage Finch.*

"I'll try," *Aren replied,* "but remember, I'm kind of new at this."

Aren tapped into the magic energies surrounding him and unraveled the enchanted web. Several minutes later, Aren had freed the Consort, who relaxed into peaceful slumber.

A few minutes after that, the Consort came to on his own. He groaned. "Where am I?" the Consort asked with a clipped accent that was unmistakably Chailan. Through bleary eyes, he saw two strangers standing before him: a young noble and an equally young commoner. "Who are you?"

William took a step forward and bowed. "You're in Ghan, your Grace. I'm William Escobar, and this is Aren Cordelaine. We're going to get you safely to the palace in Antara."

The Consort tried to get up out of the bed, and Aren bent down to help him. "Easy, your Grace," Aren told him. "You'll be disoriented for a while."

The Consort managed to throw his legs over the side of the bed and sit on the edge. "What happened?" he asked. "The last I remembered there were noises in the hallway, and shapes,

and shadows, then..." *The Consort tried to focus—to find the next memory—but it just wasn't there. All he could remember was waking up a few minutes ago in this dark, cramped room. "...nothing."*

"It's rather a long story, your Grace," *Aren said, uncertain whether even he himself believed the events of the past two months.*

William interrupted Aren. "But we don't have time to tell it right now," he said, speaking quickly with urgency in his voice. "Other people are hunting you. We've got to move."

Aren tried his best to reassure the Consort. "It's all right, you Grace. You can trust us."

The Consort gave a small laugh. "Heh-heh. Do I have a choice?"

While Kahleth's wrath was of concern, William and Aren were more worried about the Swampwalking potion wearing off before leaving the swamp. Taking a quick look around the barren cabin, they saw nothing of value worth taking. At the front door, William grabbed one of the Consort's arms and Aren grabbed the other. Together, they held him up as they hurried out onto and over the Ghanish swamp, stepping quickly over the fetid water's surface until they touched dry land. Giving the weathered cabin in the murky swamp one last look, the three left it behind as they started the long trek to Grandeur.

— Chapter 7 – Start —

After dinner, Kaelyn, Raal, and Garvin reminisced until well after sunset. Too late to begin their journey, Kaelyn and Raal decided to get an early start the next morning and turned in for the evening.

When Kaelyn woke, it took her a moment to recognize where she was: in her room. Her room. Her father had left it the same condition from the last time she was home, which was...

...much too long ago. Lying in the darkness, she reflected upon the events of the last few days in the Ridgewood, but that only led to the massive secrets her father had revealed. Intrusive thoughts swirled in her head, preventing sleep from returning...

The story of her mother's death by drowning was frightening enough to her as a young child, but what her father revealed was even worse: her mother suffered greatly and died horribly in part because of his own hubris. Yes, it was an accident, but... but why didn't he tell her before now? What else was her father keeping from her?

Then she thought back to her current problem.

Were William and Aren okay? What if they couldn't find the Consort? The Antaran Empire was vast—if the Consort was even still somewhere in Antara! Would she be wanted fugitive the rest of her life, pursued until her dying day by agents of both Antara and Chail?

No! she chastised herself. Over the short time that had been together, fighting side-by-side, she knew both were capable and resourceful. Showing great resolve, they would succeed. They'd have to... and she would be right by their side to help.

Confident that her current problems would be resolved, Kaelyn's mind drifted back to her father's disturbing revelations.

He was a mage, and from what she had observed over the last few days, a rather powerful one at that; did that mean she might have magical abilities as well? She had never felt any before now. Were magical abilities something passed down from parent to child, or simply a random act of the Triune?

Eventually, she heard stirring in the main room. Kaelyn opened her door to see Garvin making breakfast for the three of them. She quietly took a seat as Raal came out of the guest room and sat next to her at the table. And while she had been unusually talkative last night, describing her adventures over the last month or two, Kaelyn now ate her breakfast mostly in silence. And that preoccupation didn't go unnoticed by her father.

When breakfast was finished, Garvin gathered the plates and flatware from the table as Kaelyn and Raal finished packing their gear. Stepping out of the cabin's doorway and into

the crisp morning air, rays of sunlight peeked through the eastern mountain range separating the Ridgewood Forest from Ghan Province.

"My thanks forrr the bed and the food, Garrrrvin," *Raal said.*

Garvin smiled up at the large, furry Grrrlf and gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder. "You may always consider my home your second den." Raal returned the gesture by giving him a mighty Grrrlf hug.

"I suppose we should be on our way now," *Kaelyn said abruptly.* "Thanks for everything, Father."

Garvin faced his daughter and put his hands on her shoulders. "Kaelyn, life is too uncertain for you to leave with this distance between us," *he said softly.* *Starting off into the vast forest surrounding the cabin, he continued.* "You must try to understand. Since the death of your mother, every decision I've made has been with your good in mind. You see, I never thought the day would come when I would need my rusty magic again."

Kaelyn felt the hurt and confusion return. "And so, you had no choice but to finally tell me the truth?"

His simple answer caught her off guard. "What harm if indeed you had never known?" *Garvin asked, finally looking into his daughter's eyes.*

Kaelyn sputtered, searching for a reply. "Well, I... it— it would... you..."

She then reflected on her happy childhood with a loving father trying his best to be both father and mother to a willful young girl. And had she known the truth at a much younger age, anger and resentment would have likely plagued her upbringing. No, she realized, he has to relive that awful event every day for the rest of his life. It was his burden to bear and his alone, not hers; his atonement for the horrible accident was to raise a strong daughter and shield her from his own pain. That she never had a inkling of any of it was a testament of his love for her... and for her mother.

"...You tried to spare me... Now I understand," *Kaelyn's voice turned sympathetic.* "I'm glad you told me. What a terrible burden to bear alone."

Garvin gave a hint of a smile. "There, there, my little barley-mouse," *he said, using his pet name for her.* "I've had your company to keep life from being too great a burden. And it certainly was never boring!" *Kaelyn saw a twinkle in his eye.*

Now that it was safe to speak, Raal added, "Yes, the man who weds our Kaelyn won't die in his bed of old age, of that much I'm cerrrtain."

Embarrassed by Raal's comment, Kaelyn punched him in the arm. "Raal, just for that, I'm going to run your hairy behind into the ground today!" *Turning back to Garvin, she gave him a quick hug and said,* "Father, we have to go. I'm sorry to be leaving again so soon."

Reaching deep into his pocket, Garvin produced a small necklace. "I'd like you to have this, Kaelyn," he said, holding it in front of his daughter. "It's merely a simple neckcharm I made for your mother. Nothing fancy, but it does have some power to shield the wearer from harm." Lowering it into her outstretched hand, his voice grew quiet. "But be careful," he warned. "These are strange times. Watch your back and take care where you place your trust."

Heeding Garvin's cautious advice, Kaelyn promised her father, "I will." It was then that she realized the delicate necklace contained her mother's favorite gemstone. Clutching it her hand, Kaelyn felt a wave of warmth radiate through her. She sensed a strong, immediate connection to mother... or was it merely the effect of Garvin's protective spell that she felt?

Kaelyn gave her father one last hug goodbye. When she finally released her father, she was surprised it lasted longer than she had expected. Walking down the path leading from the cabin and into the mass of trees, Kaelyn picked up her pace to catch up with Raal. Within a minute, she was gone from Garvin's sight once more, swallowed up by the vast, overgrown forest. Sighing, he slowly closed the door and began his daily chores.

10839.msg – Chapter 7\Outside Grandeur – Naku the TrKaa Courier

Naku the TrKaa Courier

Topic: Greeting #2

Naku: "You must be Kaelyn and you must be Raal."

Raal: "Very few things in this world 'must be'. Most things simply 'are'."

Naku: "(CHIRPS APPRECIATIVELY) That's very good. All right then. I'll play... Are you Raal and are you Kaelyn?"

Kaelyn: "Perhaps it would be best if you first told us who you are."

Naku: "Sure. I'm Naku. I've been waiting here to deliver a message to a Grrrlf with a pet woman in tow."

Kaelyn: "(DARKLY, UNDER HER BREATH) William."

Naku: "(CHIRPS) He was right! Your nostrils do flare when you're angry. Anyway, here's the note. William seemed quite anxious about something. Sounds exciting! What's going on?"

Raal: "You have discharged your task admirably. Thank you for your diligence."

"The road we travel, we must walk. You must fly, air dancer. Fair winds to you."

9320.msg – *Chapter 7\Letter – William Escobar to Kaelyn Usher #1*

Topic: Letter – William Escobar to Kaelyn Usher #1

Kaelyn,

We've found our lost friend, but his playmates won't be happy and will want him back. We'll wait for you at the Feral Duck in Darvi, then take him home together.

– William

42500.msg – *Chapter 7\Darvi – Reliable Couriers*

Topic: Reliable Couriers #1

Kaelyn questioned the clerk. "Excuse me, sir. Your courier Naku delivered a message to us. We were wondering if you could recall anything about the young men who sent it."

The clerk thought a moment. "Well, they did seem rather anxious about something."

"How many were in the party?"

"Three, I think. Yes, three. Two young men about your age, and one a little younger. I seem to recall they mentioned taking a room at the Feral Duck, a local inn."

Topic: Reliable Couriers #2

Kaelyn approached the clerk again. "I'm sorry. What did you say the name of the inn was?"

"The Feral Duck," the clerk said. "You can't miss it, it's right across from my shop."

Topic: Innkeeper of the Feral Duck Inn #1

Raal described William and Aren to the innkeeper, asking if they were staying at the Feral Duck. The innkeeper tugged his ear and said, "Hmmm. Doesn't ring any bells."

Kaelyn added, "A young Chailan nobleman might be with them."

The innkeeper idly scratched his palm. "Nope, still no bells."

Kaelyn noticed the innkeeper had left his hand lying open on the counter. She looked into his face, but he kept his eyes fixed on a rafter that apparently held particular interest for him.

Topic: Bribe for Information – Not Enough Money

The innkeeper didn't even look down at the money in his hand. "Still no bells..." he murmured.

Topic: Bribe for Information – Pay 30 Burlas

Kaelyn casually put the burlas in the innkeeper's hand. It disappeared beneath the counter as if by magic, reappearing a moment later, empty. "Oh yes, of course! Now I remember. The men you're looking for had to leave in a bit of a hurry. I think they left a note for you somewhere... Now where did I put it?"

Rather than looking for the note, the innkeeper maintained his position, his palm empty, open, and relaxed on the counter. "This could get expensive," Raal muttered.

Topic: Bribe for Note – Not Enough Money

The innkeeper stared at the rafters as if he found counting cobwebs a fascinating activity. "I may have to search all day to find that note..."

Topic: Bribe for Note – Pay 45 Burlas

The innkeeper's hand disappeared with the money, while his other hand slapped his forehead. "Oh, silly me. I just remembered I had it in my pocket all along. I completely forgot I put it there so it wouldn't get lost."

The innkeeper pulled out the note and handed it to Kaelyn.

Topic: Innkeeper of the Feral Duck #2 – Returning before Completing Bribe

Kaelyn did a double-take. She was sure the innkeeper had attended to patrons and other business since their last conversation, but he appeared to be in the same position they left him in-- his open palm outstretched.

9330.msg – ***Chapter 7\Letter – William Escobar to Kaelyn Usher #2***

Topic: Letter – William Escobar to Kaelyn Usher #2

Kaelyn,

Junior's playmates are coming but Junior's exhausted. We think he's had enough play for a while, so we're taking him to his new home. If you can meet up with us on the way, it might be helpful in case Junior's playmates don't take no for an answer.

– William

700.msg – ***Chapter 7\Entering Ghan Province***

Topic: Entering Ghan Province

Kaelyn: "We won't find William and Aren this way. Let's figure out where they went and try to catch up to them."

Topic: Benje and Cherise – Sortiga Wedding Quest Completed #2

A handsome young man opened the door. "Don't I know you?" he said, a quizzical look on his face. Then suddenly, recognition dawned. He grabbed Kaelyn's hand and pumped it vigorously. Then he called to someone inside the cottage. "Cherise, my angel, come here!"

A beautiful girl with thick auburn hair appeared at his side. "Who is it, Benje?"

"Do you remember me telling you how I lost the rings in a foolish attempt to keep you from marrying my brother?"

"Yes, but what...?" The girl looked puzzled. Kaelyn tried to help out. "We merely cleared the road of Montari and found the rings. Benje did all the rest himself. After hearing so much about you from other sources, I am very pleased to meet you, Cherise."

Cherise profusely thanked Kaelyn for aiding their elopement in Sortiga.

Kaelyn asked, "So you ran off to Friole? Isn't it a rather depressing village to live in?"

Benje put his arm around Cherise, drawing her close. "We don't think so. Sure, the town went through bad times, but it's exciting have the chance to build something up from scratch, the Triune willing."

"I can see how it would be at that. Did your father ever forgive you, Cherise?"

Cherise sighed. "No, not yet. But he may when his first grandchild comes along." She laughed. "Of course, Benje's brother is still furious. I'm afraid I proved a bad return on his investment."

With just a trace of wistfulness, Kaelyn wished the newlyweds Henne's blessing on their new life together. "I'm sure you two will be blissfully happy together."

Cherise looked up at her husband. He met her gaze with love and a tinge of amazement at his good fortune. "Yes, I'm sure we will."

Topic: Benje and Cherise – Sortiga Wedding Quest not Completed #2

A handsome young man opened the door. "Don't I know you?" he said, a quizzical look on his face.

Kaelyn pondered, then said, "No, I don't think so. Are you from Chuno?"

"No, Sortiga." Just then a beautiful girl with thick auburn hair appeared at his side. "Who is it, Benje?"

Kaelyn introduced herself and Raal. Benje shook her hand, saying, "This is Cherise. My brother didn't send you by any chance, did he?"

Kaelyn assured him to the contrary, then asked, "Why? Is he after you?"

Benje explained that his brother was supposed to marry Cherise, but it was a marriage without love. At the last possible moment, Benje and Cherise eloped and were married by a sympathetic priest of Henne.

Kaelyn asked, "So you ran off to Friole? Isn't it a rather depressing village to live in?"

Benje put his arm around Cherise, drawing her close. "We don't think so. Sure, the town went through bad times, but the chance to build something up from scratch is exciting. The Triune willing, Friole will soon regain its life."

With just a trace of wistfulness, Kaelyn wished the newlyweds Henne's blessing on their new life together. "I'm sure you two will be blissfully happy together."

Cherise looked up at her husband. He met her gaze with love and a tinge of amazement at his good fortune. "Yes, I'm sure we will."

42315.msg – *Chapter 7\Durst – Adrian the Mercenary*

Topic: Adrian the Mercenary #3

Kaelyn greeted the retired mercenary, asking for any news. "There has been some excitement at that. A company of mercenaries passed through town, chasing someone who stole something from them."

"Wonder if it was anyone we know," murmured Kaelyn to Raal.

"I saw a few of my old comrades in the company... too few..." Adrian shook his head ruefully. "Got to admit seeing them after so many years got my blood going again. I joined up for the chase. We caught them in the woods, but one of them was a spellcaster and he, uh, heated things up for us."

Kaelyn jumped to the logical conclusion. "So the spellcaster's fireballs started the forest fire."

"No," corrected the mercenary. "Our firebrands did that. Carelessness, plain and simple. In my day that never would have happened. I tried to put the fire out... Folk 'round here take their trees seriously. The rest of the mercenaries turned tail and ran."

"Where are they now?" Raal asked.

"Probably still chasing the thieves. Whatever they took must be pretty valuable if the swordarms are willing to face a mage for the chance to recover it."

10826.msg – *Chapter 7\Durst – Temple of Henne – Jhana, Child of Henne*

Jhana, Child of Henne

Topic: *Greeting #5*

Jhana: "(CONCERNED) Have you found her?"

Kaelyn: "Found who?"

Jhana: "Oh, forgive me. When I heard you come in, I thought it was one of the villagers back from the fire with news of Phoebe and her tree."

Topic: *Fire*

Kaelyn: "We smelled the smoke. What happened?"

Jhana: "A band of heavily armed men came through the village a short time ago. There was some sort of commotion in the woods, and then Falen raised the cry of fire."

Raal: "Is the village in danger?"

Jhana: "I don't think so. We've sent word to a mage in Varnasse for help, but the woods may be gone by the time she gets here."

Topic: *Phoebe*

Raal: "Is Phoebe lost in the fire?"

Jhana: "I'm afraid so. The heat got too intense, and most of the villagers had to turn back. We know Phoebe wouldn't abandon her family's tree to the fire. A few have returned to search for her."

Kaelyn: "They'll be lucky to come back alive."

Jhana: "With Henne watching over them, they'll have more than luck on their side."

Topic: Phoebe's Tree

Kaelyn: "What's so special about Phoebe's tree?"

Jhana: "A Chinese family's honor is embodied by their tree. Phoebe's ancestral tree is in the heart of the wood. It's been tended by her family for generations. The entire village fought to save it."

Kaelyn: "With the entire wood in jeopardy, I'd hardly think there would be time to worry about a single tree."

Raal: "Phoebe protects the tree to honor her ancestors, Kaelyn. Losing it would sever her link to her past."

Topic: Rescue

Raal: "Her cause is a noble one. Is there anything we can do to help?"

Kaelyn: "Raal, weren't you listening? It's like an oven in there!"

Raal: "Kaelyn, you know how the Grrrlf feel about their ancestors. I cannot stand by and let Phoebe perish in the flames, even as the spirits of her own ancestors are consumed."

Jhana: "She won't be far from her ancestral tree, but you'd be burnt to a cinder long before you reach it. (PAUSE) Give me your hands. (PAUSE, THEN VIBRANTLY) Henne, cast your watchful eye over these brave travelers. Shield them from the hungry flames that they may return with one of your faithful, to hear your song another day."

Kaelyn: "(SHUDDERING, AS IF CHILLED) Ooh. What was that? Raal! Your fur's standing on end!"

Raal: "My skin is... tingling."

Jhana: "(NORMAL VOICE) With Henne's grace, you may be able to reach Phoebe now. But take care... all too soon, the effect will fade. Of all the Faces of the Triune, Henne's is the most fickle. Beware the flames."

Topic: Protection

Kaelyn: "I live in the forest -- you can't protect a tree from such an inferno."

Jhana: "The Chinese have had generations to learn how to tend their ancestral trees. In a blaze like this, the only hope is to dig a trench around the tree and fill it with Senwater, letting the roots soak up the healing liquid."

Kaelyn: "I see... The trench to keep the flames from the trunk, the Senwater to regenerate singed branches and keep them from catching fire."

Jhana: "With Senaedrin's kiss and Henne's smile upon them, Phoebe and her tree may yet survive."

Topic: Greeting #6 – Phoebe not yet Rescued

Jhana: "Is Phoebe safe?"

Kaelyn: "I'm sorry, we haven't brought her out of danger yet."

Jhana: "Trust in Henne, my friends. He will guide you to her."

700.msg – ***Chapter 7\ West of Durst – Durst Blaze***

Topic: Durst Blaze

Kaelyn: "I'm surprised your fur isn't getting singed from here, Raal! It'd take a miracle to survive that blaze."

42325.msg – ***Chapter 7\ West of Durst – Durst Blaze – Saving Phoebe First, then Tree***

Topic: Saving Phoebe First, then Tree #1

Kaelyn spied the woman through the smoke. "Quick, Raal. Help me get her out of here."

They lifted the woman to her feet. "Phoebe?"

The woman brushed her hair out of her face. Her hand left a streak of ashes on her forehead. "Who are you?" she asked weakly.

"Friends. We'll take you to safety."

With a surprising show of strength, Phoebe yanked herself out of their grasp. "No!" she shouted, then coughed violently.

"We have to protect the tree," she gasped, gesturing toward the unfinished trough around the trunk. "I won't leave until I know it won't burn."

Topic: Saving Phoebe First, then Tree – Dig Trench

With a few hurried motions, the party completed the trough around the beleaguered tree.

Topic: Saving Phoebe First, then Tree – Pour Senwater

Kaelyn poured most of the Senwater into the trough, then handed the flask to Phoebe. "Drink this. It will give you strength."

Gratefully, Phoebe drained the last drops. "Thank you for protecting my ancestral tree."

Raal said, "We know how much it must mean to you. Won't you come with us now?"

Phoebe refused. "The Senwater has revived me greatly. I will stay for a few more moments to make certain the trough holds. Then I will follow you out of the woods. Please go now."

Topic: Saving Phoebe First, then Tree #2 – Tree not yet Saved

"We have to protect the tree," she gasped, gesturing toward the unfinished trough around the trunk. "I won't leave until I know it won't burn."

42326.msg – ***Chapter 7\East of Durst – Durst Blaze – Saving Tree First, then Phoebe***

Topic: Saving Tree First, then Phoebe – Dig Trench

With a few hurried motions, the party completed the trough around the beleaguered tree.

Topic: Saving Tree First, then Phoebe – Pour Senwater

Kaelyn poured most of the Senwater into the trough, then handed the flask to Phoebe. "Drink this. It will give you strength."

Gratefully, Phoebe drained the last drops. "Thank you for protecting my ancestral tree."

Raal said, "We know how much it must mean to you. Won't you come with us now?"

Phoebe refused. "The Senwater has revived me greatly. I will stay for a few more moments to make certain the trough holds. Then I will follow you out of the woods. Please go now."

10826.msg – *Chapter 7\Durst – Temple of Henne – Jhana, Child of Henne*

Jhana, Child of Henne

Topic: Greeting #7 – Phoebe Rescued

Jhana: "There you are! The entire village is talking about your daring rescue!"

Kaelyn: "News travels fast. Phoebe was weak, but she refused to go to safety until Raal and I finished digging the trench and filling it with Senwater. She needs attention, quickly."

Jhana: "We will all care for her. Thank you both! <hug>"

Jhana: "<GASP>"

Raal: "<GASP>"

Kaelyn: "<GASP>"

Raal: "When you hugged me and Kaelyn, something happened... It felt different than before."

Kaelyn: "I felt it too. Was it Henne?"

Jhana: "(SHAKEN, CONFUSED, AND AWED) No... No, that wasn't Henne. It was Senaedin!"

Kaelyn: "Senaedin? But you're a Child of Henne!"

Jhana: "I... I don't understand. (TENTATIVE, MUSING) Perhaps though we call Henne, Senaedin, and Kor the Three Faces, too often we forget what that means... that they're different aspects of the same divine spirit."

Raal: "Perhaps by opening yourself to one, you open yourself to all."

Jhana: "This... This is extraordinary. I have much to think about. Thank you, my friends. Truly you are thrice blessed."

Raal: "And so, it would seem, are you."

42305.msg – *Chapter 7\Durst – Kraw the Chuman*

Topic: Kraw the Chuman

The companions took an involuntary step backward when the door opened. "Weren't expecting to see a Chuman, were you? I'm used to that reaction from strangers," said the deformed man.

"It's just that we've never seen one in a human village before."

"There's reason enough for that. Most Chumen don't like to live among the Normals... It reminds us of what we can never be. And most Normals are uncomfortable around us too, because it reminds them of what they could all too easily become."

"Isn't it strange being the only Chuman living in town?"

"No, this is my home. As far back as we can remember, my family has lived in this village. When the Disaster happened, my great great great great... oh, I don't know how great she was... Let's just say my ancestor was returning from a visit to the Temple of Senaedrin near Grandeur. She caught the edge of the blast that made the Waste. It changed her and her unborn child, but she was fortunate and her family took them back. Over many years, the town accepted the family too."

"It sounds like everything worked out all right."

The man shrugged and gestured down at his misshapen body. "Guess that all depends on how you look at it."

42310.msg – *Chapter 7\Durst – Kraw's Neighbor*

Topic: Kraw's Neighbor #2

Kaelyn greeted the woman of the house. Two children, a boy and a girl, watched the strangers with their big dark eyes. "What pretty children you have," Kaelyn remarked.

"Why, thank you. They're always a little shy around people they don't know. But normally, they're as lively as two lambs in a dandelion patch."

"Are they shy with your Chuman neighbor?" Kaelyn asked.

The woman shook her head, laughing. "My goodness, no. If I let them, they'd be over there all day, plaguing the poor man with demands for stories and piggyback rides."

"So he doesn't make you nervous?"

"Not at all. Why, whenever I have to go to Burlen for supplies, Kraw watches the kids for me. He's great with them, and I think the children should experience the... well, the cultural diversity."

A small frown crossed the woman's face. "Now I know the stories they tell about how Chumen are a little... unbalanced, but I've never heard a word against Kraw or his family. They are as much a part of Durst as me and my children."

"If only all villages were so open-minded," Raal said, and bade the woman good day.

700.msg – *Chapter 7\South Chuno Bridge – South Chuno Bridge Destroyed*

Topic: South Chuno Bridge Destroyed

Kaelyn: "I'll say one thing for Aren-- he knows how to make an exit. With the bridge destroyed, we'll have to find some other way across the river."

42210.msg – *Chapter 7\Camille – Pamela*

Topic: Pamela – Greeting

"Come in," called a voice through the door. Kaelyn and Raal entered the cottage to find a young woman seated at a table, polishing a thick gold bracelet. Kaelyn greeted her, offering a compliment on the bracelet's beauty. The woman poured a dab of lotion onto a cloth which she vigorously applied to the gold.

"This is my most prized possession. It belonged to my mother and her mother before her. Several days ago I almost lost it while I was rowing on the river. My boat hit a rock and sank. I swam to shore but the bracelet slipped off my wrist. If it hadn't been for Stephen's help, I never would have found it again."

"Stephen?" asks Raal.

"He's a mage from Eastbank. He waved his magic staff over the water and the river bottom rose to the surface! I searched the mud for my bracelet. It took a long time to find it. I could see the strain on Stephen's face and his arms were shaking, but he kept the water away until finally the sun glinted on the gold, showing me where the bracelet lay."

"Lucky the mage happened along when he did."

"Yes. I thanked him and offered to pay him for his trouble, but he left quite quickly without saying a word. It seemed rather odd actually."

"Well," said Kaelyn, "We won't be that rude, but we should be going too. Good day."

42205.msg – *Chapter 7\Camille – Man Complains about Destroyed Bridge*

Topic: Man Complains about Destroyed Bridge

The door was opened by a man whose face was red with irritation. Without giving Kaelyn a chance to get a word in edgewise, he launched into a tirade. "It's about time you got here! It doesn't take a moon to travel from Grandeur! If the Consul can't send a representative in a timely fashion, he shouldn't bother sending one at all."

Kaelyn decided to play along. "I'm sorry, sir, truly sorry. Now what was it you wished to see me about?"

The man blustered, "What I want to know is why Imperial security is so lax as to allow saboteurs to destroy two bridges within weeks of each other!"

"That's a very good question," Kaelyn agreed.

"With my own eyes I saw the destruction of the bridge south of town. It looked like a couple of youngsters were responsible. Now if the Imperial Guard can't do something as simple as..."

The man faltered as he noticed Raal for the first time. Kaelyn encouraged him by asking for a description. He continued, uneasy in the Grrrlf's presence. "Well, one of them was a mage, that much was obvious. Don't we have procedures to keep hostile mages away from decent citizens? Don't we have laws about that sort of thing?"

Kaelyn was growing impatient. "Can you describe the mage or his companions?"

"There were three of them, one dressed as a Piandan noble of all things!"

That was all Kaelyn needed to know. "On behalf of the Consul in Grandeur, I thank you for your diligent observation and report. Be assured, we will take care of the situation."

As they turned to go, the man spoke to their backs. "I wasn't aware there were any Grrrlf working with the Consulate."

Raal turned back, treating the man to a white-fanged Grrrlf grin. "There aren't," he said, then casually sauntered down the path to the road.

Topic: Riverboat Captain

"Excuse me, sir," Kaelyn said to the man who opened the door. "We were wondering if you know of any way we can cross the river."

The big man laughed heartily. "Know one? Kor, I AM one! Missy, don't you recognize a riverboat captain when you see one?"

Kaelyn searched for an identifying insignia or badge, but saw none. "No, I guess I don't."

The captain looked down at his shirtsleeves. "Can't say I blame you, what with me being out of uniform. Don't know if I can even call myself a riverboat captain since those ray-kissing bottom feeders took my barge."

Kaelyn ventured a guess. "Ghanish mercenaries, right?"

The captain eyed her suspiciously. "Aye, but how would you be knowing that?"

"We've seen their handiwork. They're after some friends of ours, and we'd like to get to them first."

The Captain scratched his chest. "'Fraid I can't help you go anywhere without my barge. I'm about to head down river... Maybe I'll find her beached on the riverbank not too much the worse for wear. But I 'spect I'll be lucky if those lubbers didn't sink her on a sandbar."

Topic: The Blind Prophet of Camille #2

The door opened. Kaelyn saw the blank white eyes and realized that the man standing before her was blind. To her surprise, he greeted them with, "Good day, m'lady huntress, and to you, young Grrrlf."

"I don't mean to be rude, but how can you see us if your eyes..."

The man answered simply, "One does not require eyes to see. Have you come for a blessing?"

"Which Arm of the Triune do you represent?"

The man's voice took on deep, ringing tones that made the air vibrate. "I represent all, or none, as you see fit. I do not split my faith into three and then decide between the parts. I open myself fully to whichever Face wishes to speak through me."

"Then a blessing from you would be three times as potent."

The prophet frowned. "Mine is the faith of peace; my blessings are not gifts of power. To receive a blessing, you must relinquish a sword, pristine and unmarred by battle."

Topic: Give Used Weapon – Not 100%

The prophet was dismayed. "This weapon has been used in combat. You will receive no blessing for that which is stained with blood."

Topic: Give Unused Weapon – 100%

The prophet examined the weapon with his sightless eyes. "Yes, this metal is pure, unstained by blood. I will give you my blessing."

The companions knelt before the prophet who set his hands on their heads.

In a voice so low as to be almost unintelligible, he said, "Man lives but once, though in that life is a thousand lives. Man dies but once, though in that death is all eternity. Blood, breath, and bone. Ocean, air, and earth. The fire that binds is the fire that burns. May your flame burn clear and still in the winds of the world."

Topic: Imazi Insurance Policy is Blessed

The companions rose to their feet and noticed that one of their packs was glowing. Looking inside, they discovered the source to be the insurance policy bought in Imazi, which shone with a warm, blue light. Pleased, the prophet told them, "You have been touched... granted a great gift. Do not squander it. Now you must leave."

The glow faded as the prophet ushered the companions out. "Gift? What kind of gift? I don't understand."

The prophet smiled enigmatically as he closed the door.

Topic: Party doesn't Possess Imazi Insurance Policy

The companions rose to their feet. "That's funny. I didn't feel a thing."

The prophet shrugged. "I can cast the hook into the waters, but I cannot make the fish bite. Go in peace and may the Triune's wisdom come to you in time."

Topic: The Blessed Well #2

Kaelyn noticed a sign by the well. "Sixty burlas per sip? That's outrageous!"

A short, husky man launched into his sales pitch. "Camille's very own prophet once drank from this well, blessing it with wondrous restorative powers. Sixty burlas per sip, but you might say it's well worth it." The man laughed loudly at his joke.

Choice: Pay 60 burlas

"It's rather a steep price, but we're in need of restoration."

They each took a sip of the water. Sure enough, there was an immediate healing effect.

After a moment, a realization occurred. "I think all he's done is dump some Senwater and anti-poison in the water. Well, that was an expensive lesson, but not totally worthless."

Choice: Pay 60 Burlas – ***Not Enough Money***

Kaelyn patted her purse regretfully. "I'm afraid my well's a little dry."

The man shrugged. "This one won't be when yours gets refilled."

Choice: Leave

Perhaps some other time," Kaelyn replied, walking away. "Kor, that fellow must think we just fell off the rhubarb wagon."

Topic: Cheese Merchant

"What do you want?" a man snapped, seeing the two road-weary strangers on his doorstep.

Kaelyn stood her ground. "Nothing, sir. We're just passing through town."

The man grimaced. "Well, don't expect to take the southern bridge on your way out, 'cuz you can't. It's out. And don't expect to take the northern bridge neither, 'cuz there's a pack of racketeers charging outrageous fees to cross over. Saw themselves an opportunity to cheat honest citizens, they did. They're stationed every couple of feet so no sooner do you pay off one, then there's another blustering and threatening. I can't afford their prices so I had to turn around."

"Why aren't the officials dealing with the situation?"

"There's supposed to be a troop of guards on their way up from Burlen, but by the time they get here, it'll all be spoiled anyhow," the man complained bitterly.

"Are you a trader, by any chance?"

"Yes, and I'm stuck with a wagon full of Asprezan cheese melting in the sun." The trader brightens. "Say, you wouldn't happen to be in the market for some cheese, would you? I can let you have it at... let's see... a special rate of 15 burlas a wheel."

Choice: Buy Cheese

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we would like some cheese." Kaelyn paid the trader and received an odoriferous package. "Hey, are you sure this hasn't spoiled already?" she asked, holding her nose.

"Oh no," the trader assured her. "It's supposed to smell that way."

Choice: Leave

Kaelyn checked her money pouch. "Uh, I think we need our ready cash more than we need cheese just now. Thanks anyhow."

The trader's grouchy mood returned with a vengeance. "Fine! That's just fine! I only hope that soon you find yourself in a situation where you desperately wish you'd bought some cheese!"

Kaelyn laughed as she and Raal took their leave. "Somehow it's difficult to imagine a situation in which only cheese could save us."

42000.msg – *Chapter 7\Eastbank – Stephen the Mage*

Topic: *Stephen the Mage – Before Meeting Pamela*

The door was opened by a man holding a bucket of water. He looked at Kaelyn as if he didn't really see her. "Sorry, I've got a lot on my mind now. No time to talk."

Before the door closed in her face, Kaelyn heard mumbling and caught a glimpse of the water churning inside the bucket.

"I think he's some kind of a mage," she said to Raal.

Topic: Stephen the Mage – After Meeting Pamela

The door was opened by a young man who would have been handsome but for the dark half-circles under his eyes. "Who is it? I really don't want to be disturbed just now..."

He started to close the door, but Kaelyn interjected, "Are you Stephen the mage?"

"Yes, but I really don't see..."

Kaelyn continued. "We thought you might be able to help us cross the river."

"Distracted, he responded, "The river? What? I don't..."

Raal elaborated. "Don't you have the magic to part the waters? A young woman in Camille said..."

The mage interrupted, a sudden interest lighting his eyes. "A woman? What woman? Was her name Pamela?"

Raal thought. "I don't know her name, but she stood about this tall, had brown eyes, and extraordinary hair. She said she'd lost a bracelet and you helped her find it."

The mage sighed wistfully. "Skin as fair as Isten linen, with eyes that glowed brighter than the purest torchite gems."

Kaelyn arched an eyebrow. "I don't think I would have described her that way, but yes, that sounds like her."

The mage replied dreamily, "Her image is painted forever upon my memory, though I met her but once."

Kaelyn snorted. "Once? If you like her, why not go see her?"

"Oh, I... I couldn't. I just wouldn't know... I mean, what if I... What would I say? What would I do? She's so beautiful, and I'm..."

"...sitting here alone instead of telling her how you feel," Kaelyn finished. "It's not that difficult. She's a woman, not a karn."

His eyes sparkled with hope. "You'll help me then? You'll go to her, talk to her, tell her how I feel?"

Kaelyn backpedaled. "I didn't say that! I can't... I'm no matchmaker!"

"If you help me, I'll have you across that river in no time."

Raal grinned. "We do need to get across, little archer. Why not help our friend here?"

Kaelyn curled her lip in a mock snarl. "Thanks a lot, fur brother. All right, I'll do it. To the lady's bower let us fly. We'll win her love... or at least we'll try."

Upon hearing Kaelyn's attempt at poetry, the mage began to look worried. But summoning up a weak smile, he wished them good luck with his fair lady love.

Topic: Not yet Spoken to Pamela for Stephen

With firm resolve, Kaelyn knocked on Stephen's door. It opened, and she launched into her prepared speech. "Listen, Stephen, I've been thinking and I don't really have the necessary skills..."

Kaelyn faltered when she saw the hopeful expectation on the mage's face. Under her breath, she muttered, "Kor's elbows! Why does he have to look so very much like the last puppy in the litter?"

Stephen asked, "Did you see her? What did she say?"

Feeling surly, Kaelyn snapped, "Don't rush me. These things take time."

The companions turned back when they reached the road. Standing in his doorway, Stephen waved farewell. Waving back, Kaelyn growled, "This is absolutely the last time I ever meddle in other people's affairs."

Raal had the good sense to bite back his retort.

42210.msg – ***Chapter 7\Camille – Pamela***

Topic: "Stephen's" Message to Pamela

Kaelyn knocked. "Pamela, are you home?"

The young woman answered the door. "Oh, hello again. How are you?"

Kaelyn answered hurriedly, anxious to get this errand over and done with.

"We're fine. Pamela, we have a message to deliver from Stephen, that mage over in Eastbank. It's sort of a... well, I guess it's a poem."

Pamela looked pleasantly surprised. "Really? For me? How exciting!"

Kaelyn cleared her throat. "Here goes nothing.

"Your eyes glow like the torchite stones,
Found deep beneath the ground.
Your hair is like the flowing sea,
With seaweed ribbons bound."

Pamela was smiling. Kaelyn took a deep breath and continued.

"Your skin's as fair as Isten linen,
Or perhaps as cloth from Choth.
I long to rush to your embrace,
As the flame flies to a moth."

Raal interrupted. "Kaelyn, shouldn't that be..."

Kaelyn hissed, "Shush, Raal. I'm doing the best I can."

Pamela sighed. "Oh, please do continue."

Kaelyn spread her arms wide for the dramatic finale.

"To win you o'er is my heart's dream,
And that I'll not deny.
By steadfast love I pledge this day,
To woo and win... or die."

Pamela looked like butter on a hot day. "Oh, that was charming. I had no idea... Tell Stephen I'll meet him on the night of the next full moon, down by the river. He'll know the spot."

As Kaelyn and Raal departed, Raal asked, "Won't Stephen have trouble living up to the poetic reputation you just made for him?"

Kaelyn shrugged. "I doubt it. If his kisses are only half as bad as my poetry, I'd say he has nothing to worry about."

42000.msg – *Chapter 7\Eastbank – Stephen the Mage*

Topic: After Speaking to Pamela for Stephen

Despite her outward calm, Kaelyn felt a jitter of excitement. "Stephen, come out here. We have something to tell you."

In seconds, the mage stood beside them on the steps. "Yes? Did you see her? What did she say?"

Milking it for all its worth, Kaelyn spoke slowly. "Oh, not much. We talked for a while of this and that... Nothing important. The weather, the price of milk, that sort of thing..."

"Kaelyn," Raal chided, "The poor fellow is about to burst."

Kaelyn grinned. "Pamela asked you to meet her at the same spot on the river bank, on the night of the next full moon!"

The mage danced around the yard like a moon-crazed rabbit. After a few minutes, Raal cleared his throat to catch Stephen's attention. Looking sheepish, he returned to face his benefactors.

"I don't mean to detract from the joy of the moment, but you agreed to help us cross the river, remember?"

Stephen nodded. "I definitely owe you a favor. Meet me by the grandfather tree on the bank. You've made me very happy. She's so beautiful, so lovely..."

Kaelyn grabbed Raal's elbow. "Uh, I think this is where we came in. Stephen, we'll see you down at the river. Come on, Raal. Let's go before he starts in on the chorus again."

42001.msg – *Chapter 7\At River Northwest of Eastbank – Stephen the Mage*

Topic: Stephen Raises the River Bottom #1

As promised, Stephen was waiting for the companions. "Stand back and don't move until I tell you to," he says, waving his hands over the river.

As if an invisible boat set sail from the shore in front of them, a tiny wake appeared. It crossed to the opposite river bank, the ripples spreading outward and growing with each passing moment.

Raal studied the wake and realized that the trough wasn't getting deeper-- the river was getting shallower. "Look, Kaelyn! He's raising the river bed."

Soon they could see the river bottom, rising from beneath the surface until a muddy path connected the banks.

Through gritted teeth, the mage gasped, "Go now, quickly. The pressure's tremendous-- I'm not sure how long I can hold it!"

Topic: Stephen Raises the River Bottom #2

Raal backed away from the river's edge. "I don't know about this, Kaelyn. Looks dangerous."

Stephen called out, "Go! If you don't take the path now, you won't get a second chance!"

42003.msg – ***Chapter 7\At River Northwest of Eastbank – Stephen the Mage***

Topic: Crossing the River – Success

Upon safely reaching the other side, they waved to Stephen. He lowered his arms and the path dropped beneath the surface, water crashing in to fill the gap. Within seconds, the river flowed normally again. Stephen waved to them and walked away.

42002.msg – ***Chapter 7\At River Northwest of Eastbank – Stephen the Mage***

Topic: Crossing the River – Failure

Raal and Kaelyn turned away from the river. They hadn't gone more than a few steps when they heard the sound of thundering surf. Turning quickly, they saw waves crashing together, obliterating the path. The mage was nowhere in sight.

42028.msg – ***Chapter 7\West of Grandeur – North Chuno Bridge Blocked***

Topic: North Chuno Bridge Blocked

An obese brigand stood in their way. "One hundred burlas or you don't pass."

Kaelyn eyed his ponderous bulk. "Well, there certainly is enough of you to block the bridge. Let me confer with my partner a moment. We'll get back to you."

Choice: Fight

Kaelyn addressed the corpulent brigand. "To put it bluntly, rather than pay the fee you demand, we have decided to carve you up like a feasting cake."

Choice: Pay – 100 Burls

"We'll pay you," said Kaelyn, handing over the money, "but only so we don't have to dull our swords on your bulk."

"I have big bones," the brigand protested, pocketing the burlas.

Choice: Pay – Not Enough Money

Kaelyn grumbled as she reached for her pouch, becoming exasperated when she discovered it wasn't as full as she thought.

"Look, I don't have that much right now."

The rogue looked at her flatly. "Then you're not crossing right now."

Choice: Turn Back

Kaelyn addressed the fat brigand. "We don't want to pay you, and we don't want to dull our blades on your bulk, so I guess that leaves us no choice but to turn back."

"Suit yourself," said the brigand, cramming a handful of sweetmeats into his cavernous maw.

41425.msg – ***Chapter 7\Everton – Frightened Mother and Her Tomboy Daughter***

Topic: Frightened Mother and Her Tomboy Daughter

The frightened woman barely opened the door wide enough for Kaelyn to catch a glimpse of her. "Excuse me, ma'am, we're looking for some friends of ours..."

The woman interrupted, "Please, just go away. We don't want no trouble."

The door closed. Kaelyn looked at Raal, perplexed. "What did I say?"

Quickly and quietly, the door opened again. A towheaded 12-year-old girl beckoned them to follow her. When they were out of earshot of the house, the girl asked, "Does one of your friends have dark hair? And he's really handsome..."

Kaelyn rolled her eyes. "That's a matter of taste, but yes, I suppose so. And my other friend is fair and carries a staff. Have you seen them?"

The girl grinned with conspiratorial delight. "They said some men were after them so I hid them."

Kaelyn commended her. "That was brave of you."

The girl puffed out her chest with pride. "They were with another man who talked funny. The handsome one said if a woman and a Grrrlf came looking for him, to tell them they're missing all the fun. That's you he meant, huh?"

Raal nodded, then asked, "Where did they go?"

"South to Ciaga Pass, toward the capital."

Kaelyn and Raal thanked the girl for her courage and reliability. As they turned to go, Kaelyn gave the girl a quick spontaneous hug.

"Hey, what was that for?"

Kaelyn just smiled and bid the girl farewell. As she and Raal turned away, he shot her a quizzical look. "She reminded you of you at that age, didn't she? I thought so too, a bit, though of course you were a lot more disagreeable."

41416.msg – *Chapter 7\Everton – Natalie's House – Natalie's Sister / Natty's Aunt*

Topic: Natalie's Sister / Natty's Aunt – Natalie and Baby Saved (Ch 4)

Curtains waved in the open windows. The party was greeted by a happy woman carrying a smiling babe in arms. "This is my new nephew, Natty." She lapsed into baby talk. "Isn't he a fine boy? Isn't he a pretty boy?"

Kaelyn agreed somewhat tentatively, privately thinking that she'd never seen such a homely child.

"I'd invite you in, but my sister is resting. Her fever has broken and it looks like she's beaten the Pox, but you know how it is when you've just given birth..." The woman eyed Kaelyn's flat stomach and clear eyes. "Or maybe you don't. But you will someday!"

Kaelyn grunted noncommittally. "We'll see."

The woman blushed. "Oh, I didn't mean any offense. I'm just so happy!"

Topic: Natalie's Widower – Both Natalie and Baby Died (Ch 4)

A tall, powerful man blocked the doorway. His eyes were red and swollen, his voice raw. When he saw the Grrrlf standing before him, he screamed, "It's your fault my wife and baby died! You and your kind! Everyone knows you dogs spread the Pox! I'll kill you!"

Topic: Invitation to Dinner

The flower boxes and curtained windows invited the party to approach the house. The door was soon opened by plump, apple-cheeked man wearing a checked napkin in place of a cravat. A chorus of children's voices sang out, "Who is it, Daddy? Who's at the door?"

Before the travelers could get out a word, the man was joined by his wife, every bit as round and pleasant as her husband. "Oh, my dear! Don't keep these youngsters standing in the door. Invite them in, my pet... Invite them in!"

The husband complied with his wife's hospitable wishes. Before they knew what happened, the companions found themselves seated at the head of a long table, staring into the scrubbed faces of ten or twelve children. Ten or twelve pairs of shining blue eyes stared back.

Someone managed to stammer, "Oh, but we couldn't intrude on your meal..." before the rumbling in their stomachs drowned out the words. They surveyed the table groaning under the weight of platters filled with carrots and yams, roast meat, savory pudding, and tender greens. "Well, all right, maybe just a mouthful..."

An hour later, feeling as stuffed as goose down pillows, the companions bid farewell to their hosts.

Topic: Bailey's Tavern – Overheard Conversation #2

Kaelyn cocked her head, her attention caught by a conversation between two Jaegers nearby.

"Caverton's in hot water over this whole Consort fiasco," the first was saying. "People are moving against him in the Shira-- I hear he's been calling in years' worth of favors just to hold onto his interests."

The second man nodded agreement. "There's talk in the palace that the Emperor might transfer the governorship of Ticor to another House. Requests from major Houses for Imperial audiences have tripled already. It's quite a bee's nest."

The conversation drifted to other topics, and Kaelyn looked at Raal. "Well, that explains Caverton's sour mood, but I hope they're wrong-- I'd hate to see Caverton ousted."

Raal's ears pulled back in surprise. "That's very noble of you."

"Noble, nothing," Kaelyn snorted. "If Caverton got cut loose from Ticor, he'd only make more trouble elsewhere. Better to see him clinging desperately to his position but without any real power-- makes him easier to keep an eye on. Not that watching him is my problem."

Raal chuckled. "My mistake. Forgive me, I should have known better."

Her eyes narrowed at the Grrrlf's mirth, trying to decide whether or not she'd just been insulted.

41205.msg – *Chapter 7\Burlen – Pernath Academy*

Topic: Greeting #3 – Pass Needed

The matron stood from behind the desk. "May I see your pass, please?"

Kaelyn looked at her blankly. "Pass?"

The woman's expression didn't change, but Kaelyn suddenly felt like an idiot. "Your Academy authorization pass. You can't go in until I've seen it."

Topic: Show Pass

The matron inspected the pass before handing it back. "Thank you. Go right in."

Topic: Greeting #4 – Pass Already Shown

The matron smiled up at them. Kaelyn thought she heard ice cracking. "I've already seen your pass. Go right in."

Walston Moore, Director of the Vell Studies Department at Pernath Academy

Topic: On Sabbatical

The sturdy wood doors refused to budge. Raal pointed to a sign hanging from the door handle: "On sabbatical."

Topic: Marcus and His Fiancée Reunited

Kaelyn knocked loudly on the door. Some minutes passed before it opened, revealing a young officer in the process of buttoning up his trousers. "Yes, what is it? Make it fast. I'm rather in the middle... of something."

Kaelyn heard a giggle coming from a pile of blankets in front of the fireplace. She grinned. "I can see you're busy, sir. We won't take up any more of your valuable time. Sorry to disturb you... and you too, miss."

As Kaelyn turned to go, Raal grabbed her arm. "He was rude to you, skin sister. Do people in this part of your Empire not learn proper manners?"

"That's all right, Raal. I think he's already learning everything he needs to know... under the circumstances."

Topic: Man Paranoid of Mehrat Threat

The door was thrown open by a man wearing a gaudy velvet cloak and a maniacal gleam in his eyes. He held high a drawn sword. "I'm ready for you, Mehrat swine!"

Raal tensed but Kaelyn held him back. "Down, boy! And I mean both of you!"

The man relaxed somewhat, lowering the sword but maintaining the maniacal gleam. "All right, I can tell you're not attacking Mehrat hordes, but I'm taken care of for when they do show up. See my protection!"

Kaelyn reached out to touch the cloak. The man jerked back. "Don't touch the cloak! It's centuries old, made by one of the mages who created the Imperial Cloak itself! How about that!"

Kaelyn arched an eyebrow. "Where'd you get it?"

The man winked confidentially. "A man in Burlen sold it to me. It was the very last one he had. Cost a lot but swords can't penetrate it, won't even scratch it! Let's see the Mehrat try to hurt me now!"

Quick as lightening, Raal lashed out with his staff, knocking the man as flat as a halibut. Raal observed drily, "Swords aren't the only weapons the Mehrat can use."

Kaelyn chuckled and helped the poor fellow to his feet. The companions went on their way, leaving the chagrined though somewhat wiser man to rub his new bruises and reconsider the Mehrat threat.

41331.msg – *Chapter 7\Teal – The Watering Hole Tavern – Man Bumped*

Topic: Man Bumped in Tavern #2

Raal accidentally bumped into the man sitting alone at a table. The man's ale slopped over, spilling onto his trousers. "Kor's eyeballs! Watch where you're walking!"

The man jumped up ready for a fight, but when he saw the Grrrlf, he thought better of that course of action and slumped back into his chair.

"I'm sorry, sir. Please allow me to buy you another," Raal said courteously, choosing to ignore the near attack. Kaelyn looked closely at the man, then set her hand on the Grrrlf's arm. "Leave him alone, Raal. Can't you see he wants to drink in peace?"

A flicker of a smile crossed the man's weathered face. "You're an insightful one, missy. Got more understanding in your little finger than my wife has in her whole body... and if you saw her, you'd know that's saying plenty."

41315.msg – *Chapter 7\Teal – Allie Renee and Her Father*

Topic: Allie Renee and Her Father #2 – Afraid of Grrrlf

A little girl opened the door playfully to greet the strangers. When she saw Raal, the laughter died on her lips and she ran screaming into the house. Her father hurried into the doorway, a dull sword in his hand. Seeing the Grrrlf, the man paused. Raal crouched to defend, but Kaelyn yelled, "No!" and stepped between them.

The man dropped his sword and held out his hands. "I'm sorry, I heard my daughter scream... she's never met a Grrrlf before. Allie Renee, come here!"

A little face peeked out from the safety of the house. "I said, come here. It's all right. He won't hurt you."

Raal tried to make himself smaller and less intimidating. "I'm not such a bad fellow once you get to know me. Really."

Unfortunately, Raal's dagger-toothed smile sent the child skittering back into the protective shadows of the cottage.

"This could take all day," Kaelyn sighed. "Come on, Raal. Let's go."

"No, Kaelyn. This is important. What this small one thinks of me today may determine her opinion of Grrrlf for her entire life. Go if you wish and I'll catch up later."

Kaelyn paused. "No, that's all right. I'll stay."

Though it took some time, eventually Allie Renee became comfortable with Raal... so comfortable that when her new friend tried to leave, she clung to his fur and begged him to come live with her and her father. Finally, Raal managed to pry himself out of her grasp.

41310.msg – *Chapter 7\Teal – Teal Bakery*

Topic: Teal Bakery #2

Kaelyn sniffed the fragrant air. "Raal, smell that! A bakery. Let's go in."

Raal turned away. "Go if you like. I'll wait for you across the road."

"What's the matter, Raal? I know Grrrlf don't eat grains, but nobody's going to force you! Come in to keep me company."

Raal swallowed hard. "Actually, I think it would be better if I moved upwind, and quickly."

Kaelyn followed Raal out of range of the bakery's enticing aroma. "Raal, you don't know what you're missing."

The Grrrlf looked distinctly green beneath his fur. "Kaelyn, the thought of eating bread is as appealing to me as the thought of eating raw field worms would be to you. That yeasty odor alone makes me nauseous."

"Hmmm," Kaelyn cocked her head to one side. "I never knew that about Grrrlf. Better not get me mad, Raal, or I'll put muffins in your sleeping blanket and dinner rolls in your pockets!"

Topic: Children's Counting Game

The door was open. The companions peeked inside to see two lines of children sitting on the floor. They were playing a common counting game, dealing out pebbles one by one until they ran out. The child with the most pebbles wins all the pebbles from the child sitting across from her. The game continued until one child had all the pebbles or it was time for bed, whichever came first.

The companions watched as the children played.

"1 is for the Emperor, the one the Cloak has graced.

2 is for the mages who in battle made the Waste.

3 is for the Triune, for they are always near.

4 is for the seasons as they turn throughout the year.

5 is for the years in which a priest of Kor must train.

6 is for the countries over which our Emperor reigns.

7's for the books of law which make Antara great.

8 is for the Harvest Days that we all celebrate.

9 is for the pirate clans who sail upon the sea.

And 10 is for the fingers that I count on, 1, 2, 3!"

As they turned away from the door, the companions smiled and remarked that it was good to see the recent events in Teal hadn't had much effect on the children's cheerful moods.

Topic: Mercenaries

Kaelyn: "These mercenaries seem to think there's something important around here. I've got a hunch we'd better find it before they do."

Topic: Reunited with William, Aren, and the Consort #1

Aren: "Kaelyn! Raal! It's good to see you!"

Kaelyn: "It certainly wasn't hard to track you two. We just followed the path of destruction and lo, here you are!"

William: "We've been doing all right so far, but now we're in a tough spot. This here's the Consort... he's still a little woozy. As you no doubt noticed on your way in, we're surrounded by mercenaries. If we leave this cozy hidey-hole, they'll be on us in a second."

Kaelyn: "Got any Grrrlf tricks up your sleeve, Raal?"

Raal: "Hmmm. We could make snares and tripwires. That would slow them down. There are plenty of rocks in the area. Do we have rope and oil?"

Kaelyn: "I think so. William, wait until you can tell if our traps worked, then get going."

William: "How will we know?"

Kaelyn: "I'd say the abundant cursing should be a dead giveaway. When you hear the commotion, make for the pass and keep going until you reach Antara. Don't stop no matter what."

Aren: "But Kaelyn..."

Kaelyn: "It's our best chance. Don't worry, Aren. We'll be fine."

William: "(GRUFFLY) You better be."

Kaelyn: "Raal, are you with me? Let's go."

Topic: Making Molotov Cocktails

Kaelyn: "Hmmm, looks like I spoke too soon. We don't have a rope after all. We'll need to look for one if we're going to pull this off."

—or—

Kaelyn: "Guess I was wrong about having enough oil. Wonder where we can find some, and fast!"

41500.msg – ***Chapter 7\North of Isten – Amphitheater Box Office***

Topic: Amphitheater Box Office #2

Kaelyn tugged at the doors, but they didn't budge. She pounded on them with her fists. "Hello? Hello?"

Raal tapped her on the shoulder. "Kaelyn, look." He pointed a thick finger at a broadside pasted to the ticket window:

"Theater closed. Watch for the grand premiere of Kate E. Steen's hilarious new comedy of the absurd, 'And the Triune Makes Three'."

41800.msg – *Chapter 7\North of Ciaga Pass – Molotov Cocktail*

Topic: Molotov Cocktail

The fuse burned quickly. Kaelyn and Raal shielded their eyes and mouths as the flask exploded, filling the air with a cloud of greasy black smoke. The mercenaries, their lungs filled with the choking fumes, quickly dispersed in search of fresher air.

700.msg – *Chapter 7\North of Ciaga Pass – Molotov Cocktails*

Topic: Molotov Cocktails – One –or– Two Used

Kaelyn: "Aren and William aren't out of the woods yet. We'd better make sure their path is clear. I think we have some more mercenaries to take care of."

Topic: Molotov Cocktails – All Three Used

Kaelyn: "That should do it-- William and Aren should be in the Pass by now. Let's follow their lead and meet up with them in Antara."

41605.msg – *Chapter 7\Korus Landing – Germaine's Outfitter's – Sylvie Ashwood*

Topic: Sylvie Ashwood #2

Sylvie welcomed Kaelyn and Raal to her shop. Noticing their weapons and travel-stained clothes, Sylvie asked if they were mercenaries. "No," Kaelyn answered, "just on a bit of a journey."

Sylvie nodded in understanding. "I was born in Balmestri, about as far from Korus Landing as you can get. Never could keep still for a minute as a kid. My mom said I must have jumping fleas in my veins."

Kaelyn smiled. "My dad said that about me too."

"When I was fourteen or so, my mom died. That's when I hit the road. Had a lot of adventures. Made a lot of friends and not quite as many enemies. Yep, I saw it all once and did it all twice."

"How did you wind up here?" Raal gestured at the small though cozy shop.

"Ran out of money or shoe leather... Been so long I can't recall which. It's not a bad life. Traders and trappers come through on their way south to Antara, bringing news of the Empire. I got a nice little house in the woods, a garden, couple of dogs. All right, so it's not as exciting as being on the road, but it's also nice knowing where I'll be sleeping at the end of the day."

Apparently struck by an inspiration, Sylvie brought a bottle up from under the counter. "Januli juleps, anyone? Seems like the right weather and the right company for them."

Raal backed away from the bottle. "Not for me, thanks. You go ahead if you want to, Kaelyn. I'll see to it you don't fall in the river."

41626.msg – *Chapter 7\Korus Landing – Andy and Arielle*

Topic: Andy and Arielle #2

The door was answered by a young woman with thick blond braids pinned in coils on top of her head. She looked at the companions' dusty boots and stained traveling clothes, then at their packs and weapons. "No sirree," she declared. "I simply won't have it. Not again. I won't have two more strangers waltz in off the road, telling their tall tales and making my poor husband restless and discontented. You'll have to go bother someone else this day, I'm afraid."

The door slammed in the companions' startled faces. Kaelyn laughed. "Off hand, I'd say William and Aren have been here before us. Made quite a good impression too, wouldn't you say?"

41620.msg – *Chapter 7\Korus Landing – Malcolm Rourke, Night Patrolman*

Topic: Malcolm Rourke, Night Patrolman

The man's sash of authority identified him as one of Korus Landing's finest. His manner identified him as an officer, but no gentleman. Eyeing Kaelyn up and down, he leered, "My, look what Henne has brought to my doorstep. How about stepping out on the town with me, little lady?"

Kaelyn figured she could catch more rats with cake than vinegar so she played along. After turning to wink at Raal who stood back in the shadows, she flirted, "I always do admire a man in uniform."

"Then you've got a lot of admiring ahead of you, sweet thing. I happen to be the official in charge of the night shift so I always know where the action is."

The officer put his arm around Kaelyn and gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze. He blinked. "You've got some good muscle there, girl."

Kaelyn giggled. "I like to give massages to my... friends."

The officer grinned salaciously. "Well, I'm the only friend you're going to need in this town. You can help me spend the burlas I made during the shipping strike. Ah yes, that was easy work for some damn fine money."

The officer handed Kaelyn a bulging money bag. "Pretty impressive, huh?"

Kaelyn simpered. "Oh yes. I've never seen such a big, heavy... money sack before. Not that I'd understand it, having no head for such complicated things, but what did you do to earn such a fortune?"

The officer snorted. "Nothing really. Bust a few heads, confiscate some cargo, just generally make it so unpleasant around the harbor that the dockworkers had no choice but to strike."

"And someone paid you all this money just for that?" Kaelyn asked innocently.

"Lord Caverton has deep pockets. But enough about the affairs of state. Let's get down to business. I think we should first go inside my house to, uh, get to know each other better, then we can hit the taverns. I've got some friends who would love to meet you..."

Kaelyn pulled free of the officer's embrace. "Oh, I just remembered something... I told my boyfriend to meet me here, right around now..."

On cue, Raal stepped out of the shadows. "Hello, Kaelyn. Who's your friend?" Raal growled amiably.

The officer backed up a few paces until he stood in the doorway. "Your boyfriend's a Grrrlf? You're a dog-lover?" he shouted. "Get out of my town before I have you arrested for not obeying the leash laws!"

Raal grinned, showing double rows of sharp white fangs. "Pleasure to meet you too, officer. See you around."

Kaelyn pat Raal's back as they sauntered casually down the path. "Nice self control, fur brother. As tempting as it seems, it would not be prudent to chew up an officer of the law right in his own town. Maybe we can figure out some other way to teach him some manners..."

Topic: Korus Landing Dockworker

As Kaelyn and Raal approached the house, the front door opened and a big man in an open-necked shirt emerged. He sang a song that Kaelyn immediately recognized from taverns throughout the Empire. "I've never been a hero, and I've never been a mage. I've never changed the minds of men, as I am not a sage. I've never been to foreign docks..."

The man broke off when he saw the strangers. "Hello! It's a grand and glorious day today, is it not?"

Kaelyn remarked, "You seem to be in an awfully good mood for a man who looks like he's heading off to work."

"You're right, I am. I'm a man who likes to work. Keep me from working and I get as jittery as a TrKaa on the nest. This shipping strike went on far too long, and I'm darn glad it's finally over. Say, you two look in need of some ready scratch. Why not come down to the docks with me? I've got a ton of furs and skins to load. I'll pay you well if you lend a hand..." the man winked at Raal, "or a paw."

Choice: Work

Raal shrugged. "Sure, why not? A little exercise in the fresh air should do us both some good."

Kaelyn looked doubtful but decided it couldn't hurt. The dockworker thumped the Grrrlf on the shoulder. "Great! I appreciate the help."

They walked down to the harbor where the ship was waiting, her holds open and empty. The dockworker showed them the ropes, and soon they used them to hoist the furs on board. While they worked, he entertained them with songs and idle conversation. "So what do you think of the kidnapping?"

Kaelyn tried to act casual. "What are you talking about?"

"Where have you been? The entire Empire knows that the Imperial Consort has been snatched. The Guard passed through Korus Landing on their way north, and they'll most likely come back this way as well. You don't have to worry though... As far as I know, they're not looking for a woman and a Grrrlf."

Raal and Kaelyn snuck wary glances at each other behind the dockworker's back. They had a feeling they knew exactly who the Guard was looking for...

After a few hours of labor, the furs were stored below decks. The dockworker paid his hired hands 30 burlas each, plus a bonus. "Take this shield too. It, uh, sort of fell off a ship..."

Choice: Shirk

Kaelyn grimaced. "I don't feel up to loading furs on a hot day like this. The very thought makes my head ache."

The dockworker shrugged. "Suit yourself. But the docks are a good place to hang out if you want to look inconspicuous. Not that you'd have anything to worry about... The Imperial guards aren't looking for a woman and a Grrrlf."

Kaelyn tried to act casual. "What are you talking about?"

"The kidnapping of course. Where have you been? The entire Empire knows that the Imperial Consort has been snatched! The Guard passed through Korus Landing on their way north, and they'll most likely come back this way as well."

Topic: *Passing Along Information – After Meeting Malcolm Rourke*

Kaelyn decided to pass along a bit of information she thought the dockworker might find of interest. "Do you know the officer in charge of the night patrol?"

The dockworker frowned. "Sure. Malcolm Rourke. What of him?"

"Well, he let it slip that he accepted bribes to instigate the strike. For your own protection I'll not mention any names, but someone very high up decided to stir up trouble to suit his own ends. Your Malcolm is on the take."

The big man spat. "That carnivorous butt weasel! Pretending to be a protector of law and order, and all the time creating havoc and civil unrest. Well, I think me and my fellow dockworkers should go and have a little chat with Malcolm, maybe give him a few underwater singing lessons just to even the score. Thanks for the information. You two is all right."

As Kaelyn and Raal walked back to the main road, Kaelyn chuckled. "I wonder if the dockworkers' singing lessons will include teaching Malcolm how to tune a fish."

700.msg – *Chapter 7\Entering Ticor Province*

Topic: Entering Ticor Province

Kaelyn: "We won't find William and Aren this way. Let's figure out where they went and try to catch up to them."

Topic: Antara City Gates

Raal: "Your friends and the Consort are safe, little archer. It's time for me to go back."

Kaelyn: "Tell Krrrrrrlaak my father and I will come for the Harrr-Quan ceremony."

Raal: "I will, though you know you don't have to wait that long to visit."

Kaelyn: "Maybe I won't. Raal, thanks. Without your help, we'd probably be rotting in the Imperial dungeons now. If there's ever anything I can do for you..."

Raal: "I know. You don't even have to say. Go with the wind, little archer."

Kaelyn: "Go with the wind, fur brother."

Topic: Reunited with William, Aren, and the Consort #2

Aren: "How long are they going to keep us waiting?"

Consort: "Sit and stew. A standard procedure in Chail."

William: "But you're not some minor bureaucrat, you're the Imperial Consort! And you've been missing. They must have been worried silly over you. Something doesn't add up here."

Kaelyn: "Greetings, strangers!"

Aren: "(DELIGHTED TO SEE HER) Hey, Kaelyn!"

William: "(RELIEVED) So what took you so long?"

Kaelyn: "(SARCASTIC) Hey, I'm glad to see you too. Just couldn't tear myself away from my new friends."

Aren: "Where's Raal?"

Kaelyn: "He said to give you greetings, but he had to get back to his pack."

William: "Well, thanks for getting those mercenaries off our backs. Good job."

Kaelyn: "(PLEASED) Uh, sure. No problem. Guess that makes us even now. Hey, looks like we've got company."

Aren: "They're sending out an honor guard!"

William: "(WARY) I wouldn't wager on it."

Sergeant: "If his highness would be so kind as to follow me, I will escort him and his... companions into the palace."

Topic: Waiting

Sergeant: "If his highness and the rest of you will wait here, the Captain will be with you presently."

Consort: "We shall await his convenience."

Kaelyn: "Honor guard? (SNORTS)"

Aren: "(WORRIED) What's going to happen?"

Kaelyn: "Wouldn't be surprised if we were here for quite a while. If I was Captain of the Guards, I'd have questions too."

Aren: "(SCARED) Question us? But we rescued the Consort! We didn't do anything wrong!"

William: "No, we just knocked out a bunch of Imperial Guards, escaped from their custody, evaded them again at the headquarters of a covert military group, aided rebellion in our home province, destroyed an Imperial bridge, and then showed up on their doorstep with a kidnapped foreign dignitary. Why would they possibly want to question us?"

10814.msg – *Chapter 7\Antara – Captain of the Imperial Guard*

Captain of the Imperial Guard

Topic: Greeting

Captain: "Apparently you already know the answer to that question, Master Escobar. Perhaps you wouldn't mind answering some of my own."

Consort: "Captain..."

Captain: "(INTERRUPTING) I am relieved to see you well, your highness, and am most interested in hearing anything you can tell me about your abduction. But first, I think it prudent to have you examined by our court mage Colere. Just as a matter of form of course. I'm sure you understand."

Consort: "(SIGHS) Very well. I'm sure Gazrim would insist that Mashu do the same. The sooner we get this over with..."

Captain: "Now then, I believe you were about to answer some questions."
"What was the Consort's condition when you found him?"

William: "He was in a magical sleep or enchantment of some sort. Aren brought him to, then we got out of there as fast as we could."

Captain: "How convenient for you that the Consort was unconscious at the time of his abduction and so cannot identify his kidnappers. Perhaps your plan went awry and you decided to pose as his rescuers to avoid detection."

Aren: "It was nothing like that!"

Captain: "(MUSING) Or the conspiracy could run deeper. You could just be the tip of the iceberg. So many possibilities, so many questions. And I intend to get some answers."

William: "We intend to fully cooperate with you, Captain."

Captain: "Oh, I'm sure you will... one way or another."

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— *Chapter 7 – End* —

Seat of power for generations, the Imperial Palace is an elaborate structure dedicated to glorify the first family of Antara. Built by Emperor Valorian to represent his consolidation of the empire, the palace has become a monument to excess, expanded upon by every Emperor or Empress since. When the subgates are open, anyone may enter to request an audience with his highness.

Today, however, the subgates are closed. Today is the ceremony to present the Consort to the Imperial Court.

Walking alongside William toward the Grand Hall, Aren was self-conscious and visibly uncomfortable in his new formal attire. "I feel like a prize sheep on fair day," he told William.

William, having been to similar events before, tried to calm Aren's nerves. "Nonsense. You look quite the gentleman. Now stop fidgeting and relax."

Aren was incredulous. "I'm about to see the emperor and you expect me to relax?"

As they continued towards the hall, they saw Kaelyn with arms crossed, leaning against one of the numerous marble pillars lining the front entrance... and still wearing her hunting clothes. While they were certainly cleaner than they had been at any time over the past two-and-a-half months, they were also worse for wear—definitely not something to be seen wearing in Antaran high society.

"Oh there you are," *she teased William and Aren, eying them up as they approached.* "Don't you both look handsome."

William was shocked. "Why aren't you dressed?" *He quickly looked around to see if anyone had noticed her clothing.* "The ceremony is about to start!"

"I'm dressed," *Kaelyn replied matter-of-factly. She was wearing clothes; it wasn't as if she were indecent or nude, after all.*

In William's world, this wasn't how proper young ladies presented themselves at such events. "Couldn't they find you a gown, or—or something?"

"Why yes, I believe there was some mention of gowns..." *she said sweetly, then laughed.* "They changed their minds."

"But Kaelyn," *William protested,* "I wouldn't be surprised if the entire Shira will be there."

"Then we'd better get going before all the good seats are taken!" *Turning on her heel, she started toward the entrance. Over her shoulder, she asked,* "Coming?"

As they filed into the hall, the Captain of the Imperial Guard kept a stern eye upon them. *Kaelyn stared right back as they passed by him.* "Snake spawn," *she muttered under her breath.*

Aren was relieved. "I thought for sure he was going to lock us up, even after questioning each of us in private. Good thing our stories meshed."

"That's easy..." *William said,* "when you're telling the truth."

"I know, but I still didn't think he'd believe—..." *Aren was at a sudden loss for words as he took in the scale of the vast auditorium filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of people.* "...wow!"

William pointed near the front. "I think I see some seats over there." *As the trumpeters signaled the beginning of the ceremony, the trio made their way through the throngs of people to a section reserved for honored guests.*

The Emperor's Herald began to speak. "Hear ye! Hear ye!" his voice rang out sharp and clear, filling the hall for all to hear. "All rise for his Imperial Majesty, Emperor Justin Valorian V, Guardian of the Cloak, Champion of Harmony, Favored of the Triune, and the princess Aurora Valorian, daughter of the Emperor, heir to the Imperial Cloak, Light of the Empire." The Emperor entered the auditorium from the left side of the stage, with the Princess following behind him. As the Emperor sat upon his throne, Aurora took her seat to his left. Three of the Emperor's ever-present Shadows, dressed in their traditional red robes, stood silently behind them.

The Herald next announced the Chailan emissary. "Prince Gazrim Kalibanque, second heir to the throne of Chail," his words piercing the air.

The Chailan prince entered, closely followed by his honor guard. The crowd buzzed like irritated bees, every head craning to see. ***Walking down the center of the auditorium, Gazrim approached the steps leading to the stage and bowed to his most gracious host.*** The hall fell silent.

The Prince continued up the steps and onto the stage, addressing to the Emperor in his clipped Chailan accent. "My Emperor, I bring you greetings and salutations from my father, King Kalibanque of Chail. Unfortunately, his health would not permit him to travel." Emperor Valorian gave a slight nod of understanding. "Your majesty," Gazrim continued, "before we proceed with the formalities of the betrothal ceremony, I'd like to acknowledge three of your Empire who did a great service for Chail."

Facing to the audience, the Chailan Prince said, "These individuals fought adversity and suspicion to ensure the safe arrival of my brother, thus preserving not only his life, but my family's honor as well." Turning back to the Emperor, he held out his left hand towards the trio. "May I present to your royal highness: William Escobar, Aren Cordelaine, and Kaelyn Usher. Sir, by your leave, I'd ask them to stand and be recognized."

From their seats near the front of the hall, William, Aren, and Kaelyn took their cue as the hall erupted in applause. Humbled at the recognition before their Emperor, they dutifully rose to their feet to receive the accolades of hundreds of their fellow Antarans. As the polite applause dwindled, Gazrim continued. "The kingdom of Chail and the Kalibanque family are in your debt."

The emperor directed his penetrating gaze to each in turn, finally granting the trio and brief nod of acknowledgement. William took that as a signal to be seated, and the others followed his lead.

"And now," ***Gazrim said***, "your majesty, princess, ladies and gentlemen of the court, and good people of Antara, may I present Farril Kalibanque, third-heir to the Throne of Light, beloved of the kingdom, Prince of Chail."

Gazrim's handsome younger brother entered the Grand Hall from the main entrance, proceeding down the center of the auditorium.

As he strode by in his regal attire, Kaelyn was duly impressed. The Consort certainly looked a lot different than when she first met him a week ago on the run north of Ciaga Pass. "Whew—he cleaned up well."

Stopping at the bottom of the steps, the Consort bowed to the Emperor. Holding his arms out, he began his recitation asking for Princess Aurora's hand in marriage. "Your Majesty, I bring..."

...But he never finished his statement, as he began to cough and choke. The Consort's eyes bulged as he fell to his knees, desperately clutching his neck. Trying to breath, he couldn't make a sound.

Aurora left her chair and ran to the edge of the steps. With concern in her voice, she called to him. "Farril?"

Suddenly he threw back his head, and from his gaping mouth, a gaseous purple column swirled upward, coalescing into a hideous ethereal form, with a sphere of roiling energy visible within. ***The swirling transparent purple gas was contained within a bright bluish-white light outlining the creature's shape. Its narrow head had a long, prehistoric beak and long, thin ears at the top, but its buzzard-like neck connected to a body and wing structure that were more akin to those of a bat. As if to emphasize its bizarre alien origins, the creature let out an unnatural screech that reverberated throughout the Grand Hall. No one in attendance had ever heard such a sound before... save for one.***

Someone in the crowd recognized the form. ***Kaelyn leapt to her feet with sword in hand, shouting, "By the three Faces, it's a Wraith!" Though it had been a few weeks, she hoped the enchantment her father had cast upon her sword remained strong enough to damage or at least injure the creature in some way.***

The Wraith lunged toward the Emperor. But the Princess, rushing forward to her Consort's side, intercepted it. The Wraith engulfed her, then disappeared down her throat.

The Emperor left his throne and rushed toward his daughter at the bottom of the steps. "Aurora, are you—"

Moments later it erupted forth again, with a second glowing sphere visible within. ***The force of the eruption knocked the Emperor to the floor.*** The Wraith streaked toward the Emperor, but a sudden shimmering barrier repelled it. ***The three Shadows had immediately taken equidistant***

positions around their Emperor with arms held aloft, their protective spell emanating from palms pointed towards the Wraith. The sound of loud, reverberating chants accompanied their efforts.

The Shadows worked in tandem, maintaining the shield while weaving a snare for the creature. But as the Wraith bucked against their magical net, it loosened the Shadows' hold and slipped free. The Wraith cast a smoldering look at the Shadows, unable to break their shield over the Emperor. ***Even against the immense concentration of Ethereal mana the Wraith retained, the Emperor's Shadows held firm.*** With a terrible hiss it turned and fled from the Palace.

The Shadows remained wary as the Emperor rushed to the side of his motionless daughter, mournfully cradling her in his arms. "Aurora," ***he murmured softly as he knelt down beside her.***

In ensuing the commotion, Kaelyn held her sword aloft. "We've got to go after it!" she told William.

Instead, he grabbed her by the arms to stop her. "Are you insane?" William asked. "After what it just did? Besides, by the time you trample everyone and get outside, it'll be long gone."

Suddenly, William felt a large hand grasp his left shoulder and a familiar voice say, "Don't move, boy." He turned to see the Captain of the Imperial Guard looming over him. "I just thought of a few more questions." William, Aren, and Kaelyn were immediately surrounded by a dozen guards as the Captain gave the order: "Seize them!"

Meanwhile, Justin Valorian V—the most powerful man in all of Antara—was reduced to rocking his unconscious daughter back and forth in his arms as if she were still a babe. "Aurora... Aurora..."

— Chapter 8 – Start —

The Shadows were powerful mages hand-picked to safeguard the Emperor. They took their business seriously, so when the Captain of the Guard told them he was holding suspects, the Shadows came.

The Shadows said nothing, but William, Aren, and Kaelyn understood and opened their minds to them. The Shadows were not gentle, nor cruel or brutal. They were direct. And efficient.

Much like a scrivener shuffling through stacks of papers, the red-robed mages searched their minds for any image or sound that might lead to culpability. Random experiences from the last few months—no matter how mundane or trivial—were observed then immediately discarded as the Shadows continued their search. It was an experience every bit as unpleasant and painful as Lord Caverton had threatened... and then some.

When the process was over, the three were returned to their jail cell. Kaelyn rolled over on a stone bench and groaned, "My head feels like a farrrel drum."

William was bent over, leaning against a block wall. "The last time I felt this bad, at least I'd felt good the night before," he said wryly.

Aren sat on the other bench, holding his head in his hands and staring at the stone floor. "If that's what it's like to submit to a voluntary probe, I'm sure glad I didn't have anything to hide."

Kaelyn looked at their surroundings. It was definitely a jail cell, but more modern than Tigor's repurposed dungeon. "Well, at least this cell has more class. We must be moving up in the world," she said sarcastically.

Something about the betrothal ceremony continued to gnaw at William. He walked over to Aren's bench and took a seat next to him. "What I want to know is how the Wraith got into the Palace," he wondered aloud. "This place is filled with alarms, wards, and protective spells... an ethereal thing like that should have set off every warning."

"Don't look at me," Aren said, lifting his head and looking over at William. "I never saw anything weird about the Consort." After thinking for a moment, he continued. "Then again, I wasn't really looking. I'm learning as I go, remember?"

The loud metallic sound of their cell door opening caused them to look up. Two guardsmen entered, followed by the Captain of the Imperial Guard. "You will come with me," he ordered.

Leading them out of the cell, the two guardsmen fell in line behind William, Kaelyn, and Aren, while a third guard joined the Captain at the front. Up one set of stairs, down several hallways, and up several more sets of stairs—it was a wonder the Captain didn't lose his way navigating the Imperial Palace. As the trio followed, the palace decor kept changing,

becoming more and more refined; passing by large paintings, ancient tapestries, and delicate vases on pedestals, William also noted that people made certain to clear the path for them.

Still feeling the aftereffects of the Shadows' mind probe, Aren grew fatigued from walking. "Where are you taking us now?" he finally asked, uncertain if he wanted to know the answer. They appeared to in the Palace's living quarters, if any of the open doors were an indication.

"Quiet!" the Captain barked as they proceeded to the end of the hallway. Stopping outside of a set of bright red enamel doors decorated with gold filigree, he opened them and directed the three friends inside. "He will see you in there. Mind your tongues."

The three companions were startled to find themselves face-to-face with the Emperor himself. They quickly regained sufficient composure to drop to their knees in the prescribed manner.

Emperor rose from his chair in front of a roaring fire to face the new guests in his study. Three Shadows remained silently behind his chair. "As near as my advisors can determine, the Consort had some sort of reflecting shield inside him. It kept a bubble of mana around this... Wraith, sustaining and blocking detection. They've never seen anything like it before. At least we know why the Consort was abducted. Your claims of innocence in that matter ring true. I'm told that one of you, however, has seen these... things... before. Tell me."

Kaelyn recounted her experience in the woods with the Wraiths. The Emperor listened intently, questioning details and probing for more information.

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"The mindlessness is temporary, your majesty," Kaelyn explained. "Soon the Princess and the Consort, drawn to the souls around them, will lash out with unnatural strength and fury." She thought of those poor soulless villagers in the Ridgewood whom she and Raal had had to defend against.

"My... advisors have already put Aurora and the Consort in stasis, outside the normal flow of time," the Emperor said. "They hope this will forestall the transformation until we can find a way to reverse the process."

"Reverse it?" Kaelyn shook her head no. "Your majesty, my father is a mage. He said the only way to save a victim is to destroy the Wraith before it consumes the soul."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," the Emperor countered. "I've sent word to the Triune. The most learned of all three arms are on their way. My advisors will help them try to find a cure." However, the Shadows also reported that Kaelyn had successfully destroyed several Wraiths in the Ridgewood, so her father's assessment might just be the correct one. And the Emperor could not—nay, would not—risk Aurora's life without pursuing any and all possible

solutions. "But sometimes a physical assault succeeds where intellect fails. The... thing... that hurt my daughter is out there somewhere. You've faced these creatures before. I ask you to do it again. Will you help me?"

"We'll do everything we can, your majesty," **Kaelyn vowed, with William and Aren both nodding in agreement.**

William thought for a moment, then made a suggestion. "In that case, I think we should start in Nathby."

"Why there?" **the Emperor asked.**

"Though I didn't think of it at the time," **William said,** "reliving the attack during the mind scan made me realize something." **Images of the 'Fair Current' and the pirates and Gregor and the Griffin flashed through his mind with clarity, as if the incident just happened within last the few minutes and not some three months ago. Now knowing Gregor's part in this whole affair changed William's perspective.** "I had thought our ship attacked by pirates or Guild strong-arms. But now I'm certain that our attackers were after Gregor. He had forewarned that the Consort was going to be kidnapped, and was killed to silence his tongue. If we can find out who sent that ship and the griffin, we'll know who's behind this plot as well."

"And he may lead us to the Wraith," **Aren concluded.** **If someone could control a powerful creature of magic like a Griffin and open rifts into Etherea, it's certainly possible he could have found a way to control an Ethereal Wraith.**

"Good. My men will escort you to Januli." **The Emperor's voice turned hard.** "Find this thing. Destroy it." **Then his voice softened for his last order, almost to the point of pleading.** "Save my daughter."

When the Emperor said "Go," you went. They left within the hour, an armed escort clearing the way before them. They rode hard, stopping at posts along the way to trade their tired horses for fresh ones. Finally, after days of riding, they reached Januli.

The guards reclaimed the Emperor's horses, saying their orders were to return to the Palace immediately. William, Aren, and Kaelyn watched as the Imperial guards disappeared into the pass. Once again, they were on their own.

Having just traveled nearly the entire length of the Antaran Empire, William gathered his bearings, then led Kaelyn and Aren west toward the sleepy village of Breland. Mindful that time was running short, they sorely needed a moment to rest and plan their next course of action.

Topic: Vero's Baby Kidnapped #1

Before William could knock, the door was thrown open and a distraught young woman rushed out. "My baby!" she screamed, and ran down the path through the village.

Topic: Vero's Baby Kidnapped #2 – One Day Later

Passing by the house, the party saw the young woman through the open door. She sat in the middle of the floor, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Topic: Townsfolk – Baby Kidnapped

A group of men stood on the doorstep, their voices raised in anger. "I say let's shoot it and be done with it."

"But Call says he doesn't know where it is!"

"Well, we've got to find it before it does any more damage!"

William approached the angry knot of men. "What's the problem?"

One of the men spat. "Damn trerang's gone crazy. It stole Vero's baby and ran into the woods. Probably going to eat the kid."

Topic: Vandalized House #1

The door was open, half torn off its hinges. Looking inside the room, Kaelyn saw overturned furniture, closets emptied haphazardly of their contents, food splattered on the floor and walls. "This place has been trashed, but it doesn't look like the work of human vandals."

Topic: Call, the Trerang's Owner #1

A big man with a red, angry face opened the door. "Well, what do you want?" he snapped.

"We were just wondering what all the commotion was about."

"None of your business... And none of theirs, either!" the man yelled, and slammed the door in the trio's startled faces.

Topic: Call, the Trerang's Owner #2A

The florid man sat on his stoop, drinking whiskey straight from a jug. He glared up at William with reddened eyes. "You did it, didn't you? You killed him," he said, his voice halfway between a growl and a sob.

Kaelyn set her hand on his shoulder.

"I found him when he was a baby. He'd fallen from a tree. I took him home and made splints for his tiny broken legs. I named him Mouk."

Kaelyn said, "Call, we didn't kill the trerang. It ran into the woods. There's still a chance to save it, but you'll have to hurry. The men are trying to track it down."

Call looked up, tear marks streaking his face. "I'll go right away. If I find Mouk, we'll go deep into the mountains. If I don't find him, well, maybe I'll go anyhow. I can't live in this town anymore..."

Kaelyn wished him luck. Call thanked them briefly for sparing the trerang's life, then ducked into the house to gather supplies.

Topic: Townsfolk – Hunting the Trerang

"The men must be out in the woods, hunting that trerang down," said Aren. "In a way, I hope they don't find it."

Topic: Vero's Baby Kidnapped #3 – Trerang Killed – Baby Saved

The woman met them at the door, her baby clutched tightly in her arms. She could hardly speak through her tears of joy. "Thank you! Oh, thank you! You saved my sweet little Baboo. Kor bless you!"

"Our pleasure, ma'am," William replied gallantly.

The woman thrust a small velvet bag at William. "Here, please take this. It's a pearl. I want you to have it. Please."

The young mother broke down in tears again. The companions took the pearl and removed themselves from the scene of the emotional reunion.

Topic: Vandalized House #2 – Trerang Killed

Looking inside the wrecked room, Kaelyn saw the villagers already hard at work, cleaning up after the trerang's destruction.

Topic: Call, the Trerang's Owner #2B – Trerang Killed

The florid man sat on his stoop, drinking whiskey straight from a jug. He glared up at William with reddened eyes. "You did it, didn't you? You killed him," he said, his voice halfway between a growl and a sob.

"I found him when he was a baby. He'd fallen from a tree. I took him home and made splints for his tiny broken legs. I named him Mouk."

Kaelyn put her hand on Call's shoulder. "You should have returned him to the forest when he was healed."

Tears rolled down Call's face. He brushed them away angrily. "I couldn't. His own kind would have smelled human on him and torn him to pieces!"

Kaelyn pat him several times, then took her hand away. "You did what you thought was right, but a creature of the forest can't change its nature."

"I know. But why did I have to save his life just so he would be hunted and cut down like a... like a..." the man's voice broke.

"...like a wild animal," William concluded. The three friends turned away, no longer able to bear the sight of Call's grief.

45020.msg – *Chapter 8\Breland – Blind Fire Mage and Twink*

Topic: Blind Fire Mage and Twink

A withered old man opened the door. A silver film covered the pupils of his eyes. "Yes?" he quavered. "Who is it? What is all the commotion?"

Aren explained, "We are travelers. There's a lot of activity in town today, but you should be safe enough."

"Ah, that is good. Won't you come in for a minute," the man paused, then added, "all of you."

The threesome entered the cottage, following the old man. Aren noticed a small ball of intense light floating a few feet in front of the man's eyes. It drifted down to a chair, the man's eyes tracking it. He sat, and the ball of light zipped out from under him just in time to avoid being squashed.

"Is that some kind of lightning bug?" asked Aren, intrigued by the light's behavior.

The man laughed like dry leaves rustling. "No, this is my little seeing eye light. Twink, say hello to the gentlemen."

The little light pulsed. Aren asked, "Are you a mage?"

"Yes, that is, I was. Once I had the power of Fire. I could weave a curtain of energy until it was bright enough to blot out the sun. But power has its price, as you can see... and as I could not. I would not curb my gift for the sake of my eyes. Over the years, both my magic and my sight failed me until now all I can create is all I can see, and vice versa. After a life spent in brilliance, Twink is my one light in the darkness."

Kaelyn asked, "Are you in any pain?" to which the mage replied, "Not much, though my eyes do burn with dryness most days. Senwater helps, but it is costly..."

Topic: Give Senwater

The flask of Senwater slipped into the mage's hand. "Perhaps this will soothe your eyes."

The mage poured some Senwater into his hand. Tipping his head back, he trickled a few drops into each eye. "Ahhhh..." he sighed with relief."

"That was kind of our guests, wasn't it, Twink?" The light danced around the mage's head. "But what can I do for you?"

Aren chewed his lip. "Well..."

"Yes?"

William interjected. "Sir, my friend is a mage, a novice. I'm sure he's trying to think of a polite way to ask you if you'll teach him some of your magic."

The mage considered. "I don't know. The risks are high, as you can see... and as I could not."

Aren grew impatient. "Yes, I know. You already said that. But I'll be careful, really. And it's not like you have to teach me anything dangerous... Please?"

"Ah, youth. Always think they know what's best. All right, I'll show you the basics. Even a fool couldn't hurt himself with that much."

William couldn't resist. "Well then, Aren should be all right."

Aren ignored the remark, since the mage had already begun his instruction. The mage conveyed a surprising amount of information in an hour, after which the man grew too tired to continue and the companions bade him farewell. Twink followed them to the door, then returned to alight in the mage's upturned palm.

On the way down the path, William asked something that had long been puzzling him. "Aren, why is it that whenever a mage teaches you something, it always takes about an hour?"

Aren considered, then shrugged. "You know, William, I have no idea..."

45205.msg – *Chapter 8\Knightridge – The Sword And Crook Tavern – Griffin Painting*

Topic: Griffin Painting

As the party approached the bar, a painting on the wall drew Aren's attention. "William!" he called excitedly. "Take a look at this!"

William joined Aren to stare at the painting. "Well I'll be..." The beast on the canvas was a dead ringer for the one that killed Gregor.

The tavern keeper approached. Proudly he said, "So you've noticed my monster. Isn't it a fine piece of art? I think it gives the place a certain amount of class, don't you?"

William hastened to agree. "Sure. Cultural distinction. Who's the artist?"

"He's a local fellow, lives right in town. Kind of an odd duck, but talented. Name's Perdugo."

"Perdugo, eh?" William mused. "It might be worthwhile to pay our respects to the artist."

45210.msg – *Chapter 8\Knightridge – Perdugo the Artist*

Topic: Perdugo the Artist – Not Home

Kaelyn looked through the window. "I see easels and paints. Guess this must be an artist's home."

"Do you see him?"

"No. Perhaps we should come back when he's home."

Topic: Perdugo the Artist

The artist was at home, and more than happy to show the companions around his studio. Pointing to a canvas painted entirely blue, he said, "This was when Perdugo was in his blue mood. I mix blue after blue, but not quite what I looking for. Took seven weeks to find The Blue, and she is it."

Kaelyn moved to stand in front of a large canvas spattered with a myriad of colors. "And this was when you were in your rainbow phase?"

"No! That is a piece from Perdugo's early days, when I was still trying to find self. I call it 'Portrait of Young Man as an Artist.'"

William attempted to be diplomatic. "All these paintings seem to be quite, uh, different than the beast we saw in the Sword and Crook. You did that too, didn't you?"

Perdugo snorts. "Piffle. Pig snot. That Perdugo do on commission. Perdugo have to eat too, you know."

William protested. "But you portrayed it so accurately!"

The artist snorted again. "Thingness. Mere thingness. You take a thing, you put it on canvas. Except in this case, Perdugo just have a description to go on. No model. Makes more challenging."

Aren became interested. "You mean someone around here actually saw one of those creatures?"

"Yes. Farrel. It made mincemeat out of his arm. Oh yes, Farrel, he get a real close look at beast."

William led his friends toward the door. "It's been quite fascinating, Perdugo, but we should be going."

The artist shrugged and pointed to a canvas half-filled with black and purple streaks. "Perdugo need to get back to work anyhow."

Kaelyn studied the canvas. "What is it? A thunderstorm?"

"The wife of the mayor. He commission a portrait but then he doesn't pay. So this is how Perdugo sees the wife when his stomach growls with hunger."

45215.msg – *Chapter 8\Knightridge – Farrel, Attacked by a Griffin*

Topic: Farrel, Attacked by a Griffin

A one-armed man answered the door. "Yes?"

William said, "Are you Farrel? We'd like to ask you about the flying beast that attacked you."

"I'm Farrel. Why do you want to know?"

Aren improvised. "We were attacked by one of them too. We're wondering if it could have been the same one."

"At least you were lucky enough to still have all your limbs," the man said bitterly.

"But our companion lost his life," William added.

"Too bad. Guess I got lucky too. It was a couple of years ago. I was working my fields. The creature must have flown in from the Waste. I felt a shadow cross over me, too quick to be a cloud. I looked up to see the monster diving down right on top of me. It grabbed me in its talons and carried me clear across town."

"Why did it drop you?"

"Something hit it, a fireball I found out later. I fell into a haystack. The beast mauled my arm so bad that the healer had to take it off."

The man rubbed his stump. "Turns out Lord Sheffield's mage Bryce was in town that day. He saw the thing and nailed it with a spell. Funny thing was, he didn't kill the creature, just stunned it. Telling all the townsfolk to keep back, he went to the beast's side and did some magic stuff that seemed to calm it down. Then it flew away."

William thought out loud. "Interesting. The monster attacking us was out for blood. Aren here had to kill it."

Farrel looked at Aren with new respect. "That must have been some trick."

"Yeah," Aren smiled, casting a sidelong glance at William, "you're not the first to say that."

45200.msg – *Chapter 8\Knightridge – The Toymaker of Knightridge*

Topic: The Toymaker of Knightridge

"Yes, can I help you?" chimed a clear voice from within. The party entered through the open door, then they stopped and stared in astonishment. The room was filled with wondrous toys of every kind: carved wooden animals on wheels, spinning tops, masks and costumes, miniature swords and shields, even a joyman doll, his TrKaa-feathered hat perched at a rakish angle.

"This is amazing!" Kaelyn looked through the window of a tiny castle. "There's a tiny emperor inside! He's standing in front of a mirror, trying on an ermine robe. And there's a tailor too, taking his measurements. It's perfect down to the last detail."

"Thank you very much, my dear." Though the companions looked around, they still could not find the source of the voice.

Suddenly, from behind the counter, out walked a little man standing only about as high as Kaelyn's waist. He swaggered up to her with an odd rolling gait, then he made a full bow. "I am charmed," he said in polished tones.

Kaelyn was taken aback but she managed a graceful curtsy of her own. "Likewise, I'm sure."

"Are you the toymaker?" asked Aren, his eyes round with wonder.

The midget's blue eyes sparkled. "Yes, I am. Do you like my creations?"

"Oh, very much indeed. The children of Knightridge must adore you."

The toymaker clambered up on a tall stool so as to be eye-to-eye with his visitors. "I hope so. You see, that is why I became a toymaker in the first place... so the children would like me. I grew up in this town. All through my childhood those who were my own age or older picked on me, while the younger ones were afraid."

"You became a toymaker so they wouldn't be afraid..." Kaelyn began.

"...because I was different. Yes. I'll never forget the day I opened my shop. No one came in the whole morning and well into the afternoon. In a town this size, if a new shop opens and the townspeople don't flock to it immediately, that's a sure sign it will fail."

"You obviously didn't fail. What happened?" Aren inquired.

"A young woman, Sarah, brought her little sister in. The little girl was shy, hanging back until she spied a particular Empress doll. She started playing with it. Soon all the other children had their noses glued to the windows, watching her. One by one, they crept in and began to play with my toys."

"That's a happy ending," Kaelyn smiled.

"Oh, that wasn't the ending. That was just the beginning." The little man grinned, hopped from his stool, and went to a cradle hidden in the corner. He lifted out a newborn babe, her head covered with curls like spun gold.

"You see, Sarah and I got married. This is Sarlette, our third child."

Kaelyn felt her eyes moisten. "Now that is a happy ending. Best of luck to you, master toymaker. May your own children be your best customers of all."

800.msg – *Chapter 8\Entering Ghan Province*

Topic: Entering Ghan Province

Kaelyn: "I promised the Emperor I'd help save his daughter, and I intend to keep that promise. That means staying in Januli until we get some answers."

11560.msg – *Chapter 8\Nathby – City Overview*

Topic: Nathby – City Overview

The waterfront districts in many towns had unsavory reputations. Nathby was nothing BUT a waterfront district. The entire town could have used a coat of paint-- and a bath.

The Salty Dog: Set far back from the water, the wooden planks of the tavern still couldn't escape the ravages of the sea air.

Bric-a-Brac: The run-down shop, offering cast-offs and miscellaneous items of questionable value, was undoubtedly Nathby's finest boutique.

The Mermaid's Kiss: Many's the sailor who'd spent the night in the tiny rooms of this inn. Many more's the sailor who'd spent an hour.

Arnold's Salvage: Prowling the docks for lost weaponry, rusted shields and the odd item recovered from sunken ships, the proprietor eked out a living passing his finds on to others.

Shipyard: Thanks to recent pirate activity and the end of the shipping strike, the shipyard had become the most frenzied place in town.

The Lusty Maiden: Patrons came to this tavern for many reasons, none of which were its food or drink.

10852.msg – *Chapter 8\Nathby – Shipyard – Captain Tyee, Formerly of the 'Fair Current'*

Captain Tyee, Formerly of the 'Fair Current'

Topic: Greeting

William: "Captain Tyee! Do you remember me?"

Tyee: "Well, blowed if it ain't William of Pianda! How fare thee, lad?"

Topic: Wreck

William: "I'm well, Captain. But what of yourself? How did you escape the shipwreck?"

Tyee: "(TALE-TELLING VOICE) As you recall, we could have taken the pirates but when that beast attacked it was every man for himself. I clambered into a dinghy with a few of the crew, but I thought we was all done for. We put away from the sinking ship with the creature's horrible cries ringing in our ears. But then, just as I was expecting to feel its claws on the back o' my neck, I saw it veer off and away. A wave of relief washed o'er me, only to be dashed to the rocks by a rising tide of worry when I saw the creature make for the boat you shared with that minstrel. I can see you're right enough, m'lad, but tell me what of the joyman?"

William: "Gregor was killed, Captain, but after we landed, my friend Aren here made short work of the beast."

Tyee: "Aye, I can see that one'd be a match for any monster from the depths of the Waste, he would. Well, sorry I am to hear about Gregor. That makes three sent to their graves, as two of my men went to the bottom along with my darlin' Fair Current. Now that she's gone, I'm casting around for what to do next. Some of my men stay true in the cut of their gib, and wait for me to chart a course. (DISGUSTED) The others, well, there's those that hoist anchor at the first hint of a squall and make for any port that'll have 'em."

Topic: Ships

William: "You can't blame your men for taking work where they find it, can you?"

Tyee: "(DISGUSTED) 'Course not. What boils my bilge water is the manner o' crew my men signed up with. Their captain came to see me when he heard about the Fair Current. Tried to get me to join up as his first mate, he did! Well, there's one pirate with a new bend to his nose."

William: "How do you know they're pirates?"

Tyee: "(SNORTS) I've been around these parts long enough to know a rotten fish when I smell it. And those boys are the rottenest. They're holed up close by here too. Don't know exactly where, but I see them around."

Topic: Options

William: "What do you think you'll do?"

Tyee: "William, I don't know for sure. Right now I'm in the doldrums, waiting to see which way the wind picks up. The Fair Current was my father's ship before me. She's been my life since my mother hung my cradle up on the yardarm and let the waves rock me to sleep. I'm used to being my own master."

William: "Can't you build a new ship... The Fair Current II?"

Tyee: "Aye, I could, if I was willing to hire out to a merchant company or pay a hold-full of interest to a banker. T'other possibility is hiring onto another vessel for a year or two. There's a few captains I respect enough to work for. I've got some money put aside after all these years, but not enough to retire on. Besides, I'm not ready to be landlocked yet... I'd rather be at sea."

Topic: Gregor

- William: "Can you tell us anything more about Gregor? Did you know him well?"
- Tyee: "Gregor sailed with us one time before. His music sparked the lads' spirits and kept them hopping on the rigging like sand fleas. I carried him for free on our fateful trip, not just for the tunes but also seeing as how he saved my life."
- Aren: "(SURPRISED) He saved your life?"
- Tyee: "(EMBARRASSED) Aye. Dinner at the captain's table. I swallow down some jackfish the wrong way and catches a bone in my gullet. I'm gasping out my final breath on this earth when Gregor grabs a hold of me and hugs me so tight around the waterline that the fishbone shot clean out of my mouth. Nearly harpooned the second mate in the eye, it did."
- William: "I see why you felt he deserved free passage on the Fair Current."
- Tyee: "And glad he was to take me up on the offer. He came to me late one night, nervous he seemed and anxious. Said it was a life or death situation. Well, I'm not one to ask too many questions. I just reckoned he'd found himself in between the wrong set o' sheets when the master of the house came home, if you know what I mean.
(CHUCKLES) "

"He'd saved my salty hide and that was enough for me, so we put to sea against the Guild strike. No doubt you recall that, William."
- William: "Yes, I remember. Bit of a touch 'n go situation, wasn't it? Did you get a chance to talk to Gregor on the voyage out?"
- Tyee: "No, but the first mate, Poul, now he might know more. Of course you'll probably have to swab his decks with rum before he'll talk. He's most likely down at the Salty Dog or the Lusty Maiden this time o' day."

Topic: Goodbye

- William: "Thanks, Captain. It was good to see you again."
- Tyee: "May your skies be red in the evening, and the north star always on your bow. Yeoman's luck to you both, lads."

Poul, Former First Mate of the 'Fair Current'

Topic: Greeting

William: "Excuse me. Aren't you Poul, first mate of the Fair Current?"

Poul: "Why, if it isn't William Escobar! Sit down, my friend, sit down."

Topic: Plans

William: "I'm glad you weren't hurt when the Fair Current went down. What are your plans for the future?"

Poul: "I take it that by the future, you mean past closing time this evening, right? Well, seeing as Captain Tyee is the only seafaring man I know who's worthy of my company, I plan on going where he goes, whether he gets a new ship or crews with another."

Topic: Gregor

William: "Do you remember Gregor the minstrel?"

Poul: "Hmmm. (SINGS BADLY) Oh, Karen's kiss is sweeter than wine. Her arms around my neck entwine... (STOPS SINGING) My favorite song. Gregor sang it often, and well."

William: "I'm sorry to tell you he didn't survive the shipwreck."

Poul: "A pity, that. Here's to 'im."

Topic: Friends

William: "(LYING) Since I was with him when he died, I feel a duty to find his friends in case they haven't heard of his passing. Did he ever mention any names to you?"

Poul: "I never saw him on land, just at sea. I do recall him mentioning a girl in Beluckre, Misha was her name. He said she was the one that the rhyme was originally written about... "There once was a girl from Beluckre. If you had the price, you could..."

Aren: "(CLEARING HIS THROAT LOUDLY TO INTERRUPT) Ahem! I think we get the general idea. There is a lady present after all."

Poul: "She doesn't look like she offends all that easy to me."

William: "Trust me, nothing about Kaelyn is easy... Oooof!!! (AS KAELYN ELBOWS HIM IN THE GUT)"

Kaelyn: "(SWEETLY) You were saying..."

Poul: "(DRAWS "ANYHOW" OUT TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT) Anyhow, Gregor said Misha was a sweet girl trying to earn her loaf of bread in a hard world. You might want to look her up."

Topic: Goodbye

William: "Thanks for the information, Poul."

800.msg – *Chapter 8\Beluckre – Brothel*

Topic: *Entering the Brothel*

Aren: "Do we have to come in here?"

William: "We won't stay long. We're just here on business."

Aren: "Yes, I know, but what kind of business did you have in mind?"

William: "Don't even kid about that, Aren. The day I have to pay for... (SNORTS)"

Kaelyn: "Aren't these girls good enough for you, William? What makes them so different from all the dairy maids and serving wenches you've no doubt bedded on so many occasions?"

William: "(KIDDING) Jealous? (SERIOUS) Actually, not so very many occasions as you'd imagine."

Kaelyn: "But you still didn't answer my question. What makes an easy-girl any different from a scullery maid? They both take things in exchange for their favors. It's just that an easy-girl collects in burlas while a scullery maid makes do with cast-off petticoats and glass jewelry. Between the two, who do you think places more value on her... assets?"

William: "(IRKED AND CONFUSED) But what about love? What about romance? Ladies go with me because they want to, not because I rented their services by the hour."

Kaelyn: "(SYMPATHETIC) If that's what you want to believe, go ahead. In my experience, people will do whatever they have to to get by in this world. It's just more pleasurable to earn a trinket on one's back with the handsome son of a nobleman than by mucking out stable stalls. (PAUSE) Or at least that's what I assume."

William: "(ARCHLY) So, you think I'm handsome..."

Aren: "Um, can we just do what we came to do, and then get out of here? Please?"

10838.msg – *Chapter 8\Beluckre – Brothel – Misha the Prostitute*

Misha the Prostitute, Gregor's Favorite

Topic: Greeting #1

William: "Hello, pretty. What's your name?"

Misha: "(COY) My name is Misha, but a man as handsome as you might call me anything he likes. Do you and your friends want a party?"

Topic: Gregor #1

William: "We're here on behalf of a friend of yours... Gregor."

Misha: "(SAD) Is it true what I heard? Is he dead?"

William: "Yes, I'm sorry but it's true. I was with him when he died. There was an enormous flying beast. He fought it bravely but it was too much for him, and would have been too much for me as well if Aren here hadn't come along."

Misha: "(LITTLE WHIMPER) Oh. I'll miss Gregor. He was the only man who ever called me by name, the right name that is, when he... well, you know."

Topic: Information

- William: "I don't think Gregor's death was an accident. He may have made some powerful enemies in high places, people who could pay a mage to send that monster. If you tell us what you know, we might be able to learn who was responsible and bring them to justice."
- Misha: "All right, but I don't think... (PAUSE) (SUSPICIOUS) Why should I tell you anything? Even if you catch who killed Gregor, it won't bring him back, so what's in it for me?"
- William: "This is important, Misha. There's more at stake than I can tell you, but I know Gregor would want you to help us. Please."
- Misha: "All right, you sweet-talkin' thing, I'll tell you. But I only give out tit for tat, if you know what I mean. I can see you got money, but things has been good and I need a favor more than the coin just now. So find me some sencream and then I'll talk. The local shop is out and it's the only thing that helps with the chafing."

Topic: Sencream

- William: "Listen, Misha, we really need to know where Gregor lived."
- Misha: "So? I really need that sencream."

Topic: Goodbye

- Misha: "Come back anytime. The door is always open to fine folk like yourselves."
- Kaelyn: "(CONCERNED) Take care of yourself, Misha. In your line of work, no one else will."

Marlon, Proprietor of Marlon's Mercantile

Topic: Greeting

Marlon: "(BREATHLESS) Good day, good day! Welcome to Marlon's Mercantile. How may I be of service?"

Topic: Sencream

Kaelyn: "I'm looking for a jar of sencream. Do you carry it?"

Marlon: "Oh, my dear, of course I do. It's one of my best sellers. Quite the thing among the ladies. I don't like to boast, but they tell me that my sencream is the finest they've ever tried. Unfortunately, because it's so popular, I can't seem to keep it on the shelves."

Kaelyn: "(SLOWLY AND PATIENTLY) Well, when do you think you might mix up another batch?"

Marlon: "I would do it in a jiffy for you, my dear, only I seem to be missing some of the ingredients. Sadly, I do not know when they'll come in."

Topic: Ingredients #1

Kaelyn: "What ingredients are you missing?"

Marlon: "Let me think a moment... I have the aloecohol and the glycereum. All I need is Senwater, animal fat, and fidali leaves."

Kaelyn: "(GROSSED OUT) Animal fat?"

Marlon: "For supple skin and glowing vitality. Restores youthful vigor to the most wrinkled, leathery, and ancient of hides. My clientele just can't seem to get enough of it. Of course, you don't have to worry about such things as wrinkles and worry lines, my dear, not with your young, soft, resilient skin. (MUSING) If only there was some way to bottle that..."

Topic: Goodbye

Marlon: "If you happen to come across the rest of the Sencream ingredients, I'll be more than happy to mix you up a batch."

Topic: Ingredients *#2 – First Item Given*

Marlon: "Thanks for the fidali leaves. Now if only I had animal fat and Senwater, I could make the Sencream."

—or—

Marlon: "That will do nicely for the animal fat. Now all I need is fidali leaves and Senwater."

—or—

Marlon: "That takes care of the Senwater, but I still need animal fat and fidali leaves."

Topic: Ingredients *#3 – Second Item Given*

Marlon: "Thanks. Now all I need is the Senwater."

—or—

Marlon: "Good, now all I need is the animal fat."

—or—

Marlon: "Now if I get some fidali leaves, I'll be able to make the Sencream."

Topic: *Sencream in Stock – All Three Items Given*

Marlon: "Here is a fresh jar of Sencream."

Kaelyn: "How much do we owe you?"

Marlon: "Oh no, I wouldn't dream of charging you. You provided most of the ingredients and I have plenty of Sencream left to sell at the most exorbitant prices imaginable! (TITTERS)"

Topic: Goodbye #2 – *Sencream in Stock*

Kaelyn: "Thank you for the Sencream, Marlon."

Marlon: "Oh no, my dear, thank you!"

10838.msg – *Chapter 8\Beluckre – Brothel – Misha the Prostitute*

Misha the Prostitute, Gregor's Favorite

Topic: *Greeting #2*

William: "Hello, Misha. How's business?"

Misha: "It comes and it goes."

Topic: *Gregor #2 – Give Sencream*

Kaelyn: "We brought you the sencream, Misha. Now will you tell us where Gregor lived?"

Misha: "Thanks. Much appreciated, to be sure. Now that you've lived up to your end of the agreement, I'll live up to mine. Gregor kept a room in Havesly for when he'd give performances for Lord Sheffield. My guess is if he had any enemies, you'd find 'em there. Oh, and you may need this key, though it grieves me sore to part with it, seeing as it's all I have of Gregor's to remind me of him... Well, besides for a pair of long underwear he kept here for the chillier nights. A courier brung it, the key I mean, with a note that I got a fella to read for me. It said, (MEMORIZED) 'My Misha, now you hold the key to my heart. Wear it close to yours.' He had a way with words, he did, but I suspect it opens more than he said."

William: "Thank you, Misha. We'll bring the key back if we can. If not, then know that we'll do our best to avenge Gregor's death."

Topic: The Old Jaeger

The old man sat in a chair on the front porch, soaking up rays from the sun. A man servant stood by his side, occasionally reaching over to adjust the lap robe. The party approached. "M'lord, some visitors to see you," the servant shouted, cupping his hand to the gentleman's good ear.

The old man turned bleary eyes in William's direction. "Petitioners, no doubt," he quavered. "Christopher, I'm afraid you'll have to tell them I can't help them. Nor will talking to my son do them a lick of good... The damn fool wastes his education and his opportunities, preferring to spend his days in the company of whores and gamblers."

William spoke loudly. "Are you a Jaeger, m'lord?"

The man looked puzzled until the servant shouted the question several times. "Yes, I'm a Jaeger. Our line goes back to long before the Empire. My ancestors marched with the first Emperor Valorian when he took the Piandan peninsula. They fought side by side in Ambra and Quavain..."

The old man broke off, coughing. The servant rushed to help him swallow a spoonful of viscous liquid poured from a large bottle. "Where was I?" the Jaeger continued querulously. "Oh yes. Nothing is the way it used to be. Corruption, greed, scandals. The Shira is the worst of course, but even the Jaegers... We should be above such things!"

The Jaeger started to get worked up again. The servant waved the party off with his hand, then whispered to calm the old man. Nodding off into a light doze, the Jaeger murmured, "Mehrats invading, pirates, strikes... and a worthless son to boot. At least I won't be around long enough to see much more of this, thank Kor."

Topic: Drunken Nobleman Gambling

A young man gambled with several Montari. The companions watched long enough to determine that the human was losing badly. The Montari cleaned him out, but he tried to prolong the play with vouchers. "Don't you know who I am? My word is worth thousands," he cried in a drunken rage.

The Gold Montari stood, followed by the two Greys. "We don't play for paper," he said.

"You'll play for paper with me!" The young man lunged forward. The Montari leader sidestepped neatly as the man fell on his face.

The Montari sniffed derisively, brushing past the companions on their way out the door. Aren bent to help the man up, but a string of drunken curses and a stiff arm in the ribs convinced him to leave the man be.

45410.msg – *Chapter 8\Beluckre – Jax the Magic-using Card Cheat*

Topic: Jax the Magic-using Card Cheat

The party looked in through the open door. A group of men sat at the table, involved in a game of cards. A man at the far end looked up and invited them in. A fat man laughed. "More fish for you to scale, Jax?"

"I think we'll just watch for a bit first," William answered jovially. "After all, we need a chance to find your tells." The men laughed at that and resumed their play.

The tide of the game was quickly apparent, as much of the money was pulled towards the enigmatic gentleman at the end of the table. When the players finally called a break, Aren pulled the winner aside. "You're cheating," he said flatly. "I can sense the magic. You're making your hands move faster than the others can see-- probably pulling cards from hidden places."

The enigmatic man was nonplussed. "So? What are you going to do about it?"

Aren waved his hands dismissively. "Nothing... as long as you teach me how to do it."

The man laughed. "Tell you what-- you beat me at cards, I'll give you a lesson." He smiled, pointing to the pile of coins at his seat. "The stake will be 300 burlas a hand. If you can clean me out, you'll have more than earned it. And yes, I'll play fair."

"So-- shall we play?"

Choice: Yes

Topic: Aren Wins

Aren looked over his hand. The men cycled through a few cards until Aren, satisfied, knocked and revealed his cards. Jax winced and slid his stake across the table. "I won!" Aren crowed.

The dealer glared at him. "Nobody likes a winner, kid." He reached into his pouch for more coins.

Topic: Aren Loses

Aren looked over his hand. The men cycled through a few cards until Aren, satisfied, knocked and revealed his cards.

Jax flashed his pointed teeth. "Not good enough," he said, showing his cards. Aren watched, crestfallen, as the man collected his winnings. "Care to try again? Same stakes."

Topic: Jax Cleaned-Out

The dealer turned his empty pouch inside-out, staring at it accusingly. He pulled Aren into a private corner of the room. "This is for your eyes only, understand? Not a word to the others."

Aren nodded. The enigmatic mage showed him how to use magic to enhance his movements. Soon Aren could move his hands faster than the eye could follow. Aren thanked the man, saying, "I bet this skill will come in handy for a lot more than just cards."

Topic: Not Enough Money

The party's purse was not up to the task. "Sorry," Jax said, "but there's no credit at this table. Come on back when you've got the coins. I'll be here."

Choice: No

"I'm not feeling very lucky just now," Aren demurred. "Some other time."

Jax shrugged and turned back to the larger game. "Suit yourself."

45405.msg – ***Chapter 8\Beluckre – Tibor and Cecilia***

Topic: Tibor and Cecilia

The party saw a man and a woman sitting under a tree holding hands. "Greetings," William called out, and the couple stood to meet them.

"Ho, travelers. Welcome to Beluckre."

Kaelyn brushed the dust off her shirt. "It's not difficult to tell we've been on the road, is it? We were wondering if you had any food or goods to sell."

The man glanced at his wife, then replied, "Well, yes. I have a service I provide..."

"No, Tibor, don't. It always takes so much out of you." The woman laid her hand on his arm. Tibor gently removed it.

"Cecilia, I have to ply my trade if I'm to earn enough to keep you out of the brothel. Don't worry, I'll be all right."

William was intrigued. "What is it that you do?"

"Though I'm not a mage, I can channel magic. If you have a magical staff, I can recharge it for 500 burlas."

"Does this harm you?"

Tibor put his arm around Cecilia's shoulder. "No, but it is very tiring. Just recharging one item alone will necessitate many days of rest. But that is my gift, so that is what I do."

"I think if I were you, I'd look for another line of work," Kaelyn said.

Topic: Recharge Staff – ***Pay Fee***

The companions handed Tibor's fee over along with the staff. Aren watched carefully, but he couldn't quite grasp what Tibor did. It didn't look like he did much of anything-- he just stood with the staff in his hand and an intense look of concentration on his face.

After several minutes, Tibor sagged into his wife's arms. Aren took the staff. "It feels fully recharged to me," he says. "How are you?"

Tibor smiled weakly. With a trace of anger, Cecilia said, "I will take him inside and care for him. You have your staff. Goodbye."

Topic: Recharge Staff – ***Not Enough Money***

Aren took back the staff when he realized he couldn't afford Tibor's fee. "Perhaps if our fortunes improve..." he began.

Tibor smiled with understanding. "You know where to find me."

Topic: Greeting #2 – Tibor Exhausted

Cecilia answered the door. "I'm sorry, but Tibor's still too exhausted to recharge anything right now. It takes him a few days to build up his strength again."

Topic: Greeting #3 – Tibor Rested

Tibor smiled at them. "Found something for me to recharge?"

45610.msg – ***Chapter 8\ Dumali – Trio of TrKaa Messengers***

Topic: Trio of TrKaa Messengers

Three TrKaa messengers stood at a bar sipping fermented nectar from long, thin glasses. Aren walked up to them and greeted them courteously. Always eager to chat, the TrKaa invited him and his friends to join them. "What say we exchange stories?" suggested one TrKaa with bright blue and yellow feathers.

Choice: Swap Stories

"You go first," said a slender TrKaa with green feathers. Aren drew a deep breath and began. "Now I'm sure you've heard about the tragedy at the Imperial Palace not too long ago. A terrible fiend was trapped inside the Consort's body in an attempt to assassinate the Emperor himself. Well, we three were actually there when the wraith came out of the Consort!"

The TrKaa clicked and chirped excitedly. Aren waved for silence. "I was one of the closest to him. I saw the creature rise up out of the Consort's mouth. Using my magic powers, I wrestled with the wraith, trying to subdue it before it could do any more damage..."

Kaelyn commented to William, "Is this the same innocent, truthful boy I left in your care not so very long ago? What have you done to him?"

William shrugged. Aren continued, "Alas, my powers were not yet strong enough. The wraith knocked me to the ground and went straight for the Emperor. Sadly, the princess Aurora was in the way. She was stricken, her body falling beside that of the Consort."

The TrKaa rattled their beaks, all talking at once. "Too sad, too terrible." "How awful for you, for the Princess, for the Consort!"

Finally, they quieted down and the green-plumaged TrKaa offered her tale. "I saw something just last week, near the river southeast of Breland. A human struck another, struck him dead. Then

he took something big and shiny from the body. He loaded it onto a rowboat, then he went back to see if there was anything left to plunder. Suddenly..." The TrKaa paused for dramatic effect.

"...there was a rumble in the distance. The rumble got louder and the ground started to shake. The man realized what was happening and he ran toward the boat for safety. But too late, too late. The herd of stampeding karn caught him up and trampled him. I was curious about what he had taken off the corpse, but by the time I finished my delivery and came back, the rowboat was gone. I think maybe it sank. What do you make of that?"

Aren puzzled over the TrKaa's story. "Can't really say I know what to make of it other than the murderer got what he deserved and then some. William?"

"I wonder what the big, shiny thing was. It's always interesting to find out what's worth a man's life."

Choice: Leave

Kaelyn complained, "If we start swapping tales with these TrKaa, we'll be here all day and then some. Let's go."

William and Aren decided to give in to Kaelyn's wishes.

45615.msg – **Chapter 8** | *Dumali – Salt Mine Guildmaster*

Topic: *Salt Mine Guildmaster*

As the party approached the open door, two burly men came out, carrying a wrought iron bedstead. A plump woman followed, scolding them. "Now you take care of that bed, do you hear? It's been in the family for years!"

The movers grunted, and took special pains to walk across the flower beds.

"Looks like you're moving," William said politely.

"Yes, and if you've words with my husband, make 'em quick because he has far too many important things to do to waste the day on business."

The companions entered the house. In and amongst the boxes and packing crates, they come across a man wrapping candlesticks in an old tablecloth.

"Leaving Dumali?" William asked.

"Yup. Moving closer to Ticoro. I'm guild master of the salt miners."

"But I thought a lot of salt went through this area, Havesly in particular."

"Not so much anymore. Caverton's contracts pay the miners more than Sheffield's do. Sheffield's been able to hold onto fewer and fewer men. With business slacking off here and picking up in Tigor, I've got to be where the miners need me the most. And since Lord Caverton is providing the wagons for my move, well... you see how it is."

William's voice was harsh. "Yes, I see exactly how it is."

45605.msg – *Chapter 8\ Dumali – Salt Miner and Petrush*

Topic: Salt Miner and Petrush

The door was answered by a brown-skinned, desiccated man. William began to introduce himself but stopped short, surprised to see a grey burro standing on the hearth as if warming his old bones by the fire. "Oh, don't mind Petrush," the man said.

"I don't mind him. I was just wondering what a burro is doing inside your house."

"Just about anything he wants to. Petrush and I worked side by side in the salt mines for twenty years and more. They pensioned me, but they were going to turn Petrush into cat food. I bought him and brought him home."

"We haven't been as far north as the salt mines. What's it like up there?"

"Let me start from the beginning. A long time ago, something dried up an inland sea... must have dried it up real quick 'cuz the salt deposits aren't muddled with sediments. After a while, things got back to normal and this layer of salt was covered with layers of rock. Then someone found the salt and decided to dig it out."

The burro turned his long ears toward the miner, looking as if he understood every word. "Salt mining is a lot easier than gold mining, that much I'll tell you right off. And the caves are beautiful. The way the light filters through the crystals makes you feel like you're standing inside a white and blue glacier."

45620.msg – *Chapter 8\ West of Havesly – Temple of Kor – Brother Kenneth of Januli*

Topic: Brother Kenneth of Januli

A Brother of Kor welcomed the party. "I am Brother Kenneth. How may I be of service?"

Aren looked around the monastery. "This place looks old. What is its history?"

"See how thick the walls are? These buildings were the original Shepherd stronghold."

Aren was puzzled. "I thought the Shepherds were a recent development."

Brother Kenneth frowned. "Unfortunately, that cult's leaders decided to borrow from a noble source when they chose their name."

The Brother tucked his hands inside his long sleeves. "When the Grrrlf War ended, a garrison was established here to watch the mountains and make certain the Grrrlf kept the treaty. Those soldiers were known as Shepherds since they guarded Antara from the Grrrlf. As the years passed in peace, the men turned from warcraft to more intellectual pursuits. It was to these noble, isolated people that the Triune first spoke, and the garrison became the first home of the Brothers of Kor."

10849.msg – *Chapter 8\Havesly – Castle Sheffield – Lord Cameron Sheffield*

*Lord Cameron Sheffield, Governor of Januli Province and
William's Future Father-In-Law*

Topic: Greeting #2

Sheffield: "William, my boy. What tidings?"

Topic: Aurora & Consort

William: "Have you heard about the attack on Aurora and the Imperial Consort?"

Sheffield: "Yes, just. It's shocking. I'm absolutely stunned. Why would anyone want to hurt her?"

Aren: "The Wraith's attack was intended for the Emperor, but Aurora got in the way."

Sheffield: "(SHOCKED) Oh my Gods. Is the Emperor all right?"

William: "As all right as he can be, given the grievous circumstances."

Sheffield: "That's a relief. At a time like this, losing the Emperor would throw everything into turmoil and chaos."

Topic: Gregor

William: "In truth, sir, we came to see you on a particular matter. Do you recall Gregor the joyman?"

Sheffield: "Certainly. But what interest could a wayward minstrel hold for you?"

William: "Gregor's talents reached beyond singing and storytelling, m'lord. He was Caverton's man, an undercover agent of sorts."

Sheffield: "(SNORTS) Nonsense! Gregor a spy? The idea's preposterous!"

William: "But what better cover for a spy than as a traveling joyman, welcome into all homes and privy to all secrets? We believe that Gregor discovered the plot to kidnap the Consort and got killed for it. The question is, who's behind the scheme and what are their motives?"

Sheffield: "It all sounds quite far-fetched to me. However, you seem convinced. Even though I won't be at all surprised if you're wasting your time, I'm willing to lend a hand. What can I do to help?"

Topic: Pirates

William: "I was on board a ship with Gregor. We were set upon by pirates. Though they've been plaguing the coast of late, I don't think this attack was mere coincidence."

Sheffield: "Pirates, you say? I don't know anything about pirates. None of my ships have sailed since that blasted strike began. Come to think of it, perhaps that strike's a blessing in disguise. I might have lost a lot of valuable cargo otherwise."

Topic: Beasts

William: "A great flying beast attacked the ship. Gregor and I abandoned the ship and took to a boat. The beast seemed to take a personal interest in Gregor, for it veered off and followed us to shore."

Sheffield: "With that range and intelligence, my guess is that you were dealing with a magical hybrid. As I've heard tell, magic creatures like that Wraith you described can't survive in Ramar. Occasionally they live long enough to mate with a natural animal. The magical offspring are quite at home in our world. Since they tend to be unusually intelligent as well, they can pose a real problem at times."

Topic: Inn

William: "Where did Gregor stay when he was in town?"

Sheffield: "He had a room at the Sentinel. Having not seen him for a while, the innkeeper came inquiring. He mentioned that Gregor was paid up through the end of this month."

Topic: Goodbye #2

Sheffield: "Don't know what help I was, but best of luck to you."

William: "Thank you, sir. We'll let you know what we find out."

45520.msg – ***Chapter 8\Havesly – The Mantigua Holding Company – Bank Manager***

Topic: Bank Manager

The bank manager kept the party waiting for quite a few minutes. Finally, they were ushered into his office. William decided to take the upper hand right away. Grasping the manager's fish-like hand, he identified himself as Lord Escobar's son. The title got the man's attention. He fawned, "And what can I do for you, Master Escobar?"

"As one of the foremost citizens of Havesly, you are no doubt aware of the upcoming marriage between myself and Selana Sheffield?"

The manager preened under the flattery and tried to look like the news was indeed already known to him. "Yes, most certainly. Of course. My sincerest congratulations."

William strived to look as official as possible. "Thank you. Now if you'll permit me, I have business with you. I am interested... rather, my father is interested in knowing the current financial state of his future in-laws. As you must realize, my father is quite a wealthy, powerful man. He does not want to conjoin the two families unless the match will prove beneficial to both sides. I hasten to assure you my father's bank is providing the same courtesy to Lord Sheffield."

The bank manager simpered. "I understand completely. Lord Sheffield has two accounts with us. Here are the records for each."

The manager opened a heavy ledger, indicating several pages of tabulated figures.

"Lord Sheffield handles this account personally, has done so for years. This second, more recent account is handled strictly by courier. Come to think of it, I don't believe the lord has ever

mentioned this account at all. Perhaps I should say something the next time... No, perhaps not. I'm sure Lord Sheffield has his reasons."

William perused the numbers for both accounts, then he closed the ledger. "I've seen enough. I'll be sure to tell my father you've been most attentive."

The banker dry-washed his hands. "Oh thank you, m'lord. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

45510.msg – *Chapter 8\Havesly – Havesly Tailor*

Topic: Havesly Tailor

The tailor appeared from the back of his shop. Seeing three travel-stained strangers, he began to say, "I'm sorry, the shop is closed," but then he narrowed his eyes and came closer. Fingering William's collar and eyeing his boots, he murmured, "Panizo broadcloth, finest weave. Imported leather boots from Chail. Hmmm..."

William disentangled himself. "We're, er, not from around here. I am..."

The tailor interrupted. "...a noble. Yes, that is plain to see. Though why you should appear in such a condition is beyond me. But I will take care of that, m'lord. Just put yourself in my hands. It will be such a pleasure to serve you, as opposed to my last client."

Kaelyn teased, "Don't tell me his clothes were even more ragged than William's?"

"No, frankly they weren't. But his manner! Oh, so demanding, so uncouth! His clothes reeked of the sea, but he certainly wasn't with the military."

Kaelyn was interested. "A trader?"

The tailor snorted. "With the strike, there's little chance of that... at least not the legitimate sort, if you catch my meaning. Still, he had a letter of credit signed by Lord Sheffield himself. Who am I to turn my back on that?"

The tailor started to remove William's garments. William hurriedly gathered his ragged clothes around him, saying, "I'm sorry, but we're in a bit of a rush. Perhaps some other time..."

The tailor shrugged as if to say, "Can I help it if you go out in public looking like that?"

Topic: Chailan Refugee

A middle-aged woman in plain clothes came to the door. "Yes? What is it? Can I assist you?"

William detected a slight accent. "You're Chailan, aren't you?"

The woman lowered her gaze. "Yes, I am from Chail," she admitted softly.

"Have you lived in Havesly for a long time?"

"Yes, for many years. Now if there's nothing else..." She turned as if to close the door.

William tried to prolong the conversation. "It's, uh, very beautiful in Chail."

The woman smiled sadly. "Yes, it is lovely. This is the time of year when the calliewood is in bloom. Its blossoms glow like candle flames in the evening."

"I would like to see them someday. Why did you come to Havesly?"

The woman sighed but did not answer. "William," Kaelyn put in tartly, "did you ever consider that perhaps people don't appreciate a total stranger prying into their personal lives?"

The woman looked up, surprised. "Oh, your name is William? That was... is... the name of my son. He must be around your age now too."

Gently, Kaelyn asked, "Your son doesn't live with you?"

"No, he is with his father who can better afford to support and educate him. I hope..." Her words trailed off into another sigh.

William turned away. "I'm sorry if we've bothered you." To his companions, he added, "We should start thinking about paying a visit to my future father-in-law, Lord Sheffield..."

The Chailan woman set her hand on William's sleeve. "You are to be Lord Sheffield's son-in-law? Oh, he is a good man, a man of honor."

Turning back, William asked, "Do you know him?"

"Yes, I owe him my life." Then woman told them her story in a quiet, hesitating voice. "My husband is from a wealthy, influential family in Chail. I was young when I married him, overwhelmed that such a man loved a simple country girl like me."

Tears formed in the woman's eyes. "I soon found out that beneath the refined exterior, he was a cruel, violent husband, though a kind and benevolent father. Soon after our son was born I began to fear for my life. One night I ran away, though it broke my heart to leave my son. I crossed the

border and made my way to Havesly. My husband followed. I pleaded with Lord Sheffield for asylum and he hid me until my husband returned to Chail."

"Is that why you live here in the village?" Kaelyn asked.

"Yes, not only is it safer to stay out of notice, but the simple, gentle life appeals to me after the harsh, superficial ways of the Chailan court."

"And your husband doesn't know where you are?"

"No, though he found out Lord Sheffield was instrumental in my escape. I fear the lord has suffered for his charity... My husband is sure to have used his connections to sever Sheffield's supply lines and contracts."

Kaelyn took the woman's hand. "Have no fear on our account, ma'am. We will keep your secret."

"You are friends of Lord Sheffield," the woman replied. "You have my trust."

45505.msg – *Chapter 8\Havesly – Lighthouse – Grandson of Lighthouse Keeper Bock*

Topic: Grandson of Lighthouse Keeper Bock

A sign on door read, "Bock, Lighthouse Keeper"

The door opened a crack. An eye peered out, looking them up and down suspiciously. William quickly blurted, "How's the lighthouse?"

The door opened a little wider, revealing a scrawny man with a hangdog expression.

"My grandfather used to be the lighthouse keeper. What's it to you?"

William asked, "Why isn't the lighthouse in use anymore?"

"Hasn't been operational for years," the man said bitterly. "Tides changed. Shipping lanes too."

"Do you ever go out there?"

The man rubbed his nose. "To the lighthouse? Nah. Too many memories. I spent a lot of time there when I was a boy, listening to my grandpa's stories of the good old days..."

"It must have been a great place to play," Aren said, sensing the man's nostalgia for a happier time.

"Aye, it was. I used to pretend I was a pirate.. afore we were plagued by the real thing, that is. I'd sneak up the beach and come in by way of a secret entrance near the stairs. Hidden behind some boulders it was, so no one would see it if they didn't know it was there."

"Well, maybe someday the tides will turn and the lighthouse will be needed again," Aren offered hopefully.

"Sure I'll go to my grave afore that happens." Sadly, the man closed the door.

9480.msg – *Chapter 8\Letter – 'Sheffield' to Pirates #1*

Topic: Letter – 'Sheffield' to Pirates #1

The Fair Current left Nathby for Pianda today with a joyman on board. That joyman must not survive the trip. Salvage rights to any other cargo are yours.

Sheffield

9460.msg – *Chapter 8\Letter – 'Sheffield' to Pirates #2*

Topic: Letter – 'Sheffield' to Pirates #2

This letter is to inform you of the termination of our arrangement. Henceforth your vessels will no longer be welcome in my coves, and there will be no further contact between us. You may keep any percentage I am owed and depart.

Sheffield

Topic: Innkeeper of The Sentinel Inn

The innkeeper inquired if the party wanted a room.

"We're not sure yet," replied William. "We may just have a few questions."

Topic: Give Gregor's Key to Innkeeper

The innkeeper studied the key. "Yes sir, it's one of mine, all right. Room 4. Been paid up through the end of the month. I haven't seen the joyman in weeks, though."

William said, "There's good reason for that. Gregor is dead. We're... friends of his."

The innkeeper shook his head. "Now isn't that a pity. He was quite a likable fellow, for a joyman."

William asked, "We were wondering if we could see his room."

"Certainly, sir. Right this way."

Topic: Gregor's Journal

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 3

One of Sheffield's trappers returned this evening. The man was terrified. He claimed to have seen a specter in the Ridgewood. Sheffield calmed him and sent him on his way. The cook was furious to have no fowl for tomorrow's supper, but my tale that evening was inspired...

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 6

Sheffield's meeting with the merchants went every bit as poorly as expected. Their anger with him is growing rapidly, though they still feel that he might be of use to them. If the shipping strike continues much longer, they may begin to worry him greatly.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 7

Another ghost, it seems! This time our gates were assaulted at an unholy hour by a family of peddlers seeking protection from a horrible apparition. They insisted such a thing had pursued them from the woods, but a search found no specter in evidence. Sheffield's pet mage Bryce tried to reassure them, but they seem to believe the Ridgewood is haunted.

This presents some interesting possibilities. I may try to encourage that notion, stirring up the locals and giving Sheffield yet another problem with which to distract him.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 12

There is much unrest in the servants' quarters. They know that Sheffield cannot possibly keep his coffers full with the shipping lanes closed, and I've made sure they know that my lord is selling the product of his own salt mine overland at a discounted rate. They fear for their positions, but are hopeful that the shipping strike will resolve itself before the Sheffield family falls into financial ruin. I have not heard anyone so much as speculate upon my lord's role in engineering the strike.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 18

I was greatly interested to learn that Sheffield has started to make arrangements for Havesly's annual festival. By now, with his exports cut off by the strike and my lord driving down the price of salt, he should be strapped for cash. Either he's secretly found a new source of revenue, or he's stretching himself even thinner in order to keep up appearances. I must look into the former possibility.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 21

Of late we have been suffering a very plague of the dearly departed. None of Sheffield's trappers will return to the Ridgewood, and new reports of hauntings arrive almost daily. It seems I needn't have concerned myself with stirring up the locals, as they've done a marvelous job by themselves.

Unfortunately, Sheffield's growing concern was allayed by Bryce, who convinced him that ghosts were merely a joyman's tale and had no physical basis. When next I see Sheffield, I will be sure to relate my own harrowing experience with a dangerous specter-- as soon as I think one up. Perhaps I can undo Bryce's damage. The superstitious townsfolk, meanwhile, believe the tales of frightened travelers over the rationalism of Sheffield's mage.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 24

The merchants came to Sheffield today. I was not privy to their council, but by the dark looks on all faces as they left the hall, I would say that tempers are fraying rapidly. My lord will be pleased to know that his efforts have proved so successful.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 29

My lord's suspicions were correct! This evening, as I passed Sheffield's daughter in the hallway, I could see under the line of her cloak an embossed pendant. I caught only a fleeting glimpse, but the more I think upon it the more convinced I become that it was a Shepherd medallion!

If this is so, then perhaps it is they who are the source of Sheffield's inexplicable resources. I cannot help but wonder if Sheffield has known of my lord's machinations from the very start, and has enlisted the aid of the Shepherds in some retaliatory scheme. This seems unlikely, given Sheffield's strong sense of honor-- he is a man more prone to a frontal assault than a flanking maneuver. And yet...

I shall seek proof-- my lord will require evidence more convincing than a half-spied design. I need the medallion itself. With it, I could return to Ticoro to accolades from my lord and a respite from this backwater tedium of Sheffield's household.

— *Chapter 8 – No End Cutscene* —

— Chapter 9 – Start —

As they walked towards Castle Sheffield, William felt conflicted. Lord Cameron Sheffield had shown nothing but kindness to William since his betrothal to Selana had been arranged; now he had to confront his future father-in-law with the evidence they had uncovered. Either Lord Sheffield was the mastermind behind the entire plot—which would be bad enough—or he was oblivious to happenings in his own House, right under his nose... which would be arguably worse.

Following behind William, Kaelyn and Aren were surprised when he began to slow his pace. "That's odd," William said before coming to a halt.

The castle exterior was lit by numerous flickering sconces and torches, but Aren couldn't see anything out of place. "What?" he asked, scanning the area.

Kaelyn immediately saw William's concern. "There's nobody guarding the castle entrance," she explained.

"So?" Aren was still confused. "It's not like they're expecting an invasion."

"That's not the point," William explained. "There are always guards outside the gate. It's a matter of honor, of etiquette. Lord Sheffield is meticulous about such things." William shuddered to think what his father would do if guards weren't posted at the front of the Escobar Estate. Heads would roll, that much he knew for certain.

As they passed through the castle gates, Kaelyn kept looking around with her skills as a hunter. "It's too still," she said. "I don't like the look of this, William."

"I hear you," William agreed. "Stay alert." Drawing closer, the smell of seawater was strong in the air—strange, William thought, because Castle Sheffield was some distance away from the shoreline. The air this evening was still, and it shouldn't have carried this far in the cool, early summer night.

Suddenly, in the darkness before them, someone—or something—made a gurgling noise, like a human groaning in agony. Making certain he wasn't imagining things, Aren looked over at the other two. "Did you hear that?" he asked.

William motioned in front of them as he said, "It came from the courtyard up ahead." They quickened their pace to discover the source.

Upon entering the courtyard, they immediately discovered why the guards were missing, and why there was so little activity outside the castle: they were here, an entire garrison, all slaughtered. Aren could only gasp in horror at the carnage. "Kor's teeth!"

Kneeling to check one of the fallen guards, Kaelyn felt his exposed neck. "This couldn't have happened very long ago," she determined. Maybe within the last hour?

"How can you tell?" *Aren asked, then thought better of it as his stomach began to turn. "On second thought, I don't want to know."*

Kaelyn looked up at William. "You don't think the Imperial Guard...?"

"No, not the Guard," *William said, looking at another corpse on the ground. Turning the body over with the toe of his boot, this one wasn't wearing the traditional House Sheffield armor like the others. Instead, he wore a telltale blue-and-white striped shirt under his leather armor vest, with a yellow kerchief around his neck and a red bandanna upon his head; next to his lifeless body was a bloody cutlass.*

"Pirates."

900.msg – *Chapter 9\Havesly – Castle Sheffield – Selana's Room*

Topic: Selana's Writing Pad

Aren: "(READING) Cameron Sheffield... Lord Sheffield... Hmmm. Looks like Selana's been practicing her handwriting."

Kaelyn: "Sounds like your little girlfriend can add forgery to her list of accomplishments, William."

William: "(A TAD ADMIRING) Kor, that's gutsy. My father would kill me if I signed his name to as much as a laundry order."

900.msg – *Chapter 9\Havesly – The Caverns beneath Castle Sheffield*

Topic: The Caverns beneath Castle Sheffield

William: "The pirates must have climbed up here. I bet those caves open up to the beach eventually. No sense going down there."

Topic: Lord Sheffield Fights Unknown Man

Kaelyn: "(SHOUTS) Sheffield's in trouble!"

William: "(SHOUTS) No, Kaelyn! Stay back, Aren!"

Aren: "But we should help him!"

William: "(FIRMLY) It's his fight. We'll avenge him if necessary, but he wouldn't welcome our interference."

Lord Cameron and Selana Sheffield

Topic: Greeting

William: "Who's the dead man?"

Sheffield: "I don't know. I heard the alarm raised and came out of my office to find the castle crawling with pirates. That man was chasing Selana."

Topic: Chase

William: "Selana, why was he chasing you?"

Selana: "Why do you suppose a pirate chases a girl? Really, William!"

William: "Are you sure there wasn't more to it than that?"

Selana: "I'm sure I don't know what you mean..."

William: "(WITH AN EDGE) I think you do. I know about your secret bank account -- the one you set up in your father's name."

Selana: "What are you talking about?"

William: "The banker thought it odd that all the transactions were made by proxy rather than receiving Lord Sheffield's personal attention, but the signature and seal were right, so who was he to ask questions?"

Topic: Signature

William: "I imagine it took you a while to master your father's signature."

Sheffield: "Are you accusing my daughter of falsely conducting business in my name?"

William: "I'm sorry, my lord. While we were looking for you, we found some of the practice sheets in Selana's bedroom. But there's more. I have a strong suspicion the money in that account came from the pirates in exchange for safe harbor in your private coves -- safe harbor granted, no doubt, in your name."

Sheffield: "Selana, is this true?"

Selana: "I... I... (FIRMLY) Yes. Yes, I assured them safe harbor in your name."

Sheffield: "Pirates! And forgery! Selana, things would have turned around eventually. If you'd only talked to me..."

Selana: "And have you brush me aside as a dimwitted girl? You've never taken me seriously, even though I've got twice the brains of any of my brothers. I'm just a pretty little thing to trot out on formal occasions or marry off at your political convenience. Well, I couldn't stand idly by, trying on the latest fashions and doing lacework while our House crumbled around us. I did what I could to save us."

Topic: Dead Man

Aren: "There's something I still don't understand. Who's the man your father just killed?"

Selana: "He's the one who first suggested the kidnapping idea to me. He never told me his name."

Kaelyn: "What do you think was in it for him?"

Selana: "He said he represented certain interests who wanted to see Caverton embarrassed."

Sheffield: "(PITYING, TOUCH OF ANGER) And you believed him? Selana, you don't have half the brains you think you do."

William: "Someone must have wanted the Emperor dead. When things went wrong, it was deemed too risky to let you live."

Topic: Kidnapping

Kaelyn: "You used the Shepherds to kidnap the Consort."

Selana: "(DEFENSIVELY) In Chail, ransom is a legitimate, time-honored practice. The Shepherds saw it as a chance to bargain for political favors. I saw it as a way to secure our financial position. We both would have gotten what we wanted, and no real harm done."

William: "Only someone else snatched him away from you."

Selana: "I thought Gar Warren was covering up for his own incompetence when he told me the Consort disappeared into thin air. Then I learned of the... thing that came out of him at the Palace. Clearly, a mage was involved."

Topic: Pirates

William: "So you threw in with the pirates to save your House. What went wrong?"

Selana: "I began to hear stories about their raids. What they've done to women... children... I wanted to save our House, but not at that price. Not when I had other prospects. I cut off negotiations with the pirates."

William: "But they didn't take no for an answer."

Selana: "I should have known better and paid them off. They must have decided I -- well, my father, as far as they knew -- owed them, and they came to collect."

William: "(THINKING) Other prospects... Of course. Ransoming the Consort. That was your Shepherd amulet Gregor gave me!"

Topic: Amulet

Sheffield: "Hold on, William. We've no quarrel with the Grrrlf. Why in Kor's name would Selana have a Shepherd amulet?"

Selana: "William's right, Father. The amulet is mine... (HASTILY) not that I believe in their cause! I just thought a connection there might prove useful."

Sheffield: "Useful? They advocate genocide, girl!"

Selana: "(STRONGLY) And create political turmoil! By being on the inside, I hoped I might turn their actions to our advantage."

William: "Was Gregor your agent?"

Selana: "Him? No! That Caverton spy had free run of the castle. He overheard something he shouldn't have, slipped into my room, and ran off with the amulet."

William: "So you sent the pirates to stop him."

Selana: "(LAUGHS) Right! It was only sheer coincidence that you were on the same ship. Almost got two worms with one bird."

Aren: "Bird? That wasn't like any bird I've ever seen."

William: "I don't understand why you sent the pirates at all when you had that creature up your sleeve."

Selana: "What are you talking about?"

William: "The flying beast that killed Gregor and damn near killed me and Aren! (PAUSE) The monster you and Bryce sent?!"

Sheffield: "Bryce too? Is there anyone in this castle who wasn't involved in this conspiracy?"

Selana: "Calvert Bryce? What's he got to do with this? I didn't send a flying beast!"

Topic: Bryce

William: "Wait a minute. Are you telling me you're not in league with Bryce?"

Selana: "I've hardly even seen the man in weeks."

William: "So you had nothing to do with the attack in the Imperial Palace?"

Selana: "Of course not! I wanted to ransom the Consort back to Chail, not use him to kill the Emperor. Sheffield's are not assassins."

William: "No, just kidnappers. Bryce must have found out about Gregor's discovery, but he didn't trust the pirates to take care of him. Lord Sheffield, we need to find Calvert Bryce. He may be the only one who can get back the souls stolen by the Wraith. (WITH AN EDGE) Without his assistance, the Emperor's daughter and the Consort will die."

Sheffield: "Bryce likes his solitude... His workshop is west of here, in the foothills."

Topic: Goodbye

Aren: "If Bryce is still in his workshop, that's where we should go."

Sheffield: "You go on ahead. I'll follow right behind you, but I'd like to have a few private words with Selana first."

William: "We understand, my lord."

9470.msg – *Chapter 9\Letter – Silver Hawk to Petrov*

Topic: *Letter – Silver Hawk to Petrov*

Petrov,

As you've no doubt heard, the plan backfired. I'll see to it that Bryce is taken care of. Take no chances-- eliminate the Sheffield girl and leave the Empire. Do not contact me-- I will send for you when the time is right.

Silver Hawk

900.msg – *Chapter 9\Leaving Havesly*

Topic: *Leaving Havesly*

William: "Bryce holds the key to this whole affair, and time is running out. We can't afford to get distracted. Let's keep to the most direct route to Bryce."

Topic: Bryce's Journal

2nd Moon of Senaedrin, day 15

Soon the shadows will see how wrong they were. Once I have a means of safely shielding an Ethereal traveler, the Shadows will be the ones considered fools, for trying to stop my research. A flicker of hope. Just moments ago, I managed to summon a mana shield. Although the spell's effect lasted only a brief instant, I believe it can be suitably prolonged...

Useless! At its strongest, the shield might be enough to protect an ordinary person, but I cannot increase its power enough to shield a mage! Without a functional shield, I could just as well have acceded to the paranoid demands of those thrice-damned Shadows.

2nd Moon of Senaedrin, day 21

Sometimes it is only the darkest of despair which leads to the brightest inspiration. Although my magic is not sufficient to create a strong enough shield here in Ramar, Etherea is a realm of raw mana. I shall simply create the shield after I cross the fracture! My success is finally at hand.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 3

Damn the weakness that consumes me! When the rush of wild mana overcame me, I lost control of the shield spell. Several Wraiths were forced through the fracture before I could recover and return to Ramar. Instead of dying, as Ethereals usually do in this mana-poor plane, these seem to have survived. Sheffield's trapper has seen them in the Ridgewood, as have several travelers. With my power as depleted as it is, how can I send them home before these tales of "hauntings" reach unwelcome ears? How can the creatures have survived?

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 10

The situation has worsened. Not only does my shield spell seem to have affected the Wraiths enough to keep them alive in Ramar, but it seems to have driven them mad. They hunt the Ridgewood now, taking human souls and causing panic in the townsfolk. I am doing what I can to quell the rumors, but it is only a matter of time before the Shadows will suspect something. This is their fault! If they hadn't discredited me, I could have had help in the spellcasting and the Wraiths wouldn't have escaped...

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 21

The Wraiths are secure. For the sake of family honor, my cousin Liam has used his influence as a Child of Henne to convince the Children to herd the Wraiths into a wardstone circle. He will say nothing of this, to preserve our name. I shall turn my attentions to discovering a more permanent solution to these crazed Ethereals. They must not be discovered!

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 23

The gods themselves must have sent this man Petrov. He has brought me the perfect plan to turn the tables on the Shadows -- to humiliate them the way they tried to humiliate me. This must be why they forbade my research! For how can they possibly protect the Emperor's life from an Ethereal creature? They sacrificed my reputation for their own fear -- not fear that I'd fail, but that I'd succeed! Well, with this Petrov's help, they will soon wish they'd never interfered with me.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 24

Although the plan of encasing a Wraith in a mana shield and hiding it inside a human being seems simple enough, how does one convince a Wraith to help? And who to use as the carrier? It must be someone with access to the Emperor. No matter, I shall let Petrov worry about finding a suitable carrier. My task of summoning and binding a Wraith will be difficult enough. I shall move my workshop to the Waste, where discovery is less likely.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 28

It seems that little Selana Sheffield has decided to solve her daddy's troubles by joining the Shepherds. The gods alone know what she thinks she can accomplish by this. Petrov says she may be useful, as the Shepherds could help obtain a carrier for my Wraith.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 29

Petrov plans to use the Consort as the carrier! I have argued in favor of a less conspicuous host... we could obtain a chambermaid or minor Jaegar with considerably less trouble, but Petrov is adamant that it be the Consort. Once again I have to wonder what his reasons are for helping me, but it doesn't really matter so long as my ends are served.

3rd Moon of Senaedrin, day 30

A spy for Caverton has discovered little Selana's secret. As it would be terribly inconvenient to have my plans disrupted now, I've sent him a little surprise from the Waste. Some of the denizens here are proving themselves quite useful, once tamed.

The Wraith-summoning spell is proving tricky. It will definitely require material elements to bind a creature of mana to our own plane. Preliminary research suggests that five ingredients should suffice. Alternating the polarity of the items as I add them should increase the potency of the effect. Of my ready supplies, only sapphires, Senwater, TrKaa feathers, herbal powder, and hardening fluid hold a positive charge.

1st Moon of Henne, day 1

Yes! Not only should the polarity be alternated, but the spell absolutely must finish on a positive charge. This should attract a Wraith through the fracture. It also seems that an overabundance of organics will spoil the spell. I'll limit myself to two in the future, added in succession to minimize their impact.

Liquid components seem to be helping, but it seems to be absolutely essential that one of the items used be neither liquid nor organic. This one item will be the anchor that holds the Wraith to this plane once it is summoned.

1st Moon of Henne, day 8

Finally, the spell is complete! When liquid components were used as both the first and last items, a Wraith was finally lured through from Etherea. Now, to discover how one of these creatures might be bound to assist me...

Eggs. Who would have thought that Wraiths would lay eggs like lizards or TrKaa? Fortunate for me that they do. I have here the eggs of one of these Ethereal monsters, and I suspect that it will cooperate most heartily in order to get them back. Interesting, but the summoning spell seems to be more robust than I thought. Although the precise ordering of the ingredients allowed me to more easily devise the component list, in the end it didn't actually matter in what order they were added to the spell.

Petrov has actually managed to capture the Consort. I must admit, I had my doubts, but everything has gone quite well so far. The Shepherds' hidden home seems to be a long-deserted mage's sanctum, one of the Golden Age relics. Once this is over, perhaps I will go there to search for some vestige of enlightenment from the last Age when mages were truly given the respect that we deserve. Petrov says that there is a sealed Ethereal fracture there. His agent is stationed at the fracture, to spell it open when the Consort is brought in.

1st Moon of Henne, day 15

A fine day, indeed! My research, the very research that will be the undoing of the Shadows, has proven itself today. I provided several of Petrov's men with mana shields, and sent them THROUGH ETHEREA to the fracture in the Shepherd's home. They returned with the Consort, and the Wraith was easily implanted. I had never thought of victory as being a tangible thing, but tonight I can see it in the air around me, smell it on the wind, taste it in this cup of wine. Tomorrow, the Consort will be sent back to the Shepherds.

1st Moon of Henne, day 18

Petrov is a quick thinker and a great planner. Although complications prevented the transfer of the Consort back to the Shepherds and on to the palace, he has improvised another means of accomplishing the same goal. I wonder if perhaps he isn't a little TOO good at planning, and that makes me wonder what his plans are for me. I still have no notion why he is helping me. And now that the Consort is on his way to the Palace, perhaps it is time to start considering what can be done about Petrov...

2nd Moon of Henne, day 4

It's over. The Wraith has returned, carrying the souls of the Consort and the Emperor. My spell has been successful, my revenge on the Shadows complete. So why is it that I still have no sense of triumph? No rush of joy? Instead, there is nothing but a curious apathy. Perhaps when Petrov himself returns, and brings me an account of the event, of the reactions of the court -- and of the Shadows -- I will feel something more of the vindication that I deserve. For now, I have returned the Wraith its eggs, and banished it again to Etherea.

45700.msg – *Chapter 9\Havesly – Tunnel to the Waste*

Topic: Tunnel to the Waste

The trio entered the tunnel. It stretched for what seemed like miles, straight as an arrow through the rock beneath the mountains. Finally they emerged, weary but determined, at the edge of the Waste.

Topic: Returning to Havesly

William turned his back on the tunnel. "We've come this far, and I'm not turning back now. Let's find Bryce."

10813.msg – ***Chapter 9\The Waste – Bryce's New Workshop – Mage Calvert Bryce***

Mage Calvert Bryce of House Sheffield

Topic: Greeting #1 – Lord Cameron and Selana Sheffield held Hostage

William: "I demand you release them immediately!"

Bryce: "Do you think I can be defeated that easily? (LAUGHS) Ha! I'm not so eager to face a Shadow interrogation, thank you kindly! Once burned is enough for me!"

Aren: "Look out! He's up to something!"

Topic: Greeting #2 – After First Fight

Bryce: "(SARCASTIC) My deepest apologies, but I really can't permit you to leave here."

Kaelyn: "(MAJOR EDGE) How amusing... I feel the same way about you."

45800.msg – ***Chapter 9\The Waste – Bryce's New Workshop – Following Bryce***

Topic: Following Bryce after Second Fight

"Come on," Kaelyn snapped, glaring down the corridor at the door Bryce had passed through. "We've got something more important to see to..."

Mage Calvert Bryce of House Sheffield

Topic: Greeting #3 – After Second Fight

Bryce: "(DYING) Better death from your hand than the Shadows..."

Topic: Motive

William: "Why did you try to kill the Emperor?"

Bryce: "(MUSING) The deed is done... I've won. Why not? (TO PARTY) The Emperor was nothing to me, merely a means to an end. I was after the Shadows! They said I'd fail, that it couldn't be done. They embarrassed me! But I showed them. I beat them at their own game."

Topic: Shadows

William: "What did the Shadows do to you?"

Bryce: "I knew travel through Etherea... safe travel... was possible. They forbade me from pursuing my experiments. Said it was too dangerous. Made me look a fool before the entire magical community."

Topic: Ethereal Travel

Aren: "You found a way to travel through Etherea safely? How?"

Bryce: "A shield... to block mana and prevent overload. But I never quite perfected it. When I tried, a miscalculation nearly killed me. Would have if it hadn't thrown me back through the fracture I'd entered. Sucked some Wraiths back too, catching them in the spell. But the spell was twisted inside out."

Kaelyn: "The Wraiths in the Ridgewood. Your spell wrapped them in a bubble of mana, sustaining them when they should have died."

Bryce: "And driving them mad in the process."

Topic: Shield

- Aren: "You wove the shield to make it -- and the Wraiths inside it -- undetectable. A perfect assassin."
- Bryce: "Yes, although I can't take credit for that. A man learned of the Wraiths and my connection. He came to me and suggested the plan to attack the Emperor."
- William: "The same man who tried to kill Selana."
- Bryce: "(SNORTS) I would have been next. I was expecting him when you showed up."
- William: "What were his motives for wanting the Emperor dead?"
- Bryce: "I don't know, and I don't care. He offered me a chance to discredit the Shadows for once and for all by destroying the Emperor right under their noses!"

Topic: Souls

- Kaelyn: "I don't care why and I don't care how. All I care about is getting those two souls back."
- Bryce: "(CHUCKLING WEAKLY) Well, you're welcome to ask the Wraith for them, if you can find it."
- Kaelyn: "(FURIOUS) You don't know where it is? Tell us how to summon it or I'll kill you here and now!"
- Bryce: "You can't really... expect me to... tell you. That would rather... defeat the point."
- William: "(TAKING OVER FROM KAELYN, MORE RATIONAL) You made your point, Bryce. You outwitted the Shadows. Don't let two innocents die."
- Bryce: "(ON HIS LAST BREATHS) Not me... The Shadows' fault. They should never... have challenged... (FADING) me... (DEAD)"
- Kaelyn: "Bryce? Bryce! Damn!"
- William: "Great."
- Aren: "Let's look around. Maybe we can find something."

— Chapter 9 – End —

With the addition of final ingredient of Bryce's spell, the pot began to glow green and swirl with black smoke. The other four took several steps back as Aren waved his arms around, coaxing and guiding the spell. A jagged opening to the Ethereal world formed a few feet above the roiling cauldron, and the black smoke began to drift lazily in its direction. From the surface of the liquid, coils of magical-energy-made-physical slowly snaked towards the portal linking the world of Ramar to Etherea.

William finally broke the silence. "Do you have it?"

"I think... I— I have something," *Aren said, still trying to control the spell.*

The dimensional rift sucked in the coiled cord of vapors. An eerie silence filled the room with foreboding.

Lord Sheffield grew uneasy. "What's happening?"

The coils were now merged into a single magical cable that penetrated the barrier to Etherea. At Aren's direction, it began searching for anything from Antara's dimension. With any luck, it would find the souls of Princess Aurora and the Consort. Aren silently prayed to the Three Faces that the rift had opened close enough to the Wraith that had taken them—and that the souls were still viable.

"I'm not sure," *Aren said with eyes still closed.* "I can feel the tendril probing... probing..." *Aren grew quiet as he focused, then suddenly yelled,* "I've got it!"

"Terrific," *Kaelyn said warily.* "Is it too late to throw it back?"

Aren had definitely found the souls, but there was tremendous resistance from the other side. Having caught plenty of fish back home in Briala, nothing compared him for what was on the other end of this line. Things were quickly growing out of control for the novice mage as the magical link to Etherea was slipping from his grasp. "I... I think I need help!" he called out.

Lord Sheffield asked, "What can we do?"

Aren pointed to the magical rope and yelled, "Pull!"

The four of them rushed to the magical cable, pulling with all of their strength against the raging force at the other end.

Suddenly, without warning...

...the Wraith burst forth from the rift into Bryce's Workshop once again, tethered by the magical rope around its neck. Still clutching the two human souls, the prehistoric-looking creature let out an unnatural shriek as it fought back.

"Aren!" William shouted at his friend while the four tried to keep the Wraith from disappearing back through the rift to Etherea.

Violent winds whipped around the cauldron as Aren yelled back in frustration, "I'm working on it!"

The magical struggle between Aren and the Wraith consumed the entire workshop; anything not nailed down began to swirl around the room. Books, pieces of glassware and pottery, and small furniture became deadly projectiles while the Wraith continued its furious screeching.

Watching for flying debris, Kaelyn looked over her shoulder. "William!!!" she called out in warning.

*Burning timber hurtled toward William from behind. Kaelyn moved quickly. **Knocking both of them to the ground, the wood missed William by inches. Quickly getting to her hands and knees, she asked, "Are you all right?"***

"Yeah... nice tackle," William yelled above the noise of the commotion. "Now I guess we're even."

"Uh-uh," she corrected him. "Now you owe ME one."

Aren slowly gained control over the Wraith as it held tightly to the two souls. Though it was only a few feet from the rift to Etherea, the lack of mana in Ramar's atmosphere was already taking a toll on the creature. There was no bubble of Etherea mana to sustain it here, unlike when it was hidden within the Consort for weeks or any of the other Wraiths that Kaelyn had encountered in the Ridgewood. Flying debris fell to the floor and the room grew quiet once again; the captured Wraith simply stared at Aren.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Aren leaned over the cauldron. "I wasn't ready for that," he admitted.

Resource\9060.vmd

With the magical rope tied around its neck, the Wraith continued staring at Aren. After a few moments, it spoke, surprising everyone in the room. "You bring me forth again?! Whyyy?!" the Wraith hissed.

The green glow of the cauldron colored Aren's face. "You took something that doesn't belong to you. Two human souls. We want them back," Aren demanded.

The Wraith pointed its beak toward the lifeless body of Calvert Bryce lying on the workshop floor. "That human stole my egggs. I took the ssssoouls, he returnned my egggs. Our bargain iss done."

"So. But just as your eggs are important to you, those souls are important to us," ***William said, hoping to resolve this diplomatically.*** "We ask for their return."

"My eggs hatch soooooon," ***said the Wraith.*** "Theese soouls will fceeed theem."

"Great," ***Selana said sarcastically.*** "It won't give up its baby food."

William unsheathed his sword. "We don't have to stand here arguing with swamp gas," ***he said, obviously annoyed.*** "Let's just kill it and release the souls."

Kaelyn said, "Without the proper enchantment, our swords are useless against it." ***She held her hand on William's arm, not want to provoking the Wraith while it still held the souls of Aurora and the Consort trapped within its form. After thinking for a moment, she asked the Wraith,*** "What about a trade?" ***Pointing to Bryce's lifeless body in the corner of the room, she said,*** "Take his soul instead."

Aren was shocked at her suggestion. "Kaelyn!"

"He's dead, Aren. Besides," ***she said with disgust in her voice,*** "he caused all this."

"That one's sooooul is already disssssipating," ***the Wraith said.*** "It would not nourishhh my young."

Lord Sheffield stepped forward. "Then take mine," ***he volunteered.***

"Father," ***Selana said in horror,*** "no!"

Lord Sheffield turned to his daughter. "Kaelyn is right, Selana. Our house is responsible. I will not stand idly by while others clean up our affairs. Sheffields played a part in this tragedy. To preserve our honor, Sheffields must play an equal part in repairing the damage." ***Softening his voice, he hugged his daughter and continued.*** "Selana, this is a sacrifice I make willingly. The honor of the House is foremost above all. That is what I believe and what I tried to teach you."

Selana looked up at Lord Sheffield. "But the House needs you, Father," ***she pleaded.*** "Jason's a fool—he can't manage things. And what of mother?"

Lord Sheffield hugged his daughter again. "You've always been hard on your brother, but he's sharper than you give him credit. He's ready. As for your mother... in forty-five years I never met a more honorable woman. She'll grieve, but she'll understand."

Releasing his daughter, Lord Sheffield stepped forward and directly addressed the Wraith. "I say again. Take mine in exchange."

"What is to ssstop me from adding yourrrr soul-- all of your sssouls-- to the ones I already have?" *the Wraith asked.* "My young will beee verrry hungry when theyyy hatch."

Aren stepped out from behind the cauldron. "Because if you agree to make the trade, we will guarantee that you'll never be summoned again," *he promised.* "No one will steal your eggs, no one will pull you away from your young. In exchange for what we ask, we offer freedom and isolation."

"I wish never to seeee your kind again," *the Wraith hissed.* "But III shall not relinquish two to claim one. The trade must be eeeveeen."

Resource\9090.vmd

It was Selana's turn to step forward. "I will be the second," *she offered, raising her hand.* "I cannot ask another to make a sacrifice I would not make myself. I am a Sheffield. I am my father's daughter."

Lord Sheffield had never been prouder of his daughter than in that moment. "You are indeed, my little one," *he said, giving her another long hug.* "And I love you with all my heart."

"Oh, father..." *Selana said with eyes closed tightly.* "I love you too."

William touched his once-future father-in-law on the shoulder. "The Emperor will know only that you made the ultimate sacrifice for his daughter, the Chailan prince, and the well-being of the Empire. I swear it," *William vowed with his word as an Escobar.*

Lord Sheffield smiled at William, knowing he could trust the young man. "You'll tell Jason... and my wife?" *he asked.*

"I'll tell them," *William promised.*

"Well then," *Lord Sheffield said,* "let's get on with it."

The Wraith brought forth the two spheres still held firmly its claws. With a screech that echoed through the workshop, it opened its beak to expel them and allow their escape. The wraith's form swirled as it released the souls of the Daughter-heir and the Consort. The two balls of light hovered for a moment, then streaked westward through the rock toward the Palace.

The Wraith stared back at the humans through narrowed eyes. "I have done ass III agreeed."

As the Wraith was released the souls, Kaelyn created a mixture of Calderleaf and Irthinide from what was left of Bryce's workshop. Presenting the two small vials of deadly liquid to Lord Sheffield and Selana, Kaelyn explained, "This will act quickly and painlessly. I... added mint, to take the bitter edge off."

Lord Sheffield quietly said, "Thank you," as he and Selana drank the potions. Sitting side-by-side in two chairs Williams had found, they held each other's hand as they waited patiently for the end.

Aren held his arms up over the cauldron and released the Wraith from the magical cable. Freed from its tether, the Wraith claims the Sheffield's freely given souls. Beams of light erupted from their mouths as the Wraith absorbed the balls of energy containing their life essence. Kaelyn's elixir took effect, and the lifeless bodies of Lord Cameron Sheffield and Selana Sheffield slumped against one another in the chairs.

The Wraith floated near the portal and warned the trio, "Remember. Never again."

"Never again," Aren vowed, setting a torch to Bryce's Journal.

Upon hearing Aren's promise, the Wraith entered the opening to Etherea and was gone; the rift behind it was sealed for good.

The Wraith's departure left the room in silence but for the crackle of burning parchment. The three friends stood together and reflected on the wreckage around them, their adventure finally at an end.

William finally broke the silence. "It's over." They headed back up the stairs of Bryce's workshop and out into Waste for the long trek back to Havesly.

— *Epilogue* —

Epilogue: Two months later.

The people packed Ticoro's Tabernacle Court. They came from every district of the city, every corner of the Empire, and beyond. High and lowborn mingled together, class boundaries temporarily forgotten, raising their voices together in cheer and peering expectantly at the Tabernacle steps.

The guards of honor stood at rigid attention but the mood was infectious, and sometimes a smile cracked a soldier's stony facade. After all, it wasn't every day that the Daughter-heir to the Empire got married.

Being House Escobar's newly-apprenticed Mage afforded many changes in young Aren Cordelaine's life, including an upgrade to his attire. As he and William ascended the grand steps leading to the Tabernacle Court, Aren kept tugging and scratching at his shirt underneath his cape.

Failing to notice, William continued their conversation. "...I suppose Finch can be a bit gruff, but I always thought he was nice enough."

"Yeah," *Aren countered as they reach the top of the steps,* "but YOU aren't his apprentice."

William smiled in agreement at the thought, thanking the Three Faces that he wasn't. It was then that he finally noticed his friend's discomfort. "Will you please stop fidgeting?" *he chided.* "You're making me nervous." *William hoped that in this jubilant atmosphere, Aren's actions would go unnoticed.*

"Sorry," *Aren apologized.* "My shirt itches."

Surprised at the thought, William stopped them both at the Tabernacle's entrance. "Aren," *he reminded the young mage,* "that shirt was made by one of the best tailors in the Empire."

"I know," *Aren said, scratching once again.* "It still itches."

William rolled his eyes as he turned to walk through the massive entrance. "Aaaahh," *he teased.* "You can take the boy off the farm..."

"I've never been on a farm!" *Aren said indignantly, racing to catch up.*

William could only laugh as they passed by the Ticoro City Guards.

A familiar voice was waiting for them inside. "Ah ha, there you are. You're late."

William and Aren both turned to see Kaelyn waiting for them... but this was a Kaelyn they had never seen before: wearing a strapless navy ball gown with her hair done-up in the current Antaran style, she could have been easily been mistaken for one of Princess Aurora's royal coterie. "Would you gentlemen care to escort me?" the new Kaelyn continued. "It wouldn't be proper for a lady to enter alone."

William was, for once, speechless.

Noticing William's befuddlement, Kaelyn said sweetly, "Aren, would you be a dear and wipe William's chin? He appears to be drooling." Gliding past William, Kaelyn grabbed Aren's right hand with her left and pulled him forward. Now it was William's turn to catch up.

"It's just... I'm..." William could only stammer and stutter in response as he walked on the other side of Aren.

Aren laughed as they continued toward the atrium. "It's good to see you, Kaelyn," he said. "How's Palace life treating you?"

Letting out a snort, the 'old' Kaelyn resurfaced to answer. "It's 'milady' this and 'milady' that... makes me queasy," she replied with a frown.

Understanding her unease, Aren agreed. "Ah, the price of gratitude." Most of his young life was spent serving others at The Spitting Lion in Briala, so his recent transition into Piandan high society often unnerved him as well. The fact that others were now waiting on him for a change seemed the more alien concept to Aren than his ability to fire blasts of green energy from his hands.

"The Emperor was so grateful, I just couldn't turn down his invitation," Kaelyn explained as they passed through huge marble columns that surrounded the atrium. "Actually, I've enjoyed spending time with the princess; it turns out we have a lot in common."

Looking straight ahead, William finally found his voice. "Oh, she's stubborn and razor-tongued too?" he asked dispassionately... or at least as much as he could muster.

'Palace' Kaelyn immediately returned as she put her recently-acquired decorum skills to good use. Looking past Aren, she batted her eyes at William, and—as any proper lady would—disingenuously said, "You say the sweetest things." Perhaps some aspects of Palace life agreed with Kaelyn more than she thought.

Continuing into the Tabernacle's atrium, Aren asked Kaelyn, "So you'll be staying at the Palace for a while?"

"No, the Emperor has made me his diplomat," she said. "He wants me to help improve relations between the Empire and the Grrrlf. I'll be heading home soon."

Aren wasn't certain, but he thought he saw William—if only for a moment—exhibit the tiniest of frowns.

The three friends made their way through the crowd of people gathered outside of the basilica: the governors of all the Antaran provinces, members of the Shira, representatives from all Three Arms of the Triune (Kor, Senaedin, and Henne), various Lords, Jaegers and other nobles, wealthy merchants, foreign dignitaries, and just about every other person of influence from in and around the Antaran Empire.

One of those was Lord Nathan Escobar. Walking up to his son, he called out, "Ah, William, there you are." Giving a curt nod to Kaelyn and Aren, he immediately began talking business. "William, I've been talking with Masterweaver Binetti. I'd like you to sit down with him next week and iron out our contact for the coming year." Pausing to put his around his son, Lord Escobar looked over the crowd and continued. "Then, I need you to inspect our steward's operation in Balmestri. Find me after the ceremony and we'll talk on it further."

"I will, Father," William dutifully agreed.

"Good," Lord Escobar said. Seeing a familiar face from Midova, he called out, "Ah, Lord Verazza! I've been meaning to talk to you about..." William's father disappeared into the mass of people.

Compared to the interaction she witnessed in Panizo several months earlier, Kaelyn was heartened to see Lord Escobar now held his youngest son in much higher regard. Leaning around Aren, she cheerfully observed, "Sounds like you'll be busy."

"Yes," William said wearily, "I haven't had a free moment since I got back from Januli."

Continuing through the atrium, they came upon a large group of people clamoring around a tall, young nobleman—with everyone trying to make their introductions to him. Aren turned to William and asked, "Who's that?"

"Jason Sheffield," William said, but then corrected himself. "Or rather, Lord Sheffield. He's the head of their House now. Doing a much better job at it than anyone expected, as a matter of fact."

"I'm sure the Emperor's financial assistance helped," Aren reasoned.

"Jason feels indebted to me for not telling the Emperor about Selana's role in the Consort's abduction," William said as they continued toward the basilica's entrance.

Aren probed a little further. "As her potential bridegroom, you seem to be taking Selana's death pretty well."

"I'm sorry she's gone, but... well..." William frowned as he chose his next words carefully, "I really didn't want to marry her. It was a political arrangement. As it turns out, House Sheffield's allegiance is now probably stronger than even our marriage would have made it." Not quite blackmail, William thought to himself, but rather... an 'understanding of gratitude.' He

didn't want to think what would happen to House Sheffield should the Emperor learn the truth. Turning the conversation back to his deceased fiancée, William continued. "Selana wasn't a bad person, she was just trying to protect her House. Only..." he paused, "she wasn't the right person for me."

Staring straight ahead, Kaelyn frowned and said, "No. SHE wasn't." Aren and William both looked at her in surprise but neither said anything.

Upon entering the vestibule, ushers escorted William, Aren, and Kaelyn to their seats. Kaelyn joined the others ladies of Princess Aurora's royal court, while William and Aren were led directly to the front row. Once again, Aren was duly impressed. "Nice seats," he commented.

"It's not what you know," William explained, "it's whom you know." And it also didn't hurt to have the rulers of two empires in your debt. Slowly the atrium emptied into the basilica as the other guests took their seats, and the wedding music began to echo through the Tabernacle.

Everybody stood. Two columns of soldiers, both Chailan and Antaran, marched into the hall. When all were in, they raised their thin rapiers toward each other, forming a series of arches.

The Consort strode regally down the aisle to the dais. As one, the soldiers lowered their swords. The Daughter-heir glided down the aisle in the bright colors of Henne. The bride and groom formally greeted each other and Fellich Marr mounted the dais. As Hand of the Children of Henne, it was his honor to perform the ceremony which would bind two people, and two nations. *Carrying his ceremonial staff, Marr ascended from steps on the right to meet the Princess and the Consort already at the center.*

Aren watched in rapt fascination as the Imperial wedding unfolded. William, with other things on his mind, lost track of the proceedings.

...namely, visions of how lovely 'Palace' Kaelyn looks displaying her newly-found sense of fashion.

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A sharp elbow from Aren to his ribs woke William from his reverie.

"William!" Aren said in a slightly louder-than-hushed tone. William saw Aren with mouth agape, staring at the dais. "The staff!" Aren could barely contain his shock.

Confused, William asked, "What?" Clearly he wasn't understanding to what Aren was referring.

"His staff!" Aren said, gesturing again at the dais. "Look at High Brother Marr's staff!"

"What about it?" *William still couldn't understand what had agitated him so.*

Aren, being an apprentice Mage, was keen to notice the designs of other staves, regardless of whether they were magical, functional, ceremonial, or merely ornamental. "At the top—it's a silver hawk," Aren slowly explained. "Silver Hawk! From Petrov's note!"

William saw the staff as if for the first time. Suddenly, everything fell into place. *It was the final part of the puzzle that had tormented William the past two months: How could a disgraced House Mage from a far distant corner of Antara formulate and execute such an elaborate plan without help? His mind reeled as he started to piece the together various bits from their adventure, like fog lifting from the morning coast...*

"That was Petrov leaving Fellich's office!" — *William finally recognized the dead man in the caves beneath Castle Sheffield as the same gruff, bearded man they had bumped into at this very Tabernacle during Ticoro's Spring Festival some four months earlier.*

"The ambush at Simon's house... Marr sent us there." — *William had wondered why Imperial soldiers were lying in wait at the house of a lowly Henne priest in Ravenne... who himself was conveniently summoned away under mysterious circumstances to Levosche on a red herring.*

"And the wardstones Kaelyn told us about—they were from the Children of Henne. Marr was involved with the Wraiths." — *William thought back to her battles in the Ridgewood and how the Wraiths were contained. Marr would definitely access to such ancient magics.*

"He wanted to expand the fostering system." — *William recalled their conversation with Selana Sheffield at The Knight's Promise Inn in Ticoro. She had said, "The Emperor ultimately refused the idea." Since the Brotherhood of Kor held the greater sway over Emperor Valorian, it was High Brother Vaughn himself who ensured Marr's proposal would fail.*

"And he gained Aurora's confidence when she was younger." — *Lastly, Fellich Marr's own prophetic words about the Daughter-heir during the Spring Festival rang out: "She fostered here in Ticoro shortly after my elevation," Marr had told them. "We spent a great deal of time together. With proper guidance, she'll make an extraordinary Empress someday." And if something had happened to Emperor Valorian during the Betrothal Ceremony—say, a Wraith had stolen his soul, perhaps—the newly-crowned Empress Aurora would naturally turn to High Brother Marr for advice and guidance...*

While Fellich Marr looked all around the vast hall, ensuring to include everyone in his orations during the ceremony, he had kept casting glances in the direction of William and Aren during the proceedings. William thought it odd, but now the joyous smile Fellich Marr held during the long ceremony now appeared to him as a triumphant smirk.

William still possessed Petrov's cryptic note—the only bit of evidence that could connect Fellich Marr to the whole affair—hidden safely back at the Escobar Estate in Panizo. However, he also knew a single piece of parchment taken off the body dead man meant nothing against someone like Marr. To set a plan like this into motion, someone as devious and conniving as High Brother Fellich Marr had obviously spent a lifetime covering his tracks...

"He knows," *William said*. "He knows we've figured it out." *William's voice hardened*. "And he also knows we can't do anything about it."

Aren was incredulous. "You mean he just gets away with it?" *The man who almost succeeded in orchestrating the Emperor's assassination? The man who would have thrown the entirety of the Antaran Empire into chaos, all for personal gain? The man who would have gone against every principle he supposedly represented as the Revered Hand of Henne to do so?*

"We can't touch him," *William said, but then his voice grew deadly serious*. "For now. But I'll be watching him," *he vowed*. "He knows that as well."

Fellich Marr held out his arms in praise to the Triune, and his voice rang out through the grand Tabernacle. "Good people of the Antaran Empire, by the grace of Henne, I declare Aurora Valorian and Farril Kalibanque to be husband and wife."

The newly-wedded couple ended the ceremony with their first kiss as husband and wife, officially uniting Antara and Chail—two of the most powerful empires on all of Ramar. With the wedding complete, a roar of celebration went up across the city, and subsequently, across the Empire. Colorful fireworks lit up the sky high above Ticoro, and everyone in attendance, regardless of origin—Antaran, Chailan, Mehrat, Grrrlf—was awash in jubilation and happiness...

...everyone, that is, except for two young men in the very front row.

GAME ITEMS

3.msg – "Betrayal In Antara" Game Items

While each of the four game characters can look at or observe any game item, for the following I have arbitrarily chosen...

- *Aren the Mage as the observer of all magical items (naturally)*
- *Kaelyn ("Little Archer") as the observer of all archery-related items*
- *William as the observer for all other remaining non-magical items*

Swords

ITEM: Short Sword

DETAIL: This simple sword was little different from the thousands like it in Antara. Easy to wield and equally suited for thrusts and slashes, it was the most commonplace weapon in the Empire.

ITEM: Long Sword

DETAIL: The long blade of this weapon gave a fighter a tactical advantage over a foe with a shorter blade, enabling him to strike while keeping his own body farther out of reach. The unadorned blade and bare hilt marked it as the product of a simple smith from a simple village. Judging from the weapon's balance, though, the smith knew his craft.

ITEM: Chailan Cutlass

DETAIL: It looked peculiar to William, but then William's days were spent on land. Curved blades like this one had been popular at sea ever since legendary Chailan captain Adufe Ballil used one to kill his princess' would-be kidnapper. Its nation of origin was as important as the blade itself - trying to peddle a non-Chailan cutlass to a sailor was riskier than hugging a spineray.

ITEM: Broadsword

DETAIL: Its shine dulled and surface pockmarked, it was clearly a weapon meant more for use than show. With a strong arm behind it, the heavy blade could deliver a blow few could stand against.

ITEM: Rapier

DETAIL: Here was the weapon of a swordsman. Its form echoed the style and elegance of its use. More commonly found in courtly duels than battlefield melee, the rapier was not for hacking madly at an opponent but rather for carefully probing and smoothly slipping beyond his defenses.

ITEM: Onyx Blade

DETAIL: Where most polished blades reflected sunlight, this jet-black sword seemed to absorb it. The process used by the Montari to forge such a blade remained a mystery, but the result was a lightweight, superbly balanced weapon with few equals.

ITEM: Malchian Bore

DETAIL: The golden-hued spiral blade seemed like a Jaeger's trophy, but the enchanted weapon was quite deadly. With a good solid thrust the blade came to life, boring into its hapless victim. Ironically, it was named for neither the smith who first forged one nor the mage who enchanted it, but the first man to be impaled by one.

ITEM: Januli Greatsword

DETAIL: The mastersmiths of Januli produced a handful of such blades every year, each of unique and exquisite craftsmanship. They offered unparalleled balance, durability, and striking power and felt so natural to wield that they functioned as an extension of the fighter himself. A Januli greatsword was a weapon to be honored and respected.

ITEM: Everedge

DETAIL: William thought it was the most unusual sword he'd ever seen. The sinuous blade hardly seemed practical let alone functional. Yet it sliced through the air with nary a sound, and no amount of abuse seemed to dull its keen edge.

Staves

ITEM: Wooden Staff

DETAIL: The stout length of wood seemed better suited as a walking staff than a weapon, but what it lacked in balance it made up for in weight.

ITEM: Quarter Staff

DETAIL: The polished pole was almost as tall as Aren was. Although most fighters preferred swords, the wise ones respected the swift strikes, extended reach, and tight defense the quarterstaff afforded.

ITEM: Grrrlf Staff

DETAIL: Aren traced the animal carvings with his finger, idly debating which was more impressive-- the detail of the carvings or the technique which rendered them virtually impervious to nicks and scratches.

ITEM: Kinetic Staff

DETAIL: Two shiny metallic cords twisted together to form this spiral staff. As Aren grasped it, a tiny spray of sparks shot from the staff's forked end.

ITEM: Staff of Nightmares

DETAIL: The ruby eyes in the cobra's head capping the onyx staff were the key to its power. An enemy peering into those eyes saw his worst nightmares made flesh, sending him fleeing from the horrors of his own mind.

ITEM: Firestaff

DETAIL: A red crystal nestled amidst the carved cherrywood flames of the staff, which radiated just enough heat to provide comfort on a chilly night.

ITEM: Winterstaff

DETAIL: Most of the staff appeared to be carved of ivory, but it seemed to flow into translucent crystal at its tip. Gripping the staff sent a chill through Aren's arm. For a moment, he thought he could see his own breath.

Bows

ITEM: Short Bow

DETAIL: Kaelyn strung the bow and gave it an experimental pull, deciding the tension on the string was about right. The lightweight bow was perfect for traveling. It could be readied quickly should a beast-- whether two- or four-legged-- cross their path.

ITEM: Long Bow

DETAIL: Such a simple weapon-- just a flexible frame for a taut bowstring. Yet it could propel an arrow with enough force to punch through all but the strongest armor. Kaelyn doubted they'd be facing a phalanx of armored knights across a wide battlefield, but the bow would be just as devastating at closer range.

ITEM: Grrrlf Bow

DETAIL: Like all Grrrlf woodwork, the fluid lines of the bow evoked the natural harmony of a people close to nature. It almost seemed to have been grown into its shape rather than being carved.

ITEM: Ridgewood Bow

DETAIL: There was no mistaking the purpose of this weapon. The compressed form, the unusually heavy wood-- this bow was built for power. With such strength behind it, Kaelyn was certain the bow's accuracy suffered. But then, perhaps one good shot was all it would need.

ITEM: Fire Bow

DETAIL: Kaelyn couldn't tell what material the crimson bow was made of, but it seemed to shimmer and was faintly warm beneath her fingers. When Kaelyn nocked an arrow, the tip began to smolder in anticipation of the arrow's flight.

ITEM: Speed Bow

DETAIL: As Kaelyn gripped the bizarre composite bow and thought of firing a test shot, an arrow instantly appeared nocked and ready. Stunned at the enchantment, Kaelyn realized that eliminating the need to find and grab a new arrow made it possible to shoot twice as quickly.

Arrows

ITEM: Arrow

ITEM: Poisoned Arrow

DETAIL: Kaelyn held an arrow up to her eye and sighted along its length. Satisfied the shaft hadn't warped, she set it back down. With a good bow behind it, the arrow would fly straight and true.

ITEM: Enchanted Arrow

ITEM: Poisoned Enchanted Arrow

DETAIL: As far as Kaelyn knew, the secret of enhancing an arrow's accuracy was jealously guarded by the Mehrat, making these arrows hard to come by within the Empire. They took the challenge and skill out of hunting, but in combat she'd take whatever advantage he could get.

ITEM: Grrrlf Arrow

ITEM: Poisoned Grrrlf Arrow

DETAIL: As with the rest of their woodwork, Grrrlf arrows were superior in every way to those made by humans. They flew farther and truer, had more stopping power, and incorporated an aesthetic human fletchers seldom considered.

ITEM: Flaming Arrow

DETAIL: Kaelyn was tempted to disassemble the firebrand to discover exactly what made it burst into flame on impact, but she doubted she'd be able to reassemble it and didn't want to waste a valuable resource. The thought of it blowing up in her face wasn't pleasant, either.

ITEM: Corrosive Arrow

DETAIL: The specially treated pouch lashed to the tip played havoc with the arrow's aerodynamics. When it struck, though, the acid bursting from that pouch would eat through wood, metal... and flesh.

Body Armor

ITEM: Leather Jerkin

DETAIL: Lightweight and affordable, the simple leather jerkin and leggings offered a modicum of protection without slowing the wearer down-- a common choice for travelers wary of brigands.

ITEM: Leather Armor

DETAIL: The leather armor, its stiff leather plates bound together by thin metal strips, conveyed a certain measure of danger. The reinforcing studs helped deflect incoming blades and suggested the wearer wasn't someone to be trifled with. It wasn't pretty, but it did the job.

ITEM: Shepherd Armor

DETAIL: William fingered the links of the armor, more stylish than standard mail but lighter and less protective. An accompanying tabard emblazoned with the Shepherd emblem reinforced his impression that the ensemble was intended more for show than for serious combat.

ITEM: Chain Mail

DETAIL: The chain mail, standard equipment among the Antaran military, was heavy but well worth the extra weight. Its interlocking links and inner padding absorbed much of a blow's impact while preserving the wearer's freedom of movement.

ITEM: Montari Chain Mail

DETAIL: An impressive feat of metalwork, the lightweight links in this suit of armor were virtually unbreakable. Despite years of study and failed attempts, humans remained unable to match the astounding resilience and craftsmanship of the stylish Montari mail.

ITEM: Breastplate

DETAIL: The breastplate was a simple piece of engineering made of two pieces of metal fastened together with buckles and leather straps. Its deflecting surface made it popular among mounted soldiers, who were likely to find themselves amidst a lethal rain of arrows.

ITEM: Montari Plate Mail

DETAIL: In the hands of Montari craftsmen a piece of metal became a work of art. The finely filigreed plate mail with its ebony and onyx inlay was in great demand among generals, knights, and poseurs-- the former for the unmatched protection it offered, the latter for the flashy image it afforded them at public appearances.

Shields

ITEM: Wooden Shield

DETAIL: The stout wood planks bound together by a metal rim and studs was better than nothing, but its weight made it clumsy to use and it tended to splinter under the impact of strong blows.

ITEM: Small Shield

DETAIL: Shields like this one were small, lightweight, and standard issue among Imperial foot soldiers. While the soldiers liked their utility, the Imperial Army liked their low cost.

ITEM: Grrrlf Shield

DETAIL: If the Grrrlf were finding limited acceptance among humans, their incredible woodwork was another story. Originally created as ceremonial gear (the Grrrlf themselves abhorred violence), the spectacular detailing and relative imperviousness of their hardwood shields made them eagerly sought within the Empire.

ITEM: Banded Shield

DETAIL: The studded metal rim on this shield provided an anchor for tight metal bands bolted across its face, reinforcing the shield for greater protection and durability.

ITEM: Tortoise Shield

DETAIL: With its patchwork of polished carlith scales, this shield resembled nothing so much as a giant tortoise shell. While such a shell provided its host with a haven from danger, the many angled surfaces of this shield helped deflect incoming strikes away from the bearer.

ITEM: Tower Shield

DETAIL: Knights carried such shields, often emblazoned with the crest of the House they served. Its length covered much of a fighter's body, protecting a greater area than smaller shields could.

ITEM: Vanguard Shield

DETAIL: The shield tugged against William's hand, eager to defend him against unseen threats. A relic from the era of the First Wave of magic, the process for making such shields was lost during the Anti-Magic Uprisings.

Amulets, Rings and Charms

ITEM: Circlet of Senaedrin

DETAIL: Circlets of Senaedrin were said to have been forged from the goddess' own tears at the death of Emperor Valorian I. Only a few were known to exist, but the tales of their astounding curative abilities created a broad market for worthless fakes.

ITEM: Henne's Horn

DETAIL: Contrary to the joymen's tales, the horn didn't produce banquets of succulent delicacies at the wearer's command. Named for the Face that watched over travelers, it did allow one to go for longer stretches without food.

ITEM: Intapi's Eye

DETAIL: The impossibility of sneaking up on House Mirabi's greatest warrior led people to say he had eyes in the back of his head. Only after Intapi's death was his amulet, the source of his uncanny combat awareness, discovered. It wasn't long before copies appeared, allowing the wearer to more easily guard his back in battle.

ITEM: Lucky Charm

DETAIL: The charm was one of the few items TrKaa ever exchanged with outsiders. Woven from their own feathers, it was valued not just for the good fortune it was reputed to hold but because the TrKaa only bestowed them as gifts of respect or appreciation.

ITEM: Necklace of Communion

DETAIL: The silver loops, each intertwined with its neighbors, were elegant in their simplicity. William traced his fingers along one of them and got a brief sense of those around him-- as if he was inside of them, with a better understanding of their abilities than they likely had themselves. William let his finger slide away from the silver and the feeling faded.

ITEM: Protective Charm

DETAIL: The charm obviously had been crafted with painstaking care. Branches of gold cradled a lustrous pearl with a delicate resolve. When worn against his chest, the charm felt reassuringly warm.

ITEM: Ring of the Ranger

DETAIL: Most people thought the peculiar rings sported by some trackers and scouts were awarded to them when they finished their training. Actually, a Ring of the Ranger was not a reward for natural skill. By linking the wearer with the earth beneath him, it could make even an inept city lordling a capable ranger.

ITEM: Ring of Welcoming

DETAIL: A well-meaning mage first manufactured such rings to enable engravers to perform more delicate work. Once less scrupulous sorts got wind of their existence, craftsmen had to guard them well or have them purloined in the night. Just touching the ring, William felt a surge of nimbleness and sensitivity in his fingertips and immediately understood why thieves would find them so interesting.

ITEM: Shadowring

DETAIL: Rings such as this weren't often seen in the Empire. Stealing them away from Chailan spymasters tended to be more trouble than it was worth. In fact, one generally needed a shadowring to sneak up on a spymaster in the first place, which made acquiring one something of a paradox.

Enhancers

ITEM: Oil

DETAIL: A byproduct of the Silvertail fish, this flammable and tenacious goo clung to whatever it touched. A sword coated with ignited oil made an intimidating weapon.

USE: Tilting the specially treated gourd, William spread a coating of oil on the sword and set it aflame. It wouldn't burn for long, but while it lasted the flame would give his opponents something extra to worry about.

FAIL: William caught himself just in time. "What was I thinking?" he muttered. "That would just make a big mess."

ITEM: Irthinde

DETAIL: The container, cleverly woven from treated irthinde fronds, was made to look like the thorny bulbs of that poisonous plant. Deadlier even than calderleaf, irthinde acted on the muscular system to gradually sap the victim's strength until at last there was not even enough to keep his heart pumping.

USE: William dripped irthinde onto the point and sharp edges, taking great care to avoid contact with the stuff himself. William carried the poisoned object gingerly, knowing that if it cut his skin he'd soon have toxins coursing through his veins.

FAIL: William thought better of it at the last moment. "Irthinde's deadly-- I'd better not play with it."

ITEM: Frostband

DETAIL: The frigid gold band with lapis inlay resisted all attempts to slip it over his wrist. William was puzzled until he spied the engraving on the inner surface: "Down, then up slide on a blade, to winter's frost a link be made." Lousy poetry, but he got the idea.

USE: The band's temperature plummeted as William slid it down the length of the sword, chilling the tips of his fingers. As he lifted the band back up again, icy sparks leapt from its inner surface to coat the blade with a wintery frost. When William removed the band, the weapon sparkled with the icy film the magical device left behind.

FAIL: Try though he might, William couldn't get the frostband to react when he tried to use it that way. Recognizing the futility of his effort, he finally put it aside.

ITEM: Fidali Paste

DETAIL: William wondered how many people had died from poison before someone had stumbled upon fidali paste. It would have taken a lot to get William to swallow fidali leaves that had been chewed and regurgitated by a cow. Then again, he reflected, it was better than dying of poison. Fortunately, the paste could now be synthesized without a cow's help. It still had a hideous flavor, but smearing it on armor countered an attacker's poison-- without the aftertaste.

USE: William scooped up a glob of paste with his fingers and rubbed it over his armor, rubbing until the stuff coated the entire surface. It was a thin layer, but that was enough to neutralize any poison it contacted.

FAIL: William laughed at his silliness. Imagine, trying to use fidali paste that way! William resolved to pay more attention to what he was doing.

CONSUME: William scooped up a glob of paste with his fingers and sucked it down, grimacing at the vinegary taste. Within moments he relaxed as soothing warmth spreading through his body indicated the paste was counteracting any toxins in his system.

ITEM: Talicor Dust

DETAIL: The small drawstring pouch protected a scant supply of talicor dust, a fine powder ground from the mineral so common in the Harkune Mountains. Homes throughout T'icor, where fire posed a serious threat, kept a supply of the dust on hand for emergencies. Soldiers found that when sprinkled on armor, it would counteract the effect of a flaming blade.

USE: William opened the pouch and sprinkled a liberal amount of dust onto his armor. Some of the powder struck the ground and he frowned at the waste, but William knew he'd prefer safety to economy if an opponent swung a flaming sword at him.

FAIL: William blinked, surprised at his own behavior. William knew the talicor dust was only useful on armor. Bemused, he shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

ITEM: Thawing Belt

DETAIL: The studded leather belt looked normal enough, if overlarge. The buckle appeared to be broken, though. No matter how William tried to clasp the belt closed, the buckle refused to hold. Once, though, William would have sworn the thing grew warm to the touch before releasing.

USE: William clasped the end of the belt into the buckle with an audible click. The buckle's red stone flashed for an instant and William felt a gentle wave of warmth ripple up through his armor. When the wave subsided, the belt slipped open and dropped to the ground. His armor still felt a little warm-- just enough, William realized, to cancel out the effect of a frosted blade.

FAIL: The belt had no effect when used that way. William guessed it was designed to be used differently.

ITEM: Attractor

DETAIL: The Empire had the Mehrat to thank for this device. Much of their native terrain was rife with ledges and outcroppings. With ambushes commonplace, Mehrat mages found a thriving market for devices providing extra protection from hidden bowmen. This was an Antaran version of the original Mehrat design, but it functioned much the same.

USE: The shield glowed briefly with a light blue aura that would draw enemy arrows to it much like a whirlpool devouring passing driftwood.

FAIL: William reconsidered. The point of the device was to help block arrows, and it made little sense to use it on something that didn't share that purpose.

ITEM: Hardening Fluid

DETAIL: William unscrewed the clamping ring and popped the parchment cap from the horn, then quickly recoiled from the cloying sickly-sweet aroma of the chemical fluid inside. Hastily replacing the cap, William paused to examine the parchment. A hard, rigid film coated the underside, the result of continued exposure to the fluid.

USE: The fluid vanished as quickly as it was applied, already forming a protective coating that would guard the item against deterioration.

FAIL: While it was amusing to think of bizarre ways to use the various items he carried, William realized he had more important things to do.

ITEM: Grounding Wire

DETAIL: William didn't understand the principle behind it, but he'd seen people with such wire trailing from their armor survive electrical attacks which should have cooked them where they stood.

USE: William unrolled a length of wire from the spool, tying one end to a metal fastener on the neck of his armor and hanging the other end down its back so that it trailed along the ground. It would probably be ripped off during battle, but until then William would breathe a little easier during a thunderstorm.

FAIL: William supposed he could loop the wire around it, but couldn't see how that would be useful.

ITEM: Carluda's Chain

DETAIL: In the early days of the Imperial Army, provincial rivalries made it difficult for untrained soldiers from different homelands to trust each other. An insightful commander solved two problems in one stroke by linking his men together with a magical chain. The weakest men were automatically protected by the strength of their fellows, and every soldier learned the importance of looking out for his comrades.

USE: William seized the chain in both hands and yanked hard. The endmost link came free and immediately dissolved into a purple stream of energy that wrapped itself in a loop around he and his comrades. When the steam dissipated, William still felt somehow... linked... to his companions.

FAIL: William tugged at the chain but, outside of straining his muscles, accomplished nothing. Apparently its magic was sophisticated enough to prevent misuse in inappropriate circumstances.

ITEM: Dervish Disk

DETAIL: The glazed clay disk felt fragile to William, but he knew that was intentional. The disk would be easy to break in combat, which was necessary to release its defensive magic.

USE: William threw the disk to the ground and quickly stomped on it, snapping the disk in half. Twin tendrils of light spiraled up and around him in opposite directions, streaking ever faster and drawing thinner with each circuit until, finally meeting directly over William's head, the tendrils collapsed into a point and vanished. William's head spun as he adjusted to a flood of new images. The light wasn't gone-- it was still swirling invisibly around him, letting William see simultaneously in all directions.

FAIL: William squeezed the disk experimentally but it remained intact. Somehow its magic kept it whole until needed in combat. Just as well, William reflected, since otherwise he would have wasted a valuable tool.

Useful Items

ITEM: Burlas

DETAIL: The shape, size, and Imperial portrait featured on the burla had changed many times in the Empire's history. Yet the coin's gold content, the foundation of the region's economic stability, remained constant.

ITEM: Torch

DETAIL: The club-like stick was wrapped at one end with cloth that had been thoroughly soaked in oil and pitch. William couldn't tell how long it would burn once lit, but he knew torches were usually good for most of a day.

ITEM: Whetstone

DETAIL: William ran his finger along the edge of the whetstone. The friction it would create with a sword would help smooth out the nicks the weapon picked up in combat.

FAIL: William gave the blade a final pass with the whetstone before wiping it down with an oilcloth. "I'd say that's about as sharp as I can get it."

ITEM: Armorer's Hammer

DETAIL: William flipped the hammer end over end into the air, catching it by the haft. Too light to be useful in battle, it was just the thing for patching up any chinks his armor developed.

FAIL: William poked at the armor, but soon set it and the hammer aside. "A smith might do better, but I've already done everything I can with this."

ITEM: Shovel

DETAIL: A humble tool, but sturdy-- the craftsman hadn't cut any corners. William didn't plan on digging any privy ditches, but he'd hate to stumble across buried treasure unprepared.

WRONG: William eyed the spot skeptically. "This doesn't seem like a good place to dig."

ITEM: Rope

DETAIL: The braided cord looked strong enough to support a person's weight.

ITEM: Pick Axe

DETAIL: Sharp at both ends, the axe was a fairly easy tool to use. The trick was knowing where to find the rich veins of minerals which made its use worthwhile.

USE: William took to the rock with the axe, stone chips flying in all directions. After a time, a glittering reflection caught his eye.

FAIL: William took to the rock with the axe, stone chips flying in all directions. After a long while of digging with nothing to show for it but a pile of rubble, he reluctantly set the axe aside.

WRONG: William put the axe away. "This doesn't seem like a good spot for prospecting."

ITEM: Fishing Rod

DETAIL: Hardly much more than a polished stick with a gut line attached to one end, the pole was obviously intended for small fish. William wouldn't catch any trophies with it, but then he intended to eat what he caught, not mount it.

USE: William carefully baited the hook and cast his line into the water, settling in to wait. It wasn't long before the tip of the pole dipped sharply. After a brief struggle, William pulled something in.

FAIL: William carefully baited the hook and cast his line into the water, settling in to wait. Time passed peacefully, but without so much as a nibble. William reeled in his line and decided to seek a better spot.

WRONG: William reconsidered. "This doesn't seem like a good spot to fish."

ITEM: Lockpicks

DETAIL: William admired the polished silver tools. The precision taken in crafting the lockpicks was matched by that required to make a lock give up its secrets.

USE: William probed the lock's mechanisms, gently feeling the tumblers slide into place until he heard a telltale click. William couldn't keep a satisfied smile off his face as he pulled at the lock, which fell open obligingly.

FAIL: William probed the lock's mechanisms, but the tumblers didn't seem to line up properly. At last he gave up. "I'm not having any luck here," he grumbled. "It may be too complex for me."

WRONG: William twirled the ring of lockpicks on his finger, searching in vain for a lock on which to use them.

ITEM: Beeswax

DETAIL: Bowstrings took a lot of pressure and abuse, and no archer could afford to have one snap in the heat of action. Careful application of beeswax kept the string from fraying and helped restore its tension.

FAIL: Kaelyn ran her finger along the string. "More isn't always better," she reflected. "I'd say I've done all I can for now."

ITEM: Bowstring

DETAIL: The waxed hemp fibers looked to be in top condition and would make a fine replacement for the worn string of any bow.

FAIL: Noticing that her bow was already at peak performance, Kaelyn realized there was no need to waste a perfectly good bowstring.

ITEM: Ale

DETAIL: William struggled with the stopper, jammed tightly into the mouth of the jug. With a sudden jerk it came free, sloshing dark malty ale onto his hand.

USE: William took a few long pulls, letting the warm ale course down his throat in steady streams. After staring accusingly at the bottom of the empty jug he set it down with a thud, feeling heartier-- and a trifle woozier.

ITEM: Wine

DETAIL: William squinted at the label. Although most Antaran wine came from southern Tigor and Pianda, the quality varied widely from vineyard to vineyard and year to year.

USE: William's first swallow was tentative, but his initial caution was soon washed away by the heady flavor of the wine. Before he knew it the skin was empty, and he felt a bit heartier-- and a trifle woozier.

ITEM: Fidali Leaves

DETAIL: Though separated from the roots that nourished them, the leaves remained oddly soft and moist.

ITEM: Bucket

DETAIL: The wooden slats of the bucket had warped a little with age, but it still seemed watertight.

ITEM: Drum

DETAIL: Aren struck the drum tentatively, producing a pleasantly deep resonance from the aged wood and cured sheepskin instrument.

USE: Aren struck the drum in rhythm as he'd been shown. The effect was immediate-- some worms began swaying in response, the vibrations tickling their nerves and soothing them.

FAIL: Aren struck a fumbling beat on the drum, but it had no noticeable effect.

ITEM: Barn Key

DETAIL: The simple iron key might fit any of hundreds of locks in the Empire, but its size suggested the lock it matched was too big for a chest. William guessed a door was most likely.

ITEM: Key

DETAIL:

Quest Items

ITEM: Shepherd Medallion

DETAIL: William studied the bronze medallion. The face was cast with an image of a rolling pasture. A cloaked shepherd watched a flock of sheep, his crook held loosely at his side. Flipping it over, he found the back of the disk to be bare except for a triangular indentation in the center and the letters "R, L, R" hastily scratched into the bronze.

ITEM: Animal Pelts

DETAIL: Although they weren't as valued as wolf or bearskins, the small animal pelts could still fetch a good price.

ITEM: Note

DETAIL: The wrinkled note looked like it had been flattened back out after being crumpled into a ball.

ITEM: Wedding Rings

DETAIL: The three identical rings formed a traditional Antaran wedding set: one for the bride, one for the groom, and one to be passed down to their firstborn child for its wedding day.

ITEM: Handkerchief

DETAIL: This may have once been a fine silk handkerchief, but he doubted any amount of washing would make it presentable again. William tried not to speculate about what may have caused the various colored stains. Much of the intricate embroidery was still intact, though, including a monogrammed "LG" in one corner.

ITEM: Deed

DETAIL: William sifted through the legalese with some distaste. In essence, the deed granted its bearer the custodianship of the lands Farmer Brunia had worked most of his life. William looked forward to returning it to him.

ITEM: Sealed Scroll

DETAIL: The simple scroll was sealed with a wax signet William recognized as belonging to the Contuso family of Waterfork.

ITEM: Enkudi's Gems

DETAIL: William stared at the handful of tiny gemstones. Pearls, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, diamonds-- even at their size, such a collection was worth more than most men could hope for in two lifetimes. William suppressed a flash of avarice and realized he wouldn't be at ease until the gems were delivered to Antoni in Midova as promised.

ITEM: Divining Rod

DETAIL: It seemed like an ordinary stick to Aren until he grabbed both prongs of the forked end. Then the stick came alive, tugging at him as if dragged by an invisible current.

USE: The rod lurched under Aren's hands, pulling him along with it. Suddenly its tip dipped to the ground and penetrated the rock like a diver into the sea. As they watched, the rod disappeared completely beneath the earth. Within moments, a trickle of water began seeping up from that spot.

USE:

USE: "Um, I think we should get out of here," Aren stammered. "It may not be much yet, but I'll bet this is just the beginning-- and I don't think we should be here when the dam breaks."

FAIL: The rod quivered briefly, pointing vaguely downward. "I don't think we've gone far enough," Aren concluded. "I can't see the spring."

ITEM: Chailan Tea

DETAIL: William raised the bundle of crushed leaves to his nose and inhaled, filling his nostrils with the rich aroma. It smelled vaguely unpleasant to him, an opinion shared by most Antarans-- which was why few shops in the Empire stocked it. Chailan tea was something of an acquired taste.

ITEM: Nudberry Roots

DETAIL: The soft, thin end roots of the nudberry bush were hard to come by. The roots grew deep into the soil and were tenaciously difficult to remove.

ITEM: Nudration

DETAIL: The packet of rations looked and smelled normal, betraying no hint of the ground nudberry roots mixed into the food. Kaelyn put the sleep-inducing bundle aside.

ITEM: Rampart Key

DETAIL: The custom-made key looked like it would fit the massive locks on the rampart gates.

ITEM: Nutrients

DETAIL: Aren gave in to curiosity and loosened the bundle. It contained fine crystals, which he ran through his fingers, trying in vain to divine their composition. Finally he gave up and rewrapped the bundle.

ITEM: Letters

DETAIL: The letters were packed together in a tight sheaf and carefully preserved. William guessed they were of great personal import to someone.

ITEM: Play Tickets

DETAIL: The hard leather strips branded with the amphitheater's name would undoubtedly be reused upon collection at the front gate. These tickets were for the current performance of "Academy of Broken Hearts" starring Gerald Vardese and Maria Liana.

ITEM: Brian Castere's Journal

DETAIL: Notes and diagrams covered the journal's pages, permanent records of someone's thoughts and observations. Additional sheets, perhaps ideas captured when the journal was out of reach, stuck out at all angles.

USE: Aren studied Castere's notes on the nature of motion, struggling to comprehend the author's arcane notations and obscure nomenclature. When he finished, Aren felt he had sufficient grasp of the concepts to experiment on his own.

FAIL: William flipped through the journal but couldn't make any sense of it. Most of the pages were filled with mystical-looking notes and symbols.

ITEM: Red Key

DETAIL: The simple iron key might fit any of hundreds of locks in the Empire, but its size suggested the lock it matched was too big for a chest. William guessed a door was more likely.

ITEM: Blue Key

DETAIL: The simple iron key might fit any of hundreds of locks in the Empire, but its size suggested the lock it matched was too big for a chest. William guessed a door was most likely.

ITEM: Green Key

DETAIL: The simple iron key might fit any of hundreds of locks in the Empire, but its size suggested the lock it matched was too big for a chest. William guessed a door was most likely.

ITEM: Tree Idol

DETAIL: The polished wood statue evoked a visceral reaction, simultaneously revolting and compelling. Where Grrrlf woodwork illuminated the material's natural form and beauty, it was almost as if this wood had been forced into something it didn't want to be.

ITEM: Faded Note

DETAIL: The faded note carried the musty smell of many years spent languishing in a forgotten courier satchel.

ITEM: Note

DETAIL: Kaelyn recognized the handwriting immediately-- the note was from her father.

ITEM: Glass Tube

DETAIL: Four crimson glass panels were held together by a box-like lead frame with a hook at the top. The resulting tube looked like it was intended to be wall-mounted.

ITEM: Sealed Note

DETAIL: William stifled his curiosity about what was written on the paper. If he broke the seal, the note's authenticity might be questioned.

ITEM: Sealed Note

DETAIL: William had a pretty good idea about what was written on the note, but decided not to verify it-- he doubted Lokath would trust them if they broke the seal.

ITEM: Swampwalking Potion

DETAIL: William held the bottle at arm's length. Even with the cork in place its stagnant odor filled his nostrils. Apparently, to walk on swampwater he'd have to drink something that smelled like swampwater.

USE: It was every bit as vile as William had feared, but he forced the noxious sludge down his throat. By the time he'd finished, the stuff was starting to taste good and the air around him smelled fresh and pleasant.

FAIL: William turned the bottle in his hands, grimacing at the thought of swallowing the sludge inside. "On second thought," he mumbled, "I don't see a pressing need for this right now." William put the bottle back in his pack. "In fact, as far as I'm concerned, those mercenaries waiting near Darvi are welcome to it!"

ITEM: Explosive Flasks

DETAIL: A small length of oil-soaked rope poked out of the container. When set alight, the fuse would burn slowly until the flame contacted the oily pitch inside. Kaelyn planned to be far away for that explosion!

ITEM: Fatty Meat

DETAIL: The purity of the slab of fat was only rarely marred by a sliver of meat that had somehow wandered into foreign territory.

ITEM: Sencream

DETAIL: It smelled rancid and felt greasy. Kaelyn silently thanked the Triune for not making her so vain about her appearance as to rely on concoctions like this to maintain it.

ITEM: Gregor's Key

DETAIL: Upon close inspection William saw the key wasn't actually silver. A thin layer of silver plating covered a standard door key.

ITEM: Note

DETAIL: The note looked like it had been hastily scrawled on a blank page which had been ripped from the back of a book.

ITEM: Gregor's Journal

DETAIL: Notes and diagrams covered the journal's pages, permanent records of someone's thoughts and observations. Additional sheets, perhaps ideas captured when the journal was out of reach, stuck out at all angles.

ITEM: Practice Sheet

DETAIL: The paper was creased haphazardly, as if it had been folded accidentally or in a hurry.

USE: The page was covered with signatures, all of the same name: Cameron Sheffield. William had seen many documents signed by Lord Sheffield, and while the topmost signatures didn't look right, those at the bottom were dead ringers.

ITEM: Cellar Key

DETAIL: The simple iron key might fit any of hundreds of locks in the Empire, but its size suggested the lock it matched was too big for a chest. William guessed a door was most likely.

ITEM: Bryce's Journal

DETAIL: Pages jutted haphazardly from between the volume's covers, holding scrawled notes written while the journal was not at hand.

ITEM: Nudberries

DETAIL: A peculiar fruit, both purple and green berries grew on the same plant. They grew throughout the Empire and were a particular nuisance in T'icor, where their influence could spoil an entire vineyard.

ITEM: TrKaa Feather

DETAIL: The long feather came from the outermost of a TrKaa's three feathered layers. Aren expected it to be soft and fluffy and was surprised at the rough feel it had against his skin.

ITEM: Notes

DETAIL: The loose pages included papers and parchments of varying grades and types, likely from many sources.

USE: Aren read through the notes eagerly. After many false starts, he finally felt he understood how to create the magical effects they described. Aren couldn't wait to test the spells out.

FAIL: William flipped through the pages, but he couldn't sense any of the forces described in them and quickly lost interest.

Potions

ITEM: Senwater

DETAIL: William held the bottle gingerly, for it contained one of the Triune's greatest gifts to humanity. Only the Sisters of Senaedin knew the location of Denna's fabled spring, but its healing water had saved thousands of lives.

USE: William unstopped the bottle and drank greedily. His skin tingled as the pure, clear water took effect, purging toxins and infection and closing open wounds.

ITEM: Herbal Powder

DETAIL: William opened the bag and peered inside, recoiling at the horrid stench. Applied to a wound, the crushed herbs and ground roots would accelerate the natural healing process. William just prayed he never injured his nose.

USE: William carefully mixed some of the powder with enough water to form a sticky paste. Wrinkling his nose, he pressed the goo against his wounds and wrapped it with a bandage. The pungent dressing would have to be changed daily, but it was better than bleeding to death.

ITEM: Halder's Brew

DETAIL: Bubbles rose from the bottom of the vial as William shook it, floating to the top of the thick green liquid. Maybe the bubbles were the secret to its strength-augmenting power-- but if so, William didn't understand how.

USE: Downing the brew felt like swallowing a rock-- a rock that sat stubbornly in William's belly. Stomach rumbling, William felt his muscles spasm and then flexed his arms and legs experimentally. The unnatural power he felt in them was exhilarating.

ITEM: Essence of the Wind

DETAIL: William fingered the stopper and almost lost his grip on the bottle, which lurched violently. As he watched, the bottle began vibrating faster and faster, blurring in William's vision. Startled, William released the stopper and the bottle immediately stilled. William wasn't sure what was inside, but whatever it was, it was fast!

USE: William snatched the stopper from the bottle in one swift movement. Instantly, pale vapors swirled around him, disappearing down his throat when he inhaled. The world seemed to slow to half speed, the edge of his vision blurring when he moved.

ITEM: Kor's Blood

DETAIL: The viscous red liquid moved as if alive, crashing against the bottle where William's fingers held it. Despite the battle prowess it bestowed, it wasn't really the lifeblood of the Father god. At least, William hoped not.

USE: William's arms burned for a moment. When the sensation faded, they felt much longer. His weapon was no longer merely held in his hand-- it was a natural extension of his body. Each motion flowed seamlessly into the next in an exquisite dance of martial forms.

ITEM: Razorcup Nectar

DETAIL: It was said that needlebills, which drank the nectar from the rare razorcup flower, never flew off course. The piercing thorns and finger-slicing leaves of the plant made the extraction of that nectar a hazardous procedure for humans.

USE: Kaelyn's breath caught. Though it seemed distant and unimportant, she could still hear and smell everything around her. Mind centered amidst that sudden void, Kaelyn was certain she could shoot a mouse at a hundred paces.

FAIL: Aren considered the nectar, but decided against it. With a bow, he was more of a threat to himself and his allies than to any opponents, and he doubted anything could change that.

ITEM: Abrida's Conduit

DETAIL: Something pulsated behind the smoky glass, creating an ever-shifting shadowplay across the canister's surface. Drinking its contents just gave most people indigestion, but for a spellcaster it cleared the mind and brought the forces of power into sharper focus.

USE: Aren unscrewed the brass cap and took a long pull from the canister. Immediately the cobwebs in his mind dissolved and his thoughts focused on the magical forces around him.

FAIL: William eyed the canister warily. "I tried this stuff once a long time ago, and I couldn't hold food down for days. I'll pass, thanks."

ITEM: Steadfast Tonic

DETAIL: Magically distilled from the glands of ginger toads, garrisons stocked "frog juice" to make their defenders more efficient when outnumbered. Supplies dropped sharply after the Chinese savannah, the toads' main habitat, was vaporized in the disaster which created the Waste.

USE: William downed the tonic in one long swallow. Immediately, he became aware of the position of everyone around him, tracking every movement with heightened reflexes. William felt like a jaeger, muscles tensed and prepared to leap.

ITEM: Shadowmilk

DETAIL: The best thieves took pride in their natural abilities, but lesser talents often relied on Shadowmilk to augment their capacity for stalking and sneaking. Illegal within the walls of most cities, the Imperial Army made sure their scouts had a flask with them on forays into enemy territory.

USE: William didn't feel any different after the Shadowmilk slid down his throat, but he noticed that his body's motion had changed. When he moved, it was with an economy, grace, and preternatural silence he normally lacked.

ITEM: Malkere's Serum

DETAIL: Legends spoke of the courage, valor, and phenomenal prowess of Barran Malkere, hero of the Grrrlf War and perhaps the greatest fighter humankind had ever known. This serum created a berserker state reminiscent of Malkere's battle rage, but it was unpredictable and sorely taxed the body.

USE: William shuddered violently as the serum raced through his bloodstream. A battle lust boiled within him-- a burning force shutting all else from his mind. Muscles bulging, William looked around eagerly for a target for his rage.

ITEM: Tonguecoat

DETAIL: The closely held secret of a Burlene trader until an aide got drunk with a competitor's agent, the charismatic enhancement of this mysterious brew explained the trader's meteoric rise to wealth. The impotence caused by repeated use explained why that trader's name had been lost to history.

USE: William quaffed the liquid with some trepidation-- surely occasional use was safe. But as it slid across his tongue and coated his throat, a vision of himself dying alone many years hence made him wonder if he'd later regret his more adventurous days.

ITEM: Yelloweye

DETAIL: Purportedly the result of brutal experiments on Grrrlf prisoners during the Grrrlf War, this potion temporarily restructured the human eye to give it better vision in the dark. The yellow irises were an unintended side effect.

USE: The world blurred as the potion did its work. When William's vision cleared, shadows and darkness were much brighter-- and, William thought with some surprise, not at all tinted yellow.

FAIL: Raal eyed the bottle with distaste. "I find my vision is quite sufficient," he growled. "I will not offend my ancestors by drinking their blood."

Books

ITEM: A Field Guide to Irrigation and Farming

DETAIL: Aren examined the book's broken spine, tattered cover and yellowed pages, but couldn't conclude whether it had seen a lot of use or merely a lot of abuse.

USE: Aren wasn't particularly interested in farming, but one section of the book caught his eye. The mystic symbols and descriptions, intended for itinerant rural mages, gave Aren unexpected ideas about the moisture in the land and air around him.

FAIL: William didn't expect to do any farming in the near future. Stifling a yawn, he closed the book and set it aside.

ITEM: A Social Analysis of Organisms

DETAIL: The smooth cover, pressed pages, and distinctive smell suggested this book had barely been opened, let alone read.

USE: William's eyes almost glazed over as he scanned through the highbrow theories and technical minutia, but he was impressed by the observational methods described therein.

ITEM: Acute Senses and Perception

DETAIL: William examined the book's broken spine, tattered cover and yellowed pages, but couldn't conclude whether it had seen a lot of use or merely a lot of abuse.

USE: William studied the book, a guide to meditative and observational techniques for enhancing the acuity of the senses. Although many of the approaches seemed bizarre or even silly to William, he found some he looked forward to putting into practice.

ITEM: An Optics Primer

DETAIL: The quality of the volume's leather binding and its neatly trimmed pages suggested the book had been prepared and maintained with great care.

USE: It was like a whole new world had opened for Aren, sucking him into its pages of arcane notes and procedures. When he finally emerged, his eyes glittered with excitement and knowledge.

FAIL: William flipped through the volume but couldn't make sense of the many pages filled with mystical-looking notes and symbols.

ITEM: Cadman's Memoir

DETAIL: The book was homemade. A pair of thin wood slats sandwiched scraps of parchment with handwritten words scrawled in a barely legible hand.

USE: William flipped to a random passage. The memoir was a detailed and surprisingly entertaining collection of stories spanning the author's years working in the mines near Aliero. Setting it down, William felt like swinging a pickaxe himself.

ITEM: Carlith Mating Rituals

DETAIL: It wasn't until recent decades that paper became cheap and durable enough to be bound into volumes. Prior to that time, longer works were inscribed on parchment and rolled into scrolls.

USE: William scanned the scroll, curious about why someone would bother to study the mating habits of carliths. That question was never answered, but he did find a fascinating section about the random nature of carlith pairings and the probability of producing clutches of certain sizes. William thought he might be able to put the underlying theories to practical use.

ITEM: Constitutional Study

DETAIL: The quality of the volume's leather binding and its neatly trimmed pages suggested the book had been prepared and maintained with great care. Its full title read, "A Study of the Effects of Magic on the Body's Constitution."

USE: Aren read the book with interest. The author's insights on the nature of the body and how magic could interact with it gave Aren much to think about.

FAIL: William flopped through the volume but couldn't make much sense of the many pages filled with mystical-looking notes and symbols.

ITEM: Halder's Tale

DETAIL: William handled the scroll gingerly. From the look of it, it dated from a time before paper binding was possible.

ITEM: Ledger

DETAIL: The double-rolled format was ideal for recording information. Previous entries could be easily located and reviewed, and if more parchment was required it could be added to the end of the roll.

USE: At first the many columns of numbers meant little to William, but as he studied them he began to see patterns in the values. His mind swam after a short while, but when he set the scroll aside it was with an increased understanding of the ways of commerce.

ITEM: Muscles and Glands

DETAIL: The quality of the volume's leather binding and its neatly trimmed pages suggested the book had been prepared and maintained with great care.

USE: The book turned out to be less about muscles and glands themselves than about how to magically control them or duplicate their effects. Aren studied it eagerly.

FAIL: William leafed through the pages, but the mystical portions went over his head and the clinical sections put him to sleep.

ITEM: Ponaka's Last Stand

DETAIL: William examined the book's broken spine, tattered cover and yellowed pages, but couldn't conclude whether it had seen a lot of use or merely a lot of abuse.

USE: The story of the defense of Ponaka, the last village to fall to the ancient Grrrlf onslaught, was noble and inspiring. William found it also contained sound practical advice that was still applicable centuries later.

ITEM: Swamp Survival Skills

DETAIL: Someone had done the best they could, using bare boards and leather thongs to create a makeshift book. Among the few peasants and 'prentices who could read, such books were far more common than expensive leather volumes.

USE: The grammar was poor, but the wealth of information about swamp hazards and survival techniques made it worth deciphering.

ITEM: The Adventures of Caarl Maston

DETAIL: William examined the book's broken spine, tattered cover and yellowed pages, but couldn't conclude whether it had seen a lot of use or merely a lot of abuse.

USE: As William browsed the pages a flood of fond memories washed over him. The adventures of Caarl Maston were a joyman staple, whisking children and adults away to a mysterious region rife with unknown dangers and discoveries. This written version included details the joymen left out, though, and William found himself fascinated anew.

ITEM: The Inner Void

DETAIL: The gold leaf embellishing this volume was beyond the means of most binders, suggesting it was made on a special commission.

USE: The book described how an archer could achieve a state of maximal focus by clearing his mind and turning his thoughts inward, letting the bow become a natural extension of his body.

FAIL: The book's spiritual discourse on meditative archery held little interest for Aren.

ITEM: Weather Patterns of Ramar

DETAIL: Aren partially unrolled the parchment scroll, wondering why some mages, politicians and scholars still insisted on such an archaic form instead of the more easily read bound book.

USE: It turned out the report wasn't merely about observing or predicting weather patterns, but about manipulating and controlling them. Aren understood only a fragment of the concepts explored in the scroll, but what he gleaned electrified him.

FAIL: William scanned the scroll but found little of interest in the technical and occasionally arcane analysis.

Documents

ITEM: Academy Pass

DETAIL: The heavy parchment read, in precise, elegant calligraphy, "The bearer of this document, a seeker of truth and wisdom, shall be allowed full privileges and access to the Academy's vaults that he may partake of and contribute to the Empire's greatest treasure: knowledge." It was signed "Varta Grelorian, First Rector."

ITEM: Blessed Insurance Policy

DETAIL: Ignoring the writing, he studied the paper itself. William found nothing remarkable about the laid pattern, the cut, or the materials from which it was made, but the document glowed almost imperceptibly.

USE [DISABLED IN GAME]: As William teetered on the brink of collapse, he felt a peculiar warmth in his heart. The feeling grew, spreading throughout his body. As suddenly as it began the effect faded, leaving William enervated with renewed health vigor.

USE [DISABLED IN GAME]:

USE [DISABLED IN GAME]: An odd sound from his pack caught his attention. Checking it, William found a pile of dust where the insurance policy once was.

ITEM: Insurance Policy

DETAIL: The excessive verbiage of the policy made William's head spin. It was too late now, but he wondered if he'd been had.

ITEM: Note

DETAIL: Ignoring the writing, he studied the paper itself. William found nothing remarkable about the laid pattern, the cut, or the materials from which it was made.

ITEM: Note

DETAIL: Judging from the wrinkles, the note had passed through many hands-- or the same hands many times-- before finding its way into William's.

ITEM: Note

DETAIL: Ignoring the writing, William studied the note. Aside from the fine grade of the paper, there was nothing else remarkable or indicative of the note's origin.

ITEM: Treasure Map

DETAIL: The weathered parchment sported blotches of spilled ink and smears of wax, legacies of a careless cartographer.

USE: William studied the map, but without a key or recognizable landmarks it was impossible to determine what location the map depicted. "It's probably fake anyway," he decided.

Gems and Jewelry

ITEM: Brooch

DETAIL: Ladies of the Chailan court offset their simple gowns with brooches like this one. With the impending alliance between Chail and the Imperial Family, demand for the brooches among the Antaran nobility quickly outstripped supply.

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DETAIL: Ladies of the Chailan court offset their simple gowns with brooches like this one. With the impending alliance between Chail and the Imperial Family, demand for the brooches among the Antaran nobility quickly outstripped supply.

ITEM: Bracelet

DETAIL: Some things never went out of style. Bracelets of silver accented with lapis inlay predated the founding of the Empire, and their simple elegance seemed destined to outlast it.

ITEM: Pendant

DETAIL: William grimaced. The pendant was far too garish for his tastes. Trends in fashion were always transitory, but he hoped this particular one passed quickly.

ITEM: Pendant

DETAIL: William grimaced. The pendant was far too garish for his tastes. Trends in fashion were always transitory, but he hoped this particular one passed quickly.

ITEM: Pearl

DETAIL: Plucked from the depths of the sea, the pearl was a mistake-- the result of a grain of sand irritating the flesh of an oyster-- but William couldn't think of a mistake more valued.

ITEM: Sapphire

DETAIL: William held the stone up to the light, turning it in his hand to appreciate the azure gem's beauty.

ITEM: Ruby

DETAIL: William had heard many women described as having ruby lips, but none lived up to the real thing. Men would fight equally hard over either.

ITEM: Emerald

DETAIL: The brilliant gem was the deepest green he had ever seen. William suddenly realized that he held more wealth in his hand than most peasants saw in their lifetimes.

ITEM: Diamond

DETAIL: The hardest substance known to man, the diamond sparkled with prismatic radiance. But, William thought, you couldn't cook on it.

ITEM: Torchite

DETAIL: The inner glow of torchite, like a firefly caught in amber, made the rarest of all precious stones eagerly sought by jewelers as dramatic centerpieces for their work.

ITEM: Sapphire Shieldstone

DETAIL: William held the stone up to the light, turning it in his hand to appreciate the azure gem's beauty. The stone wobbled a bit in William's hand.

USE: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. As the gem rose above him it suddenly changed direction and assumed a steady orbit around his head.

FAIL: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. Expecting it to stay about his head, he was surprised when it plummeted back down and barely reached out in time to catch it. "Hmm..." he thought, "I guess I can only use one at a time."

STOP: William reached up and grabbed the stone, plucking it from its orbit. The stone tugged violently in his fist for a moment, then settled down to a timid wobble.

ITEM: Ruby Shieldstone

DETAIL: William had heard many women described as having ruby lips, but none lived up to the real thing. Men would fight equally hard over either. The stone wobbled a bit in William's hand.

USE: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. As the gem rose above him it suddenly changed direction and assumed a steady orbit around his head.

FAIL: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. Expecting it to stay about his head, he was surprised when it plummeted back down and barely reached out in time to catch it. "Hmm..." he thought, "I guess I can only use one at a time."

STOP: William reached up and grabbed the stone, plucking it from its orbit. The stone tugged violently in his fist for a moment, then settled down to a timid wobble.

ITEM: Emerald Shieldstone

DETAIL: The brilliant gem was the deepest green he had ever seen. William suddenly realized that he held more wealth in his hand than most peasants saw in their lifetimes. The stone wobbled a bit in William's hand.

USE: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. As the gem rose above him it suddenly changed direction and assumed a steady orbit around his head.

FAIL: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. Expecting it to stay about his head, he was surprised when it plummeted back down and barely reached out in time to catch it. "Hmm..." he thought, "I guess I can only use one at a time."

STOP: William reached up and grabbed the stone, plucking it from its orbit. The stone tugged violently in his fist for a moment, then settled down to a timid wobble.

ITEM: Diamond Shieldstone

DETAIL: The hardest substance known to man, the diamond sparkled with prismatic radiance. But, William thought, you couldn't cook on it. The stone wobbled a bit in his hand.

USE: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. As the gem rose above him it suddenly changed direction and assumed a steady orbit around his head.

FAIL: William put the stone on his thumb and flipped it into the air like a coin. Expecting it to stay about his head, he was surprised when it plummeted back down and barely reached out in time to catch it. "Hmm..." he thought, "I guess I can only use one at a time."

STOP: William reached up and grabbed the stone, plucking it from its orbit. The stone tugged violently in his fist for a moment, then settled down to a timid wobble.

Food

ITEM: Food Rations

DETAIL: William was never sure what he'd find inside these wrapped bundles, but dried fish, smoked meats, and roasted nuts were the most common. Whatever they held, it never spoiled. But it never tasted as good as fresh food, either.

ITEM: Roast Chicken

DETAIL: Just thinking about the roasted chicken made his mouth water. William could see the herbs and spices clinging to its skin and sniffed it appreciatively, savoring the aroma of basil, pepper, and parsley.

ITEM: Leg of Lamb

DETAIL: Even cold, the juicy meat looked delicious. William could see the slits where the cook had inserted slivers of garlic, infusing the meat with a heavenly flavor. As far as he was concerned, you could never use too much garlic.

ITEM: Meat Pies

DETAIL: The delicately spiced savories were much better fresh from the oven. Even without hot steam carrying a hint of cinnamon from a slit in their crust, William preferred them to dried trail rations.

ITEM: Fish

DETAIL: William didn't care what type of fish it was, so long as it was edible. Grilled over an open campfire, it would make a welcome change of pace from the usual trail rations.

ITEM: Cheese

DETAIL: Aged in the damp, cold caverns of the Asprezan coast, this semi-soft cheese had a sharp bite cherished throughout the Empire. Transport in sweltering caravan wagon beds only seemed to deepen its heady flavor.

ITEM: Bread

DETAIL: The thick-crustured peasant loaf filled the stomach and helped stretch other provisions a little further.

Unused Descriptions

ITEM: Shepherd Armor

DETAIL: The style of armor seemed to be the fashion amongst the Shepherds-- which, William mused, spoke volumes about their taste. Still, wearing it gave William a chance of passing as a Shepherd himself.

Unused Items

ITEM: Crude Map

DETAIL: The weathered parchment sported blotches of spilled ink and smears of wax, legacies of a careless cartographer.

USE: The scrawled map showed plans for a new workshop in the heart of the Waste, and an impossibly long tunnel leading from the old workshop to the Waste's edge. William could scarcely imagine how Bryce managed to build such a tunnel.

Duplicate Items

ITEM: THIS ITEM SHOULDN'T BE IN THE GAME!

DETAIL: This item was a duplicate of NOTE_9350. Please find the code where this item is being used and replace it with the note.

SONG LYRICS

43885.msg – *Songs – Ballad – The Ballad of the Cyrilan (Complete)*

The Ballad of the Cyrilan (Complete)

Once there was a vessel as proud as she was tall.
Many hands of men did toil to build the graceful yawl.
Her bow was arced, her belly lean, her sails were clean and white.
There was nothing in her form to lend a shadow of her plight.

The Emperor Benarren's fair daughter Isabelle,
Was pledged to wed the prince of Fain, of whom the stories tell,
He sought Cavotte to build a boat, and said, "A vessel gay
That's fit to give as wedding gift to bear them both away!"

For her mast they felled an ell tree, for weight and flex and strength,
To the forests of Januli went to harvest planks of length.
Her lines they made of silk to trim her rig and tie her wales,
Set the greatest weavers in the land to labor for her sails.

On a summer day in Riva, the Cyrilan was named.
The Triune's Three did come in peace to bless this vessel famed.
On her maiden sail to the Isle of Fain, her bearing filled with pride,
For aboard this day the honored pair: the handsome prince and bride.

The sea was gaily dancing in indigo and green.
The crew all swore this was the finest day they'd ever seen.
The sun shone bright, the wind blew strong, the wingfish jumped and played.
In the evening breeze the Cyrilan was steady on her way.

In a night sky torn asunder, the sudden maelstrom came,
The darkness pierced by spears of lightning, thundering hail of flame!
The boat began to spin and sink, the crew fled to a man
When the captain cried, "Abandon ship! Save all that ye can!"

Young Derek was the ship's boy, he jumped atop a float.
And with luck and speed was tossed away from 'round the burning boat.
A mighty beast of legend rose to kill the sailors brave.
The prince and Isabelle embraced to share a watery grave.

For weeks the ship's boy drifted to land in sea unknown,
And eleven years it took for him to find his way home.
When Derek finally crossed from Chail, he sought the Emperor great
To lay to rest the mystery of fair Cyrilan's fate.

Tavern Songs – The Gods Of The Triune (All Four Versions)

Say, barkeep, set up four strong drinks.
Although it may seem odd,
Tonight I'll buy a round or two
For our fine friends, the gods.

For all that they have done for us
A drink seems only fair.
But if they don't show up tonight
I guess I'll drink their share.

Well, the Triune's first-rate, but they're terribly late.
So I don't think they'll mind if I look at the time and say
Hey where were you when the man poured the brew?
And I guess I'll be drinking their share.

Oh, Kor's the strongest of the strong,
So question not his might.
And any man would hail him as
A brother in a fight.

Since Kor's the guardsman of us all
A drink is only fair,
But since a guardsman can't be drunk
I guess I'll drink his share.

Well, the Triune's first-rate, but they're terribly late.
So I don't think they'll mind if I look at the time and say
Hey where were you when the man poured the brew?
And I guess I'll be drinking their share.

Oh, Senaedrin's a woman fine,
The mother of all men,
A healer and a teacher
And a lady to the end.

Since Senaedrin has guided us
A drink is only fair,
But ladies prefer wine to ale
So I guess I'll drink her share.

Well, the Triune's first-rate, but they're terribly late.
So I don't think they'll mind if I look at the time and say
Hey where were you when the man poured the brew?
And I guess I'll be drinking their share.

Oh, Henne lives in innocence
Where all true wisdom starts.
He gave us laughter, tales, and dance
And music in our hearts.

Since Henne gave us tavern songs
A drink is only fair,
But Henne's far too young to drink
So I guess I'll drink his share.

Well, the Triune's first-rate, but they're terribly late.
So I don't think they'll mind if I look at the time and say
Hey where were you when the man poured the brew?
And I guess I'll be drinking their share.

Tavern Songs – The Farmer Girl (All Three Versions)

Oh, the farmer girl has a crooked smile
And patches and stains on her blouse
And a braid that hangs all the way to her arse
And she lives in a tumbledown house.

But the farmer girl has a smile in her eye
As she waits for me in the cart
And of all the women I've known and loved
She's the one who stole my heart.

Oh, the tavern-maid has a jaunty walk
And a promise in her wink
And she squeals when pinched and laughs when she's teased
And she always brings you a drink.

But the farmer girl doesn't just promise
When she winks, it's a fact
And of all the women that I have pinched
She's the one who pinched me back.

Oh, the Jaeger's daughter's a beauty, true
And her skin's as white as milk
And her hair is woven all through with gold
And her gowns are made from silk.

But the farmer girl is a simpler soul
And a true and honest maid
And of all the women I've taken home
She's the only one who stayed.

Tavern Songs – You'll Never Hear My Name (All Four Versions)

Oh, I've never been a hero
And I've never been a mage.
I've never changed the minds of men
As I am not a sage.

I've never been to foreign docks
But I'll bet they're all the same.
And in all the tales the joymen tell
You'll never hear my name.

Oh, I've never been in battle
And I've never been to sea.
I have never saved a prince's life.
None owes a debt to me.

Oh, I haven't sacked a city
Or set a town to flame,
So in all the tales the joymen tell
You'll never hear my name.

If Fame comes round to find me
Please, friends, now don't you tell her.
If Glory comes a' callin'
Then just hide me in the cellar.

For I'll never lie with Glory
And I'll never look for Fame,
And in all the tales the joymen tell
You'll never hear my name.

Of all the men they sing of
I'm the only one who's free,
Since my cup contains no poison.
No assassin waits for me.

Oh, I'm not one to remember,
But I'm also not to blame,
And in all the tales the joymen tell
You'll never hear my name.

Yes, in all the tales the joymen tell
You'll never hear my name.

UNUSED GAME TEXT

There are a number of ideas with completed text in the SCI msg files that were removed from the finished game. Among those are:

• There is an unused introduction summary of the game's beginning, describing the events of Resource \ 1000.vmd.

40799.msg – ***UNUSED TEXT***
Chapter 1 \ Introduction Summary

Topic: Intro Summary

Aren Cordelaine was fishing on the beach. Hearing a commotion in the distance, he ran toward the sound and found a young noble battling a huge winged beast. Nearby, a wounded stranger lay motionless on the sand.

Aren ran to help and for some unexplained reason, a burst of energy flew from his hands and disintegrated the beast. The wounded stranger, knowing he would not survive his wounds, entrusted the noble with a curious gold medallion and a cryptic message.

After brief introductions, the noble suggested Aren accompany him to his home in Panizo for training in his new-found skills.

• In the Temples of Kor, once the player offers an item to be blessed, the Brother repeats the price of the blessing.

46000.msg – ***UNUSED TEXT***
All Chapters \ Temple of Kor – Blessings

Choice: Blessing Armor

"I can bless that armor for a donation of 250 burlas. Would you like the blessing?"

Choice: Blessing Sword

"I can bless that sword for a donation of 150 burlas. Would you like the blessing?"

• *In Balmestri, Farmer Brunia talks a little more about his plight; plus, there is an alternate greeting.*

10812.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 1\Balmestri – The Safe Harbor Inn – Farmer Mattai Brunia

Farmer Mattai Brunia of Imazi

Topic: Tavern

Kaelyn: "So now you're working in this tavern? Rough luck."

Brunia: "Lord Garson's soldiers marched me off the land tilled by my father and his father afore him. My cousin owns this inn. It's him what give me this work and the roof over my head. (RUEFUL) Reckon I'm 'bout as helpful as a bow-legged goat... Farmin's all I know."

Topic: Greeting #2 (Alternate?)

Brunia: "Welcome back."

• *The Vell: the history and back story of the Vell—at least from the perspective of the religious, modern-day Antaran—was explored further in the wonderful book, "Betrayal In Antara – The Official Strategy Guide" by Joe Grant Bell [Prima Publishing, 1997].*

The short version is the Vell were an ancient, scientifically-advanced race inhabiting the Antaran Peninsula. Originally one of the races of the Sentenna—beings who saw themselves as superior to the other creatures of Ramar—they started wars between the races, between civilizations, and against nature itself. Seemingly intent on destroying the planet of Ramar, the great spirit known as "The Power" appeared and implored the Sentenna to change their destructive ways. Only the Vell fully embraced the message,

vowing to learn everything they could from the great spirit; in turn, "The Power" saw the Vell as the people chosen to redeem planet Ramar by returning it to harmony and innocence. In their hubris of acquiring such powerful knowledge, however, the Vell turned away from their all-powerful benefactor and were subsequently destroyed for it. After this betrayal, "The Power" fractured into the Three Faces of the Triune known today.

The game "Betrayal In Antara" is set thousands of years after the Vell's demise and all of their advanced technology has been lost. Some acknowledgment of their existence still remains in the game, however, such as:

- Walston researching their language at Burlen's Pernath Academy in Chapter 4.*
- Also in Chapter 4, Walston describes the only known working Vell device, which runs on "science," not magic; its sprays a polymeric coating on items to toughen them.*
- The cause of the Feeblepox outbreak was hinted as the fault of miners opening an old Vell chamber within the Aliero mines in the Harkune Mountains, which allowed the disease to spread throughout Antara (see Jarston's letter found in the dead courier's satchel as well as the Friole farmer's response / Friole Barn, Chapter 4).*

However, aside from the mining town of Aliero having fallen on hard times during the finished game (according to the Strategy Guide, two-thirds of the population of Aliero had died from the Feeblepox plague), it's never touch upon again.

William and Aren cannot give the Jarston's journal to Walston, even though he'd the person be MOST interested in the find. (There is a typo in the finished game: when the letter is discovered in the Friole Barn, William says it was written by "Marston" and in the unused text, Walston refers to him as "Marston." However, when the actual letter is read in the finished game, it is signed by "Jarston"...)

Perhaps the Vell plotline was intended to play a larger role in a sequel, or might have been repurposed in some way?

40500.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**

Chapter 1\Aliero – Fresh Air Tavern – Miner

Topic: Miner – Vell Caverns

Aren chimed in eagerly. "We've heard that miners discovered Vell caverns while digging the mines. Were you there?"

The miner shook his head ruefully. "Yes, I was there. Seems like that day was the start of a long downhill slide for this town."

"Really? I'd think it would have been terribly exciting!"

"We didn't know what we'd found, at first. We were following a rich vein. One swing of the pickaxe went into ore, the next into thin air. We broke through to a cavern. Air smelled strange in there, like no one had breathed it for centuries."

The miner sipped his ale as if to wash ancient dust from his mouth. "Our lanterns revealed strange markings on the walls... symbols and pictures. We brought up what we found... small objects made of a metal we didn't know. We passed them around, traded them as mere curiosities. We were fools!"

"You didn't know you'd stumbled onto an something incredible?"

The miner stared into his mug. "No, but word got to those that did. Within weeks, the Pernath Academy had a team of scholars here, giving orders like they owned the place. They hired a bunch of us to do their dirty work for them..."

"What did they find? More chambers? Artifacts? Skeletons?" Aren interrupted, unable to contain his excitement.

"I don't know, boy. I wasn't part of the Academy's work crew, thank Kor. All them's what was is dead."

"Oh. What happened to them?"

"Nobody knows. After a week o' digging, the scholars had that shaft sealed off. They paid us for the trouble of starting new digs, but since that vein was mostly played out anyhow, it weren't no skin off our backs.

"They went back to the Academy, never saying a word to no one. One after another of the work crew fell sick and died, them and most of the town. My wife and I lost both our sons..."

The miner fell silent. With no words of consolation to offer, the companions soon took their leave.

40515.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*
Chapter 1\Aliero Mine – Miner

Topic: Miner in the Aliero Mine

As the party drew near, they saw that the beacon came from a miner's lantern. In the dim light, the miner's glowing eyes appeared the only living part in a grime-encrusted face. "Ho there! What are you doing down here? This is no place for topsiders! Go back up into daylight before you get into trouble."

William asked the miner if they were close to the Vell caverns. The miner looked at William as if he'd just asked for directions to the moon. "You don't want to venture down there, lad. It's bad luck or worse for them what go where humans have no cause to be."

William assured the miner that they knew what they were doing. After absolving himself of any responsibility should an accident befall the party, the miner revealed the way to the sealed caverns.

William sighed. "Maybe you're right. We don't know much about mining. We could easily get in over our heads."

The miner nodded. "That's only good sense talking."

10854.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 4\Burlen – Pernath Academy – Walston Moore

Walston Moore, Director of the Vell Studies Department at Pernath Academy

Topic: Hardener

William: "So if I understand you right, this Vell artifact makes things harder and tougher."

Walston: "In a nutshell, yes. However, the liquid is useless if not applied directly from the device."

William: "Can you show us how it works? I wouldn't mind trying it out on my sword and armor."

Walston: "That's out of the question. We haven't finished our studies yet and the artifact's abilities may be limited. We can't allow the random visitor to spray it on whatever he feels like."

Topic: Missing Piece #1 – *Before Journal Found in Friole Barn*

Aren: "Is there a chance that you'll eventually figure out the scientific language?"

Walston: "I don't know. Our chances were better a few years ago before Marston died, one of the first Feeblepox victims. He was our chief linguist. His death set us back quite a bit."

Aren: "I'm sorry to hear that."

Walston: "You know, by chance I found one of Marston's letters the other day. Of course, the way Burns kept his files, finding anything around here is by chance. Anyhow, the letter was Marston's last before he died. He was quite excited about a new Vell site, found almost intact near Aliero. He must have died before he could gather an expedition. Once I get things organized around here, I'll send a team out."

Topic: Missing Piece #2 – *After Journal Found in Friole Barn*

William: "We found this. Judging from the writing, I'm guessing it's Vell."

Walston: "Yes, this is definitely Vell script, and the illustrations are consistent with their style. Common tongue... verse... (BREATHLESS) Science! This has all three languages! Can this... (SOUND EFFECT OF TURNING PAGES) this might... (FLIP, FLIP) common... verse... Kor's blood! Here! At the back! Passages in all three tongues, and the common and verse passages say the same thing! Do you realize what this means?"

William: "The Vell like to repeat themselves?"

Walston: "The third passage, the one in scientific language, most likely says the same thing as the other two! In the name of the Triune, this could be the most important find in the history of the Empire!"

Topic: Vell Codex

William: "So that book will be helpful?"

Walston: "(EXCITED) Helpful? My dear boy, you have a talent for understatement."

William: "Well then, since we gave you our Vell artifact, how about letting us use yours? The hardener, I mean."

Walston: "This isn't a trading post! I do not barter precious artifacts from lost civilizations!"

William: "I just want to use it. Right here, right in front of you. Then I'll put it back in the case, no harm done. Come on, we just handed you the key to all of Vell science! Are you telling me that's not worth a couple of squirts from that thing?"

Walston: "(IRRITABLY) All right. But only once for each of you, and be quick about it."

William: "Like the wind."

Topic: Goodbye #2 – After Missing Piece Found

Walston: "No time to talk! I've got to start my research on the Vell Codex immediately!"

William: "We'll leave you to your work then. Good day."

• There are two mentions of Magic Wardfields in Chapter 2, one by Finch and one by Enkudi. From the unused text, it's intimated that Enkudi had Wardfields protecting him. Was this a discarded game mechanic based on the Magical Traps found in "Betrayal At Krondor"?

Also, Finch tells Aren to find Camille Farray in Ticoro for Chapter 3.

10821.msg – ***UNUSED TEXT***
Chapter 2\North of Midova – High Mage Finch

High Mage Finch, Court Mage for House Escobar

Topic: Training

Aren: "High Mage, the little you've shown me has made me eager to learn more. When will you have the time to teach me?"

Finch: "Your enthusiasm is gratifying. However, I will be busy for quite a while. In the meantime, I suggest you pay a visit to my friend Camille Farray in Ticoro. Tell her I sent you. She may need an apprentice, or if not, I'm sure she'll take the time to teach you something new."

Topic: Traps

William: "High Mage, recently we've run into some unusual magical devices... traps of some kind."

Finch: "Wardfields, you mean. Been sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong, have you?"

William: "Well, I wouldn't say... (INTERRUPTED)"

Finch: "(INTERRUPTING) I never had much use for wardfields myself, but they put bread on the table for the mages that make them, so who am I to judge? My advice? Steer clear of them in the future, Master Escobar."

Topic: Wardfields

William: "The wardfields we've encountered were annoying, but hardly more than that."

Finch: "Then you've only seen the cheap ones, meant to keep out the riff-raff. Expensive wardfields were designed with clever lads like you in mind. They can be deadly. You can only turn them off by stepping on the keypad, and the most direct path isn't usually the right one. Have a care, Master Escobar. Losing you to a wardfield would make your father quite upset."

William: "(SARDONIC) For a few minutes, at least."

10819.msg – ***UNUSED TEXT***

Chapter 2\Northeast of Sortiga – Enkudi the Ghanish Mystic

Enkudi the Ghanish Mystic, First Mage of the House of Makka and Friend to the Montari

Topic: Traps

William: "What's with all these traps? Got a lot of traveling tinkers 'round these parts?"

Enkudi: "I don't like to be disturbed while I work."

• ***Similar to the Brothers of Kor above, once the player offers an item to the Tinker in Aspreza to be repaired, he repeats the price of the repair.***

Topic: Pox – Tinker #2 – Post-Senaedrin Sisters (Success) (Alternate)

"For you, I'll patch up any armor for a flat rate of 200 burlas."

"I'll sharpen any sword, get rid of the nicks, and even tighten up the pommel for just 150 burlas."

"I'll fix up any bow, no matter how well used, for 120 burlas."

• In Chapter 2, an unused character ("The Healer of Melay") would have helped William solve the mystery of the Malachite Cat and was likely located in either the "No Answer House" or the Vacant House. However, this quest could also have been solved in Chapter 4, as there is no mention of Kaelyn in the text (she's not present in Chapter 4). Afterwards, William could have taken a drink of water from the previously-contaminated well.

Topic: Mariah Goodbody, Healer

William told Aren he wanted to stop in at this house for a minute. Aren read the sign over the door, "Mariah Goodbody, Healer."

William came out a short time later. He announced, "I have solved the mystery of the malachite cat."

Aren could barely contain his excitement. "You know where it is?"

William smiled mysteriously. "In a sense, yes. That is to say, I know where it was."

"Are you going to tell me, or do I have to dunk you in the well?"

"Ah ha, now you're getting warm," William said, enjoying his friend's annoyance. "All right, I'll tell you. I just took some well water into the healer's cottage to verify what I had already guessed... that the water is uncontaminated. It's now perfectly good to drink, only since no one had tested it for so many years, no one knew."

"But why?" Aren asked.

"We found the torchite gem in the well, right? Therefore it only makes sense to suppose that the statue had been put down there too. But why wasn't the gem still in the statue?"

"It fell out?" Aren guessed.

"No. Gemstones aren't glued in, they're held in with bent prongs. Water shouldn't affect that kind of setting. Remember how the old woman told us that the water tasted like vinegar?"

Aren began to catch on. "Ah... Did the acid in the water dissolve the malachite cat?"

William nodded. "Yes, and so slowly that the dissolved malachite had a chance to rebalance the water in the well. At least that's how the healer explained it. I don't fully understand the process myself..."

"It's rather sad in a way," Aren mused. "We won't ever get to see the malachite cat."

"No, but after the healer finishes her tests, the people of Melay won't have to carry water from the river anymore. That's something."

43615.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*
Chapter 2\ Melay – Melay Well

Topic: Get Water After Torchite Gem Removed

William lowered the bucket into the well, filling it with water and pulling it up. Cupping his hand, he scooped off the surface scum. Then he took some well water in his palm and smelled it. It smelled fresh. Dipping a finger into the bucket, William cautiously tasted the water. He looked puzzled, then he smiled.

• There is only a single mention of Mantises in the finished game: south of Melay in Chapter 4, when Nauke the TrKaa Courier laments to William and Aren that he hasn't had any adventures as of late -- not even a single Mantis attack.

However, there are three further mentions of Mantises found in the unused text: a large passage for the unused "Weasel Man of Melay" location (Chapter 2), and twice more by Naku. In Chapter 4, Naku gives a hint that "cold" may be a way to incapacitate Mantises in a fight, and in Chapter 7, he off-handedly mentions the same encounter; however, instead of dodging the one, now his story is that he fought an entire swarm of them.

You fight Masliths and Carliths (lizards), large Field Worms, large Land Crabs, Karn (wolves), and Fire Wolves in the finished game. Were large Mantises planned to be another type of enemy creature the team would have battled?

Topic: The Weasel Man Of Melay

The door opens and a flood of what appear to be furry snakes poured out and swirled around the party's ankles. William looked up into the mild face of the tallest man he'd ever seen. Milky blue eyes peered down at him, squinting in the bright light. "You've come for my wee ones then? I'll not be giving them up without a fight, you know."

William sneezed. "No, we don't want to take any of your weasels. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Then you've not come from the mayor?"

William sneezed again. "No. Why? Are you expecting someone?"

"The town council voted to make this a weasel-free village. And me with 27 at last count," the man said, despair apparent in his voice. "I fear they'll take my babies away and drown 'em."

Kaelyn scooped up a sable kit and rubbed noses with it. "How could anyone, even a public official, be so stupid and heartless? I wish there was something we could do to help."

The man gently took the tiny weasel from Kaelyn and put it on his head where it immediately curled up into a furry beret. "That's a kindly thought to be sure, but I can't think of a thing."

The man whistled a melancholy tune. From all about the yard, dozens of weasels immediately halted in their tracks, looked up, and made a mad dash for the door. Just as the last slender body slipped inside, the man gently closed the door.

Topic: Weasel Ordinance Implemented – Mantis Attack

William knocked on the weasel man's door. After a few minutes, the door opened. Unshaven and wearing a grubby robe, the weasel man peered down at them with bloodshot eyes. "Oh, it's you again. As you can see, the ordinance to make this a weasel-free village went into effect. The town council took 'em all away... All except this one little jill which I hid."

The man reached into his pocket and pulls out the tiny sable weasel. The kit yawned, revealing dagger-sharp teeth.

"Oh, we are so sorry," Aren says, voicing his friends' sympathy as well as his own.

"My house feels so empty." The weasel man gently closed his door.

William started to say something but breaks off in mid-sentence as he sees malicious bug eyes peering around the corner of the house. "What the Henne is that?"

Kaelyn just has time to cry out, "Mantis!" before the deadly insect attacks.

Topic: Weasel Ordinance Revoked

Aren knocked on the weasel man's door. A cheerful "Hello" met their ears. The door flew open and a torrent of weasels spilled out.

"The town council took a special vote and decided to give me back my babies!" the tall man said gleefully, the sable kit wrapped around his neck like a boa.

"Why?"

"Because the village was over-run with mantises, that's why! The mayor came to me with a personal apology and a contract. I now rent my weasels out by the day to merchants, farmers, even the school. They're a great favorite in the classrooms, I understand. But no matter where they go, they always come home to me at night."

"That's wonderful," Kaelyn agrees. The weasel man joined them on the front steps and began whistling a happy tune. The weasels perked up their ears, regarded their human slave with affection, and then went right on with whatever important weasel business they were doing.

10839.msg – ***UNUSED TEXT***

Chapter 4 | South of Melay – Naku the TrKaa Courier

Naku the TrKaa Courier

Topic: Mantis

William: "So you've been attacked by Mantises before?"

Aren: "Oh, I've heard stories about them... Elusive, aggressive, and very dangerous."

Naku: "That's them, yes sir. I stopped to drink from a pool in the forest west of Cardone. When I looked up, I was surrounded! They stood still for a moment, quiet as rocks. Then one of them lunged at me, but I managed to take off just in time. It missed me and fell into the water. To a one, they all started in chittering."

William: "I guess they don't like baths."

Naku: "(EXCITED) That's what I thought at first, but there's more to it than that. I circled around a few times to watch them. The one that charged me eventually got out of the pool... it wasn't very deep. It just lay on the ground, trembling and rubbing its legs together like it was cold and badly needed warmth."

William: "What did the other Mantises do?"

Naku: "Not much. They didn't go near the one on the ground. Some drank from the pool. After a few minutes the cold one got up, then they all disappeared into the forest as silently as they'd come."

10839.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 7\Outside Grandeur – Naku the TrKaa Courier

Naku the TrKaa Courier

Topic: After Relaying William's Message to Kaelyn and Raal

Naku: "Maybe I can help. There's a lot I can do. I fought off an army of mantises once."

• During Chapter 3, there is mention of a Spring Festival fighting tournament in Ticoro. A large, blocked-off area still exists in the finished game; it's located against the North Wall between the North Gatehouse and a Fountain in Ticoro's Northeastern section. Would that have been a way for the trio (or at least William) to increase fighting skills and perhaps make a little money on the side?

43810.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 3\Ticoro – Northeast(?) – City Guard Practice Yard

Topic: City Guard Practice Yard

Spectators packed the bleachers of the City Guard's practice yard. The best swordsmen in Ticoro-- and many from outlying regions-- flocked to the festival to vie for the honor of facing the Champion of Kor at the coming Summer Rites. A friendly guard at the entrance sized William up at a glance.

"It's a tough field, m'lord, but I can tell you're no stranger to the sword. I hope you understand if I root for one of our local boys, though."

William pushed his palms forward. "Whoa there! I think you've got the wrong--"

"Nothing personal, m'lord. I'm sure you'll account yourself well. Just give me your name and the 125 burla entry fee and I'll add you to the lists."

Choice: Pay Fee

William handed over a stack of coins. "I am William Escobar of House Escobar, Pianda."

The guard took the coins and made a note on his list. "Leave everything but your sword, armor, and shield in the box by the gate. You'll be called when it's time for your match."

Kaelyn cocked an eyebrow at William. "I thought you were all fired up about this business of Gregor and the Consort. Do we have time for this?"

William looked her in the eye. "The right to face the Champion of Kor-- the best the Temple Knights have to offer-- is a great honor, Kaelyn. It would bring my fath-- I mean, my province would be very proud and it would lift Piandan spirits. It's worth the time."

Choice: Pay Fee – *Not Enough Money*

William checked his purse and was dismayed to come up short. "Hmm. Looks like I won't be dancing with Kor after all."

The guard shrugged indifferently. "One less man for the locals to beat, then."

Choice: Decline

William shook his head. "Thanks, but I fear I'd have little chance against T'icor's best."

The guard beamed and nodded agreement. "You are very wise, m'lord. Enjoy the rest of the festival, then."

• *In the finished game, it is Aren who inspects the Torrance Pasege's picked lock in Chapter 3. Alternate texts have the messages spoken by Kaelyn, not Aren.*

43845.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southeast – Storeroom #1 (Alternate)

Topic: Lock #1 Picked (Alternate)

Kaelyn fingered the distinctive lock that hung loosely from the door. "It looks like our friendly neighborhood lockpick has already been here."

43846.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southeast – Storeroom #2 (Alternate)

Topic: Lock #2 Picked (Alternate)

Kaelyn fingered the distinctive lock that hung loosely from the door. "It looks like our friendly neighborhood lockpick has already been here."

• In Chapter 3, you could have fought lockpick Torrance Pasege, and after defeating him, either let him escape or have him wait until you to talk with Coulaïne (as he does in the finished game). There is also text that Torrance could have been killed during the fight, so one wonders if Coulaïne would have given the trio the rampart key out of gratitude for having "solved" his lockpick problem once and for all...

10851.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 3\Ticoro – Southeast – Torrance Pasege

Torrance Pasege, Coulaïne's Former Apprentice Locksmith

Topic: Fighting Torrance – Torrance Escapes

Torrance: "(COMING TO, GROANING) So, you gonna arrest me now or what?"

William: "We're not of the Guard. Just clear out before we decide to call them."

Torrance: "You don't have to tell me twice. I'm gone."

Topic: Fighting Torrance – Greeting #1 After Fight

Torrance: "(COMING TO) Ow, my head! What do you want?"

William: "We mean you no further harm. We just want to talk."

Torrance: "So talk."

Topic: Fighting Torrance – Greeting #2 After Talking with Coulaine

Torrance: "You're not going to beat me up again, are you?"

William: "Wouldn't dream of it. We have good news for you."

10818.msg – ***UNUSED TEXT***

Chapter 3\Ticoro – East – Keys and Bolts – Coulaine the Locksmith

Coulaine, Locksmith and Proprietor of Keys and Bolts

Topic: Fighting Torrance – Torrance Dead

Aren: "We found the culprit."

Coulaine: "Who is it? Tell me so I can turn him over to the constable."

Aren: "We don't know his name. We caught him picking a lock. He attacked us -- we defended ourselves and, well, he died."

Coulaine: "Can't say as I'm brokenhearted to hear that. He caused me no end of trouble. But I wasn't expecting you to risk your lives on my behalf."

• Also in Chapter 3, there is specialized text about buying rope in Ticoro, and meeting a young boy who gives the trio the idea of climbing to the rooftop of a building and using a flag pole to swing across to the ramparts—perhaps as an alternate solution to discovering the Consort's location, instead of getting the rampart gate key from Coulaine?

There is also unused text about roping in Chapter 2; since you were likely expected to rope/lasso the flag pole in Ticoro, you might have learned of the idea or even trained in roping skills with Farmer Garrison...

43700.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**
Chapter 2\ Varnasse – Farmer Garrison

Topic: Farmer Garrison's Roping Skills

The party approached a farmhouse. There was a knot of people gathered at the fence skirting the pasture.

"What's going on?" William asked, elbowing his way into the crowd.

"Garrison's bull got loose," was the laconic response from the nearest Varnasse hayseed. The lone man in the field walked slowly toward the bull. The bull tossed its head and snorted. The man casually swung a rope by his side. Then in one smooth, fluid motion, he twirled the rope and dropped the noose over the bull's head.

"Garrison's got a way with a rope, all right," admitted the local philosopher. Recognizing the limitations of freedom, the bull meekly submitted to being led back to its pen. With the show over, the crowd dispersed.

William waylays the farmer as he climbs over the fence. "That was some impressive lasso work, sir."

The farmer recoiled his rope while gazing at his bull, now perfectly content to chew hay and reflect on the errors of his youth. "Lasso's a versatile tool. Helped me stop a bar brawl once. My brother-in-law Casey had just lost his bid for a seat on the Shira. Bottle of whiskey on top of a bad mood made Casey mighty unpleasant company."

The farmer tilted back his hat and narrowed his eyes. "Casey started in on tearing up the place. I knew my sister would want him home before he went through their life savings in damages. Got out my rope, moved in on him, and snared him neater than a calf on leap day. Drug him back home like a stray dog, not a yip out of him. Sister made me a pie by way of thanks. Ogolliberry pie, it was. My favorite."

Topic: Boy Climbing Rope

A boy hung precariously against the rampart wall, clinging to a rope anchored somewhere above him. The rope barely reached halfway down the wall-- he was too high to drop safely. His feet scrabbled for purchase.

"He's not going to be able to hold on much longer," Aren cried out with alarm.

William agreed. Positioning himself under the boy, he called out to him. "Hey! Go ahead and drop-- I'll catch you!"

The boy called back. "I didn't do nothin'! You wanna catch me, you gotta come up here."

William sounded annoyed when he answered, "I'm trying to help you, kid. You don't want it? Fine. Happy landings."

The boy's left hand slipped off the rope. He lost his perch and swung hard against the wall, cursing madly but holding on. "Wait! I-- You'd better catch me!"

"Don't worry," William answered. "I'm ready."

The boy looked down, took a deep breath and let go, dropping right into William's waiting arms. The impact knocked William to the ground, the boy sprawled on top of him. Almost immediately the boy rolled aside and tried to bolt, but William snapped out his hand and grabbed his collar.

"Not so fast, kid. How'd you get up there, anyway? That rope's too short for you to have climbed."

The boy rolled his eyes. "No crap, brainy. I swung over from a roof. But the rope slipped on the way over, and it swung back to the other side so I couldn't get back. I thought I had enough rope left to get down."

"You swung over from a roof?"

The boy waved his hand in front of William's eyes. "Anyone in there? I just said I did. You know, the rooftops? Keeps the rain out? The Thieves' Highway?"

William ignored the boy's tone. "I didn't think any buildings near the wall were higher than the ramparts."

"Ever hear of flagpoles?"

William considered that. The boy saw his opportunity and squirmed in William's grip, breaking free. Kaelyn started after him, but William waved her off. "Nah, let him go. He'll get himself into more trouble soon enough, and there's not much we could do about it."

43865.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 3\Ticoro – Location(?) – Ramparts, Ropes and Poles

Topic: Ramparts, Ropes And Poles

"I think," Kaelyn said, thoughtfully comparing the height of the pole, the ramparts, and the distance between them, "that we might be able to get onto the ramparts if we looped a rope around that pole and swung across."

43850.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 3\Ticoro – Location(?) – Thugs Blocking Stairs

Topic: Thug Blocking Stairs

A stairway led up to the building's roof. The group stopped short as a wicked blade flashed across the doorway to block their path. A broad-shouldered, short-haired man with a dark scar beneath one eye glared at them flatly. It was clear they'd have to get through him to enter, and he didn't seem like the kind of guy one got through easily.

Topic: Bribe Thug

The man's swordarm never wavered while he counted the coins. Apparently satisfied, he lowered the blade and let the party pass without a word.

Topic: Bribe Thug – Not Enough Money

The man snorted derisively at the offer.

"I think we insulted his honor," Kaelyn muttered.

William whispered back, "My bet is that the insult was to his purse. I think we've just established that his honor can be bought. Now we're haggling over the price."

- *You can interact with Scott Gratsi the Joyman during five chapters of the game:*

Chapter 1 in Aspreza at The Riper Wheel Tavern
Chapter 2 in Imazi at the Flowing Flagon Inn
Chapter 3 in Ticoro at The Henne's Shadow Inn in Ticoro
Chapter 4 in Ravenne at Berjon's Tavern
Chapter 6 in Ligano at the Shady Vale Inn

However,

- *"Consort" is an unused topic choice for Chapter 3.*
- *There is a specialized greeting pun mentioning Levosche for Scott, possibly intended for a meeting in Levosche for Chapter 4 instead of Ravenne (you cannot travel to Ticor Province during Chapter 6 in the finished game).*
- *There is more text in Chapter 6 when William and Aren are in the employment of the mercenaries. The pair explain to Scott in further detail the recent events of Chapter 6 (Shepherd Caves and the Consort), as well as hearing Scott's view of the politic maneuverings between the Temples of Kor and Henne.*

10845.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 3\Ticoro – Henne's Shadow Inn – Scott Gratsi, Joyman

Scott Gratsi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Consort

Aren: "Did you know that the Imperial Consort will be at the festival?"

Scott: "Do I look like my ears are full of wax and my eyes crusted over? I'd have to be dead not to know that!"

Aren: "(CONSPIRATORIALLY) Well, I suspect the Consort is somehow linked to the Shepherds..."

Scott: "(THINKING) Hmmm. The Consort's native Chail has about the same relationship with the Grrrlf that Antara does. Why would the Consort associate with Shepherds?"

Aren: "I don't suppose you know where we could find the Consort, do you?"

Scott: "(LAUGHS) I doubt even the Consort's innkeeper will know he is to host such an important visitor until the man himself walks through the door. Security is so tight that my guess is the only ones who know the Consort's location are the Consort and the Captain of the Guard. And the governor, of course."

10845.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 4\Levosche – Jacob's Vineyard – Scott Gratsi, Joyman

Scott Gratsi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Greeting – Alternate Location for Chapter 4?

Aren: "Scott! What are you doing here in Levosche?"

Scott: "(SLURS, WITH ACCENT) I Levosche lookin' for you."

10845.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 6\Ligano – The Shady Vale Inn – Scott Gratsi, Joyman

Scott Gratsi, Joyman and Aren's Friend

Topic: Caverns

Aren: "(EXCITED) We found where the Shepherds had taken the Consort... some caverns near Senaedrin's Head. We were this close to getting the Consort back!"

William: "(JUMPING IN) And this close to getting caught by the Imperials again too."

Scott: "If Imperial soldiers manage to round up the Shepherds, that should make a lot of people happy, from Caverton right up to Fellich Marr..."

William: "Caverton I understand, but Fellich Marr? Why should he care one way or the other?"

Scott: "The Shepherds blame the Grrrlf for Feeblepox. This notion is at odds with the Arm of Henne's doctrine, that the Pox was a divine cleansing sent to bring humans closer to the Grand Redemption. The Shepherds were gaining popularity with the masses, but they were also causing political havoc with their rising influence. Few people in power, High Brother Marr included, will shed tears if they're disbanded."

Topic: Arm of Henne

William: "Henne's Arm of the Triune seems to be much more prominent lately."

Scott: "Maybe it's been lifting weights... Seriously, the sect's influence increased during the Feeblepox epidemic. People flocked to their temples to purify themselves in an attempt to avoid the plague. (SADLY) It's my personal belief that congregating in an enclosed area helped spread the disease all the faster..."

William: "Though they try to hide it from the fosterlings, I could tell there's a lot of political maneuvering within the Triune."

Scott: "That's what I hear as well. Now that High Brother Vaughn has the Emperor's ear, the Arm of Kor has the upper Hand. But since High Brother Marr was named, he has increased the Children's influence to unprecedented levels."

• Already metioned above in the Game Items section, there is an unused description for the Shepherd Armor that states the wearer could disguise themselves as a fellow Shepherd. Could William and Aren have worn Shepherd Armor at the start of Chapter 6 to avoid the enemies in the Shepherd Caves, or avoid fights against Shepherds in other chapters (but obviously not Chapters 5 or 7 when Raal is in the party)? Or was only intended to be a specific puzzle solution for William and Aren to get to close to Shepherd Leader Gar Warren?

3.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**
Shepherd Armor Description

ITEM: Shepherd Armor

DETAIL: The style of armor seemed to be the fashion amongst the Shepherds-- which, William mused, spoke volumes about their taste. Still, wearing it gave William a chance of passing as a Shepherd himself.

• *William and Aren could have snuck back into the city of Ticoro during Chapter 4, but it is unknown why that might have been necessary. Mackey the Traveling Merchant would have helped by hiding them in his wagon as he entered and left Ticoro.*

400.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 4\Outside Ticoro – Sneaking Back into Ticoro

Topic: Sneaking Back into Ticoro

William: "The guard must be searching for us by now. If we want to get into Ticoro, I think we should find some way other than waltzing through the city gates."

10835.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 4\West of Ticoro – Mackey the Traveling Merchant

Mackey the Traveling Merchant

Topic: Sneaking Back into Ticoro #1

William: "I don't suppose you're headed into Ticoro any time soon?"

Mackey: "As it happens, I'm planning to go into the city this very afternoon. Why do you ask?"

William: "We'd like to get into the city without being seen. For instance, in back of your wagon?"

Mackey: "Oh ho! And what might you be hiding from? Never mind, the less I know, the better. I'll let you hitch a ride, but the guards might inspect the wagon... Ah. I see. So much for my earlier question. Well then, it'll cost extra to persuade the guards to look the other way, and I'll have to cover my own risks... 50 burlas ought to do it."

William: "We'll take you up on that offer, Mackey. Ready to leave the city?"

Choice: Pay

William: "You no doubt have a fine extortion business on the side. Fine, it's yours."

Mackey: "Hop in then, gentlemen. Your carriage awaits."

Choice: Pay – Not Enough Money

William: "Hmm... it seems my purse is lighter than I thought."

Mackey: "Well then, come back when it gets a little heavier."

Choice: Decline

William: "Thanks, but no thanks."

Mackey: "As you wish. Let me know if you change your mind."

Topic: Sneaking Back into Ticoro #2

Mackey: "I thought you lads would be back. For 50 burlas, we're ready to roll."

William: "50 burlas? You can't be serious."

Mackey: "Oh, I'm quite serious. I'll be in just as much trouble as you if you get caught."

Topic: Arriving in Ticoro

Mackey: "Alright lads, you can come out now. It'll cost you another 50 burlas, but I'll be here if you want to go back the other way."

• Sometimes the triggers don't always work in Betrayal In Antara. One example of this is Marnia Contuso and her sons in Waterfork. Sometimes the sons appear, sometimes it goes straight to Marnia instead. Another example is the following text; more often than not, you are met with a "no one's home" message for this interaction, so I'm placing it here...

Topic: Man Hiding from Imperial Guards

Through the door, a man's querulous voice inquired, "What do you want?"

William answered, "Just a few moments of your time, sir. Got a couple of questions to ask."

The door opened a crack. "I don't know anything. Why ask me? Are you with the Imperial Guard?"

William reassured the timid man. "No. Just strangers passing through."

The door opened a bit wider and a very long nose poked out. Beady eyes lurking somewhere behind the nose took a good long look at William. "If you're traveling the main roads, you should keep an eye out for the Imperial Guards. They passed through here just a short while ago. Very grim and determined they looked, not in the mood for any funny business."

Aren looked anxiously at William. "Do you know where they were headed, sir?"

"Ticoro. I overheard the captain telling the men that their orders were to escort the Consort's captured kidnappers back to Antara for trial."

"But they didn't come back this way again?"

"No. I would've known if they had, seeing how noisy they were. Tramped through this town like they owned the place, boots stomping on the gardens, loud voices frightening the children. Anyone who got in their way, they shoved aside like a stray dog."

"Thanks for the warning. We'll be sure to stay out of their path."

"Smart if you did. Captain said something about this plot running deeper than just a few kidnappers... that on the way back they should round up the usual suspects. I've had my hands in a few muddy puddles myself... that's why I'm sticking indoors until after they pass through. Now if you'll excuse me..."

• *For some reason, you were expected to buy an awful lot of rope in Chapter 4.*

Topic: The Rope Seller of Isten

The way was blocked by a huge coil of rope. A man came outside, climbed like a trerang over the rope, and jumped down in front of the group. "Want to buy some rope?"

William asked, "Why should we?"

The man's wrinkled face collapsed into a toothless grin. "Why should ya? Well, if that ain't a stupid question. Don't ya know you always need rope, 'specially 'round these parts, 'specially during the hot season. Dang idiots!"

William admitted his perplexity. The stringy old man spoke loudly and slowly. "This is the hot season. This is jaeger country. They come down from the hills. They'll pounce on you in a second, 'less you're prepared."

William was still confused. "Prepared? With rope?"

"Sure with rope. Smart travelers-- which I sure ain't sayin' you are-- smart travelers always carry rope. Yep, and know how to use it too. Jaegers can't pounce too good if their legs is all tangled up." The strange little man does another strange little dance, imagining the hogtied jaegers with vengeful glee.

"Well then. What do you charge?"

"Them's the first words of sense to come out of your mouth, stranger. Rope's ten burlas a coil."

Choice: Buy Rope

"Give us a coil," William said, handing over ten burlas."

"You won't regret it, young fella. With this rope you can lasso jaegers, hoist furniture, hell, you can even hang yourself, and it won't fray a bit."

William snorted. "Comforting thought. Thanks."

The man measured out a coil. "Don't mention it. Now then, you want to buy some more rope or is this enough?"

Choice: Buy More Rope

"How can one ever have too much rope?" William asked. "Give us another coil, if you please."

The man grinned and measured out another ten burlas' worth. "Now yer talkin' intelligent. How about some more rope?"

Choice: Leave – *After Buying Rope*

William eyed the length of rope stretched between the man's hands. "I think that's more than enough rope for us to hang ourselves. Thanks."

The man shrugged, cut the rope, and handed it to William. "Happy jaeger snagging."

Choice: Leave – *Without Buying Rope*

William reconsidered. "I don't think we'll take any just now, thanks."

The man shook his fist at the party. "Mark my words, you'll live to regret it, ya durn fool!" The companions made good their retreat, unkind remarks about "Kor-damn foreigners" ringing in their ears.

• In Chapters 4 or 7, depending on which group (William/Aren or Kaelyn/Raal) has the Imazi Insurance Policy—assuming it was purchased in Chapter 1 or Chapter 2—when you give the Blind Prophet of Camille an unused (100%) weapon, the Insurance Policy will simply increase the Defense Skills of the pair.

As mentioned above in the Game Items section, the original mechanic of the Blessed Insurance Policy appears to have brought its possessor back from death after a fight—but it would only work once.

While it was assumed to have been intended for use by any of the four characters, I chose to use William in the example here.

(Following the conventions of wording and variables used for the other game items found in 3.msg, it would seem that only the possessor would be revived. Whether it could have revived any fallen party member is unknown at this time and only mere speculation...)

Also, the word "spreading" was misspelled as "speading" in 3.msg.

3.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**

Blessed Insurance Policy saves Possessor from Death

Topic: Blessed Insurance Policy saves Possessor from Death

As William teetered on the brink of collapse, he felt a peculiar warmth in his heart. The feeling grew, spreading *[sic]* throughout his body. As suddenly as it began the effect faded, leaving William enervated with renewed health vigor.

An odd sound from his pack caught his attention. Checking it, William found a pile of dust where the insurance policy once was.

• In Chapter 4, you can sneak into the "Cheese" Jaeger's house to steal back Sumner's Chinese Tree Idol. In the unused text, you are either successful or are discovered. In the finished game, however, there is no threat of success or failure; the "Cheese" Jaeger's house is simply treated as any other inventory cache containing the Tree Idol with accompanying text.

41601.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**

Chapter 4\Korus Landing – The "Cheese" Jaeger has Sumner's Idol

Topic: Retrieving the Idol

William neatly lifted the tree idol from its pedestal. The companions quickly left the way they came in. Pausing to calm their racing hearts, they agreed that if the adventuring business ever turned sour, they always had a future as house burglars.

Topic: William and Aren Discovered

William sidled up to the pedestal, but just as he was about to pocket the tree idol, the door opened and a housekeeper entered carrying a lamp. Upon seeing the intruders, she shrieked, grabbed a broom, and chased William and Aren from the house. Catching their breath out in the road, the companions agreed that such as things are, they were just not ready to be house burglars.

• *In Chapter 4(?), you can return to the Contuso Estate in Waterfork, where a party is in full swing, thanks to the team bringing the Contuso and Verazza families back together in Chapter 2.*

43532.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**

Chapter 4(?) \ Waterfork – Contusos and Verazzas Reunited

Topic: Contusos and Verazzas Reunited

The laughter and music heard through the door provided circumstantial evidence that the Contuso family was throwing a party. William's repeated knocking was finally heard and the door thrown open. Much to their surprise, the companions were greeted by Paolo, grinning broadly, with his arm around the waist of a comely Contuso lass.

"Looks like you've managed to settle your differences with the Contuso family," William said with a wink.

"Yes, thanks to you, my friends! Come on in and have some wine!" Paolo wouldn't hear no for an answer. It was quite a few hours before the party could slip away from the families' joyful reunion.

• *In Chapter 6 in Torlith, William plays hardball with a hypocritical member of the Shira and blackmails him, which seems to be a little out of character for the likeable young protagonist.*

44205.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**

Chapter 6 \ Torlith – Tobe Benedict, Shira Member

Topic: Tobe Benedict, Shira Member

The door opened just as William lifted his hand to the knocker. William was knocked off his feet by a brick house of a man, as wide as he is tall. Aren helped William up. The man glared at them both. "What are you doing loitering in front of my house? Leave the area immediately I'll have the town officer throw you in prison."

William replied indignantly. "We're not doing anything wrong. What gives you the right to barge onto a public walkway, bowling over people who mean you no harm!"

The man bristled with anger. "You can't talk to me like that! I'm a very important member of the Shira. Why, everyone in the Empire knows the name Tobe Benedict!"

Working himself up into a rage, Benedict continued. "How dare you get in my way! Your interference may cause me to be late for my speech to the Daughters of Antaran Veterans. I need their support if I'm ever going to convince the Shira to pass my bill."

William recalled his father speaking of Tobe Benedict, calling him a rabid conservative with no thought deeper than the bottom of his pocket. He decided to find out as much as possible. "What bill is that?"

Benedict puffed up in righteous indignation. "Haven't you seen the moral degradation and decay all around you, sir? Haven't you noticed that this great empire of ours is going to wrack and ruin?"

"Well, yes, especially with people like you in the Shira," William thought, but he kept the sentiment to himself.

"I want our government to take a stand against the foul, filthy, depraved practice of prostitution! That Antaran law sanctions such a stain upon the fabric of our society is a complete and total disgrace! I vow to see this stinking blot removed from the legal code or my name isn't Tobe Benedict, the fourth!"

Suddenly, William took a closer look at the pompous Shira bureaucrat, imagining him with a beard and moustache. William grinned. "Actually, I don't think the name Tobe Benedict suits you, sir. Such handsome looks as yours deserve a virile, masculine name... What do you think of a name like, oh, I don't know, say, Manly Johnson?"

Benedict turns white with anger. "We will continue this discussion inside, sir." He turned on his heel and stormed into the house, closely followed by William and Aren.

"I can't have my little human folly revealed to my supporters," Benedict said, seating himself in a leather chair. "What do you want to keep your mouths closed?"

Choice: Bribe

"What are you offering?" William asked coyly.

Aren muttered under his breath, "Great. Now we can add bribery to our many talents."

Benedict grunted, "Money?"

"Money is good. But before we discuss terms, be so kind as to answer a question for me. Why do you want to make prostitution illegal if you yourself partake of its pleasures legally? Oh, wait, perhaps I can figure that out for myself... Kickbacks from the brothel owners, right?"

Benedict glowered. "They're my friends and business associates. Why shouldn't I help them out?"

William thought out loud. "If prostitution is made illegal, it wouldn't close the brothels down, just force them underground. Owners would be able to charge outrageous rates, and they wouldn't have to follow all those pesky government rules and regulations either."

Benedict nodded. "I see you have a head for figures."

William snorted. "So do you apparently. Now the figure I'm thinking of has three numbers in it..."

"I'll give you 250 burlas and not a red cent more!" Benedict shouted.

William was about to start haggling when he noticed how uncomfortable Aren was. He agreed on the price, adding one condition. "We promise not to say a word about your little 'conflict of interest' if you swear to leave off trying to get your bill passed. How about it?"

"All right. I swear. After all, the prostitution game isn't the only one in the Empire." Benedict paid William and sent the companions off with an idle threat or two.

Out on the road, Aren drew in a deep breath of fresh air. "Kor, William, one would think you blackmail Shira members every day of your life."

William laughs. "No, just watched my father do it enough times..."

Choice: Leave

Aren pulled William aside. "Even with your father's protection, I don't think we should mess with this guy. He's got friends in higher places that you and I can see with a ladder."

William sighed. "I guess you're right. But I would so love to take him down a peg or two. Maybe someday, if not now."

The companions begged Benedict's pardon and edged toward the door. He threw a few idle threats in their general direction, then lit a good cigar and settled back in his chair with a brandy. "So what if I'm late for those wrinkled old hens at the DAV? They'll wait..."

• In Chapter 6, you could have actually declined the offer of employment from Khorus Bale. In the finished game, this option is removed, since the whole point of Chapter 6 is William and Aren gaining the trust of Kahleth the Mercenary in order to find the Consort. It's assumed that when you revisited Khorus, he would have made the offer again when you re-selected the topic "Employment"... otherwise, it would be a game dead-end.

10828.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**

Chapter 6\Ganath – The Pearl Spittoon Inn – Khorus Bale

Khorus Bale, Former Mercenary and Proprietor of The Pearl Spittoon Inn

Topic: Employment – Decline

William: "Thanks for the offer, but I'm already pretty busy."

Khorus: "(KIDDING WILLIAM) Oh, to be sure, m'lord. (A COMMON SAYING) Many a wench to woo and win 'twixt bread and bed, eh? Well, let me know if you change your mind."

• In Chapter 6, there are two vacant houses in Bakril in Chapter 6, but the game does have text messages for two unused locations there: a slatternly woman who offers a filthy room for rent, and Raksheesh drug den.

44420.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**

Chapter 6\Bakril – Slatternly Woman

Topic: Slatternly Woman – Room for Rent

A slatternly woman answered the door, a rough, hand-rolled cigarette hanging from her lips. "Eesh," whispered Aren to William. "Smells like she's smoking seaweed..."

"You here about a room?" the woman whined. "I got a spare one, up front. Used to be me and my husband's afore he drowned at sea."

"Sounds charming," William said politely. "How much?"

The woman narrowed and raised her eyes as if her rates were engraved on the ceiling. "Fifteen a night."

"But..." Aren began to protest, but was hushed by a stern look from William. "We'll take a look at it."

"Follow me," said the landlady, leading the way up stairs slick with the accumulated cooking grease of the ages.

Choice: Stay

William took a look at the mildew stains on the walls, the scurrying cockroaches, and the soggy, saggy mattresses on the floor. "It's better than being out in the elements, I suppose. We'll take it."

The woman picked a bit of seaweed tobacco from between her teeth. "Fifteen burlas. You can scrub up in the kitchen, but no pissing in the sink or out you go."

The landlady departed, leaving behind the lingering odor of burning ocean bottom. Aren scratched his arm. "We've only been here two minutes and already I'm itching. Nice judgment call, William."

Choice: Leave

William took a look at the mildew stains on the walls, the scurrying cockroaches, and the soggy, saggy mattresses on the floor. "I regret that at this particular juncture, we find ourselves unable to take advantage of your charming hospitality."

The woman shrugged and picked a bit of seaweed tobacco from between her teeth. "Suit yourself."

44415.msg – **UNUSED TEXT**
Chapter 6\Bakril – Raksheesh Den

Topic: Raksheesh Den

The door opened, though the room was so smoky that Aren couldn't see who opened it. William put a warning hand on Aren's arm. "It's a raksheesh den. Can't you smell it?"

Aren's eyes lit up. "A raksheesh den? I've heard of them of course, but I never thought I'd actually have a chance to see one. Come on..."

Aren forged ahead, stumbling over a man passed out in the hall. "Oh, excuse me, sir... Sir?"

William caught up. Disgusted, he poked the man with his toe. "Aren, he wouldn't notice the Emperor's trumpeters if they marched over him in parade formation right now. Take a quick look around, then let's get out of here."

Ten or twelve men, mostly Ghanish merchants by the looks of them, lay sprawled on huge cushions on the floor. The men sucked smoke from tubes that snaked from brass pipes. A dancing

girl undulated her way between the groups, receiving a burla from one man, an idly licentious caress from another.

Aren stood in the middle of the room, taking in the debauchery around him in wide-eyed wonder. Suddenly a clammy hand grabbed his ankle. Aren looked down into a face as smooth and blank as a egg. Blue eyes gazed into his, their pupils constricted to pinpricks. "You're a new one, aren't you," the man hissed like a thick-tongued snake.

"Pretty girl, come down here and get acquainted." The hand crept persuasively up Aren's calf. Aren jerked his leg out of the man's grasp. Looking around wildly, he spied William chatting with the dancing girl.

"Are you coming or aren't you?" Aren headed frantically for the door.

Aren stood on the porch, coughing the smoke from his lungs. In a few moments, William joined him. "What in Henne's name happened to you? I thought you wanted to drink in the ambiance."

Flustered, Aren replied, "William, a man in there thought I was a girl! He... He..."

"He laid hands on you?" William kidded, then noticed that Aren was not in a joking mood. "Aren, that raksheesh head was so bombed he would have mistaken a mantis for his sister! As your traveling companion I can assure you you're 100% pure male."

Aren recovered his good humor. "Well, Kaelyn was our traveling companion and she certainly isn't 100% pure male."

William laughed. "Yeah, maybe only 60 or 70% at best." William paused, a thoughtful look crossing his face. "No, Aren, you're right... Kaelyn is the exception to a great many rules."

• In Chapter 7, there is further text between Kaelyn and Sylvie Ashwood, proprietor of Germaine's Outfitters in Korus Landing. Seeing in Kaelyn a kindred, adventurous spirit, Sylvie offers both Kaelyn and Raal a drink in the finished game; Raal declines, and that's the end of the interaction. However, unused text reveals that there was to be a drinking contest between the two women.

41605.msg – ***UNUSED TEXT***

Chapter 7\Korus Landing – Germaine's Outfitter's – Sylvie Ashwood

Choice: Leave

Kaelyn put up her hand. "None for me either, thanks. As much as I'd like to waste a couple of hours in a drunken haze with you, Sylvie, we'd best be moving on."

Sylvie poured the green liquid into a glass, then downed it with a farewell toast. "Happy trails to you, Kaelyn. May ripe apples fall into your hand and handsome men into your bed."

Choice: Have A Drink

Sylvie raised her glass in a toast. "To your health, wealth, and social standing."

They drained their glasses in one swallow. "Have another?"

Kaelyn proposed a standard Antaran toast. "May the Imperial Cloak land on someone else's shoulders."

Thus the second julep went down on top of the first. "Want another?"

This time, Sylvie suggested they drink to her personal philosophy of life. "When all is said and done, believe in yourself but trust in none."

This toast led to a long discussion on the meaning of life which resulted in no conclusion other than the realization that their glasses were empty.

Kaelyn waved her refilled glass. "Wait! Wait! I know a good one! All right, here it is... "Through the teeth and over the tongue! The bottle's full and the night is young!"

Sylvie applauded and clinked her glass against Kaelyn's. The fourth drink got drunk, accompanied on its way south by several handfuls of salted limanuts."

Sylvie stood to propose this toast. With heartfelt sincerity, she lifted her glass. "May your journey be short and easy, and your man be long and hard."

Kaelyn dissolved in gales of laughter. Raal turned his back on the women, suddenly fascinated by a display of cooking utensils.

Thus inspired, Sylvie launched into tales of her wild and licentious youth. Before they knew it, the bottoms of their glasses were once again brought forth into the light of day.

Topic: *Kaelyn Out-drinks Sylvie*

Sylvie raised her glass to her lips, then put it back down untouched. "I don't believe it," she slurred. "You actually outdrank me, Kaelyn, old chum. No one's done that in years and years."

The two women grinned at each other in mutual admiration. Raal shook his head and puffed air through his teeth.

With some difficulty, Sylvie rose from her chair. "Tell ya what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna give you something. Something special." She went into a back room. The companions heard boxes crashing down, then some rummaging noises, then another crash, and Sylvie reappeared clutching a bow and some arrows.

"Here, you take 'em," she said, thrusting the weapons at Kaelyn.

"Oh no, I couldn't. These are beautiful!"

"Take 'em! They were mine when I was on the road. Got no use for 'em now. I want you to have them. Please."

Kaelyn accepted the generous gifts. Not able to find words to express her gratitude, she thanked Sylvie with a hug. Sylvie said, "Don't usually find a kindred spirit out in this branch of the tree. Take care and good fortune, Kaelyn."

Topic: Sylvie Out-drinks Kaelyn

Kaelyn lifted her glass, then lowered it to the table. "I think that's it for me," she said, slurring her words. "Time to be going."

Raal helped Kaelyn stand. He shook his head. "You are going to feel this one in the morning, little archer."

Sylvie rose from her chair long enough to give Kaelyn a hug. "Great knowing you, Kaelyn. Don't often get to meet a kindred spirit in this branch of the tree. You take good care of yourself, you hear me?"

Kaelyn grinned and waved as Raal escorted her out the door.

Kaelyn stood and swayed. Raal helped her get her balance. Shaking his head, he asked, "What do you see in that stuff anyhow?"

Kaelyn grinned. "Hate the taste, love the feeling. Goodbye, Sylvie."

Sylvie raised her glass in farewell. "Goodbye, Kaelyn. Don't often get to meet a kindred spirit out in this branch of the tree. Take care and good fortune."

• In Breland in Chapter 8, it appears that—perhaps after a certain period of time has passed and inaction on the player's part—the townsfolk succeeded in killing the trerang themselves and string it up in a most gruesome manner. The disturbingly graphic picture located at View\45006.v56 in the SCI Resource files would have accompanied this text.

45006.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*
Chapter 8\Breland – Townsfolk

Topic: Townsfolk – Trerang Killed

The men had tied the trerang's limbs to two trees outside the house. It hung like a hairy hammock, blood dripping slowly from its wounds to congeal in a puddle on the ground. Aren turned away, his breath coming in short gasps. "It was one thing to kill it, but to display its body like a trophy?"

• *In Chapter 8 at the Lighthouse in Havesly, Aren reads the letter ordering the attack on the Fair Current: sink the ship and leave no survivors. In the finished game, the letter described in 9480.msg limits the attack to only Gregor the Joyman being killed and salvage rights to any cargo.*

45506.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*
Chapter 8\Havesly – Havesly Lighthouse – Letter

Topic: Letter at Lighthouse

"Hey, listen to this," Aren says, looking up from a letter in his hand. "To the crew of the Bloody Dirk. Your orders are to attack the Fair Current. Make sure it goes down with all hands. There are to be no mistakes, and no survivors." Aren gasps. "It's signed by Lord Sheffield!"

• *In Chapter 9, there is an unused message when attempting to leave Havesly, likely before finding Lord Sheffield and Selana Sheffield in the caverns beneath Castle Sheffield.*

900.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*
Chapter 9\Leaving Havesly

Topic: Leaving Havesly

William: "Lord Sheffield and his family might be in danger. We can't leave until we find out what's going on here."

• *In Chapter 9, Williams refers to the plot to assassinate the Emperor as a "conspiracy." This verbiage is unused in the finished game.*

10848.msg – *UNUSED TEXT*

Chapter 9\Havesly – The Caverns beneath Castle Sheffield – Lord Cameron and Selana Sheffield

Lord Cameron and Selana Sheffield

Topic: Goodbye (*Alternate – "Conspiracy"*)

William: "I know we haven't gotten to the bottom of this conspiracy yet, but we need to leave temporarily."

Sheffield: "Return when you can. My daughter and I will be here."

REFERENCES AND FUN FACTS

There are a number of references and fun facts to be found in "Betrayal In Antara."

• *In Chapters 2 and 4, the character of Ravenne's Museum Curator, Cynthia Vanous, was modeled after her real-life namesake, Sierra employee Cynthia Vanous. She is credited with writing the game manual for "Betrayal In Antara" as well as contributing supplementary text for the game.*

• *In Chapter 3, the name of the apprentice locksmith in Ticoro, Torrance Pasege, is a direct reference to Al Lowe's 1995 point-and-click graphic adventure game, "Torin's Passage," also released by Sierra On-Line.*

• *In Chapter 4, William and Aren can gather three keys to help with side quests:*

– *A Red Key unlocks Gerard Fayle's house in Everton to help solve Brian Castere's murder*

– *A Blue Key unlocks the house of Natalie's Sister in Everton, but only if Sister Senena in Isten is notified in time*

– *A Green Key unlocks the "Cheese" Jaeger's back door in Korus Landing, from which Sumner's Chinese Tree Idol can be retrieved*

These three keys are a nod to the first-person shooter trope of the mid-'90s where various colored keys or keycards were needed to progress.

• *The Defenders of the Empire armor shop in Burlen (Chapters 4 & 7) is likely named after "Defender of the Empire," the 1994 LucasArts expansion pack for their space combat simulator game, "TIE Fighter."*

• *In Chapters 4 and 5, the characters meet a young woman in Durst named Phoebe and comment on her cat Louie's terrible odor. This is a reference to the American television show "Friends" (1994-2004), where the character of Phoebe Buffay sang at the local coffee shop about a 'smelly cat': "Smelly cat, smel-ly cat, what are they feeding you?" (First heard in episode S02E06, "The One with the Baby on the Bus" – November 2, 1995)*

• *In Chapter 6, the Torlith hot beverage shop destined to spread throughout Antara by a fellow named Ishmael is a reference to the Starbucks Coffee Company, which was started in Seattle, Washington in 1971. In Herman Melville's 1851 novel "Moby-Dick," Starbuck was the chief mate of the whaling ship 'Pequod,' and Ishmael ("Call me Ishmael.") was the story's first-person narrator.*

• *Breaking the fourth wall: Whenever Aren trains with another character to learn magic, it takes one "game" hours' worth of time. In a self-referential nod at the start of Chapter 8, William and Kaelyn wait patiently for Aren to train with the Blind Fire Mage in Breland. When Aren finishes, William asks him why magical training always seems to take about an hour, to which Aren has no reply...*

• *Just west of Havesly in Chapter 8, you can meet Brother Kenneth in Januli Province's Temple of Kor. There, he will tell you about the noble history of the Shepherds. He looks a lot like Ken Williams, founder of Sierra On-Line. "Betrayal In Antara" follows the tradition of Sierra's game creators placing cameos of Ken into various Sierra games.*

While the same character model of Brother Kenneth is used in the other three Kor Temples (in Aspreza, near Levosche, and near Burlen), the other three "Kenneths" only offer blessings. You can only talk to the one true "Kenneth" near Havesly.

- *A well-known Cheat Code found in 666.msg is:*

Some call me Tim

During any battle when it is the player's turn:

- *Press the keys Ctrl+Shift+Z to enter the debug mode*
- *Type 'Some call me Tim' and press [Enter]*

This Cheat Code is a variant of Antara's "Lightning Strike" spell (which itself is similar to the spell "Mad God's Rage" from "Betrayal At Kronдор"). During normal gameplay, "Lightning Strike" only affects metal-wielding enemies; however, the use of this Cheat Code instantly kills ALL enemies in a battle, dealing 9000–10000 damage.

The phrase refers to a John Cleese character from the 1974 film, "Monty Python and the Holy Grail." He plays 'Tim the Enchanter,' a wizard who uses magic to conjure deadly fireballs. When asked his name, he simply replies, "There are some who call me... Tim."

- *There is as-yet undisclosed Cheat Code found in 666.msg that can be entered:*

Seattle

- *Press the keys Ctrl+Shift+Z to enter the debug mode*
- *Type 'Seattle' and press [Enter]*

This results in a sound effect of thunder being played, a nod to Seattle's notoriously rainy climate (~37–39 inches of rain over 156–165 days a year on average).

VERSION UPDATES

The most current version of this document can be found at the following websites:

- *The Sierra Help Pages / SHP forum*
<http://forums.sierrahelp.com/viewtopic.php?t=6272>
 - *Larry Laffer Dot Net*
<http://larrylaffer.net/>
-

Version 1.0 – 10/31/2023

- *Initial Release*

Version 1.1 – 11/13/2023

- *General updates*
 - *Adjusted/edited formatting*
 - *Added Page Numbers at the bottom of each page*
 - *Replaced Asterisk separators with Em-dashes*
 - *Standardized/revised Topic Names*
- *Split "Writing Credits" and "A Brief History of Antara" into their own sections*
- *Revised Expanded Cutscene sections (Prologue/Chapter Starts & Ends/Epilogue)*
- *Chapter 2: Moved using Melay Well entry to the end of that section*
- *Chapter 4: Moved Seductive Enchantress ahead of Levosche Farmer, not after*
- *Chapter 7: Corrected topic name "Natalie's Widower," not "Natalie's Widow"*
- *Game Items section*
 - *Replaced Equals Sign separators with Em-dashes*
 - *Moved "Unused Descriptions" ahead of "Unused Items"*
- *Unused Game Text section*
 - *Slightly revised of Commentary text*
 - *For the Mantis entry, noted that there IS one mention in the Finished Game*
 - *Added an entry for the unused Shepherd's Armor description text*
 - *Expanded the "Blessed Insurance Policy" entry*
- *References / Fun Facts section*
 - *Added entries for Cynthia Vanous and "Defenders Of The Empire"*

Version 1.2 – 12/17/2023

- Added "Version Updates" section*
- Standardized all spaces and spacing throughout the entire document*
- Revised the "Video Cutscenes that Bookend each Chapter" section*
- Revised Expanded Cutscene sections (Prologue/Chapter Starts & Ends/Epilogue)*
- Changed "Video *.vmd" to "Resource *.vmd" for Chapters 7–9 and Epilogue*

END.
