

PACE'S JOURNAL

After several years of searching, the following manuscript was finally discovered in the library of Dweomer University. I believe it to be an authentic journal of the noted adventurer, explorer, mage, rogue, diplomat and spy Andross Pace, detailing his arrival in Harkuna and the first five years of his now famous travels. The material here is reproduced with the kind permission of the University Arch-Chancellor. -Ed.

1030

May 1

I have made landfall. After a month at sea, I have *finally* made it to land. By my reckoning I should have reached the east coast of Harkuna at least a week ago, but considering how amazed I am that I survived the voyage at all I'm certainly not complaining.

I sighted land soon after sunrise, not far to the northwest, and not a day too soon - my water supplies would not have seen me through another day. I steered towards land, but struck a reef as I approached shore, and was forced to abandon the boat and swim through the rough surf. The waves cast me, battered and bedraggled, onto the sand, where I lay gasping for breath. I had landed in Harkuna with only the leather jerkin on my back, and my grandfather's map and sword.

As I lay there I heard footsteps approach, and dragged myself to my feet to discover an old man with wild hair and a dirty loincloth approaching. He muttered something about driftwood, talking to himself. A feverish look in his eyes suggestive of a mystic; or a madman.

I eventually managed to gain his attention and asked whether I was, as I suspected, not on the Harkunan mainland but rather on the Isle of Druids of the south-east coast of Sokara.

"Indeed you are," the old man crooned. "I see that you are from a far land, so it up to me to welcome you to Harkuna. But I think that you may have much to do here, as it is written in the stars that someone like you would come. Your destiny awaits you! Come, follow me!"

I rolled my eyes, but the old man was already turning around and climbing up a path that led inland, to hills covered only by scruffy grass.

"Come, come, I will show you the gates of the world," he called, words drifting away on the sea breeze.

I followed him, not particularly wishing to spend my first day in a new land with an odd-smelling madman, but neither having anywhere else to go. He led me to a small hill overlooking the sea. The interior of the island was heavily forested, but the coastline was covered only with grasses and shrubs. There was a circle of large obsidian stones atop the hill, laid to form three archways, covered in runes and symbols.

"Each gate will lead you to a different part of Harkuna, though I know not where," the old man said. Abruptly he turned and wandered back down to the beach, off to fling feces at seagulls or whatever it is lunatics do all day.

I walked around the stones several times, and was surprised to see several common runes plainly stating the names of cities: Old Sokar, Yellowport and Wishport. Old Sokar and Yellowport are well-known to me; Old Sokar is the capital of Sokara and one of the largest cities in Sokara, while Yellowport is a smaller port town to the east, where my grandfather first came ashore after being picked up at sea by a merchant ship. Wishport is not marked on the map, but I remember my grandfather mentioning it once or twice. It may be in Golnir.

There was a strange aura around the stones, and I felt weirdly frightened of stepping through them. I tried tossing a few pebbles through. They didn't come out the other side.

That was enough to make me start walking very quickly away. Oh, alright. Call me a coward. But it was my first day in a strange land and this island was eerily silent except for the wind and it was all very *foreboding*.

So I set off up the east coast of the island, hoping to reach the small town marked "Trading Settlement" on the map. I reached it in the late afternoon; a tiny settlement of a few houses and a tavern, with a single ship moored in the bay.

The mayor greeted me personally, giving me a guided tour I didn't particularly want and telling me all about the town's history and (apparently) bright future. The main export appears to be furs from the forest. I asked why they weren't exporting any timber and he went very quiet, mumbling a few things about woodsmen being shot by arrows, and strange noises in the forest. Then he left, which was good.

I went to the tavern, the Green Man Inn, and spoke with Captain Smith, the skipper of the barque out in the harbour. He's a depressing and negative man,

hunched over a beer in a corner of the bar, but he agreed to take me as a passenger for 15 Shards. His next port of call is Yellowport.

I look forward to sleeping in a bed tonight, even if it is tiny and full of bugs. Sleeping under the tarpaulin on the boat in the rain in the open ocean with sharks bumping against the hull wasn't much fun. She was a good little boat, though, seeing me across the Unbounded Ocean. Shame she's now driftwood on the reef - although she couldn't have asked for a more intrepid final voyage.

May 2

Left the Isle on Smith's ship, the *Pathfinder*, early this morning with a fair wind at our backs. He told me in no uncertain terms to stay out of the crew's way, so I stayed at the edge of the forecastle flipping the single Shard I have left, trying to spot dolphins in the ship's wake. I don't hate the ocean - I was born on its shores and I will always love it - but after four weeks in that tiny boat of it I'm a little tired of it. When we reach Yellowport I'm heading inland.

May 4

Sighted first land - the promontory of Scorpion Bight, a desolate place of scrubland where I'm told giant, monstrous scorpions hold sway. What a lovely country!

May 9

We landed in Yellowport today, the second largest city in Sokara. It sits at the mouth of the Stinking River, so named because of the huge amount of sulphur in it. Even as we were sailing up the bay into the river I could see the perpetual cloud of yellow smog that hangs over the city, a result of the panning yards and extractions. After shipping, sulphur is Yellowport's primary industry - it is greatly in demand from the sorcerous guilds. The smog and the stink are perpetual, and overpowering. As the ship came up the river I caught glimpses of shapes through the yellow fog: the city gates, then the bridges, and the masts of other vessels in the harbour.

I bid adieu to Smith and headed off to explore the city. The harbour was full of beggars and supplicants. Night soon fell, and confused by the warren-like streets and the fog that makes clear navigation impossible, I found myself wandering through the slums along the riverside. I was accosted by a ruthless thug, and forced to kill him. Really, honestly - first night in civilised Sokara and I'm attacked and forced to kill in self-defence. Some country. I found about fifteen shards on his body, took his knife, and dumped the corpse in the river.

Further upstream is the wealthier part of town - the lord's manors, and merchant's

houses. A woman in black brushed past me and I only just managed to grab her wrist before she slit the strings of my money pouch. I dragged her around to face me, but she met my scowl with a swashbuckling grin.

"You've got good reflexes," she said. "Most of the street scum around here are too drunk or too dim to notice the loss of a few Shards. Want to make some real money?!"

What the hell, I figured. I needed some money. What could go wrong?

She introduced herself as Lauria, and led me to a townhouse standing at the back of a treelined square. We waited until well after midnight, for the fog to be thick enough to shroud our activities from any passers-by. I told her about my home island, and my voyage across the ocean. She didn't seem particularly impressed, but perhaps she merely didn't believe me. My grandfather always said that the Harkunans believed the Unbounded Ocean to be the end of the world.

Eventually we crept forth and jemmied open a downstairs window. Lauria told me to stand guard while she headed upstairs.

She was gone a very long time - a little too long, in fact. Suddenly I heard shouts from outside and realised with a stab of panic that I had been played for a fool. The door burst open and three militia men entered with a tall gentleman; the house's owner, stamping with fury. One of the militia men kicked over a table, blocking my escape, and I was forced to fight. Through panic and desperation, I managed to dispatch them, though I was badly wounded in the process.

The tall man watched me with eyes like a snake watching a mongoose, as I limped towards the exit. "We'll meet again, perhaps," he said with a voice like slithering murder. "My name is Talanexor the Fireweaver."

"Remember my name," I called back as I disappeared into the night. "Lauria the Housebreaker."

Bitch.

I wasted no time in fleeing the city, with the blood of three militia men still on my sword. Getting over the wall wasn't difficult; it's designed to keep armies out, not thieves in, and buildings go right up to it. I dropped down to the dirt outside the city and fled along the north-west road, with the first grey light of dawn behind me.

May 10

I hitched a ride with an oxen wagon heading north-west once traffic increased slightly in the morning, sitting behind the driver and wrapping strips of cloth around my wounds. The driver was an old man, half-blind, which was a relief - I didn't need any questions about why I was dripping blood all over his cart. At dusk we stopped over at a roadside inn, and I patched myself up a little better.

To recap: first night in Sokara, killed three people, forced to flee the city a wanted man. Probably couldn't have gone much worse.

May 11

Set out again with the half-blind wagon driver. We passed several militia patrols along the road, which made my heart jump, but they appeared to be regulars. Sokara is quite a militaristic nation; the wagon-driver tells me they have to repel barbarian invasions from the north quite often, not to mention keeping the Nerech beasts and the scorpions in check.

Arrived in Trefoille at dusk; a rather unremarkable crossroads trading town. Took a room at an inn - I need to heal up for a few days.

May 18

Left Trefoille, feeling well enough to travel. Decided to head for Old Sokar.

May 20

I arrived in Old Sokar this morning. Now, Yellowport was an *interesting* city - I use a nicer word than I could - but Sokar is truly *grand* - a huge, sprawling metropolis on the eastern edge of the Grimm Delta, enclosed by a thick wall said to have been built by the ancient Shadar Empire a thousand years ago. The gates were guarded by soldiers in golden livery, and topped by eagle-headed sculptures.

The city itself is quite warm, and very dusty, but fascinating. Dozens of marketplaces, temples, lodging houses, taverns, barracks... I spent the morning slitting a few purses in the markets, which gave me enough Shards to buy a decent meal, and then spent some time exploring the city. I found a smokefilled gambling den in the Street of Entertainers, and did extremely well - winning nearly 100 Shards. I was discreet about it; no need to draw attention.

Unfortunately some do not have my prudence. I saw a scholarly-looking type win far more than I did, and yell it all about with glee. When he left several shifty-looking fellows followed him, and I sighed and cut my evening short to go after him.

I emerged into the darkness of night, having spent longer there than I thought, and followed the pursuers down the street. As I suspected, they tackled the scholar down an alley and started robbing him. I headed after them and knocked them about the head with the hilt of my sword. They were after easier prey and fled.

The scholar was quite thankful, and gave me - wait for it - a vial of yellow dust. At first I assumed it was gold, but he told me it was something he found at an archaeological dig, and that it was supposed to be tossed into the waters at Blessed Springs. No matter how many hints I dropped at a monetary reward he refused to pick up on them. Some people just can't be helped, I suppose.

May 21

This morning I decided to leave Sokar for Blessed Springs. The vial of golden dust makes me quite curious, and while Sokar is also fascinating, I can always come back.

May 22

Arrived in Trefoille again.

May 23

I'm travelling directly east past Yellowport, not quite ready to return to that city yet. Slower going, but I don't want to get picked up by a military patrol. Not relishing crossing the Stinking River.

May 24

There was a small village on the banks of the River, and I paid a boy a Shard to take me across in a boat. How anyone can permanently live next to that thing I have no idea.

May 26

Rejoined the road north-east of Yellowport.

May 27

Arrived in Venefax at dusk. It's a strange little town, structured into a single gigantic building, all the houses joined together to form a single mass. None of the houses have doors - the only way in is through holes in the roof, reached by ladders. "We had to build it that way, for defence," a farmer explained to me. "You see, the scorpion men from the south cannot climb, so they can't get up the ladders!"

I rented a room at the Scorpion's Sting Tavern for the night, with a tiny window that looks out over the south, to the arid scrublands where the scorpions hold

sway. I'm surprised the king hasn't stationed a military barracks here. Perhaps he feels farmers are not worth defending.

May 28

After breakfast I stopped in at the market, by climbing down a ladder into a long, low hall. To my irritation there was a sign reading "Closed on Thursdays" - and, as luck would have it, today is Thursday.

As I headed back up to the rooftop, a young boy ran up to me. "Please sir! You have to help us! The Blood-Thursday Gobbler has got my sister!"

I assumed he was playing a game. "Blood-thirsty Gobbler, you mean?"

His mother, a flaxen-haired beauty nearby, shook her head gravely. "Blood-Thursday Gobbler. We call it that because it only strikes on Thursdays."

That sent up a red flag. "And your daughter was taken last Thursday?"

"That's right. But we can't ask you to risk yourself - pay no mind to my boy, sir..."

I spoke with them for a while. The boy was Mikail, and his mother Lynn. Their daughter Haylie disappeared a week ago and was seen only by Mikail, who described the creature as a terrifying beast. "We're farmers," not warriors," one of the women nearby said, "and all our fighting men are serving in the army."

I promised to try and help them, and asked around about Fourze, the master of the market. Somebody said they had seen him heading off into the country, though they were confused as to why I was asking. I followed his trail out to an abandoned farmhouse, where I found two thugs helping him into a crudley stitched animal skin resembling a monster. Amateur stuff, really.

I waited by the door and knocked one of the thugs out with my sword. The other two surrendered pretty quickly, and I summoned the villagers. We found the kidnapped children in the basement of the farmhouse. Fourze had been selling them to a slaver from Caran Baru.

After he was dealt with by brutal mob justice (ain't nothing like it), I was toasted by Venefax at a feast. Lynn gave me a chainmail vest and rusty sword that had been in her family for some time. The villagers are quite thankful, and I'm tactful enough not to mention how foolish they were not to draw the connection between the market being closed on Thursdays and the monster attacks.

May 29

Set off this morning for Blessed Springs.

May 31

Travelled some way with a priest of Alvir and Valmir today. I asked why he was on an inland road, and he said he was suffering from a malady which required the holy waters of the Blessed Springs to cure. He thanked me for my company, and protection from bandits, and gave me a blessing of Safety From Storms.

June 1

Arrived in Blessed Springs at noon. The springs have naturally been capitalised upon; there's a priesthood here to ensure that all pay the admission fee, as the gods would wish. I begrudgingly forked over the 35 Shards and entered, finding an electric blue pool with several bathers in it. It gave off a strong, invigorating scent, like crushed pine leaves.

"Here goes nothing," I said, quite literally, and tossed the vial into the water. To my surprise there was a flash, and a cloud of yellow smoke billowed up out of the water. When it cleared, I found myself face to face with a white-bearded old man, dressed in ornate robes, floating a few feet off the water!

He blinked a few times before announcing himself as Oliphard the Wizardly, and thanking me. The other bathers stared in surprise as we retired to the Blessed Ale Tavern for a few drinks. He told me that he had been exploring the lair of Vayss the Sea Dragon, when the dragon had spotted him and entombed him inside a vial of yellow dust.

"I thought it was just a name," I said. "The Lake of the Sea Dragon, I mean."

"An oxymoron, certainly, but Vayss is quite real. My idiot apprentice was supposed to recover the vial and throw it in the spring if anything went wrong, but apparently the idiot couldn't even be trusted to do that."

I told him about how I'd found his apprentice gambling in Old Sokar, and then being mugged. He swore to punish the idiot, and then told me to seek him in Trefoille if anything ever went wrong, after casting a few magical blessings on me. Then he was heading off down the road to Yellowport.

June 2

I spent the rest of yesterday evening in the tavern, getting drunk and feeling quite pleased with myself. Some locals were discussing recent events; it seems a hideous beast has taken up residence in a cave outside the village. "It's a gorlock,"

said a farmer. "And it's amassed quite a bit of treasure by most accounts; lifted from its victims."

Last night it seemed like quite a good idea, but this morning I was considerably hungover and it was early afternoon before I felt up to the task of exploring the cave. It wasn't pleasant - there were human bones dumped near the entrance. Fresh tracks of some large, two-legged, three-toed creature led away from the cave into the nearby forest. It seemed that the creature was not home.

Fighting back a rising tide of last night's ale, I crept towards the entrance warily. I was on the lookout for something approaching from behind - which was why I was so surprised when the gorlock came screaming out of the cave and raked my belly with its talons. The bastard has backwards-pointing feet.

I managed to kill it, nonetheless, though it was like fighting a bladed windmill, and I dripped an awful lot of blood over the loot inside the cave. 500 Shards in total, with a few old weapons and a single silver nugget. Not a bad haul, but not quite as good as I was expecting, especially after I nearly lost my small intestine. I limped back into Blessed Springs to the cheers of the villagers. I expect to spend about a week in the tavern healing up.

June 3

While I slowly regain my flesh and regenerate blood, I'm thinking about travelling to the Lake of the Sea Dragon. Oliphard told me that Vayss has an underwater cavern full of riches. A greater haul than the gorlock's, I'm sure...

June 10

Set off this morning for the *lake* of Vayss, the *Sea Dragon*. These wacky Sokarans.

June 12

After two days of pleasant travel across farmlands, I've come to the lake of the Sea Dragon - the source of the Stinking River, fed by streams and tributaries from the Coldbleak Mountains. The lake's shores are swept by ochre waves and the air smells foul. A sickly, pale green seaweed is the only vegetation that can survive on the lake, laden with sulphur - as legend has it, generated by Vayss himself.

There was a small fishing village called Cadmium at the south shore of the lake, and I made my way there. Dull place - a few houses and a boat pulled up on the shore. I talked to a fisherman about what, exactly, they fish here. Apparently "smoulder fish" are highly valued by the sorcerers in Dweomer.

It was getting late, so I paid a fisherman a Shard to sleep in his boathouse. Tomorrow morning I'll rent a boat and head out to explore the lake.

June 13

At first light I set out. It's a big lake, and I had a lot of ground to cover if I wanted to find the dragon's lair.

But I didn't have to wait long. I was approaching the centre of the lake around noon, when there was a great bubbling and frothing, disturbing the still silence. A massive, scaly head - the size of the boat - erupted from the water on the end of a long, sinuous neck. Great luminous eyes stared down at me. The creature was covered in brown scales, with a bright red crest running down its neck.

I exhaled, very slowly.

"I am Vayss, the Sea Dragon," the creature said, its head hovering above me, breath stinking of sulphur. "You are in my waters, and must pay tribute - to wit, one silver nugget. Pay now, or face my wrath."

I very slowly reached for my backpack, and pulled out the silver nugget from the gorlock's cave. I hurled it into the air, and Vayss snagged it out of the air with a clawed forelimb.

"Excellent," the dragon said. With that, he rolled over, and dived down into the lake. At the last second, his tail whipped up out of the water, inches from my face. I instinctively reached out and grabbed it, and was yanked from the boat, dragged down into the murky water at incredible speed.

Some days I regret impulsive decisions like that. Not today.

I thought my lungs were about to burst when at last Vayss headed upwards, breaking the surface of a dim grotto. A cave in a rocky island. A hole in the roof let in a shaft of bright sunlight, reflecting off the water, casting dappled light around the walls.

Part of the cave was dry ground - heaped with glittering treasure, just as Oliphard had described. A rocky ledge was lined with a number of yellow vials of dust. People, I realised, entombed. It was beyond my reach.

Vayss pulled himself atop the hoard, dripping water. I had but a few seconds to scramble to safety behind a rocky pillar.

I waited for a very, very long time, before Vayss slithered out of the cave again - no doubt to harass some fishermen for silver. I looted the hoard with as much panicky, running-out-of-time speed as I could muster. It wasn't long before I heard the dragon returning, and scrambled up the mound of gold to climb out the hole in the roof, onto the rocky island.

I counted my loot up there, hoping Vayss wouldn't realise anything was missing. An ebony wand, a sword that appears to be enchanted - what with the glowing and slight vibrating - and some very nicely crafted lockpicks. It's not all about cash, you see.

After a few hours I managed to flag down a passing fishing boat. They picked me up and took me back to Cadmium.

By the gods. I can't believe I'm still alive.

June 14

With not much else to do, I've decided to follow the Stinking River south, to Yellowport. It's been a month. I'm sure I can show up safely again.

June 19

The river twists and turns its way through farmland, and, in the area I arrived in today, through a steep chasm. A village called High Therys was perched on the edge, and as I arrived in the late afternoon I found the villagers behaving quite oddly. They were laying out a fine feast on the green - fruits, bread, roasting pigs, even local merchants leaving coffers of silver - and then, rather than dining, they scurried home and closed their shutters. I snagged one before he fled inside his home, and asked him what was going on.

"This banquet is for the ghosts of three travellers who drowned here. They lost their way in a storm, and fell into a millpond, seven years ago."

"Right. You're serving ghosts."

"They come every year on this night. If we didn't placate them with victuals and treasure, there'd be a mess of trouble."

"How do you know this?"

"Old Meg told us. She is knowledgeable of such things." He tugged free of my grasp, and fled inside his home.

Ghosts indeed. From the cover of a hedge I waited as the sun set, and darkness gathered. As the sky turned from velvet indigo to starlit blackness, three figures came loping across the green from the direction of the millpond - leaving footprints on the damp grass.

"Alright, what's all this then?" I asked, emerging from the hedge.

The "ghosts" were just sitting to dine, and they jumped, startled. "Get back, mortal!" one of them cried, "or I'll touch you with my grave-cold hands and it'll be the end of your days!"

I sighed, strode forward and beat the idiots over the heads, laying them out like logs on the village green. The air was thick with dusted flour; that was how they made themselves look pale.

I summoned the timid villagers forth, who still failed to grasp what was going on. "Why, that's Old meg!" one said. And Bradok the miller, and Lame Pootmar! "Where are the ghosts?" I shook my head at the stupidity of these yokels. "There were no ghosts. It was always these three."

The villagers gave me 80 Shards, and a farmer let me stay the night in his house. When I left the next morning there were three corpses swinging in the gibbet.

June 21

Caught a smoulder fish while fishing today. Tried eating it but it tastes like poison. Maybe I can sell it in Yellowport.

June 24

Arrived back in Yellowport at last, and walked through the north-east gate without being decried and executed on the spot. A good start, I suppose.

I headed for Brimstone Plaza, the city marketplace, where they constantly burn braziers of incense in an attempt to get rid of the rotten-egg smell that permeates the city. Got rid of the smoulder fish, and also offloaded some old weapons I didn't need anymore. A trader from Golnir was selling what he called a treasure map, and on impulse I bought it. It was of the Forbidden Forest in northern Golnir, and showed a safe path to the fabled Tower of Despair. On my map it is marked as being on the banks of the River Rese - my grandfather told me of how he spent months searching for it fruitlessly. Interesting.

While at the market I heard that the guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild was looking for adventurers, so I stopped by that afternoon to visit. His name is

Vernon, a hugely fat man bedecked in jewels. He laid the cae out clearly - a group of ratmen had taken up residence beneath the city, in the sewers, and ventured out at night to raid the merchant warehouses. "We need somebody destroy their king," Vernon said. "Without him, the rats wouldn't be able to organise a feast in a larder."

"Assassinating a rat," I said. "How much?"

"450 Shards." I tried to bargain him up, but there's just no arguing with someone who does it for a living. Vernon showed me a map of the city, pointing out a well in the poor quarters which lead to the sewers.

I didn't have anything else on that night, so after swinging by the markets again to buy a lantern and some rat poison, I headed straight there, arriving as the sun was setting. It was dank and smelly in the well, but I soon found a passage leading deep into the darkness. It soon branched off into hudnreds of different tunnels; I amrked with chalk so I could find my way back.

I was ambushed my some ratmen, ugly, stunted things, but made short work of them. They had a few Shards and an indecipherable note, so I headed the way they'd come from in the hope of finding their lair. Eventually I came to two rotten doors: one marked "kitchuns" and one marked "thrown rum." Throne room, evidently, so I opened the door and slipped inside.

The throne room appeared to be the remains of an ancient Uttakin temple, part of the sunken old city below Yellowport, dating back to a time when the Masked Lords of Uttaku ruled over Harkune - before the people rose up and overthrow them. A wooden chair was sitting on the altar as throne, with an ugly ratman sitting on it, with a cheap iron crown. Four ratmen knelt before him, talking to him in their scratchy language.

I crept through the shadows, before burtsing out and cutting the king down. The rest of the rats fled in terror. I took an amulet from around the rat's neck, looted some chests for scant treasure, and quickly retraced my steps to the surface.

June 25

At nine o'clock this morning I was on the guild's doorstep, throwing the amulet in the air and catching it, sauntering into Vernon's office to declare success. He joyously handed over my 450 Shards.

While I was there one of the clerks told me about this new thing called "investing." Apparently you can give the Guild money and they'll spend it on

trade, and if they make a profit, you make a profit. It seems quite strange, but I have money to burn at the moment, so I thought I'd give it a shot. I dropped 200 Shards off and headed out to spend the day wandering around Yellowport.

June 26

Call me crazy, but I still feel uncomfortable in Yellowport. Guards keep giving me weird looks. I think I'll head up to Trefoille and see what Oliphard's doing.

June 28

Arrived in Trefoille and spent the evening at Oliphard's elegant townhouse. I told him about my adventures in the Lake of the Sea Dragon. Think I'll head to Sokar tomorrow.

June 30

Arrived in this big, glorious, bustling metropolis again. I think I'll spend some more time here, this time. Do some exploring.

July 4

Heatwave's come in. Terrible, baking hot weather; apparently southern Sokara is like this every summer.

July 5

I heard in a tavern that the local Temple of Nagil is looking for "a person of unusual resourcefulness," and since that fits me quite well, I showed up this morning to talk to the warden, the priest in charge of security. "We have had an unfortunate, um... accident," he said. "In the crypt, we sometimes experiment with corpses of the dead - you know the occassional zombie, part of the rituals of honour of that particular aspect of Nagil... anyway, it seems a ghoul has escaped, and is terrorising the city at night. We'd prefer it be taken care of before the city militia get wind of it. Destroy it, and bring me the creature's head."

My grandfather said he'd hunted a ghoul once, though that was further west in Golnir, not here in Sokara. He told me they were nocturnal, generally liked to hide out during the day in crypts or graveyards, and that a mixture of salt and iron filings is valuable protection against them. I picked some of those up at the market for 15 Shards, and then set off to search the cemeteries of Old Sokar. There were no less than twelve of them, which made things difficult. I searched high and low and found no trace of any ghoul.

The next day I heard in a tavern that some warrior-priest of Tynnai had slain a ghoul the previous night. Pipped at the post.

July 6

Being in the temple of Nagil made me think about life and death. I've been in Harkuna two months now, and have already had plenty of close shaves. It might be time for me to start thinking about being initiated into a religion.

But which one?

July 10

I've decided on joining the Temple of Sig - the patron of vagabonds, troubadours, lovers, thieves and general rogues. He - or she, it's sort of indeterminate - sounds like my kind of fellow. The Sokar temple was full of so much wealth it made me gasp. "As you can see," said one of the priestesses, "we have been made rich by generous, er, donations!"

The initiation rite took several hours. Afterwards, I was speaking to the chief priest about something he would like taken care of - specifically, a suit of golden armour. Entirely ceremonial, in the Temple of Tyrnai in Caran Baru. I was quite happy to take up the challenge, and I leave for Caran Baru tomorrow morning.

July 11

Uneventful day on the Soakar-Trefoille road.

July 12

Stopped off at Trefoille; Oliphard was out of town, so I stayed at the local inn.

July 13

Started travelling north on the highway to Caran Baru today. It's mostly supply caravans and troop convoys.

July 16

Stopped at the Weary Pilgrim Tavern, where a trader from the far north told me the tale of Targdaz the Magnificent - a wizard tricked by a shaman of the Horde of the Thousand Winds, on the Great Steppes. Targdaz was imprisoned in a giant ruby, and is still there to this day. If the story is true, of course.

July 19

A priest mistook me for a beggar today, which was quite galling, even if he did give me 10 Shards.

July 22

Closer to Caran Baru, there are more troops on the road, clearing their ways through the throngs of pilgrims and travellers by banging people on the head. The

soldiers have far too much clout in this country. The king should really do something about it.

July 24

Arrived in Caran Baru today. It reinforced my uneasy feelings about Sokara's enormous military. It's a garrison town, serving as a waystation between the mountain citadels and the cities of the south; many supplies, arms and soldiers move through here on the north-south trail. Shops, temples and traders have sprung up to support the needs of the military. There is also a sizeable mining community - just to the west lie the Bronze Hills, Sokara's primary source of mineral wealth.

The place is packed with soldiers, of course, and surrounded by a pair of thick walls with fields of stakes inside. What bothers me is, who are they *fighting*? There haven't been any barbarian raids past the citadels in decades. Even when my grandfather was here, he said there seemed to be far too many idle soldiers.

I scoped out the temple this morning, before waiting for nightfall. It's a small fortress in one corner of the city, by the barracks, with heavy wooden gates flanked by iron statues of bull-headed men wielding clubs - golems, who would no doubt come to life if I even looked at them cross-eyed. Inside, the god was represented by a stone jaguar idol - wearing the golden suit of armour I'd been sent to steal. All the priests were wearing very large, sharp weapons. The whole experience left me feeling quite nervous. I wonder if every new initiate gets sent to do something this stupidly dangerous.

I returned after midnight, and climbed onto the roof of the temple, leaning down and removing the vital plugs from the golems out the front, rendering them lifeless before they had a chance to animate and smear my brains across the road. Green liquid spilled out, and the two golems remained lifeless as I dropped silently down and entered the temple.

Inside, I spotted a pressure pad at the base of the idol just in time. Who knows what kind of fresh hell that would have set off. Avoiding it was simple, and I was soon leaving the temple with the golden mail stashed in my backpack. What I did was sacrilege - but who cares?

By the time the sun rose, I was safely back in my inn room, and by the time the priests were entering the temple to find their mail missing, I was amidst the throngs of travellers leaving the south gate.

August 5

Arrived in Trefoille - Oliphard still out of town, someone said he was in Dweomer and may be there for some time. I'd like to take a look at Dweomer someday. Magic would be a useful thing to learn.

August 7

Arrived in Old Sokar in the afternoon, and headed back to the Temple of Sig. "By the Larcenous One," the high priest exclaimed when I came into his office. "You are indeed an accomplished rogue!"

The high priest gave me 300 Shards as payment, and taught me a few arcane secrets of Sig's lore. The experience in itself was reward enough - I learned a few new tricks, and who else can say that they stole from Tynrai under his very nose? (up one rank)

August 8

I was going through my belongings today and found an old map furled up at the bottom of my rucksack - the treasure map I bought in Yellowport, of the Forest of the Forbidden, which I'd completely forgotten about. It strikes my fancy - if I can find the Tower of Despair where my grandfather failed, that would be brilliant. I think I'll set off in a few days.

August 14

I decided to head west into Golnir - which was a bad idea. The Grimm Delta leads directly onto the Magwort fens, and together they combine into a gigantic swampy mess. I've been trapped in these fens for days, and I'm wet and muddy and tired and miserable. Just yesterday a warthog attacked me and nearly gored my leg. That would have been fun - an open wound in a swamp full of diseased insects.

August 16

Finally left that bloody swamp. I headed straight into Wishport, a pictureque little town set at the back of a bay rimmed by white cliffs. First thing I did was to go to the public baths and rent a private room, where I stayed for the rest of the day, scrubbing and sweating and cleansing all that bloody dirt out.

August 17

Spent today looking at townhouses in Wishport. I need somewhere to stash the loot I'm starting to build up. There's a nice little place on one of the islands close to shore in the bay, all of which are covered in buildings. Should finalise it in the next few days, if I don't find anywhere nicer.

August 20

100 Shards poorer, but the owner of a pleasant townhouse overlooking Wishport Bay. I had a few new locks installed. I don't plan to spend much time here, and it needs to be secure.

August 21

Set out today on the road north, to the town of Harggart's Corner. The Magwort fens are on my right, sometimes coming right up to the road, bridges leading across all the little pools and rivulets. Accursed place.

August 22

Arrived in Haggart's Corner in the late afternoon. I hitched a ride with a farmer taking his oxen into town, who told me that the village is famed for being one of the few places in the world where the trau come and trade with humans. "What on Earth are trau?" I asked.

"Creatures of the darkness," he said. "Never seen 'em, m'self."

We arrived in the town proper, a pretty, pastel-hued collection of houses set around a series of fountain courts. I asked a woman selling flowers about trading with the trau, and she told me I had to wait inside the ring of standing stones that sits atop a hilltop outside of town. "Some nights the trau come," she said. "Most nights they won't. And mind that you keep one Mithral to pay your toll when you leave the standing stones, else you won't be seen this side of the sky again!"

"What's a Mithral?" I asked.

She laughed. "If you don't know that, I suggest you avoid the trau entirely!"

Partly out of curiosity and partly out of spite, I walked up to the circle of stones and waited for nightfall, determined to trade with the trau. I waited there till dawn, but no trau came. I'm determined to wait again tomorrow night.

August 23

Still no trau.

August 24

Still no trau.

August 25

Still no trau.

August 26

Stuff this for a lark. I'm going to the Forbidden Forest.

August 27

Travelled today with a thatcher who had come up with an ingenious if amoral scheme: selling villagers shares in their own roof. I said that people would have to be stupid for that - apparently they are.

August 28

Arrived at the Monastery of Molhern at dusk. Molhern is the blacksmith of the gods, famous for his cleverness and the breadth of his knowledge. Initiates of the god study at the monastery, combining academic pursuits with hard physical labour. Normally they only allow initiates in, but I charmed my way in and spent some time talking to the abbott.

August 29

Set out northeast for the town of Conflass. I made good time, hitching a ride with a pedlar's cart, and arrived in the little village at dusk. It's a lively town, white-fronted houses with brightly painted timber frames. The burghers were open and friendly; one said to me "We tell the baronies that we pay tax to the Sokarans, and the Sokarans that we pay tax to the baronies. That's why you'll never find a long face in Conflass." I found several, afetr making it my business to look for them, but on the whole they did seem to be quite a cheerful lot.

August 30

Spent the day looking through the markets of Conflass: tiers of shops, linked by walkways, around a pleasant green park. Didn't buy anything, but it's a nice little place.

August 31

The last day of summer, and as I travel up the valley of the Rainbow River the leaves are already turning brown.

September 3

Rugged country up here. I haven't seen anyone in the last few days. There may be a few hunters and trappers, but other than that it feels like I'm the last person alive in the world.

September 6

Came to a waterfall today and stopped to try my hand at fishing in the pool below it, where a fine spray hung in the air like sparkling mist. The longer I stayed, the more I imagined I could see dancing figures outlined in the mist. Then I started hearing whispers, and realised that it wasn't my imagination at all.

Soon the shapes came down to me, hanging in the air. They identified themselves as the spirits of the waterfall, and said they could lead me to a great treasure - but only one.

"One great treasure is enough," I replied glibly. "Take me to it."

Plucking at my sleeves with damp ethereal fingers, the spirits led me to shallow water below the torrent. There was a heavy jade ring set in the riverbed, and when I pulled it, the waterfall miraculously stopped as though a tap had been turned off. In the rock face beyond where two caves.

Picking one at random, I entered the left cave, and it led me into a deep chamber where stalactites as fine as silver threads hung from the ceiling. The cavern contained three chests: one of corroded copper, one of rusty iron, and one of tarnished silver. I opened the copper chest, simply because it was closest, and found inside a sword and a shield. A voice at my shoulder made me jump in alarm, but it was only the spirits, who had followed me. "You must choose only one," they said.

I already have a magic sword, so I took the shield, which proved to be quite powerful. Suddenly I passed out, and found myself lying on the side of the pool again. The waterfall was flowing. The spirits had departed.

September 7

Travelling north today I caught my first glimpse from a hilltop of the Forest of the Forsaken, a huge mass of dark green trees stretching to the horizon. I could have reached it by nightfall, but I came across a trio of nuns heading for the Abbey of Lacuna, and they invited me to join them. It was preferable to sleeping under a tree for another night, so I fell in with them.

September 8

I left the abbey at dawn to head north to the forest. Even in the morning light it was a dark and forbidding place, shadows clustering like cobwebs under gnarled roots. As I skirted the forest searching for a path, I saw a hamlet at the edge of the trees. As I approached a man looked up and started ringing an iron bell. The hamlet was marked on the map as the "Hamlet of Lazars" - lepers - so I steered clear. Further up was another small village, with several bald men tilling the fields nearby. I found their gazes somewhat unsettling, and passed by their village to enter the forest.

Here on the map was marked "knightly challenge" - and sure enough, next to a

bubbling brook was a small pavilion with a knight sitting astride his sword in silence. A dwarf squire waddled up to me. "My lord contests your right to use this path," he said. "You must fight him or turn back."

"Fair enough," I said, hefting my fancy magic shield, and my sword from the lair of Vayss the sea dragon.

"I'll trounce you!" the dwarf sniggered. "I mean, my master will."

What a strange little man, I thought, as I prepared for combat. The noon sun was above us, filtered through the red and brown leaves, as we approached each other and duelled. It was a nasty struggle, but thanks to my unfair magical advantage, I soon defeated him. He fell with a heavy clatter to the ground, visor springing open and releasing a wisp of green vapour. I was amazed to see that the armour was empty.

The dwarf came running out of the parlour and whined something about unfairness and revenge, before disappearing into the forest. I suppose he'd captured a spirit in there or something. I took the armour and the sword, which should fetch something back in civilisation, and then headed further up the path.

I ventured on through the eerie forest and eventually came to a fork in the path. According to the map, left would lead me to a tomb, while right would lead me deeper into the forest. I followed the path right, eager to find the Tower of Despair, and soon came to a gibbet at a crossroads. The map directed me west, towards the tower, and it proved correct. After a half hour walk I arrived at a clearing in which stood a jet black tower, narrow and windowless. The parapet was encrusted with small gems that glittered like stars. There was only a single door, banded solidly with panels of dark iron. With the aid of my magic lockpicks (thanks again, Vayss) I opened the door and entered the tower.

At the foot of a spiral staircase was a huge slaver wolf. I had a brief heart attack before realising it was chained to the wall. This made it quite easy to kill, but as I watched its splintered bones began to knit together again, the blood pouring back through its wounds. A faery wolf of some kind, with powers of regeneration. I ran up the stairs three at a time, eager to grab some loot and leave the tower before I had to fight it again.

At the top of the stairs was a belfry filled with roosting vampire bats, hanging like sacks of dun-cloured leather around a huge iron bell. A loathsome trickle of fleas and lice fell constantly from them, raining over me as I carefully picked my way beneath them to gather the coins and items scattered on the floor. I gathered a

golden sword and a regal helm, along with some huge armfuls of treasure. I gathered 500 Shards before the bats began to stir, and I was forced to flee from the tower before they awoke.

Outside in the forest, I caught my breath and stared up at the tower, shivering. My grandfather had heard of its riches and had spent a long time searching for it. I felt proud that at last someone of our line had succeeded. (Gain 1 rank).

I found a woodland stream and followed it to the edge of the forest, emerging shortly before dusk. I wasn't sorry to be elaving it behind - it would appear to be the msot dangerous region in Golnir.

Tomorrow I'll head back south-west, towards the Endless Plains, and offload some of this loot in the market towns.

September 10

Camped with some gypsies by the Rainbow River. Lovely people. Don't see why they get such a bad rap.

September 12

Arrived at the first few farms of the Endless Plains - a rolling vast expanse of fields that gleam like quilts of gold. It's harvest season now, and everyone is out in the fields, every spare hand bringing in the crop.

September 15

I'm so goddamn sick of wheat.

September 19

Finally arrived at Wheatfields, a small trading town near the southern edge of the plains, rising from the sea of gold like an island. It's a dull, boring, generic town, but after a week of fields and fences it seems like Old Sokar. They have a surprisingly large market, and I was able to sell a lot of the treasure I found in the forest. I now have a personal fortune totalling nearly 3,000 Shards.

September 20

Left Wheatfields today, heading south for the coast, passing hundreds of carts laden with grain, headed for the market. I miss the ocean.

September 23

Came to an inn with low, overhanging eaves at the edge of the Whistling Heath. A sign proclaimed "Civilisation stops here!"

"Surely you risk offending travellers coming the other way," I said to the inkeeper, a friendly man named Troilus. He smiled and showed me the other side of the sign, which read the same thing. "I flatter everyone, offend no-one," he said. "It is a good philosophy of life."

Tired of travelling; might put my feet up for a few days.

September 26

Set out again, hitching a ride with a merchant caravan heading south for Metriciens.

September 29

Arrived in Metriciens this morning. The merchants would not shut up about what a beautiful city it is, and I got quite sick of hearing it, but I have to admit - they're right. Broad market plazas, great palaces, ancient stonework bridges jutting over canals in the old quarter... this is a beautiful little coastal city. Not quite as great as Old Sokar, but still somewhere I could spend a few days. I'm not quite sure what to do with myself now that I've plundered the forest, but cities are always interesting.

October 3

Heard a rumour today about a spice shipment from Ankon-Konu, due to arrive at port in a few days. "I got the news from a wizard who just came from Dweomer," said the fellow as I bought him another drink.

"How come his ship got here before the one with the spice?"

He gave me a knowing smirk. "I said he was a wizard. He probably flew here on a demon's back!"

An unlikely prospect, but I was intrigued nonetheless - and also bored, which was why I decided to risk 500 Shards on an investment.

October 5

The spice ship arrived, and a roaring trade has developed. My investment has more than doubled. If I ever get tired of adventuring, trade wouldn't be a bad way to rack up the Shards.

October 7

Tired of Metriciens, and eager to spend some time at sea, I talked today with the captain of a Sokaran vessel called the *Black Lady* which is setting sail for Yellowport tomorrow. 15 Shards. Spare change for me these days.

October 8

The captain insists on sticking close to the shoreline, which is much safer but slower than travelling in the open sea. "I've been attacked by pirates six times already this year," he says. "Somebody needs to do something about those blasted Reavers."

The Reavers, he told me, are pirates operating out of the Unnumbered Isles to the south of the Grimm Delta. It was the same in my grandfather's day; he was captured and sold into slavery by them once, though he managed to escape when the slave ship was intercepted by the Sokaran Navy.

"Why doesn't the navy do anything about it?" I asked.

"They guard the coasts, but they have no chance of penetrating into the islands," the captain said. "It's a labyrinth of reefs and shallow waters and dangerous rocks. Only the Reavers know how to navigate them safely."

October 16

We arrived in Yellowport at dusk, and I thanked the captain and set off to find lodging. The Gold Dust Tavern had a spare room, and after setting my things down I entered the common room for dinner. I struck up a conversation with a man named Pyletes, a scholar of Molhern.

"Many years ago, the Book of Seven Sages was stolen from us," he said. "News has reached us that it may be in the hands of the scorpion men. I need a young adventurer like yourself - you could travel to Scorpion Bight and retrieve it for me!"

"Well, I didn't have anything else planned."

We talked for a little while more - he gave me a description of the book, but resisted my attempts to learn precisely how it was stolen. Obviously someone screwed up, and I'll bet it was Pyletes himself. I think I'll head off tomorrow.

October 17

Set off early this morning. Heavy autumn showers coming in - good thing the wayhouses here are frequent. I'd hate to be sleeping under a bush in this rain.

October 20

Arrived in Venefax this afternoon, and was hailed by the villagers. When they asked why I had returned I told them I was retrieving something from the

Scorpion lands and they weren't very pleased to hear it. "It's far too dangerous," Lynn insisted. "Nobody who ever goes into the Scorpion Lands ever returns!"

"Well, I intend to buck the trend," I said.

They gave me everything they thought I might need - rope, gear, rations, scorpion poison antidote. I intend to set off at first light tomorrow.

October 21

The lands around Scorpion Bight are rugged, hilly and covered in scub. There's a lone pine tree or cedar here and there, but no thick vegetation to speak of. Even in mid-autumn it clings to an arid climate, with the sun uncomfortably and hawks circling overhead.

Before noon I'd encountered my first scorpion man - travelling alone, probably part of an outer perimeter guard. He was like a scorpion centaur, with a scorpion's body but a human torso and head, only with eyes that were blazing gold. He attacked me with his enormous sting, but was slower than I was, and I managed to kill him without sustaining any wounds. I squeezed a little venom out of his sting, for the villagers of Venefax had said it is a potent poison, then continued south.

Throughout the afternoon I encountered more scorpion patrols, but I was ready now, and managed to hide from them. Towards sunset I encountered a huge mound set beyond a ridge in a low valley - the scorpion's nest.

I waited until nightfall, and then crept towards the mound, finding a hole with only a single sentry (asleep). Inside it smelled like foul rotten vegetables. I headed for the centre of the mound, hoping to find some room where they stored their treasures, past tunnels, rooms and egg chambers. There were a few close calls, but the scorpion men seem to have poor eyesight, and I avoided most of them by sticking to the shadows.

Eventually I came to a room which seemed more like the laboratory of a sorcerer than a scorpion's den - flasks, alembics and scrolls all over the place. A scorpion man was working at his desk, but unlike the others, his torso was dressed in crude clothing. I crept a little closer into the room, when suddenly what I had taken to be a stuffed boar's head on the wall opened its mouth and said, "There is an intruder, master."

The scorpion man wheeled around, startled and ready to attack, but I had already realised that something was wrong. No scorpion man would have the intelligence to set up a room like this; the people of Venefax had told me that even their

magic-users were just shamans, incapable of higher thought or accomplishment. Under this uncertainty, the magical illusion fell away, and the scorpion man in front of me was reduced to his true self - a fat, balding little man, dressed in a dirty tunic.

"Ah..." he said, realising I had seen through the magic. After an awkward moment he dropped to his knees and begged me not to kill him.

I interrogated him for a while and learned that his name was Kaimrem the Portly, a minor mage who had disguised himself a scorpion man and swiftly taken control of their society several years ago - using the Book of Seven Sages, which he had stolen from the Monastery of Molhern in Golnir, after Pyletes foolishly showed it to him during a tour of the monastery. He had been planning to use the scorpion men as an army, though to what end I'm not sure. I'm not sure he knew either.

Kaimrem was terrified of me - his magical skill is all in illusion, not attack - and he gladly gave me the Book of Seven Sages, before leading us through a secret escape tunnel to an area outside the mound. I marched him through the scorpion lands all through the rest of the night and the next morning, until we arrived in Venefax the next afternoon. I promptly handed him over to the authorities to face trial, with a smug grin on my face since I had returned alive from the scorpion lands after all their warnings and head-shaking.

October 23

Slept well last night. Will head off for Yellowport tomorrow.

October 26

Arrived in Yellowport this evening. It was raining, which does something to dampen the smell of sulphur. I headed to the Gold Dust tavern and handed the Book of Seven Sages to Pyletes, who was overjoyed. he assured me that I had done the cult of Molhern a great service, and would always be welcome at their monastery in Golnir (Illuminate of Molhern).

October 29

I was wandering around the merchant's storehouses last night, scoping out some potential targets, when I heard a muffled cry of distress from a dark alley. Naturally I pulled my sword out and ran down there to investigate, which was quite foolish, and when I found a huddled figure lying on the ground I sheathed my sword and didn't bother looking over my shoulder - which was even more foolish. A net was thrown over my head and the last thing I saw was a glimpse of a face with red circles painted over it before a club slammed into my head and

knocked me out.

When I came to I was in an abandoned warehouse, still caught in the net. I was surrounded by people dressed in furs and feathers and with that red face paint, which was very disconcerting. "What the hell?" I yelled. "What is this?"

"Hello," their leader said cheerfully. "We are the unspeakable ones. It is our way to eat people in sacrifice to our gods."

I noticed that his teeth had been sharpened to razor points.

"You have got to be kidding me," I said.

There was carved wooden idol standing nearby, of a grossly fat figure who was half-man and half-ape. The name "Bagodor the Unspoken" was inscribed at the base of the plaque.

"Bagodor the Unspoken," I said. "What..."

"Do not speak his name!" the leader shouted angrily. "Or you will be forever cursed!"

There was a bubbling nosie behind me, and if I twisted my head just right I could make out a cauldron of water, which a few other cannibals tossing herbs and spices into it.

"This is meant to be Yellowport," I yelled. "Not... wherever you're from!"

"We are from Ankon-Konu, the Feathered Lands," the leader said. "We are here to gain new recruits for the Unspoken One."

"Bagodor?" I asked.

"I told you not to..."

"Bagodor!," I yelled spitefully. "Bagodor, Bagodor, Bagodor!"

The cultists clapped their hands over their ears and howled. "Stop your blaspheming, heathen devil!" the leader cried.

It was all the distraction I needed. I hauled myself to my feet and, still caught in the net, staggered forward and threw my weight into the cauldron. It spilled over

and poured boiling water across some of the cultists, throwing them into screams of pain. While the confusion reigned I grasped my backpack and scabbard from where they lay nearby and fought my way to freedom, cutting the net and knocking down a few cultists as I fled the warehouse.

It was a bizarre little adventure to be sure, and I reported it to the militia the today, who dismissed it as drunken rumours. I wasn't keen to pursue it further, since I have a bad history with the Yellowport militia, and in any case I'm not entirely sure it happened myself. Cannibals? *Really?*

October 30

The experience with the cannibals left me feeling a little weird about Yellowport, so I paid for passage on a merchant vessel heading for Old Sokar today. We leave tomorrow morning.

October 31

The *Waverunner* ran into a bad storm not long after we left port today, and it's only just now clearing at sunset. She's a huge galleon and there's not a lot that could sink her, but it's not fun to be shut up in the lower decks while everything's pitching. At least I'm doing better than some of the other passengers, who were seasick and retching all over the place. Growing up on a tiny island gives you good sea legs, at least.

November 4

As we were approaching Old Sokar this morning, we were approached by a navy vessel that demanded we pull aside. The marines tramped all over the ship for an hour without any explanation, wrecking the captain's cabin and seizing "contraband." The captain was furious after they eventually declared all clear and left. "King Corin needs to do something about them," he said. "People complain about how the army acts, but I tell you, they're nothing compared to the navy."

A common complaint, from what I've heard in the waterfront taverns. I wonder why the king doesn't keep a closer reign on his military.

November 5

Spent the day picking pockets in the market, but I have to say, after the thrill of looting the Tower of Despair, slitting purses doesn't do much for me anymore.

November 6

I was walking near the barracks area today when I was accosted by a trio of soldiers. They were clearly drunk, and shoved at me, calling me a dog and telling me to step in the gutter to get out of their way. I shoved them back and it soon

degenerated into a fight. It was easy to beat them - they were drunk, after all - but I drew the attention of several other soldiers and was forced to flee down the backalleys.

Why do they think they can treat people like this? It all happened within plain sight of the royal palace. What *is* the king doing?

I'm tired of soldiers, tired of Sokara. First thing tomorrow I'm finding a ship for Golnir.

November 7

Left Sokar this morning on a Golniran trading brigantine bound for Ringhorn. "You ever been to Ringhorn before?" one of the sailors asked me, as we watched the sun set over the ocean south of the Grimm Delta.

"No. Metriciens, though. Wonderful city."

He laughed. "You liked Metriciens, wait till you see Ringhorn. Greatest city in the world."

November 9

We passed Knucklebones Point this morning, a headland on which stood the drizzle-soaked ruins of an ancient castle. "Castle Orlock," the captain told me, as we stood together below the foc'sle, sheltering from the rain. "A relic from the old baronies. Full of treasure, they say."

"They always do," I replied, as the castle gradually disappeared into the rain.

"Aye," he said, "and probably full of other things they forget to tell you about."

Still, something to remember.

November 14

We arrived in Ringhorn this morning at sunrise. I stood at the prow of the ship, one hand on the guiding rope, staring in amazement at the city emerging from a golden haze. Spires, towers, castle - a thousand ships riding at anchor - a harbour dotted with islands, some built upon and some left as wild parks - bridges and canals and walls and more than a million people. Truly a city where a man could make his fortune.

November 15

So, while I was making that aforementioned fortune, my mark realised what I was

doing and cried for the guard. There was an extended chase across the city rooftops, a bit of a brawl by the harbour, but eventually I managed to escape them by hiding on a barge. By the time I peeked out from the tarp I was hiding under, the barge had set sail and was well upriver.

I jumped overboard and swam to shore. Maybe I'll do a little exploring of the countryside after all - certainly can't go back to Ringhorn anytime soon. Why does that always *happen*?

November 16

This morning I caught my first sight of the majestic castle of Ravayne. Its heavily forested in these parts, and as I was topping a hill, there the castle was in the trees before me: a splendid white palace, pennants fluttering in the wind, turrets rising above the treetops.

It was all quite impressive, but when I tried to gain entry one of the guards just jabbed me with the butt of his halberd and told me to get lost. Bastards. Now I'm sleeping in a haystack in a barn and it's bloody freezing.

November 17

Woke up this morning and emerged from the barn to find a wintry wonderscape awaiting me - the first snow of the season had fallen while I slept. Fortunately it wasn't too thick, and while it's cold, travelling is still easy.

There'll be heavier falls coming soon, though. I should probably head south for the coast for winter. I think I'll continue along the north-east highway and see if I can link up with a wagon or caravan heading for Wheatfields, then hitch another ride south to Metriciens.

November 18

No wagons so far; occasionally some peasants wrapped in cloaks harrying cattle along the road, or a troop of soldiers with the banner of Ravayne. Much nicer than Sokaran soldiers.

November 19

Something strange just happened. I was travelling along the road this evening, looking for shelter - night had already fallen and it was snowing lightly - when I caught an eerie glimmer in the trees just ahead. Venturing further, I saw an iron gibbet set on the side of the road with a bubble of light hanging around it, like marsh gas.

As I approached, shivering in the cold, I saw a pale figure loitering below the

gibbet. The hairs on the back of my neck rose as I came closer and realised I could see right through him.

"Yes, I am a ghost," he said sadly. "Wrongfully executed on this gibbet for a crime I did not commit. The real murderer had me framed, but I'll have revenge on him yet, with your help. He wears a velvet patch over one eye. Find him and bring me what lies under the patch. I'll be grateful, don't think I won't..."

He faded away, and a shiver ran up my spine. But it made me angry. However long ago this crime was committed, he won't be able to rest in peace until his tormentor is dead.

But where to find him? He could be anywhere in Harkuna by now. I suppose I'll just have to keep an eye out.

November 21

I was eating at a roadside inn today and fell to chatting with a scholar of Molhern. I mentioned what had happened with Pyletes and the Book of Seven Sages, and was surprised to learn that he had heard of me. He gave me great thanks, and told me that I should stop off at the Monastery of Molhern. He was heading south to Ringhorn, but told me that I would be gladly welcome at the Monastery.

I spent a night there in August, on my way to the Forest of the Forsaken, and it was a nice place, with a large library. I've resolved to winter over there. Hopefully I can make it there without getting caught in a blizzard.

November 25

Travelling east across open country. It's snowing most nights, but there's always a barn or farmhouse where you can spend a Shard to sleep with a roof over your head. Good old Golnir.

November 30

Talked to a friar who was travelling through the same village as me, who told me about the town of Goldfall. "People there imagine they will get rich by searching for gold that falls from the sky. But even if gold did fall from the sky each night, and there was enough for everyone in the world to collect a handful each morning, would that make you rich?"

"Yes," I said.

He shook a finger. "Ah, but, if everybody had a handful of gold then it would no longer be worth anything."

"But not everyone would have a handful," I said. "People in Atticala and Akatsurai, or even in Wheatfields and Confluss, wouldn't have any. It would be immediately scooped up by the people on the scene, and they'd each have a lot more than just a handful."

"Yes, but..."

"Sorry, must dash."

December 3

Travelling on a backroad in the farms north of the Whistling Heath, I was surprised to find a herald wearing the livery of the king of Old Harkuna. "Surely the throne is vacant?" I said. "The barons have divided the old kingdom amongst themselves."

The herald nods. "That is true. But my father's father served the last High King, and I have sworn to continue the family tradition."

I watched him ride away down the snowy road. His cause was honourable but futile; the High King was killed by the Uttakin more than seventy years ago, and the kingdom now lies in ruin. My grandfather travelled through there and told me that many of the people believed the High King was not dead but merely banished, and that he would one day return and restore the kingdom. Apparently it still hasn't happened.

December 8

I arrived at the Monastery of Molhern today in the midst of a bad snowstorm, and it was very pleasant to enter its high halls with roaring fires and be welcomed like a hero. Pyletes was not there - apparently he is still in Sokara - but the abbot personally greeted me, and invited me to the upper priests' private smoking room, where I regaled them with my adventures late into the night.

I mentioned my eerie experience on the road north of Castle Ravayne, but the abbot was skeptical. "I am not sure that the spirits of the dead can truly speak to the living," he said. "Perhaps you dreamed the whole event."

"If so, it is a remarkable coincidence," chipped in one of the monks. "A man with a velvet eyepatch passed through here a few weeks ago. He said a stroke of lucky fate had saved him from the gallows."

"Where was he bound?" I asked uneasily.

"East. To Caran Baru in Sokara, I think."

I groaned. I had dearly hoped that I would be able to spend winter in the monastery, curled up in bed or next to a fireplace, working my way through the library. Now I'm going to have to go back into Sokara to look for this asshole with the eyepatch.

Maybe just a few days. To recover from travel, and such.

December 14

Having put off leaving the monastery for nearly a week, I eventually gave in and left this morning, heading for Conflass. I came across a group of merchants tonight who had drawn their caravan into a circle to protect from bandits, and I'm sheltering with them. It's snowing again. Stupid winter.

December 16

Arrived in Conflass, stopped only for a quick lunch before crossing the bridge into Sokara. The Forest of Larun lies to the east; normally I'd try to cut through it, but not in winter. I'm following the river north until I can head east to Caran Baru.

December 18

Arrived in the Bronze Hills, a horrible expanse of torn-up earth full of quarries and mineshafts. The source of Sokara's mineral wealth, where not a patch of green earth remains, and the ground is hard with frost. Great heaps of excavated rocks, leeched of minerals, mar the landscape.

December 20

My twenty-second birthday. When I turned twenty-one I never imagined that I would be celebrating my next birthday by arriving in a snowy garrison town a million miles from home, trying to hunt down a murderer on behalf of his victim's ghost. Funny old world.

Anyway, I'm not going to do any hunting tonight. It's my birthday, dammit, and I'm getting drunk - spectral justice quest or not.

December 21

I'm not sure what happened last night. I got very drunk. I know that for sure. And at some point I fell in with a group of warrior-priests of Tyrnai who were celebrating a successful expedition to Nerech or something. And then I may - *may* - have told them about the classic time when I stole the golden mail from the idol of Tyrnai in the temple right here in Caran Baru.

That soured the mood a bit. There was some blood, I think. And I woke up this morning stripped of my possessions and money, sold into slavery and lying in a slave cart with a bunch of other huddled wretches.

I've lost everything. The sword I took from the lair of Vayss the Sea Dragon, the magic shield from the spirit waterfall in Golnir... I have nothing.

December 22

Today we arrived in the tin mines outside the city. The overseer - a fat, cruel looking man - promised me that within a month I will be dead.

I don't think he's wrong.

December 27

Conditions here are terrible. We work more than fifteen hours a day, scraping away at rock faces underground. We are fed on a thin, watery gruel. We are given only a single sleeping blanket each, not nearly warm enough to protect us from the chill of the midwinter night. Every morning some of the slaves have frozen to death overnight, and every afternoon some of the slaves have dropped dead from exhaustion.

I need to escape if I'm going to survive. But how?

1031

January 14

More than three weeks in this hellhole, and still no chance of escape. I'm wasting away. I think I am going to die down here.

January 16

Today a new slave was brought to work beside me - Lauria, the woman who left me in the lurch when we burgled the wizard's house on my first night in Yellowport.

"You little bitch," I hissed. I would have killed her, if my hands weren't chained together.

"Don't be like that," she said. "Business - you know."

"I don't sell my friends out because of business."

"Friends? Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Uh-huh. So why are you here?"

"Merchant's house, Trefoille, slip-up, you know how it goes," she said. "You?"

"Stealing golden chainmail from the temple of Tyrnai," I said.

"But that was stolen months ago."

"Yeah. I got away fine. Then I came back a few weeks ago and got drunk and accidentally confessed to the wrong people."

She looked at my wasted frame and filthy rags. "You've only been here a few weeks?" she asked, with some sympathy in her voice.

"We need to get out of here," I said. "Or we're going to die."

She nodded. "Listen - when they were bringing me in, I saw a tunnel where there'd been a cave-in. There's no mining going on there now, they're still working to clear it, but it's nearly done. We could wriggle through easily. They don't work at night - I'll make a diversion, and you can bolt for it."

"Why me?" I asked suspiciously.

"Because you're half-dead. Don't worry, I'll catch up."

Foolish to trust her, in retrospect. But I was desperate for anything. After she picked the locks on my chain and went off yelling as a diversion, I went in the other direction for the cave-in. There I found the mine overseer and a group of guards waiting for me.

Lauria was with them. She avoided eye contact with me, but it was clear what had happened. She'd sold me out in exchange for transfer to easier surface work, from which she can escape more easily. "Oh, you *bitch*," I said.

The rest of the night passed in a blur of whipping and screaming. I am going to kill that girl.

January 22

I'm going to make an escape attempt of my own tomorrow. I can't survive here much longer. I need to get out or die trying.

January 23

Amazing. Success. I slipped from my chains and hid inside an ore-laden cart. It took me all the way into Caran Baru, where I escaped into the streets. I have seen the sun for the first time in a month.

Slit a purse in the marketplace and got a handful of Shards to buy an inn room. I need to spend a few days resting and healing.

February 4

Feeling like I have recovered to at least some extent, I left the Red Lion Inn, where I've been holed up for the last two weeks, and started searching the city for the man with the eyepatch - if he's still here. If he ever was here.

I'm careful to wear my cloak's hood low, and avoid the slave market and areas full of guards. I don't want to go back to the mines again. I'd rather die.

February 7

Have spent days searching inns and taverns, asking around for the man. No luck so far. How long am I obliged to keep searching the world for this ghost's tormentor?

February 9

Was leaving the Blue Griffon Tavern today after another fruitless Q and A session, and was heading down an alleyway, when a figure stepped out of a doorway to block my path.

A man with a velvet eyepatch. His one good eye gleamed with evil humour, and his face was scarred from many years of fights. "I hear you're looking for me," he said in a silky voice.

There was a sound behind me, and I realised the one-eyed man had a thug creeping up on me. I slipped out of his way as he thrust a dagger into where I'd been standing, grabbing his arm and elbowing him out cold. Throwing the dagger into my good hand I put up a defensive position just as the one-eyed man pulled out a sword and charged me. He got in a good gash to my side before I managed to drive the dagger into his heart.

I stood there in the alleyway, panting and soaked in blood, before searching his body. A handful of Shards, and a flame opal eye beneath his patch. I took them and limped out of the alleyway before a patrol arrived.

I left the city that afternoon, heading north up the road to the Ciatdel fo Veris

Corin. I was hurt, but I could last until I found an inn outside the city. I don't want to be anywhere near Caran Baru or the Bronze Hills for a long time.

February 10

Found an inn, stayed overnight and managed to patch myself up a little. I probably shouldn't be travelling, but I want to get back to that ghost. I want this weight off my shoulders.

February 13

After travelling across hills for a few days, still covered in thick white snow, I arrived at the River Grimm. There were chunks of ice floating down it from the mountains. I walked along it a way before reaching a ford where I paid a Shard to cross.

February 14

Crossing through frozen fields of stubble, with puddles of meltwater and distant black crows flapping across the treetops. Should arrive in Conflass tomorrow.

February 15

Tore my wound open while jumping across a puddle. Think I better stay at an inn for a while after all, now that I'm in Conflass.

March 1

Stayed two weeks at the Golden Eagle Inn, waiting for my side to heal up, before finally setting out today on the first day of spring. Certainly doesn't feel like spring, though

March 3

Arrived at the Monastery of Molhern, and talked to the abbot at length about what happened to me in Sokara. I showed him the flame opal eye, tossing it into the air and catching it. "Guess we'll see if the dead can contact the living after all," I said.

March 7

Reached the Wheatfields/Metriciens highway after a few days of uneventful travel.

March 9

Travelling across the farms of Golnir, spring is truly in the air. Every day I see farmers in the fields, leading oxen across the land, tilling the soil. The first few flowers are beginning to bud in the trees and the bushes, and the last of the snow is being washed away by the rain.

March 10

Came across a storyteller sitting on a grassy hummock in a leafy lane, regaling the local children. I took a break from walking to listen to him for a while. He told them a story about a hairy "bogle" who threatened to eat a milkmaid unless she could guess his name. She spied on him, learning that his name was Friddle McCade, thus saving herself from the frying pan.

Funny how stories travel. We had the same one back home, except he was called Rumpelstilzkin.

March 14

Came to Chard's Inn, which sits at the halfway point on the highway between Wheatfields and Castle Ravayne. The gibbet is just a few days south of here.

March 16

I reached the gibbet - the ghost was there, as before. I showed him the flame opal eye and he was overjoyed, sinking down into the dank soil. I dug in that spot and found a chest containing 250 Shards. But it's not the money - I feel good, for having accomplished a good deed. That should get me off two or three years of purgatory.

I'm going to head to Wishport now, to recover the belongings I left in my townhouse. Having lost everything in the Bronze Hills, I need some equipment.

March 19

I reached the Whistling Heath today, a land of high craggy tors where the wind rips through with an eerie keening sound that gives it its name.

March 20

Travel here is confusing - I'm not sure I'm heading in the right direction.

March 21

The incessant breeze makes the heather sway like a living thing, but I haven't seen any of those since I entered the heath.

March 22

Today I came across a goblin sitting on a toadstool, chewing a dead rat. Blood dribbled down its chin as it looked at me with a grin and said, "She works hard to fill her larder. Her mother dined after killing father."

"...what?"

"Answer that," the goblin said, eating the rest of the rat, "and you'll know the safe door to take in the old fort on the coast."

I backed away slowly, maintaining eye contact, and then fled into the heath.

March 23

All alone on the gloomy dales...

March 24

Not sure if I'm going to be able to get out of here.

March 25

Goblins pelted me with stone from atop a tor, the runt bastards.

March 26

A week. A WEEK I was in that heath. I finally burst out today on open country near Haggart's Corner.

March 27

Travelling towards the coast, I met a bunch of fools who thought the moon had fallen into the pond. It was a reflection. The idiots were so grateful to me for pointing it out that they gave me a four-leaf clover. Country folk!

March 29

I travelled for a while today with three penniless adventurers who had been washed up on a lonely shoreline. They reminded me of myself, washed up on the Isle of Druids last year, so when we parted ways I gave them 25 Shards. It was only later that I remember I'd seen their faces on a wanted poster in a village yesterday. Clever little scamps.

March 31

Arrived in Wishport today, and went straight to my island townhouse. Unfortunately I didn't stash nearly as much stuff here as I thought I had - just a sword and a few bits and pieces from my early days in Sokara. No money. I went and bought some armour and basic supplies like lanterns from the market, with the money I found below the ghost's gibbet. Gonna stay here a few days while I think over my next move.

April 4

I remembered something this afternoon, while I was sitting up on the cliffs, watchign the ships sail in and out of the harbour. Castle Orlock, the ruined fort

that stands at the edge of Knucklebones Point. I saw it from the deck of a ship months ago, and the captain told me it was full of treasure. It's only a day's walk from Wishport - what better time to investigate?

April 5

I arrived at the castle at dusk - a brooding fortress encased behind walls of weathered black granite. I lit my lantern and explored inside, eventually finding a library full of dusty tomes. Many of the books were written in Old Uttakin, a confusing language of runes, but I found one book full of maps and explorer's notes, which was quite useful. (+1 Rank) Suddenly I heard a floorboard creak from behind another shelf, and stricken with terror, I dropped the book and fled.

It's only when running that you become truly terrified. I fled the dark castle and ran across the moonlit woodlands. I nearly blundered right into a pitfall, set by brigands no doubt, but managed to escape it safely due to my catlike reflexes.

By dawn I was sleeping peacefully under a bush. Tomorrow I'm going to head back up to Wishport.

April 7

Was caught in a rainstorm yesterday and waited it out beneath an oak tree. I was travelling late, therefore, when after nightfall I stumbled across thirteen witches dancing "sky-clad" in an old circle of standing stones. It was too late to run - they spotted me, and snared me with enchantments. A curious hex was placed upon me - I am compelled to travel to the Haunted Hills, with great haste, stopping only when too exhausted to walk.

April 8

Have been travelling inexorably northward all day. I tried turning to the south, and it was impossible. An invisible force compelled me to turn back north. East and west have a little more leeway, but I still find myself gradually drifting northward. I suppose there's nothing for it but to go to the Haunted Hills.

April 11

Passed through Haggart's Corner - at least now I'm on a bloody road.

April 12

Travelled some way with a journeyman mage from Dweomer named Hendricks, who attempted to lift the hex on me but failed; I thanked him anyway. He warned me to be careful in the Haunted Hills. Can't say I'm looking forward to it.

April 14

Passed the Monastery of Molhern, unable to stop.

April 16

Travelled for some way with a horse-trader from Goldfall, which is not far to the west. "See this scar on my forehead?" he said, pulling off his straw hat. "A nugget fell from the sky and brained me, so it did! But a villain made off with my nugget while I lay stretched out senseless on the grass."

Goldfall sounds like an interesting place. It sure would be nice to visit it, IF I WASN'T UNDER THIS GODDAMN HEX.

April 19

I've reached the endless plains. I can't wait to walk across fields for the next week, getting itchy chaff caught in my socks.

April 27

The farms are petering out, becoming shepherd's fields and scattered forests. The land is rising. I'm approaching the Haunted Hills.

April 28

Left the last few signs of human life behind me today, pressing deeper into the hills. The hex is still drawing me towards the centre.

April 29

Reached a small foggy lake, which I suppose is somewhere around the middle of the hills, and found that the compulsion hex was leaving me. I can move south again. Now I just have to get out of these hills alive.

May 1

Was travelling past a low ridge today when I was ambushed by a group of otulaws in wolf-pelt jerkins. They outnumbered me, but their leader ordered his men to lower their crossbows and then scrambled across the scree to talk to me.

"No offence," he said, "but one lone traveller isn't worth robbing."

"You're a man after my own heart," I grinned.

I settled down with them around their campfire for the night, regaling them tales of my adventures. It was only during the telling of my ocean crossing that I realised it has been one year, down to the day, since I washed up on the shores of the Isle of Druids. I told them about Lauria's doublecrosses, and my pillaging from the lair of Vayss the Sea Dragon, and my theft of the golden mail for the

Temple of Sig, and my looting of the Tower of Despair.

They were quite in awe, and as we were turning in for the night, the bandit leader - Axel - asked me to stay with them for a while, apparently believing that I'm in a higher league than his motley crew. I told him I'd think it over.

May 2

I've decided to stay with the bandit group for a while. It should be an interesting experience.

Axel tells me they have a number of hideouts scattered across the hills, and as there are few travellers moving through the hills, they generally raid the farms on the southern fringe.

May 8

First raid today - robbed a group of adventurers moving through the hills, claiming they were looking for buried treasure. Their map was a charlatan's trick if I've ever seen one.

May 18

We've been raiding the farms lately, picking off sheep and chickens. It's not all about wealth - sometimes you need to eat as well.

May 25

Today we robbed, of all things, a merchant caravan. After the raid, during which we sustained heavy losses, I questioned one of the wounded guards about why they'd been travelling through the hills. Apparently they'd been harassed by a hydra after straying too close to its nest in the mountain foothills, and had fled south.

June 4

Encountered some warrior-priests of Tyrnai, who were hunting the hills specifically for men like us. We took them down without too much trouble, but there wasn't much loot on them, just weapons and zeal.

June 12

Another lone traveller like myself crossed our path today, and Axel again let him go because he was penniless. Watching him trek away across the hills stirred something in my heart. I'm feeling the wanderlust again. I can't spend my life tramping about with the bandits, even if they are good lads. I talked to Axel about it, and tomorrow I'm leaving.

June 13

A few moist eyes as I left today. Outlaws are hardened men, but the gang had learned to look up to me. I have a lot of respect for them, as well - they taught me plenty of new tricks.

June 15

I'm heading north, out of the hills, towards the Spine of Harkun. I'm interested in hunting down that hydra the merchant guard mentioned. Hydras would have loot in their lairs, wouldn't they?

June 19

Talked to a shepherd today, a boy eking out a meagre living in the windswept foothills of the Spine. He said something had been killing his sheep, leaving behind carcasses more mangled than the work of wolves. The hydra, perhaps? I'll scout around this area.

June 21

As it turns out, the hydra found me. I was travelling through a rocky patch when I heard scales rasping against stone, and turned to see a thick serpentine body with many heads rise up from behind the rocks. Plumes of acidic vapour were thrown up where its venom dripped onto the ground.

I readied my sword and fought. Everyone knows that a hydra grows back heads that are lopped off, so I focused my attacks on the body. I received a few bad burns on my arms from its acidic venom, but managed to kill it. Following its trail back through the rocks, I found its lair - a cave of mouldering sheep skeletons and a few human ones. Amongst the debris I found a total of 700 Shards, and a few good weapons.

June 24

I've been climbing deeper into the mountains. I'm not sure why. Something compels me to go north, to leave the fields and pastures of Golnir for the rugged wilderness.

June 26

This is a rough crossing. High peaks tumbling up to the verge of heaven... legend has it that this is the exposed backbone of the slaughtered god Harkun.

June 29

I'm coming down the northern slopes of the mountains. The vast steppes of the Howling Wasteland are stretched before me, cloudless, flat, plain. It's exciting and intimidating at once.

July 8

Have been travelling for more than a week across the plains without seeing any living thing except the occasional hawk. The mountains have disappeared over my shoulder.

July 9

Last night I dreamt of rolling hills, and cities awash with people.

July 10

Came across a circle of ancient, wind-pitted stones today. In the centre was a weathered stela, carved with Shadar runes and symbols. I entered it, which felt like a mistake - as though I had violated the realm of some ancient and forgotten god. I hurried away.

July 12

My rations ran out today, and I'm hopeless at catching food in the wild. I'm hungry.

July 13

Have resolved to head eastward, toward the city of Yarimura. It's marked on the map, and I think I've heard sailors mention it once or twice on the brief sea voyages I've been on, but I have no idea what kind of a city it is. Surely it was not founded by the barbarians of the plains?

July 15

While travelling today I stumbled across an ancient ruined tower - a godsend in the plains, where it is boiling hot during the midsummer day, and bitterly cold at night. The sun was setting as I crawled inside the ruins and sheltered in a corner.

I slept uninterrupted for a few hours but was woken by an unpleasant rustling sound. At first I saw nothing but then I made out two small red lights a few feet away from me, then two more, then two more.

Not lights - eyeballs. I was surrounded by redcaps, a very nasty kind of goblin that congregates in places where blood has been split.

They had me cornered and I had no choice but to fight them. Four of them came at me, wielding pikestaffs with talon-like fingers. I fought with the fury of a man with his back against the wall, and managed to kill them, though I was badly wounded myself. The rest of the redcaps fled, and I huddled in the corner holding my wounds shut as I waited for dawn.

July 16

Spent day stumbling across the plains. I feel weak, and need to rest, but there are no inns here, no taverns or wayhouses. I'm not sure if I can survive tonight...

July 21

Woke up today in a rough bed, inside the cruved canvas dome of a yurt. My wounds were healed. A group of nomads from the Horde of the Thousand Winds found me unconscious in the waste, and nursed me back to health. I'm not sure why they did, and I hope they don't expect anything of me. I intend to slip out of the camp tonight.

July 22

Recovered my equipment from the yurt near mine, and stole past the horse guards and perimeter sentries to escape into the wasteland night. Yarimura should not be too far to the east.

July 28

Caught my first glimpse of Yarimura today, a great walled city on the eastern coast, with an impressive array of towers and fortresses rising above the walls. They close the city gates at sunset, so I was forced to camp outside, but there were a number of other travellers outside as well and we congregated. A pleasant night of campfire chats, dancing and drinking.

July 29

Entered Yarimura at first light. I had learned about it from the other travellers last night. It is a young city, ruled over by the Clan of the White Spear - a family exiled from Akatsurai during their last civil war about a hundred years ago. The junta fled in its ships to the west. Unable to find refuge in Sokara, they went north and founded Yarimura, building their pagodas on the bare ground of the plains, the clan's firecely loyal samurai easily supressing the local natives.

Yarimura's streets and plazas are accordingly cosmopolitan. Finely dressed samurai swagger and strut alongside nomad traders from the plains and merchants and mercenaries from Golnir and Sokara. This is a city where east meets west. Lord Kumonosu rules the city with an iron fist, keeping the navy ready for the hypothetical day when Akatsurai attempts to seize the city.

I passed through the horse market, a huge open corral where thousands of horses are bought and sold, and moved onto the regular market to buy and sell some weapons and armour. I also visited the Plaza of the New Gods, where temples to the Akatsurese pantheon sit alongside places of worship for the gods of the plains.

As dusk gathered, I entered the Foreigner's Quarter and found an inn called the Nomad's Rest, where I took a room for the night.

It's been a long time since I've been in a large city, and I enjoyed it. Tomorrow I think I'll try to contact the local underworld.

July 30

Thieves' Kitchen is the most undesirable part of the town. The scum of the plains have made it their home, along with dishonoured samurai and exiles from the southern nations. It is a ramshackle collection of huts, taverns and houses that are more like stockades than homes. Cutpurses and beggars line every doorway, and it is said that even the city patrol does not come here. The local thieves' guild, the Brotherhood of the Night, pays off Lord Kumonosu to leave its member alone.

I found a tavern, called the Severed Hand (a punishment for thievery in Yarimura) and entered for a few lunchtime drinks. At a table in a shadowed corner, a short nomad of the plains was arguing with a large, fat, red-faced woman. I was drinking alone when the nomad approached me, introducing himself as Luroc Bans. "Would you care to join us?" he said. "We might have need of someone like you."

The woman's name was Floril Dellas, a washerwoman who works for a rich merchant from Metriciens named Avar Hordeth, who owns a villa just outside town. According to her, the villa contains a vault stuffed with wealth.

"Floril's given me a map of the place," Luroc said. "I can get in there but we need a tough accomplice to help deal with whatever's guarding the treasure. Something is, but no-one knows what. Once we've grabbed the loot and gotten out, we split everything three ways. What do you say?"

It sounds like a good deal to me. I agreed to meet them tomorrow night at the villa, south of the city.

August 1

I left the city an hour before nightfall, and travelled south down the coast towards the small woodland area where Hordeth makes his home. The white, marble walls of the villa seemed to glow in the moonlight, and I counted four guards patrolling it while lying in the undergrowth.

Luroc soon joined me, carrying a grappling hook. "We go in over the walls," he whispered. "Floril will meet us in an inner courtyard. She should have the keys to the vault by now. Just follow me."

We slipped up to the walls in a gap in the patrol route, and quickly slithered up the grappling rope, padded with cloth. Then we dropped silently down into the courtyard below, where a fountain was bubbling merrily in the quiet, hot night. We descended a stairway that led below the villa to a set of bronze doors, and a snoring guard - Floril had drugged him. The doors were open. The two of us stepped into the treasure vault of Avar Hordeth.

It was a long hall of dark grey stone. Naturally, riches were in abundance. Crates filled with objets d'art, bolts of silk from Akatsurai, jars of oleum and oil from the Feathered Lands, ingots of gold and silver, chests of gems and coins - the treasure house of one of the richest merchants in the world.

"Well," I grinned. "It's just a question of how much we can carry, isn't it?"

But then I noticed Luroc eyeing me distrustfully, intently, as if unsure of my intent. Come to think of it, I didn't trust him an inch either. Every passing second made me feel more uneasy. I was convinced he planned to kill me and take the loot for himself.

Then it hit me. "Luroc," I said. "You said there was something guarding the treasure."

"Yes," he said suspiciously, fingering his long daggers.

"But there's nothing here," I pointed out. "It's *this* - this feeling of distrust. A magical affliction. Ignore it. We better just grab what we can and get out before we kill each other."

He agreed, and we set about stuffing treasure into our bags. I grabbed a casket of gems, a richly-inlaid battleaxe and 500 Shards.

Suddenly I caught Luroc's reflection in a polished silver plate - he was charging at me with his knife. I turned and knocked the blow to the side, and was about to yell angrily at him, but then I didn't - the spell had taken hold of me too. I only wanted to kill him. I drew my sword and we fought briefly before he fell dead at my feet. The spell instantly passed, and I felt full of grief.

There was clapping behind me. I saw Avar Hordeth, flanked by his guards. "You stinking thief," he said contemptuously. "What's your name?"

"Pace," I said, almost absent-mindedly, looking for a way to escape. There was

only one exit.

"Pace," he said. "You did well to get this far, but this is where your fun ends. I could kill you, but it was entertaining to watch you fight - besides, I have a better idea."

I was rushed and beaten by his guards, stripped of everything I owned. Now I'm locked up, bruised and bleeding, in his dank cellar.

August 2

Hordeth's guards took me in to Yarimura today and sold me as a galley slave, condemned to row under lash. The ship I was placed on has set sail - I don't know where we're going. A single day was hell. I don't know how I will last much longer.

August 17

Sea battle today - I could hear the shouts and cries on the deck above. I don't know who we were fighting. All I ever see is the inside of the this galley. Curse Avar Hordeth. If I ever escape from here, I swear I will return to that villa and slit his throat while he sleeps. I owe that to Luroc.

September 2

A month on this ship, and I'm considerably weakened. Whippings, bad diet and strenuous labour are taking their toll on me. (Lose 1 rank).

September 11

The ship was attacked by pirates yesterday, and the Yarimurans overwhelmed and slaughtered. The pirates spared the galley slaves - for now. The pirate captain came down into the ranks to inspect us, to replace lost slaves on the pirate vessel. I stared at him bleakly. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

The pirates dismissed me as too weak, and flung me overboard with several other galley slaves. I managed to cling to a piece of driftwood, a broken spar from the battle, and saw out a cold night floating in the vast open ocean, only my refusal to die stopping me from letting go of the spar and sinking into the water.

Not long after dawn I was picked up by a passing vessel, the *Idiot Wind*. I've never seen a sweeter sight. She was a Golniran merchant craft, bound for Yarimura. The crew put me in a cabin with a warm blanket and fed me some hot soup. "Always pick up the stranded," said the captain, a friendly man named Blake. "Code of the sea."

September 14

The *Idiot Wind* docked in Yarimura today. I shook Captain Blake's hand and walked down the gangplank, feeling better than I have in months.

I plan to return to Avar Hordeth's villa - but first I need supplies. For that I need money. For that I need to go to the Thieves' Kitchen. A few picked purses got me enough for an inn room tonight, but tomorrow I need some better money.

September 15

Fruitless day in the Kitchen. Killed a mugger, but all he had was the rope he was using as a belt, which I sold for 45 Shards. Whoop-de-doo. Maybe I need to visit rougher area.

September 16

Spent the day in the rougher area of the Kitchen, and was set upon by some ruffians. After killing them I found 15 Shards and a nice set of lockpicks on their bodies. Better.

September 17

Visited the very rough area, but still had no success. I think it's time I tried to get into contact with the Brotherhood. I need a big job.

September 19

After talking to the right people in the right taverns, I was led to a long, shadowy hall, lit by torches set in brackets. I'd been blindfolded, but it was clear we were somewhere under the city.

At the far end, sitting behind a massive oaken table, were five cowed figures. The one in the middle threw back his hood to reveal a shiny, black, featureless mask.

"Speak," he said.

I explained to him what had happened with Luroc at Avar Hordeth's villa, and how I had been chained to a galley bench for more than a month as a result. How I thirsted for vengeance. He listened to my story, and after a pause, said "We do not appreciate freelance thieves; however, you appear to have paid a sufficient price. I would also discourage you from seeking vengeance. Thievery is a game. You must accept that sometimes you will lose that game."

I said nothing.

"Nonetheless," he continued, "we would be glad to welcome a man of your

resourcefulness into our ranks. But first you must prove yourself. You must infiltrate the private bedchamber of Lord Kumonosō."

"And what must I steal?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. That would be rather... unwise. Just prove that you are capable of getting in there unseen. That will suffice."

"But how will you know whether I've done it or not?" I asked.

"Oh, we'll know," he replied enigmatically. "Return when you have done as I ask."

I was blindfolded again, and eventually released into the squalid streets of the Thieves' Kitchen. It was only a few hours till sunset. I made a quick trip to the Horse Market to pick up any equipment that might prove useful, before heading to the north sector to scope out the palace.

The daimyō's palace rose up from the centre of Yarimura - straddling it like a colossus, lord of its domain. It was built in the Akatsuresse style, with massive walls and towers - more a fort than a palace. Difficult to break into.

The daimyō's bedchamber was atop the tallest tower. As soon as night fell, I immediately set about climbing over the palace walls and making my way over the interior rooftops, well aware that I would need all eleven hours of darkness to accomplish my task. Eventually I managed to evade the guards and, sometime after midnight, was crawling up the stonework of the tower. Below me, the city was spread out like a carpet, fiery pinpricks of light a mirror to the stars.

At the height of my dizzying ascent, I reached a a windowsill, and slipped through it into the silence of the daimyō's bedchamber. He was asleep on a massive bed, snoring loudly, a concubine at his side. There was a casket of fabulous jewels open by the window, and I squelched every instinct in my body to refrain from seizing it.

I turned to exit the window again, when the concubine sat up, a pale white face in the darkness, framed by long white hair. I thought the jig was up, but she simply smiled at me and went back to sleep.

I made my way back down the tower without a hitch. Now I'm in the Plaza of New Gods, listening to the dawn call to prayer, watching the sun rise over the eastern pagodas. I think it is time to pay a visit to the Brotherhood.

September 20

Led back down to the den of thieves, and the master seemed pleased that I had achieved my task. Hard to tell, with the mask. I was given membership of the brotherhood and taught some arcane secrets of thief knowledge.

"I thought I might be receiving some tangible reward," I said.

"For your foolish quest for vengeance?" the master said. "No amount of thief's tools will help you achieve that. You already have what you need, if that is what you truly want."

I returned to a tavern in the Thieves Kitchen and thought that through over a beer. He was discouraging me, obviously, and I'd taken his words to heart. What had Avar Hordeth done wrong? He had been protecting his wealth, which he had rightfully earned. As a thief, you have to accept that you are in the wrong, and that if you get caught there will be consequences. It's part of the game.

I left the city before dusk and headed south through the woods, waiting till nightfall, lying in the trees outside his villa once again. Nearly two months since I had been there earlier. It was much colder, this time, as I waited for the moon to slip behind a cloud.

I slipped up the walls again, and penetrated my way into Hordeth's bedchamber. He was slumbering in his bed, dressed in a nightshirt. With a piece of chalk, I left a message on his wall.

When I want the treasure, I'll take the treasure.
- Pace

Then I slipped back out of the villa and returned to the city.

That was good fun.

September 29

A few wasted days in Yarimura, a few picked pockets and burglaries. Being a member of the Brotherhood really only means that you can drink in certain taverns and not get mugged in certain streets. Maybe it's time to hit the road again.

September 30

Left Yarimura today heading north. It's getting brisk, and a light snow is falling

over the pines. Winter comes early to the steppes.

October 4

Came to a small village in the fir forest, and the thought of a warm tavern was mighty inviting, so I made my way down to it. A small sign bleakly proclaimed the village to be called Vodhya. The people seemed to be a pale, unhealthy lot, dogged by some terrible worry, their faces pinched and drawn. They pulled their furs around them and dispersed, closing doors and shutters, until I was left alone in the village square with a young boy gazing at me with wide eyes.

There was no tavern.

"What's going on, kid?" I asked the boy. "Why's everyone so surly?"

He pointed to a tall hill, upon which a dark and windswept keep squatted. "The Lady Nastasya, Kaschuf's got her... and he won't stop hurting us until she promises to marry him. But she won't, no she won't. How could she marry the one who killed her father?"

"Alright, I didn't ask for your life story," I said. "I'll go up there and have a talk with this Kaschuf fellow. I'm sure he's a reasonable man."

I left the village and climbed a rocky, wind-blasted path up the hill. Icy gusts chilled my bones, and the grim, grey keep chilled my soul. I realised that I hadn't bothered to buy any kind of weapon while in Yarimura. I wish I hadn't left on such an impulse.

Eventually I reached the keep, where two massive, iron-bound doors stood. There were no guards, nor any life on the battlements. I used the gong set in place to knock on the doors, and they were soon opened by an old, white-haired man. He stepped aside, looking frightened, allowing me to enter. A hall of grey stone, with blood-red banners set on the wall.

"Don't mind Kevar, my old butler," said a booming voice from the back of the hall. "He's a bit simple, but it's difficult to get good staff these days." With that the voice dissolved into laughter, and a man stepped out of the shadows. he was tall but powerfully built, with piercing green eyes. Of more concern, he was wearing lacquered black and red armour - and wielding a massive battleaxe.

"Mr. Kaschuf?" I enquired.

"Kaschuf the Deathless," he replied. "I suppose you're another of those fools who

has come to rescue the Lady Nastasya."

"Well, actually, I thought I'd just ask..."

He fell into paroxysms of laughter. "Come on then. Let's get on with it!"

I yelled in surprise as he swung the battle-axe at me, and only just managed to jump backwards. He swung again, and again, until I took advantage of a lull and spear-tackled him in the midriff, pushing the axe to the side, sending it skittering across the floor. We struggled for a moment, before I grasped the dagger sheathed at Kaschuf's thigh and stabbed him several times in the chest. He pulled away, and I scampered for the battleaxe, bleeding from his blows to my jaw, and he dragged himself after me. I reached the axe just in time as he caught up to me, and swung around with full force to slice his head from his shoulders, spinning off into the corner. His decapitated corpse swung to the ground, and I staggered backwards, leaning on the axe for support.

Suddenly the head rolled back out of the shadows, reconnecting with the body. The blood on the floor soaked back up into the wounds, which closed themselves. Kaschuf stood, flexed his arms, completely whole. I stared in horror as he burst into laughter.

"Oh, you're a good fighter, I'll give you that. But they don't call me Kaschuf the Deathless for nothing."

No way to win there. I abandoned the heavy battleaxe and turned to stagger for the doorway, Kaschuf giving me one last blow to the leg with his axe for good measure, splitting open my calf muscle. "Goodbye, milksop! Please come by again!" he called from the doorway, as I limped down the hill, leaving a trail of blood in the snow.

I managed to make it back to the village square, where I drew some water from the well, groaning in agony as I cleaned my wounds. I slumped into the shade of a nearby hut and rested for a while, tearing strips from my cloak to bandage my wounds.

After an hour, the old butler, Kavar, came down to draw water from the well. He eyed me nervously. I staggered to my feet and approached him.

"So how often does he do this?" I asked, gesturing to my bleeding body.

"Once a month or so," the butler muttered. "There are less heroes these days."

Word gets around. You did better than most."

"How is he deathless? What kind of magic is that?" The only place I had seen such enchantment before was in the Tower of Despair, with the faery wolf - old, arcane, spirit magic. Not the magic of men.

"He has bound his soul into a heart-shaped locket. It means he can never be slain while his life force is safe inside it."

"And where is the locket?"

The butler lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "On an island, in the Violet Ocean. I know not where."

"That's damn stupid. If I were him I'd keep it round my neck."

The butler gave me an appraising look. "If you could find the locket... and release his soul... you could beat him in combat."

I gave a bark of laughter. "Do you know how many islands there are in the Violet Ocean? How long it would take to find something as tiny as a locket on even one of them? Forget it, old man."

I turned and stumped out of the village, my body aching with every step. The young boy had been watching, and he tugged at my cloak as I passed. I brushed him away. "Get yourself another hero, kid," I said in a gritty voice. "I'm all washed up."

October 8

Stumbled back into Yarimura today, went into the Nomad's Rest and flung some Shards at the innkeeper. I have some serious healing to do.

October 14

Have been thinking about the Violet Ocean. Not because of what Kavar said - not going to spend my life going over the islands with a fine-toothed comb just because some asshole beat me in an unfair fight - but I miss the ocean. I really want to spend some time on a ship.

I've been thinking about magic, too. Thinking about the wizard's university on Dweomer. I want to learn some magic. I'm sick of being pushed around by people like Kaschuf. I want to be powerful.

Shame I have barely a Shard to my name.

October 28

Feeling well enough to travel, I gathered my things and made for the docks, looking for any southbound ships. 65 Shards for passage to Yellowport is daylight robbery, but I didn't have much choice - Yarimura isn't exactly a bustling hub. The *Eagle* sets sail two days from now at dawn, with a load of lumber bound for Sokaran warehouses. Can't wait to see the back of this stupid country. I'm not full of pent-up aggression about the beatdown Kaschuf gave me or anything.

October 30

See you later Yarimura, you dog city.

November 4

Passed through Disaster Bay, a storm-wracked region renowned for its shipwrecks. The captain is a devout worshipper of Alvir and Valmir, so we should see it through safely.

November 7

Passed the land of Nerech, domain of the man-beasts. I thought I could see some inhuman figures moving atop the cliffs in the fog, but perhaps it was my imagination.

November 16

Sea of Whispers, passing Druid's Isle. Eighteen months since I was washed up there. How time flies.

November 20

Arrived in Yellowport under heavy rains. This city still stinks, even with the rain washing the filth away.

November 23

I've been in a room in the Gold Dust tavern for a few days now, mulling over my options. I want to study at Dweomer. That would be nice. But I need money to do so. And I don't want to hang around in Yellowport slitting purses and robbing storehouses until I have enough. It would take forever. So I've resolved to revisit my two biggest scores of all time: the Lake of the Sea Dragon, and the Forest of the Forsaken.

November 24

Set off today, following the Stinking River upstream.

December 4

Arrived on the cold, misty shores of the Lake of the Sea Dragon. Rented a boat from a local fisherman and struck out onto the lake, hoping to once again find the small island containign the grotto where Vayss has his lair. It took a few hours - during which time a few fish came near the surface, and nearly gave me a heart attack because I thought they were Vayss - and I pulled the boat up onto it and scrambled down the hole into the treasure mound.

I was in there for approximately four seconds before Vayss' head erupted from the water and roared at me. I screamed and scrambled up the pile of coins out the hole again, with about three feet between myself and Vayss' terrible fang-lined throat, and from there I legged it down to the boat and started paddling furiously for shore. Vayss wasn't far behind me, and no sooner had I reached shore did he burst from the water and smash my boat to splinters. I sprinted up away from the lake, screaming my lungs out, while Vayss - confined to the water - roared in anger after me.

When I'd put a comfortable distance between myself and the lake (about two hours of running) I stopped to check how much money I'd taken from the hoard before he surprised me. Fifty Shards.

Fifty goddamn Shards.

Scratch that one. Time to visit the Forest of the Forsaken.

December 10

Passing south of the Forest of the Forsaken. Devil's Peak looms to the south - an angry, industrious volcano.

December 13

First snowfall, and I've reached the bank of the river Grimm where the bridge crosses over into Confluss. Treating myself to a proper bed for a single night before heading north, for the Forest.

December 20

Twenty-three years old. A very lonely birthday celebrated in the ruins of an old farmhouse in the middle of a surprisingly heavy snowstorm in a desolate wilderness. Still a marked improvement over my last birthday.

December 24

Arrived at the edge of the Forest today, after a hard slog over a snow-covered landscape. I avoided the leper colony, but was desperate enough for a bed that I

approached the village of the surly looking bald men. They pelted me with stones, which was lovely of them, so now I'm sleeping under a pine tree freezing my ass off and listening to the wolves howl.

December 25

Entered the Forest today. I lost the map a long time ago, but the path wasn't too difficult to find. Following it was rather more difficult, in midwinter, with the snow bearing down on all the branches and making it seem like I'm walking through a dim frosty tower. But I eventually reached the point where the gibbet hung, and managed to follow the old path to the Tower of Despair.

If anything it was even more foreboding in winter. I picked the lock again, breath misting out, and found my old friend the undead wolf waiting inside. I killed him, and made my way to the top of the tower, to the bat-infested belfry - which was empty.

Apparently some other adventurer had made his way here before me.

I stifled the cry of frustration and went back down the stairs, leaving the tower and trying to retrace my steps. Unfortunately, it was now snowing heavily, and my footprints had been covered. I wound up stumbling blindly through thick trees. I could see sparkling eyes in the gloom, and eerie faerie mutterings from above, so it didn't help my nerves at all when I heard a voice crying out for help.

I followed the sound and found, against all logic, a severed head lying on a tree stump. It was yelling its lungs out, despite not possessing any. When it saw me it looked quite relieved, and said, "Could you take me to the hut of Knocklar the Hermit? He's always taking me out to cut wood, and leaving me behind."

"I... you don't..."

"It's not far. I'll show you the way."

"But... the thing... can't..."

"Come on, get a move on. It's bloody cold."

Still mired in disbelief, I picked the head up and allowed it to guide me through the forest. We crossed a frozen stream, and eventually emerged into a clearing where a homely-looking cottage was sitting. There was a well there, and a man dressed in thick furs was breaking up the ice in it with a long stave. "Hello there," he said. "I don't get many visitors in these parts. Are you lost?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said. "And I believe this is yours."

I held up the head, which immediately complained. "Knocklar, you oaf! You left me in the forest again! If not for the kindness of this stranger I'd be frozen solid by now!"

"Thank you," Knocklar said, taking the head and leading me into the cottage. "You must stay the night, and tell me of your travels. I myself have renounced the world for a life of spiritual contemplation."

"A life of drunken idleness, more like!" declared the head. Knocklar promptly stuffed it in a breadbin.

"What's his story?" I asked.

The hermit shook his head dismissively. "Don't ask."

I stayed for a fine dinner of roast turnips, leeks and venison pie, washed down with some feary mead. Knocklar told him the elves provided it for me, for otherwise he would disrupt their nighttime revelry - they can't stand the odour of sancity. We chatted for sometime about various subjects - I told him of how I had robbed the Tower of Despair, and returned to find it empty. He was quite impressed to learn that I had breached the tower, but suggested I seek wealth elsewhere. "It's a wide old world," he said. "No sense retracing your steps when there's so much treasure out there, in the caves and dungeons and ruins..."

December 26

Woke up early today to the sound of Knocklar already chopping wood. He showed me a safe route to leave the forest, and wished me good luck in my journey. On the way we checked his traps and found a rabbit. He was quite glad, planning to make a up a stew, and sliced one of its paws off to make a charm for me. It was kind of gross, but I thought it would be impolite to refuse.

December 27

Travelling south from the forest, I stumbled across the Abbey of Lacuna entirely by chance, and the nuns have allowed me to stay for the night. Beats sleeping out in the snow.

December 31

Travelling south along the riverbank, looks like I'm in for a lonely New Year's. I'd rather be in Old Sokar or Ringhorn, but it certainly beats where I was this time

last year.

1032

January 1

Made an acquaintance today with a friendly fellow who travelled south with me for a bit; he entertained me with his jokes, and told me he was coming down from visiting the Abbey of Lacuna where his sister is a nun. A lie of course, since I was just there and didn't see anything of him. My money pouch was soon quite a bit lighter, so when he stopped to answer a call of nature I went through his bag and took bag what he'd stolen plus some more. When we parted ways it was with a cheerful wave. This year's off to a good start!

January 2

The rogue yesterday was talking about Goldfall, which I'd compeltely forgotten about. Goldfall, where gold falls from the sky! Now that's a place where a man can make his fortune!

January 7

After passing through several country villages I arrived at Goldfall, a ramshackle town. the buildings were in poor repair, the livestock wandered untended in the fields. Most people here are transients, deadbeats and drifters. I can classify them as such with confidence, because I am all of those things myself. I passed a beggar huddling under a blanket in the frosty village square, and asked him if he'd ever found gold. "Nope," he said. "But I heard of a bloke that got rich from finding three nuggets as big as your fist. Got any spare change?"

January 8

After taking lodging at an inn last night, I headed out bright and early into the goldfields. Despite the fresh snowfall and freezing temperature, the place was already teeming with other prospectors. I was forced to make do with a tiny patch of ice-hard soil.

In a whole day of digging, I found only a speck of gold worth 2 Shards. I was irritated by this, but the prospector next to me said it was great luck, as it suggests there might be a larger nugget nearby.

January 9

Returned to my stake at first light to keep looking for gold. Nothing so far.

January 15

Found a few more small specks, enough to buy some prospecting equipment.

January 31

Haven't written much lately - too busy prospecting - certain I will strike a big lode soon.

February 25

I don't know what I was thinking. Six weeks I have been here, and found almost nothing. I should have left long ago, but I was too drunk on gold fever to realise it. This place is a trap. Hundreds of people come from all over Harkuna to seek their fortune here, but few ever find it. I've thrown away all the useless junk I bought and I'm leaving tomorrow. Never again will I return here. It's a town of fools, waiting for gold to drop into their laps. I prefer to seek my own fortune.

February 26

Rains today, washing away the last of winter's snowfall. It feels good to be on the road again. I'm cold, I'm wet, and tonight I'm going to be sleeping under a hedge, but by the gods I'm free of that wretched town.

March 2

Travelling through the fields of Golnir, I got hideously drunk on nettle beer at a country fair yesterday that was celebrating the first day of spring. I lost the scant few Shards that I had, but somehow picked up a candle, silver horseshoe and a peacock feather. Go figure.

March 10

Somewhere north of the Whistling Heath, I think. It's hard to tell. Just bloody wheat fields and fences all over the place.

March 12

Crossed over the Metriciens-Wheatfields highway today, and kept heading west. I'm playing over an idea in my head that could gain me some wealth.

March 15

Stumbled across some old burial mounds at dusk yesterday, in a quiet part of the countryside. I went inside them and found a wight there, which was a bit of a surprise in cultivated Golnir farmland, but he didn't prove to tough to take down. And there was an amazingly good haul - nearly a thousand Shards! Golnir hides more than a few secrets.

March 17

Heard the lilting of pipe music through the trees while walkign down a country lane in the evening. Following the noise, I came to a clearing by a pond where a stranger in grey robes was sitting on the steps of a horse-drawn carriage playing a

bulbous flute. As I approached, he looked up and smiled, teeth gleaming in the light of the rising moon. he said:

"Read me this riddle and read it aright -
Where shall I next from my carriage alight?
It's east of the sunset, west of the moon
North of the sea, overlooked by a dune
Such is the spot where we'll make our tryst
But be prompt, for sometimes it doesn't exist."

The pipeman stood to re-enter his cabin. Pausing, he turned and gave me a wink.
"Mind you go straight there," he said. "I can't abide being kept waiting."

The horses needed no touch of the whip nor stir of the reigns - as soon as the door closed behind the stranger, they were off.

What an odd man.

March 18

East of the sunset... but the sun sets in the western horizon. Isn't everywhere east of that?

This is gonna drive me nuts.

March 19

Arrived at Castle Ravayne this morning, ready to put Plan III-Gotten Gains into action. Last time I was here I was turned away by the guards, but today must have been a market day or something, because there were plenty of commoners streaming inside. I lowered the hood of my cloak and joined the throng.

The castle is huge, virtually a city in its own right - full of stables, grainstores, pens for livestock, carpentry yards and a smithy. Knights kept fit by charging at a straw-filled dummy with lances. A secondary line of defences enclosed the inner keep.

I spent the day wandering the outer bailey, scoping out the defences, and when night fell and the peasants were ushered back out of the castle, the gates swung shut behind them, I was hidden in a hayloft. After a few hours I extricated myself and crept across the rooftops to the treasury, where the wealth of the Ravayne clan is stored. It was surprisingly poorly guarded; perhaps the guards didn't expect a raid to come from within the castle. I gathered enough gems and gold to fetch 900 Shards, and managed to slip back past the guards and drop over the outer

bailey wall into the moat, swimming to the opposite bank and disappearing into the sweet sweet night.

March 20

Slept in a barn not far from the castle last night. Best sleep I ever had. Now I'm following the Rese River into Ringhorn. Time to offload some gemstones.

April 5

I've spent the last two weeks in Ringhorn, offloading gems here and there, and also getting rid of the assorted rubbish you tend to pick up during three months wandering across Harkuna. I have to do it in little bits and pieces - a market stall here, a pawn shop there - or it looks suspicious.

I've been thinking a lot about that bloody piper's riddle, too. It's been bugging the hell out of me.

April 7

Was in a beer garden today, near one of the city parks, discussing the riddle with a bunch of drunks who had the kind of insight only alcohol can bring. One proposed that perhaps east of the sunset meant east of where I was *when I met the stranger*, which would only mean some way to the east. And north of the sea, but still overlooked by a dune, means it must be close to the actual shore.

Not sure about all the "sometimes it doesn't exist" stuff, but I've resolved to follow the coastal highway tomorrow and see what I can find.

April 8

Been travelling along the highway all day. It's fairly busy, with trading between Ringhorn and Metriciens, and is regularly patrolled by militia-men bearing the black lion banner of Hosue Ravayne, which controls most of south-west Golnir. Suckers don't suspect a thing.

April 10

Arrived today at a weathered coastal hill fort, moss cladding the pitted black stones of its high walls. There was a small fishing village below it, nets and boats lying on the pebble beach before it. I went down there and chatted with a couple of fishermen, and as we spoke a breeze blew in from the ocean, bringing with it the faintly heard strains of flute music. Familiar flute music.

"It's from the belfry of the old village that now lies under the sea," one of the fishermen explained. "At low tide you can see the roofs of the buildings - walk out to them, even."

So that's what he meant by it not existing sometimes. "Flute music from a belfry?" I asked.

"They never had a bell, you see. A fellow called folk to prayer with his flute. They say he was still playing when the sea closed in over his head."

I walked out to the spot where the men said the village was. Clouds scudded across the sky, gulls circled above and crabs settled in the rockpool. It was late afternoon. I sat and waited for low tide.

As darkness approached, the sea receded, exposing a flat expanse of tidal flats dotted with seaweed-clumped boulders. Crabs ran to and fro. Then I saw a carriage rumbling in my direction, pulled by two huge green horses, rising straight from the sea.

The carriage drew to a halt before me, and the flutist climbed out. "I see you solved my riddle," he said with a smile.

"I had a bit of help," I said.

He hauled a chest from the back of the carriage, and was about to give it to me when he spotted a seashell lying in the wet sand at his feet. "Tell me," he said. "Would you rather have what's in the chest, or what's in the shell?"

Intended riches, as opposed to the rotting remains of a dead hermit crab. Not difficult. "The chest," I said.

The man ahnde dit over, and I thre the lid open, assaulted by a smell of tar and salt. Within was a pearl breastplate and a coral spear, both finely crafted. The stranger bade me farewell, and climbed back into his carriage.

"Wait!" I cried out. "Who are you?"

"They call me Dom Daniel!" he replied, nearly drowned out by the whinnying of the horses. As they turned and sped back towards the sea, I could hear the lilting pipe music on the wind once more.

I've returned to the fishing village where I'll sleep tonight. I haven't told the fisherman about what happened. I doubt they'd believe me.

April 11

Before leaving the village today and heading back to Ringhorn, I explored the coastal fort. Inside was a flight of steps leading down into the bedrock. At the bottom were three doors, one marked with a spider, one marked with a sun, and one marked with a ram's head. I'm sure a goblin told me about something like this once, but I couldn't remember what, so I simply tried the spider door. Inside was a chest containing 300 Shards, some ringmail and a compass. Not bad, so I tried to the door marked with the ram's head, and a metal automaton emerged and started headbutting me out of the fortress. Fortunately it had a tough time climbing the stairs, otherwise it might have chased me all the way back to Ringhorn. I got a lot of nasty bruises anyway. Still, not a bad day's haul.

April 15

Arrived back in Ringhorn today. Since I now have a total of more than two and a half thousand Shards, I feel the time is ripe for me to travel to Dweomer and enrol in a college, before I get shanghaied or something and lose it all again. I'm going to put my feet up here for a few days and then look for a ship bound for Dweomer.

April 20

Today I was trawling through the taverns on the Bridge of Titans, that enormous wharfside bridge covered in buildings, and I stumbled into Captain Blake, the master of the *Idiot Wind*, the vessel that picked me up in Disaster Bay after the slave ship I was on sank last year. We caught up over a few beers - he's been doing very well for himself over the last few months, plying the spice route between Ankon-Konu and Harkuna, and is in fact setting off for Dweomer a few days from now. He agreed to take me on as a passenger.

April 24

Fair wind at our backs and a gentle sea beneath our keel. I've missed the ocean. I talked today to Captain Blake about that, and he offered to let me join our crew, but I declined. I'm set on going to Dweomer, and besides, I don't like taking orders. The life of a seaman is not for me. Captain, though... maybe one day.

April 28

The famous perpetual drizzle of Braelak was already pattering down on the sails as we pulled into the harbour today, the thousand spires of Dweomer visible through the haze even from the tiny port on the island. Captain Blake accompanied me into the city, for he planned to buy some magical charms. We traversed along a long, metallic road lined with fanciful statues, the woodland to our right gleaming with blue light. "The cursed Bluewood," Captain Blake said. "Don't ever venture in there if you value your sanity."

Dweomer was an amazing city - dozens of colleges line the streets, their great gothic edifices bearing portals as large as those of any castle. Together they formed the jumble of the university, thousands of years old, a labyrinth of stonework and cellars and spired rooftops, topped by gargoyles staring down at the streets below overcast skies. "They say that some of those gargoyles are failed students," Blake said with a smile. "Sure you still want to go through with this, lad?"

"I'm sure," I said, shaking his hand. "Thank you for everything, captain. Good luck on the seas."

He laughed. "I'd be more worried about yourself, lad," he said, and then disappeared into the outer city, the ring of shops and alleys and private houses that cling to the university like barnacles.

I spent the rest of the day exploring the town, visiting the different colleges. There were many of them, each distinguished in its own field. Fortuity College specialised in charms and benedictions; Carminry College for healing magic; Fulgur College for the conjuration of storms, and so on. I eventually chose to apply at Union College, simply because it was the oldest and most versatile. I waited in a room with several other candidates before being told to return for an examination three days from now.

May 1

Two years since I landed in Harkuna, and I spent the day being subjected to a series of difficult and vexing examinations. They largely seemed to be trying to determine how holy I am, which was strange. I had to try to drive off a spirit using only a display of self-righteous indignation, wax pompously about other people's ethics, curdle milk with a beatific smile, speculate uselessly for hours on what the gods intended when they made Man, and so on. The examiners noted it all down with relentless glares and neutral expressions. I have to back there tomorrow at 9 am sharp. I'm nervous. No sleep tonight.

May 2

The board of examiners met me in a long hall, from which birds seemed to be nesting in the rafters. With the drizzle soaking down on the windows, they invited me to sit in a not-at-all-intimidating chair before them and scanned my exam papers. "You seem unsure about anything at all," one of them said. "Most of the metaphysical questions you've just answered with a Don't Know. The sprite liked you so much that it's taken up residence in your coat pocket - and your smile, instead of curdling the milk, nearly froze it."

I looked at them uncertainly. "Does that mean..."

"You'll be a model student," another examiner said. "Welcome to the college!"

They shook me hands and led me into the Grand Hall in time for dinner. Apparently wizards value open-mindedness. After a loud, noisy dinner, at which most of the college's several hundred students were present, I was led up to the dormitory tower and shown to the room I'll be sharing with another student, a scruffy looking postgraduate around my age named Fionn. "Luckily this bed has just opened up," the professor said. "The former occupant, was foolish enough to venture into the Bluewood." He gave Fionn a sharp look.

"What?" the student said defensively.

"Fionn is studying the remote magical areas of the world for his thesis," the professor said. "Including the Bluewood."

"I had nothing to do with it."

"Hmmm," the professor said, and left the room.

Fionn looked me up and down. "You seem like a rugged explorer-type fellow," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe you..."

"No," I said, throwing my bag down on the spare bed.

"But I haven't..."

"No."

May 9

I've been at Union College for a week now, and I'm settling in well. Fionn is a nice roommate, attempts to convince me to go to my certain doom aside, and he's taught me quite a bit about the college. It has a fairly relaxed attitude to teaching, relying on the concept that if you put a lot of students in the vicinity of a lot of books something will jump between them. Lectures are sporadic and randomly attended. I've been to a few, keen to pick up what magic I can, but so far I'd say I've done more drinking in the city taverns than studying. And there's certainly nothing wrong with that.

August 1

Three months in Dweomer, and I really like it here. Our room has a good view of

the city rooftops, of the gutters and tiles and spires and gargoyles, and I've used my thievery skills more than once to sneak back in drunk after the gates are closed. Things are generally quite cluttered, but since they're Fionn's things, and they're usually maps and notes, I have no problem with that. They're quite interesting. I've learned as much from him as I have from lectures, and likewise - I've told him the real location of the Tower of Despair, and confirmed the source of the sulphur in the lake of the Sea Dragon as emanating from Vayss. I even told him about my encounter with Kaschuf the Deathless. "The name rings a bell," he said. "You might find something in the library about him." I have been meaning to take a look at the library - after three months I still haven't - but things keep coming up. Like last night's beer.

September 10

I finally got around to visiting the library today, when I was trying to find Fionn, because he owed me some money. It's an enormous building at the centre of the university, containing thousands of dusty tomes, few of which have been properly catalogued. I found Fionn in a reading room with a small fireplace, surrounded by maps and books, writing industriously. "I see it's only taken you half a year to show interest in your studies," he said, glancing up from his scroll.

"Actually, I want my 50 Shards."

"Tomorrow. While you're here, do me a favour and go dig up whatever you can on Dangor."

I glanced out the room, down the long rows of shelves. "The shelves look like they go on forever," I said.

"They do," he replied. "It's a simple infinity spell. Now get a move on."

I spent a few hours poking around through the shelves, trying to find what he was looking for. Eventually I returned with an entry from a Sokaran navy vessel's log, twenty-five years ago: "We arrived at the base of the cliffs and there laid at anchor three days, while a mountaineer carried our documents to port authorities above. These documents being found to be in order, grapples were lowered and secured and the whole vessel was winched up to the docks a thousand feet above."

"And what's the rest of it say?"

"Don't know. It's soaked in something. Blood, I think."

"Useless," Fionn muttered.

I took a seat opposite him and stretched out in front of the fire, putting my feet up against the fire. "If you want to know about these places, why don't you *go* to them?"

"Hah!" he snorted. "Everything I need is right here in Dweomer, thank you very much. Greatest library in the world. No need to go there. Besides, it's dangerous."

Fionn's a good friend, but I think we share a fundamentally different world view that will never be reconciled.

November 12

I've been spending a lot more time in the library. It's no substitute for actual experience, but as long as I'm here *anyway*, I may as well do some research. I could save myself a lot of time down the track if I knew *where* all the riches were stored, instead of tramping aimlessly around Harkuna hoping to stumble upon them.

November 28

Did some research on the Bluewood, since it's the focal point of Fionn's thesis and he keeps trying to subtly convince me to go explore it on his behalf, which I shall do on the day that he agrees to travel to the Peaks at the Edge of the World. It's a high-octane magic zone, which is what gives the vegetation such a weird blue glow. The books say that a tree whose mast is cut from the Bluewood will always find its way back to Braelak. The stories and rumours I've heard indicate that it is also a snake's nest of dangerous enchantments, and there's not one indication that there's any kind of treasure within. Sure sounds compelling!

December 20

My twenty-fourth birthday. I marked the occasion by going out and getting drunk with Fionn and several other students, and waking up hungover in torrential rains on the university quadrangle. Good times!

1033

January 1

Spent last night getting outrageously drunk, watching the spectacular magic fireworks and wandering the streets to get into magical duels with those bastards from All Hellions College, Union's traditional rival. God, I hate those bastards from All Hellions *so much*.

February 15

Old Harkuna - "Once a pinnacle of civilisation in the northlands, Old Harkuna is

now but a wrecked shell of an empire, like the carapace of a crab discarded on a beach by gulls. The Uttakin conquered Harkuna in ages past, but the lands of Golnir and Sokara that were once its vassal states still maintain the vestiges of ancient tradition. Harkuna remains the model of kingship even though the High King's Seat has been empty for three hundred years. Indeed, many superstitious folk still claim that the High King was never slain by the Uttakin, but instead sleeps under the frozen Rimewater and will awake when the World Snake spits fire and the end of the world looms."

Three hundred years, and yet I met a herald in Golnir who claimed that his grandfather had served the high king. A liar? A ghost? Or an unbroken line of loyal generational servants?

March 21

Oliphard the Wizardly has arrived in Dweomer for a brief spell, and was the guest of honour at a dinner held at Union College. I spent some time talking to him, and was quite pleased to see the professors balk at having an esteemed wizard speak equally to a student. "They don't actually like him," Fionn said, as Oliphard went off to mingle and we returned to the bar. "He was the one who appointed Estragon the warden of Choronzon College, and we all know what a cock-up that was."

"I don't," I complained. "What happened?"

"Before my time, but it was a bad experiment with storm magic. It rained for thirteen months and a day. High Street was accessible only by punt, and the warden of Cromlech College drowned after falling asleep in his wine cellar. Estragon was banished." He paused, pouring himself some sherry, and grinned as he added, "You might even say he left under *something of a cloud*."

"Or you might not. So where did he go?"

"He's the court wizard at Castle Ravayne in Golnir. Still continues all those experiments. Recruits adventurers all the time to hunt for rare items."

Another thing to keep in mind for after I leave Dweomer.

May 19

I've been doing a lot of research on Kaschuf the Deathless - or rather, trying to, because there's virtually nothing here about him. Occasionally he is mentioned in this or that treatise on the history of the Great Steppes, but there's nothing in-depth. Nothing that suggests where he might hide his locket.

Oh well. It's not my fight anyway.

June 22

Fionn is doing some research on the Forest of Larun, and has asked me to try and track down a particular book on it, which I've been trying to do for some time. *Walks In The Forest of Larun*, by Bosquay d'Arborealle. I turned to the chief librarian for help today, a man with a long grey beard who peers through spectacles, and he led me to the shelf where it is supposed to stand. There was a blank spot. Checking his files, he said, "That book is out on loan to the Master of the College. Overdue, actually."

"You should tell him to return it."

He gave me an extraordinary look. "*You* tell him!"

June 23

"Yeah, you tell him," Fionn said.

We were in our room, and I was staring out at the rooftops. Even in summer Braelak is overcast, and a light drizzle was falling down across the rooftops. "Why?" I asked.

"Because you're good with people," he said, scribbling away at something at his desk.

"Yes, but why should I get the book for you?"

"Because you constantly come home drunk at four in the morning and wake me up and I tolerate it."

"Alright, fine. But I'll do it tomorrow. Tonight I'm going to the pub."

June 25

It didn't go very well. I showed up at the Master's private residence yesterday evening - a fine, old stone house at the back of the lawn just inside the college gates. His lugubrious butler Mantel admitted me into a study that smelt of books, pipe smoke and armchair leather. Heavy rain was pattering down on the windows, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Who's there?" the Master demanded.

"One of the students, I'm afraid, sir," said Mantel.

"Well?" the Master said. "What do you want?"

I sat down in the chair opposite him, unbidden - probably a grievous error in judgement - and stammered out my reason for wanting to see him. I suddenly had a bad feeling about asking him for the library book, so I instead spun out an entirely different reason, one of my own. I told him about what had happened with Kaschuf the Deathless, and how his soul was hidden on a desert island, but how I couldn't figure out where. I was nervous, so it was a fairly jilted sentence and probably didn't make much sense.

"Desert islands?" the Master bellowed. "You come here and waste my time asking about desert islands? Why not go investigate for yourself!" He hurled a crackling blue spell at me with his left hand, and I felt a moment of nauseousness as the surroundings dropped away - and I suddenly found myself floundering about in the sea on a palm fringed beach.

Shocked and terrified, I swam to shore and pulled myself up onto the beach. I've apparently been teleported significantly to the east, as the sun is already rising, but it was about eight o'clock at night in Dweomer. Surf pounds on the shore; palm trees sway in the breeze; a wall of craggy grey rocks at the back of the beach is covered in ferns. A classic desert island.

When I get back to Dweomer I'm going to murder Fionn with my bare hands.

June 26

Note to self - purple berries are poisonous.

June 27

Note to self - yellow berries are *very* poisonous.

June 30

Who would have thought fishing with your bare hands would be so hard?

July 5

I had the most wonderful dream last night where I was in Dweomer forcing Fionn to dig his own grave, but then I woke up and nope, still on this tiny miserable island.

July 25

I've been here a month now and it's not going too badly. I've made a little shelter, there's a few flightless birds I kill now and then to eat, I've managed to make fire

and I've figured out which fruits make me vomit blood and which don't. But I still miss things like people and civilisation. Man, those were the days.

September 4

A ship passed today, but it was bearing the flag of the Reavers, and I'd rather stay here than be picked up by *them*.

December 20

My twenty-fifth birthday. A quarter of a century still alive. Never did I imagine that I would be celebrating it on some muggy, humid, godforsaken island in the Violet Ocean.

December 27

I can't stand the thought of spending another birthday here, so I've set about building a raft. No doubt it will sink and I will be eaten alive by sharks, but I'd rather die out there than live out here.

1034

January 10

The raft is about as good as it's going to get. It's made of saplings tied together with palm leaves, and hollow gourds to provide bouyancy. I'm not the best smith in the world, so it's more like swimming with the aid of a float, but here goes nothing.

January 16

Six days at sea. The current seems to be drifting me south. With my luck I'll probably wash ashore on Ankon-Konu and get eaten alive by jaguars.

January 18

Miracle! I was picked up at sea by a Golniran merchantman, the *Flying Fish*. The sailors bundled me into a warm bunk and gave me food and hot soup. I told them my own ship had sunk and stranded me on a desert isle for six months; they'd never believe the truth.

January 19

As luck would have it, the *Flying Fish* is bound directly for Dweomer, before heading home to Metriciens. Oh yes. Oh my, yes.

February 14

Braelak came into sight today, surrounded by its familiar mist of drizzle. God, I missed this place. It's come to feel like home.

I bade farewell to the crew of the *Flying Fish* and marched down the harbour road into the city, all the way to Union College, through the gates, up the east tower stairwell, to the room Fionn and I shared. It was early evening. I hammered on the door and an unfamiliar face opened it - a fresh-faced, smiling boy in his late teens.

"Where the *hell* is Fionn?" I growled.

Fionn appeared at the door, pushing the boy out of the way. "Pace!" he yelled. "By the gods, you're alive!" he embraced me in a hug, still yammering: "I had no idea what had happened to you, I didn't dare ask the master, and - ow - Pace, not so tight, I can't... breathe..."

I released him, and punched him across the jaw. "You stupid idiot!" I yelled. "I just spent half the goddamn year on a desert island!"

Fionn recoiled, rubbing his mouth in pain. "Alright, but that's not my fault!"

"What's going on?" asked the other kid, and I glared at him angrily. "Who's this idiot?" I demanded.

"This is Cam," Fionn said, clapping a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Listen, Cam, Pace and I need to go down to the pub for a discussion. In the meantime, why don't you go check out the Bluewood like we talked about? Lovely, dry night for it..."

February 15

Moved back into the room today. Cam's gone, forever no doubt. Feels good to be settled back in. The Master made eye contact with me at dinner in the Great Hall tonight and seemed somewhat puzzled, but I think he was just trying to place my face. Doesn't remember me.

I might even go to a lecture tomorrow!

February 16

Went to the pub today.

May 3

I've been at Union College two years now - one and a half if you don't count the spell as a castaway - and my magic skills have certainly improved. I wouldn't say I'm ready to go take on the gods themselves, but I could certainly beat a number of the other students in a duel. It enhances the old thievery skills, too - brief stints of invisibility, footpad charms, increased agility - I miss the thieving game. I don't

dare try stealing from anyone in Dweomer. Far too risky - everyone has their own spells and protections up, and magic's complicated. A wizened old man who looks like he's about to keel over could very well be capable of scattering every atom of your body to the far corners of the earth.

September 8

Was walking down High Street to the Soused Sorcerer yesterday evening with Fionn when I caught a mortifying glimpse of something through a latticed window of a restaurant taverna. I immediately grabbed Fionn's sleeve and pointed, gasping.

"What?" he demanded.

"Her!" I hissed. "It's *her*!"

Through the window was a tall young woman having dinner with an older, scholarly man. I dragged Fionn out from the haloed light of the streetlamp into the cover of some bushes, where we still had a view of the window.

"Who?" he asked irritably.

"Lauria!" I swore. "You know! Set me up during a burglary in Yellowport! Left me for dead in the slave mines! Evil!"

He sighed. "Pace, we don't have time for this. The pub closes in nine hours."

"I'm going to give her a piece of my mind," I said determinedly. I strode out of the bushes, pushed open the tavern door and walked up to her table. Ignoring her companion, I launched straight into a rant which eloquently expressed my feelings towards her. I didn't trouble with niceties - I used oaths and curses that made even Lauria herself blush.

Her elderly companion removed his monocle and peered at me in amazement. "Look, this just won't do," he said.

I turned to give him a piece of my mind as well, but instead found myself staring at a tree trunk covered in blue moss -

The tavern was gone. I was in the middle of a dense blue forest.

"Uh-oh," I said.

Something I'd learned from being Fionn's roommate was that the Bluewood is immensely dangerous, and that the longer you stay there, the harder a time you will have escaping. I immediately set off at a run, ducking through trees, vines and ferns, all coloured in that eerie blue hue. I could hear things slithering in the shadows, and it came as quite a shock when I stumbled across a mouldy skeleton hanging from the vines. It was about Cam's size. Ew.

Eventually, from a combination of sheer luck and - well, nothing else - I burst from the trees into the open grasslands by the harbour highway. Dweomer lay at the end of the road, a city of lights sparkling in the night. I sprinted towards it with long strides, breath raggedy, determined to make it back to the tavern before Lauria left.

Back through the cobblestoned streets of Dweomer, and Fionn was gone - at the pub, no doubt. But Lauria was still inside the tavern with the old man, their meals finished, drinking wine.

I walked back inside, brushing blue leaves off my shoulder and straightening my jacket. "And another thing," I said, as though nothing had happened, "you conniving little..."

"Pace," Lauria interrupted, "I don't think I had time to introduce my father the last time you were here. He is the Master of All Hellions College."

"I attend Union," I said brusquely. "Sir, are you aware that your daughter is a thief? And that because of her, I was brutally whipped in a Sokaran slave mine?" I pulled up my shirt to show him the scars.

"Please," said her father. "I do not care to have you expose yourself to me over dinner. And in any case, those can hardly be called scars." He traced a finger over my injuries, which healed completely, leaving unmarked skin behind.

"Now perhaps you'll stop being such a pest," Lauria said, with a smile. "Why don't you join us for a drink?"

"I would sooner slam my genitals in a door," I said, and promptly left the tavern.

But I wasn't done with her. Oh no, not yet. I lurked in the bushes outside for another hour, waiting for her to leave. I couldn't touch her while she was in her father's company. Ergo, the solution was to wait until she was alone. She left the tavern, stumbling and singing, and I followed her through the misty midnight streets. Eventually she came to a small townhouse, and disappeared up the stairs.

A light went on in an upstairs window, then turned off a few moments later.

I picked the lock on the door and silently crept up through the house to the bedroom, where Lauria was sleeping like a babe. It was an easy matter to knock her out cold, roll her up in a rug and drag her downstairs. I managed to haul her through the streets for a while, but she was heavy. So I turned off down a side-alley to the street where the Soused Sorcerer Pub was. Through the window I could see Fionn draining the last of a pint as he talked to an attractive young woman. I tapped on the window, and he shot me a dirty look, but came out into the street anyway.

"What do you want?" he hissed. "She's the daughter of a merchant captain and his ship is leaving tomorrow..."

"Need help," I said, jerking a thumb at the rug. "Got to get this all the way to the harbour."

He looked at me incredulously, and knelt down to inspect it. "Why the hell are you taking a rug to the harbour in the middle of gaaah!" He jerked back, realising Lauria's hair was poking out of the end. "You *didn't*!" he hissed.

"She's not dead," I said defensively. "Just unconscious. And there's an Uttakin slaver ship at anchor in the bay."

"No," he said. "No. We are not doing this."

"Remember when your idiocy got me banished to an island in the middle of the ocean?" I said, picking up one end of the rug. "And how I had to drink my own urine to survive, and wept piteously at night for fear I would never touch another human again?"

"Yes..."

"And remember how I came back to Dweomer and *didn't* throw you off the roof of the tower onto the spiky iron fence below, before then pushing your broken corpse off the cliffs into the sea?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"I'm calling in the favour."

He picked up his end of the rug and we set off down the street, giving a friendly

nod to two men exiting the pub, who looked at us and exchanged odd glances. A little further down the street we passed the gates to Union College, where the doorkeeper gave us a suspicious look. "What's in the rug, boys?" he called out.

"The Master murdered another student on a whim," I replied quickly. "We're just taking the body off to dump it in the harbour."

"Ah. Well, be sure to bring the rug back, boys."

"Yes sir!"

After a strenuous slog down the harbour highway, during which Fionn would not stop complaining, we arrived at the docks, where a number of ships were lying dormant. We spoke with the watchman of the Uttakin vessel, who summoned its captain from slumber. He gave us 150 Shards for Lauria; I'm no expert at slave trading, but I think that's pretty good.

"She has very white skin," the slaver said appreciatively.

"And a black heart," I replied cheerfully. "So long, you evil bitch!" The slaver carried her aboard the vessel, unconscious head lolling, as Fionn and I turned to walk back to Dweomer.

"You're a terrible person," Fionn said.

"And you're the paragon of virtue?"

"Naturally."

"That's odd, because when her father teleported me into the Bluewood, I ran into Cam's skeleton, and it begged to differ."

He stopped walking and stared at me. "You... you went into the Bluewood?"

"Yeah."

"What?! Why are you only just telling me this! How did you get out?"

"Ran!" I said, as I started to run back towards the city. Fionn struggled to keep up, still calling out to me.

"Pace! For gods' sake, what was it *like*?!"

"Blue!" I laughed back, sprinting into Dweomer. The rain had cleared, and the first grey light of dawn was appearing in the east. A new day was being proclaimed over Braelak, and it felt good to run.

Revenge makes me happy.

September 11

Fionn still won't shut up about the Bluewood. He seems to think that just because I made it out alive means it's my destiny to return and uncover its secrets. Screw that. There isn't even any treasure there.

December 20

Twenty-six years old. My god, but how the time strips away. I finished drinking this birthday at six am. So *early*. In the old days I could go on until noon the next day. I'm starting to lose my touch.

1035

January 2

Another new year - and news from Sokara. One of the court wizards from the royal palace in Old Sokar arrived in Dweomer in the early hours of the morning on a summoned demon's back, wounded and exhausted, and was immediately taken into the Master's private residence. Union College is abuzz with rumours, the consensus being that there has been some kind of military coup.

January 9

More news surfacing. Military coup did indeed occur, on New Year's Eve - the royal family was executed and a general named Grieve Marlock has seized control of much of the country. Golnir has cut off diplomatic ties.

January 19

More terrible news from Sokara - Trefoille declared for the old king and held out against the military, which razed it to the ground. Every day mages and wizards fleeing the new regime are arriving in Dweomer, including Oliphard the Wizardly, who was present at the destruction of his hometown. I met with him for dinner and he told me of the battle, a terrifying seven-day ordeal of apocalyptic destruction...

"I always thought something like this would happen," I said. "The military in Sokara had far too much power."

Oliphard nodded. "The king tried to limit it, but it was always a delicate balancing

act. The problem was that the army had become a way of life for the Sokarans - but it served no purpose. The Wall of Nerech kept the manbeasts out easily, and the citadels long since plugged up the mountain passes to protect us from barbarians. We needed a military, certainly, but not one this large. Where to next?"

I shuddered, thinking of Golnir.

February 5

It's been a month since the military coup in Sokara, and apparently the situation has stabilised. Marlock controls most of the country, and is mopping up the last few pockets of resistance. Sokara's military is nothing if not efficient. Old Sokar has been renamed Marlock City, and it is now a capital crime to call it by the old name. This a chilling vision of Marlock's intentions for the future of Sokara.

But trade is starting back up, and Marlock doesn't appear to have any further ambitions of conquest. For now.

March 23

Fionn and I were traversing our well-worn route to the Soused Sorcerer yesterday evening when I bumped into a tall gentleman in a velvet cape. "Excuse me," I said, and moved to go past him, but he put a hand against my chest to stop me.

"A moment of your time," he said. "I believe we are old acquaintances?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"No? In that case," he said, with a twitch of his lips, "why did you make yourself at home in my house?"

I peered at him in confusion. His face wasn't familiar at all. "Who?"

"I am Talanexor the Fireweaver, you scoundrel. And your name, I believe, is Lauria."

I almost laughed. "Oh - Talanexor. Yes, I remember you. But my name's not Lauria. She was my accomplice. Sold me out, so you nearly caught me. But I got even with her in the end. So what brings you to Dweomer? Not a fan of General Marlock?"

Talanexor stared icily at me. "Prepare to take your punishment," he said, raising one hand.

I jumped in surprise. "What? Are you kidding! It was five years ago, water under the bridge..."

"Duel!" Fionn shouted, stepping in between myself and the fiery sparks gathering in Talanexor's hand. "Pace challenges you to a duel!"

Talanexor hissed angrily, before saying, "Fine. Erebus Meadow. Tomorrow at noon." He stomped off into the misty night, sparks still crackling around him.

"What did you just get me into?" I asked Fionn, watching Talanexor's silhouette disappear into the grey fog.

"You'll be fine," Fionn said soothingly. "Carminry College has an excellent burns ward."

A duel is apparently a bigger deal than I believed. Fionn and I arrived at Erebus Meadow today to find quite a crowd gathered, expecting some spectacular sorcery. Two pavilions had been set up, one bedecked in the colours of Union College, the other in those of Duke's College - presumably Talanexor's alma mater. I was ushered inside the Union pavilion where the Master was waiting.

"Pace!" he said, seizing my hand and shaking it vigorously. "Pleasure to meet you! I hope you'll defend Union's honour today..."

"Actually, we've met before," I said. "You teleported me to a desert island."

"Oh," he said. "Really?"

"Yes. I barely survived for six months, then built a raft, got picked up at sea and made my way back here."

"Oh. What had you done to deserve it?"

"Nothing, really."

"Well never mind that now," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "You need to focus. Talanexor is one of the best fire mages the university has ever seen. I hope you've been studying protection charms!"

"Well, that might have been easier if I hadn't been stranded on an island a thousand miles from the university."

"It's time!" somebody called out, and the Master pushed me from the pavilion with shouts of good luck. I walked nervously out into the meadow. It was an unusually fine day for Dweomer; the sky had only a few clouds, and the sun was shining brightly. Just my luck that it stops raining on the day when there was a good chance I would burst into flames.

To my surprise, Talanexor did not commence with one of his fabled fireballs. Instead, as the challenged party, he posed a conundrum.

"There are thirty colleges in Dweomer," he said, calling across the ten paces we stood apart from each other. Butterflies were flitting about the flowers that swayed in the breeze. The crowd was silent. "The other day I attended a sherry party where there were six others beside myself. What was the chance that at least two of us belonged to the same college?"

I glanced over at the sidelines, where the Master was watching, along with Fionn and a lot of my other student friends. "Mathematics," I said. "Really?"

The Master glared at me, and Talanexor said sharply, "Answer it! You have one minute."

I did some quick calculations in my head, to no avail. "Fifty per cent," I responded.

"Correct," Talanexor said, arching his eyebrows. "Good guess."

"Also correct," I said, raising one hand to call forth a lightning bolt. No wimpy maths for me.

What followed over the next half hour is being called one of the greatest magical duels Braelak has seen since the founding of the university. (It's being called that by me, but that still counts). For what seemed like an eternity Talanexor and I exchanged hexes, curses, spells and charms, flinging fireballs and conjuring shields, circling each other about the meadow like duelling knights. It was a test of everything I have learned here over the last three years, an education bought with a stolen fortune that, ironically, had its roots in the night I burgled Talanexor's house on my first night in Sokara.

Eventually I bested him, knocking him to the ground with a well-timed flash of plasma, and immediately calling forth roots from the ground to ensnare him tightly. I was borne aloft by the crowd, while the adjudicators announced that I

was the winner of the duel and fined Talanexor 500 Shards for besmirching my good name. As he handed over the money he gave me a glowering look and said to me under his breath, "You'll lie in your grave before you can spend the last of those coins. See if you can deflect that curse!"

As he turned and strode away, I returned to Dweomer with the crowd and immediately deflected the aforementioned curse by spending every last coin on shouting drinks for every person in every tavern in the city on an eighteen-hour bender. I woke up today at noon hanging upside down from a gargoyle on the roof of the university library, with a taste like a dead whale inside my mouth. I managed to extricate myself and stumble home, where I found Fionn in a similar state, and now I'm lying in bed fighting the urge not to vomit every time I hear Fionn do so.

Suck on that, Talanexor! Curse deflected! The money's spent, and I may currently *feel* like I'm dead, but I'm not!

April 16

Fionn has been harping on about the Bluewood again, arguing that if I can defeat Talanexor the Fireweaver I can easily handle whatever those woods can throw at me. Because an ancient, eldritch, high-intensity magic zone will of course be much safer than a garden variety Dweomer alumnus.

He did manage to dig up an old parchment suggesting there's a wand of incredible power hidden somewhere in there, though...

April 20

Against all common sense, I've decided to venture into the Bluewood. Part of this reason is boredom - since my defeat of Talanexor, there's little the college seems to have left to teach me. I need a fresh challenge. Part of it is so that Fionn will just finally shut up. I'm striking out tomorrow at dawn.

April 21

I left Fionn holed up in his library reading room, next to his toasty fire - he declined to follow me to the edge of the woods, since it was "blowing a gale." He did, however, give me a pickled witch's hand, floating in a jar. "What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked.

"Old journals indicate that it might lead you in the right direction," he said.

"Where did you *get* this?"

"Vortense Pogue's shop. Come on, you're wasting time. Get cracking."

So I left him in his warm little room, venturing out into the rainy wilderness, wondering why I was. I penetrated the Bluewood again, tramping through the glowing undergrowth, the rain pattering down through the leaves and casting a weird light over everything. As I went the witch's hand suddenly turned rigid, pointing in the direction of a toadstool-lined path I hadn't seen before.

It led to a clearing where a tall tree stretched up into a blue plane. "Few reach this far," boomed a voice. Startled, I whirled around in all directions, but there was nothing to be seen except the pall of leaves and trees like silent sentinels.

The branches of the tree moved, sluggish serpents stirred to life, unfolding to reveal a fissure in the earth.

"Where does it lead?" I asked.

"Anywhere you wish, if you have the science to find your way. But to the uninitiated, it is only a gateway to hell."

"What the hell," I said, and jumped. I probably shouldn't have.

I tumbled down a twisting hole stinking of damp loam and ozone, my skin tingling and stomach swirling. Sorcery was strong here. I blacked out.

When I awoke, I was lying on a riverbank, in hot, humid weather. I looked up to see dense rainforest ahead of me, and a ramshackle town further upstream. A growling came from nearby, and I turned to see a crocodile lying in the mud beside me.

I scrambled to my feet and dashed up the riverbank, heading for the town, yelping piteously. The crocodile soon gave up chase, and I wandered into the town I realised was Smogmaw.

I've heard of Smogmaw but never been here. It's an armpit of a place, at the mouth of the Nozama River in Ankon-Knou, populated by traders, pirates, thieves, adventurers and fierce natives, all drawn together by a common motive - greed.

I'm in a tavern right now, a wooden structure set on stilts over the river, with curtains of woven pandanus leaves serving as partitions. Customers sit on mats on the floor. They serve a very sharp liquor.

I suppose I have to get back to Dweomer and report my findings to Fionn. In the meantime I might take a wander around Smogmaw.

April 22

Stayed in a filthy tavern last night, eaten alive by mosquitoes. Wandered around the markets this morning for a taste of local culture. Some bastards tried to kidnap me, but I beat them off. Good thing I took my coral spear and pearl breastplate with me when I ventured into the Bluewood; they've been gathering dust under my bed at Union for the last three years.

I headed down to the docks in the afternoon, and by good fortune, found a vessel that was setting sail for Dweomer that very evening. The captain of the *Taradiddle* apparently hates the humidity and is keen to leave as soon as possible. So here I am on the deck, watching a spectacular tropical sunset as the ship pulls out of Smogmaw's rancid harbour.

April 23

Captain Sala invited me to dine with him last night, and we discussed the situation in Sokara. I told him I hadn't been there since the revolution, and he said the army has grown even more brash now that the General rules. "It's so bad I don't even dare sail to Old Sokar or Yellowport," he said. "The navy searches almost every ship, applies 'levies' and 'tolls'... it's a disgrace."

"Didn't they do that before?"

"Yes. But now they're *allowed* to, *supposed* to. It's been institutionalised. If Nergan doesn't retake the throne soon, it'll be hard to take things back to normal."

My ears pricked up at that. "Nergan?" I asked, sipping at the brandy. "Who's Nergan?"

"You don't know?" he said in amazement. "He was third in line to the throne, before his father and brothers were slaughtered on New Year's Eve. They say he fled the city and now he's in hiding somewhere."

"But you don't know where?"

He scoffed. "If I knew where, so would everyone, and Nergan wouldn't be long for this world. No, he'll emerge when the time is right, when he's raised an army, and then Marlock's head will be on a pike above the city gates."

May 4

The *Taradiddle* arrived in Braelak harbour today; I was surprised we had such a swift and easy journey. Captain Sala slapped the ship's mast. "Bluewood pine," he said with a smile. "She always finds her way home."

I thanked him and headed inland, following the familiar path along the harbour road. I entered the college gates, and walked up the stairs to my room - where I found Fionn standing, talking to a thin teenage student.

"Nonsense," he was saying. "The Bluewood's dangers are greatly exaggerated. You'll just stroll down, have a look around, and *oh gods you're alive!*"

The last part was directed at me, as he caught sight of me from the corner of his eye. He pushed the teenager out the door and said, "Find a different room to stay in, this one's taken!"

"But all my stuff's in..."

"Get lost!" Fionn slammed the door shut and turned to me. "Pace!" he yelled, embracing me. "Where have you been? What *happened* in there?"

I smiled. "That, my friend, is a story best told down at the pub."

May 5

Fionn and I were at the pub until it closed, discussing what had happened to me in the Bluewood, and my voyage home. After that we wandered the streets of Dweomer, eventually climbing up onto the roof of the university library and sitting there until dawn, watching the sun rise and reminiscing about the events of the last three years. My university years, my student years, a glorious whirlwind of books and study, of magical duels and late nights at the pub, of boring lectures and - incongruously - hunting for crabs on a deserted island.

The rain had stopped, and the tiles and spires of Dweomer were coated in buds of water, a rainbow arcing over the Bluewood, lit up by the rising sun. As we watched it I had a sudden epiphany, spurred on by my short voyage away from the island, which had rekindled my wanderlust. "I think it's time for me to leave, Fionn," I said. "A man can only spend so many days amongst the library shelves, or listening to old men drone on at the lectern. A man needs to seek knowledge and wisdom for himself. A man needs to venture far afield, across the fish-haunted seas, through the dark and gloomy forests, over the frosty mountains. A man needs to seek out the ancient treasures and arcane secrets. A man needs to explore, to seek, to find... a man needs to live!"

Fionn took a swig of whiskey from his hip flask. "You've run out of money to pay your tuition fees, haven't you," he said lazily.

"Yes."

This is the end of the journal's first volume, but as we all know, Pace had many further adventures. I am still attempting to track down the later volumes. If my patron receives this note, please send a further 200,000 Shards for... living expenses, care of Mr. Holloway, 12th Canal, Metriciens. I am unable to venture afield and follow Pace's footsteps until Mr. Holloway receives this money. Please. He's going to break my legs. - Ed.