

kublacon

This was my first time attending this young convention held over Memorial Day Weekend in Oakland. There was a good selection of non-d20 games, and I played in 5(!) games¹, so I was very exhausted at the end of it all. With all the games, I had little down time but I still afforded time in the afternoon for naps between games.

The first game of the convention, besides the throw-away LARP on Friday night, was a d20 Cthulhu game on Saturday morning. With our 3rd level characters, it was not much different that BRP Cthulhu (which I played that night). I would not be against playing d20 Cthulhu, but I see no reason for me to buy it.

Sunday morning, I ran a Silver Age Sentinels game using the playtest rules released on Pyramid. This was my first time with the system, but it was the same adventure I ran at DunDraCon using BESM. I have no major complaints about the system, but see my comments to Brian Rogers for specifics.

I am encouraged enough to continue on my original goal of making it an ongoing series. The introduction to the setting, as developed by Matt Helms and I, is on my web site. It treats superheroes by drawing parallels to celebrity athletes. The “scenario” includes a commercial shoot, a sponsor meeting, and community service at an elementary school. I will be running a new adventure (same characters and setting, new challenges) for ConQuest over Labor Day.

Sunday night was for Unknown Armies. The scenario revolved around a search for a mafia don who disappeared while under police surveillance(!). The game was exceptionally fun thanks to the two players playing mob heavies. The other PCs were police detectives with various connections to the mob. Yet again, I picked the one PC with the magical ability, but it seemed superfluous to the scenario and could very well have been left out. Besides, UA magic fails to grab me—it just comes across as too mechanical and, dare I say, mundane.

I concluded the convention on Monday with a Fantasy Hero game that helped solidify my dislike of the system. It is not a bad system and it

¹ Most lasting 6-8 hours each and not the wimpy 3^{1/2}hour games of GenCon and Origins.

can be run well, but there is just far more mechanical detail than I care about. The scenario was a standard “go and dethrone the bad guy” fantasy adventure done as amusing rip on *Little Shop of Horrors*.

The dealer’s room and open gaming room shared the same space(!), the former being partitioned off when after hours, which contributed to both being rather uninspiring. Food outside the hotel required a short drive and parking was limited. The parking issue may be addressed when it changes cities to Burlingame next year and I will definitely be there.

comments

#322

robert dushay

There is a reason why hotel staff will not give out guest room numbers, even to people claiming to be relatives.

lee gold

Rebellious teenagers find most things boring unless it fits into their unpredictable tastes. :)

McLuhan’s quote just muddies the waters, I think. Television is cool because it has more interaction, participation, and feedback than hot radio or film? I just do not buy it.

avram grumer

Fudge’s trait levels work very well, especially if you can keep things abstracted to “easy” or “difficult” instead of odds and percentages. But some people cannot help but ask, “How often do I succeed at a difficult task?” There is also great debate of what the odds *should* be, leading to countless variations on the dice mechanics.

viktor haag

It is rather ironic that Giovanni has no domain over “meat,” considering his own flesh is dead.

I think the most efficient use of dragon heat-energy would be to inflate air bladders (ditching heavy bones and muscles) and become less dense than air. The base body plan would be jellyfish, not pseudo-lizard.

michael hopcroft

d20’s core mechanic (d20 + skill + stat mod against target number) is solid. This was the key element missing from all other versions of D&D

and it works fine for CoC or any other genre adaptation. I dislike everything else about d20-based games—levels, classes, wonky combat rules, etc. d20 CoC removes classes and simplifies combat, but I agree the idea of level *advancement* does not fit. Still, skills should improve and so long as you keep added feats and hp under control, it works well.

I have concluded that my tastes are so contrary to mainstream gamers² that I should not even try to figure them out. One stated intent of d20 SAS is to allow people to use SAS characters in D&D, and visa-versa. It may be a wise marketing decision, but a terrible artistic one.

richard iorio ii

I see D&D3 Feats as “power-ups” like those featured in computer games. In past editions, the thrill of getting new powers was mostly reserved for spell casters. This nurturing of the inner munchkin (I do not say this to be demeaning) is a large factor in its popularity, I think.

rene a louviere jr

I cannot believe that no one knows how to synthesize Carverex or salagar and they have to resort to hunting. At the very least, they should be able to engineer a laboratory animal to produce the same base compound.

jonathan nicholas

I do not think the dispatcher’s life was “ruined” unless the pictures were distributed publicly. But if that’s how you feel, just have the NPC commit suicide, including a heart-wrenching suicide note. Or if you do not want to be that harsh, have the NPC, now homeless and destitute, confront the PC in a random encounter on the street. Guilt is a powerful tool.

lisa padol

If you grok WaRP but not Fudge, there is nothing anyone can say to change that.

Rolf was brainwashed by a hag with an overdeveloped maternal instinct toward “special” children.

brian rogers

I concur with your comments on the Silver Age Sentinels playtest. I lament the fact it is one step closer to Hero and away from BESM. However, I would still rather play it than Hero.

I did not have trouble with the damage rolls, but having a table on the character sheet helped. No critical hits came up, but I just play those by ear rather than using a damage multiplier.

Here is a quick synopsis of my likes and dislikes about SAS:

The scales used for power progression are inconsistent, unintuitive, and difficult to use (too much page flipping). For example, it irks me that super strength and telekinesis do not use the same progression.

I like the way you can add range or area to a power by buying up those aspects separately instead of using Hero-esque calculations. Unfortunately, some powers like Force Field require these add-ons; otherwise, the power does not work as you might expect.

Some of the powers are wonky. I miss a simple “Insubstantial” power instead of a goofy mix of Alternate Form and Mass Decrease.

Knockback has too great an effect. In my game, I determined knockback by whatever looked good and never applied extra damage because of it.

I like the speed and looseness of play. It approaches the original Marvel game in this respect. All of my players were new to the system and we had no system implementation glitches. Unlike your experience with damage rolls, I did not have a moment when the system seemed to fail or cause a disruption in the game.³ While it is not a Great system, my experience was positive.

GOO’s decision to release a d20 version is perhaps an attempt to wiggle out of the no-man’s land between BESM and Hero.

jonathan wooley

Murphy Rules are supposed to be exaggerations; besides, it is still ludicrous to say someone with a Search of 20 is not be able to detect a trap with DC 21. “I can see a wire, but not a trip wire?” And on the subject of quoting rules, “Finding a nonmagical trap has a DC of at least 20, and the DC is higher if it is well

² Remember, I think of myself as a roleplayer, not a gamer.

³ But then I may have inadvertently glossed over those moments. I may experience problems as I run it more.

hidden.⁴ The way I read this, most (if not all) traps will have a DC of 20 or more.

My DM did not use house rules. He might have applied rules incorrectly, but as a new player, how am I supposed to know?

Using the expert NPC class for PCs is strongly discouraged by the rules, so why should I even try to use it? The lack of skills and useful adventuring abilities would have rendered my character useless in the campaign. I am not big on game balance, but I am not going to shoot myself in the foot. I was not even given Expert as an option, and Rogue was the obvious choice.

While lack of facing rules speeds things up and prevents twinks from “running around to the back” when they logically could not, it ignores the obvious advantage of attacking from the rear, particularly with a missile weapon. The flanking rules try to fix this, but fail. There is no longer any value to being sneaky during the combat when the opposition is not flat-footed and cannot be victim to a sneak attack.

daphne and bertwald

Last we left our heroes, they had a midnight encounter with the Duke and a man in black. Our heroes were charged with delivering a secret message to Olden, about 4 days away, and ordered not to identify themselves with the Duke. They are to be contacted by someone named Germain and may receive further instructions. What secrets have they been entrusted with? Who is that man anyway? Will Daphne ever give Bert some credit?

We join our heroes outside the Duke's chamber....

“Well, I guess we'd better get out gear,” Daphne says. “Meet you by the stables in half an hour.”

Bert heads off to pack up. Bert packs his regular weapons, a change of clothes, the usual. Making sure, of course, that he packs nothing with the Duke's livery or sign on them.

A half-hour or so later, they meet at the stables. The place is deserted, except for sleeping horses.

Daphne makes leaves a note for her dad, telling him to privately ask the Duke where she is Bert says nothing to his dad.

“Do we have a cover story?” Daphne asks.

“I don't know—isn't the planning your department?”

⁴ srdskillsii.rtf (or srbasiccharacterclassesii.rtf), from the WotC web site. This sentence immediately follows the one you quoted me.

She is saddling her horse while they talk. “Just let me know, are you going to be bitchy all the way there and back?”

“Me, bitchy? Hell no, I'll be quiet as a mouse.”

“Well, unfortunately, there's only one reason I can think of why a young man and a young woman would be traveling together.”

“Oh? What's that?”

“On a, ahem, honeymoon.”

Bert hesitates, and glances at her. “What kind of game are you playing now? Waiting for me to say “yeah, sure!” so you can take a nasty dig at me? I can think of all kinds of reasons why we'd be traveling together.”

“I'm just saying, if you can think of something better. ANYTHING better, feel free.”

“Fine! We're brother and sister.”

“OK, why are we going to Olden?”

They have been traveling for an hour or so and are now out of the city and into open farmland. Besides their bickering, all they hear are the horses walking and the insects chirping. It is rather chilly tonight.

“How would our being on our honeymoon explain our being in Olden?”

“Going to visit Aurora's Vale,⁵ of course.” This is a folk tradition. Daphne spends a lot of time with country people and assumes that everybody just knows these things.

“What the hell's Aurora's Vale?”

“You know, the spot with the pond. It's supposed to be good for, ahem, fertility.”

Bert wants to keep being mad, but his heart is starting to beat a bit faster. “Hmm. Well, maybe that is an okay idea, being newly married. Otherwise, we'd have to make up someone we were going to visit or something like that, which might get us in trouble.”

A rabbit hops across the road.⁶

Daphne says, “No, no. I think for once you have an idea with merit. Brother and sister could work.”

Then a fox follows it.⁷

Bert swears to himself. “Yeah, you're right. No one would believe you were a loving wife.”

“On the other hand, I'd hate to actually admit being related to you...”

Bert reaches out, grabs her reins, and pulls both horses to a quick stop. He turns and glares at her.

⁵ Avis: okay, what's the likelihood Bert's heard of this? Me: considering the GM hasn't...? :) Making stuff up is fine by me. Matt: considering I just made it up? Avis: yes, considering you just made it up! :) Me: Just tell me which parts are true (to your characters' knowledge) and which are lies.

⁶ I love it when PCs interact this way, but it can leave me with nothing to do...

⁷ ...except to insert random scenery.

"In the name of Merik, I am sick to death of your snide comments about me. How much do you think I can take?"

They stop on a wide, low wooden bridge spanning a stream. They hear frogs and the flow of water.

"I'm sorry."

He tries to grab for her, intent on kissing her.

Daphne struggles against him.

He works hard to get his lips planted on hers, but he does not want to hurt her.

"Stop it!"

He stops, then looks away, gives a little growl of frustration.

"Does that crap work with all the little giggle-heads at court?"

He kicks his horse to start ahead again. She does the same, and they race down the road, neither wanting the other to be in the lead.

Eventually, Daphne stops and yells, "I'm stopping here."

Bert wheels his horse around. They're both in a lather. "That 'crap' works just fine with any real girl. But don't worry. I won't bother you again, not even if you beg for it."

"Oh, I'm sorry that I am not properly submissive."

He makes his face as inexpressive as possible as he rides back.

"Would the good sir like for me to set up his bedroll now?"

They are in open farmland. No farmhouses nearby that they can see in the dark.

"Massage his feet? Polish his boots?"

Bert ignores her comments. "You're planning on setting up camp here? Fine. Do you want a fire?" He dismounts.

"Why bother? We'll just be leaving in a couple of hours anyway."

Bert tethers his horse to a nearby fence/bush/tree. He takes down his bedroll, climbs in, turns his back, and lays still.

Daphne kneels down next to him and whisper in his ear. "Bert?"

He pretends to sleep.

"You are laying on a pile of cow chips."

Damned if he'll move. Besides, after sleeping in stables so much, he's used to the smell.

She stands. "Just thought I'd let you know." She goes over to her own bedroll and lies down, chuckling to herself.

Eventually, the chill of the dawn and the morning dew wakes them both up.

Bert gets up stiffly, stretches. Daphne lies there for a while, trying not to think about how little sleep she got.

He grooms his horse, and leads it to a nice patch of grass and then goes to duck his head in the

stream. He looks around for a private place to take care of some private business and finds a tree.

Eventually, Daphne gets up and gets everything packed up again on her horse.

He comes back, gets his horse packed up.

"Breakfast?"

"You want the chewy stuff or the crunchy stuff?"

He shrugs. "Whatever."

"Or were you offering to make something?"

"Whatever"

Back on the road, after a few hours they see a couple of donkey carts heading their way. There is a woman at the reins of the first cart. The carts appear to be laden with potatoes, grain, and other vegetables.

The woman nods, "Good day to you," as you pass.

Bert nods back. "Good morning." Daphne smiles at her, but doesn't say anything.

The second donkey's reins are tied to the first cart. A man is walking behind the second cart. He has a walking stick and is eating something. He smiles and tips his hat at the both of you.

Bert nods at him.

As they approach the village, there are a few similar encounters with everyday travelers. By late morning, they arrive into the village Aerden, about three times the size of Brennon. The air is filled with the sound of people buying and making goods. A small livestock auction of pigs and goats is taking place as well.

Bert starts looking for somewhere to buy something to eat, preferably a hot meal. There are a few pubs and a several outdoor vendors as well. He's hungry and buys something at several vendors.

He offers some to Daphne.

"Thank you."

He grunts.

Bert asks one of the vendors, "How far's the next village on the road to Olden?"

"Hmm, a day and a half by road, but you could get there by nightfall if you cut through the hills. Wouldn't recommend it though."

Bert asks "Why not?" as Daphne asks, "Why's that?"

"There are strange lights and goings on up there. Some say it's faerie. Others say it's guarded by nature spirits who despise men ... and women." The vendor adds, "Like to buy a roasted onion?"

Bert speaks up, "Sure!"

"Would you like bread with that?"

"Yeah!"

He gives Bert a roasted onion with a half-loaf of bread. Money exchanges hands.

Stuffing his mouth with the latest food, he turns to Daphne. "Well, what about it? Are we in a hurry? We didn't get much sleep last night. Should we rest, and

then take the shortcut, or just head out and keep plugging along?”

“I’ve had my fill of messing with that which should be left alone for a while,” she answers. “On the other hand, the sooner we get this done, the sooner we get back. If we take the shortcut during the day, it should be fine.”

“Would you like an onion, Miss?”

“No thank you. I’ll just smell his.”

“Roasted onions smell great, don’t they?”

“Yes, sir, they do. They are also good for curing colds.”

Daphne says, “We’d better be taking off, if we’re going to do this shortcut.”

Bert heads for his horse, Daphne right behind him. They mount up. Bert is still munching away on his onion and bread.

After just short of an hour, they see a small road (practically a trail) leading off into the hills.

Daphne asks, “You sure this is a good idea?”

Bert loosens his sword in the scabbard, makes sure his knives are accessible. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen a fairy. Are they even real? Or just stories?”

Daphne bites her lower lip. “Had you ever seen an ogre before?”

“What the hell are nature spirits?” Bert asks.

“You know—dryads, pixies, that whole bit.”

“Well, let’s think about this. How much travel would you say this road gets?”

“This shortcut here?”

“Yep”

Daphne says, “It doesn’t look like anybody’s been on it since the last time it rained.”

“I’m just thinking, if it’s really dangerous to use the shortcut, why is there even a trail?”

“Could be a trick.”

“Hmm... I smell what you’re stepping in. Well, we’ve got time to go the regular way. If we get to Olden too early, we’ll have to wait for our connection anyway.”

“True.”

“The Duke’s business seemed very important.”

“Well, I guess it’s the long way, then. We’ll still reach the village by tomorrow night.”

Bert sighs. “Okay.” He heads out on the regular road, not the shortcut.

By afternoon, the farmland has given way to forest. The road slowly winds around the hills. In late afternoon, Bert sees a wagon up ahead on the side of the road. It is a large, enclosed wagon that seems to be listed a bit to one side

The wagon is in the shade, but appears to be red in color. There are no horses in sight.

Bert says, “I’m going to check out that wagon, see if anyone needs any help.”

Daphne stays back a bit. She glances around, a bit suspicious.

As Bert approaches, he sees a small fire on the side, several yards away from the wagon. There is someone sitting at it.

Bert calls out, “Hello, there. Is everything okay?”

“Hello!” The figure waves. When it stands, he sees it is a middle-aged woman in a long skirt.

“Are you having a problem with your wagon? It seems to be tilted.”

She tilts her head to see around Bert, noticing Daphne. “Oh deary me. The wheel busted on a rock.” She points. Bert can see about 1/5 of the front wheel is broken and missing.

“Where are your horses?”

“Who is that Ma-Ma?” They hear a female voice from behind the wagon.

“The men rode them to town to get help,” the middle-aged woman answers Bert’s question, ignoring the younger. The woman leans again, “Are there just the two of you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hm, I see.”

“Why do you ask?”

Bert sees a young woman, probably in her teens, come from behind the wagon, “Who is... oh.” She has long black hair, dark features, wearing a long patterned skirt.

“Just curious,” the first woman says.⁸ Turning to the teen and giving her a stern look, she says, “Go back into the

Bert looks at Daphne, then back at the woman. “Well, if you’ve got help coming, I suppose we should be on our way.”

“Well, good journey then.”

He heads back to the road, checking to see if Daphne is coming. Bert tells Daphne what was said. “I wonder why she asked how many of us there were?”

“That does seem an odd thing to ask.” Daphne does not remember being passed by anyone since before the trail and certainly not men on horses. “How long had they been stuck there?”

“In fact, it’s making me feel itchy. Like, maybe she’s the lookout or something? Umm, she didn’t exactly say.” Bert adds, “How about if we get off the road for a bit - ride parallel, maybe?”

Daphne sees tracks besides theirs leading back to that village, left sometime today. “They were probably afraid we’re up to something.”

The woman watches the two intently.

“Let’s get out of sight, okay? She’s giving me the creeps.” Bert kicks his horse to get it going faster.

“She probably just thinks you are going to jump her daughter.”

Bert rolls his eyes. Bert has his hand on his sword.

⁸ Our heroes could be bandits for all she knows.

As they pass the wagon, they notice a couple of adult faces behind curtains watching them.

Bert says, "Now I'm really creeped out. Let's get out of here."

"Lead on."

They ride on and after a short while the horrible wagon is out of sight behind them.⁹

Bert kicks his horse harder, heading on toward Olden.

They do not pass any more travelers by the time the sun sets. The sky is mostly obscured by the canopy of trees that line both sides of the road. There are birds and bugs making noise.

Daphne suggests, "Might as well stop here for the night."

"That's a good idea."

They pull to a halt, set up camp just off to one side of the road.

"I'll go look for firewood," and Bert collects a big armload of firewood, and starts a fire. The wood is not the driest, and it smokes a helluva lot before the fire gets going. Bert fans the smoke out of his eyes.

A squirrel scurries up a tree near the camp.

Daphne asks, "You want first watch, or do you want me to?"

"I'll take first watch"

The night sky, what they can see of it, is fairly clear with a few wispy clouds.

"Daph? You awake?"

"Yeah"

"Hungry?"

"Nahhh. I'm still smelling that onion."

"Okay, I'm gonna cook something." Bert digs through his pack for something edible. He finds some bread, cheese, and ale.

After a few hours, well before he planned on waking Daphne, Bertwald hears excessive scurrying a the tree several yards from the camp. It sounds like a squired, but... bigger. Bert reaches out slowly, tries to shake Daphne awake. Then he slowly stands, pulls his sword, and moves cautiously toward the tree.

"Wha?"

Quietly... "I heard a noise. Checking it out, but didn't want you eaten in your sleep if it gets me."

Bert sees two beady red eyes staring at him from a dark shadow. Bert has never seen anything like this before, but the glowing is oddly like a cat's eyes in firelight.

He backs up and bends down to grab a branch out of the fire, hoping it will cast some more light. He waves it in the direction of the eyes.

Daphne sees what he's doing but not what he sees. She draws her knife and rolls into a crouch.

The eyes seem to follow the waving light. Bert can make out a shadow about the size of large cat. It is making a chittering noise.

He takes a step closer.

The eyes blink and rise up about a half-foot. All Bert can see is an all-black mass with red eyes.

"What is it?" Daphne asks.

"I don't know. Eyes like cat, but big."

Daphne sheaths the knife and grabs her bow and an arrow. She starts to circle around to approach the whatever from the side.

He takes another step forward. "Hello there, whatever you are," he says softly.

The eyes disappear from Bert's view. Daphne sees them now, for the first time in the general direction Bert was looking.

The chittering stops momentarily, but then starts up behind Bert.

He starts to spin, catches himself, and turns halfway, so he is facing Daphne, sword arm ready.

Daphne sees the eyes disappear then reappear on the other side of the tree. It is now shadowed by the tree.

"Daph... any idea?"

"Take a run at it—maybe you'll scare it off."

Bert catches movement out the corner of his eye from the other direction, where the last chittering came from. He looks quickly in that direction and sees three pairs of eyes now.

"Daph, I think there's more than one. In fact, there's more than two..."

"Hello?" she addresses their visitor.

"Let's back up toward the fire... get it behind our backs, okay?"

The one Daphne sees moves out onto a branch. Daphne sees a long, thick tail wrapped around the branch and human-like hands gripping the branch. When it turns to face Daphne, she cannot make out any features other than a roughly cat-like outline.

"You ever heard of these?" Bertwald asks.

"Can't say as I have."

It blinks at Daphne.

Daphne asks the thing, "How you doing up there?"

"So... we try to scare them away? Feed them? Run?" Bert notices the three other sets of eyes have clumped together on one branch, about head-high.

He steps closer, peering up. As he approaches, the chittering gets louder. The sound is almost like three slow-moving rattles.

"Wait... didn't I pack a lantern?" He steps back, puts the branch in his sword hand, and roots through his pack, but he realizes it is on the horse. "Crap. It's on the horse. Oh well." He steps back up to the branch, holding his makeshift torch higher again.

The one with Daphne blinks again and then its eyes drop a whole foot, right next to the branch.

⁹ I had to tease them for their "let's run away from the woman with a flat" tactic.

"I won't hurt you... just want to get a look," Bert says. Bert sees all three of these things climbing over each other, before they scatter in the light.

Daphne continues to remain very still and quiet. The one she was watching drops to the ground with hardly a sound.

Bert turns toward Daphne. "These seem to have left, for the moment at least."

No sooner does Bert say that, when the chittering returns from three different trees near him. They are well overhead. Meanwhile, Daphne's starts to approach slowly, with the tail straight up and a curl on the end. The fur is black with ill-defined edges. She senses it is not natural.

When it is about six feet away, she goes down to one knee.

Bert does not move, but is prepared to leap forward if needed.

Daphne hears it start chittering just before it leaps at her. It knocks her over with the force of the leap, hitting her squarely in the chest.

Bert leaps forward just as soon as he sees it start to jump, flailing the firebrand at it.

Daphne feels it grabbing at her neck before it bites down on her throat. It was ignoring the fire until now.

Bert swings his sword at it, parallel to the ground, trying not to hit Daphne. It looks up and Bert can see something in its mouth. Now Bert feels a rage coming over him. Bert stabs the sword right at its eyes, but it falls/rolls backwards and scurries off. The sword plants firmly into the ground, though an inch layer of underbrush.

"Daphne!" He drops to a knee beside her, feels for a pulse in her neck. Daphne is fine. She feels fine. Startled, but fine. "Are you bitten? Where are you hurt?"

Her hand goes for her neck. It stings a bit, in the back of her neck, and this big oaf is over her.

He reaches for her neck, to feel for injuries. All he feels is her smooth, cool skin.

"Damn thing stole my necklace."

He checks the back of her neck. Bert can feel/see where the cord was ripped.

"Do you mind?"

"Thanks to Aurora, you're unwounded. Here's the rest of the leather cord." He takes it off her neck, and shows her.

She stands up and rubs the back of her neck. Then he stands up, offers a hand to help her up. But she got up without his help. He turns back and stokes the fire higher.

Daphne has had worse nips from her father's dogs. In fact, the thing hit with a force of a good-sized dog.

"What the hell was that thing?" Bert asks.

"I don't know, but I'm guessing that it explains the stories of faerie we heard back in that village."

"Dammit, that thing was given to you special! We should go after them and get it back!"

"Yeah, well, be my guest if you can track the little bastards down."

"I mean it." He gives her a steady look, though there's a lot of mad in his eyes.

"Just forget it. Maybe they'll leave us alone now."

"What if that necklace is important?"¹⁰ Maybe something will happen to you if you don't have it." He continues, "Of course, something did just happen to you, even though you did have it..."

Daphne gives him the "are you done yet?" look. He mutters, kicking at things on the ground.

"I'm going back to sleep. Wake me if they come back."

"Crap. If you don't care, I don't either. Hey, it's your turn to watch."

"Already? Fine." She slowly walks over and sits down by the fire.

He curls up next to the fire, and tries to go to sleep.

Daphne's rump, back, and elbows are a bit damp from being on the ground, so the fire feels nice.

Bert says, "Wake me if you get too tired... after a few hours..." before falling asleep.

Once his eyes are safely closed, she rubs her chest where the thing hit her. Daphne is no worse for wear. It did not claw or nip her.

Bert wakes up the horror that Daphne never woke him up. Its morning now—just after dawn. He looks around for her. She is right there, tending the fire.

"Why didn't you wake me? Lie down and get a couple hours more sleep, we don't have to leave yet."

"I just want to get to wherever." She throws her saddlebag back onto the horse.

Bert gets up, stretches, and heads off to find a tree. He looks for the tracks of those things along the way but finds no signs of tracks. Bert is in the middle of a forest and manages to find a tree.

Daphne is all mounted and ready to go by the time he gets back.

"Did you have anything to eat?" Bert asks after getting back.

"I ate before dawn."

He saddles his horse, packs up, and mounts. "Fine. I'll eat as we go." He rummages for some more bread and cheese.

The journey goes by uneventfully. They do not talk much.

Around noon, they come to a Y in the road. The southerly road leads to Olden. The easterly road leads... who knows. However, Olden is to the southeast, so either might work.

Bert waits for Daphne.

"What?"

"Just following you."

¹⁰ It is.

Daphne notices a tree on the easterly road. Hanging from a branch is her pendant. The east road looks less traveled than the Southern road, but it's more than a simple trail. She frowns a little bit and then guides her horse down the east road, stopping at the tree. The strap is tied in a simple knot, but it comes off easily.

Bert follows. "What's up?"

"Somebody is trying to tell us something."

Bert sees the pendant. "I see that. Well."

She re-ties it and slips it around her neck again.

"Hopefully this road will get us to Olden by the end of the day."

"This road? East or south?"

"East."

"But, I thought it was south to Olden?"

"Fine. You take the south road, and I'll take the east road."

Bert hears his teeth grinding. He makes an effort to relax. "East is fine."

"Let's go."

As they ride east, the forest turns ugly. Black fungus clings to the trees. The air feels like a crypt.

Bert's jaw is starting to ache.

The ground is rocky and the going is slow for they do not risk the horses. Though it is mid-afternoon, it feels much later. The road winds through hills, but she guesses it is heading east-southeast.

Daphne's eyes dart back and forth but she doesn't say anything.

Bert draws his sword and lays it across his lap, ready for anything. His eyes are also constantly moving from side to side, and he regularly checks behind them. Bert is riding behind Daphne.

Up ahead, about 50 yards, they see a wide river spanned by rickety bridge. The bridge has no rails and no cover, but is wide enough for two wagons. The river flows roughly south to north and does not appear all that navigable except by rowboat or canoe.

They head toward the bridge, Bert behind Daphne, guarding her back, basically.

As soon as Daphne's horse is on to the bridge, she hears a rumbling, like a roar coming from under the bridge, and the horse rears. Bert tries to move up to grab the reins. Bert grabs the reins, but the horse is trying to walk backwards on two legs.

He tries pulling the horse's head down urging it forward at the same time.

Daphne sees a bent figure climb onto the bridge from below. "Get back on that side!" She calls out.

"Who? What? Where?"

If it stood up straight, it would be eight feet tall. Its skin is covered with the same black fungus as they saw on the trees, before. All its features are spindly and at odd angles, like a spider; it is otherwise very human-like.

Bert feels a cold, clammy shiver run down his spine.

"Back on that side." She gestures to the side of the bridge they came from and tries to guide her horse back to the same.

"Only if you come, too." He tries to back his horse up and bring hers along.

"I'm trying, damn it!"

Once off the bridge, the horses calm.

"My bridge," it says in gravelly and sickly voice. It holds out its gnarled hand and opens it palm-up. The crooked fingers end in black claws with thin strands of fungus hanging from them.

"How much?" Bert asks then looks over at Daphne.

"Has this forest always been like this?"

It tilts its head and snarls, "That one." It points at Daphne... actually Daphne's horse. It limps forward, nearing the center of the bridge, ignoring Daphne's question.

"Well, Daphne? Going to hand over your horse? Or shall we go the other way?"

"A horse seems like a lot. What's on the other side worth getting to?"

"Or do you want me to kill it?" he whispers sarcastically.

It tilts its head and drools. Daphne sees its teeth are black and rotten.

She looks at Bert. "Maybe the two of you should talk."

"The horse is too much for a toll. I could feed you this blade, instead. Or perhaps a coin?"

"Yes, that one, if you want to pass. Cannot eat coin, stooopid man-thing"

Daphne laughs.

"You could buy food with the coin, tree-thing"

"Perhaps eat lady instead?" It has limped closer, a quarter-bridge-length from them.

Bert looks like he's considering the offer. "No, she'd just give you a belly-ache. We need the horses. What else would you take for the toll?"

"Let's just go back." Daphne says, "This thing can starve if it isn't going to talk."

"Fine. Let's go." Whispering, "I wonder what would happen if you made a noise like those things from last night?"

"Perhaps eat anyway." They are close enough to smell the foul odor of stagnant water.

Daphne turn hers horse and start heading back to the fork.

Bert starts backing up. "Who said this was your bridge, anyway?"

Daphne stops at about 100 feet away, takes out an arrow and nocks it.

It walks to the edge of the bridge and sizes Bert up.

She draws the bow and aims at the things chest.

Bert lifts his sword meaningfully off his lap. He sees its arms are like an old, sickly woman—thin and spindly.

Bert is conveniently blocking Daphne's firing line. It sniffs at Bert's horse.

Bert impulsively dismounts, swats the horse away, and runs at the thing, taking a hard swing at the closest leg.

It leaps back, cut by the sword. Bert overran it so it now stands between Bert and Daphne.

Bert swings around and takes another hard cut at the other leg. At the same time, Daphne lets loose an arrow, that hits it in the shoulder.

Black puss oozes from its wounds. It hisses and lunges at Bert.

He strikes again, chopping at arms and legs, but it gets under Bert's swing and grabs him by the waist.

She readies another arrow, but cannot get a shot off with Bert in the way.

Bert tries to jab it in the eyes and hack at the arms, but it is pushing him back toward the edge. The leverage is terrible for Bert to swing. He makes a really major effort, and tries to hack off its head.

Daphne drops the arrow, and spurs her horse forward, drawing her knife.

Bert cuts into its neck as they both tumble backwards off the bridge. The water fills with brackish blood.

Bert stumbles in the water and by the time he is able to stand on the rocks and the current he sees the thing's head floating downstream. The depth of the river is between waist and chest high.

He realizes, all of a sudden, that he's just had his first real sword battle... and he seems to have won!

"Need some help down there?"

A heady glow fills his body, and he stands proudly for a minute. Then he begins striding toward shore. He is soaked to the bone and has sticky blood clinging to his hands. "No, thanks, I don't need any help."

When he gets to shore, he tries to clean the blood off his hands, and then looks for his horse. Daphne has his horse by the reins.

He cleans and sheathes his sword and knife, and strides over to her, making squishing noises as he walks.

"You OK?"

"Yep, fine." He vaults up into his saddle, then gestures to the bridge. "After you"

"Good. We've got to keep moving if we're going to make Olden." She adds, "And next time... don't get in my way." She leads them over the bridge.

Bert hears his teeth grinding again.

They ride down the road, away from the bridge, as evening comes. The forest is still creepy, but they are moving away from the creepy area.

Bert is drying out. After the fight, he did not appear to be bleeding anywhere. He did not feel any pain, but now that he is riding, there is a twinge in his

back. He shifts in the saddle, trying to get comfortable.

Daphne figures out this road twists back the right way to get to Olden. Just as it is starting to get dark, they see lights, as from a village, up ahead.

Bert cannot seem to get comfortable. He reaches around himself, trying to feel where it hurts and finds some rips in his clothes. "Daphne, can you wait a minute?"

"Something wrong?"

"I don't know. My back's hurting. Can you see if there's something wrong?"

There are noticeable rip marks in the jerkin from when the thing grabbed him. She tells him to, and he gingerly takes off both the jerkin and shirt. It stings as it comes off. He grits his teeth and keeps quiet.

Daphne sees five cuts, three on the left side and two on the right, near his kidneys. They don't look serious, but they are deep

"So what is it? You're awfully quiet."

"Looks like that thing had claws."

"Claw marks? Are they bleeding?"

They are not bleeding, but in this light it is hard to see much detail.

"Maybe there'll be a healer in the village." Bert says, "Let's get going, before it gets any darker."

"I don't think it's too bad. You're right, though, we should get to town before it gets too dark."

Bert nudges his horse moving again. He shrugs back into his shirt and jerkin.

As they move forward, they see a few houses far off the road. The village itself is only a few buildings around a wide spot in the road. They see nothing that looks like an inn, but there are lights in the houses.

Daphne suggests, "I guess we just try one."

"Okay, go ahead."

"Although you should probably put your shirt back on first."

"I already did."

They spot the only two-story building. There are lights coming from the upper floor and maybe a candle on the lower floor. Daphne knocks on the front door

"What?" calls a male voice. They see a shadow upstairs.

"Two travelers, sir." Daphne answers, "Slightly lost."

"Oh, ... one moment."

After a few moments they see a curtain being drawn back on a window next to the door. They see a middle-aged, male face, staring, looking them over.

"Smile," Bert whispers.

Daphne smiles at him.

The man asks, "Which way did you come from?"

"We came from the, uhh, bridge back yonder."

"Impossible. No one comes from that way."

"Well, my errrrr..." she looks at Bert

"Hired hand," Bert says.

“...my hired hand had a run in with a troll of some sort. Threw it right off the bridge, he did.”

“REALLY?” The door opens, “come in, come in!”

Bert tries to look humble. He waits for Daphne to go in first.

She looks at Bert. “Go in, go in.”

“No, mistress, after you.”

“You really dispatched the troll?” their host asks.

Daphne goes in first.

“He looked pretty dead floating down the river.”

The man is medium build, maybe a little stooped. He is balding and is wearing a simple robe.

“Yes, but he was apparently somewhat injured by the beast. Might you have any goldenwort around?”

Bert is surprised that Daphne remembered.

As they come in, he closes the door.

“Goldenwort?”

Bert looks around. The place looks humble, but very roomy. There is a large living area with a large, round table cut from a single cross-section of a large tree. There are simple, rough wooden chairs around the edges of the room

“An herb with a golden flower,” Daphne says. “It’s usually found in the undergrowth of a deciduous forest.”

Bert shifts his shoulders uncomfortably.

“What kind of wound does this man have?” He turns Bert around looking him up and down.

Daphne points to his lower back. “Some claw marks, down around here.”

“Pull up your jerkin, young man.”

“You heard him, boy.” Daphne orders, smirking to herself. “Get moving.” Bert pulls up on the back of his jerkin and shirt and grits his teeth.

“Could you please light some lamps, dear?”

“But of course, Master...?”

“Erdin and do no need to call me Master, child.”

Daphne lights some lamps while Erdin bends down to look at Bert’s back.

“What?”

“What is it?” She asks.

“I don’t know yet.” To Daphne, he looks concerned.

Bert’s heart starts thumping.

“Yet?” She asks.

“Can you lie down ... on this table?”

Bert pales visibly. “On the table? Should I... take off my shirt first?”

“Yes, please.” He grabs a lamp from Daphne and gets really close to the wound.

Bert takes off the jerkin and shirt, and gets on the table. Daphne looks on with interest

“There is some goldenwort on the shelves in the next room, please get some.” She does.

Erdin pokes Bert around the edges of the wound and it feels like he is poking him with hot irons

The next room looks like a small apothecary with small clay jars labeled and organized. Finding the goldenwort is easy.

Bert is wrestling with trying to keep a brave face and the fears of his first wound in battle.

Daphne returns. “Here you go.” He takes the jar from Daphne.

Taking a pinch of the herb, he barely sprinkles some on a cut. Bert cannot help but cringe in agony as the herb reacts and bubbles. Bert grits his teeth and balls his fist, trying not to let a sound out.

Erdin sighs. “I am sorry, lad.”

“That’s OK. He’s tough.”

“Tis a great thing you did, dispatching the troll, but you are infected with its evil.”

Bert gets a little paler. “Can... can you get it out?”

“There is a miasma in the wound. Getting it out will be tough.”

Daphne asks, “How tough?”

Bert asks, “What do I have to do?”

“I will have to consult my books ...and pray. Right now, try to get some rest.”

Bert sits up, pulls on his shirt. He looks pale.

Daphne puts her hand on his shoulder.

Erdin adds, “I suggest you pray as well.”

“Thank you for your help, sir. I take it we are in the house of a healer?”

“Well, I am a healer of sorts... closest thing to a healer outside Olden, anyway.”

Daphne says, “That’s a pretty impressive collection you have for someone who isn’t in the trade.”

“I am an ... herbalist. Healing is only a subset of my craft.”

Bert asks, “Do you have a stable or somewhere I can put the horses?”

“No, I am sorry, lad.” There is a knock at the door. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Bert turns to Daphne. “I’m going to check the horses.”

“You lie down. I’ll take care of it.”

Erdin is having a conversation with a man out front, explaining about “the young man killed the bridge troll.” The other man looks very excited and rushes off.

“No, I have to do something. I can’t just lie down.”

“Just lie down.”

“Where?”

“On the table, on the floor. I don’t care.”

Bert looks at her. Then he goes over to the fire, and lies down near it, to one side. He is scared, but it makes him feel good to know the villagers are so excited about the troll being dead.

Daphne takes the horses to the back of the house and finds a tree to tie them to. When she gets back, there is a small crowd collected in front of the house.

“There’s one of them!”

“Did he really kill it?”

"Yes, he did."

"Praise Remul! Thanks Aurora."

"Now, if you will excuse me, I need to attend to my, errrrr ahh, farmhand."

"He is hurt, though?"

"Apparently, a little, yes." They look both elated and concerned.

Bert cannot sleep. He tries getting into a comfortable position in a chair.

Erdin says, "No, please, come upstairs. I have a spare bed." He leads Bert upstairs. Bert follows gratefully.

Daphne says to the crowd out front, "So, if you excuse me then." Daphne tries to squeeze by them into the house. Several reach out to shake her hand. She shakes, then goes inside.

When she gets inside, there is no sign of Bert or the other guy. "Hello?"

"We were upstairs, dear." He says on his way downstairs.

"How is he?"

"Resting."

"Come," he motions toward the other room with all the herbs and Daphne goes. He says in hushed tones, "This is only the beginning. Eventually, the miasma will spread throughout his body. He will eventually become that thing which he killed."

Bert spends a while offering up a prayer to Aurora. It is a pathetic little prayer, but at least it is silent.

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"I am sure there is, but I do not know what.... yet."

He adds with a smirk, "Do you care for him? Beyond being a sturdy farm hand?"

"He does the work of two men and an ox."

"I'm sure," he says dryly. "How is it that you came by this road?"

Daphne and Bert hear some people singing outside. It seems to be a hymn of some sort. Bert falls asleep to the voices, dreaming his mother is singing him to sleep.

"We got lost. We were heading for Olden, and apparently took a wrong turn."

"Why were you heading to Olden?"

"An errand of a personal nature."

"I see. Well, I must be to bed. Make yourself comfortable down here. I hope to have an answer by morning."

"We're no going to wake up to him being a troll, are we?"

"Oh no. The whole process will take a couple moons. It will be very painful."

"Is that good news or bad news?"

"That's for you to decide," he says as he goes upstairs.

Daphne mutters to herself. Something about the stupid bastard just getting out of the way. She lies down and tries to get some rest.

Bert has a very restless sleep. He keeps dreaming about the fight with the troll.

Daphne does too, but only because she couldn't get comfortable.

Come morning, Daphne goes upstairs and checks on Bert. "How's it going?"

He slowly sits up. Then slowly stands up. "Okay, I guess." All of his muscles are stiff, and his back itches like hell—like a rash.

"I think you should stay here while I press on ahead to Olden."

He tries doing some stretches, to limber up. "What? No, absolutely not." The stretching does not seem to help much.

"Look, we're real close right now. You just need to rest. I'd be back in two days. Three, tops."

"Did that guy tell you anything else last night?"

"Yes."

"What did he say, dammit!?"

"Unless we find a cure, you're going to turn into one of those things that you killed. Probably." Bert turns very pale now. "That's why I think you should stay here."

"When? How long?"

"It'll be a while."

"Olden's a lot bigger place, isn't it? Won't it be easier to find a healer there? Besides, that contact may need both of us for the Duke's business."

"And what, pray tell, are you going to be able to do in your condition?"

"I can still move, can't I? I could at least get between you and something." He's sarcastic now.

"Yeah, look where that got us last time."

"Everyone else here thinks that was a pretty good thing! And you're safe. That's all that's important, right?"

"We should find this Erdin guy first. Maybe he figured something out."

"Fine, we can talk to him first. But I'm not staying behind."

"We'll see."

"Unless you're afraid of me."

The front door opens. It is Erdin. He is wearing brown robes made of very coarse fabric. Around his neck is a necklace made from vines. When he walks in, he hangs the necklace on the back of the door.

Daphne greets him. "Morning."

Turning, he says, "Oh, good morning. Glad you see you up and about."

"Good morning, sir."

"How are you feeling, lad?" Erdin goes into the other room and begins mixing a potion of some sort.

"Okay. Though I guess that might not last?"

Erdin gives Daphne a sideways glance.

"Is that true?"

He grabs a kettle off the fire and pours it into a ceramic mug. "Yes."

"I guess that's why no one killed the troll before, eh?"

"No, others had tried." He hands Bert the small mug. "Here, drink this." He pours another.

Bert takes it. "Can I ask what it is?" He holds it up, sniffs.

"It's tea. Thought you might like some. What about you, dear?"

"If I'd know what it could do, I'd have stayed further away." Bert takes a sip. It smelled better than it tastes. Bert drinks it anyway, slowly. The warmth feels good.

"You killed the last one who succeeded in killing it."

"Some tea would be wonderful, thank you," Daphne answers.

"It would have made no difference. It can only be killed with iron... or steel."

"Has anyone survived killing a troll?"

"What you ... and I ... have been calling a troll isn't really a troll."

"What is it, then?"

"You know what a dryad or a nyad is?"

"A forest spirit bound to a particular tree."

He continues, "This is the evil, twisted, dark reflection of those."

"I thought it looked kinda like a tree..."

"Instead, this was bound to a dead tree. A wooden bridge in this case. It is not a natural creature." He adds, "And that is why I cannot help you any further."

Daphne asks, "What if the bridge was destroyed?"

"If you destroy a tree, the dryad inside is destroyed."

"Is there anyone who can help?"

"Go to Olden. Seek out a priest of Aurora. And pray. Or we can end this right now."

"End it now? What do you mean?"

"I can mix a tea that would... end it."

Bert probably has never been as pale as he is now without being unconscious. He stands, straightens up. "No, I will have more faith in Aurora than that."

"Will this road out front lead us to Olden?"

"Absolutely. It has been our only road out of the village."

"How long does it take?" Daphne asks.

"May your faith prove stronger than this evil," he says to Bertwald.

"It will have to be."

"If you leave now, you should arrive by nightfall."

Daphne says, "I guess we'd better get going, then."

"I will prepare something for you."

Bert nods. He bows his head to Erdin.

"While I cannot cure this thing, I can make something that will help with the pain." After about 15

minutes, he hands Bert a clay jar. "Make a tea out of this."

"Thank you," Bert says with unexpected dignity.

"It will sooth the mind."

"Will I be... any danger to Da... umm... Mistress Daphne?"

"Not yet."

"Thank you again." He takes the jar and tucks it into his pack. "Mistress, shall we get under way?"

"Yes, thank you for your hospitality and ministrations."

"Remul thanks you and wishes you godspeed."

"Remul?"

"The guardian of these woods. As the miasma is to his body, so is this thing to Remul."

"With Aurora's light, we can solve both."

"Let us pray so," Erdin says.

Bert heads for the door. Outside, there are several people standing, waiting. They are holding candles nearly exhausted and look like they had been there all night. "Thank you."

Bert is startled to see them. A woman walks up to Bert, "My husband thanks you."

He blushes. "Your husband?"

Daphne elbows him in the arm.

"Yes, his soul can now rest."

"Oh. I'm ... so sorry."

Daphne says, "Yes, Remul receive him. Now we must be off."

"No, he was lost long ago, but you have released him."

"I see. My sorrow, then, is for your earlier loss."

He bows to her.

She takes his hand and pulls it up to her cheek. Then she lets go and steps back.

He blushes again, and follows Daphne to the horses.

Out back, The horses are doing fine. Someone left applies scattered at their feet.

The ride out of the village and on toward Olden is long and hard.

Bert's somewhat distracted, though he's trying to act cool. Daphne notices that Bert seems more hunched in the saddle at times.

She sets as rapid of a pace as he seems to be able to handle while he goes as fast as he can without leaving her behind. Bert finds that the faster he tries to ride, the more his back hurts, but he grits his teeth.

After a very, very long, quiet day, they pass some outlying farmhouses near dusk. They catch sight of Olden in the distance. It is a fairly large non-walled city.

Up head, they see an odd little house on the side of the road.

Bert looks over at Daphne. "Where are we supposed to meet the contact?"

There appears to be some sort of barrier blocking the road right next to the house.

"I have no idea," she answers.

Bertwald recognizes the house as a tollbooth. There is a light inside, maybe one lantern. The gate is really just a sawhorse-like thing blocking the road. Bert rides up to the gate, and looks around for a bell or horn.

Daphne asks, "What are you stopping for?"

"I think this is a toll booth. We'll need to pay the keeper."

A lanky woman carrying a pike steps out of the building. She is wearing some sort of military uniform, but they do not recognize the symbol or the colors. She's probably 6 feet tall and the pike is nearly twice that.

"What do you mean pay the keeper?" Daphne asks.

"Hello, are you the toll keeper?"

"Evening, folks," the woman says. "No tolls, but I do need to ask your business in Olden." She smiles.

"We've come to seek aid from the temple of Aurora," Daphne states.

"Both of you?" She stares down both of them, checking them out and sizing them up.

Bert is having a hard time sitting up straight.

"My friend is afflicted with an ailment, and we have been referred here."

"Very well then. Keep your weapons sheathed at all times. May the goddess be with you." With that, she moves the barrier out of the way.¹¹

"And with you."

"Can you tell us..." teeth gritted, "... where the temple is?"

"Straight until you hit the main street, turn right, and you can't miss it."

"Many thanks." Bert says.

After they pass, she dutifully returns the barrier.

Bert lets Daphne lead the way, half-shutting his eyes and letting his horse follow hers. They go straight until they hit the main street, et cetera.

The city is about half the same size as their hometown. The temple is a white-marble, two-story rectangular building. There are lights shining out every side through stained glass windows. There is no physical door on the building—just an open doorway.¹²

Daphne ties up the horses to a likely looking spot, and helps Bert.

He realizes they have stopped, and struggles to get down from the saddle.

"C'mon. We're here. It'll be OK now."

He concentrates on walking, trying not to lean on her... too hard, anyway.

The interior of the building is fairly spartan, with large, multi-candle stands at each of the windows. There are some normal-looking folks about. There are a few priests in white robes with gold trim. Most of them seem to be chatting in normal tones; most of the conversations seem to be of normal, everyday chitchat.

Daphne sits Bert down on a bench or something and approaches a small, middle-aged woman is attending to some books at the far end.

"Excuse me, madam."

She turns around. She has a round face with a broad smile. "Peace."

"My friend over there is beset with an affliction that I fear is extremely serious. Is there anyone here who might be able to aid him?"

"My dear, Can he walk?" She says, concerned.

"Not easily, but yes."

"Please, bring him this way. I will be right back."

She turns and scurries off into a side room

Daphne gets Bert up again and heading in that direction. He struggles to get up and stay up.

The priestess returns and helps by taking Bert's arm. "I have a room, prepared." Her touch is firm, but gentle.

Daphne says, "Thank you."

The room that is prepared is sparse, with a bed and a desk, but the walls are nothing but bookshelves built into the wall. She helps Bert to the bed and closes the door so the three of them are alone. There are no windows in this room, which is lit by two candles on the desk and a lantern hanging in the center.

Bert mutters, "My thanks," before he collapses.

Daphne explains the whole situation to her. "We were coming from up north and ran into some sort of troll thing on a bridge. Bertwald here killed it, but the thing injured him. As a result, he is now apparently becoming a troll-thing himself. Unless there's something that can be done here to stop it."

"How do you know that?" The priestess went from concerned to perplexed.

"There was a healer in a village north of here. He told us that."

In his haze of pain, Bert has to smile at her description of events.

"Hmm" Her brow furrows. "Where is the wound?"

"On his back."

"Take off your shirt, son. I will be right back." She leaves the room, shutting the door behind her.

Bert pulls at his shirt, trying to get it out. Daphne notices his shirt is stained in blood, old and fresh. There are also traces of a black oozy substance, like black puss.

"How are you doing there?"

¹¹ Yes, it's a bit absurd, because they could have ridden around it.

¹² First described by me as a building with no door—much to the confusion of the players.

He manages to get the shirt off without assistance.¹³ "How does my back look?"

"I've seen worse."

"On anything living?" He tries to grin deprecatingly.

"Well, no actually."

"Ah, yes," teeth gritting again. "That's my Daphne, reassuring as always."

There is a light knock on the door. Daphne says, "Come in."

The priestess returns. She sits on the chair as she firmly pushes Bert facedown on to the bed. He doesn't put up a struggle.

She pokes around the edges very lightly, but to Bert, it feels like hot poker. His fingers clench on the mattress.

Daphne sees it has spread to cover about a foot-side area across his kidneys.

"It is wise you came here," the priestess says. "This is no ordinary wound."

"We were starting to get that impression."

"Can you help me?"

She brings a candle and holds it close over the wound. "Aurora can," she says without pausing

She stands, and returns the chair to its original position at the desk. "Where are you from?"

"A village called Brennon," Daphne says, "It is some distance from here."

"I have not heard of it."

"It is a rather small place," Daphne asserts.

"How long ago did this ...?" she motions.

"Two days, now."

"Do you have a place to stay in Olden?"

"We came directly here."

"I see. You are welcome to stay here, but we only have the one bed."

Bertie starts to sit up. "You can have the bed, Daph."

Daphne says, "Lie down."

"No, I'll sleep on the floor. I'm used to it."

"I said lie down. Now."

The priestess¹⁴ seems very uncomfortable, even more so than before. He lies back down.

"Try to rest. I need to consult and pray," She says, "Would you like some food?"

"That would be most kind," Daphne answers.

Bert is nearly asleep.

"Someone will be by shortly." She leaves.

Daphne pulls out the chair and sits on it, leaning against the wall. Daphne half-dozes and Bertie moves restlessly in his sleep. In a half-hour, an alter boy of no more than 13 brings food, hot water, and some linen.

¹³ At this point, I said: brb, please talk amongst yourselves. Avis: looking forward to GenCon? Matt: very much so. Me: I was hoping in character, sheesh. Matt: that was in character. Avis: LOL!

¹⁴ And GM.

Daphne wakes Bert. The boy says, "You are to place these over the wound. The linen should be moist, but not soaking."

Bert tries to sit up, reaches for the linen.

"Just relax, OK?" Daphne tells him.

He gives up and lays back down on his stomach.

The lad leaves and Daphne applies the linen to his back. The warmth feels wonderful and he groans.

After eating, Bert falls asleep very quickly.

After an hour or so, Daphne notices the linens have absorbed a lot of black puss. She changes the dressing and notices the wound looks a lot better.

Then she peeks out the door, looking for the priestess, but does not find the same one. It is nearly midnight by now. There is an elderly priest reading in a corner and a young girl tending to the candles.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

The place is quiet as a ... well ... a church.

Daphne startles the poor child. She yelps

"Y-yes, m-ma'am?"

"I was looking for the priestess who was helping us before."

"I-I w-wasn't here w-when you c'ame in."

"C'an y-you desssscribe her?"

"Just settle down, honey. She was an older lady, not all that tall." Daphne says, "I never did catch her name."

"U'Umm, I think th-hat w-wouldd'd b-be, Marria."

Bert half wakes up. "Daphne?"

"Sh'she's n-not here."

"OK. Thank you." Daphne notices the girl is wearing a blue sash around her neck.

Daphne goes back into the room.

"Daphne? Were you talking to someone?"

"Not really."

He sits up. He feels better—much less stiff. Bert can actually twist his back without wincing ... much. Remembering where he is, he mentally says a quick prayer to Aurora. "I feel better. How does it look?"

"Not so much of the icky black stuff. So I guess that's good."

The wound is oozing slightly, but it's red-yellow, not black.

"What's been happening?"

"Nothing that I've been able to tell."

"Why don't you get some more sleep?"

"You lie down. I need to sit up for awhile." He gets up and goes over to the chair. He eats the leftover food.

Bert asserts, "Lie down and get some sleep, for Aurora's sake. I mean it. I can't sleep any more right now."

"Fine." Daphne lies down and is out fairly quickly.

Once she's asleep, Bert folds his arms on the table, puts his head down, and falls back asleep.

Shortly before dawn, Bert is woken by a hand on his shoulder. "Come, pray with me." It is Marria. Daphne wakes up as well.

He gets up. "Yes, I'll come."

Daphne lies there for a moment, getting her bearings, then gets up as well

Marria leads them to the main room

Bert says, "My thanks for all you have done for us so far."

She lines him up, facing the east and smiles. "Kneel."

Together, they kneel and pray until the first light of the dawn fills the room. Bert feels like a great weight is being lifted. Daphne feels slightly woozy.

Marria finishes and helps Bert to his feet. He still doesn't have his shirt on, and the cold stone floor and morning air has given him a chill.

He gets up quickly. "I feel much better. Thanks to Aurora and her priests." He helps Daphne up.

"Thanks." Daphne asks, "How are you feeling?"

"Get your shirt on, lad." Marria pats him on his shoulder

"Back to normal. Better, even." It is clear he's a bit chilled, though.

"That's great," Daphne says. At this time, Daphne notices that Marria looks very haggard and as tired and unrested as Daphne feels.

Daphne says to Marria "Thank you very much."

Marria hugs Daphne and whispers, "It is not over yet."

"What do you mean? And what did you do? I mean, how did you cure him?"

Marria sighs. "Come." When they are back in the room, she sits on the bed. "Close the door."

Daphne orders, "Bert, close the door."

Bert does so.

"The wound is healed, but the evil is not gone," Marria explains.

"What do you mean?" Daphne asks.

"There is a seed of evil, planted by the Unseelie."

"The un-what? He did what?" Bert asks.

"Aurora's light has made it dormant, but it can still grow in the shadows."

Daphne asks, "What is the seed?"

Marria thinks, "A thing of the dark faerie. It is not gone and cannot be removed until its source is uprooted."

Bert gets his shirt and puts it back on. "I don't understand. Its source? And what kind of "shadows" will it grow in?"

She sighs, "Neither of you have ever been gardeners, have you?"

"Not me"

"Never had the time," Daphne says.

"If you have a weed, you can pull it out and it will grow back unless you get every bit of it," Marria explains. "It can be buried deep in the ground and return with the next rains."

"So you are saying Bert is going to start turning back into a troll again?"

"There is a seed, an evil seed, inside Bert. It is sleeping now, but it will return."

He gets a little pale, and sinks down into the chair.

Daphne asks, "What do we need to do to stop it?"

"You have to find the source of the evil and destroy it."

"Then I didn't kill the unseelie thing?"

"Think of it this way. You killed a branch of a much bigger tree."

"Any ideas on where we can find the trunk?" Daphne asks.

"How long will it be before it starts growing again?"

"We are searching for it right now," Marria answers Daphne's question. "And that depends on you, Bertwald. If you feed the seed, it will grow again."

He thinks for a minute. "Are you saying I should keep evil out of my heart?"

"Always." She smiles, "Especially now." She stops smiling.

"If it grew in me before, did I have evil in my heart then? I didn't think I did. I mean, I'm not perfect, but I didn't think I had evil."

"No, that was a fresh planting, like a seedling. It grew on its own."

His troubled look clears.

"That is gone, now," Marria assures him. "Give us a few days to find the source so that it can be destroyed. Until then, you are welcome to stay here."

Daphne says, "We will provide any assistance we can."

"Thank you for all your help. I am more grateful than I can express. Is there anything I can do to express my gratitude?"

She stands and hugs Bert warmly, "Be good."

He hugs her back. "I'll try my very best."

She hugs Daphne again, "Take care of him. And yourself."

Bert stands. It's almost like he's standing straighter, taller, than he ever has—more mature, more confident.

After this session, Avis, Matt, and I were all at GenCon. We ran a live session of the campaign, so I do not have chat log. This is also a good time for a break, as I am finding my motivation for including these long write-ups waning. The feedback has been wonderful, but I feel silly paying for it. Yes, I could condense the story if I possessed any skill at condensing. Ah well.