

ORDER
&
CHAOS

This story is dedicated to my family and friends, without whose patience and support its authorship would not have been possible.

Sincerely,

Matt Darrow 2013

Character List

Alex: A young, subordinate Mage of Coermantyr. He has red hair. Alex practices traditional magic but is appreciative and studious of the experimental incantations of his half-ghoul friend, Leif.

Athros and Zalkos: A pair of specters from the Plane of Chaos.

Anemone: A Dagonite Captain. She is Marlin's girlfriend. The merwoman found the Orb of Paryphax in a salmon and bears it in a necklace.

Ankharet, the Dire Queen of Arkadia: She is a white-haired troll woman whose ambition and ruthlessness have caused her to be estranged from her people. Ankharet has become aligned with goblins in her region and has built her Abyssal Cairn there.

Axel: A gnome pilot.

Barracuda and Nautilus: A female and male pair of fish hunters in Lord Dagon's ocean region.

Satvinder and Jalhi Bengal: Leaders of the Bengal Clan of Tiger Trolls in the Ghastly Fens.

Blueblood: An Orc Captain from the lairs in Mount Crow. He is accepted as a member of Rauros' reformed Harad Ghul.

Bors, Keeper of Bard's Inn and Burgomeister of Wood's End: He is a burly, middle-aged troll who has grown sons, the oldest of whom is named Torvald. Bors is concerned about the recent invasions of wolf-creatures and specters into his home region, Mystic Down. He is a good cook and fights with a hefty, studded mace.

Cara and Fangoz: A stone troll couple who assist the mercenaries on their journey to Lich Town in the Ghastly Fens.

Charles: A wood troll Guard of the City of Arborea.

Claude: A dethroned Vampire Lord trapped in Guardon's Spires.

Cooper: The Unofficial Leader of the Maegar Council.

Lord Dagon, Leader of the Dagonites: He is a practical mertroll who is aware of Ankharet's conjurings on the land. Dagon was petitioned by her to join her cause but declined. Recently he's been concerned over rumors of the disappearance of Key Captains in his ocean region. His son, Marlin, has been included in the list.

Dakros: The Second-in-Command of the Harad Ghul, a faction of goblin assassins led by Rauros.

Dar'ghaz: A giant muskrat that found Sharon. He healed her injuries and took her to the Muskrat Leader in the Garaz Forest of Coermantyr.

Miles Davenport: The Mayor of Tinkerburg.

Deirdre: A wood nymph in the deep woods of Mystic Down.

Driptwist, Formshift and Swirlmass: Morphozoids found in the Under Earth of Guardon's Spires. They allied themselves with Bjorn Roundtree and his companions.

Drumtone and Oxholm: Two Maegar Dwarf brothers. Their clan originally resided in the Under Earth of the Arkadian Mountain Range but migrated to the Gorgon Plane due to increasing invasions by Stalactite Orcs.

Dweeble Dworx: An Arachnoid who resides in the Gorgon Plane.

Einar: An Assistant Guard of Lich Town.

Flamering and Starfling: Jalhi Bengal's wyvern familiars.

Ben Frostberry: Bjorn Roundtree's uncle.

Gabrielle: A fledgling vampire in the Arkadian Mountains.

Galatia: A female gnome engineer.

Gearzon: A disoriented gnome engineer protecting Guardon's Spires.

Gilead, Key Mage of Coermantyr and Innkeeper of the Wolf's Fang: He is affianced to Lady Redthorne. Their partnership is practical and industrious. He is outgoing and keeps a watchful eye on the visitors to his tavern. Gilead cares for Sharon but, in the name of diplomacy and tactical defense, allows her to consort with other troll folk.

Glasslook: An analytic, brown-haired seraphim troll woman from the Plane of Order.

Gnoll: Skjold's Bodyguard. He is a husky wood troll who hearkens from the distant region of Arborea. The Leader of the Wood Trolls, Skjold, was slain by Ankharet's Vizier and his Orb of Paryphax stolen. Gnoll has been captured along with other Gaeans by Ankharet's rampant spatial rifts. The troll has begun a growing friendship with Bjorn Roundtree and other humanoids in the Gorgon Plane.

Grondol: The Leader of a group of Ice Goblins. They caught Sharon spying on them and chased her into a pyrrhic battle.

Grumbold: The King of the Maegar Dwarves.

Guardon, the Gorgon King: He is a daemon in the Spatial Plane of the Gorgons. Guardon has become allied with Ankharet through her arcane rift-making and summoning.

Heartsing: An empathetic, blond seraphim troll from the Plane of Order.

Hydro: One of the larger Entities in the Plane of Order.

Ichthos: The Leader of the Nozroth.

Leif: A lich-troll spawned from the bonding of troll and ghoul. He is an adept magic-user. Leif applies his knowledge to aggressively defend his friends and destroy his enemies. Siegemunde at the Martial Academy in the Ghastly Fens educated him. The Fens are the home region of the lich folk.

Llewellyn: A Captain of the Qualinesti Elves.

Loki: A goblin assassin who has remained loyal to the Harad Ghul after the defeat of the Dire Queen and Gorgon King.

Listhew: An administrative, red-haired seraphim troll woman from the Plane of Order.

Mara: A silver dragon from the Plane of Order.

Nighthawk: A defected goblin healed of injuries inflicted by the beholders while fighting them in the Gorgon Plane.

Petra and Volcan: Stone giants. A pair of Terranoids living in the depths of Guardon's Spires.

Raphael: Claude's apprentice.

Rauros: The Chief Assassin of the Harad Ghul, an octet of Ankharet's elite goblins.

Raven: A blue-haired student at Jefferson Community College. She is friends with Michelle and hopes to transfer to a university somewhere in California. Her dreams are woven with fantastic people and places, namely Baroness Sharon's companions and the regions of Gaea.

Sharon Redthorne, Baroness and Liege Lady of Coermantyr: An amber-haired troll woman who inherited her Dais from a matrilineal descent. She is ambitious, protective of her region and highly trained in swordplay, archery and armored combat. Sharon possesses a mysterious ruby amulet that she suspects is from a Spatial Plane alien to her home world, Gaea.

Reoren: A merchant lich-troll and amateur magic-user caught with other Gaeans in the Gorgon Plane.

Restadicus, Leader of the Lore Masters: He is a grizened wizard who has become a counselor and advisor to the mercenaries in their quest to defeat Ankharet and Guardon. Restadicus lives with the Council of Mages in Coermantyr Castle.

Rex: An enterprising troll from Wood's End who takes up arms against the Harad Ghul.

Rodnik: Sharon's Sergeant-at-Arms. He grooms the warhorses of the mercenaries. Rodnik is a flaxen-haired troll who helps Bors in setting the nightly camp, cleaning the weapons and keeping watch over the sleeping fighters.

Bjorn Roundtree: An active, middle-aged halfling.

Siegemunde, Director of the Martial Academy: He is an old acquaintance of Restadicus' and has relocated to the Ghastly Fens in an attempt to focus on new magical methods to help combat the goblin and Lykanthros invasions. Siegemunde is bald and wears a silver earring.

Senegoth: An aged troll, scarred from years of battle with stone trolls and goblins. Senegoth lives in a tree fortress in the Garaz Forest. He helped the Baroness in a time of need.

Sigrid: A Sentinel lich-troll woman who assists Siegemunde and is Leif's friend.

Smithforge: An industrious, black-haired seraphim troll from the Plane of Order.

Squidge: Lord Dagon's assistant in the administration of the affairs of the Dagonites.

Taliesin, Liege Lord of Mystic Down: He is ambitious and would have married Sharon. She declined but has agreed to unite with him on a campaign to protect Gaea and eliminate the Summoners and Illusionaries, Ankharet and Guardon.

Themistokles: The Vizier of the Dire Queen. He killed Skjold for the Orb of Paryphax and was himself killed by Leif's experimental sorcery. He summoned the specters, Flotsam, Jetsam and Mayhem who now run free of his holding spell.

Thoth: A Demigod who rules the Plane of Chaos. He is attended by the Drystyx Monks.

Tiamat: A five-headed Chaotic Behemoth Dragon.

The Watcher: An ancient halfling long caught in Guardon's Spires. He functions as the Daemon King's record-keeper and historian. The Watcher has consented to assist Lord Taliesin and his companions in their mission to liberate Gaea.

Thorgrym: The Captain of the Lich Town Guard. He is protective of his region and people.

Trilobite: A stocky mertroll who meets the returning Marlin and Anemone.

Valinor: The eldest of the Qualinesti Elves.

Woodfist: A dryad in the Forest of Mystic Down.

Wotan: A subordinate Lore Master in Coermantyr Castle.

Zolgnath: The firbolg Leader of the Drystyx Monks.

Prologue

Most people live out their lives in steady routines. These include the morning drive of the kids to school, the nine to five shift at the office, the commute home and preparation of the evening meal.

It is in the night that the human mind unravels its sublimated wishes. In the depths of sleep the brain continues to function. The Realm of Gaea is strengthened when the dream weavers roam the dimension of the unconscious.

Some dream weavers become groves and are satisfied to sense the coming and going of the personifications of others. Many weavers travel the windswept Forests of Gaea as troll folk and goblins.

The Dharmic Equilibrium shifts constantly as dreamers around the world are affected by wars and famines, prosperity and celebrations.

Somewhere in California a woman dreams after a day of classes at the prestigious Jefferson Community College. Her name is Raven. But when she sleeps she is Sharon Redthorne, a Baroness who fiercely defends the troll folk of her land, Coermantyr.

Coermantyr is a thriving region within the changing Realm of Gaea. Although Gypsies and minstrels travel from one region to the next, most Denizens of Gaea reside in one place and make their homes merry.

As Sharon, Raven is able to run free. She relies on her longbow and sword to drive away intrusive marauders, namely the Lykanthros and their goblin cohorts. The wolf-like creatures seek supplemental food sources at the behest of the Dire Queen of Arkadia, Ankharet.

The last few lunar cycles have seen the proliferating Lykanthros packs exhaust the existing caches of wild prey in the untamed wilderness of Arkadia. The wolf-beasts are usually satisfied with the occasional boar or turkey. When these staples are unavailable they crave the comparatively easy pickings of cured hams and meats stored in the wattle and daub homes of the villages of Coermantyr and Mystic Down.

The Baroness was a good shot and turned the hungry Lykanthros that appeared in groups of three or four at a time. Her longbow was strong and a few steel-tipped shafts deterred even the most aggressive of beasts.

Chapter One: Sharon and the Ice Goblins

An icy wind blasted through the spindly trees. As Sharon Redthorne patrolled her hunting grove, goblin voices emanated from the Under Earth near the roots of one of the larger oaks. The Baroness of Coermantyr ran across the snowy ground and slipped into the increasing darkness.

She drew close to the massive oak. The troll woman hunched over, feeling for something through the encrusted snow. Sharon paused when the goblin speech ceased and uttered a whispered curse from her cowl. The Baroness fled through the deepening snow.

The Liege Lady was making good progress when she stumbled over a root buried beneath the icy surface. At the same moment in which she hit the snow eleven Ice Goblins leaped from a portal at the base of the oak. They were variously armed and sized.

Sharon struggled to lift herself but faltered. She gasped in frustration. The Ice Goblins unsheathed their swords and wielded their bows and daggers. There were various types: three with red skin, two with green and six with bronze complexions.

The archers shot their arrows through the cold wind. One shaft hit the troll woman squarely and bounced off like an eagle's plume caught in a zephyr. When the arrow pierced the dark cloak, golden sparks flew forth. A reverberating ring of steel upon steel was muffled in the wind.

The Baroness, now on her feet, was shaken. In the dying light she tilted her head back, causing her cowl to fall. There stood revealed the amber locks and smooth features of a troll woman. Sharon skittered into the surrounding woods.



As soon as the troll woman rushed into the safety of the trees a pair of goblins ran behind the oak to return with several, glowing lanterns.

Sharon crawled desperately, hoping for someone to aid her in an escape. There was no one, though, and the Ice Goblins closed in upon her. The multicolored humanoids were able trackers.

The troll woman searched for a hiding place. She ran a bit further, stopped and coughed as she found a spot with enough snow for the task. The Baroness dug with all her might and her fingers bled from the jagged rocks hidden beneath the snow. At last the hole was big enough. The Liege Lady crawled in and covered herself.

The goblins advanced to within two hundred paces of Sharon's hiding place when she succeeded in burying herself entirely. In a few moments, two goblins stood upon the troll woman's makeshift shelter.

Below the surface of the snow the Liege Lady thought about the goblins hunting her. She was supposed to be the one doing the hunting. Her air supply began to run out when she heard the angry voices of the goblins from above.

With her last breath the Baroness recalled the items her Key Mage, Gilead, had given her. They were the troll-made Orbs of Falstaff, providing the gifts of animal sense, temporary invisibility, fire being, poly-morph self and water being. Sharon felt as if her lungs would burst for want of air, but kept herself in check. She reached to her waist pack and closed her numbing fingers around one of the orbs. She couldn't tell which orb it was. Her only hope was that it would get her out of her predicament.

Suddenly, she was aware of life around her. Most of the living things rested in a dormant state. Yet, somehow, she sensed a different presence close to her. She asserted her last bit of strength, wriggling through the snow toward this presence. Just before she blacked out Sharon felt the snow under her give way. Something firmly grasped her arm.

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The warm hearth in the main room of The Wolf's Fang Inn had a cheerful ambiance. Gilead, the Proprietor and Key Mage of Coermantyr, was about to close up for the night. Amid the lingering crowd he overheard tales. The patrons jested about giant muskrats that lived deep under the snow and devoured unsuspecting travelers. They recalled encounters with Ice Goblins that they credited with cunning, skill at tracking and ruthlessness in battle.

Just as Gilead was throwing out the revelers, one of the last trolls slurred, "I gave my good will to Sharon as she left on an adventure early this morning."

"Are you sure it was the Baroness?" Gilead asked.

"Of course it was. Don't you trust me?" answered the inebriated town troll.

"No," the middle-aged troll replied. "Which way do you remember she went?"

"She headed west to the Garaz Forest. You know, where Baago told everyone he saw those goblins roaming around last week."

Gilead thanked the troll and hurriedly pressed a gold piece into his hand. He rushed into the night, calling for Max, the stable hand, to fetch his swiftest steed with his finest bow and blade fastened to the saddle.

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Sharon awoke in a warm, dark place. She felt strangely serene, at first thinking she was in Coermantyr. There was a pressing stiffness in her chest and she couldn't draw breath without coughing painfully. The troll woman heard a stirring near her

and felt something warm and rough brush her forehead. The Liege Lady sat up quickly.

Then the troll woman remembered the Ice Goblins, the snow and the cold. She realized that one of the five orbs had taken effect.

The Baroness tried to deduce which of the orbs she had chosen. It couldn't have been that with the gift of temporary invisibility for cold can bite flesh unseen. It couldn't have been fire being for she would've drowned in the melting snow. It couldn't have been water being for she would have frozen; and, it couldn't have been polymorph self for she hadn't had any time to think before she blacked out.

Only one orb remained as a possibility. It must have been the remaining orb, that with the gift of animal sense. An intelligent forest animal who answered her call had rescued Sharon.

The Liege Lady felt a presence nearby and perceived what the Entity was hearing, seeing and thinking. She sensed the coolness of a flowing river and saw a bright, golden sun. Reeds and willows bowed in the wind. Near her were the homes of many creatures. Then the Baroness was herself again and knew she was with friends.

Out of the corner of her eye the troll woman glimpsed a red glow. As she turned to locate its source her gaze fixed on a wall of earth. Then she spotted a furry figure as it ran across the light of a lamp.

The red light burst into brightness and Sharon saw she was in a cave. In front of the only apparent way out was a strange creature. The troll woman thought it to be a cross between a large muskrat and a badger.

She reached for her sword, but it was gone. Before panic set in the creature spoke and, surprisingly, she understood its words.

The anthromorph said, "Do not be alarmed. I am a giant muskrat. My name is Dar'ghaz. You crawled out of a mound of snow that fell from the roof of my cave. I healed your injuries but you will be stiff. We haven't seen one of your kin for many years. Our Grand Rat would like to speak with you. Please, follow me."

Curious more than scared, the Baroness followed the giant muskrat through twisting tunnels. They passed the entrances to passages on their right and left. She heard voices singing far in the darkness. For a time they moved downward into the Under Earth. Then the roof of the tunnel disappeared. The walls of the passage leapt away from each other and became carved stone.

In the center of this hall was a murmuring crowd of similar furry creatures. When they spied the troll woman, however, they scurried into dark corners in the distance. This left an old, gray muskrat sitting on a stone Dais.

He grunted, "Are you she that summoned Dar'ghaz with the Old Magic?"

Sharon replied, "My Key Mage gave me five orbs of power."

Cries emerged from the dark corners.

"Falstaff! Falstaff!"

The gray muskrat was still for a moment. His eyes glazed over as he remembered days when rivers were young and trees were alive.

He said, "How was it that you were in our wood? I heard there was a band of Ice Goblins nearby."

The troll woman answered, "My parents were killed by goblins in the war. I came to avenge them. But, my luck turned and the Ice Goblins ambushed me. I was badly wounded. My only chance was to hide in the snow."

"We know of your injuries," said the old rat. "Your rib was bruised when Dar'ghaz found you."

The Muskrat Leader continued, "I remember a stronghold built by your people during a war in ages past. It lies in the heart of the wood. You will find sanctuary there and many weapons. We have received word from other friends of the forest that the eleven goblins are close on your trail.

"You are now an hour's march from the stronghold. If your luck goes well you may once again see Coermantyr Castle. Remember, you have eleven desperate trackers on your trail and they know that if you ever reach home alive their dooms are sealed."

"Thank you, Grand Muskrat," replied Sharon. "I vow if I reach home my folk will repay you well!"

"Regretfully that must never happen. The goblins have hunted my brethren for many generations. This secret of the forest must be kept safe at all costs."

"But, then why did you rescue me? Why is it we address one another as friends?" asked the Baroness.

"The answer is in the orbs," the Muskrat Leader answered.

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Gilead rode for hours. He stooped over his warhorse, looking for signs on the ground. He relied on the light of the moons and stars to guide him. The crunching of his warhorse's hooves was the only sound in the stillness of the early morning forest.

The Key Mage of Coermantyr continued to follow his Lady's trail through the silver fingers of the sleeping trees.

Sharon's tracks came to a stop. The troll was in a small clearing. Directly in front of him was a large oak. Many smaller tracks curved around the tree and doubled back. Leading away from the looping tracks were several more identical markings. Before following these footprints Gilead inspected the area behind the oak.

Circling around, he found a door, about four feet high and three feet wide. It was ajar. The Key Mage silently drew his sword and looked inside.

Bending through the low door, Gilead crouched inside a room carved out of the tree. There was an opening in the floor with a ladder going down. He approached the ladder cautiously. The Key Mage descended a short distance when his feet touched the ground. He was in a room with a table at its center. There were rows of shelves covered with tools and jars.

The troll saw little of use but noted that several trunks around the room had been hurriedly flung open and rummaged through.

The Key Mage of Coermantyr realized that the place was a repository for goblins and that Sharon had run into trouble there. Taking one last look around, the troll climbed back up the ladder. Once outside the tree he followed the trail of the goblins and the staggering of a troll woman leading into the wood.

Gilead found a place where the footprints abruptly stopped in a pile of snow. Reluctantly he dug, afraid of what he might find.

Then he smelled the odor of a creature the troll vowed never to approach again. He realized who had found the troll woman. Gilead knew of another entrance to the creatures' dwelling places. The Key Mage feared that not only was the Baroness being stalked by Ice Goblins but that she had been informed of the old fortress. Sharon's arrival there must be avoided at all costs.

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The Baroness of Coermantyr bade the muskrats farewell and stepped out into the light. The briars and bushes clenched tightly behind her. She was in an unfamiliar part of the wood. There was no more snow and the trees were the waving, green ash, spruce and elm of summer. Sharon stood at the bottom of a steep hill covered with impassable thorns and hedges. Before her was a glade bordered by the trees.

The Baroness recalled the advice of the Muskrat Leader and followed the path of the sun. It was dark when she saw the ancient battle haven. The huge tree formed a silhouette before the setting sun. This was the heart of the Garaz Forest. High in its

branches generations of birds thrived. The fields around it were scarred with ages of arcane combat.

The troll woman was taken aback. This tree had elaborate structure. During every siege it was hollowed out and built taller. For centuries skillful artisans dedicated their lives to this fortress. She passed through the main gate. Sharon marveled at the bas-reliefs in the walls. The etchings climbed up into the creaking darkness.

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Grondol and his ten comrades followed the troll woman's tracks for nearly a day. They stalked her through snow, cold and thicket. It was nearing dusk when the forest opened to a field and a giant tree. The goblins sensed that their prey was prowling around inside somewhere.

The band of Ice Goblins piled brushwood in a perimeter around the tree. This wood, once ignited, would provide light for the marksmen and created a barrier against a charge. Around the main fire Grondol's nephew, Rundig, and his comrade, Ulmo, sharpened axes. It was only a matter of time. They would wait until dark.

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Sharon walked for a while. The sole source of light was from an opening above. Torches ignited alongside her, illuminating a long hallway. As she neared the end she saw that it opened into a huge room. There sat a large troll, looking directly at her.

The troll woman spoke, "I am Sharon Redthorne, Baroness of Coermantyr. I am pursued by eleven goblins. I've been told I might find refuge here and gain aid in battle."

The troll answered, "Call me Senegoth. I understand your predicament. I'll help you fight these goblins. They are outside. We have an advantage, however, for I know this tree well. It has many surprises. I also have a plentiful store of weapons. Come, we must hurry. We have much work to do!"

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Sharon and Senegoth waited at their posts. Among their battle preparations they found uses for the four remaining orbs.

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Gilead rode tirelessly. He scooped a handful of water from a flowing brook. When he looked up he saw a pillar of smoke stretching above the treetops. Although he was just a few miles away, some of the thickest brush in the woods was between him and Sharon. The Key Mage of Coermantyr doubled his pace.

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Noli and Roli wrapped swabs of cloth around arrowheads and dipped them in an acrid mixture. They lit the fires. Immediately the tree fortress was bathed in an eerie, red glow. The goblins charged. It was about one hundred yards between the tree and the fires. Before the humanoids came any closer Senegoth raised his longbow and fired a shot that arched in the air.

As it hit the ground directly in front of the goblins, Grondol, the eldest, saw that the usual, iron head had been replaced by a glowing, crimson sphere. The burst of an explosion blinded the wiry humanoids. Two goblins were burned to a crisp in the preternatural fire and a third was thrown hard to the earth, never to rise again.

The goblins, angered by the deaths of their kin, ran in frenzy toward the gate. There they found the orb of water being. It lay just a few inches under the ground's surface in a sack of pressure-reactive spark dust. All the goblins heard was a faint click before four of them were swept away in a torrential flood.

Unleashing a battle cry, Sharon and Senegoth simultaneously leaped from the tree. Mid-way through their fall the Baroness transformed into a were-bear while Senegoth disappeared completely.

Standing bewildered, one unlucky goblin found his shoulder cut while another felt a dagger in his back. The latter goblin managed to turn and thrust his own blade into Senegoth's chest.

Sharon surged in were-bear form at the last two goblins. The she-bear knocked them out of consciousness.

Gilead galloped into the battle scene.

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Grondol awoke with his head burning with pain. In the stillness he thought he was the only survivor of the battle. He walked over to Rundig, his dead nephew, to mourn him. Then he saw other living people.

Standing over the body of the big troll was a pair of troll folk, mourning their ally.

Gilead sensed the goblin watching him and spun around, his eyes burning with rage and his sword drawn. The Ice Goblin wielded his axe and growled like a wild animal. Gilead and Sharon looked at Senegoth. Grondol stared down at Rundig. The enemies gave each other a final look of sadness and resignation. They each sheathed their weapons and picked up their slain kinsmen. They headed in opposite directions.

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Upon her return to the safety of The Wolf's Fang Inn Sharon visited with the residents of Coermantyr. Over mugs of ale they discussed the latest happenings around Gaea. When not assailed by the Lykanthros, the trolls and troll women worked in varying trades. These skills ranged from weapons craftsmanship to the fabrication of fine cloths and regalia to be bartered with visiting Gypsies and pilgrims.

Gilead brought the Baroness a pan of scones, still steaming from the oven.

"What news, Gilead?"

Sharon tasted her supper.

"Not much beyond the usual business, Milady. There are visitors talking among themselves in the far corner. They've been here for some time and have something afoot. You should go speak with them and see if they have need of your assistance."

The Innkeeper of The Wolf's Fang was a sturdy troll with a ruddy face and a pocketed leather apron that he wore over his homespun tunic and breeches. His boots and belt were made of tanned and cured wolf hide.

Sharon glanced casually at the visitors in question. They were a secretive bunch as they chatted with each other in the dim candlelight of the quietest section of the tavern. She tossed back her braided, amber hair and pulled her buttoned vest about her as she ambled over to the party of newcomers.

There were three people at the table. They sipped mugs of ale drawn from a pitcher set next to the candle. Upon closer inspection, one of them was a troll whose face was partially obscured by a dark cowl. He looked at the Liege Lady as she extended her hand to him in greeting.

"Hello, I am Sharon Redthorne, Baroness of Coermantyr. What brings you folks to town?"

"Goblins, unfortunately," said the burly troll.

He took the troll woman's hand and shook it robustly.

"I am Lord Taliesin, of Mystic Down. My lich-troll friend here is Leif. He hails from the Ghastly Fens and is a member of the scrupulous order of magic users known as the Sentinels. Our halfling scout is Bjorn Roundtree. We need help. We happened upon a cave on our way here from my region. At first I took it to be a fine place to provide us with shelter during the cold night."

"I discovered we were not the first band of visitors to make use of the location," Taliesin continued. "As we settled before a cook-fire I saw piles of skeletal remains scattered around the floor of the cave. A few of the bones and rags contained jewelry and gold upon further investigation. The chamber extends deep into the

Under Earth. I wanted to travel inward to inspect the full extent of the cavern's riches. We chose to press on to Coermantyr, though. There were large, strange-looking caterpillars building silk nests in notches of rock. At times I heard pattering foot falls deep in the darkness."

Lord Taliesin paused to take a sip from his mug of ale before he continued.

"If you are willing to take your bow into our employ, we will gladly share with you what values we encounter in the depths of the cave."

"Perhaps your Innkeeper friend would care to join us on our enterprise," said Bjorn.

The halfling's green eyes shone with a palpable eagerness.

"I'm sure he'll be glad to accompany us," answered Sharon.

As if on cue, Gilead approached the table with a platter of hearth bread and a fresh pitcher of ale.

"What business interests Milady with you fine fellows?" the Key Mage asked.

"These gentlemen wish for me to join them on a treasure hunt. They were just saying that they thought you'd make an excellent team member," said the troll woman.

"Aye, and I'm sure there'll be goblins involved," Gilead scoffed. "I'll join your band, for what it's worth. My assistant, Max, will mind The Wolf's Fang in my absence. Whenever the Baroness sets off on risky missions of this nature I like to escort her. I'm a protective troll at heart. I'm handy with a short sword, too," Gilead chuckled.

The group of adventurers left for the mysterious cavern first thing in the morning. They marched quickly through the wilderness outside of Coermantyr. Although the untamed regions of Gaea were the homes for many hostile creatures, the travelers reached the mouth of the cave without interception.

Sharon saw several gatherings of old bones scattered within the cave's entrance. There were also the ashy remains of the original campfire left by Lord Taliesin and his acquaintances.

As they traversed inward they saw the large caterpillars. Several of them had sealed themselves in silk cocoons. A few had metamorphosed and arisen as large, shimmering, purple and blue butterflies. They clung to the walls of the cavern and flapped their wings so they would dry.

The cave extended into the depths of the Under Earth. Sharon and her friends heard the trickling of subterranean rivulets flowing through the rocks.

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