



Berrigus's Tales

from the

Araulmor Storyboard

(and beyond)

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Arrivals

A cold mist had rolled in from the west with the dusk. The darkening world was muffled under its damp blanket, and the farmer's nose and ears were clogged with the diaphanous stuff. Visibility was so bad that he barely noticed driving his wagon into the familiar copse of trees. "Almost home," he told his mule, "and none too soon, t'will be a miserable night"

Thoughts of the days market in Araulmor ran through the farmer's head. It had been a profitable trip, the wagon was empty and his purse was full of coins. Now, many leagues north of the city gates and almost home, the mule's gentle clopping along with the wagon's sway and the dreamlike landscape was lulling the farmer into a semi-trance.

A large unnoticed shape approached the road ahead.

The dream was split by the mule's cry as a large fist struck its head. The animal staggered for several steps and fell, stunned. The farmer stood up in the wagon. A putrid stench wafted over him, carried gently on the mist.

"Your money or your life, man." Highwaymen, thought the farmer, a rough type of people and not to be trifled with by honest folk. He wondered where the nearest rangers were, but knew full well that help would not come in time. The rangers rarely ventured this far out, especially on a night such as this. Hesitantly, the farmer removed his purse and threw it toward the form of his mule's assailant. The dark thing moved off, apparently the purse was sufficient to buy a farmer's life tonight.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the farmer went to see his mule. Like a clap of fetid thunder the fist struck him in the head. With a quick thought to his waiting family, he fell unconscious to the ground. Laughter split the fog. "Sweet dreams," the bandit's deep voice boomed. The mugger slipped into the night, breaking wind loudly.

The troll Berrigus wandered towards the city gates, mouth open and gawking. Never could troll-kind erect such a magnificent gate. Oh, they could conceive of it and were even capable of building it, but they could never co-operate among themselves long enough to actually construct it.

Attempting to blend in, Berrigus joined the throngs of people trying to enter Araulmor via the Cara gate on the morning's business. The midmorning sun softly warmed and dried his moldy cloak, and the moldy clothes and skin beneath it. The scent was

indescribable except to Berrigus himself, and people began moving away. The putrid scent reminded the troll of home, and a tear softly touched his cheek. He began idly picking his nose as he thought of his lost life among the Troll King's palace guards. The years he had served the Rotting Throne had been among the best in his young life.

His thoughts strayed to the fateful day of his banishment and eventually to the vile, disgusting creature that was the root cause of his demise. Memories of lost love were too painful even for trolls, and with a mighty sigh of mental effort he pushed the thought from his head. As with most troll thoughts it vaporised like wind broken in a gale.

Several very long minutes had passed.

People around Berrigus had also begun to tear up, but not in sympathy. His attempt at animosity was being thwarted not only by his over nine foot height, but by the fact that every beast of burden, and most of the people, were by now giving him wide berth and trying to get upwind.

Before long he had the attention of the gate guards, who began pointing in the direction of the commotion in the crowd, his direction. He again tried to look innocent and unmenacing, softly whistling to himself like a steam kettle. Somewhere dogs howled. People began holding their ears and running, and poor Berrigus soon found himself facing a ring of guards' halberds and bared swords.

Alone.

Belatedly he realized his finger was still knuckle deep in his right nostril and he quickly removed it. He smiled, sheepishly revealing a row of sharp menacing teeth and breath that could stop an oxcart cold.

It was slightly less intimidating to watch the Gate Guards try to hold their weapons steady while not breathing too deeply, one or two had even relinquished a handhold in order to pinch their noses.

"Evening," called one of the Guards, a half orc soldier who seemed to be having less trouble coping than the others, "troll," he said disparagingly, his black and yellow teeth gleaming in the lantern light, "You have business in the city or are you just lost?"

A slightly apprehensive sniggering rippled through the three human Guards while the half troll who had now made his way down from the left gate tower made a loud protest. His approach split the ring of Guards who seemed grateful to have an excuse to disperse slightly.

"Constable Gypsum," he stated, then indicating himself so as to point out this was an introduction and Berrigus should now state his own name, "and why you come here?"

"Trolls are trouble," muttered one of the other Guards behind their back, "he's not registered with us."

"Don't mean he's bad," Gypsum grated, "no more than any 'uman at any rate."

"Yeah, alright," came the concession, "but I wanna know his business and intentions. We gotta have some standards....look at that last one we let in. Caused all manner of trouble....." This degenerated into an argument between the half orc and the human concerned, but Gypsum and the others maintained their ground, awaiting a response from Berrigus.

Being questioned was never one of a troll's best situations, and Berrigus was no exception. He paused momentarily, deep in thought (a habit that has caused him to be struck several times by speeding carriages). He pondered fighting his way out, but there was an Orc and another Troll with the humans. Taking them by surprise was also out. There were also no innocent bystanders close enough to take hostage, and there was no where to run or hide. With a deep sigh he resigned himself to answering questions.

A sweat broke out on the beleaguered troll's brow as he formulated a response that would hopefully answer all the questions simultaneously (thus keeping him from thinking any more than he had to). He addressed his response to the troll who had introduced himself.

"Most repulsive Constable Gypsum, I Berrigus of late a humble palace guard in the service of the Rotting Throne. I seeking work and sanctuary. Maybe too seeking cold ale. No trouble."

Having been uttered, the thought and accompanying words vanished like mice scurrying for cover. His finger idly started back towards his nostril, but with a mighty force of will he stopped it. The vacant, toothy grin returned to Berrigus's face.

Gypsum watched as the troll went through a relatively familiar set of slow, deliberate motions. It passed among his mother's side of the family as thought processes and, while he was only half troll, he could identify with the time span involved. A smile broke across wide craggy features and he nodded in acknowledgement of the compliment.

"Berrigus you foul smelling, disgusting cess pit of a troll, welcome to Araulmor," he chuckled, the sound like stone grating against a cliff wall, "Palace Guard eh? I have a

cousin who works in the kitchens for the Rotting Throne - Mossy - you know her?" he watched as Berrigus' face attempted to cope with another racking of brains and slapped the troll on the shoulder with considerably less force than Berrigus was used to.

"Work and sanctuary you can find here, cold ale too. Just remember that if you are here to cause trouble, we'll be coming to find you," he smiled the typical smile of a bored Guard anticipating a good, mindless brawl and indicated the main north - south road on which they stood, "Just head down there," he explained, "Mercari's the best place for you - head south till you see the Castle then take a right - whole Western Sector's more likely to be troll friendly if you know what I mean. Good ale too, filthy living conditions if you ask nicely."

And so they let him pass, the Guards forming a small conversation group behind him as he began to wander away. If nothing else, Gypsum pointed out, he would be easy to find if he did start any trouble and besides, they hadn't had a decent bar fight for a while... what was the harm, he argued, plenty of worthless, evil humans were admitted to the city after all...

Relieved that the constable didn't expect an answer requiring thought, Berrigus replied, "Mossy- ugly nasty bitch. Quite a head turner if I recall." Having received Gypsum's kind words with a tear in his eye and broke wind loudly to relieve the pressure that caused his eyes to tear up in the first place.

"Curse you, putrid worthless scum of a Constable, and may we someday bash each others heads over a cold pint. Look me up after I've settled should you need unwelcome bad cheer and a kick in the arse." Having exchanged niceties, Berrigus trundled through the gates jostling unwary bystanders and frightening pack animals. The gate and guards vanished behind him much more quickly than his lingering odor.

It wasn't long before Berrigus found himself with his first decision. Before him lay the castle that Gypsum had foretold of, but he couldn't remember right or left.

He looked left down a lovely well groomed lane toward what appeared to be marble buildings in the distance. His head slowly turned and he gazed to his right. The road narrowed and the pavement ended, turning to mud. Ramshackle, unpainted warehouses could be seen down this road. This was far too beautiful to be the low rent district, so Berrigus turned to his left and took a step. A speeding carriage struck him soundly and he rolled down the street toward Mercari.

Apparently he had paused too long again.

Picking himself up, he reapplied the disturbed dust to his clothing. Still slightly stunned

he wandered into Mercari and finally toward the friendly cheer of a nasty looking inn.

Berrigus stepped through the small door of the inn. The room went quiet and several patrons, holding their noses, slipped away. "How may I help you?" the innkeeper asked, hoping to be rid of the creature.

Berrigus put two copper coins from the borrowed purse on the counter. "A room, and not one of the tiny ones you offer fools and little people."

"Perhaps a bath as well?" the innkeeper offered.

Berrigus boomed a laugh, and shoved a large finger into an equally large nostril, "Not bloody likely!"

Thinking quickly, the innkeeper said, "Well, I have several nice rooms, but for an additional two coppers I can offer you the 'Troll Suite'." He looked at the creature in anticipation.

"I'll see it first." Berrigus said, one eyebrow lifting like a caterpillar humping his eye.

"Of course, sir, right this way." The innkeeper led Berrigus into the inn-yard, past the stables, and across to an abandoned rotting tool shed. The door hung loosely and it could have used several fresh coats of wood. The scent of dead things and rat droppings wafted softly from it. "Here it is."

It was lovely. "The whole place, to myself?" asked Berrigus.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not a fool, three coppers total!" Berrigus boomed.

"You drive a hard bargain, sir," the innkeeper flattered, "but you are right. I should not expect more than three coppers for this humble cottage." He held out his hand.

Berrigus, stopping twice to recount, slowly placed three coins into the man's hand. As he entered the shed the innkeeper offered, "Sleep poorly with troubled dreams."

Berrigus stopped in the doorway. "Why, thank you." After all, he wasn't an uncivilized troll. He did offer human pleasantries to humans when the creatures were kind to him.

Finding several field mice in the shed and picking them up in a massive hand, the troll dropped into a pile of moldy hay and stretched his arms over his head. "Ahhh," he

sighed, popping one into his gaping maw, "this *is* the life!"

Friendly Introductions

A creak of the shed's door was the first sign of life beyond that within and, in the pale light of a time somewhere between night and day, a small figure stood momentarily silhouetted in that doorway. From a first impression, the shadowy form seemed to belong to a roughly eight year old human boy, his clothes rough, his hair a mass of long curls.

Secondary guesses hinted at more than he appeared however as the lad slipped inside, took a deep, purposeful breath of the extremely pungent, troll-filled air and repeated that inhale/exhale routine again. He started when he saw the vast form actually still reclined in the filth however, keeping to the edges of the shed, uncertain. Here was a troll he didn't know and, by default, hadn't yet pissed off. That was a gift or a curse, and he would only find out which when one of them opened proceedings.

Casting a wary eye in Berrigus' direction, the lad screwed up his angelic face and grabbed a rat as it darted past him. Chewing slowly on this wriggling find, he tilted his head on one side and regarded the troll, checking to see if this brought a reaction or not.

Berrigus snored, deep in an unusually gruesome and enjoyable nightmare. The creaking door touched off a niggling thought that he wasn't alone. It entered his mind cautiously as if lost. (Most thoughts that entered Berrigus's mind were lost.) It bumbled around a while, and finally the troll slipped into a half sleep and became aware of it.

Berrigus continued to snore away, playing 'possum'. He was very good at it, a familial trait that had gotten his great uncle Rottenfoot prematurely embalmed. Thoughts began to wander around in his awakening mind in a frenzy of inactivity. The idea that it might be the authorities finally scurried into a tiny corner of his brain and Berrigus fought the urge to pick his nose. One of his eyes cautiously opened and he perceived a lone smallish figure, perhaps a human child. It seemed to be eating something and watching him. The troll immediatly became perturbed, (a trollish emotion roughly akin to 'livid' in humans), he had really been enjoying that nightmare.

Feeling safe at last, he picked up his club and bellowed softly in his nicest roar, "Who the HELL are you?"

Pitfall leapt backwards, dropping the half eaten rat in a reflex action which overrode any pretence at bravery he might have harbored with a human. This was a fully fledged troll, with a weapon no less and his roar swept the youth's strawberry blond curls back, flecks of spit hitting his face as he found himself backed up against the ramshackle shed's wall.

"Name's... um... Tim?" he asked rather than answered, hoping this might be believable if the troll was as smart as they usually were. Course that wouldn't save him if the mood took this guy and he'd been on the wrong end of a troll clubbing far too often to expect any less, "Sorry, um, I was just passing through. Isn't usually anyone here, but it smelt soooo good I had to take a look," he risked a step forwards and flicked the rat with his foot so that it landed closer to Berrigus, "here, it's yours."

Berrigus was perplexed, a condition unusual for him because it required two competing thoughts to occupy his mind at the same time. He immediately felt a headache coming on due to the mental gridlock, and his cranium was noticeably warmer. Here was a child, confronted by an angry troll, who wasn't screaming in terror. He idly wondered how little Umtim would taste with hot mustard, then remembered that humans frowned on having their children eaten. Ignoring the rat for a moment, and dismissing the obvious statement about the scent, the troll began pondering the phrase "passing through" and looked for a second exit.

He saw only one.

Finally Berrigus's struggling mind stumbled on the obvious- little Umtim was mentally impaired. He had not run from an angry troll and was passing through a cottage with only one entrance. Remembering that the boy was eating a rat and claimed a fondness for trollscent, Berrigus finally decided that Umtim must be an amazingly ugly troll midget (and not a very bright one at that).

Satisfied with this conclusion, the troll's mind slipped back into lethargy. With his cranium now slowly cooling, Berrigus picked up the offered rat. Taking a bite he extended a formal and traditional troll greeting, "What do you want, asshole?"

Side-stepping slightly in the vague hope that he might reach the loose board in the far wall and be through before this troll caught up on current events, Pitfall made it most of the way there by the time Berrigus bellowed out another question. He froze again, pushing trembling hands behind him and facing up to the magnitude of what he had got himself into now.

"Food," he admitted, for once being honest, "I'm bloody starving and this place is usually good for a couple of rats. I didn't," he paused, winced and maintained eye contact for fear of missing something. As long as he kept watching, the chances of a troll pulling a move faster than he could leap for the small exit was minimal, "know it was occupied. Sometimes Arcalite stays here, but he always lets me know," Pitfall swore silently in his head at his own stupidity, but it was too late now.

"So," he rallied, "you're new here right? I could maybe show you the market.... by way

of apology for disturbing you and that. If you wanted, um, your unbelievably stench-riddenness," he added in an attempt at recovering some aspect of goodwill. Groveling was not something he enjoyed, but it was marginally preferable to being beaten senseless. Barely. Unknown trolls were worth a try, who knew what might come of a fledgling relationship such as this one if he played his cards right. Not that he had a particularly good reputation with card games either, he reminded himself, wishing he could stop the internal rambling of his overactive mind and trying not to look at the loose board too often lest even the troll might suss something was up.

Berrigus's brows wrinkled, causing his eyebrows to imitate a large bat landing on his forehead. He got the food part, and the disturbed sleep. Other than that the poor creature was rambling, perhaps due to the alleged hunger. Once again the troll found himself thinking.

His first thought was that thinking sucked. He offered the remaining bite of rat back to Umtim, who was hungry. Second thought handled, Berrigus tackled a third. Arrggghhh!

Pointing to himself, the troll announced, "Me Berrigus of the Tarpoools. Noble knight of the Rotting Throne, defender of King Cephalus and his cesspits, breaker of heads." He broke into Trollsong, which was only similar to whalesong if the whales were plated in aluminum and slamming into each other.

"Sad is my tale, for I loved not well, but unwisely too. For the lust of a princess I lost all, my commission, my bludgeon, and impaler as well. Banished was I from the Troll lands forever and a day."

The innkeeper awoke. Alarmed by the sound of what he believed was a pitched battle in the courtyard, he called his family and any able customers to the defense of the inn. The rabble, armed with kitchen utensils, cleaning implements, and the occasional sword, burst into the courtyard. They focused on the tool shed as the source of the commotion.

Happily taking in the familiar discordant Trollsong, Pitfall let his mind wander as he listened to the simple words. He'd known quite a few trolls since his arrival here but none of them had spoken to him for this long before. Perhaps this was a smarter one, or even better, perhaps he wasn't actually going to take advantage of him or beat him, for a while anyway. Usually once they got to know their way around town he could expect a beating, which, he had to admit, was sort of endearing in its own way. After all, it was only to be expected and he knew his place even if he didn't always like it. Sabra, now she had class, if he could keep up the thieving work maybe he might meet her again some day. Until then, he needed a means to survive and Berrigus here represented a new chance.

Berrigus's song ended abruptly as the cottage door burst inward. He gathered his club and stuffed the startled Umtim under his arm. Looking for a way out, he glanced at the back wall and saw it. Umtim's door, etched in light, was on the back wall of the tool shed. Being a troll of action, Berrigus went through the 'magic door' into a back alley. Dropping Umtim, and turned to face his attackers.

He faced a brick wall.

The confused Berrigus sniffed the air, turning around several times. Rats scurried everywhere, running for cover. "Stoopid magic door, now we're blocks away from the fight," he finally said despondently. He remembered Umtim, who was hungry.

Pitfall found the perfect scene ruined by the abrupt removal of said geography and a new position in an alley. Pitfall shook his head as he hit the ground, scoping for trouble, then, seeing where they were, relaxed.

"Umtim," Berrigus said, "lots of rats here." He added his vapid grin.

"S'okay stone-face," he said without thinking, "we're almost there. This sorta thing happens a lot in this city. Magical stuff that is. If you wanna really appreciate it, you need a guide. My rates are quite reasonable, if you're interested," he added helpfully, pointing down the alley and walking in that direction, chatting as he snagged another rat, "There's a market just down here, Xua Kia, lots of our sort down here. Whatcha want from life anyways - money, women, drink, just a lil rotting carcass to call your own? Cos, me," he pointed at himself in case Berrigus had forgotten, "I can help you with that sort of stuff, proper useful I am, if properly encouraged."

"Lucky you are Berrigus, breaker of heads and stinking of rotting flesh," Pitfall presented his case with flair for once, "for this is Araulmor and you can get anything here. Anything. Whatever you want. All it takes is coin or contacts," he beamed a beautifully angelic little boy butter wouldn't melt in his mouth smile and held up his hands to either side, "and I know lots of them."

Berrigus listened to the boyish creatures words, for the first time actually paying attention to him. His brows knitted in concentration, once again imitating a bat trying to steal his nose. Umtim's words were sweet, sugar coated, and meant to lull the troll into complacency. This sly, underhanded boy thing needed close watching, and couldn't be trusted.

Berrigus's heart warmed to Umtim, a little treachery and underhandedness reminded him

of home. He slapped Umtim in the back hard enough to break a real boy's spine. "Come, Umtim," he smiled in a truly sharklike grin, "we find good breakfast. Then talk."

Ignoring the rancid smells of humans fixing their own food and with Umtim in a sure grip, Berrigus set off to conquer the city.

The princess and her father crossed his mind briefly. "Screw them," he thought.

"Thrice."

Under the Bridge

Berrigus wiped the counter of the bar, his bar. With Umtim's help, and some 'borrowed' cash, the property was his, with the little creature as a silent partner. Berrigus had become somewhat attached to the being he thought of as Umtim. The lying little freak had a way of bringing nothing but trouble, and the troll hadn't had so much fun since childhood.

He cracked a hideous grin as he enjoyed the mid morning street noise. It was a lovely day, a putrid steam rose as the sun gently warmed the muddy scum outside the "Under the Bridge" tavern. The tavern was actually partially under one of the many bridges in Mercari that straddled one of the many small delta waterways. This one was little more than an open sewer, which endeared it to Berrigus's black heart.

Berrigus was proud of his tavern, in a blazing fit of creativity he had even named it himself.

It would be several hours until he opened, but he liked to start early and work slowly. He always worked slowly in contrast to the pace of the rest of Araulmor. The troll smiled as he worked, remembering the lovely fight of the night before. The place still smelled of the dried blood and spilled beer.

A loud knock rang through the empty bar, someone was at the front door. The troll sighed. He knew that Umtim had 'errands' to run today, so it wasn't the little freak and he needn't bother to lock the cash box. It was probably the city guard with a hundred questions he would have to answer. Just thinking about thinking that much gave him a headache as he trudged to the door. Bending his huge frame down till his eye was even with the peephole he peered out.

Berrigus stood up sharply and shook his head violently. At first he wondered how he had gotten outside, then realized that he was still inside. If he was also outside that would mean there were two of him, and that was silly. It must be another troll outside, his image distorted by the crappy optics of peephole. This thought process took an excruciatingly long time, and the knock boomed again. Berrigus opened the door.

"Berrigus?" the other troll belched.

"Thorax?" Berrigus grinned greenishly. It was his cousin Thorax. "You slimy bastard, come in and have a pint," he said as he grabbed Thorax's collar and dragged him inside.

"Berrigus, I bring you frightening news!" The newcomer held forth his burden, wrapped

in greasy rags, "Behold, you have a daughter!"

Stunned, Berrigus stood there for several long seconds in thought. (A habit that had quite recently caused him to be struck by a speeding carriage.) Berrigus raised one fuzzy eyebrow suspiciously, which looked like a caterpillar humping his left eye. "Oh, really," he began. Two things crossed his mind at the same time, bewildering him for several seconds. Unable to decide, he cleverly combined them in the same question. "Who is her mother and why have you brought her here?"

"Why, Princess Ruphia is her mother. You do remember the reason for your banishment from the Troll Kingdom, don't you?" It was a valid question, Berrigus had been banished for almost three years and trolls had short memories.

A tear touched the banished troll's eyes. He broke wind loudly, releasing the pressure that caused the tear, and remembered Ruphia. It was because of her that he was sent into the human world with nothing but his wits. It was truly a miracle he survived this long.

"You're doing well," Thorax lied as he took down two chairs at one of the tables. Berrigus got two large steins and filled them with ale. Sitting down, they both sipped their drinks noisily and pondered each other; two trolls deep in thought. This took a while, and Berrigus got up a few times to refill the steins.

Berrigus looked across the table at his cousin. Gone was the youthful look of murder in his eyes, replaced by cynical brutality. His teeth were rotting and falling out, his skin was wrinkled like wind-blasted leather, and his greasy locks of hair were falling out in patches. At least he was well. "Your looking good," Berrigus offered. They finished another pint as Thorax thought of a response.

The soft human world was taking its toll on Berrigus. In order to fit in he had learned to bathe occasionally and comb his gnarled locks. His teeth, although greenish yellow, were all in place and his eyes were clear and bright like polished black onyx. Gone was the characteristic troll body scent and flatulence from eating carrion. For a troll Berrigus was disgustingly clean. "Cousin," Thorax began, "it pains me to see you in such a state. I'm sorry we can not bring you back."

"Beat yourself up over it," Berrigus said, "you're as much to blame as anyone else." Thorax smiled at the kind words. "The last time you showed your ugly face you caused me nothing but trouble, it's been far too long. Why have you brought... that." Berrigus indicated the sleeping bundle lying forgotten near the front door. He stood up and refilled the steins, knowing Thorax would think a while.

"King Cephalus is dead, Berrigus," Thorax replied minutes after he returned, "and Ruphia as well. The whole royal family was bludgeoned as they slept, save one, and Blog of the Salt Marsh has claimed the rotting throne."

Berrigus looked at Thorax. Pieces of the puzzle slowly come together, and he began to sweat profusely due to the exertion of thought. He finally realized that the sleeping toddler must be his illegitimate child from Princess Ruphia. The child would have nowhere else to go, as royal blood she would to be killed before she could pretend to the throne.

"Yes," said Thorax, who had been waiting patiently for the glimmer of comprehension, "Ruphia's dying command to me was to bring you the child. You must never know her true name, for to speak it would mean her death...."

....Besides, I have forgotten it on the journey here."

Berrigus thought of the most pleasant word he'd heard in the human world. "Cholera," he stated, "her name shall be Cholera." He gathered the bundle from the floor and opened it. He grinned stupidly at what was probably the ugliest creature in all of Araulmor.

"Oh, one other thing," Thorax stated, "'King' Blog has ordered your death. Beware of assassins." With that, a curse, and one putrid belch, Thorax stumbled out the door into the mid day sun.

Berrigus refilled his stein, it would be a long day indeed, and wouldn't Umtim be surprised!

Returning from Xua Kia, Berrigus put the now very awake toddler on the bar and went through his purchases. Troll milk was next to impossible to acquire in Araulmor, but he had a suitable formula, (after all, it was the one he himself had been weaned on). 'Little' Cholera watched as her father took the three day old goats milk and mixed it half and half with hard cider. After putting it in a cast iron carafe with a leather nipple, he passed it to her.

Burbling happily, the babe whacked Berrigus over the head with it before settling down to lunch.

A cross-between a troll and a mountain ogre, Chip was the sort of handsome that only cliffs and rocky crags would appreciate, should they ever feel the urge to speak. Lichen

grew in a fuzzy half beard around his face and across about two thirds of his head, giving a off-balance appearance, dark grey eyes gazed out of a darker charcoal face and his substantial frame was dressed only in a ragged pair of leather shorts. While he gave the impression of a slow, lumbering idiot, many smaller creatures had rued the day they assumed appearances dictated actions and on moving from the cliff side caves to the city itself, Chip had acquired a reasonably good position in the damage control business.

Warehouse security, contacts in Mercari which ensured constant work and a cousin who had connections all conspired to give Chip a taste of the good life. For now, it was daytime and he was off work, but the delivery he had been expecting from his current underling was late and that put him in a bad mood. Storming towards the tavern where he'd met Pitfall the night before, Chip restrained himself just enough to knock rather than lift the door off its hinges and waited impatiently for Berrigus to respond.

Someone began pounding on the door, but Berrigus ignored it, the bar wouldn't open for several hours yet. Thoughts of Thorax's parting words flashed briefly in his mind, then vanished like marsh gas. He watched the child's eyes begin to close like twin frog's mouths.

When the door failed to be answered within a count of ten, Chip bashed it again, calling out to whoever was inside.

"Open this door. I want the boy! Where's the boy?" the gravelly voice boomed easily across the inner chamber.

"Assassins," Berrigus finally thought.

That was his last thought, for all his years of training kicked in. Say what you want about slow stupid trolls, but one trained to act without needing to think first was truly amazing. In one semi-fluid motion the ex-palace guard snatched the child, tucking her behind the bar, and grabbed a bludgeon and buckler from their hiding place. A single leap found him standing in the center of the bar facing the door.

"Bar closed, no boy here," Berrigus challenged. "Go screw yourself."

Awakened by the ruckus, Cholera climbed back up on the bar, 'bottle' in hand to watch the fun.

It would take too long for a sly smile to fault-line it's way across Chip's face, so he settled for a roughly achieved grimace, the lichen adopting a jagged line along his brow, darkening the shadow still further across his eyes. He inspected the door for another second, confirming what he had initially checked and stabbing a heavy finger against the

first weak point in its design. It groaned as the full weight of its attacker followed through, rolling into the tavern's main room amongst shards of wood.

Only the hinges were broken, Chip had been encouraged since his arrival here to leave premises as intact as possible unless the contract called for demolition. Everyone was a potential client in this business and it paid to save what would need to be mended later. As he rose, unarmed and, to anyone but a fellow bruiser, menacing, he looked Berrigus in the eye then did a quick double-take to the child perched atop the bar.

"You wanna fight," Chip offered, "we fight for audience," a roughly hewn finger indicated Cholera without looking away from Berrigus, "but I only want the boy. The boy is late. Tell him he owes you a new door," he added meaningfully, holding position in case Berrigus decided to make a further point in attacking. For now they stood about ten feet apart purely out of Chip's respect for a future paying customer in the protection racket run by his employer.

Berrigus wasn't worried about Cholera. She held an iron bottle in her hand and troll children, especially those of noble birth, bit like crocodiles. The assassin might carry her off, but he would pay with a limb in the process and be encumbered until her jaw unlocked. Another thought slowly crossed the troll's mind and was dismissed. The troll knew he could take this creature, and it promised to be loads of fun for everyone. If only the assassin would attack. "You make like fight," he prompted, "but I hear only words. You gonna talk me to death?"

The nagging thought touched Berrigus's mind again, a true assassin wouldn't announce himself. If he was going to fight it would be nice to know the right reason before the fun started. He began to circle his opponent menacingly. "No boy here now, assassin, just troll. Soon be angry troll, door is yours. If fight, attack. If talk, sit. If not, use door."

Chip's thought processes were slightly faster, but he came to a familiar conclusion. It wasn't a good idea to smash up a new business on its first day on account of they needed to get a bit of financial credit under them in order to keep up the protection payments. It had been a hard learned lesson, but his cousin had eventually made the thought stick. So, he paused before stating his purpose.

"Boy not here, fair 'nuff. I look elsewhere," he stated, turning but not completely allowing his back to face Berrigus, to meet a breathless Pitfall in the doorway.

Trying to scoot backwards and not look like he was running away simultaneously, Pitfall fell over the step into the bar and sat on the broken door, flinching. He fully expected a beating here, and head down to protect it, he raised the bag of items he'd collected and steeled himself for the smack.

Easily prying the sack from his minion's hand, Chip opened it, looked inside and regarded the tiny form before him. He then turned back to completely face Berrigus again, suddenly generous of spirit in light of his prize and the abject groveling before him.

"You want to beat boy?" he asked Berrigus cordially, "I had last turn."

Berrigus pondered the now trembling Pitfall. "Why?" he replied, "not pissed at boy and boy no fun, no fight good. Besides, nothing to take from boy." He paused while he gathered his thoughts and added, "Now you look like better fight, and I already mighty pissed at you for door."

He slowly turned around, appraising the bar and considering how much cleanup he could do before opening. Cholera gurgled, but Berrigus knew she could take care of herself. Besides the general stench troll children bit like crocodiles and screamed like banshees. If he grabbed her it would only slow him down.

The troll eyed the bag that had passed between Pitfall and Chip. "What in bag, asshole?"

Chip's expression tried to register confusion and failed, his features not really designed for the quicker emotional responses that some of the softer creatures favored. His scowl, still present, had to suffice as he regarded Berrigus. The thought of a troll not wanting to beat a goblin was somewhat hard to wrap his brain around, but he tried bravely for a few moments before replying.

"O-kay," he managed slowly, patting Pitfall condescendingly on the head and making him wince, "good boy no get beaten today," the smile painstakingly chiseled its way across his lower face and Chip took up a steady, casual fighting stance, "Employer expect payment end of week, you send boy with coin and no need for fight," his eyes registered a little disappointment at this, but he had been told very slowly and carefully how this worked.

Holding the bag tightly in one hand, Chip's lopsided grin answered the question secure in the knowledge he would be leaving with it, whatever Berrigus had in mind. However much they liked to mess with his underlings, no one would risk denying his employer his due.

"Goblin weed, shiny things and special stones for employer. I come back Aaldydd if no money. Send boy. Understand. He know where to deliver."

Chip turned then, ready to leave, storming towards the door with determined steps, the

bag still clutched securely in his left hand.

Pitfall, meanwhile was staring open mouthed at Cholera, standing what he determined to be a safe distance away from the child.

"W-w-what's that?" he asked, still a little shaken by Chip's visit.

Berrigus watched Chip turn and practically run out the door. With a sigh he realized that they wouldn't be fighting and it would be another boring day. Maybe after the bar opened he would have some fun. The creatures actions were very confusing. First he acted like he was going to fight, and then offered to fight Berrigus for money.

The tease.

Maybe he was some kind of fight prostitute, get a troll all worked up and then ask for money. Whatever his game, Berrigus was not going to pay for a poor fight, the half troll would have to earn his fee. Next Aaldydd now gave him a little something to look forward to.

Turning, the troll looked at Umtim as if pondering taking his disappointment out on the little ass. Actually, Berrigus's vacant stare was in response to Umtim's question.

"Daughter, stupid Umtim. No see fambly resemblance?" He passed a freshly poured pint to the goblin, "Al-co-hol deficiency, need fix."

Cholera gurgled. "Soopid Untin," she parroted. Realizing the fun was now over she popped the bottle back into her mouth and began suckling noisily.

"Er, yeah, sure, sorry," mumbled Pitfall, a shadow of his former self in such company, "Daughter... er don't you need a..." he paused, accepting the pint and holding it with both hands to drain it, "thanks," he belched, the sustain echoing about the tavern room.

Remembering Thorax's parting words, Berrigus said in a lower boom, "Much trouble, mother murdered. Assassins might look for Berrigus, so if trouble come you care for kid, okay Umtim?"

"Murdered?" Pitfall swore inventively for a couple of minutes, then licked the inside of the tankard a bit until he'd thought it over, "Here?"

There was a pause as he waited for Berrigus to respond, then he shrugged, gave Cholera another long look and nodded.

"Okay, sure," he responded, accepting responsibility for the troll child should the worst happen. In his mind of course, Berrigus was never going to die and he would just get to lurk around here and drink beer.

"So, er, these killers then... they're human right? We taking them out?" he asked, bravado back in force temporarily.

Berrigus watched 'Umtim' carry on while he sipped his own ale, thoughts racing through his own mind. (Kind of like a hamster racing on an exercise wheel- lots of motion and noise but no actual movement.) Finally Berrigus held up his hand.

"Not human, troll assassins. Need to know if any unusual trolls about in Mercari." Berrigus rubbed his head, all this thought was incredibly painful. He remembered what a royal assassin looked like. "Troll be dressed all in black," he began, "with big red 'A' on back 'cause troll can no spell assassin. Have emblem over heart that say 'Royal Assassin Corps.' Carry bludgeon. Very," Berrigus paused for a moment searching for the right word. 'Surreptitious' obviously didn't come to mind so he used 'sneaky'. "sneaky trolls, blend in good. Umtim need look hard."

"I'll keep looking, don't worry," he acknowledged, sounding sincere, "and I'll look hard," he added for the troll's benefit. It was always good to reassure them that you understood the importance of their orders, he felt, kept things clear and open.

Apparently he hadn't done a good enough job, though as, on looking up into Berrigus' face directly for a split second, Pitfall felt the unmistakable glare of a troll sizing up his opinion. It took a while, so the cursed goblin studied the foam rings in the tankard a little further, using his finger to scoop up the final dregs.

That being said Berrigus pondered the little freak. Seeing looks of confusion and hilarity crossing his face simultaneously the troll thought he'd better explain Cholera. "Berrigus in trouble with Troll King. In troll kingdom Cholera's mom and family executed by he who sits on throne. If he find out Cholera alive will send assassins. Berrigus just in way."

"Wow," he finally noted, "the King? Why does he want you guys dead?" he looked over to Cholera and shrugged, "I mean, I understand why someone might want you dead, but why the kid? What did you do, sleep with his daughter or..." Pitfall's face fell as his brain caught up with his mouth, "Oh..." he said.

Long pause.

Berrigus poured himself another pint, hoping this would be over soon, it was after midday and they needed to be open. He trundled over to the doorway and moved the broken door out of the way of patrons, checked on Cholera who was now asleep and drooling peacefully, and took his place behind the bar.

"You be watching, Umtim, sneaky too like I know you can."

"I'll watch," he nodded, slowly, "don't worry." Sounded like he really meant it too.

A dark shape entered the bar, stooping low to allow his trollish frame inside. "Excuse me, proprietor of place I have never seen before, can I get directions out of city?" Thorax asked.

"Of course, troll I have never met," Berrigus replied cleverly, "I have my friend Umtim show you to Cara gate."

Turning to Pitfall Berrigus said, "Umtim, show Thora, I mean this strange troll I have never seen before, to Cara gate. Extra pint in it for you."

Thorax's entrance and the highly bizarre conversation which followed amused Pitfall in the same sense as having his head beaten against a wall might. He waited for the inevitable conclusion only to be surprised by his part in it.

"Uh, okay," he agreed, knowing he had no choice, placing the tankard down finally on the bar and waiting for Thorax to move. The promise of an extra pint was more than enough incentive to actually do the job well so, once they were clear of the tavern, he led Thorax across the wharfs to the main road, picking up the ferry across the Hayoku river and heading directly northeast.

The Journey to Cara Gate

Cara sector was the wilder of the five, the most given over to encroaching forest and farmland and yet still urbanised. The occasional tavern, wooden houses rebuilt after the mage attack the previous year, fresh paint, lively workers and Rangers walking or riding on the edge of the population. Pitfall avoided the main streets now, wandering ever so slightly ahead of Thorax, ready to warn if anyone untoward showed themselves, ready to warn and ready to run away if conflict ensued.

It was a good eight miles as the dragon flew, and neither goblin or troll moved particularly quickly, but in the back of Pitfall's mind the whole time was the fact that trolls with big letter As on their backs might be out here already, gunning for them. He deliberately wavered towards the Battle Cry and past the Darisan stronghold, trying to keep near people who would add their assistance to any trouble, while not wanting to attract the attention of the general public more than absolutely necessary. Not that it was possible to hide Thorax to any extent of course, but he lived in hope of at least making it to the gate without spoiling his chances of that free pint back at Berrigus' tavern.

Although it was midday when they started out, by the time the little creature Berrigus called "Umtim" had meandered his way well into Cara the streets were getting gloomy. A light ground mist added to the gloom. Thorax realized that the creature he followed was not what he seemed, which suited him just fine. The troll passed the time in thought, a passtime which was in itself incredibly odd.

The game was afoot, he thought, and in another sixteen or so years, if all went well, he would return and wed the princess Cholera. It was a simple plan, of course, and depended on Thorax's ability to infiltrate the current royal court. Once in the confidence of the Troll King, Blog, he would bide his time. As of now Blog's days were numbered, and as soon as he could consolidate power Thorax would strike. Blog was stupid, even by troll standards, and Thorax was quite clever for a troll.

If, of course, Thorax had actually been a troll.

Thorax was in fact half faerie, a fact he kept hidden from other trolls for obvious reasons. His mother had been sent to 'keep an eye' on the troll royal court under a powerful glamor. The glamor had worked too well and she had not only passed for a troll but had ended up wed to Berrigus's uncle. With the current situation in the troll kingdom what it was the faerie court had seen in Thorax a chance to once and for all stabilize a serious menace.

Provided of course if Thorax could eliminate King Blog and wed the former king's

daughter to cement his claim to the rotting throne. His cousin would help him bring all the pieces together.

Thorax began to realize that Umtim was keeping off the main thoroughfares, and suspected the little freak had an agenda of his own. This was fine with Thorax, for if he had been followed it was best to give the assassins a tempting target and bring them out in the open. At least the princess would be protected. As he followed Umtim around the back corner of a walled innyard he heard the boy gasp, startled.

That was his only warning.

Out of nowhere three black clad trolls rushed them, bludgeons raised. Fortunately trolls don't need to think during battle, for even a halfblood is woefully inadequate. Thorax immediately disarmed the first assassin by taking his bludgeon arm off at the shoulder. The three and a half foot elven blade he now held cut troll flesh like butter. Off center, the wounded troll ran in tight circles as Thorax beheaded the second. Turning to the third, he plunged the blade deep into his heart just as the headless troll completed his bludgeon swing.

The bludgeon hit its mark, catching Thorax just under the left temple, and the troll went down. The circling attacker slammed into the headless one and they fell into a heap of flailing arms and legs, which the last attacker fell on top of as he died. The headless troll finally realized he was dying as well and stopped flailing about.

Thorax rose, still stunned. Seeing his one remaining attacker trying to climb out from under his dead cohorts, Thorax plunged the elven blade into him. Wiping the troll gore on the topmost assassin, the halfblood returned the sword to the scabbard along his back.

Within moments Thorax once again had the appearance of a shambling, slightly hunchbacked troll. He scanned the street for any more signs of attack, and seeing none exclaimed, "Umtim, need get out of here before soldiers come."

Openmouthed, Pitfall simply stood beside the barrel which had been his hiding place for the duration of the fight and gaped at Thorax until the troll's words jarred him into movement.

"Er, yeah, right," he muttered, "this way," he added, securing his bow at his back again and turning to lead the way once more. This time he took the main street, the wide open thoroughfare which led directly to the guarded Cara Gate, their pace quick and urgent. On reaching the gateway, he stopped, turned around and spoke again, eyes still wide and a little afraid of the vast figure standing there.

"That's the gate," he indicated unnecessarily as, even to a troll, this was blatantly obvious, "do you need anything else?"

Chance Encounter

Berrigus wandered Xua Kia idly in search of his quarry, a vapid grin on his face. He was, for a troll, content at the moment. Few thoughts (perhaps from fear or pain) crossed his mind to defer his one-tracked quest. Nearing the edge of the market he spied a likely subject sprinting towards him.

Almost immediately Cloud was stopped, a troll blocking his path. He opened his mouth to speak but was lifted swiftly upwards by his shirt and dangled before the far taller rocky form, dark gray eyes twinkling as the troll examined his prey.

"Pretty blond elf have name?" Berrigus asked. He had learned to flatter the lesser creatures when greeting them, even though few trolls could find an elf even mildly attractive.

"Cloud," gasped Cloud, struggling to breathe in the grip. He waited another few oxygen-less seconds as the troll processed this information and nodded slowly.

"Yup," Berrigus responded, picking him up as gently as a troll could. This one would do for the trolls purpose. Slowly and methodically he wandered northward towards the bridge over the Kodoku, showing no sign of stopping or relenting on his grip and not reacting to any comment from Joriya in any way. He didn't stop the man following however, in fact he seemed completely oblivious to him.

Joriya was panicking, but after he saw that nothing he said or did was having any effect on the trolls northward bound plans, he started to pull himself together, following along and looking for an opportunity.

When the troll came within ten feet, Joriya tried to put on his most dangerous voice as he intoned, "Troll! Halt and put down the elf! Halt or be brought low before all to see!"

Berrigus smiled. Another little elf had apparently followed him and was blocking his path. A smarter creature would have wondered why, or pondered the creatures motives, perhaps questioning the creature for a purpose to his madness or even empathising with his plight. Berrigus chose to break wind. Breaking wind always made him smile.

The far end of the staff suddenly crackled with electricity, even as it leapt upward like a live thing possessed, and with remarkable accuracy slammed forward with a shocking blast into the trolls groin, discharging its electrical field along with the considerable impact into the trolls stones.

The troll stopped and scratched the affected appendages. He now had to choose between simply trampling his attacker, stepping over him, or brushing him aside. Unable to choose, Berrigus picked him up and added him to his growing elf collection. Coming to the end of the bridge he made a quick right between two ramshackle buildings into an alley. The sunlight was noticeably dimmer here, blocked by the buildings and unable to overcome the grime and dust. Several more turns brought the troll to the waters edge and it's aroma of street wash and rancid muck tickled his nostrils. His elves seemed to be wriggling, perhaps even plotting something, but he tightened his grip with barely a thought, which was all he could muster anyway.

The Under the Bridge tavern came into view, it's rotting half-off-the-hinges door greeted Berrigus. Cholera played by herself at the waters edge and ran to greet her father with a toddlers unsteady glee. Placing his quarry on the ground, Berrigus pointed to them and exclaimed, "Chollie, this is elves. See, not like humans."

"Ev's," the toddler replied.

Rubbing his head and refocusing blurred vision, Cloud took in the new scenery, characterised initially by the revolting stench. Sensitive nose wrinkled against this onslaught, he frowned, making the headache worse as he then tilted his viewpoint to reconfirm what greeted his eyes.

A miniature troll wobbled before him and for a second he was lost in the imagery, muzzy brain still processing, but then Berrigus' form, sturdy, massive and unyielding, came back into view. That and the hint of burning. He toyed with the idea of protesting loudly, halted only by all the tales he'd heard of trolls.

In Valochia there were many stories, almost all of them used to mollify children into sleeping or behaving and Berrigus certainly looked typically typecast for that role. The smaller version was presumably his child, or at least an offspring of some kind, and Cloud didn't think it would be a good idea to start anything resembling combat even if the younger troll hadn't been present. Either one of them could likely break bones without raising even a wrinkle in their craggy exterior and it was a sobering thought to consider that potency in a wobbling figure that could barely pronounce proper words yet.

"You okay?" he asked Joriya, turning slowly then to face the troll who had brought them both here, feeling somewhat vulnerable and overshadowed, but recalling one useful piece of information from all those years spent in the far North, "Your place stinks like a cesspit. Can we go now?"

Berrigus grinned stupidly at the complement (the only grin he knew), and shrugged his

huge shoulders. Bits of dried mud and other less identifiable things flaked off, falling to the ground. "Me work with what I got, thanks." He replied.

Cholera toddled around the pair, examining them and dripping wetly from her recent play by the water (either that or she needed another changing- with troll children it's hard to tell). "Da!" she exclaimed, pointing at Joriya's ear, "Hoomen this!"

Berrigus scratched his head, slowly pondering this new information. A thoughtful look painfully crossed his cragged face. "So?!?" he replied. There was a barely noticeable grinding sound as his mind switched gears. "Good, good, see human. Kay, Chollie, this elf is," he pointed at Cloud, "and this human is," he pointed at Joriya.

The toddler nodded, thought for several excruciating moments, and pointed at Cloud. "Ef!" she exclaimed happily. Pointing at Joriya she added, "Hoomen!" Both trolls grinned at each other.

Time passed.

Having seemingly reached an agreement with his daughter, Berrigus looked at Joriya and boomed, "You go now, bar closed till sundown. Mebbe come back tonight, Berrigus give many free beers." He wasn't exactly sure how much 'many' was, but he was sure two small creatures like these wouldn't drink much.

At Clouds question, Joriya moaned loudly, still dazed enough to be unsure of exactly what hit him, sitting up and looking around blearily, wrinkling his nose at the stench. When his sight steadied enough for him to recognize his surroundings and the company that he found himself in though, it was enough to scare the headache right out of him.

Still unsure of why they had actually been brought to this nest of horrors, but unwilling to pass up the chance to escape when it had been given to them, he scrambled to his feet and made for the door.

It wasn't until he was outside, gratefully gulping in mouthfuls of fresh air that he noticed that his staff was gone. Groaning aloud again, he realized that he must have lost it back at the market when he had so unwisely tried to stop the troll. By now it was surely gone, he only hoped that it had not fallen into the hands of those who might unwittingly hurt themselves with it.

Ignoring the relief washing over him at the unexpected turn of events, Cloud grinned broadly at the offer of many free beers. Soft brown eyes glinted with that thought, enough to have worried Joriya had the Ynysforian stayed around rather than bailing from the tavern swiftly. It seemed that this troll wasn't a threat for the moment, even a

friendly bar owner, which was always a welcome thing.

"Thanks!" he answered, totally forgetting about his headache in the sheer rapture of Berrigus' wondrous invite, "I'll see you later then," he promised, still grinning up at Berrigus. He could handle the stench for a free evening's drinking, it had been all too long, memories of Juiklo and bottles of wine drifting contentedly through the young elf's mind. Crone would say it wasn't a good idea, Joriya might even pick up on that one, but he was a free agent here and now and while Ani was busy what was there to stop him having a little fun, making a new friend and a troll-sized one at that.

Noting the tavern's location as he exited, Cloud followed Joriya and between them they headed back to check out the bridge where the staff had been dropped. Sure enough it was missing, as they had expected, footprints in the soft dirt tracing all over the place indicating this to be a busy route which again they already knew. Cloud shrugged.

"Sorry man," he apologized, "maybe we can get you another one," he turned then, scanning the street around them as a tickling sensation at the nape of his neck suggested they might be being watched. Mercari appeared to be going on around them as usual, pedestrians and wagons going through the motions of a normal afternoon and yet the itch remained. He met Joriya's gaze directly, "You get that feeling?" he asked, not explaining any further for now as he turned slowly, trying to gauge a direction from his intuition alone. No luck.

"Back to the market?" he asked, still uncertain but figuring the more people they had around them the safer they might be.

Baby's Day Out

A warm Ceffyl breeze brought a foul stench off the water and it swirled around inside the Under-the-Bridge tavern, tickling Berrigus's nose pleasantly. It also brought in the sound of a troll toddled happily splashing in the steaming muck. Berrigus would have realized that he was becoming much too content for a troll, if his thought processes had been a little better evolved. Instead he just grinned stupidly and continued to wipe the larger clumps of crud out of the house jacks with a filthy rag. Unless one was a troll, ogre, goblin or other 'dark' creature the Under-the-Bridge was known as a good place to bring one's own drinking vessel.

Nothing was too good for his customers, after all.

The 'protection' ogre, Chip, had stopped by earlier and demanded payment, which Berrigus had happily given after a good fight. The half-breed mountain ogre was untrained, but tougher than hell and rollicking good fun. Berrigus didn't quite understand the protection racket (not a surprise), but he liked to fight and Chip was much better at it than the usual drunken Cwrwdydd night amateurs, and well worth the money.

Berrigus's stupor was interrupted by a loud call of, "Ale's here!" He checked on Cholera, who was still sitting near the water making small 'muck trolls', and went to help unload the ale wagon. He would have felt better had Umtim been near to keep an eye on her while he took care of business, had he been able to think that clearly. He also would have wondered where Umtim had gotten off to, had the troll ever been able to wonder at all.

It wasn't until much later, after the wagon was unloaded and the barrels of ale were scattered haphazardly in the back room, that Berrigus felt something wasn't quite right. He dismissed the feeling out of hand, but it returned several times and finally made a nuisance of itself to the point that he had to address it. He discovered that Cholera wasn't outside playing in the muck anymore.

Slowly at first, but then more frantically, the troll began looking for his offspring. When Pitfall strolled through the door Berrigus announced, "Umtim, Chollie not here! Where she?!?"

Pitfall looked side to side without moving his head at all, fully expecting this to be the usual 'hide and seek' game which ended up with Cholera leaping out at him from some 'covert' hiding place. However she was in none of her normal haunts - not on the bar or any of the tables and certainly, he qualified, turning quickly in a complete circle, she wasn't anywhere in sight. His mind panicked while his hands opened and closed fists,

unsure what to say that wouldn't gain him the blame and/or a pounding.

"Not... here...." he mumbled, buying time he knew he had with Berrigus, though the troll already sounded anxious which meant he was nearing the end of the thought process, "Upstairs?" he ventured, but Cholera never went up there when there was stinking mud to play in. This didn't bode well.

"I'll look," he decided, running out to where the troll toddler bottom print clearly showed next to a line of half finished mud trolls. She was getting better, Pitfall mused, gaze wandering to note the line of footprints in the river sludge and then, where the edge met roadway, a disappearing trail of mud on packed earth and stone.

"The market!" he yelled to Berrigus, waiting for the troll to catch up initially, then racing off ahead.

If Berrigus were the type of being that could be mentally surprised, Pitfall's lack of mental acuity would have surprised him. As it was he merely suppressed the urge to kick him across the bar as unproductive and continued his own search. He barely noticed Pitfall's departure until he heard the boy yell, "The market!"

At first Berrigus thought that Pitfall was throwing out random suggestions, then he realised that the little turd was tracking her. "Umtim smart like dog?" he wondered fondly as he quickly splashed through the muck after him scattering little mud trolls in his path. Berrigus almost over-ran the boy as well until Pitfall sped off ahead.

At first he lagged, letting Pitfall run as one would a hound, but after seeing him turn a corner into Xua Kia Berrigus sped up.

This was a mistake. A troll barreling around a corner into Xua Kia could only add to any of the usual mayhem of the market.

Berrigus nearly slammed into an overturned turnip wagon, and only by falling over an injured ox and careening into the side of a building did he manage to stop before crushing Pitfall. Startled, the other ox broke free from the damaged wagon and headed deeper into the market, following a trail of munched turnip pieces. Both Berrigus and Pitfall saw the familiar gum marks on the turnip pieces and looked at each other.

"Chollie," they said in unison. Once again Pitfall sped off. Berrigus followed, knocking the hapless ox out of the way like swatting a fly and breaking wind loudly.

Pitfall weaved between the crowds, dodging a half troll here, slinking swiftly beneath the grasp of two orcs there and skidding to a halt at a point where four paths intersected.

He stood still, open mouthed and was still standing there when Berrigus caught up.

Strewn all across the space formed by the crossroads were shiny stones and sparkling bits of metal, all trodden in with a brown substance that Pitfall's nose told him was goblin chocolate. A potent mix of sugar, cocoa and certain herbs which were known to encourage hallucinations. On looking around he could tell exactly where that had come from because a pair of goblins were arguing profusely with a troll guard to his left, while, to his right, headed away from the partly damaged stall, were small footprints stamped across the remains of whatever had once been formed from the stones and metal.

A slow gaze behind him gifted him a bit more information as to that mystery as a trio of gnomes were standing shaking their heads gently and discussing the failings of parents these days, the mobiles and wind chimes hanging high above their heads looking to be created from very similar pieces. Pretty they looked too, sparkling in the sun which filtered down from above, catching the light just so, and likely very intoxicating for Cholera.

As he felt the attention shift to take in Berrigus, Pitfall indicated the path of the troll toddler's escape and headed off in that direction at a loping run. He could hear the shouts as the others put child and father together and made responsibility, and he figured Berrigus could handle that if need be, what was important was finding Cholera before she destroyed too much else. He thought he heard her then, a familiar giggle echoing from one direction, then another, as if she were teasing him.

Two of the gnomes and a goblin (possibly a purveyor of fine chocolates) started towards Berrigus. Perhaps they considered demanding damages, perhaps they were going to offer parenting advice. We will never know. One look at the distraught troll, for there are few things quite as disturbing as a troll in distress, changed their minds.

Berrigus located Pitfall, who was still following Cholera's footprints through the mayhem. The troll looked for his daughter in vain, then saw his 'hound' run off again.

The guard watched Berrigus disappear in a flurry of dust right behind what appeared to be a small boy. He knew trolls were trouble. His curiosity piqued and looking for a little excitement, the guard shoved the goblins aside and fell into the growing procession. The gnomes, emboldened by the guard now being between them and Berrigus, chased after the trolls yammering like harpies. Not to be left out the goblins followed too.

A human turnip farmer wandered into the quickly emptying area and saw the mayhem. Putting two and two together he loped along behind the goblins.

Pitfall wasn't the only one confused by the acoustics of Xua Kia, Berrigus too could not locate the toddlers familiar giggle nor, surprisingly, her scent. From his higher vantage point, however, the troll did see the corner post of a stall several aisles over bow inward, shake for a second, then topple over. The troll turned, letting Pitfall continue his own way, and crossed into another aisle toward the tottering stall.

"Cholera!" Berrigus cried. Several patrons, misunderstanding entirely, backed away from a fresh fish booth. Angered at the slander, the merman fishmonger grabbed his trident from under the counter and tried to follow. He stood for several moments as a second troll, this one a city guard, three gnomes, two goblin chocolateers, a slightly confused turnip farmer and several curious unseelie faerie passed.

Finally he too joined the procession behind the lumbering Berrigus. The worried father rushed on, blind to all but his endangered daughter.

Oblivious to the mayhem behind him, Pitfall dodged and weaved as best he could, blindly following the troll toddler's footprints and any signs of destruction. Eyes to the ground he failed to see the reaching hand until it had him in its grip and was raising him to eye level.

The ogre dangled him, giving him a little shake and a few coins, half a sandwich and some shiny silver forks and spoons fell from the goblin's pockets to the floor. With a raised eyebrow the ogre shook him again, harder this time, enough to make Pitfall squeal like a little girl as he had little choice but to allow this uncomfortable motion to happen.

"Thief," pointed out the ogre helpfully, stone teeth pointy and sharpened in his gravelly mouth, dark grey skin mottled with charcoal markings and painted red circle tattoos.

"Well, er, yeah," Pitfall admitted reluctantly, reaching to try and adjust his trousers which were rapidly slipping down his legs.

"Where's my stone?" came the next request, piercing black eyes looking deep into the goblin's soul.

"I swear," managed Pitfall shakily, "I don't know. Honest, Molson I don't. It wasn't... urk..." the last as he was shaken a third time, the ogre patting him down roughly to double check.

"I want it back."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure you do," he replied, too quickly, "I don't have it."

That was about when Berrigus and his entourage caught up, having turned back on themselves in pursuit of Cholera and a loud giggle echoed strangely. Up ahead they caught a glimpse of a heavy horse-drawn wagon filled with large pottery urns, one of which was wobbling dangerously against the others, almost as if someone had found a way inside and was deliberately trying to topple it.

Berrigus realized too late that the corner post he saw bow and topple over was due to it being tied to a donkey, and not the fault of his own wayward spawn. With a cry of despair and a loud breaking of wind he doubled back, only to find his way blocked by a city guard.

"What problem, troll?" the guard demanded.

"Baby daughter missing. Must find now. No time fight you." Berrigus responded. The guard, a troll himself, understood perfectly, a troll child loose in Xua Kia could cause irreparable mayhem. The guard fell into step beside Berrigus.

Seeing the two trolls now together, the goblins quickly scattered before they would be expected to assist them. The gnomes, always annoyingly helpful and hearing the exchange, immediately scampered about looking for any small creature remotely resembling a troll. Their pointed little caps bobbed merrily about amongst the crowd. The turnip farmer wandered into the area scratching his head just as the trolls, who were doubling back, passed him in the opposite direction. The Unseelie, seeing no easy way to add to the mayhem, lost interest.

The Triton fishmonger, still looking for a fight, rushed in after the trolls were gone. Confused at the dispersing group, he waved his trident about and demanded an explanation. The gnomes were already 'helping' someone, so he confronted the farmer who was less than helpful. An argument ensued, but Berrigus was by now long gone.

Berrigus found Pitfall dangling from the hand of a dashing hansom ogre. Not having time nor mental ability to chat, the troll struck the ogre squarely between the eyes. "No play now, busy we!" he explained gently.

Molson dropped Pitfall. Slowly realizing that he was now unconscious, the ogre slid to the ground with a pleasant thud. "Stoopid Umtim, playing with pretty ogres when busy thing to do." Berrigus admonished.

The troll paused for a second trying to remember the exact reason for his near hysteria. His head began to hurt as his cranium heated up, making his eyes water. Misunderstanding entirely, three gnomes surrounded Pitfall, pointing at him

threateningly. "Here, we found the baby!" they exclaimed incorrectly in unison.

Berrigus recalled his missing toddler.

The odor of a full trolloc diaper floated towards them with an eerie giggle from a wagon full of amphorae. Berrigus turned his head in unison with the others just in time to see one of the flat bottomed pottery urns wobble menacingly.

"Gerroff!" hissed Pitfall, his angelic features belying the irritated goblin within and he wriggled free of the gnomes to stand beside Berrigus. Then the smell hit his nostrils too and he wrinkled his nose in reaction, following the scent to the disappearing wagon.

The urn seemed to move in slow motion, teetering on the brink of falling then almost correcting itself a couple of times, before, finally, gravity twisted a hand and grabbed it. It sailed in an ungainly slump from the cart to the ground and smashed into sharp shards, revealing itself to not contain any troll toddler. Giggling emanated from one of the others, lilting musically to some ears through the crowded marketplace and, as Pitfall, Berrigus and the others watched, another urn rolled onto the ground.

Turning now in his seat, the dwarf driving frowned unhappily, recognizing easily enough the sound of smashing pottery. The horses continued on a straight path until he pulled them up to a stop, the urns all now dancing precariously as Cholera, sat inside a central pot, played at making the noise happen again.

"What the bloody hell is going on?!" roared the dwarf, pulling the horses up to a sharp, unexpected stop and jumping into the back, grabbing at urns to straighten them.

"Uhoh," muttered Pitfall, charging forward with Berrigus.

As they drew closer, Cholera's urn jumped slightly, bucking from the wagon and landing safely in a large pile of horse muck behind it. With an infectious giggle powering her moves, Cholera rolled it, sending it spinning backwards through the muck towards her father.

The dwarf began to chase the urn, then reconsidered and took shelter behind his wagon. The ever helpful gnomes raced to be the first to locate the toddler, placing themselves between the rolling crockery and Berrigus. Realizing their mistake too late, they were bowled over amid a flurry of giggles and bits of crushed "street muffin". Many other bystanders and busybodies were also showered with the flung poo as the urn gathered speed toward the waiting troll.

Several people broke from the crowd and began to run. Screams broke out, panicking

even more, and soon Pitfall and Berrigus were standing in a stampede of people. The troll reached down and picked up the goblin in one huge fist stating simply, "Umtim stay." Not minding being covered in horse droppings nearly as much as being trampled, Pitfall stopped trying to wriggle free.

Berrigus raised one foot and just as the urn reached him he brought it down, stopping the projectile. A malicious giggle echoed hollowly from within it. Reaching inside with forefinger and thumb, the troll recovered his errant offspring.

Cholera smelled of dirty diaper and rotting cheese (apparently the previous contents of the urn). Her little arms flung wide and latched firmly around her fathers neck. The pair melted into one another, grinding little bits of horse poo between them. Pitfall was dropped, forgotten, onto the now empty street. "DA!" The toddler squealed with glee.

The troll guard, the only other being still close to them, smiled hideously at the reunion.

A lone urn, still on the wagon, tottered briefly and then rolled onto the street with a loud "KABOOM!"

Bits of stone, pottery, and wood were hurled into the air as the wagon and it's remaining contents were pulverized in the explosion, along with a good sized section of pavement. The trolls and Pitfall were thrown backwards violently and Cholera went flying from her fathers grasping arms.

The market went completely silent following the explosion.

Dust settled.

Berrigus slowly stood up, surveying the scene. If he were the type that thought much, the troll would have realized that the dwarf had been smuggling explosives. The wagon, horse, and dwarfish driver were gone, along with the surrounding street. They were replaced by a large crater. Bits of wood, pottery, stone, horse-meat, and dwarf-flesh still filtered down out of the air. Ignoring the occasional sound of debris settling the street was silent. Somewhere in the distance the footfalls of approaching city guards began to be heard.

Somewhere far behind him Berrigus heard a demonic giggle punctuated by a childish "Wheeee!"

As a couple of City Guard trolls and a small team of local market security half ogres showed up on the scene in a clatter of weaponry, loud curses and leather boots, Pitfall gazed unsteadily upwards trying to follow the excited sound of troll toddler. Wiping

gobbets of flesh from his face aided his vision and he groaned as his body, bruised and battered by the explosion, protested the slightest movement. Then, eyesight finally focusing on the figure silhouetted against light sky and fluffy white cloud, he exhaled with a whistle.

For above Xua Kia, great wide wingspan gradually taking her higher and further from their potential reach, was a gryphon. Long, slender legs gripped its sides giving them a glimpse of its possibly human rider, and, grasped before them, pudgy legs twitching excitedly, was Cholera. Then the winged lion/eagle gained even more height in a rapid ascent and the shape blurred beyond close recognition.

"*(^&\$£\$*!" swore Pitfall in one of the more guttural goblin dialects, then, switching to something Berrigus could understand, he added, "your, er, friends must want her real bad."

Berrigus watched in awe as his daughter began to fade from view in the gryphon's talons. He began to search the debris around him frantically, but it was mostly dust and bits of obliterated merchandise. "Need rock!" he bellowed. Getting no immediate response, he repeated, "NEED ROCK!!"

Ever helpful, one of the gnomes stepped up with a rather lovely collection of pink, blue, and green pebbles in his little hand. "Here!" it exclaimed, "Here are some rocks!" Berrigus reached forward and grasped the little man. Raising one huge foot skyward, he broke wind loudly and swung his arm skyward like a trebuchet. The pebbles made a lovely spattering on color in the greyish brown debris as the gnome was launched violently into the air.

Due in part to his pointed hat and cute little turned up shoes the gnome was quite aerodynamically sound. Add to this the loud scream which faded as he gained altitude, and he did a quite impressive imitation of a short, chubby skyrocket.

The gryphon's rider, now safely over the harbor, banked right slightly to get a nice view of the disappearing troll and offered an obscene gesture ground-ward. The wind pulled on his billowing cloak and he pulled it tighter around himself. He looked down at his chubby prize, which was giggling softly and chewing happily on the talon that held it. He began to admonish the little trolloc about chewing on the only thing between her and a very long fall.

With a truncated scream and a loud thud the gnome struck the griphon's head, snapping the mount's neck and causing it to lurch violently. The rider was flipped out of the saddle. Plummeting toward the water along with the now deceased gnome, he screamed out a spell to protect himself from the impact. The gryphon's wings locked in death, a

survival measure that made it a rather large glider. Now riderless and out of control, it swung out over the harbor and slightly southwest.

Berrigus, quite awed that he had actually hit the thing, watched the gryphon disappear. His last sight of it was somewhere towards the southwest, perhaps over the southern point or the islands near the harbor's mouth.

"Shit," he said to Pitfall, "long walk now." Gathering his friend under his arm he crunched the colorful pebbles into the ground and quickly marched southwards out of the market.

Encounter at the Dalvus Gate

It was after dusk by the time that Berrigus and Pitfall reached the westernmost Dalvus gate, and so the gate was closed for the evening. Although he had enough coin for an inn's room, he didn't much feel like the warmth of a public room. Besides, the inn's in this neighborhood wouldn't cater to a troll's need. Also, trolls were a bit miserly.

They located a small alleyway along the city wall and tucked themselves into a sheltered corner next to a drunken centaur down on his luck. The centaur didn't seem to mind, having passed out over an hour earlier. Berrigus could just hear the waters of the Pedara gurgling on the other side of the wall between the centaur's loud snores.

A happy family of fat little rats scurried up to offer themselves as tasty snacks, and Berrigus obliged himself of their hospitality, offering one to Pitfall. "Here," he said, "Umtim eat."

With a loud yawn and his customary breaking of wind, the troll slipped off into a fitful sleep.

They may have been happy to take his coin when he was buying drinks, but when it came to him wanting a bed for the night, most innkeepers told him to take a hike. He clearly wasn't suited for a normal bed, and they didn't want what they considered to be a cross-breed sharing stables with their beloved horses. Who needs their pathetic comforts anyway?

Thus, with the hour getting late and way too much ale under his skin, Shalon had ambled down an alleyway, found he'd reached a dead end by mistake, and just collapsed on the spot. He probably wouldn't have woken if the nearest building had toppled down on him, he was that drunk. He had nothing to celebrate, just plenty to forget. Everyone needs a hobby.

He awoke the next morning feeling like his brain had been replaced by a rock. His head felt three times as heavy as it should have, his eyes were out on stalks (at least it felt that way), and he felt irritable. More than usual.

Turning around in the tight alleyway with a six-foot back end was a problem in itself, but to get turned around and find the rest of the alleyway blocked off by a troll and its excrement <sorry Pitfall, he's not thinking too clearly right now!> was just the icing on the cake.

Not in the mood to do anything else, he used his powerful forelegs to plant a hoof into the troll's side several times.

He didn't bother sizing the troll up properly. He was just as tall, but probably didn't quite weigh as much... certainly had better features, but that wouldn't really matter if the troll decided to take offence. But he knew enough about those types of creatures to know that it would probably consider this foreplay.

"Wake up you lazy sh*t!," he said loudly - not loud enough to attract attention from the guards at the gate - but enough to give a nice accompaniment to more kicking of the troll's side.

Berrigus was having a sweet nightmare. He dreamt that his life had turned out differently and the Troll King (may he rot in peace) had accepted him as a suitable husband for his beloved daughter. It was their honeymoon and he had fallen asleep in her warm embrace. Now, for some unknown reason (perhaps, he thought randily, a replay) she was nudging him insistently.

"Wake up you lazy sh*t!," she whispered sweetly.

"Not yet, my rotting fungus, me sleep more," he mumbled sleepily. The prodding continued, more insistent this time. He slapped at her playfully, but she slipped away and his hand struck the hard brick of the bed. It stung pleasantly and he opened his eyes.

At first his sleep clouded and insufficient mind wondered what a centaur was doing in his royal boudoir. He began to realize that the centaur was angry, and from it's smell quite hung over as well. A second thought wandered timidly into his mind (waiting until the first had left, for his mind could only hold one at a time). It occurred to the troll that he was in a cramped alley and not a bedroom in the royal palace of the Troll King. With an almost audible pop the nightmare faded and Berrigus realized his life was much worse than any nightmare at the moment.

He grinned happily.

He scratched several unmentionable places and broke wind rather voluminously. Berrigus stood up to his full height and stretched his massive arms over his head, letting reluctant fresh air into his armpits. He picked his nose and then rubbed his front teeth with the same muscular digit.

Morning routine somewhat finished, he considered his current antagonist. The centaur appeared to be shabby and dirty, probably because of a nights drinking and sleeping in

the alley. His disposition was rather belligerent, even for a hung over centaur. All in all he seemed to Berrigus a rather pleasant fellow. The troll turned to his assailant and commented, "Crappy morning, huh. Who you?"

Not waiting for an answer, Berrigus picked Pitfall up and shook him violently. "Wake up, Umtim, you lousy little turd!" he bellowed gently.

Angelic in appearance he might be, but now it was under a good layer of filth, sweat and garbage. Pitfall's wide pale green eyes opened to greet another morning in the city, his brain rattling against his skull in the traditional wake-up call of goblins everywhere. Strawberry blond curls were ragged and darkened with dirt and he could smell four different odorous which wrinkled his nose in pleasure and hunger, the rat from last night already wearing off.

"H-h-huh?" he managed, voice in motion as he was, "I-I-I-I'm aw-w-w-wake!"

The wash of vertigo at his position above the ground caught up with him as Berrigus continued shaking, trolls not particularly quick on the uptake and below, there was the faint sensation of something else. A horse with a human head? Pitfall gave up trying to focus and waited to be dropped, immediately moving to the side as soon as his little legs hit ground, hunting for anything edible. The rubbish sacks from a nearby tavern smelt particularly appetizing and he began rustling through them, deliberately avoiding any conversation with either the centaur or troll until they had sorted their own issues out.

Berrigus stood in the alley like a dung heap. At first he watched Pitfall scurry off, then the centaur started talking and the trolls face went blank. Little beads of sweat appeared as he tried to follow the creatures thoughts, but centaurs were just so HARD to understand.

The troll picked up about a third of the words, which hit him like a bucket of cold water. What he thought the centaur wanted was to escort them to a place where every morning was crappy and they would be happy, if only Berrigus would shift his ass. "Berrigus not swing sideways. Besides, must find daughter and maybe fight gryphon." He grinned at the prospect of beating such a beautiful flying creature as a gryphon to a bloody pulp.

Berrigus tried to turn, but found he couldn't. He started to take out the wall on his right side, then remembered his mission. Knocking a building down would only delay him. As he backed himself out of the alley he offered, "Maybe you find nice faun or sphinx to share crappy mornings with."

Finally out of the alley and able to turn, Berrigus looked around for the familiar head of blond curls. "UMTIM!," he bellowed, "WHERE YOU ROTTING CARCASS!"

Not waiting for a response, and having forgotten the centaur completely, the troll gathered in his surroundings. He was in a small square just inside the gate.

The square was neatly kept, swept well and free of debris. The businesses around it were freshly painted and pretty merchandise could be viewed through spotless windows. A small group of neat little carts were set up along one side, and the local fisherfolk were selling the morning's catch from them. One of the carts was much less well kept than the others, and Berrigus approached it.

An overweight fishwife sat behind the cart. She was missing most of her teeth and her greasy black locks of hair kept falling into her piglike eyes. Berrigus took an instant liking to her, and perused her wares.

The fish she offered were at best questionable. The troll counted slowly on his fingers, selected four slimy brownish fish, and dug two green coppers from somewhere deep inside his clothing. He held out the coins in one massive hand. She took them and nodded. No words were exchanged between them, no haggling occurred. The whole transaction was just too weird for both of them.

Berrigus turned and dropped three of the fish into his gaping maw like doughnuts. He once again looked around and bellowed "UMTIM, GOT BREAKFAST!" He waved the fourth vile fish in the air violently.

He noticed the centaur and remembered him (a troll can only process one interaction at a time). "What you want now, dumbass?" Berrigus asked.

Shalon could only stand gaping at Berrigus like a drunken fool. It's not that he was still drunk (though admittedly not entirely sober yet), or that he lacked the synapses to make coherent thought... it's just that the troll wasn't making too much sense. No surprises there.

Apparently, there was a daughter involved, and a gryphon... Not sure quite where that came from, thought Shalon, but he let it go momentarily. There was a good chance that if he missed the rest of the conversation and needed it repeating, the troll wouldn't be able to oblige. And then suddenly, something coherent - but truly weird - came out of its hole (the top one, stay with me here).

"Troll know what faun is - I mean," said Shalon, shaking his head violently to try and stop himself from sliding down the path his speech was obviously going, "you know what a faun is?"

But the second brain cell in Berrigus' head had clearly fired out of turn and he was already onto his next thought, and wandering off towards the market. Checking to make sure his valuables were still intact (his purse! Goodness, what's wrong with you people?!), Shalon ran a quick inventory and then tried to follow, but got caught in a morning crowd, all obviously intending the very same thing (going to market, not catching the troll).

By the time the crowd cleared sufficiently Berrigus had gained some distance on him, and he really wasn't in a hurry... in fact, why was he even bothering? Well, truth be told, he was intrigued by the daughter comment, and wanted to just clarify a few things before he found another tavern to drown his sorrows in.

Like a rash you don't want to explain to your wife, Shalon reappeared to Berrigus... just in time to see the fishwife smile a truly traumatic smile after her transaction. Clearly SHE knew a good deal when she saw one, even if Berrigus didn't.

"What you want now, dumbass?" Berrigus asked.

"You're not exactly the star performer here either, buddy!," snapped Shalon, not realizing the troll was being friendly. "Do you always just hand over the first two shiny things that come out of your... well, I don't want to know where? You just got ripped off you great lump!"

"And while we're on the subject of being too stupid to know better, exactly who's daughter were you thinking of going looking for? Please tell me YOU haven't produced offspring?!"

Berrigus had just wanted to greet the creature. As soon as the centaur started talking Berrigus realized it was a mistake. He was neither a performer nor a star, so he disregarded the first comment as mindless drunken centaur meandering. Also his concern about being ripped off was touching, but meaningless since Berrigus had probably stolen the coppers in the first place. By now he was developing a headache.

When the centaur asked whose daughter he was looking for Berrigus's mouth opened in awe, why in the name of the septic God would he look for somebody else's daughter? Sarcasm was sadly wasted on the troll, why would this centaur want him to tell it he didn't have offspring when he had told it he was looking for his daughter. The troll's hands went to his head.

He screamed in pain.

Glass broke somewhere.

Several city guards left their posts and came running into the square. Two score more followed them from the wall. By the time Berrigus's head had cooled down sufficiently the pair of them, troll and centaur, were surrounded.

The guards had apparently dealt successfully with belligerent trolls before. While the guards encircled the offender, several others cleared a path to the gate. Ten of them got underneath Berrigus and before he could figure out what was happening they ran to the open gate, throwing his massive bulk into the road outside.

Just to be safe, the centaur followed in short measure.

Berrigus stood up. Most people would have brushed the dust from themselves, but with a troll it was kind of useless so he just stretched. The troll looked down at the centaur, who was just getting up himself. "Well, thanks. That special. Now can't come back in this gate. You part horse or jackass?!?"

Not stopping to allow the centaur to answer, or start asking more difficult questions, he continued, "Look, me daughter lost. Carried off by griffin, okay. Umtim, me, go south. Maybe find. Maybe smash pretty griffin to bloody pulp, dunno. Me not performer, run tavern. Me not star, see not shiny." He held out his arms to prove he was not, in fact, one bit shiny. "No more silly question, okay dumbass? We be friendly, not smash you, no problems."

It wasn't that Berrigus was adverse to a brawl, in fact he rather enjoyed them, he just didn't have the time. He began wondering what it would be like to brawl with something with six limbs. Once again Berrigus got distracted, this time because Pitfall sauntered through the gates. He picked up the fish where it had fallen under him and been ground into the road surface. Holding the now filthy, gravel encrusted fish over his head he bellowed, "Umtim! Got Breakfast!"

Pitfall, beneath his unpleasantly bewitched exterior, was a goblin. He hadn't survived this long, transformations notwithstanding, by being the center of attention and he knew how to disappear into the skanky, putrid darkness of rubbish bins when trouble showed. So, when the troll moved, the centaur followed and the whole debacle with noise and City Guards followed, he was nowhere to be seen.

Once things calmed down, he pulled his boyish good looks out of the garbage, lazily picking day old food out of his curls and chomping noisily on it. Looking around it wasn't hard to follow the sequence of prior events and, swift moves belying his small frame, Pitfall reached out and snagged a rat as it crawled over his foot.

He was just slurping the tail through his lips as he strolled up to the yelling Berrigus and he looked, slightly nervously, up at the vast figure of troll.

"Hey, thanks," he nodded, accepting the fish and putting it in his pocket for later. He had a feeling it was going to be another one of Those Days and unless Berrigus was planning on beating him again, he was going to have to walk a lot. Thinking about it, the beating sounded more fun, "Who's that?" he asked the troll, jerking a thumb at Shalon.

Between centaur and troll, they probably had the strength of twenty men, and yet twenty men or so had thrown them out onto their behinds. Being too drunk to stand upright was embarrassing, being seen talking to a troll was embarrassing, but being thrown out of a city was humiliating. Shalon did have SOME pride. Had, rather.

"Nice going, lard-ass," he commented calmly. "We were doing fine until you broke every window in the square. I hear they have special things called amphitheatres for people to sing like that, you should offer your services."

"Well, I had nothing to do before, now I have less than nothing to do. So if you're going to try and find your daughter - and frankly, I don't even want to know how that happened - then I guess I'm coming too. You owe me one for what just happened. And besides, finding her is going to take brains... need I say more?"

Shalon adjusted the leather strap across his chest, settling it so that his purse was in the right place again. He looked at Pitfall, and decided he was a curious mix of disgusting beauty. "I'm Shalon. You must be UMTIM!!!!," he said, mocking the shouting of the name. "Did I get that right? And what should I call you?," he asked, facing the question to Berrigus.

He waited a [long] while for the answer.

"Well, do you even know which direction they went in? You know, which way griffin fly when take daughter?"

"No," Pitfall said as an aside to Shalon, confident that Berrigus' mental processing would keep the troll from overhearing, "I'm not. But it's probably easier if you just call me that, so as not to cause any confusion. You were in the alley?" he asked, sniffing the air pointedly and nodding with approval, "If you weren't, good job," he added, "you stink like you slept in a brewery vat then rolled in offal."

"That," he added, pointing to the troll, "is Berrigus. He owns a tavern in Mercari. We're looking for his daughter. It's a long story. Well, okay, no it isn't really, but I can't be bothered to explain it all. Let's just say she's wandered off and we need to find her," he

looked at Shalon as if half daring, half expecting him to argue. If the centaur wanted of course, he could easily trample Pitfall into the dust, but Pitfall was used to abuse and yet still hadn't learned to keep his mouth shut.

"Southwest."

"She could be anywhere," Pitfall added, "she was on the back of a gryphon at the time and Berrigus here," Shalon could see that despite Pitfall's apparent disregard for respect in general, he favoured the troll with some, "smacked it in the head with a gnome. So I think you could safely say it's trajectory might have been affected. Chollie's definitely in that general direction, or at least she was last night. If she's not underwater, we should probably try the cliffs or the islands off the south tip of the harbour. Any chance of a lift?" he asked, looking up at the centaur with a semi-amused expression and only flinching very slightly in anticipation of a smack from those lethal looking hooves.

Pitfall's reply gave Shalon pause. He was already regretting shouting due to his head stepping up the discomfort, so he decided that trying to think on that one could wait until later, when he could ask the kid alone. The answer was probably going to be far less interesting than it seemed, but it was worth asking at least.

"I'm afraid I was," said Shalon in response to the alley question. "I would have been long gone before you even realized, except that your... friend here," said the centaur, nodding to Berrigus, "was blocking my exit."

Perhaps surprisingly, Shalon simply nodded to the hint of a story concerning Cholera. Having tried to talk to Berrigus recently, being able to hold a conversation, even if brief, with someone who made sense and could string syllables together was quite refreshing, and he really wasn't interested in the story anyway. Actually, he wasn't interested in the chase after the daughter, but he didn't seem to have any options left having been kicked out of Araulmor.

"Interesting use for a gnome, I have to say," replied Shalon. "I must try it for myself one day, it could be entertaining. I'm also glad we didn't start trotting off without a better direction - I can see why you two work so well together."

In response to the request for a lift, the centaur looked at Pitfall with very little emotion. He was no stranger to giving people lifts - it was how he had earned coin since he was ostracized from his clan way back. People paid handsomely for a ride you could actually talk to, the novelty value rarely wore off. It had been a while since his last job, but he had done alright in terms of coin to last for a while.

"If we were likely to be going at speed, I'd say yes, quite happily," he replied. "But unless your friend Berrigus is faster than he looks, it would be pointless since we still wouldn't make it any faster. And I'm not carrying you for the sake of it. Fair?"

"Shall we? There's a half-orc guard up there giving me the evils and I'd rather be shot of this damn place."

While his companions discussed the situation, Berrigus took a deep breath of morning air. It was sweet and pure, coming off the rolling farmland south of the Pedara. Fortunately for the troll it now also bore the scent of unwashed centaur and the residual tang of the alley the three of them had slept in. He found it barely palatable.

What he didn't smell was trolloc diaper, so he knew that Cholera wasn't south. This was obviously instinctual, not deduced. He slowly turned around, searching the landscape. "No see," he mumbled. Perhaps it was "No sea," for he turned westward along the road which followed the northern shore of the river.

Trusting Pitfall to follow, and assuming the centaur would too, Berrigus strode down the road at a brisk, deliberate pace.

After he had cleared the area around the city gate, and realizing that he had probably missed something, Berrigus turned to the centaur. "What name you?" he asked it, "and what story?" Anticipating a meaningless barrage of words he added, "Keep simple, stupid."

Tiago

Tiago knew, deep down in his bronzed chest, that he should not have taken the bet. But the ale had been flowing steadily and even when he was sober (not as frequent a thing as it used to be) Tiago Darocha, Lance of the South, was sure that there was nothing he could not successfully hunt.

Having left Araulmor after the incident with Song and the escaping dreams, Tiago had worked his way south along the coast for the next few months, hunting, tracking, trapping, whatever put food on the table and coin in his pocket, happy to leave the city life behind him.

That was how he ended up in the Drunken Rat, a real dive of a place on the coastline, perhaps half a days travel south of Araulmor. The Drunken Rat was exactly the kind of seedy place that you might imagine, but their drink was cold and the barmaids were warm, and that is all Tiago, a rather simple fellow all told, could have asked for.

He had been sitting there, more than half in his cups, a tall mug of frothing ale in one hand, a handful of Melody's (Melody? Melanie? Menaree? He never could keep barmaids names straight) bounteous bosom in the other. And he was expounding at length, as he was wont to do (to various levels of irritation or amusement from the other bar patrons who had little patience for his lengthy orations, which had, in the hunters short time in this area grown to legendary status. Legendary in the fact that the locals (with the notable exception of the barmaids) had begun to dread the next time the hunter made one of his rare journeys to the tavern for fear of having to listen to them) in a perhaps too loud voice of his accomplishments; the creatures he had hunted and killed, the lands he had seen.

And he had just had to go and boast, he reflected again to the time of the pulsing, sharp headache of his hangover, that there was nothing that he could not track down and kill. He missed the knowing look that passed between the locals at that, and a moment later, one of them, a fisherman by the look of him, with dark curls and an olive skin, stood up and said, "I'll take that wager. I know of something that you will fail in, my friend, a real challenge, and I'll bet you half a dozen gold sovereigns against its head that you cannot track and kill it."

Even then, Tiago had not been completely a fool. A wary look had come over his face as he replied, "I don't hunt dragons."

A growing smile had spread over the fisherman's face at this, and then he went on to explain that in the wooded areas between the Drunken Rat's esteemed walls and the

boundaries of Araulmor, had been seen a fabulous Rainbow Winged Serpent, much smaller than a dragon and with feathered wings, and that it is said that a feather plucked from the plume right above and between its eyes could grant its bearer either a wish or drink from the well of life. The sailor (and the other grinning locals who had now gathered to watch this sporting of the drunk hunter), after a bit of bantering, raised his bet to the amazing sum of twelve golden sovereigns for the dirty deed, and what was Tiago to do? He was an excellent hunter, of that he had not been denied. But worst of all, he considered blearily through his throbbing headache, he had been proud. Proud with a capital P. And he had taken the wager.

And then he had taken Melody once for luck.

And twice because.....well, just because.

And now.....And now he stood here, leaning against a tree out in the middle of nowhere, chill and clammy even in the morning light, peering blearily about him between wincing at the frequent bursts of pain behind his eyes.

Gripping his spear, he pushed himself away from the tree and began moving forward again, moving silently despite his near poisoned state.

Tiago was (in his better moments) a stout warrior, bred in a small valley in the South, where he learned the ways of the true hunter. Eventually though, he had surpassed the challenges offered by this area and had left home to search for more. Well, now he was getting it.

His hair was long and coal black, wore tied back into a long ponytail, held by a simple leather thong, dyed blue. His facial features were well cast in a distantly aristocratic way and he wore long mustaches which sparkled as he walked, due to the crystals tied into them. His body was bronzed, almost golden in its tint, and leanly muscled (where it was not covered by leather, cloth or furs) in the way that can only be gained by the hard, everyday life of living off the land.

His grip on his spear was tight and purposeful (perhaps in his mental image of himself, but if truth be told, his hands were a bit shaky this morning), his trusty, handcrafted longbow strapped to his back. Coils of thin, sturdy rope were coiled around his waist, right below the sheaths that held the longsword and the blocky hunting knife, one to each side, balancing the other.

Still blinking against his internal misery, Tiago comforted himself with the knowledge that he at least knew he was on the things trail. When he had first entered these woods, not long before the sun came up, he had at first wondered if he was not indeed on a fools

errand, something made up by the other bar patrons as kind of a jest. After all, he had never heard of a Rainbow Winged Serpent before, and he thought he was fairly familiar with the Lexicon of Known Creatures, having hunted most of them at one time or another.

And then, he revised his judgement and simultaneously found the Winged Serpents trail in the most simple way possible. He came to the edge of a clearing just as the Serpent was exiting on the other side. Rainbow had not been an exaggeration in title, the creature, a bloated serpent perhaps twelve feet in length, one foot in girth with protruding fangs. Its tight fitting scales covered all the colors in the rainbow, shimmering in flowing patterns. Its wings were a deep crimson, fading to yellow and then to white at the tips. A tuft of royal blue feathers sprouted from above the serpents eye ridge like some kind of bizarre crest or headpiece. One pair of small, vestigial arms sprouted from the upper length, and Tiago could not have not seen it across the clearing if he had tried.

Since then, he had just been following it at a generous distance, watching it move and trying to analyze its actions. Several hours later, his head hurt a lot more than it did before, as he sobered up, but he was no closer to figuring it out, all of its actions seemingly random and in no deference to what it had previously done or not done. Nor did it seem to mind him following it. Its writhing form had coiled around to observe him several times, but if it felt threatened in any way it made no sign of it.

And now, he realized as he moved into a thicket, trying to force himself to be more alert, the trail might be at an end. It had finally come to ground....in an annoyingly tight clustered area of thorn trees.....and did not seem to be moving. It was time to close with it. He'd take it if he could. If not, he could still learn valuable things about how to kill it if he ended up having to flee himself. He eased himself steadily through the brush, spear held at the ready, closing on the serpents form at a steady pace.

Nothing Tiago had seen before would have warned him about the impressive, no..... fantastic speed with which the Winged Serpent struck at the hunter. Its lackadaisical earlier meanderings through the forest bore no resemblance at all to this quick, powerful passage as the Serpent threw itself at him. Had Tiago been at his 100% best he might..... might have had a chance to at least get out of the way of the first assault. As it was, he stood no chance.

The scintillating serpent wrapped his leg, sinuously twisting up and around his waist and chest, pinning his arms to his side, all in lightning fast speed, its bobbing head coming to rest, mouth open, fangs dripping amber liquid, right over his own surprised face.

"Whatsssssss stheeee matterrrr, huuuumonn," it hissed tauntingly at him as it constricted

its coils tightly around him. "You doooo nottt like changingg from stheeee hunterr to the huuunted, dooo you?" And with those words, the Rainbow Feathered Serpent spread its wings and thrust itself up into the sky, and Tiago was forced to accompany it.

Tiago stomach felt like it was in his knees as the beast drug him into the air, and he knew he was looking pale. He was being hoisted in mid-air, trapped and constricted by coils of rainbow, and stared down by the unswerving and mesmerizing gaze of the obviously enraged serpent. He had never been so helpless in the face of an enemy, and yet, he could not help but admire it. The serpent was a worthy foe and a crafty one, obviously more crafty than he was. It instilled in him a kind of calm pride that he should die at the hands of such a creature. There would be a kind of honor in that, to die from such a potent foe.

But as the land dropped away below them, the serpent proved that he was not yet done with him. "I ammm amasssssszzed that you ttttried sssssssuch a ssssssimple move againsssst me. And thatttt you fffell fffffor ssssssuch a ssssssimple russssse. I am a being unique innnn the world, and itttt wwwwill take morrrre than that toooo take my headddd."

Its glare bore down into his, and Tiago thought he could feel its mind trying to press in on his own. He did not fight it, did not know how and would probably not have thought to do it even if he had ever heard of it being possible. Luckily for him, what he could not do himself was accomplished for him, by his hangover. A surprising yet strong defense against mental intrusion.

"Sssssso, ssssssurely thisssss wassss nott your idea alone." the serpent insisted, still bearing him upwards, "Ssssssoooo whichhh of my old enemisssss ssssent you? Wasssss it Kandria the Sssseer? Orrrr wassss it thatttt alchemissst Sssssunder? Orrrr theeee ghossst princce? Telllll mee nowww, I will knowww ifff you lieeee!"

Unable to control himself, he belched loudly, a nervous reaction most likely, and then, shamefacedly, admitted, "It was a bar bet."

"Whhaaat?" the serpent asked in surprise, eyes widening, "Whhaaat wassss thatt?"

As clearly as he could, with the tight coils constricting his chest, Tiago cleared his throat and said, "It was a bar bet."

The serpents eyes were cold, emotionless rocks now, as it asked flatly, "Youu huuunted dowwn meeee, a unique beingggg, onne offf stheeee unreplaccable wondersss offf stheeee world? Onnn a barr bett?"

Despite his situation, Tiago had the decency to look embarrassed. "Umm, well.....yeah. I, ummm, didn't know you were intelligent or anything.....", Tiago's voice faded to nothing at the growing look of anger and disdain the beast was shooting him.

The serpent's words were bit short and tight as it asked, "How much was the bet for?"

Tiago brightened briefly as he quickly said, "A dozen golden sovereigns. A princely sum for a hunt. And my honor, of course."

"I wouldn't dirrrttyy my ssssscales withhh your blood!!!" the serpent hissed at Tiago, making him jerk his head back as much as possible, in shock, "A meassssssly handfullll offff ssssovereigns! I have beeeeen ransssssomed withhh kingdomsssss befforre andd you ssssseek to endd mee forr a fewww coinssss!"

In its rage, the serpent gave him one last terrible squeeze, quick and hard, forcing the air out of him, then, just as suddenly, releasing completely, tumbling Tiago out into the open air.

Where he fell.....

And he fell.....

As the land rushed up at him, Tiago knew that there were only two things that might happen which would logically let him survive a fall of such heights. The first was, if he timed it perfectly, landed just perfectly, and rolled with his fall while diverting his momentum in another direction, would allow some chance of survival with only the breaking of several bones. In each limb.

The odds of this happening were extremely low. The second thing that could happen would be that he would land on a troll, ricochet off him into the relatively soft side of a centaur and then, to top it off, tumble down on top of a small child.

Though equally as unlikely as the first option, this is almost exactly what happened.

Tiago's falling, flailing body slammed into the upper hunch of Berrigus back, a feeling which Tiago later described as 'running face first into a odorous, spongy rock. Then he tumbled sideways, still rolling with the impact, and careened into Shalons furry side, only to then fall at the centaur's side, right atop a small, golden haired street urchin. Pitfall, the 'urchin' was quicker than he looked though, sidestepping his drop neatly and allowing his graceful, face first descent into the mud of the road to go unhindered by further interruption.

Amazed that he was alive, Tiago convulsed and turned over onto his side, spitting out road-mud. Looking up and seeing the odd trio looking back down at him, he wondered if perhaps he had died after all. Or at least taken a hard enough knock to the head to make him start seeing things.....

"Apparitions or not," he groaned aloud after a long moment, "I thank you for breaking my fall. And if any of you, my mental mirages, would be so kind as to aid me to my feet, I think it is far beyond time for me," he paused a moment, looking confused, then corrected himself, "errr, us, that is, to find something alcoholic and try to drown in it."

"Unless," he droned on, seeming to have gone on automatic, as he dazedly tried to sit up out of the caking mud, "you really are merely figments of my imagination. In that case," he mumbled on, " I am you and you are me and we are all together and I won't really have to share any of the alcohol....."

Back to the Story- Pedara Road

Before the centaur could answer the party was interrupted by a falling human. He struck Berrigus squarely between his hunched shoulders, rolled off and slammed into Shalon, and barely missed crushing Pitfall. "Asshole," Berrigus mumbled.

At first, Shalon immediately assumed Berrigus had lashed out at his side for some inexplicable reason. Conversation had run dry immediately following the personal details he had given out, leading to them tramping quietly along. Troll ambled along, boy skipped along, and centaur trotted along slowly, none of them saying much. It would have been amusing, if it weren't so irritating.

It took a small moment to realise something new had dropped amongst them, and had been the cause of the pain now in his flank. It was a humanoid, and it was speaking. Where the hell it had come from was perhaps something they would wonder for a long while, but right now the three of them could only look at his pitiful form, prone in the mud.

"If I had a bottle, I certainly wouldn't be sober enough to be involved in this little adventure," said Shalon bitterly, wishing himself that he had something else to drink. He hadn't thought about it until Tiago mentioned it. Great.

"Explain yourself. Or I'll get him to sit on you," he added, nodding towards Berrigus.

Berrigus considered the human who had just fallen from the sky. He seemed to be dressed as a hunter, and from the smell of him a rather drunken one. He also smelled heavily of forest loam and reptile, which was curious as he had just fallen out of a clear morning sky. The troll scratched his back where the man had struck him and looked up. He caught a glimpse of light, like a touch of a rainbow or a mirage.

Had he been a smarter creature Berrigus would have related the glimmer to the man. Had he been in the least bit curious or clever he would have wondered why a drunken hunter had just fallen on him. Instead he turned to Shalon with a blank expression and asked again, "So, what name you?"

Shalon's eyes snapped sideways to the troll, his head still throbbing too much to add glare to the malice already there. Still, there was always a chance the troll recognized his own limitations and was actually announcing that he himself was stupid, and that's why it had to be kept simple. Yes, the centaur decided, that I can accept.

"I'm Shalon, son of Gaius. I used to be a guard for my clan, but I lost my status thanks to

some stupid mare who claimed I had slept with her. Her mate had me removed from duty, and then ousted from the clan. I earned myself coin by carrying people around, but was at a bit of an all-time low recently... hence ending up in an alley."

He looked across at Berrigus, who was simply staring at him.

"Me Shalon, was guard, woman centaur lied, I got thrown out. Have job, felt bad. Here now."

Light entered Berrigus' eyes, and Shalon nodded. That time he had gotten through.

Tiago peered blearily around him at the three odd personages standing around and above his prone form. Perhaps they were figments of his jostled imagination, but whether they were or not, none of them were offering him a hand up. The troll, in fact, had barely registered his presence, merely giving him a brief look before turning back to one of the others.

The centaur though, he was talking to him, and the tone was not excessively friendly.

As none of them showed any inclination to either help him or take him up on his offer of finding something to drink, Tiago painfully levered himself up out of the mud until he was standing before Shalon. He took a second to try and flick off the worst of the mud and then attempted (failing badly) to take on a dignified pose.

"Explain myself?" Tiago demanded groggily, "I should think it would be obvious my half equine fellow. I have been delivered from the heavens, here, to this place. A place," he added in an ominous tone, "distressingly vacant of alcoholic beverages."

"Yet it must be some sort of sign," Tiago went on in a sulky voice, "for what are the odds that your mountainous friend would be in the specific spot to break my fall on my return to the earth? So perhaps it should be me asking you the questions?"

The string of curses falling from Pitfall's lips overshadowed any politeness from their drop-in companion and they seemed endless, inventive and far beyond the usual achievements of a young lad. Clearly this boy had known access to some seriously depraved areas of society and its darker underbelly. When he finally did stop, exhausting even his supply of coarse words and insults, he regarded Tiago with an unpleasant glare. It wasn't bad enough that the centaur had refused to let him ride instead of walking, not bad enough that he was in the service of a troll and his infant daughter, but this odd human had to drop from the sky and nearly squash him for no apparent reason whatsoever.

"You don't look like a bloody angel," Pitfall pointed out, moodily and unhelpfully, "so shut up about the heavens."

Standing with his hands on his hips, empowered by the fact he was relatively certain Berrigus wouldn't let anyone kill him, Pitfall faced off Tiago with borrowed bravado.

"We're looking for a troll baby," he stated harshly, "so piss off and let us get on with it. If you want a drink," he jabbed a thumb towards the city gates, "there's plenty that way. We've got enough bloody problems without you trying to KILL ME!" he added with a deep scowl, though not quite enough courage to try any attack on the human.

Berrigus was impressed at Pitfall's command of high cursing, as any troll would be. What he couldn't understand (no surprise there) was why he was honoring the interloper so well. "Umtim," he began, "why you so nice, he not have Chollie. I not even see her where he drop from." Berrigus indicated the open sky, understandably barren of troll toddlers.

The troll turned his attention to the interloper. The centaur offered to have him sit on the human, and perhaps he would, but first he was going to have his say. Berrigus was tired of having his thought train derailed and he was becoming belligerent. Apparently his companions seemed to think a human falling from the sky as significant, but Berrigus did not. (Probably because it required a sense of irony and an imagination, and Berrigus had developed neither.)

The human was complaining about drink, and trying to remove the mud from himself. Berrigus didn't even wonder why anymore, humans were so odd! When it seemed to the troll that the human had composed himself, He addressed the interloper. "You! Maybe you come to bar when we get back and get drunk there. Maybe get ass kicked, me not care. Stop interrupting." (He really was referring to dropping from the sky. Remember-no sense of irony.) "What you story, you see troll baby with injured gryphon up there?" Again the troll indicated the open sky, now barren of human hunters as well.

Without waiting for the response he turned to Shalon. "Me understand guard-girl-exile. Happen me too. Now me girl gone too and Chollie all me have, need to find daughter." He rummaged around in the outer reaches of his clothing and produced a large wineskin. Remembering that most species didn't care for dirt, he gave it a cursory dusting and passed it to Shalon. "Here, why you not ask?" Indicating Tiago he added, "Share he or not, me not care. Umtim get some too."

Pitfall intercepted the wineskin en route to Shalon with a swift leap and grab move, sucking on the alcohol within hungrily. Since outwardly, he was not a goblin but an angelic, if now very grubbily so, eight year old human boy this action might have raised

the odd eyebrow in a normal group of travelers. The group he was in being anything but that, Pitfall spared no thought for it and drank his fill, finally handing it over to the centaur reluctantly.

Tiago blinked stupidly at the dirty but cherubic looking young child for a long moment, taking a moment for it to seep through his dazed brainpan that the child was using such foul language towards him, then shook a shaky finger at the youth and said, "You deserve a spanking."

But that was all he got out before the troll started speaking again, and he dazedly tried to follow the convoluted message, admittedly to no avail, his concentration being lost beyond recognition when the troll produced the soil caked wineskin (the trolls hasty brush actually soiling it more) and passed it around, the youth snagging it and draining a healthy amount before grudgingly passing it to the centaur. Tiagos eyes followed it involuntarily, licking his lips, until he was distracted by a yell from behind.

Lilac

She was almost there. She could see the city she'd come for in the distance. Lilac quickened her pace, despite the fact that her feet hurt like the very hells, and she hadn't really thought that far ahead about what she would do once she reached the city.

She was an escaped slave, and before that an actress. A bloody good actress, actually, but that, she figured, was neither here nor there. And before she'd been an actress, she'd been a farmer's daughter. So what in the world she would have to offer anyone in the city was well beyond her at this particular moment.

She was a tall girl, and though she'd lost a lot of weight during her trek from the slaver cities to here, which had made her rather gaunt, she was still quite comely. She would have been prettier if her clothes hadn't hung off her in rags, too. She would probably have to do something about that, she thought.

Just then, she noticed that, up ahead of her, there was a considerable road block... In the form of a troll, a centaur, and a couple of humans. Some of the members of this party looked decidedly grubbier than she did.

Lilac stopped walking just in sight of them, and her hand flew to her mouth. She'd seen wonders when she'd been traveling in the acting troupe that had employed her, but she'd never seen a centaur before. She had seen trolls, though. Disgusting, smelly creatures with no real appreciation for art of any sort.

She wondered if the group on the road ought to frighten her. It did, sort of. But Lilac was a free woman now, and fear was something she'd long since decided to abandon to the days of her former captivity.

To this end, she marched forward, brazen as you please, and said loudly, "Oy! You're blocking the bloody road. There's some of us as has business in the city." She folded her arms across her chest and attempted to look menacing, which she more or less failed to do because when one is in the presence of a troll, even a loud mouth fails to seem all that intimidating. And the troll was quite large. Lilac reckoned he could squash her into a rather ignominious end if he so chose.

Berrigus turned to the newest interruption. Once again his thought train switched tracks, this time with visible pain. Beads of sweat broke out on his brow causing his dusty face to streak.

This new human, a female, had not dropped from the sky into the mud, but looked as if

she had several hours earlier.

The troll scratched his head, considering the possibility.

He stopped, wondering why he had been scratching his head.

Now that his mind was re-aimed, Berrigus considered the woman. He had seen her type in Mercari before, human females down on their luck, bitter, abusive, and brazen. He kind of liked them, so he decided to exchange morning pleasantries.

"Park yer arse, bitch, we not be long. Day young!"

With a loud belch Pitfall greeted the young woman's arrival, wiping his face on his sleeve and then chewing absently on the wine-flavored material as he regarded her. Tilting his head on one side, his goblin mind appraised her silently for a few seconds then he grinned from ear to ear and made cupping gestures with his hands.

"Looking good beautiful," he told her suggestively, staring up at her chest, "I like filthy women," he chuckled, the large amount of wine only adding to his usual obnoxiousness, "you're a bit tall though. Kneel down?"

Turning, and fighting off a dizzy spell as his bruises screamed in complaint, Tiago viewed the lanky, dirty, rag bestrewn woman stalking boldly towards them, but had little chance say anything before the vulgar youth behind him spouted off.

"Ignore this ignorant chattel, madam," he said, executing a shaky bow that almost toppled the lanky hunter over before struggling back upright, "his companions foul manners have obviously began to rub off on him. But perhaps you can bring to light something which will hurry them in getting out of your way," he went on to say, having finally made some sense of the prattling of the three behind him, "having come from the way they are heading, perhaps you could tell us if you have seen a troll child that direction?"

Lilac grunted as first the troll, then the obnoxious child insulted her. She reminded herself that she was not a slave anymore, and did not have to put up with being insulted in such a manner. Almost instinctively, she reached out as if to clout Pitfall on the back of the head to get him to mind his tongue, but thankfully Tiago seemed to have a few more manners than the rest of his companions. She gave him a wryly grateful smile and put her hands down to her sides, so as to avoid any urge to commit violence on seemingly innocent children.

"No," she said. "I haven't seen a troll baby. Which isn't to say there hasn't been one, just

that I never noticed."

For better or for worse, the hangover was starting to wear off from the centaur. He had been having a skinful for so long now, it was starting to become less effective at knocking him out for the following day - he was no longer lasting until the next evening where he could resume drinking. This sobering thought was interrupted, ironically, by Berrigus complaining about being interrupted. And by Pitfall making up words he'd never even heard of.

The troll's speech about his daughter actually produced a change in Shalon's mind, and, perhaps aided by the dissipation of the alcoholic fuzz, he started to feel a bit less sorry for himself and a bit more sorry for the troll. Big, ugly and foul he may have been, but dedicated to his family he clearly was. <Clearly Yoda my style has become, slightly confused as to why, I am!>

The smell of booze from the wineskin reached his nostrils and his mouth instantly salivated, only to have the boy snatch the skin away. It was like a slap across the face from a less-than-amused barmaid. By the time it reached him there was barely enough to wet his whistle - Pitfall had certainly had his fill! Disgusted, perhaps more with his lack of willpower than the near-empty skin, he held it out for Tiago with a muttered 'Ugh'.

Then Lilac appeared.

And they just keep coming, thought Shalon. Like a scene from some bizarre play, she entered the scene and said her piece, and he could only watch as each person added their bit. What could he possibly say that would make even the slightest difference?

"Touching as this is, the longer we stand here the less chance there is of catching up to your daughter," he finally said roughly in the direction of Berrigus, remembering the troll's plight. "Since this young lady clearly needs the road to herself, why don't we start moving again? I'm sure we can finish arguing and throwing insults on the way."

In a role he was actually starting to enjoy for some twisted reason, he automatically translated for the troll. "Berrigus: move fat ass, sun moving but not us, long delay make daughter harder to find."

He then turned in the general direction of Tiago and Lilac. "We have business to attend to. Feel free to go about your own business." And he started walking off. When drunk, his demeanour was abrasive. Apparently, when sober, his demeanour was abrasive.

For some reason, the centaur's comments galled Lilac even more than the insults had. She gave another disapproving snort. "Well, would you listen to that," she muttered.

"Just new to the city and this is the kind of welcome a girl gets. Hmph!"

Then her senses abruptly left her in a rush and she discovered that she didn't really especially want to continue on alone. After all, she'd been alone for a while, as an escaped slave. And she had no idea what she would do once she hit the city, so she might as well be altruistic.

"You might want to watch it," she called. "There are bandits a couple of days off in the direction you're going. Dunno if they're in the habit of stealing troll babies, but they're a nasty lot in any case... Even nastier than you lot, which is saying something."

Like most of the rest of the gentle sex of which she was a part, she expected this group to be so grateful for her little tidbit of information that they might offer some help--or at the very least more of a pleasant attitude toward her. She was probably going to be extremely disappointed.

What seemed abrasive to the humans was actually quite friendly to the troll, so Berrigus was a bit confused about the body language within the group. (Understatement, no surprise here!) The male, the hunter who had fallen into their midst, appeared distant and unfriendly in his speech but fairly amicable. The female, however, was at first very friendly, actually exchanging a trolloc greeting. Now her body language waffled between aloof, friendly, and antagonistic. Berrigus had responded to the greeting in friendly trolloc, but was apparently misunderstood.

Human females were almost as unfathomable as trolloc women.

Berrigus's head hurt, humans in general were so confusing. Except Umtim, the troll 'got' Umtim though he wasn't sure why. At least the centaur was finally making sense. <Even if thought like a jedi master he did, hmmm? (sorry)>

"Troll move ass now! Maybe no more falling hunters me hope!" He told Shalon.

He turned to the woman, "Troll baby not passed unnoticed, no diaper since yestermorn. Human near baby, they know. Some things make even troll flinch. Bandit not problem, maybe friend me." He hoped the explanation was understood, he was already developing the Fairy Godmother(tm) of all headaches.

Then Berrigus addressed the ever increasing group, "Maybe need centaur, hunter, woman. If come, okay. If not, okay. Maybe even need Umtim, get mad we kick he." The troll stopped to laugh at the joke and swing his foot in Pitfalls direction. As usual, the urchin was too quick. "Me buy food. Me buy drinkage. Me get shelter." He secretly wished he had a handfull of the Troll King's (may he rot in pain) palace guards to

command instead of this lot.

Once again, the troll hoped his message was understood. He was willing to cover the expenses if their companions chose to aid in the search. If he wasn't understood, he also hoped at least the centaur, Shalon, understood and could translate.

Breaking wind loudly, almost as a rocket booster, Berrigus began trundling eastward down the Pedara Road hoping to make the seacoast, and find Chollie, by the morrow.

Shalon paused after Berrigus' speech, trying to work out how he could explain it. Odd, but dropping words to make Trolloc was easy - filling in words to make sense was not.

"Er, I think what he was saying was, shit stinks, trolls stink more, so if a troll craps itself you're unlikely to be able to get within a mile due to a physical stench barrier. If you want to come with us, you can, but if not, that's OK too. Er... Umtim here is his sidekick (he knew he was lying about that one). I think he's trying to say he's bought plenty of provisions, but honestly, I can't see where he's hiding them and maybe that's a good thing. He's going to find us shelter - presumably for later, or to hide from the bandits, whom he hopes to get on our side. One thing's for sure, if they aren't amenable to our way of thinking Berrigus could easily knock them unconscious with another dose of flatulence."

"Oh, and by the way," he said casually as they started trotting after the troll. "I need to find a clump of trees or bushes fast... I've got a bladder full of used-up alcohol and while it's perfectly normal for my kind to... er... go en-route, I do have some manners among polite company. And you lot, as well."

Pitfall saw the woman's move to strike and flinched, but when she didn't follow through he grinned, drunken gaze holding fast at her chest level as he sighed happily. Humans had some attractive features, he contemplated simply, and so long as there wasn't going to be any violence for a bit, he planned on enjoying the scenery.

"I like you," he offered with a sporadic expression, "welcome to the city pretty, filthy, bad smelling lady," he added helpfully as if hoping she might stay.

Around the party as they began to move away from the southern city gate, the road wove its way through farmlands, arable fields and sprawling buildings, low and wooden, fairly recently remade in some cases after various battles and encounters. Orchards were in the process of changing from flower to fruit as summer began to give way to autumn and the overall imagery was peaceful. It took hard work to make that so, a toil of which the Araulmorian farmers were fiercely proud, smart fences running along the edge of the road for some distance to indicate the limits of their property. Fertile soil allowed for

several families to make a living from relatively small areas of land and from this first section of road the barely undulating ground level allowed for the party to see at least four separate dwellings.

"Bandits?" asked Pitall as Lilac spoke again, he shrank back a bit closer to Berrigus, eyes wide. He had none of his weaponry with him, none of his stuff at all and in his current guise, the goblin had little desire to fall foul to slave traders or outlaws. Thievery was one thing, undercover of the city and its myriad of hiding places, but out here, in the country.... well he stood little chance in a fair fight anywhere really.

At Berrigus' words, Pitfall stayed close, adding his own translation to the mess of conversation.

"He just means you wouldn't miss Chollie if you got close to her," he explained, "cos she stinks of shit. So bad that even he," Pitfall pointed up at the troll, "doesn't like changing her." He dodged the kick from Berrigus expertly, used to the troll's telegraphed moves and managed a half decent hurt expression, feigning a beaten child's look for sympathy. "And he's kindly offering to cover any travel expenses we might find, buy us food and that as we go. Though," he added, "I think once we get past the farms we're gonna need to head for the coast. There's a few small fishing villages, maybe we can get a boat..." he spoke slowly, as if the thought of that pained him, memories of the last time he'd been out on the ocean flooding back, "I guess we're gonna wanna check out the cliffs," he shrugged, pointing in the general direction the gryphon had flown.

"Oi!" he shouted after Berrigus as the troll went completely the wrong direction, "Dumbass! This way!" And, waiting while that instruction kicked into touch, Pitfall began to then lope off westward, keeping the Pedara River to his right and aiming for the coast. It was a long way to the cliffs and they would now have to navigate the river at some point since they were beyond the outer city boundary, but he figured one of their party would figure that out as they went. About eleven miles he figured before they hit the forests Shalon seemed to want to go to the toilet in, but there would likely be the odd standing tree before that, perhaps a weeping willow along the riverside of the road.

By midday they had reached the wider section of river which led ultimately into the ocean just south of the crab-like peninsula at Araulmor Bay's lower half. Here the Pedara was impressive, flowing deep and impatiently, silted up and darkened by its passage through three sectors of civilization. Deciduous forest loomed darkly on its northern bank, edging into the bottom half of Mercari and providing a good hideaway for any less than law abiding citizens to lurk while plotting their strategies. Pitfall shouted up when he saw the bridge, relieved that they would not have to swim, his tired feet protesting now that the alcohol had well and truly worn off.

Berrigus didn't agree with Pitfall's assessment of the woman, Lilac. He thought she was a little too clean and sweet smelling, and far too spindly. Humans, go figure! At least the urchin had turned the troll westward, thus avoiding a unique plot complication later.

He did, however, sympathize with Shalon. Not being encumbered with the centaurs manners, he lumbered to the side of the road and relieved himself loudly into a roadside ditch. Rejoining the party, he continued westward, the proper direction of travel.

The troll found the scenery far too bland and regulated. Neat little fences surrounded well manicured orchards and fields. There were no unkept areas at all. There were no steaming piles of manure, no forgotten farm implements rotting unused beside the road. There wasn't even a decent compost heap to be found. One of the things that drew Berrigus to Mercari was all the unkept buildings and grime clogged alleyways. He missed his rotten little bar and his daughter playing in the sludge beside the stream. He missed his nightly drunken brawls.

Mostly, Berrigus hoped that Chollie hadn't done too much damage wherever she was.

Pitfall seemed to be keeping close, almost underfoot, since Lilac had mentioned bandits. It occurred to the troll that maybe he was afraid of the possibility of footpads, but he dismissed it out of hand. Berrigus himself had been a bandit at times, and Pitfall didn't have anything of interest to thieves. It was probably all the fresh air making him loopy.

Pitfall had been taking lessons from Shalon, apparently, for the words flowed out of his little mouth like water. Berrigus didn't mind because his intended victim was apparently Lilac and not himself. As a matter of fact the little turd was paying quite a lot of attention to her. Had the troll been more astute he would have compared Pitfall to a dog chasing a carriage that he sure as hell couldn't drive if he caught it.

Although not very good at eavesdropping (it required too much thought), the troll had overheard Pitfall mention a boat. This relieved what little mind Berrigus had, because he was dreading entering the water. It had taken him years to layer on all his grime and water would ruin everything.

"Slavers you say?" Tiago muttered in response to Lilacs information of herself, "Foul cretins that should not be allowed to sully the same world that we live in." he shook his head sadly, then added, striking an attempt at a heroic pose, "But fear not milady, should any of that wretch try to push themselves on us, they will have to get past my blade before they can lay their filthy hands on you."

The Forest Bridge

By midday they had finally reached a forested area. It was dark, dank, and ominous. It looked like a good place for foul deeds, and it was the first part of the trip that Berrigus found pleasant.

This crossing had clearly not been designed for wagons, or for that matter any creature with any real weight whatsoever. Strung between four sturdy oaks, the bridge consisted of three ropes, one to walk on and two higher strung sections for handholds. Occasionally it was supported by the odd joining vertical length, but it looked flimsy in the extreme as it swung in the afternoon breeze just above the level of the rushing river.

Eagerly, Pitfall clambered up to investigate, clinging onto the ropes and shoving them back and forth in a game. This sort of thing he could definitely handle, feats of agility far preferable in his mind to any long marches, but he knew they'd be in trouble as he cast his gaze back towards the rest of the group and mentally weighed up Shalon and Berrigus' handicaps.

"Guess you two are swimming," he chuckled in loud amusement, dodging away from any strikes by moving further out across the river by way of the three ropes. He got about halfway across when something magical triggered an explosion which left the bridge completely unharmed but flipped Pitfall head over heels into the river to disappear into the muddy waters.

Berrigus was quite confused when Pitfall crossed the bridge. When the little shit suggested that he should swim, Berrigus was about to reply, "Not bloody likely!" and offer an obscene gesture.

The troll didn't get the chance. With a flash and bang Pitfall was thrown from the bridge. "Who swim now, Umtim!" Berrigus shouted with a guffaw as Pitfall disappeared into the swirling water.

Several long seconds later it occurred to Berrigus that somebody would have to retrieve Pitfall, and that job fell to him. "Shit," he mumbled, "now we both swim." He moved forward troll like, which meant he tripped, rolled down the embankment with a great deal of cursing and noise, and hit the water with a loud splash. Still swearing loudly and thrashing around, he too disappeared under the dark water.

After several moment, he remembered that he could swim. With broad powerfull strokes he began searching for his accomplice. Occasionally the troll yelled, "Umtim!" even though he was underwater and his mouth filled with water.

Shalon splashed noisily into the water. For a centaur, keeping your head out of the water was a cinch, although being a bit top-heavy in water was an issue. Powerful leg strides took him into the deeper part, and he used his top body half like a duck to dip in and locate the little bugger, taking care not to roll head over horse's ass. Once he located him, he hauled him unceremoniously onto his own lower back, like a drowned rat, and headed forwards. If necessary, he would come back for Tiago and Lilac, who had decided (against their own sanity, it must be said) to join them. Well, he was used to carrying people so what difference did it make?

Tiago watched with ill hid amusement as first Pitfall and then Berrigus both made their way, each in their own specific dramatic style, down into the frothing river below. "This," he said in an aside to Lilac, "begins the comic entertainment of our journey."

Lilac laughed as she watched Shalon dive in, too. "I'd have to agree," she said. Then she sighed wistfully. "I was rather hoping for a bath... But there's no way I'm getting in that water now. The gods only know what that lot has done to it." She glanced at the rope bridge and shuddered. It hadn't looked all that sturdy to her own inexperienced eye, and she was glad Pitfall had saved her the necessity of having to put her weight on the thing herself.

"Well, milady Lilac," Tiago mused as he stared down into the churning water of the Pedara river, "rest assured that should there be anything dangerous in yon river, their combined stench will have no doubt rendered it harmless." as he spoke, Shalon, having skillfully navigated the steep slope down to the river, dragged a sodden Pitfall out of the river, to which Tiago clapped loudly in appreciation.

She was, nonetheless, relieved when Shalon got Pitfall out of the water, and as they scrambled up onto the bank, she realized that they'd have to keep following the river. Still, it **was** rather more fun to watch her companions blunder along in their own unique ways, so she opted not to point this out. She did not, however, opt to wipe the smirk off her face at her companions' expense.

Just before his outer ears filled with water Pitfall heard Berrigus' shouting laugh mocking him, but there was no time for a response, not even a rude gesture as the current took him towards the river mouth. Pitfall, not a strong swimmer by any account, felt the sense of impending doom and as panic changed to partial drowning something strong moved beneath him. Images rushed through his mind, truth denied him since the silt laden water didn't give good visibility and he swallowed another mouthful of water even as the centaur pushed him onto his back and kept going.

Water finally traded places with air and Pitfall's wet blond curls felt the afternoon sun

begin the long process of drying him out. He spat out a long breath of river and choked dramatically, clinging onto Shalon's neck as they surfaced, the centaur striding up onto the far bank. It was a few moments before his passenger could manage words, and his voice when it did come was faint, breathless.

"Thanks," he managed, sliding down to lie on his back on the grass within reach of the forest's shadow. Another coughing fit followed and he lay there, simply trying to regather himself, uncharacteristically silent and still.

Fumbling around blindly in the murky roiling waters of the Pedara, Berrigus snagged his powerful hand on something slimy. Thinking that he had grasped Pitfall, he held on harder and pulled himself towards the surface. His quarry fought, almost as if he wanted to remain in the river.

The troll broke the surface. He saw the centaur enter the water, but he was quickly pulled back under. Berrigus fought harder, grabbing Pitfall under his slimy gills with both hands and kicking with his massive legs. Once again he broke the surface, this time much nearer to the opposite shore.

Perhaps it was his quarry's gills, or swimming ability, or even it's desire to remain in the river, but it suddenly occurred to Berrigus, like a flash of light in an empty room, that what he had a hold on was definitely not Pitfall. It didn't matter, by now the creature was coiling itself around the trolls torso. Now, fighting for his own life instead of Pitfalls, his survival instinct kicked in as he disappeared below the water again.

This time the underwater battle was closer to the river bank. Berrigus finally touched the bottom and could get a purchase. With a powerful kick, the troll shoved himself toward the shore and began walking on the bottom, dragging what he now realized was a huge eel.

Within moments his head broke free of the river. The troll could see Shalon on the shore, standing over Pitfall who was now safe. He walked out of the river, finally holding up the eel. It oozed eel slime and was almost twice as long as the troll was tall, but only about half as thick.

Berrigus held up his prize, now almost dead, and exclaimed, "Umtim, you all right! Me got lunch! Make fire!" Of course, it hadn't occurred yet to the troll that Pitfall was also soaking wet, and probably unable to light a fire.

"See what I mean." Tiago added a moment later, as Berrigus emerged from the river, carting out a massive river eel draped around his massive form. His face contorted a moment later as he heard and deciphered Berrigus called out words, then he sighed and

said, "Eel is most definitely not my favorite, but I have, at dire need, ate it before. And should I cut it into decent lengths, wrap it in grape leaves and rotate it on a slow spit over a pinewood fire, then it is quite palatable."

Cholera's Tale

Cholera was bored.

At first her 'day out' had been quite fun. At first the nice oxen pulling the turnip wagon were exciting, then the chocolate stall near all the pretty sparkley things were fun. Then the funny little man in the black hat had caught her attention and led her deeper into the marketplace. It wasn't much fun when the funny little man in the black hat had stuffed her into the pottery jar. She hadn't liked that at all until she found out that it wobbled so well. Then a jar broke.

That was okay, though, there had been lot's of other jars. Then she discovered that hers would roll too, it was just one discovery after another all morning! When it stopped rolling Da was there with a big hug that ended in a loud bang. After she discovered how to fly, the funny little man in the black hat came back with a big birdie that took her for a ride.

But now the funny little man in the black hat was gone and the birdie was broke, it was stuck in some trees and she was caught in it's grasp about ten feet above the ground. Da could have reached her, but Da wasn't here. She looked around for some mud to play in, but couldn't see any. She tried to get down, but something was holding her. Cholera started gnawing away at the talons that held her.

Some squirrels were chittering nearby and Chollie stopped to watch them. She tried to grab one, wondering what it would look like if she stuck it's head into some mud. She looked around for some mud, but something held her. Cholera started gnawing away at the talons again.

Chollie's little belly rumbled, and she wondered what Da was fixing for dinner. She looked around for him, but couldn't see him. "Oh well," she thought, "I will just play in the mud till he yells for me." She looked around for some mud, but something held her. Cholera started gnawing away at the talons again.

Little Chollie's afternoon faded into evening. Every time she was distracted she stopped trying to free herself. Every distraction made her think about mud, then she thought about finding mud, and then she would gnaw on her prison some more. (After all, her little trolloc brain could do only one thing at a time.) Soon after dusk she drifted off into a hungry and disturbed sleep.

Cholera awoke.

At first she wasn't sure where she was. The sun was already up and the birds were singing. A light dew had fallen overnight. The green grass she lay on was fresh and smelled clean and grassy. The world was fresh and new and ready to meet the new day. The little trolloc was unimpressed, and began idly chewing on the gryphon's talon she was holding.

The rest of the gryphon was ten feet above her in a tree, minus several digits on its left foot. Apparently even sleep had been unable to stop her continual gnawing.

Cholera wandered off in search of mud, leaving a brown patch in the fresh morning grass and a distinct trail of 'trollspoor'.

Cholera wandered the shoreline in search of her beloved mud. There seemed to be plenty of sand, and quite a bit of water, but sadly no mud to be found. The water, she noticed after a while, was alternately very heavy with surf and moderately calm. It never occurred to the little trolloc that she had circumnavigated the island about five times.

She stopped after the third pretty snake she passed. (It was actually the same one she had passed earlier, which had landed between her second and third trips around the island.) The feathered serpent had stretched its length along the warm sand well above the high tide line and was basking in the morning sun. Although it seemed to be asleep, it watched the trolloc warily and with some amusement.

Unable to find mud, Cholera's attention wandered to the serpent and she approached it. Its shimmering scales entranced the toddler, and she just watched the colors dance in the morning sun for a few moments. The creature touched her mind gently, but found nothing except childish innocence. Her stubby little hand went to pet the creature's head, and stopped. For some unknown reason Cholera reconsidered and wiped her hand on herself first, (an interesting, but totally useless gesture) and gently stroked the serpent's head. "Nice snake," she said, surprisingly coherently, "you lost too? What name you?"

The Winged Serpent had seen the trollish child wandering around the small island, but the trolloc had been keeping to itself, and did not seem to be more troublesome than any normal trollkin, so it had settled down into the warm, sun baked sand for a little nap, something to put it at ease after that disturbing encounter with the human hunter earlier.

A bar bet indeed. Hmmph.

But now, during her nap, the creature had virtually snuck up on her, being within a few feet of her before she could react. After the clumsy petting, the Rainbow Serpent reared back its head, arching its neck off the ground so as to be able to look the trollkin in the eyes.

"Noooo ssschild, I am not lost." the Serpent snaked its tongue out, smelling the air with its forked tongue. The child still did not seem dangerous and it didn't smell good enough to eat.....not at all. It withdrew its tongue quickly from the air to try and quench the awful stench.

"Noooo, I come here becaussssse it issss a pleassssant placcce to nap in the ssssun." the Serpent knew that there was no way the child could pronounce its real name, so in answer to that it said, "Yoouuu can call me Sssssaren if youuu fffeel a needd to calll meee anything at allll."

"But whooo are youu?" it went on, its curiosity roused, "Anddd how did youuu get out here onnn thissss issland?"

"Chollie," the trolloc answered. The first part of the question answered her little troll brain slammed into the second answer. She thought about the nice mud at home. She remembered wandering into the market, and the funny little man in the black hat. She remembered all the fun she had and the gryphon's flight which brought her here.

"Chossssie." Saren hissed out slowly, taking her time with it, tasting the name as it rolled across her forked tongue. "Chossie. I like it." Saren seemed unable to recognize her own inability to say the name right.

"Got lost," she said (trolls not being clever wordsmiths). Showing her new friend the gryphon's claw she still held on to (and had been idly gnawing) she added, "Birdie broke."

"Lossst? Ahhh, I am sssso ssssorry my ssssweet." And overcome by curiosity, she leaned her head forward to get a closer view of the bony looking thing in the troll child's paw, even as she asked, "Birdddiee?"

Then she hissed an awkward intake of breath and pulled her head back sharply as she recognized the severed gryphon's claw. It was not, Saren reassured herself, that she was concerned about the gryphon, she could hold her own against such a twisted monstrosity. It was just the shock that such a young creature could have, so innocently and with so little thought, ripped it off the gryphon, who doubtlessly did not care much for the idea of parting with it.

Perhaps.....perhaps she needed to be a bit more cautious around this unassuming youth.

Cholera sat down with a quite audible plop due mostly to the diaper she still retained.

"Where Da, Saren?" she complained. "Got me lost an' hungry. No mud here. No fun here."

She began to cry. Large putrid tears dropped into the sand. She looked eastward over the water. "Where me Da?" she whispered again.

Saren reared back up, even higher into the air, its brightly colored wings supporting its improbable length as she pulled back in repeated surprise, staring with its mesmerizing eyes at the whimpering child. What was that noise it was making? And the purpose of the moisture leaking from the sight organs? Was it sick? Or was this just a side effect of the hunger Chollie had mentioned?

Slithering forward, Saren coiled around Chollie in what she thought of as a comforting embrace, the surprisingly dry scales rustling ticklishly across Cholera's rough hide. "Doo nott worry little Chossie, I ammm herre. I doo nott know wherre yourr Daa issss, butt I cann find you foodssss."

"Foodsss," Saren hissed hopefully to the trollkin child, "foodsss Chossie, foodsssss, doesss that ssssound goood to you?"

Cholera's tiny mind turned to food. She remembered Da's 'slugfest' fondly. It was Berrigus's failed attempt at bringing in customers. The failure was a boon to Cholera, who loved the tasty snacks. She also thought of snails, 'crunchy slugs', and other small things she might find on the island, worms, bugs and such. Most of them lived in or around mud.

Her little mind thought of mud. The trollkin absentmindedly freed herself from the shimmering coils of the serpent, and she began looking for some. Her first thought was the water, the sunlight danced happily among the wavelets there. Then she remembered that there was only sand at the water's edge. Her eyes turned to the foreboding treeline.

It was dark under the canopy of leaves. The inner forest was obscured by a thick border of underbrush. Strange noises seemed to come out of the gloom, like something screaming in pain. Chollie passed the serpent, stroking its scales absently, and approached the darkness there.

She stood momentarily at the edge and tried to peer in. It seemed nice enough, so she pushed the underbrush aside and entered. It was cool and dank, the perfect place for slugs. Surprisingly (to Cholera at least), she wondered why she hadn't thought of this sooner!

Almost immediately something slithered up behind her through the gloom. She turned to

bite it, then realized it was Saren. "Be very, very quiet," she whispered to the serpent, "Me hunt slugs!" Saren, it seemed, had taken on the roll of 'imaginary friend' to a creature with no imagination of her own....

Saren reared back, fangs bared, at the child's sudden move, then relented, in some confusion, when the child spoke.

"Sssslugssss??" she hissed as quietly as possible, darting glances back and forth as she slithered silently after the child, assisted by her wings, "Why dooo youu huntt sssslugssss?"

"Wooould a ssssnail work?" she hissed, suddenly becoming very still, her hypnotic eyes fixed at a point above Cholera's head as she noticed that the large rock that they were creeping around, or what they had thought to be a large rock, was actually the shell of a snail. The grand daddy of all snails apparently, as the monstrous cephalopod swung its cumbersome tentacled head around to stare at them, its slack jawed skeleton free mouth chewing on something as it beheld them curiously.

It was wearing an incongruous top hat and sported a monocle. The little trolloc wondered where its walking stick was, but never even considered that the creature did not walk, nor did it have hands to carry a walking stick. Such was the troll's mental process. Cholera considered taking a bite out of the thing (just to see what it tasted like) but just then it spoke. "Here, what are you about there, troll?"

"Lunch?" replied Cholera inquisitively. Her little eyebrows squinched together in confusion, resembling a bat landing on her sloped forehead.

"Excuse me?" the snail said with some indignation, "I am a unique creature in this world, and I will never prepare your lunch!"

"No," said Cholera, "not fix lunch. Be lunch."

It glared at the trolloc, and then the winged serpent. "So, apparently this wasn't entirely your idea, troll. Which of my ancient enemies has sent such a ridiculous pair to assassinate me? Speak up you!"

Cholera grinned, stupidly innocent. "Nope, just lunch," she offered, drooling slightly.

"What?" The snail exclaimed in amazement, "You were going to try and eat me, a unique being, an irreplaceable wonder, for LUNCH?!? Well I NEVER!" With that the snail stormed off in a huff.

Cholera didn't notice, her attention was already elsewhere. There, rummaging in the debris and snail slime at her little feet was a large cockroach. It hissed menacingly at her. The troll reached out a friendly hand and the insect crawled onto her palm, filling it entirely. Lifting it up to eye level, Chollie began to pet the creature.

"There, there," she told it, "nice bug." It hissed and chattered in pleasure at the stroking. Its little antennae flitted about happily, smelling her. "You name Pfred!" Scratching its segmented thorax with uncharacteristic gentleness, she continued. "Nice Pfred, pretty Pfred." Bringing the insect closer to her face, she popped it into her mouth with one quick movement. Cholera found Pfred both crunchy and gooey at the same time, and enjoyed him immensely. "Good Pfred," she mumbled.

She began rummaging in the underbrush, looking to see if Pfred had any friends, when she tripped over the snail's tail, (which had moved several inches by now) and fell flat on her ugly little face. "Stoopid, stoopid tail!" Cholera exclaimed.

She bit it.

Hard.

The snail whipped its head around to glare menacingly at her. While it was about doing that, the toddler considered its flavor. It was actually slightly nutty, even though she found it bland and woody. Actually it was rather tasteless and was in need of a great deal of salt. Cholera, of course, had none so she quickly lost interest and continued her search for Pfred's friends. Finally whipped around enough to address her, the snail exclaimed, "That does it! Now I shall have to run you down and thrash you!"

Of course, the toddler had already meandered off with Saren close beside her. She had actually found several more of the large disgusting insects and was cresting a small knoll several hundred yards off as the snail banked into a high speed turn (the first step in its hot pursuit). "You can't run forever, miscreants!" the snail exclaimed menacingly as it raced pell mell towards the pair at an understandable snail's pace.

Saren half hovered, her tail still coiled in the loam beneath her and simply listened to the giant snail's rant. She had certainly never seen anything like it before, and, also being a unique creature in this world, felt some empathy for its plight. Seemed as if someone or something was always trying to prey on them.

But when the majestic creature crept off in a huff, Saren performed what might be considered a shrug if she had shoulders, and followed after the troll child that had caught her interest. Life as long as hers sometimes got boring, and if nothing else, following this mighty babe was leading to some interesting times. Behind them, the gargantuan

snail was bellowing something at them, but Saren found it quite easy to ignore while she watched Chollie play with and eat the large bugs she was finding.

In fact, as they topped a small rise, she seemed to stumble upon a cache of them, and was scooping them up the scattering creatures by the double handful and scooping them into her mouth, great gobbets of ichor oozing out of either side of her mouth as crunched them with gusto. She must have been really hungry, the winged serpent could only conclude.

"What are ye doin' ye great lumberin' stench laden hillock?!?!" a squeaky but nevertheless very irate voice piped up. Saren started in surprise, rearing back for a moment with a flutter of her wings, as a minuscule being, no more than eight inches high, and clad all in leaf green (its clothes proved, on further inspection, to actually be pieces of leaves sewn together), jumped from a nearby bush and landed neatly on Cholera's shoulder, and began beating her steadily, if quite ineffectively, across the nose and brow with what appeared to be a minuscule shepherd's hook.

"Yer eatin' me flock is what yer doin' ye massive shite loaf!" the minuscule fellow chortled out angrily, his pointed red beard swinging merrily in time with the useless but fervently continued blows to Cholera's face. "Ye know how long 't took me ta get that bunch o' six legged swine together? Ya expect me two wives and thurty-seven children ta go hungry jus' so an ugly, over sized, lice ridden maggot sniffer like ya can 'ave a snack? Well, ah'll not 'ave it! Ah won't, or ma name 's not Travy Kelasin Donaree Hosiah MacTaggat!"

Saren glided forward, dropping her head to hover over Chollie and Travy, more amused now than alarmed, and said, "Ssssay, aren'tt yooou onne offff the little peoplesssss?"

Had Saren knew more about humanoids and their customs, she might have realized that the single fingered gesture Travy casually made in her direction between blows of his crook was considered quite insulting in most circles. As she did not though, she just blinked confusedly at him.

As she ate the bugs, something landed on Cholera's shoulder and began hitting her. To her tiny mind it appeared to be a cabbage roll, because it was wrapped in leaves, but then she realized it was yelling something.

When Saren asked it if it was little, it managed a gesture that Da liked a lot. It also stopped hitting her. Seeing a chance to finally grab it, Cholera snagged it by the scruff of the neck. The cabbage roll swore profusely, if squeakily, at the mistreatment. It wriggled and flailed about with it's stick, striking Saren soundly on the nose several times.

The toddler looked at it hungrily, she liked cabbage rolls. With some disappointment, however, she determined that it was not, in fact, a cabbage roll at all. Since it was not edible or made of mud (or both!), Chollie lost interest completely. She dropped the creature on the ground forgotten.

About this time the bugs she had eaten were working through her digestive tract. Older meals were being pushed downward to make room and trolloc biology went to work. Things moved.

The diaper pin, which was already strained to the limit, gave up it's valliant effort to keep everything in place. (When it says fifteen to twenty pounds they're not kidding-that's all it will hold!) Apparently 'Travy Kelasin Donaree Hosiah MacTaggat' had angered the Gods in some way, for before he could get to his feet he was covered with the wet blanket that was the trolloc's diaper. On top of that landed two days worth of troll droppings.

To say the least he was securely pinned to the ground, unable to move at all. As if to add insult to injury, karma had decreed that he was still able to breath. He tried not to, but to no avail. Every time he lost consciousness he would forget and breath again.

Not even noticing that she had lost her diaper, but surprised at how light she felt after lunch, Cholera wandered off. With Saren following closely behind (but not too close!) she was once again in search of her beloved mud.

Saren hissed out what sounded suspiciously like a chuckle, eliciting a new stream of curses from the cranky sidhe trapped beneath the sodden, overloaded and now discarded diaper. She started to half float, half slither after the trollkin, who was making her way further into the brushy interior of the island, when Travy through some extraordinary feat of strength (or, just as likely, desperation), managed to pry himself out from under the diaper of brown death and threw himself onto the end of her tail, cursing loudly (and completely incomprehensibly to the winged serpent).

Saren looked back with irritation at the minuscule manling and, with a calculated flick of her tail, catapulted the cursing sidhe into the air, where he came to land, thankfully for all concerned, in a deep puddle in the shadow of a rock, and then continued on her way.

Born of stubbornness and spite, Travy did not know when to quit, for the rambunctious spriteling almost immediately pulled himself out of what was, for him, a deep pool, streaming water from his leafy clothing, and began to toss pebbles at her. One lucky shot struck her at the base of her wings, stinging smartly, and Saren turned, eyes narrowing and focused in on the tiny nuisance.

Faster than the eye could see, she sprang back at the little man, and with one lunge, swallowed him whole. "Nottt tasssste ssssoo baddd whenn wassshed." She said aloud, rearing back with a satisfied smile, then took off aflutter after the errant troll child.

A muffled cursing started coming from her midsection as she caught up with Chollie, causing Saren to frown.

Just one of the disadvantages, she sighed in commiseration to herself, of not having chewing teeth.

Cholera turned at the rustling of wings and saw her friend, Saren, catching up. At first she thought the serpent was trying to say something, but then she realized that the muffled cursing was coming from her midsection. A smile crossed her hideous little face. For the first time since landing on the island Chollie giggled. "Silly Saren," the toddler admonished, "that not cabbage roll!"

Saren belched loudly, to the temporary accompaniment of an increased volume of cursing from her interior, then said, "Yesssss, yooou arre rrright Sssschollie. Annd itt needssss morre sssssalt." Saren swallowed again, the movement carrying down almost the entire span of her lengthy body, and the cursing sidhe was, for now, muffled, as it was pushed deeper in her body.

It was then that Cholera heard the burbling of a stream, faintly, inland. Her pointed little ears turned towards the sound. The little wheels in her pointed little trolloc head began to turn. Streams meant water.

Water flowing over the ground. She broke out in a sweat. Ground is dirt.

Her cranium heated up. Water and dirt make?

Cholera broke wind loudly. MUD!

"Ow!" she exclaimed, "brain hurt!" Cholera fell to her knees clutching her head in her grubby hands for several minutes.

Finally, the exertion over, she got to her feet. "Saren," she said, pointing inland through a thick copse of vegetation (in entirely the wrong direction), "mud over there!" She began pushing her way through the sharp scratchy branches in search of her quarry. Her naked little trolloc butt disappeared last into the underbrush.

Within moments she was through the mess and inside of what appeared to be a large nest. There were several eggs here, and one of them was moving slightly. Cholera put

her little ear against it and listened intently.

Saren watched her young charges antics with growing fondness and amusement. Having no other of her kind in existence, she could never mate, and was incapable of having children of her own. But for now, as a temporary amusement, this one would do instead. A decade, perhaps two, and then she would tire of it, she had little doubt. But until then.....the young ones just grew up so fast and she did not want to miss a precious moment of it.

Chollie had moved off while Saren had hovered there in thought, and now the winged serpent flew over the brush to find the young trolloc amidst a large nest area, listening carefully to the side of one huge egg, which seemed to be vibrating. As Saren watched, cooing to herself over how precious the little troll was, the top of the egg began to split....

Cholera noticed, as she listened intently to the egg, that it was making a cracking sound. It didn't occur to her for several long moments that the shell was actually cracking. The trolloc stepped back and watched as first the tip of a beak, then a black oily feathered head, and finally a whole chick emerged.

The chick was slightly smaller than the toddler, gangly, and covered in wet black feathers. It stretched it's new wings and flapped them, squawking loudly. Even to Cholera the bird reeked.

She smiled at it and squawked back, flapping her chubby arms.

From somewhere far above another squawk answered. Where the chick's call was plaintive and Cholera's simply an imitation, the answer was strong and loud. Mommy was coming, children.

With a loud beating of wings, a powerful wind and dust everywhere the nest was enveloped in shadow. A large beak descended to both chick and trollkin and regurgitated on them. The chick knew exactly what to do, and swallowed hungrily. Cholera, on the other hand, was slow on the uptake (no big surprise here). She was covered in bird vomit. This wasn't just any bird vomit either, this was a roc.

Watching her nestmate, Cholera tasted the 'bird food'.

It wasn't half bad!

Momma Roc, looking down at her new babies, idly wondered why one was so ugly and apparently stupid. She figured it was probably from their father's side, spread her huge

wings, and launched herself into the air to find more food for the hatchlings.

Cholera yawned. As if imitating her, so did the baby roc. Both children curled up together and drifted off to sleep under Saren's watchful eye.

Saren was no fool. She might be powerful in her own right, but this was a Roc! And birds were well known for eating snakes, so a giant bird might like to make a snack of a giant serpent. So she made herself scarce until the large bird had once again taken to the skies, leaving behind her chick and a vomit covered trolloc, both nestled up against each other and sleeping soundly.

It was, she had to admit, very cute, and she settled down in the nearby brush and rested, watching Cholera out of one half lidded eye as she settled into a near meditative trance.

Cholera awoke. Her nest mate stirred restlessly, but the stress of hatching had taken its toll and the chick slept on. The other egg wasn't moving at all. The trollkin put a grimy ear to it, but heard nothing. She amused herself by picking feathers out of the nest and putting them in her greasy hair.

"Peep, peep," she said quietly, but it was clear that she was tired of being a bird. Rested and fed, she once again pushed her way through the sharp scratchy branches of the nest, this time shoving the silent egg in front of her.

Once out of the nest Cholera looked around. She was naked and filthy, with a head full of feathers and a stupid grin. She leaned against the egg. The warm sun dried the roc regurgitation she wore and made her think about sitting in a steaming puddle of mud. Before she could go off in search of some, however, the egg began to roll downhill. "Eek," she squealed and chased it through the woods.

Awoken from her dozing by the little trollocs squeal, Saren raised her head up, swaying back and forth on her sinuous neck and looked around. No sign of the Roc around, or the trolloc child, or even the other egg. The nest was empty except for the other baby Roc who seemed to still be deep in its slumber. "Sssssschollie?" Saren hissed out an inquiry, not really expecting an answer, and not getting one.

So, coiling her body, she sprang into the air, unfolding her wings then to carry her aloft with mighty gusts, peering down at the thick, foliage covered ground and testing the scents in the air with her tongue in search of the rather distinctive....and rather strong...odor of the young troll.

And finding her in this way was simplicity itself. Even though the brush hid Cholera from her eyes, the sounds of her crashing through the brush and her eye watering smell

took her right to the wayward toddler. And, as she swooped in closer, her rainbow scales glittering in the sun, she finally saw the child.

Cholera seemed to be in hot pursuit, half running, half rolling down a fairly steep embankment, of the other Roc egg, which, even as Saren watched, came to the end of its journey. The brush ended rather suddenly there and the egg, which had gained considerable speed on its downhill run, tipped right over the side of the small chasm that ran between the hills.

The egg fell about ten feet down the narrow chasm, and as credit to the toughness of the leathery eggs, did not break but merely wedged itself between the chasm walls, quivering there.

"Ssssschollie!!! Looook outt!" Saren cried out in warning as she saw Cholera heading pell mell for the chasms edge. The winged serpent dove down towards her, but she could only hope that the child heard her, because she knew there was no way she could cover the intervening distance in time.

Cholera was now toddling so fast, and downhill to boot, that there was no way she could stop in time.

Even if she hadn't looked up, confused and surprised by Saren's warning.

Suddenly the trolloc found herself in mid air, high over the pointy rocks below. "Bok! Bok!" she yelled, flapping her stubby little arms like a bird, "Bok! Bok!" At first she plummeted much like the ball of mud she resembled.

Then Chollie flew. Not well yet, but much better than a mudball. She made several wide circles around the chasm, getting used to then sensation, then she located the prodigal egg. The flying troll landed with a thump and a roll beside it.

Understand, troll royalty has intermingled with elvish blood in the distant past, and sometimes, if one believes strongly enough, they can tap that magic. Cholera, with a child's innocence, had truly imagined herself as a baby roc.

She furled her stubby little tail feathers as she said to the egg, "There you is, bad egg!" She found that odd, so she unfurled and furled her tail feathers several times, watching them in confusion.

Chollie didn't remember having a tail before, and found it rather fun. With a loud giggle she jumped into the air and flapped her arms. "Bok! Bok!" she cried (because that seemed to help her fly). Once again she circled several times, then turned east in search

of some mud.

"Sssschollie! Yooou cann flyyy!" Cholera heard Saren cry out with glee, "Thatsssss amazzzzing! Howw diddd yooou dooo itt?"

"Silly Saren," the trolloc thought to herself, "I'm a baby roc, of *course* I can fly." As if in response to her certainty, she developed more feathers. From the air, as her vision cleared into a birdlike view, she could see a river. There would be mud near a river, so she flew towards it. Saren assured her that she could, in fact, fly to the mainland and find some.

Saren was always right.

So why, she asked herself, had he been surprised when I flew?

As a matter of fact, why would a baby roc need mud?

Her imagination began to flag, slowly her feathers began to fade too. As they did, she began to fly poorly.

She realized that was quite high up, and she began to beat the air violently with her stubby arms. The trolloc began to lose altitude, slowly at first and then much faster as she gained the aerodynamic aspects of a troll.

Before long she was plummeting from the sky much like the ball of mud she resembled at an incredible speed.

Back to the Story- On the Southern Bank

Shalon stood silently for a moment on the grassy bank, watching Pitfall lolling on the ground, coughing up moisture still in his lungs but enjoying being alive still. The young lad's chest heaved as he regained his normal breathing pattern.

Berrigus then emerged with the eel, and Shalon's stomach turned somewhat. That troll had some disgusting ideas about what would be tasty, and the sad part was that for some reason Goldilocks <that's Pitfall to us> didn't have a problem with it. It was a bit rank, really.

The centaur trotted to the shore and into the cool water, and began striding across to the far side again. He didn't really care whether Tiago wanted a lift or not, but at least Lilac looked like avoiding a dip might be nice for her. She seemed to be enjoying Tiago's company, though, he noted.

"Either of you need a lift across?," he said, half-heartedly, the sheen of water making his coat shine.

"Umm, no, friend centaur, I think not for me." Tiago called back, and then casually made his way over to the rope bridge and deftly made his way across. And bearing no magic, he was able to cross it easily enough, to await the others on the far side, where he started to make a fire and construct a rude spit from several small but tough branches that he gathered from the edge of the wood.

Before them now was Coed Mor, the southern forest which covered the southern peninsula and crept darkly into Mercari, the western sector. Pitfall knew of the myths and rumours, the gangs said to make it their home, pirates and smugglers, outlaws and bandits, just the type of people he was used to fraternizing with in his real form. His current guise was a riskier one in such company, and his name was not well-known enough to protect him, but Berrigus would. He watched the clouds cross the sky while he considered that, a slow smile crossing his face.

Finally he sat up, looking back across the river to see what the others were doing. He could see the two humans waiting on the opposite bank, Berrigus wading through the Pedara and Shalon seemed to be making a return journey in case anyone else needed assistance crossing. Soaked through and surprised to be alive, Pitfall couldn't even muster up an insult to hurl over, but he watched with interest to see what would happen to everyone else.

Pitfall jumped to his feet as Berrigus approached with the eel, readying to duck and dive

out of the troll's way. He watched him warily, unsure if this was a impending punishment or simply lunch, the twitch in his small frame very evident.

With visible relief, Pitfall relaxed.

"Wow!" he gasped happily, the panic dissipating rapidly as he rubbed his hands together with unconcealed glee, "Eel steak! Al-right!!" a big grin crossed his features at the thought, slight disappointment at the troll's follow up request for fire, "Why do you want to make it hot?" he asked, to the backdrop of Tiago encountering the magical barrier mid-bridge and pausing to fathom the reason for the invisible wall, "All the slime will dry up if you cook it," Pitfall continued to protest, helpfully ignoring Berrigus' orders. In truth he couldn't have made fire if he had wanted to, but his belligerence returned in force before he even considered that as an option, "I like it slimy," he muttered, backing up a bit as the eel thrashed about the troll's shoulders like some kind of nightmarish winter scarf.

Tiago meanwhile had figured out that he could go no further without something he didn't have, a password, a key, something to trip the defence system. Since his speed across the ropes was considerably less than Pitfall's, he did at least have a few options and he settled for dropping down into the water and swimming diagonally across to join the others.

Whether it was due to the argument between troll and enchanted goblin/child or some other reason, Tiago declined to join in with his usual effusiveness and simply set down to the task of lighting a campfire.

"I-don't-want-to-cook-it!" Pitfall sulked, stamping his feet on the grass moodily and dancing a little unhappy dance of to the tune of his tantrum.

Berrigus guffawed at Pitfalls petulance. "Umtim, pouting not you, get off ass and use knife. Plenty here, not cook ours, but humans like stuff burnt, dumbass." The troll was surprised that the urchin would think he was going to cook the entire eel.

Really!

"Humans not eat guts either, they all ours." He looked at Shalon sideways, "Not know if centaur like guts or not."

Stopping in mid dance, Pitfall looked wide-eyed up at the vast bulk of troll.

"Oh," he responded, then, "Gotcha!" but hut he didn't have a knife.... then Berrigus spoke of eel guts and Pitfall couldn't help but drool a little bit down his chin at the

thought. If they were quick, the meat would still be warm too... delicious. He looked about frantically for a knife and settled for a sharp stone, holding it up triumphantly, "This'll do!" he called out happily, "C'mon, pass him over!"

"So," he asked Pitfall pensively (he didn't want his friend to think he was stupid), "what side of river Umtim think we on?"

Looking up from the still twitching reels of elongated lunch, Pitfall frowned.

"This side," he told Berrigus, then he looked to the others and realised it would require a bit more, "er, the North, the side with the city on it," he pointed to the woods behind them, "that's Coed Mor, the forest that covers the whole southern clifftop and goes into Mercari too. If you knew a way through the barrier, you could walk back to the Under the Bridge through there."

By this time Tiago had joined them and was building a fire. (He was more prepared for this sort of foray and had apparently waterproofed his fire making items.) The nice part was that he was doing so quietly. Of course, the female, Lilac, had yet to join them. Once she was near Berrigus knew that the hunter wouldn't be able to resist the urge to start talking again.

Of course, she was still watching them. A smirk of amusement, or perhaps disgust at the thought of eel steak, passed across her face. It was then that Berrigus saw the quarrel zip past her and stick firmly into a tree inches from her shoulder. "Girl, down!" he bellowed.

The troll's hand suddenly sported a bludgeon. His old training kicked in and he scanned the river banks, looking for the crossbowman. Berrigus's heart raced in anticipation of beating some hapless bandit to a bloody pulp.

Lilac managed to keep her amusement down as Tiago heroically proclaimed he would protect her should slavers show up. He had a queer way of talking, and she wondered if that was supposed to impress her, or whether that was just him.

Then he started to cross the bridge, which Lilac eyed dubiously. Apparently, he couldn't get that far, and so he was forced to dive into the water... the water whose pristine depths had been recently visited by a troll. She looked faintly disgusted as she considered the prospect.

Then an arrow landed in a tree near her shoulder and she screamed. "FUCK!" At which point she figured that the river's toxicity would probably be a better place for her than the shore, so she dove into the water and swam in the vaguely same direction Tiago had gone.

More arrows continued to fall, so she opted to do her swimming largely underwater, which was sort of a scary prospect. She broke the surface occasionally to breathe and tried not to look too much.

She clambered ashore on the other side, cursing and sodden. The wet fabric left little to the imagination, so she squatted near the fire, determinedly keeping her back to Pitfall in case he should decide to start leering at her.

At the shout from Berrigus and the follow-up from the woman, Pitfall tensed, scenting the air and looking about them frantically. Anyone who would attack a group with a huge troll in it had to be either crazy or toting magic on their side and he didn't like the idea of fighting either. Curling up inside the eel he hid, oblivious to Lilac's transparent wetness or any reaction from the others. There was no way, he told himself, that he was going up against magic if he didn't have to, besides he didn't even have his bow with him. Stupid Cholera and her stupid running away he muttered moodily.

Shalon's lip curled in distaste. "Thanks, but if it's all the same to you, I'll forage for some berries and nuts on the forest," he said, and trotted off. Everything was going fairly well - they had made it to the river without incident (exploding enchanted goblins on rope bridges notwithstanding), and were settling into some sort of rag-tag group, despite some obvious lack of harmony - but it was better than being enemies.

Just as he was about to extract some blue berries he thought he could see in a bush ahead, the shouting started. He galloped back to the shore to see arrows thudding into the ground and Lilac emerging from the water, looking... well, damp and shapely. If Tiago had not been there, he might have taken a second look, but the guy seemed to respect him and was having a slightly similar effect rub off on Shalon. He DID have manners, he reminded himself.

"Where exactly DID those arrows come from?," he asked. "And don't say 'a bow', please." Had his headache actually gone? It seemed he was starting to feel more jovial and pleasant all of a sudden.

It wasn't that he was a bit dim (Berrigus had that covered), or that he was a bit self-sacrificing... just that he was a bit tetchy, and a bit unaccustomed to being shot at - by, presumably, bipeds. Shalon bounded across the river, trying very hard to keep the image of Pitfall sliding into the eel carcass out of his head, making no bones about splashing about. When he banked the other side, after a short surge of his powerful hind legs to get him moving up the slight slope and onward again, Shalon pelted zig-zaggedly <yes, that's a word> in the general direction of the bandits, aiming to seek out their hiding place and confront them. A hoof in the face worked wonders for their sleep patterns,

although it tended to be a little rough on the dental work. There was a risk he might take a shaft or two into the flank, but with his horse's speed, his erratic approach and perhaps a bit of luck, the risk was minimal and his plan (if it could be called that) stood a chance of actually working, on the grounds that it would have taken them by surprise, should he catch them or flush them out.

Better than that, if he managed to panic them into running out, he felt sure Berrigus' instincts would make sure there were very few left with their heads intact.

Tiago shook his head at UmmTims (Pitfall to you and I) actions as he huddled next to the fire, trying to dry his clothes as a section of eel roasted over the flames on the makeshift spit. He knew that UmmTim was odd, the company he kept was proof enough of that. But in Tiago's opinion most children were odd. But to want to eat giant eel raw? And the innards as well? That went well beyond odd. Maybe, he suddenly concluded, the boy had been raised by the troll? That would certainly explain a lot. Yes, that must be it.

And then the first of the arrows winged into the camp, followed by a splash as Lilac, still on the opposite shore, flung herself down into the recently troll polluted waters. Tiago jumped to his feet and ran to the waters edge, plainly relieved when he saw that Lilac had thrown herself in rather than falling in after being shot.

Pitfall, he noticed as he was waiting for Lilac to come within reach of his assistance, was secreting himself inside the smelly hollow core of the eel remnants, where the intestines once were housed. A situation which would have, if he had more time to think about it, sickened him. Berrigus, after a long moment of contemplation in which he seemed to successfully decipher that they were under attack, began peering about for the source of the intruders.

Shalon, with what Tiago thought was uncommon courage, or perhaps complete lack of common sense, thrust himself back into the river and, after a quick crossing, began galloping in a zig zag pattern in an attempt to close with the perpetrators.

As Lilac gained the shore, Tiago held out his hand to aid her, if she would take it, helping her up onto shore. He started to say something, but then found himself distracted and his throat suddenly dry as he focused on the way her simple light garb, now soaked through, clung to her form.

The hunter from the deep south unconsciously licked his lips, then cleared his throat and forced his eyes up to meet hers. "Your slaver friends perhaps?" he asked in a gracious tone, then added, as more arrows began to fall around them, obviously from more than one source, "But this is, perhaps, not the best place to discuss such matters as we are

still," he said, ushering her hurriedly back into the trees and ground cover, "well within their range."

Once inside the woods edge, Tiago hunkered down behind a fallen log, pulling her down behind the cover with him, and peered back the way they had come. He winced when one of the arrows struck the section of eel he had been cooking, knocking it down into the fire below. But all he said was, "There appear to be at least three....no, four of the bowmen, from the angle of their shots."

"My own bow, a fine piece, was damaged recently in a long fall I took." he continued, watching Shalon and Berrigus progress, "So I find myself in the unenviable position of not being able to return fire. You would see some fine archery then I wager. However," he went on, shooting Lilac an appraising glance, "I still have my sword and my spear, and with these I shall protect you, should any of yon brigands attempt to assail our stronghold."

As if to accent this, an arrow sprouted, quivering, from the front of the log.

About the time Shalon started up the embankment Berrigus was truly moving. Trolls started slow, but once they started inertia carried them, and Berrigus had a lot of inertia going for him. Forging the water slowed him slightly, as did the opposite embankment.

Small trees and brush did not.

Neither did the quarrel that glanced off his thick skull. Oh, he would have a headache once he realized that he's been hit, but Berrigus didn't even notice. He held his bludgeon in one massive fist, and was using it to clear underbrush. Shalon could easily hear the approach of the troll, as could the archers and anyone else within a league or so.

Berrigus identified Shalon's rump as 'friend' as he caught up, and tried not to knock any vegetation in his way. The troll veered to the left of the centaur and began beating the bushes (literally) with his bludgeon, hoping to flush his quarry.

The bandits, being skilled woodsmen (or at least not deaf) heard the commotion of the approaching centaur and troll. Surprisingly it took a few shots for the arrows to stop as the attackers scrambled to evade the counter attack.

Within a few moments Berrigus found himself in the middle of a clearing of his own making, alone. The woods were now silent, except for the sound of Shalon somewhere to his right. Not even an insect buzzed. The troll broke wind loudly with an enormous grin.

Then he heard a low groan, and rushed to the edge of the clearing. Moving some fallen brush aside he found a human, injured and bleeding. "Who you?" Berrigus demanded, picking the man up like a rag doll. The bandit's cloak fluttered, shifting in and out of vision as he was shook by the troll. A longbow fell from his grasp.

"Bugger off," the archer offered in a dying response.

As Shalon approached Berrigus held the dead man aloft and bellowed at him, "Who this?" Once again the dead mans cloak seemed to dissappear and reappear as it moved, entrancing the troll.

Dropping the man, the troll stripped off his nice cloak and took his purse, dagger, short sword, and quiver. Berrigus also picked up the dropped bow. Gathering his booty under a massive arm, Berrigus started back towards the river.

The troll was clearly having more luck, and possibly more fun, than Shalon, but he continued his noisy movement to startle the attackers. The irony of something half animal trying to flush out humans rather than the other way around was rich, and he almost enjoyed the table-turning. In fairness, though, he had never seen anyone try and flush centaurs out since they tended to kick back.

And kick was what he did when one unlucky hunter thought he could stand his ground (either that or he was frozen in fear, but he HAD raised his bow at the centaur). A sickening crunch announced the man's rib cage caving in as a pair of hind legs knocked him back through the foliage, and the tree trunk his head walloped on impact finished him off. He did not get up.

Shalon shrugged as Berrigus asked him who his own kill was. He did not recognise the race, or the clothing, so Berrigus might as well have tried to come up with the answer himself for all the difference it was going to make. As Berrigus removed the items from the man, Shalon looked at the ground, studying what was left and the tracks. Three bodies littered the new clearing, but there were four sets of tracks.

As Berrigus returned to the others, Shalon stayed to try and follow the last man. But the man was no fool, and had waded into a nearby stream and stayed in it. There were no tracks on the other side as Shalon stepped over.

Once Berrigus had returned to the encampment he placed his hoard beside the fire. Pitfall was just emerging from the eel carcass as the troll picked up the cloak.

He put the cloak over Pitfall's head and declared, "Umtim gone!" Sure enough, the cloak seemed to blend itself into the riverbank, and unless one happened to be looking directly

at him, the boy would have disappeared. Removing the cloak, Berrigus said, "Umtim back!" He repeated the act, covering and uncovering the child multiple times, until he was sure Pitfall understood.

"Present me!" Berrigus declared, handing Pitfall the cloak.

Then he turned to Lilac, handing her the dagger. "Present me," he declared. "It sharp," he added as a warning.

Things seemed to be over, quicker than Tiago would have thought possible. But, on second thought, looking at Berrigus massive form wading across the river, what could stand up against that?? The troll was so stupid that he probably would not have been smart enough to realize that if had died and would just keep on going. He vaguely, and briefly, wondered if that was often a problem for the messengers of the dead, trying to convince a troll that yes, it was really dead and to come along quietly.....

Berrigus then gathered up the longbow and quiver. "Present me," he said as he passed them to Tiago. Somehow he knew the hunter could use them, but added, "Point away from self."

Turning finally to Shalon, Berrigus presented him the short sword. "Present me," he said. "Hold handle end, it sharp too," he admonished.

Glistening with a sheen of sweat and feeling thoroughly renewed mentally at having done a good job, Shalon returned to the others in time for the handing out of gifts. As Berrigus handed the short sword to him, Shalon could only stare in wonder at his generosity. He had assumed the troll would be keeping it all.

"Thankyou," he said, not knowing what else to say. He slotted it into the leather harness that crossed his chest and upper back, the same harness his passengers usually clung on to for dear life if they weren't used to riding a horse with a man's torso attached. Somehow, like Lilac, he felt less naked with it, although it meant not nearly as much to him as her dagger gift did to her.

And like Pitfall, his eyes finally came to rest on Lilac herself, and that diaphanous piece of clothing she was wearing. He could not understand why Tiago was making such a big deal of looking for him and announcing his return a few minutes ago, and still could not. After all, what was beauty for but to be looked at? And so he took his fill, as she stood talking to the others, before trotting to a shady spot away from the fire and sitting down on all fours to rest.

The troll kept the purse for himself of course, he wasn't THAT stupid. Looking around at the party, the eel crackling merrily on the fire, and the swirling river, Berrigus became very dizzy. He wobbled several times, grinned at Pitfall trying to get out of the way, and then hit the ground with a dull thud, unconscious.

He finally realized that he had been wounded.

Tiago managed to pull Lilac out of the river. She watched his gaze drift downward before returning purposefully to her face. That spoke well for him, she thought. Then he was pulling her into the underbrush and Berrigus and Shalon were crossing the river to make short work of the bandits. While they were gone, Tiago began to talk, and Lilac wondered, not for the first time, whether he always did that. She considered interrupting him half a dozen times, but not all of her compassion had soured, apparently, during her time with the slavers, and so she kept the snarky remarks to herself.

Then there was a moment's blessed silence, and then a splash as Berrigus was crossing the river again.

By this time, the eel was smelling done, and Lilac's stomach growled. She left the hiding place to rejoin the others as Berrigus was distributing the loot. She took the dagger from him, and felt a good deal better. It disappeared up her sleeve almost instantly as she dropped a curtsy to Berrigus. "Thank you," she said. "That makes me feel less naked, that does."

Then, feeling heartened, she removed the eel from the fire and offered Tiago some of the cooked meat, giving him a genuine smile as she settled herself near the blaze.

Covered in blood and slime, Pitfall looked up as Berrigus approached, flinching a little in expectation of a beating. This was perfectly normal behaviour for trolls in general and to be tolerated, but Berrigus didn't hit him. In fact, Berrigus seemed in a particularly good mood, despite the obvious (to everyone else) arrow ding in his forehead.

Catching on a lot quicker than the troll gathered, Pitfall nevertheless put up with the show and tell story until he was presented with the cloak. In truth he hadn't wanted to jinx it, and when he finally held the cloak in his grubby little hands he beamed with happiness, eyes darting about amongst the others in anticipation of a challenge. When none was forthcoming, Pitfall lovingly stroked the cloak, transferring eel blood to the cloth, then slipped it over his filthy shoulders and paraded about a bit, practising swishing the material about for dramatic effect.

"Wow," he breathed excitedly, dancing a little on the wet grass in sheer enjoyment of this new toy, "thanks!" Then the dance became a little more necessary and life

threatening as Berrigus began to topple, swaying erratically before smacking into the ground with a certain finality. Pitfall approached, cloak billowing behind him as if he were some sort of minature superhero, and adopted an intrigued stance. Berrigus didn't move and for a moment, Pitfall was simply glad he hadn't been squashed beneath the great lump, then Lilac spoke and he found himself utterly distracted by the soaking wet wench in their midst. His gaze lingered at her chest height and showed no sign of moving elsewhere.

Tiago was stunned when Berrigus gave him the gift, taking the bow and running his hands along its woodwork. It was a fine weapon indeed and he felt honored by it. He tried to compose a proper response to the gift, which, no doubt, the troll would not have appreciated, but by then Berrigus had moved off to give Pitfall his own gift, then, almost immediately, Berrigus reeled and fell over to the ground with an earth shaking *THUMP*. Tiago however, just assumed the troll was taking a nap.

Tiago followed Lilac back out of the brush and towards the fire, finding his gaze drawn unerringly towards her swaying derriere under the tight wet cloth. A pleasant enough sight and ending all too quickly as they reached the fire, Tiago jerking his gaze upward, his cheeks blushing a gentle red as he made an over obvious chore of looking for Shalon.

"Many thanks my lady," the hunter said as he took the offered and only slightly charred eel from Lilac, followed by, "Yon centaur does not seem to have returned yet, but perhaps he is scouting the local area for any of the brigands that might be remaining." He shrugged, fairly sure of the centaurs woodland skills and joined Lilac in sitting by the fire, where she seemed to be trying to ignore Pitfall staring directly at her breasts in an unabashed way.

"We shoul'da kept one of them alive," Lilac pointed out to nobody in particular. "Interrogated him to see why they attacked us. Surely we don't look like we *have* much of anything."

<OOC: I just realized that both my characters are unconscious at the same time. Will someone please splash some water on one of my trolls?>

"We have you," Pitfall told her, still locked visually at her cleavage, "and me I spose," he kicked Berrigus experimentally with a muddy boot, "though a kid and a pretty woman fetch a good price at the slave markets, it seems odd that they attacked when we had him with us," he indicated Berrigus, "maybe they only saw you at first," he finally broke his gaze away as the troll still wasn't moving, and wandered over to the river, scooping up as much water as he could carry quickly in the cupped cloak. By the time he reached Berrigus, half of it had already drained away, but Pitfall moved swiftly, and the

remainder was used to douse the troll all across his face and chest.

"Present me!" chuckled Pitfall, standing perhaps a little bit closer to the wakening troll than might have been entirely wise.

"Or maybe," Tiago said as he watched Pitfall get up and fetch some water, apparently to torment and agitate the sleeping troll with, such an evil child, "they were not slavers at all. Maybe they were troll hunters?" He considered expounding on this further, but instead took another healthy bite of the eel. It was surprisingly good and he was starving. It never ceased to amaze him how much how good the worst tasting things could be when one was starving.

After several minutes of quiet and continuous munching, Tiago had assuaged the worst of his hunger, and then he swallowed heavily and looked around at the others, "So, what do we do next? We have any clues where the troll brat went to?"

Lilac had to fight the sudden and overpowering urge to hit Pitfall over the head with a large blunt object when the evil demon spawn suggested that perhaps the hunters were looking for slaves. She shook her head and glared at him and said simply, "Been there, done that. Got the bloody T-shirt." She had no idea what a T-shirt was, or even why she had just said it, and she frowned puzzledly before deciding that it really didn't much matter.

Tiago, except for the fact that he talked too much, was probably the one member of the party she didn't mind ogling her, and he made a rather obvious attempt to quit embarrassing himself as he went to look for Shalon.

She watched the spectacle unfold as Pitfall went to Berrigus and splashed water over him. The troll came up roaring, and Lilac couldn't help laughing with self-righteous satisfaction as Berrigus threw the evil child with quite a bit of force. Maybe the landing would knock some sense into him.

Then the troll finally seemed to notice he was bleeding, and he looked around before his gaze eventually landed on her.

Berrigus sputtered as he awoke and swung wildly in troll like fashion. The swing connected and sent Pitfall rolling. Fortunately for the goblin/boy he got caught in his new cloak, wrapping himself as he flew.

The troll stood up, furious, and looked for his attacker. "Where he go?" he demanded, dripping gobbets of muddy water. Of course, even since he had figured out the cloak and 'Present Me'ed' it to Pitfall, he couldn't quite figure out what had happened. His poor

abused cranium heated up, both in anger and thought, and he rubbed it.

His hand came back bloody. "Ow," he exclaimed, "wounded me!" After several seconds he realized that Pitfall had not injured him with the water, but had actually helped.

Berrigus sat down near the fire and tore off a piece of eel (not the burned portion) and investigated his injury delicately. (For a troll this meant that he did not bash himself over the head too severely.)

Finishing his eel, Berrigus rummaged around in his pockets and pouches and came up with a needle and thread. Realizing that he could not actually see the top of his head, he searched his companions for one to assist him.

At first he thought of Pitfall, but the little urchin would enjoy it too much and he might have to bash him again. Besides he would have to find him first, and that would be a lot of work. He considered Tiago, but the hunter would insist on talking.

He would talk a lot.

Berrigus considered Shalon, but the centaur would both enjoy it too much and talk a lot. Finally the troll's eyes fell with all the other males on the lovely Lilac, cleavage first. She actually wasn't half bad for a human female, although a little too clean and spindly.

The troll approached her, holding the needle and thread towards her. "Stitch me?" he asked. His lips spread open in his best human-like smile, showing a row of sharp greenish teeth with little bits of raw eel between them. He paused for several long seconds and added uncharacteristically, "Please?"

Lilac sighed, took the needle and thread from him, and examined the gash on his forehead. She wasn't sure she wanted to touch him, but she wasn't that heartless or cruel, so she just said gruffly, "Sit down."

When he complied, she began stitching him up as best she could. She tried to be gentle, although she wasn't sure what good that was going to do since she didn't know how well the troll felt pain.

About halfway through the stitching, she turned and glanced over her shoulder at Tiago. "You don't happen to have a cloak with you, do you, sir?" she asked politely. "I'm cold." The truth was, she really wanted an excuse to cover herself and keep them from staring so much. It was giving her a complex.

Since Shalon had returned, removing any excuses that Tiago might have had, he simply

sat by the fire and munched on some of the cooked eel, which was not half bad, and watched Lilac do her bit of minor surgery on the trolls forehead. He could admire such a steady hand in a woman. And she had, he had to admit, many other....fine attributes.

Slightly startled by the question....he was used to people avoiding talking to him...he said, "Umm, yes, of course." he stood up, unhooking his own cloak, a fur trimmed affair, and swept it off, stepping forward to wrap it around her shoulders. "There, my lady," he said, holding the contact perhaps a moment too long, "I hope that suffices?" With conversation down to a minimum, and intelligent conversation down to zero, Shalon sat at the edge of the little gathering, staring out into Coed Mor. The sunlight playing through the foliage was hypnotic, and he allowed that to lull him into a miniature trance. He wasn't their guard, so he felt no obligation to stay alert. He just allowed the sounds of the ocean and forest, the birdsong, and the rustling of the breeze around him to play in his ears, relaxing him.

It was only the mildest of thoughts, barely enough to register on the intelligent thought scale, but something suddenly did not feel right. Shalon made no attempt to think further, no attempt to investigate... it was just there. A nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right, but not nagging enough to make him actually do anything. Berrigus' sloth was starting to rub off on him.

Lilac took the cloak from Tiago gratefully and wrapped it around herself. It positively dwarfed her, but she didn't much notice. She washed her hands in the river, because she wasn't sure whether trolls had cooties or not but was not willing to give Berrigus the benefit of the doubt. Then she dropped back down beside Tiago to finish enjoying her eel. Shalon seemed to be asleep, and she let the lull of Tiago's voice as he went on and on in his usual nonsensical fashion soothe her.

Pitfall Goes Missing

Once the mild concussion wore off, Pitfall rolled slowly nearer to the trees undercover of his cloak. He could hear Berrigus' voice and his blurred mind knew it would be safer to avoid contact with the troll again for a little while so he simply scooped through the wet grass and slunk away from the group.

The forest smelled green, it was bright, sunny and full of ferns, brambles and tall, broad trees standing proud in the sunlight, fed by the mature river and sheltered from the brunt of the ocean weather by the steeply rising cliffs to the north and west. Here, with the bright sun waning from the day, birdsong resumed after the fight and a substantial amount of nature between him and civilisation as he knew it, Pitfall felt just a little out of his depth.

He was used to scaling walls, loping over rooftops and through alleys, hiding in rubbish sacks and mouldy corners, sleeping in filth and scavenging what he could. Stealing, for money to pay his debts, to keep others off his back. Searching out shiny things to appease those bigger and more evil than he. He loved the city, well, most of it. Staring into this seemingly beautiful and endless flora, surrounded by foliage, flowers and fronds, he could only imagine the thorns hidden in that scenery, the trouble waiting to envelop him as it always did.

Still, he considered, wandering slowly into the trees munching on the eel flesh he'd shoved in his pocket, it was still preferable to being hit over the head again by the troll.

It was about then, just as the thought was passing through his cranium, that someone hit him over the head, shoved him in a sack, flung sack and contents over a shoulder and began to move, at pace, into cover of the trees.

A second pair of eyes watched the campsite from the comparative safety of an upper oak branch, legs drawn up out of sight, bow trained on those seated about a small fire. Scent from the roasting eel wafted to their nostrils, but the young man didn't move. He watched Lilac, noted the movement of Tiago and watched with great interest as Berrigus and Shalon joined the group. They had the child, the next best prize would be the woman, but the man could fetch a decent price in Auburn, if he survived the sea voyage. He could only wait, hoping that the pit traps, various trip wires and nooses laid about the forest floor would slow down both troll and centaur. With them out of the way, he and his band of miscreants stood a chance. With them in the picture, it might just be better to keep the kid and make a run for it, particularly after the presumably quick demise of those who had attacked from across the river. He was smarter, he told himself, he had patience.

There were plenty of bandits in these woods, but the turnover was quick for most of them, they didn't plan and that was where his team had the edge. Very few people crossed their section of forest and lived to tell anyone else about it, those who did, were telling strangers half a world away and there was little to be done about it by then.

No, he could wait, the ship wasn't due to leave for a couple of days anyway. The boy would keep. He returned his steady gaze to Lilac, nestled in a cloak, sat by the fire talking.

Berrigus felt much better. His stomach was full, his head wasn't bleeding profusely, and the mud was finally drying to a thick patina over his even thicker hide. He broke wind loudly in the centaurs direction and chased it with a loud belch towards Tiago and Lilac, clearing a wide circle around himself. He laid back in the grass. Yes, now if only he had something pressing to do this afternoon.

A small thought (for that is the only kind he could handle) wandered into his little brain. Obviously it was lost, and too small to be about on it's own, but wander into the trolls brain it did. Finally it pushed it's way to the surface, and Berrigus sighed, "Chollie would like it here."

Chollie.

"Oh, no, Chollie missing!" the troll bellowed. He ran around the fire several times, searching the bushes, until he remembered that it was that very predicament that had brought him here. "Umtim! Umtim!," Berrigus called loudly, "Chollie still missing, no screw around now!"

Once again he ran around the fire searching the bushes. "Oh, no," Berrigus bellowed, "Umtim missing too!" He picked his nose hurriedly, increasing his sense of smell. (One wouldn't think it, but trolls actually have a keen sense of smell.)

Making a spiral pattern, which was purely instinctual and had no forethought at all, Berrigus began searching the underbrush. He snuffled the bushes, flattening anything smaller than himself. Making a great commotion, the troll soon had a growing circle of defoliation. Several small traps had been tripped unnoticed by the rampaging troll.

A log, suspended from the overhanging trees, suddenly sped towards Berrigus's head. It struck with a dull thud that splintered the end of it and got the troll's attention. "Ow! What dumbshit hang log here!" Berrigus exclaimed loudly.

But the blow had calmed down the frantic troll. Finally, Berrigus announced, "Here he

was, but now he not! Trail gone!” He slammed his granite like head against the trunk of the very tree the slaver was hiding in. “Shit!” he yelled. Again and again he slammed his head into the tree with the same expletive, until the centuries old noble oak gave up and began to topple into the forest.

A thought flickered into his mind, “If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?” After Berrigus interpreted it the thought came out of his mouth as “Ooo, pretty crash.”

It was a pretty crash too, with lots of flying debris, splintering wood and screaming.

Yes, as a matter of fact long after the debris had settled it was still screaming. Quite loudly.

“That not right,” the troll stated obviously. He looked at his companions who were all staring at him, but not screaming. “WHO THE HELL SCREAMING?” he bellowed. The screaming stopped, followed by a low moan coming from the fallen oak.

When Berrigus started shouting for Umtim, Lilac realized that the evil hellspawn child was nowhere to be found. And that worried her, though she couldn't rightly explain why it should. Perhaps she wasn't nearly as cynical and mercenary as she liked to pretend, or maybe she really did think Pitfall was cute, in a frightening sort of way.

Then Berrigus started crashing through the undergrowth, bellowing. Lilac drew her dagger and cursed volubly under her breath as Berrigus started banging his head against a random tree.

Lilac's strategy during the battle was to stay behind whichever of her companions was nearest to hand and might conceivably keep her alive. Unfortunately, Shalon hadn't roused yet, and she wasn't sure she could deal with Tiago if he kept talking at her during this battle. So she decided she'd have to join the fray whether or not she liked the idea.

She took cover behind a random tree, (not the one Berrigus was trying to fell) and waited until some of the brigands came into sight, whereupon she began pelting them with rocks, which did little real good since she was (1) not a very good shot and (2) those she did hit weren't much damaged.

One of her rocks did miss its mark by quite a while and bonked Shalon on the head, which she fervently hoped might get his attention.

He would never admit it, but the centaur had actually fallen asleep. Days of sleeping rough and drinking heavily had taken their toll, and allowing himself to be entranced by

the forest sounds was just the feather on the wrong end of the balance, and he had dozed off. Luckily he didn't snore very loudly, or they would have known for sure.

Despite Berrigus' shouting and clumping around, he hadn't fully roused. The noises were much like thunder and lightning, which a centaur tended to ignore once they'd found a good spot to sleep - there was usually no need for alarm. When he finally noticed the draught caused by Berrigus' circling a vitesse, he stood up in alarm, only to get beaned on the head by something sharp and frankly, painful.

Of course, he immediately assumed they were under attack, or that Berrigus had inadvertently kicked up a stone in his maniacal running, so it never even occurred to him that the direction was all wrong. "Watch it, lard ass," he commented, but mostly to the foul stench of Berrigus' trailing wind.

He had to dance out of the way smartly when the tree came down, but a flash of metal caught his eye and he rushed over to the falling mass. Sure enough, someone had been in the tree, and a swift fist to the face stopped the screaming the troll was complaining about. The raider moaned once, then passed out.

"Nothing a nice splash of cold water won't cure. Let's not kill this one until we've got the information out of him," commented Shalon, looking to Berrigus rather pointedly. "Kill man, no find Umtim," he translated, since all that running had clearly heated up the troll's brain too much for extra thought.

Dragging a man when your own upper body was a good 6 feet off the ground was dead easy, and so Shalon made sure the guy took a few bumps to the head on the way over the flattened bushes before dropping him to lay on the beach area so someone could wake him up. Tiago had started to head for the brush on the riverbank for cover when the ruckus had started, but after seeing the mass unthinking carnage that Berrigus was making of the surrounding woodland, he decided that it might be safer if he just held his ground.

And, before he knew it, everything seemed to be over and Shalon was dragging an unconscious human out of the woods to dump him unceremoniously on the gravelly riverbank. Tiago walked over and nudged the man with the toe of his boot, then bent down to check him for vitals. Still alive, but might be a bit before he regained consciousness. Taking a coil of rope from his pack, he bound the man, hand and foot, with a secure knot well out of reach of his hands.

"By your words," he addressed the centaur, "I infer that the child UmmTimm is still missing." As Tiago stood up, he considered that it was probably the best news he had heard all day, but the others might not see it that way, so instead, he said, "Of course,

with the cloak that yon troll gave him, he could be right under our feet and we would not have any idea. And, under other circumstances I might be able to track him, for I have some skill in that, but....," he gestured vaguely out away from the camp, where very little area had escaped being trampled by the rampaging troll, "now I don't think there is much use in trying that."

The hunters gaze fell on Lilac as she emerged back into the camp, swaddled in his cloak, and he beckoned for her to join them, "Fair Lilac, we appear to be at a bit of an impasse. Yon unconscious scoundrel may be the only one who kens the whereabouts of the other little scoundrel. Pray, do you perchance have any witchery in your repertoire that could restore his wits to him without delay?"

Shalon stood studying Tiago quietly. He had done his bit, bringing the body to the shore for the others to deal with, so he felt he had earned the luxury of standing back and using the time to gather some information on the strange group he had unwittingly found himself allied with, if they could be called allies. 'In the same place at the moment' was perhaps more accurate.

Tiago was frail to look at, even by biped standards, but he had a familiar haughtiness and way with words to the centaur. Many of the passengers he had carried for money had been well-off, or just snooty, the type that felt they were too good to walk anywhere. Thus, he had become quite accustomed to hearing such strange talk.

The man had obviously developed an affinity with the equally-frail woman Lilac. In fact, they had both bonded with the other; no question about it. Understandably they must have seen more in common with each other than they ever would with the rest of the group - a sentiment Shalon could whole-heartedly agree with. So why was he still here?

The answer was not so difficult to come by as one might imagine. Over the last few weeks his demeanour had, like his condition, deteriorated, an all-time low in his life. Being constantly drunk wasn't conducive to getting work, since the smell usually kept the clientele away even if the all-too-candid opinions he tended to offer his passengers at times due to his alcohol-induced lack of sense of respect was not enough.

Thus, finding company that actually smelled worse but would at least stick with him had started him out of that slump, on a path towards what should be fitting for a centaur like him. It was a start back to civilisation. He wasn't ready to give up drinking just yet - a strange but prevalent human custom that he had taken a shine to. But perhaps toning it down a bit might help - and besides, he was unlikely to see the inside of a beer mug for a while and this was the clearest his head had been for a while. It felt good. And, for the first time for quite a while, he had a purpose.

"I think we would smell him even with that cloak," he commented to Tiago's declaration.

Berrigus shambled up, joining the group with a loud belch that brought up little bits of eel and other unidentified bits. He looked at Shalon in confusion, the centaur was talking again. The troll picked up the phrase "Kill man, no find Umtim."

They certainly sounded like a pair of great ideas to the troll. Berrigus picked up a rock to do the first half before he realized that the centaur had meant it as an either-or proposition. Cognition dawned on his face.

It wasn't pretty.

Tiago was saying something, but to Berrigus it sounded like Elvish so he ignored it. He did, however, catch Shalon's comment, "I think we would smell him even with that cloak."

"Yes," Berrigus offered resolutely, "Umtim stink." The irony of the statement was far beyond the troll's ability to comprehend. "Follow scent, end at tree like Umtim never there." His eyebrows fluttered in confusion like a bat trying to take off with his nose. His nose wrinkled, remembering the child's scent.

Once again, it wasn't pretty.

Tiago was saying something to Lilac in Elvish again, probably trying to get lucky. All this thinking was really getting to the troll, and he wished he had been cursed with smarter companions. It seemed to Berrigus that the best course of action was to rouse the captive instead of killing him. The troll wet his stubby pinky finger in his mouth and stuck it in the unconscious man's ear. "Wakey, wakey," he whispered. (Actually it was more of a quiet bellow, buy hey- he tried.)

If one has ever received a 'wet willy' from a troll one would know it has a quite startling effect. The man sat up suddenly, once again screaming. Berrigus slapped him in the face, cracked his enormous knuckles, and declared, "Now me torture him." With a grin that would melt plaster he added, "Me like, do that good."

The centaur had to put out an arm quickly to stop Berrigus. Actually it didn't have to be more than a leisurely movement, since the troll was still finishing his decision for the next 30 seconds.

"No no, troll torture kill puny man, question first, words only, then maybe torture."

"And they wonder why trolls don't make good leaders," commented Shalon as an aside to the others.

He sauntered around to straddle the man's form, the captive's eyes looking upward with a mix of trepidation and defiance. After all, Shalon was quite tall at his front end.

"Where is the boy?," he demanded. "And don't try anything funny, because my friend here doesn't have a sense of humour. I don't know how much longer I can stop him from breaking you... literally."

Staring up at the troll holding a rock, the slaver tried to push his back deeper into the ground beneath him and escape, but his bruised and battered body just protested by sending back a harsh reminder of every aching fibre within and he groaned. He wasn't going anywhere and he knew it, the resignation clear on his dirty, blood smattered face.

The centaur, he noted painfully, was pushing the bulky troll's arm sideways, guiding the rock a little further from his face and he began to breathe heavily, each breath torturing his lungs which felt as if they were burning. Whether they tortured him or not, he considered, he didn't think he was going to be spending any of the riches he'd accumulated, and he glared upward with agonised eyes, hatred at the thought of his failure pushing past the need to scream again. He spat, blood and spittle landing on his own chest through lack of momentum and lay back, feeling the cool grass against his skull.

"Screw you," he slurred, the thought of his brother outliving him nagging at his pride but a small comfort at least in the face of inevitable death which was bringing a numbing calm to his mind already.

Lilac watched as Berrigus brought the bandit around, in a much more effective way than she probably could have accomplished. Then Shalon moved to straddle him to begin the questioning, but obviously it was no good.

Lilac wasn't sure if this were a slaver or not, but she couldn't think of anything else he could be if he wanted Pitfall so badly. And that made her angry. Memories of her own brief enslavement came roiling through her mind, and she suddenly pushed past Tiago until she was standing beside Shalon.

"Move aside!" she said with rare forcefulness.

When she had room to work, she knelt beside their captive, her eyes meeting his. She drew the dagger Berrigus had given her and said quietly, "You have two choices, sweetheart. You can answer my friend's question like a good boy, or you can let me help

the troll break off pieces of you. And you know where I'm going to start?" She pressed the edge of her knife against his groin. "Right there. And I'll cut slowly. By the time I'm done, you'll wish you were in the troll's capable hands."

Had the others taken a moment to look at Lilac, they would have noticed that she seemed entirely too happy about the situation. In fact, there was something almost maniacal and triumphant about her expression.

Something in the slaver's mind rebelled at first, seeing the hatred he had seen a hundred times in a hundred faces as he looked up into the blurry image that was Lilac's face. Her eyes showed something he understood - revulsion, revenge, whatever you wanted to call it, these were emotions he knew. He had told himself often that those he captured and sold as slaves were beneath him, that if they deserved to be free they would find a way, gain some strength or spark of smarts in order to escape. So many gave in after the first few days in handcuffs, chained together in a ship's hold that he had started to blank their humanity, to see only numbers and coin and not people. Every so often a feisty captive came along, one who wouldn't break and they ended up with the harder end of matters. Or a swift journey over the side, depending on how much trouble they caused.

Lilac's voice keyed into that part of a person that was tested in times like those and the slaver responded. The knife's presence twisted and her words promised a duration he wasn't keen to endure with regards to that part of his anatomy. He gave in.

"He's in a sack on the way to our ship," he admitted, "it's moored somewhere along the coastline. I don't know exactly where, I just handle the trap setting. I was waiting," he looked up directly into her eyes, spitting blood down his own chin as the life struggled to stay within him, "watching, to see if I could get you too beautiful." Hopefully that was enough to spurn her on to kill him, and when his brother realised he wasn't joining him, with luck he'd take the ship and be long gone anyway.

Surprised and a little amused by Lilac's forceful manner as she pushed her way past him, Tiago just stood back and watched as the others took care of things. They seemed to have matters well in hand, and Tiago knew that if Lilac had threatened him in the same manner, with the same tone of voice, he would have spilled everything he knew. Nor was he far wrong as the slaver soon started giving out with the information.

"The coast isn't too far from here," Tiago chimed in as he consulted his fairly extensive knowledge of the area, "we'll have to hurry if we're to rescue the little stinker. Perhaps we should just leave this varlet tied up here for whomever might find him. Doubtless they would not be any more kind to him than us and he deserves no better."

Shalon was caught off-guard by Lilac's assertive arrival into the situation and moved

aside as commanded. The look in her eyes said she was probably more of a threat to the man than even the troll, and she didn't prove him wrong. The man caved.

Shalon nodded to Tiago's information, grateful that for once, somebody knew what they were talking about. But he didn't think it was a good idea to leave the man to squeal to anyone who might find him, and his mood was still not light enough to let him go unpunished. Quite why the centaur cared that they had kidnapped the kid, he didn't know, but sometimes you just shouldn't question these things and should follow your instincts.

"Come, my dear," said Shalon unexpectedly, putting a firm hand on Lilac's shoulder to try and guide her after Tiago towards the coast, putting himself between them and the troll. As he passed Berrigus, he indicated towards the slaver. In about 60 seconds the troll should realise he was suggesting there be a little 'accident'... after all, the troll is renowned for clumsiness. And he felt sure Berrigus had his own issues with his Umtim being captured by this cretin's people, too.

Berrigus watched as the human woman took control of the captive. Although it wasn't easy to impress the troll, he was fairly certain that Lilac was at least part troll. Perhaps not in body, true, but certainly in spirit.

The troll was a little disappointed in Pitfall though. The little shit could get out of honest work, paying for ale, and incarceration by the city guard, but he couldn't get out of a simple sack. That's when Berrigus put the several thought fragments together and determined that they had probably enchanted him.

Berrigus hated that.

As a matter of fact he was probably trying to enchant them now. Tiago even suggested leaving the "varlet", (Berrigus hadn't a clue how the hunter knew the man's religion), and heading for the coast immediately before they could kill him.

The troll thought not. After all, he wanted the man dead, and the captive obviously expected, nay welcomed it. There was no down side anymore.

When Shalon passed him, Berrigus saw him nod towards the slaver and wink. The centaur knew the disciple of Varlet was trying to charm them and was protecting the humans, so it was up to him. The troll walked to the slaver, knelt down beside him, and hit him hard enough to snap the Varlet's neck.

His companions spun around with looks from astonishment to horror. Berrigus responded with a look of his own, mostly confusion, and a simple, "What?"

Lilac had to restrain the sudden overwhelming urge to cackle as the worthless piece of shit spilled the whereabouts of Umtim. As Tiago started to walk off, she still hesitated, knife unsheathed, contemplating whether or not she should finish what she started. But then Shalon was gently guiding her away. She let herself be led a few steps away, but she caught the centaur's look toward Berrigus, and she turned to watch as he snapped the slaver's neck.

"Niiiiice," she drawled, clapping appreciatively.

Then and only then did she turn to follow Tiago. As she walked along, she whistled a sprightly tune, her mood vastly improved by the recent bloodletting.

Tiago visibly winced as he heard the thunderous crash of Berrigus' fist coming down, but he didn't turn around. He really didn't want to see it. So he just kept picking his way westward towards the coast, and soon he heard the various distinctive footsteps of his fellow travellers following along. Lilac was even humming a jaunty tune. Tiago stifled a chuckle as he wondered whether it was because of the death of the slaver or because they had, at least temporarily, got rid of the stinking, foulmouthed child, UmmTimm.

The hunters keen eyes picked up several more traps laid along the forest floor, but he either led the group around and past them or he deftly disarmed them. It was not difficult, they had been laid expecting the unwary and incompetent, not a trained woodsman. All in all, Tiago considered after some time of moving steadily through the woodland, the motley group was making excellent time.

An unremarkable half an hour of travelling later and Tiago spotted a trail crossing theirs. Holding up a hand to signal the others to stop (and moving subtly off to the side in case the signal did not penetrate Berrigus' skull in time), he knelt down and took a moment to examine them.

"Three men moved through here," he reported to the others, "on a trail cutting diagonally across ours. By the length of their stride they were either all very tall or they were moving fast. They're still heading towards the coast, but their path will take them to shore somewhere south of where we would have come out. These could be the ones we're looking for, but that I cannot guarantee." Looking around at the others, he ventured, "What do you think? Continue on our current heading or follow the other one?"

Berrigus was about to ask his companions if any of them knew Varletine last rites for the deceased captive, but they were moving out of earshot. He cursed softly and spat on the corpse, offering it trolloc rites, and shambled quickly to catch up.

Tiago didn't seem to know quite where he was going, and the troll noticed that he sidestepped several nice traps. The troll's poor overworked brain cell whimpered to itself trying to understand why the hunter was passing up so much fun. Finally Berrigus consigned himself to slogging along behind the centaur, certainly not the best of views.

A half an hour passed. Berrigus's mind, such that it was, wandered. Suddenly Shalon stopped abruptly, causing an awkward few seconds while the troll sorted himself from equine tail hair. The centaur did not, apparently, appreciate his efforts to comb the resulting knots out with his thick, clumsy fingers.

Even Tiago was unable to stifle a grin when Berrigus inadvertently almost mounted Shalon at the sudden stop, then offended the centaur even further by trying to straighten the mess with his large, clumsy fingers.

Had it been anyone besides Berrigus, he would have been inclined to make a comment about 'clumsy foreplay', but as he did not particularly want to share the slavers fate, he contented himself with a snickering laugh.

Berrigus realized that Tiago was talking again, but didn't catch the first part. He tried valiantly to follow the part he did hear. "What do you think?" the hunter asked, "Continue on our current heading or follow the other one?"

"Dunno," the troll offered helpfully, "me lost too. Mebbe we still follow trail with nice traps on it?"

He waited a second and halfheartedly added, "...could be fun...."

Everything seemed to be going really well. Berrigus had understood (or guessed) the sign the centaur gave him, and the slaver had been despatched. Perhaps more encouraging was that no-one seemed bothered, not even Tiago, although Shalon did notice he never looked around.

They made reasonably good time towards the coast, although as always it was a little slow for the centaur's tastes. He needed to let loose and gallop about a bit, stretch his forelocks; but that would have to wait until the next bit of excitement. It seemed that Tiago had some skill in avoiding traps, something a quadruped with thin legs quite appreciated.

As Tiago called a halt, all but one stopped. The next few moments were best forgotten, but the silence was punctuated with something like "Back off, Lard-Ass, we're friends, and that's as far as it goes!" The centaur moved his back end around sharpish, preferring

a little coastal breeze ruffling his tail rather than troll fingers.

"I say we follow the new trail, since we have nothing else to go on, but I leave the final decision to our lady here," he said, a little admiration left in his voice from her command of the earlier situation.

Lilac burst into hearty giggles as Shalon and Berrigus attempted to straighten themselves out. She did have the good grace to bury her face in Tiago's cloak in a more or less ineffective attempt to stop snickering.

When Shalon deferred the decision to her, though, she sobered. At least a little. "Yes," she murmured slowly. "We should follow the new trail." It seemed a reasonable suggestion to her, and she started off in the appropriate direction, still humming to herself.

"The lady has chosen it," he murmured, then hurried to catch up with her. He was not as concerned about traps here, as they had a clear trail to follow, but he wanted to be near the front to make sure they did not stray off the trail, which was often not obvious to an untrained eye.

Eyes on the ground as he continued to track their preys progress, he said in a low conversational tone, "I was impressed with the way you handled that slaver back there, milady Lilac. You must have been treated badly though to gain such anger towards them. I must say," he admitted, "that I have never had dealings with slavers before, so I know little of their methods."

Berrigus was a little upset at the decision to change trails. He wouldn't get to play with any of the clever traps, as the new trail didn't seem to have any. Of course, they did seem to be following prey this time, so the possibility of breaking some heads cheered him a bit.

His face split in a horrific grin.

As the group began to move down the new trail he consigned himself to slogging along behind the centaur again. Berrigus didn't bother to mention the large troll hand print on Shalon's hindquarter, but he did vow to be more attentive this time.

The sun was warm on his face, the coastal breeze rustled in the treetops. Once again Tiago was talking to Lilac and the troll noticed how like the drone of his voice resembled the breeze noises. It was a wonder to Berrigus that the man could hunt at all.

Perhaps he was most successful with deaf creatures. Berrigus's mind began to list all the

deaf species of prey animals that he knew of, but couldn't think of a single one (due mostly to his lack of mental aptitude). Now hopelessly lost, his mind wandered away again.

The party passed between two small knolls, the right hand one strewn with loose rock. The forest opened up before them, and a broad expanse of sandy beach presented itself. The breeze was tainted with salt and the scent of dead sea creatures. Berrigus breathed deeply, he loved the smell of low tide. Except for his missing daughter and friend, the fact that he found his current companions slightly annoying and too cleanly, and that he wished he was back home, the troll felt pretty good.

His tiny mind wandered onto the subject of squids (probably because of their proximity of the sea). They didn't have any ears, but he wasn't sure if they could hear or not, perhaps Tiago could hunt them successfully. From his side, amidst the pile of loose rock, a large claw (which had been mimicking the rocks perfectly) slipped free.

Silently it clamped on to Berrigus's ankle and pulled him off the trail. Too startled to yell (or perhaps too stupid) the troll began to wrestle with it as he was dragged through the underbrush towards the rocks. At last, unable to free his leg and finding himself being pulled between several of the rocks, Berrigus bellowed, "Crap!"

He was probably trying to say, "crab," but at that moment the other claw had successfully clamped itself over his mouth. He reached for his bludgeon, wishing it was a crab mallet instead, and began swinging. His wild swinging began striking sparks off of the surrounding rocks. The sparks, in turn, fell on the bits of leaves and dry flotsam that had collected between the loose rocks, igniting them.

:Hello,: a voice said inside Berrigus's mind.

The troll, unused to having much of anything inside his mind, especially another creature, was startled. His head hurt almost instantaneously. :Ummm, hi,: he mumbled mentally, becoming one with the pain.

:Wow,: the voice said, :there's so much room in here! Hardly any activity at all!:

:Thanks,: the troll thought with a wince.

:I haven't any friends, will you be my friend?: the voice asked Berrigus's mind.

:No,: he thought in response.

:Oh, well,: the voice continued with a mental sigh, :I haven't any lunch either.:

Amid the small fires the struggling troll disappeared under the rock pile.

Lilac was happily walking along the trail, enjoying the momentary respite from the acts of violence that always seemed to be happening around them. Then Berrigus was pulled off onto the beach and she screamed, mostly out of surprise, and jumped backwards, tripping over the hem of Tiago's cloak and falling hard on her rear. She cursed violently and explosively, then got to her feet, looking around for Berrigus. He wasn't hard to miss, but since what he was fighting looked to be a rock creature, she supposed throwing pebbles at it would be useless. And then Berrigus started igniting things, and she sighed.

"Maybe we could just leave him?" she said faintly to her other companions, although she was fairly certain that they couldn't just do that.

"I'm inclined to agree," said Shalon, nervously stepping back and forth. "Even if I had the strength to wrestle either one of them I'm not exactly keen on fire OR loose stones on the ground."

He looked around and found a lump of deadwood, a small tree trunk, and used everything he had to hurl it in the roughly right direction. Nobody said 'Ouch'. Then an idea hit him, like the creeping smell of a... troll.

"Use your best assets, Lard-Ass!!," he shouted. "Show monster where bad food goes from stomach!!" Since the troll was obviously quite occupied, he supplied the proper translation immediately.

At first Tiago was only able to gape at the troll as he wrestled with the giant stone crab thing, Berrigus having left a trail of blooming fires in his wake. But then Tiago whipped out his bow, given to him earlier as a present from the troll. Fitting an arrow to the string, he let loose. The arrow flew true, but bounced off the creature's stony skin.

Encouraged by the kind words and thoughts of his friends, if not by their clever tactics, Berrigus fought harder against the rock crab's grip. If he were inclined to use his imagination, he would have seen his small miserable life pass before his close set pig-like eyes. Instead, he used what he knew best- brute strength.

The creature's mandibles began to tentatively nibble at the troll's clothing, perhaps to discover the best way to unwrap him. Berrigus thought of Chollie, somewhere out in the world alone and scared. He realized his duty to the Rotting Throne was incomplete.

Grumbling under his breath, but having no other way to aid the troll, Tiago fit another arrow to the string and took careful aim this time.....timing it...and then released.

A brief moment later the crab thing let out an inhuman cry of pain and agony as the feather fletched arrow blossomed from its left eye.....but it only seemed to enrage the thing further. Looking back and forth between Shalon and Lilac, Tiago shrugged, unsure what else to do....

The crab grasped Berrigus in agony, squeezing him with both claws. This was a mistake, because the troll had recently eaten eel. As a matter of fact, almost anything would have given the troll gas, but it seems that eel was particularly pungent. With an enormous "BRAAAAAAP!" Berrigus broke wind.

It turns out that troll-digested eel gas is not just particularly flammable, it is explosively so. It was also fortunate that the troll's backside was aimed right at the crab's face during ignition. With a scream of horror, disgust, and pain the rock crab threw Berrigus high into the air (or perhaps it was the exploding gas, we shall never know).

From the apex of his trajectory Berrigus admired the view. Somewhere off slightly to the south was a mud flat where two children were playing. There was a rowboat, what seemed to be some kind of fanciful kite in the shape of a winged serpent, and the corpse of a slaver. He didn't really have the time to ponder this incongruity, or the ability, as he was now plummeting back to earth. What could really save him now was if he bounced off of a hunter's back, rolled off the flank of a centaur, and landed pleasantly against the ample bosom of a buxom woman.

The unfortunate smoldering troll, however, slammed into the packed beach sand about thirty feet in front of his friends at an incredible speed. He lay there on his back a few seconds, dazed, in a large troll shaped depression.

Bits of charred crab meat and shell rained down everywhere.

Finally Berrigus said, simply, "Pretty lights."

Whatever Berrigus might have supposed about landing so far from the others, was pure fiction. In reality, seeing several tons of troll hurtling towards them, the group instinctively scattered, putting as much distance between themselves and ground zero as they could. Thus, a thirty-foot radius of space opened up suddenly as a landing strip for the gravity-challenged troll, and he was spot-on for his landing.

Shalon was the first to amble up to the crater's edge, fearing that by the smell, Berrigus had burned up on re-entry. Luckily (really?), it was only 99% of the oxygen that had burned away, leaving a space filled only with troll scent. The strongest ammonia couldn't mask that smell.

"You plummet well," commented Shalon. "Don't suppose you had time or brainpower to scan the surroundings while you were up there did you?"

Tiago put his bow away and followed Shalon over towards Berrigus newly landed form. The crab thing seemed to have made a hasty exit, and just in time. If it was able to toss the troll around like that then it was unlikely the rest of them would have fared any better, even after Berrigus rather explosive attempts to destroy it.

"Interesting," Tiago observed to the centaur as he appreciatively sniffed the air, "that seems to have burned off a sizable amount of yon trolls odoriferous aurature. Perhaps it will be less painful on our own nasal passages to continue in this ill fated and alcohol free quest we seem to have found ourselves participating in."

Reunions!

Like Tiago, there were only two things that might happen which would let Cholera survive. If she timed it perfectly, she could land and roll thus diverting her momentum. Unfortunately she was a troll and this never occurred to her.

The second way she could survive was dumb luck, the protector of trolls. Hence, she landed on a human carrying a heavy sack, killing him instantly. She then bounced off the falling sack which responded with a pronounced, "Ouch!", glanced off the gunwale of a small rowboat, and rolled into some deep mud.

The sack joined her with a loud splat and several muffled curse words.

Cholera sat there in the mud for a few moments, stunned. If she were more observant she would have seen that she was on the northern bank of the Pedara river, near the sea. A small unoccupied boat was near her, and next to it was a cloth sack.

The cloth sack was wriggling and cursing profusely, so Chollie figured that it's contents was friendly or at least harmless. Her stubby fingers found the knot that secured it and began trying to open it.

Time passed.

Painfully lots of time passed.

Finally the bag fell open, probably due more in part to it's occupant's efforts that those of the trolloc toddler. Cholera gazed stupidly at the contents and squealed with glee, "Umtim!"

"*&*/+^\$£*!" swore Pitfall, descending into the darker realms of goblin cursing after that with such finesse it almost sounded attractive. His wide pale green eyes took in Cholera and he opened and closed his mouth a few times without words then, struggling to process recent events. Apart from the skull thumping headache courtesy of the slaver, now presumably the pulpy bloody mess he could see and smell a short distance to his left, and the myriad of bruises sustained when the troll toddler had landed on him, he seemed to be alive, in one piece and covered in particularly good mud. Consistency and quality both serving to offer him a welcoming wallowing ground.

"Oh," he told the toddler, with a lot less enthusiasm than she had offered him, "it's you. Good mud!" he added by way of a truce of some kind, in the vague hope that she wouldn't pick him up or cuddle him, "Your da's looking for you," he told her, rubbing

some of the river mud into his wounds and over his forehead with a soft sigh of relief at its soothing coolness.

Looking about them, Pitfall tried to get his bearings, unsure how far he'd been carried while he'd been out cold. It seemed they were close to the sea, salt in the air and a small boat off to their right. Interesting. Standing up gingerly, he waded over to it, pulling out a small bag and rummaging about inside. Some dried meat, bread and veined cheese ended up in his dirty palms and he grinned, handing half the goodies over to Cholera.

"C'mon," he told her through begrudgingly, stomping back along the edge of the muddy riverbank so as not to leave the stench until he had to, "your da's further down the river, I'll take you to him. Just follow the mud," he coaxed, lobbing a mudball at her and moving off back eastward.

Revelling in her flight, looping through the air as the sun beat down warmly on her iridescent scales, Saren flew on for some ways before she noticed that Chollie was no longer with her.

She paused in mid-air then, wings beating steadily to keep her aloft as she peered around in confusion, "Sssschollie?" There was no sign of the child anywhere, so Saren looped back on herself sinuously and began to head back the way she had come, following the river back towards the sea. It was quickly obvious that the little trolloc was not aloft, so Saren swung down low over the landscape, peering about in an attempt to find out where Chollie had went to ground.

And there, at the mouth of the river, Saren found her, wallowing in the mud. She should have known, she thought, exposing her wicked looking fangs in a wide grin. But then, after that first relief washed over her, she realized the surroundings the young troll was in was not very friendly at all. Beside Cholera, laying pulped and bleeding in the mud, was a seedy looking human, and in front of her was another one. Saren was proud of Chollie in that instant, that she had managed to take out one of those foul things by herself. And it was true that the remaining one was not an imposing figure, quite small actually and with pretty blond curls, but Saren had not, to date, had any positive dealings with humankind.

Hissing in protective fury, Saren snaked through the air and then looped sinuously around to rear up her head above Pitfall, exposing her fangs as she imposed her body between him and Cholera. "Ssssstay away! Sssschollie issss myy frieend! Ssstay backkk orr feeeel myyy fangssss!"

Saren was immediatly engulfed by two stubby, amazingly filthy, but powerful toddler arms. "Saren!" Cholera exclaimed, "you not fall too! You not lost, me found you!"

Cholera pointed to Pitfall, "Look, me find Umtim too, rescue he!" She lobbed a mudball back at Pitfall which surprisingly connected (due to the large winged serpent that had most of his attention).

"Umtim like mud. This good mud, Saren." Cholera released the serpent with a giggle of childish glee. The trolloc flopped in the mud with a loud 'floop' and rolled, spewing droplets of muck everywhere.

Pitfall managed an 'eek' followed by a serious amount of backing away as the winged snake-thing showed its fangs and hissed at him, clearly terrified and unwilling to make any form of attack. He was tired, bruised and clearly in no need to be worrying about Cholera, not since the snake-thing was so keen to protect the little trolloc. So, he figured, best to report back to Berrigus, wherever the huge, ugly, smelly troll was, and see what he made of it all.

That was about the point in his tactical retreat that Chollie decided to hug Saren. Standing still, completely confused by this new development, Pitfall felt the mudball connect with the side of his head and knock him off balance. Sitting still, open mouthed, he watched the two interact for a few seconds before finally retrieving enough sense to make a second mudball and send it flying back towards Cholera with a grin. If the kid wanted a mudfight, great, he could handle that, but he made sure to give the snake a wide berth.

Mudballs began to fill the air between toddler and enchanted goblin....

Gathered up in Cholera's unexpected embrace, Saren wheezed loudly, trying to draw in breath through the trolloc child's grip...and failing. When Cholera finally threw her to the side, lights were flashingquite prettily, she noticed in a dazed manner....before her eyes, and she gratefully drew in a deep breath....just in time to be hit by a very solid mudball that splattered across her face.

Being outclassed in this kind of confrontation....she had no arms to return fire with...Saren once again took to the skies above, circling the pair and looking down with fondness at Cholera and wondering where she picked up her companion.

Cholera was poised with a mud ball, aimed squarely at Pitfall, when she heard a loud boom in the distance. For a moment she thought she saw a flying troll, but then she remembered sadly that trolls don't fly.

Then Pitfall's latest shot connected and she landed backwards in the mud still clasping her projectile. While he was laughing at her she let it fly, knocking him over as well.

"Got you, Umtim!" Cholera squeeled with glee. Flying troll now forgotten, she quickly made another missile.

Pitfall's attention was completely and utterly taken by the construction of his patented mudball slimer, a concoction of spittle and mud which was designed to stay together until impact then ooze all over the target. He knew how much Cholera appreciated the disgustingly ingenious skill involved and so was quite disappointed when she seemed slightly distracted, looking upwards at some noise or other. What it might be escaped him for now, and the splatter of the trolloc's own ammunition sending him reeling backwards into a particularly stinky patch of river mud only served to make him forget it completely.

"Oh yeah?" he called back, hacking out mud from his mouth and rubbing it into a huge spherical missile, "Well try this!" he chuckled, using both hands to propel the slimy mudball at her. He was now completely and utterly encased in mud, which he noted as the warm afternoon sun beat down on them, was beginning to dry in layers, the first of which seemed to be setting quite hard. He tried to get up, staggered a bit and lurched to one side as his second skin tried to crack fast enough to allow movement, "Aargh, uff...." Pitfall managed as he landed face down and tried to roll towards the water a bit. If he couldn't move, Cholera would show no mercy as usual and he could feel the mud drying quite uncomfortably now. He really didn't want to be a statue standing here all night.

Cholera felt the mud drying on her skin. She could still bend her limbs at the joints, but the hardened mud was creating an outer shell, not unlike a crabs. She imagined herself and Pitfall as a pair of mud crabs, and she skittered about sideways like a crab would.

It didn't help her, Pitfall's aim was dead on and she flipped on her back when his mudball slimer connected, laughing.

All six of her legs waved in the air for a second, then she used one of her claws to flip herself rightside up. Pitfall seemed unaware that he was being charmed by the trolloc's newfound imagination. He was having trouble as a crab, and was trying to roll rather than skitter sideways.

The enchanted troll took the chance and bounced a mud ball off Pitfall's carapace. "Umtim, dummy, crabs we!" she squeeled with glee. Cholera quickly tried to make another mudball, but it wasn't as easy with claws instead of hands. Finally satisfied with her efforts, she launched it at Pitfall before he could recover.

Pitfall was no stranger to transformation spells, after all, the cute strawberry blond curls and idyllic boyish features were not truly his own. He longed to recover his greyish

green goblin skin and be able to look at his reflection again, so, when he discovered he no longer had hands and feet, but claws and armoured legs, his heart skipped a couple of beats and he rolled onto his back in shock.

It wasn't so bad, he supposed, lying there with Cholera's mudball impacted all over his... shell? At least this form was better than being human, though it would put a real crimp in his thieving duties once they returned to the city. He lay still, testing his mobility, then, with a concerted effort, managed to wriggle his legs enough to regain his upright stance just as Cholera smacked him with a second mudball.

With a clattering of skittery legs and a snowballing effect, Pitfall went end over end backwards into the river water. Being underwater stole his momentum and he righted himself again, pointy ended legs finding purchase on sand, very soft muddy sand he noted and he had an idea. Working quickly, he shifted his streamlined new body from side to side until he disappeared, all but his beady eyes, under the sand. Hide and seek... wait for her to figure it out then pounce....

Cholera watched as Pitfall rolled into the water. She tried to rush forward to help him, but found herself running sideways up the beach. Although she had the appearance of a crab, she still retained the cunning of a troll, so it took several long minutes of trial and error to figure out her own locomotion.

By the time she figured out how to move her footprints looked as if a whole flock of crabs had been playing tag on the muddy beach. Cholera had no idea where Pitfall had gone in and could see no sign of him.

She looked for Saren to help her, but the serpent was gone too.

Cholera found herself all alone again, plopped her shell down in the mud and began to cry.

After about half an hour of crying she decided to figure out what had become of Pitfall. She slipped herself sideways into the muddy water, finding it cool and refreshing after the warm beach. She turned and tentatively began to search along the shoreline for her friend's body.

He thought about coming out of the water when he heard Cholera crying, or at least he told himself he did. Lying there in the soft sand felt kinda nice, made crab Pitfall sleepy and he felt his little beady eyes begin to close as the numbing silence closed in about him.

It might have lasted sometime but another creature stood on his carapace and kept

walking back and forth over him which was ruining the relaxation and reminding him about something. A nagging, biting itch of a something.

Cholera!

Pitfall shuffled off the sand and tapped her from below with his large pincers urgently. Half of him wanted to persuade her to follow him into the deeper water where they might both sleep, and the other half didn't want to be a crab anymore, it wanted proper limbs and shiny things and it was thinking about that boat they'd seen earlier and the men and if they might have left something maybe.

Cholera was about to give up her search for Pitfall and start crying again. Tears began to well up in her eyes before she could consider whether crabs could cry, and if so could they cry underwater. Actually, like most thoughts, that one never crossed her mind. Suddenly she felt a tapping from below and clumsily stepped to the side. Pitfall's crabby face appeared out of the shallow water.

"Cholera?" he asked, "Why are we crabs? Can we go back again? Or..." he grinned inside the disguise, "we could be sharks and go scare some people...."

It took little to distract the trolloc, and pondering why she was a crab broke the spell. As suddenly as it had happened, like when she was a baby roc, the pair were transformed back. Cholera was once again a naked little troll toddler and Pitfall was a curly haired cherubic street urchin. Since she had no idea of his true form, he had returned to the one she knew him as. The nice part about this time was that neither of them were in mid air.

But she was in the water, and trolls swim almost as well as they fly. She began flailing around wildly in the water in blind panic until she realized she was standing on the bottom. In typical troll fashion Cholera shuffled out of the water. Her ugly little face squinched up and she began to cry again. "Umtim," She wailed, "clean we!"

Sure enough, there wasn't a speck of mud on either of them.

Pitfall grinned, standing up out of the shallow water and looking down at himself, the grin slowly faded as he realised he was still human in appearance, but it was slightly better than his previous crab form so he shrugged and accepted his lot. Sharks would have been interesting, but at least he felt a bit more at home now.

The sky was turning dark however, hours passing slowly towards night and still they had no idea where the others were. It occurred to Pitfall that being out here with slavers and who knew what else about with darkness closing in was unlikely to be very safe, particularly now he had no weapons.

His cloak would be enough to hide them, however and they could get some much needed sleep.

"Hey," he consoled Cholera, taking her chubby rocklike hand and leading her back up the beach to the thicker, wetter mudbank, "it's okay. We'll have a bath and then get some sleep, alright?" and then he let go, casting his cloak to one side temporarily and leaping into the mud, rolling enthusiastically, coating his entire body in the stinking mud, rubbing it into his hair and wet clothes until he was completely filthy. When he was satisfied that she matched him, Pitfall reached for his cloak and offered it above them like a protective blanket, "C'mon," he encouraged her, yawning, "I'm tired. We sleep, find your Dad in the morning k?"

Chollie didn't argue, she was tired and hungry, and now getting a bit cold. Under the magical cloak it was as if the pair had disappeared completely. She curled up next to Pitfall and started to tell him about her wonderful day. "Umtim," she began, but that was all she managed. Her mud coated thumb went into her ugly little mouth and her breathing turned deep and full as she dropped soundly into sleep.

Serpent's Strike

Saren had not the slightest idea what the purpose of the childrens mud slinging game was, and quickly got bored. They seemed to be happy enough though, and such was good enough for her. But, being bored, her attention was quickly gathered by the brief appearance of a much larger catapulting troll that rose and then just as quickly fell back to earth.

The kids seemed to be occupied enough by themselves for now, so she winged her way towards the oddity she had spied, and so missed the ensuing crab transformation.

Saren winged her way sinuously over the treeline towards where she saw the large creature plummet, and as she cleared the trees she saw that Yes! It was indeed a large troll! Could this be the father that young Chollie was seeking? She started to wind her way down towards him when suddenly some of the trolls companions hove into view.

Saren reared back with a sudden, explosive hiss of sound. The human hunter! The one who had stalked her earlier, whom she had thought destroyed! He was accompanying the troll!

Below, alerted by the carrying sound of the winged serpents loud hissing, Tiago looked up into the air, his gaze targeting in on Saren. "The rainbow winged serpent!" he exclaimed loudly, drawing out his bow and dropping to one knee to fit an arrow to it. "The scaly bastard is the one that dropped me out of the air earlier! I've got a bet riding on that foul creatures severed head!"

As the troll broke wind, Lilac instinctively ducked for cover from the blast fumes. That, she decided, was not one of the more pleasant aromas she'd had a chance to smell recently.

The troll was tossed several feet into the air, and, worried that he might indeed fall on top of her, she ducked back into the treeline. Thankfully, the troll didn't hit anyone, and she watched Shalon venture into the sinus-clearing territory of the troll's landing area.

She was about to say something that might very well have been profound, except that at about this time, a winged serpent flew overhead and Tiago was saying something again. Only this time it sounded like sensible talk, like he might be about to kill it or something.

Lilac screamed despite herself, because she was deathly afraid of snakes, and flying snakes were even worse. She dove behind Tiago, hoping he was still feeling charitable

and chivalrous, and mentally framing an apology for any negative thoughts she might have had about the hunter.

"Oh, gods!" she shrieked. "It's a huge... fucking... flying snake! Eek, somebody kill it please!"

Berrigus heard the centaur talking to him through the ringing in his ears, something about scanning the surrounding area. The troll chose not to respond, rather he just lay there enjoying his own immense pain for a few more moments. Tiago walked up, adding his own incomprehensible babble to the mix. The troll groaned to himself, anticipating the fresh wave of mental anguish that usually accompanied the hunter's speech.

But that didn't happen immediately, instead a loud hissing and beating of wings joined the ringing next. The troll thought it was just more random auditory side effect of his recent misadventure, but then surprisingly Lilac said something comprehensible.

"Oh, gods!" she shrieked. "It's a huge... fucking... flying snake!"

Berrigus opened his eyes. His depth perception wasn't working yet, so he waved his hand in front of his eyes to shoo away the tiny, colorfully winged bug in his vision.

Tiago yelled something about a bet, and Berrigus discovered that the 'bug' was much further away, much larger, and a serpent. Realizing that the hallucination wouldn't go away on its own, the troll stood up.

It looked as if a section of beach had reared up and taken on troll form. Bits of charred crabmeat and charred troll skin slid off Berrigus. All the wonderful scents that had been trapped beneath him were released at once, wafting over the sunlit sands. "Who the hell be you?" he demanded of the serpent.

It was about then that the delayed anguish from hearing Tiago speak washed over Berrigus. He grabbed his challenged cranium in one huge hand and muttered, "Ow."

Shalon stood patiently, hoping for an answer from Berrigus. It took a while to realise he wasn't going to get one, to which he simply rolled his eyes and stepped back slightly.

As the serpent appeared and Tiago verbalized his opinion. Shalon studied the pretty colours and pretty wings of the creature. Sadly, that was just not his kind of pretty - his kind had four legs, two arms and... well, other bits he tended to like. Just as he was coming to this conclusion, a loud voice from behind them shrieked.

For a moment he thought he was in a bar somewhere, until he realised with horror that

he had completely mistaken Lilac for a lady.

"Well, shoot it then," he said a little impatiently to Tiago. "If it's dangerous, and in our way, then let's get rid of it and get moving. The air is more than a little stale here so I'd like to try finding some fresh stuff."

Tiago cursed loudly, vehemently and with a profusion of strung together words as his shot, slightly off kilter from the scream in his ear accompanied by the simultaneous voices of all his companions talking at once, missed the winged serpent by a handwidth. He fumbled for another arrow from his quiver, knocking it to his bowstring, but the winged serpent was already moving, a vicious blur of motion in the air as it dove for him.

"Yooour lasssst sssshot Hunterrr!" Saren screamed as she dove towards the group, widespread fangs spraying poison, "Sssschoollie annd Iiii willl be ssssafe fromm youuuu forevver!"

Tiago released his second arrow at the diving serpent, crying out in triumph as the shot thudded into the serpents body, spraying blood as it drove between the scintillating scales. And then the serpent, moving faster than the eye could comfortably keep up with, was on him, fangs driving deep into his shoulder as her long, serpentine body crashed into him, carrying him backward to the ground as it wound around the hapless hunter in a quickly constricting embrace.

It took Berrigus a while to follow everything that was happening. Apparently Tiago and the flying serpent thing were old friends, or enemies, it didn't make much difference to a troll's mindset.

If he had followed correctly, Tiago had hunted the creature and it had tried to kill him back. Neither of them was very proficient at it, so they were trying again right now. Of course, all this commotion wasn't finding his daughter.

By now the pair of them were locked in a deadly embrace on the ground, still trying in vain to kill one another. Berrigus reached down and grabbed both the serpent and the hunter. The serpent he grabbed just under its head with one hand, and the hunter he grabbed by the nape of his neck with his other.

With a loud, mighty breaking of wind Berrigus separated the two with his wide arm span. He struggled as both tried to free themselves from his grasp and attack each other again. "You both bad kid, no listen!" he yelled at them. "This shit no find Chollie! Knock off crap!"

Vocabulary exhausted, the troll continued to struggle with the pair and waited for help from more acute minds.

Tiago screamed out in pain as Berrigus yanked he and Saren apart, the serpents fangs ripping out of his shoulder in a spray of crimson blood, the cry echoed by Saren as one of her fangs was also ripped out of its mooring in her mouth by the process. Tiago cursed loud and long as he clutched one hand to his shoulder, dangling from the trolls grip. Saren wasted no breath on curses, instead wrapping her sinuous body around Berrigus' arm and began constricting with all her might, which sadly, the troll completely failed to notice.

The battle between serpent and warrior was exhilarating, at least from Lilac's point of view. But then Tiago fell, and the serpent wrapped its senewy body around him and began constricting around him.

Lilac drew her dagger, but before she struck, something made her stop and she stared at Saren for a moment.

Then Berrigus forcibly separated the two, holding them apart. Taking a deep breath and straightening her shoulders, Lilac advanced on the serpent, dagger drawn.

"Wait, did you say Chollie?" she demanded harshly. "That's the name of your kid isn't it, Berrigus?" It was hard to keep her mind focused because Tiago was bleeding profusely, and Berrigus's body odor was unpleasant to say the least.

"Where is Chollie? What have you done with her?" she demanded of the serpent, raising the knife in a threatening manner.

"I nott ttake Sssschollie," Saren hissed vehemently at Lilac, no fear in her eyes for the frail human with the knife, "I prrrotectt herrr," Saren shot a vicious, accusing glance at Tiago, "fromm nassssty huntersssesss, and," narrowing her eyes as she looked back at Lilac, "sssslutty sssshe whoresss." and she hissed right in Lilacs face menacingly, before whirling her head back to eye Berrigus, "Youuu thenn arre herrr fatherrr?!? A sssshoddy, poorr excussse for one, letting herrr runnn awayyy! Youuu dooo nott desssserve her! Sssshe issss ssssuch an annngell!"

Tiago's face, meanwhile, went quite pale as he hung there in the trolls grip, and between the devastating odors that the troll was emitting and the serpents poison coursing through his system, his eyes rolled up in his head and he lost consciousness, falling slack in Berrigus' grip.

The centaur had to hand it to the troll, that huge mountain of a body had its strong

points, strength being one of those... er... strong points. It was a bit of a violent parting, but part they did, albeit with a bit of collateral damage on both sides. Tiago's frail nature became apparent as the troll's grip eventually rendered him unconscious, while that peculiar snake-flying-thingy was trying to outsmart a troll for whom the word 'smart' ONLY meant 'hurt a little'.

"Berrigus, let man go, grip twisty thing harder," he instructed, trotting into place to catch Tiago, assuming Berrigus squeezed the correct one of the two.

Had the troll stopped to consider his rash decision to separate the hunter and his prey, he probably wouldn't have done it. Not that it had been difficult, but now he had one in each hand, everybody was yelling at once, and he had to make a crucial decision. He could feel the steam rising from his cranium and his scalp felt like it was peeling from the heat.

Lilac was demanding to know where Chollie was from the serpent like it would know. The serpent was coiling around his arm like a worm as the woman brandished her knife at it.

Berrigus paused to savor the childhood memory of worms. Mom sure did cook good.

His mind snapped back to the problem at hand with an audible 'bong!' The serpent was saying that it had protected Chollie from hunters and whores. Berrigus was wondering where the hell Cholera had been, and whether serpents actually could talk, when he thought the serpent tried to insult him. Apparently the creature could talk but didn't get out much.

Then the serpent said, "Sssshe issss ssssuch an annngell!"

It was then that the troll realized the serpent had never seen his daughter. He was about to snap it's neck out of hand when Shalon said, "Berrigus, let man go, grip twisty thing harder!" Finally the poor troll could stop thinking, so he did exactly as the centaur suggested.

The pretty, flashy colored serpent gasped and stopped talking. Tiago fell on Shalon with a dull 'whoompf'. Lilac wasn't yelling or screaming either.

"Ummm, Shalon," Berrigus asked the centaur sheepishly (well, as sheepishly as a troll could anyway), "how hard hold twisty thing? Turn blue it."

While he awaited an answer from the apparently distracted centaur, Berrigus picked idly at his toes with his free hand. After a few moments, (the maximum attention span of a

troll) he thought he heard childish laughter.

Yes, the troll was pretty sure he had heard laughter from somewhere. Dropping the now quite blue Saren, forgotten, Berrigus wandered away from his companions. He walked quite a long way down the beach towards the apparent source of the laughter and found what appeared to be a wide expanse of mud at the mouth of the Pedara river.

Rounding a thick stand of trees and underbrush, the troll spotted a rowboat with somebody (or perhaps some body) lying next to it. Fearlessly (for, like most words, Berrigus did not know the meaning of fear) he approached the boat only to find it's owner quite dead. There was an empty sack here, and lots of footprints.

Childish footprints.

Trollock child footprints, and a small humans.

Apparently the boat's owner had been attacked by several children with mudballs.

Berrigus whimpered in pain as his poor tiny brain wrapped itself into a knot trying to decypher the melee'. He looked again at the evidence before him in the fading light.

No, the man was attacked and somehow killed by the children. The children were attacked and carried off by several crabs armed with mudballs. Painfully, slowly, the troll recognized the footprints.

The troll child must have been Chollie, and the human child could have been Pitfall. He was so close! Berrigus sat down in the sticky muck with a loud floop and wailed in anguish. He felt his overtaxed cranium about to explode.

After a while Berrigus looked around him. Night had gathered by now, it was getting a bit cool, and he hadn't had any supper. He wasn't even sure his companions knew where he was. He gathered his wits (um, right) about him and headed for the treeline. Perhaps, in the mornings light, he could find out more.

Shalon sat down on the grass. He had tried to answer the troll, but the effort of squeezing Saren, thinking and speaking all at once must have eliminated the possibility of hearing responses, so in the end the centaur just gave up. Berrigus did too, and wandered off, but since the group remained at the edge of the crater, Shalon chose to stay. There was only so much time you could spend in a troll's tailwind before it became unhealthy.

The team were exhausted, for various reasons. Some had wounds to nurse (or be nursed), some had simply had a rough day, and some were still ruing the after-effects of

alcohol withdrawal. Staying still, while they had the time and safety zone to do so, seemed fitting.

If anybody had thought about it, they would have lit a camp fire.

After being tossed aside, Saren merely lay there for a long time while trying to regain herself. Being choked nearly to death by a being who was obviously so ignorant that he had barely been aware of it tended, she noticed vaguely, to have that effect on one. After a time, when no more abuse on her form seemed to be forthcoming, she had regained enough of her strength that she decided to quietly slither away into the deeper undergrowth where she could lick her wounds in peace.

Tiago, for his part, simply lolled there where Shalon had placed him, near the surface of consciousness but seemingly unable to pull himself up the last distance. Spidery web-like blue lines began to spread visibly under his skin, radiating out from the place Saren's fangs had pierced his shoulder, growing longer and thicker as the poison continued to spread slowly through his system.

Pitfall opened his eyes, but it was still dark. He could hear, he realised, the loud and rasping snore of a troll toddler, one he knew well enough to not be running as fast as his little human legs could carry him. Cholera. The waking mind released dream and he recalled what they had been doing, why he couldn't see sky or smell the rancid litter of a city street. They were out in the world, beyond the gates of Araulmor and in forest, unpleasant green lands with no one to rob blind or coax breakfast from.

Flicking back the cloak's cover slowly, he took a quick look outside. River. Mud. Rowboat off to the far right. Footprints. Sky. All where he had left it.

And then the smell of something else caught his attention, more than the tidal river which was beginning to creep up nearer to his and Cholera's hiding place. He stood up, pulling the cloak with him. He walked over to Berrigus and kicked him, greeting him with a terse sounding;

"Finally, there you are you great ugly lump of day old dung. Wake up, your kid's hungry."

Then he wandered back to the sleeping toddler. He nudged the little girl awake with a harsh jab to the ribs.

"Hey Chollie!" he told her, pointing with a finger at the great lump of troll lying off to their left, "Daddy's home!" And he stood back to watch the interaction.

Berrigus lay near the beach, sleeping soundly, resembling nothing less than a pile of kracken dung that had washed ashore during the night. His body steamed putridly wherever the fresh morning sun struck it. He was snoring as well, emitting a sound not unlike two large brick buildings mating passionately.

His tiny mind was parrying futilely with his usual course of nightmares, too feeble to realize they were only dreams. The one he was enjoying was particularly bad, he was being attacked by some sort of giant crab which was dragging him deep under water. It held a ridiculously large bar of soap and was jabbing him in the ribs with it. Just before the monster was about to clean him, it leaned forward and whispered sweetly into his ear, "Finally, there you are you great ugly lump of day old dung. Wake up, your kid's hungry."

At first Berrigus's poor overtaxed psyche couldn't understand why it was being so nice to him, then consciousness overtook him. His piggish eyes opened to let in daylight. Too small to contain both reality and dream, his mind released the dream, forgotten.

He was under some small trees at the edge of a muddy beach, oddly he thought that the water had been much further away when he lay down. There was a rowboat, a disgustingly blue sky, and Pitfall trying to awaken something in the bushes.

Berrigus stood. Almost immediately he was struck full in the chest and knocked back to the ground with a loud, "DA!" It was followed by a loud, "Hungrywe!"

The troll peeled the missile from himself and examined it. What he found was a rather clean (only several layers of mud) and quite naked troll toddler. His brain suddenly realized that he was missing a toddler almost exactly the same size. "Chollie?!? Why clean you? Why naked you? Where go you?" Thoughts exhausted, his mind shut down to recuperate and he just hugged the child.

Following in the tail wind of a troll was never a good idea, but the party had duly followed their enormous and impromptu leader on his quest to find his daughter. Following some noises or some other whimsical lead, Berrigus had actually stumbled upon the errant child Pitfall, a joyous moment of all of five seconds.

Feeling close to victory, and with night darkening the skies, the group had sought shelter in the nearest copse of trees, and made camp - well, made a fire, anyway. Tiago stood guard over Lilac, Berrigus preferred the open air (a good open breeze helps spread the stench quicker), and this left Shalon to contemplate his own thoughts alone. Something he very much enjoyed.

Being sober was not all it was cracked up to be. With absolutely no drop of alcohol in

his blood now, the centaur relived every excruciating moment of his exit from his clan, leaving him with a restless sleep. He would have tossed and turned, if he hadn't been a centaur and thus slept laying on all fours. It didn't make for rolling over too easily.

Noise filtered through to his ears as morning broke. He had slept long in the end, much longer than he had intended; the recent days' events had worn him out, he realised. Today was the first day he would have to start dealing with things, and sorting his life out.

A movement off to his right had him up on all fours in seconds, bristling with alert. Something was moving through trees, and not entirely quietly at the moment, and whatever it was was large. He could see Berrigus off in the distance, so it wasn't him. At least there wouldn't be low-flying trees raining down on them this time. Hopefully.

What emerged into his clearing surprised both of them. It was another centaur.

The trip east had been eventful, fulfilling, and long for Copernicus. He had enjoyed the change in surroundings, enjoyed the company of Rafiki and the other one, and had explored the human world as much as he dared. But he also realised how much he loved the trees and grass, the lush stuff rather than the brown, withered stuff, and so eventually he had returned home, slightly more experienced.

Never one to sit still for long, he had chosen to then move west, to explore the area to the northwest of Araulmor and further south of that. He hadn't met a soul on his wanderings for weeks... and now suddenly he entered a clearing to find another centaur. Of all things.

"Who are you?," demanded Shalon a bit abruptly.

"Who are /you/?," Copernicus retorted.

"I am Shalon, formerly of the Lorenai Clan."

"I am Copernicus, of the Eshai Clan. Formerly, I guess," he added, realising how long it was since he had been back to see his own people.

"I suppose you claim this forest as your own?," said Shalon, derision in his voice. He knew how territorial his own kind were.

"On the contrary, I'm a visitor here as apparently are you."

"Well... that's alright then. We're not stopping anyway."

"We?"

For the first time, in his full sobriety, Shalon realised who he had teamed up with. Good God. "I'm with some people, on a quest."

Just at that moment, shouts of elation rose from the reunion between troll and troll toddler.

"Strangely enough, I'm with them, among others," said Shalon, a touch wistfully. "Two humans also. Three, if you pretend the child is human, although he's a weird one if nothing else."

Copernicus looked over to the mass of huddled troll, not quite sure which way was up and how many were in the huddle. "Strange company indeed. Looks like your quest might be at an end?"

Shalon regarded the two trolls. "Actually... you may be right there. I'm not sure what happens next."

"Then maybe we should ask?," offered Copernicus. Was he actually suggesting mixing with other creatures? How cultured he now was!

"I guess. Just a word of warning, stay upwind of the two of them. Trolls don't bathe, at least not in water."

As the two centaurs neared Berrigus, Copernicus thought he was just using humour. Then he caught a waft, and realised he wasn't.

"Hey, Puke Mountain," called Shalon, adopting what he guessed would seem a cuddly new name for the one he might dare to consider a friend, if he could only get drunk enough again to start thinking such thoughts.

If / when the troll looked up from his troll scrimmage, he would see two centaurs. Shalon looked fit enough, but the specimen beside him looked much more butch, complete with crossover leather straps holding his yew bow behind his back, and probably slightly taller than Shalon too. Possibly a comparable height to Berrigus himself.

Seeing the two trolls hugging motivated Pitfall to retch and move away from the nauseating scene. He'd enjoyed the preamble, but wasn't surprised he didn't care for the emotional reunion. Intrigued as to Lilac's proximity and another chance to ogle the

young lady, Pitfall mooched off at speed following the backtrail of the very obvious path Berrigus had taken through the mud.

Passing two centaurs on the way, the visually enchanted goblin did a quick doubletake, remembering only one previously, but the thought of Lilac was more interesting to his noxious little mind and motivated him more. He walked in the vast footprints of the elder troll, chuckling to himself at the image of what he might find, worried slightly by the fact that it seemed Shalon had left Lilac alone with Tiago. Pitfall didn't like the hunter, he was way too smooth with the ladies for the goblin's taste, but when he walked into the scene at the makeshift camp he was lost for words.

A strangled 'woaaaaah!' finally escaped him as he wandered, shell-shocked, in for a closer look. The hunter looked bad, very bad and Lilac was at his side, a cold wet rag, which might well have been part of a shirt or dress, at his fevered brow. The sheer colour of Tiago's skin made Pitfall ask what had happened and as Lilac explained, the goblin stood still and actually listened.

"Hey," he verbally prodded the unconscious hunter, "you gonna die? Cos if you are I'm going through your stuff."

Lilac shooed him away with more cursewords than Pitfall was used to hearing from anyone else, but he lurked back to the outer limit of her reach, staring at the poisoned man with a morbid curiosity. Snake bites were not something one encountered very often in the city, even one as messed up as Araulmor, but Pitfall knew a couple of healers back there who might have been able to help. If that was, they were anywhere close to the streets in question or perhaps if Tiago had not been bitten the day before. As far as he could tell, by the man's shade and his shallow breathing, he was already lost.

"I could go pick some flowers," he offered, in his mind a nice gesture, "but I'm not digging a hole for him to be buried in. Maybe we could just burn him, or push him in the river?"

More swearing from Lilac prompted Pitfall to be quiet for a little bit longer, hanging back to see what happened.

After a brief conversation in which both centaurs established that they weren't that keen on the other, Shalon returned to the camp site with Copernicus. Quite why the other quadruped insisted on following was something Shalon didn't really care about, but having one of your own kind around wasn't the worst thing possible, so he left it at that.

Copernicus immediately moved closer on seeing Tiago. Lilac might have shrieked had Shalon not been a few steps behind him. The young centaur asked what had happened to

the man, and when Lilac told him (repeating most of what she had told Pitfall, now sulking by a weathered tree nearby), Copernicus paused.

After a few short moments, he detached a leather pouch that had been hanging at his side from his harness, and undid the leather string that held it closed. He rummaged through a few unseen items, and then produced a small leather purse. This he also undid, and produced some deep greenish-brown leaves.

"Crush these, draw some of his blood, then rub the sap they produce deep into the blood to mix it. If you can find the entry wound, do it there. I have spent some time with a few select humans far to the east, one of whom was an alchemist. The sap is a 'virulent antigen', whatever that means. Basically it will aggressively work its way into the blood, and look for any substances that do not belong - by looking for parasitical molecules. Once located, it smothers them until they die off, leaving the blood cleansed."

Lilac didn't seem too keen to do that.

"You must act quickly," said Copernicus. "If the poison reaches his heart, nothing can save him. I'm no expert on human physiology, but I'm guessing he hasn't got much longer to live."

Well, aren't we the smarty-pants, thought Shalon. Scene-stealing little queen, with your kinky little leather harness. Several dozen more evil thoughts crossed the grumpy old centaur's mind to follow those. He just had to hope he hadn't picked up Berrigus' bad habit of thinking out loud.

Berrigus held his prodigal daughter quite a long while. Two centaurs wandered up, Pitfall got bored (or queasy) and wandered off. The centaurs followed him (probably slightly queasy themselves). Cholera must have noticed them, because she stated, "Pretty horsees."

Berrigus noticed very little other than his rediscovered offspring.

Much later, after the final lurches of the sickening reunion waned, the trollkin stated, "Pretty horsees we." Apparently the little diaper stuffer's imagination finally began to wander away from her father. The pair sat happily in the mud on their haunches, their rumps and rear legs nestled in the gooey muck as they watched the rising sun warm the beach.

Finally, as the muddy beach began to stink in the morning sun, Berrigus rose on all four hooves and realized something was amiss.

Yes, he whisked his long muddy tail thoughtfully, something wasn't right. Cholera, now a troll-like centaur colt, seized the moment and struck him in the flank with a mud ball, then galloped off up the beach giggling. Berrigus, who had become a lumbering juggernaught of a centaur, thundered after her towards the camp.

The pair slowed down as they approached the grim scene. Tiago lay near death with Lilac at his side, putting some kind of compress on his wounds. Copernicus and Shalon stood nearby with concerned looks on their faces. Pitfall was quietly going through the dying hunter's things.

Realizing the situation quite quickly, (as a matter of fact blindingly quick for Berrigus), the troll turned to his daughter and said, "Chollie, dear, perhaps you could imagine Tiago making an amazing recovery. He has, after all, been instrumental in your rescue."

Shalon turned at the sound of Berrigus's voice.

"Whatever are you looking at, my good centaur? Have you never seen an enchantment before? It's intuitively obvious that the child has some fledging abilities and is using them with her childish imagination."

Cholera looked at her father and stated, "I would assume that the bite came from recent companion of mine. Should I also imagine that Saren is also recovering whatever ills that were suffered?"

"Why yes, an excellent idea," Berrigus responded, "and while your about it I believe the world would be better served if we were, in fact, once again trolls." He thought for a moment and added, "As a matter of fact I would also imagine that breakfast would present itself soon as well."

The charm slowly faded from the pair of trolls and within several heartbeats they were once again each standing on their own two rather ugly feet. Cholera had thankfully taken the liberty of imagining herself in a fresh diaper. "Trolls we," she stated sadly.

They didn't have long for remorse, however, for within moments the party was being pelted by mackerel which were apparently making phenomenal leaps out of the nearby water.

"Breakfast here!" Berrigus bellowed, "Umtim get fishes!"

It was hard not to hear two bulldozers working their way towards their position, so Shalon ignored it. Copernicus was too absorbed in Lilac's efforts to think about it, perhaps used to noise like that around him - curious.

After several long minutes during which steam evaporated from Berrigus' head, he started speaking, and Shalon turned to the two of them, staring in wonder. Something wasn't quite right... no, wait - everything was perfectly normal.

Chollie's imagination was little more than that, to the rest of them. It was clearly infectious to those near her - or perhaps only those of low IQ since Pitfall seemed to be of the same mind - but to Shalon, it was just two perfectly ordinary trolls, talking gibberish.

"What you look at, horse's ass?," said Berrigus, although in the minds of himself and his daughter, it was clearly more eloquent - either that or he was still trying to loosen some wind. Trolls weren't too flexible on their facial expression so they tended to use the same one for a dozen activities and emotions.

"Trolls we," said Cholera. She didn't look so happy.

"So do most creatures - what you drink has to go somewhere. So what's new?," said Shalon. He couldn't be bothered to translate for them this time. He turned his attention back to Tiago and Lilac.

Perhaps it was the poultice that Copernicus had prepared, so expertly (and surprisingly tenderly) applied by Lilac. Perhaps it was Cholera's awkward and unwieldy fledgling powers. Or perhaps it was merely a reaction to suddenly being pelted by a virtual rain of suicidal fish that had chosen this spot to leap out and drown.

Regardless of the reason, Tiago's eyes fluttered and then slowly opened, the injured warrior peering through bloodshot eyes at those clustered around him.

"Oooohhh!" he groaned as he struggled weakly to pull himself up into a sitting position, brushing wiggling fish incuriously off of him. "It feels like I was run over." Tiago paused, spitting some sand out of his mouth and then added, "By Berrigus."

Despite his claims, Tiago must not have been that bad off because he suddenly reached out and whapped Pitfall upside the head. "Get outta my stuff, kid." he growled out, "I'm not dead yet."

Inspecting his arm and shoulder, the hunter was quite surprised. The color in his arm was still not good, reminding him vaguely of wood ash it was so grey, but the puncture wounds, where Sarens fangs had bit into him, were completely gone, not even a scratch or a scar to show it had ever been there.

Looking around at the others, all clustered around him, he muttered, "Well, I guess I owe the lot of you my thanks. I was close to being a goner there."

Sensing that something was out of place, Tiago quickly looked around the clearing again, then dropped his head into his hands, groaning, "Urgg, maybe I'm not feeling as good as I thought. I'm seeing two of Berrigus, but one of 'em is short and squat. And I'm seeing two of Shalon, but the second one, if you can believe it, is even uglier than the first one."

Not raising his head back out of his spread hands, he muttered, almost an afterthought, "Dammit, if I had to see two of somethin', why couldn't it a been Lilac? That would 'ave been a hell of a lot more pleasant."

As further hoofsteps sounded, Berrigus in particular being very hard to ignore, Pitfall looked up from his pilfering to see what was going on. Two centaurs... four?! His eyes widened considerably and he counted again to be sure, confused completely now, staring at the two trolls with their extra legs and bodies. Then he remembered the crab incident and things seemed to fall into place, until Berrigus opened his mouth, "Chollie, dear, perhaps you could imagine Tiago making an amazing recovery. He has, after all, been instrumental in your rescue."

There was nothing Pitfall could voice to compete with that, but the 'urk' that did escape his lips hung in the air before him for a moment or two while his facial expression tried to sort itself out.

Despite his claims, Tiago must not have been that bad off because he suddenly reached out and whapped Pitfall upside the head. "Get outta my stuff, kid." he growled out, "I'm not dead yet."

"Hey, screw you with a barrel of rancid monkeys..." reeled Pitfall swiftly as the blow to his head brought him back from his stunned state, "Huh?" he added shortly after removing himself from Tiago's immediate range, "You're not dead," he tilted his head on one side, "Are you sure you're not dying?" he asked uncertainly, "You look pretty grey. Worse than Berrigus in the morning." And the man did look awful, but then Pitfall wasn't much for the human form at the best of times, "I reckon this is just the moment of clear before the end," he went on helpfully, "unless you're mutating into something...." he mused aloud, with apparent interest in this new mental development, "something half man, half snake with big pointy poisonous fangs..." a few more steps were taken hastily while holding both hands up as if to deny any suspicion that he might be harboring designs on the hunter's gear.

"Breakfast here!" Berrigus bellowed, "Umtim get fishes!"

A welcome distraction from his newfound fear of Tiago, Pitfall jumped to it, sprinting into the fray of falling fish and trying to catch as many as he could in his cloak. He sank his teeth into one as it tried to escape again, thrashing up in range of his woefully inadequate human mouth, and grinned around the scaly wet flesh as he tried to chew down on the fresh food.

"Mmmmm goock," he announced, hampered somewhat by the piscine gobstopper.

Home Again

Thorax was bored, which for a troll was something. See, 'bored' is a state of mind where there is not enough stimulation to keep ones brain occupied, and trolls can occupy their tiny brains watching dust settle.

Nonetheless, Thorax was bored.

He knew he shouldn't be seen wandering about this close to departure, but he just had to see Berrigus. Of course, it wouldn't hurt to see the lovely Princess Cholera either, even if she was just a toddler.

Stealthily, making only so much noise as a rampaging elephant, he slipped from his hiding place in the goblin warehouse and into the streets of Mercari. Making only eight or twelve wrong turns, he quickly found himself at Berrigus's tavern.

The bar was dark and empty- no cheery light danced in the windows, no drunken brawls spilled into the street, no passed out patrons littered the walkway. Not so much as a murdered corpse graced it's doorstep.

Not getting the hint, Thorax knocked loudly. The damaged door swung inward on it's hinges with a welcoming scream of complaint, so the rogue troll entered. He walked around, his footsteps echoing in the gloom. "Berrigus!" he bellowed. Not even an echo answered, just a little dust settled.

After amusing his mind with the settling dust a while, the thought came to Thorax that Berrigus wasn't home. He went to the cash box and found it empty, (Pitfall probably beat him to it,) so he sighed loudly, got a mug, and poured himself a free beer.

Sipping beer in a quiet, empty bar is a time for contemplation, but since Thorax was a troll his mind simply went completely blank. Finishing his beer, he wondered why he was still there. In order to 'lubricate' his thought processes he poured himself another. See, to a troll the only thing better than a stolen beer is two stolen beers.

Finishing his second beer, Thorax smashed the mug on the floor, urinated loudly in the corner, and left to amuse himself elsewhere.

It was almost midnight before the Under-the-Bridge had another visitor.

Literally dragging Cholera, (she had drifted off to sleep hours before,) Berrigus slumped into his tavern. Cholera, in turn, was still hugging Pitfall to herself brutally. He didn't seem to mind though, because he didn't have to walk any more. They were followed in turn by Shalon and Copernicus, both tired and sore. Shalon carried the still ailing Tiago, now slung across his back like a sack of oats. Lilac was trailing the group as she had

wisely refused Tiago's offer to share his mount.

Berrigus sniffed the air, dumping Cholera and her baggage (i.e. Pitfall) into a chair. He walked around the tavern, finally picking up a piece of the smashed cup and sniffing it as well. Dropping the shard, he went to the corner where Thorax had relieved himself.

"Thorax!" the troll bellowed. Someone in the party groaned at the discordant noise and told him to use his 'indoor' scream.

Finally, not getting an answer, Berrigus went to the bar and got everyone a beer. He would have offered each of them his hospitality, lodging and food for as long as they needed, for their help in recovering Cholera. Unfortunately he was a troll, so all he could muster was, "Home now, have beer."

Hopefully they would understand.

Tiago half fell, half stumbled away as the centaur, who was quite tired of lugging him around, dumped him unceremoniously to the ground. Tiago staggered up against the bar, keeping himself, barely, from falling flat to the floor.....and by the look of the floor in this place, that would not have been a good idea.

Tiago pulled himself up the bar to a stool and eased onto it, looking around at this strange place...this strange, dark and smelly place they had brought him to.

Tiago perked up noticeably at the sound of beer, and as Berrigus slid it before him, he said, never having really got the hang of troll talk, "Many thanks, good Berrigus, you are proving to be quite the gracious host. You never cease to surprise me in new and wondrous ways." and then he lifted the mug to his lips and took a deep draught.

He probably would not have been so flagrant in his praise if he had taken the drink first, but as it was, he swallowed a big mouthful and then slammed the mug down on the counter, spitting and gagging. "Damn, Berrigus," the hunter mumbled weakly, gasping in air, "How do you get that particular rank flavor? You keep dead rats in the keg?"

The troll thought for a long second, then several more. He wanted to thank Tiago for the wonderful complement, but explain that he had selected that particular brew from several offered by the local goblin brewery. Although he was proud to sell it, he had no knowledge of the actual brewing process.

Finally the troll settled on, "How me know, dumbass? Goblins make, me sell." With that Berrigus began lumbering about lighting candles and then the fireplace. The gloom receded from the center of the room, but still clung to the edges like raw sewage. A

rancid ambiance and no small amount of smoke engulfed the tavern as the dried dung in the fireplace caught on. Apparently something had died in the chimney and the troll hadn't noticed.

Almost immediately a lost gaggle of gremlins entered the bar with an ever helpful gnome guide. They took up residence in several questionable lounge chairs near the fireplace and ordered a round.

While Berrigus was pouring, a kobald couple rolled in and picked a particularly dark, sticky corner to make out in and several local thugs followed, sitting at the bar. A menacing figure in a dark cloak came in reeking of malice towards all living things and sat with his back against the wall facing the door. Knowing his regulars, the troll got him a bottle of loka from under the bar and a shot glass.

A goblin entered with a companion, pulled out a hornpipe, and played a cheerful dirge. His companion, something probably female, began dancing by itself on the small open area between the tables. She made eye contact with Tiago and winked. Berrigus indicated a very questionably passageway leading off the bar and said to the hunter, "Got rooms in back, one yours."

By now the gremlins had their helpful guide merrily roasting on a spit at the fireplace (sadly his screams didn't last long enough to drown out the hornpipe dirge). The 'malice towards all living things' oozed from the dark figure in the cloak and pooled on the floor amidst the other detritus.

Within a short space of time the 'Under-the-Bridge' was hopping again.

Pitfall had long ago given up struggling once he realised the effort in moving had completely gone away so long as Cholera held onto him. Safe in the knowledge that Berrigus wasn't going to let anything bad happen to his young daughter, and he certainly wasn't going to stop dragging him, he slept.

Briefly he opened his eyes as the noise level changed, a surreptitious gaze through half open eyelids taking in the familiar surroundings of the troll's own tavern. The stench was comforting, and a happy little smile spread across Pitfall's angelic countenance as he breathed it in slowly and fully, then closed his eyes and cuddled back in against the beartrap hold of the troll toddler.

Shocked into silence for a moment by the Trolls reply, Tiago finally responded a moment later, calling out after the troll, "Well screw you too, Berrigus! To hell with you, your crummy beer and your miserable, rotten tavern!"

He stopped after that, partially because the taverns clientele had started to seep in, the oddest bunch Tiago had ever seen, but mostly because he didn't understand the faintly pleased look on Berrigus' face at his words. Oddly though, Tiago, who had been raised with very precise if old fashioned manners, felt much better after yelling a little and getting some of the tension and aggravation of the last few days off of his chest.

The inhabitants of the tavern were a strange bunch, that was to be sure, and many of them were species that Tiago had only ever seen as an end result of his hunting, usually skewered on the end of his hunting spear. And at first he felt uneasy, a little cowed at being surrounded by such strange folk, but after a few more of Berrigus's questionable beers, he found that it didn't bother him nearly so much.

Well past sober now, Tiago had been staring at the female(ish) thing and trying to figure out if she had really just winked at him or if that was just one of her orifices opening (admittedly, she did seem to have more than the usual number), and it took a moment for the trolls offer of a room to sink in to him.

Tiago blinked owlshly at Berrigus for a moment, then, as the most likely meaning began to sink in, cast a startled glance back towards the she-thing dancing on the floor, and then back at Berrigus, as he stammered hurriedly, "N-no! I-I'm not that d-drunk yet!" And then the mere horrifying, sobering thought that he might 'ever' get that drunk caused the ragged hunter to push his half empty mug away from him across the bar.

Surprisingly not understanding, (right) Berrigus topped off the hunters mug and passed it back. "Night young," he replied.

Meanwhile, unnoticed, Cholera had dropped the semi conscious Pitfall and had found a new toy. It was the gnomes pointed little hat, which had been dropped during his culinary preparation by the gremlins. The thing had rolled about on the floor getting trampled and muddy (for the floors, though wooden, were covered in a thick protective layer of dirt). The trollkin found it lying in a pool of 'malice towards all living things' that had dripped from the dark figure.

Giggling, she put it on and began making mud trolls out of the same muck that the hat had been steeping in. After making several of the disgusting things, they began tentatively moving about.

Finally one of the tiny muck trolls bowed to Cholera, and the others followed suit.

Tiago just gaped silently at Berrigus as the troll refilled his mug and pushed the unwanted beverage back to him.

But Tiago was not so drunk that he did not realize the futility of arguing with, or even trying to understand, Berrigus and his ways.

He took another tentative sip of the sour ale and then reconsidered. A few more mugs of this and he might be able to understand the troll just fine.

Oh well, what the hell. He took another swig, then turned around to survey the room again. Carefully avoiding the gaze of the she-thing that had winked at him earlier, his gaze finally fell on Cholera and the mud trolls she was making from the slop mess on the floors.

He watched her for a time with curiosity and growing amusement, then suddenly got really still when the mud trolls started moving around on their own. And when they turned and bowed to Cholera, his jaw practically dropped down to his chest.

"What in the name of the seven hells was that?" Tiago suddenly asked aloud, eyes never leaving Cholera and the mud trolls as he asked again, "Did anyone else see that?" and then the half drunk hunter rubbed his eyes carefully before peering at Cholera and her little creations again, but nothing seemed to have changed.

The Conga Line to Hell

Berrigus was working the bar when he heard Tiago call out, "What in the name of the seven hells was that? Did anyone else see that?" The troll wasn't worried, horrific hallucinations, blindness, loss of motor functions and even loss of bladder and bowel control were all pleasant side effects of good Goblin ale. He grinned stupidly and kept pouring.

Cholera, resplendant in her soiled diaper and pointed hat, began to dance to the Goblin dirge. Her mudtroll minions joined her, and pretty soon they had a conga line weaving around the tables. They were joined by the she-thing, who took the opportunity as she passed Tiago to brush against him sensiously (senselessly?) Sensing fun to be had, the gremlins followed suit. The lead gremlin chanced to grope the she-thing and was rewarded with a swift kick in the groin.

He flew across the room and landed in the Kobald's ale. The Kobald reacted badly and within seconds, the 'Under the Bridge' bar was well into it's first good brawl of the night. The menacing figure in the dark cloak that reeked of malice towards all living things sat back and grinned. 'Things' converged from out of the woodwork immediately and chaos ensued. Berrigus waded into the fray, fists flailing, and threw several customers and innocent bystanders into the street.

The evicted patrons returned immediatley, but somehow the brawl died down anyway. Finally Berrigus yelled, "Chollie, fight over, go bed!"

Cholera didn't answer. The trollkin and her mud minions were nowhere in sight. As a matter of fact the entire conga line had vanished entirely.

Tiago just sat there, eyes wide and bulging as the inhuman conga line formed and started to weave between the tables. He did not seem to be able to do much else but gape senselessly at it, such actions so far outside of his realm of experience that any other action seemed vain and doomed to failure.

When the she-thing first brushed up against him, he missed it, glancing down at the contact to come eye to eye with the supposedly female thing. She gave him what she undoubtedly considered a come hither look before the conga line moved on, and, as it the meaning of it sank into his goblin ale addled mind, the hunter recoiled violently, to find himself, a moment later, crouched in a shuddering heap atop the bar. Grabbing at his mug, he eagerly slammed the contents down, desperately hoping for the bliss of unconsciousness to free him from this nightmare.

That one didn't take care of it, but Tiago's questing and shaking hand soon found another mostly full mug on the counter not far from him and that one did the trick. At some point while Berrigus was happily mopping up the remnants of the impromptu brawl, Tiago

slumped down behind the bar and was soon snoring loudly, blissfully lost to the conscious world.

The pleasantly distraught troll began looking for his errant daughter. As a matter of fact, he began looking for the entire conga line that just moments before the lovely fight was weaving between the tables. He was joined by the remaining two gremlins and the female thing's goblin companion. The menacing figure in the dark cloak that reeked of malice towards all living things just sat against the wall and continued grinning. Berrigus, distraught and confused, beat him to a lifeless pulp.

Sadly, that didn't seem to cheer the troll up one bit.

"Look here!" one of the gremlins exclaimed. Berrigus joined him and the goblin. As if painted on the wall between the dubious rest rooms, a black emptiness glared at them.

"Me not see that before," the troll commented stupidly. The edges of the area were undefined and blurry, and the center was not so much as a spot, but an area of 'nothingness'. Berrigus whined plaintively, as trolls often did when trying to think.

He looked around for his friends, but everyone except Tiago had apparently wandered off. The hunter was passed out drunk, so he hadn't gone anywhere. One of the gremlins grabbed the other, wrestled around trying to throw him into the 'nothing', and them both stumbled into it.

They disappeared.

The goblin, looking sad, ran after them yelling, "Shiela!"

Berrigus scratched his head. Realizing he wasn't nearly smart enough to handle whatever situation he might find himself in, he picked up Tiago, slung him over one massive shoulder, closed his tiny pig like eyes, and barreled towards the 'nothing' spot between the bathrooms.

They fell.

They fell quite a while. Berrigus yawned. Tiago stirred, and the troll tightened his grip a little so not to lose his burden.

Slowly, Berrigus realized they weren't falling anymore. As a matter of fact, they had been standing still for almost half an hour.

He opened his eyes. They were in a meadow, the conga line crew, the gremlins, and the

goblin were all just sitting in the moist grass along with several others apparently pulled along during the mayhem at the bar. Colera was snoring, as it was way past her bed time by now. Her little mud trolls were covering her, like a blanket, with long grass that they had picked.

Berrigus shook the hunter. "Tiago, Tiago, where we?" he bellowed.

Tiago had actually woken up a short time earlier, only to find himself in an unenviable position. That is to say: Being held tightly and in very close proximity to a trollish body. The sheer stench emanating off of Berrigus' body in almost visible waves was almost enough to propel Tiago right back into unconsciousness. And had the hunter took the time to think it through, he would have realized that it would have been a blessing and allowed it to happen happily.

Unfortunately, under the stress of the unusual circumstances, he allowed his instincts to take over and tried to pull away from the noxious odour that was making his stomach roil.

Berrigus had sensed that movement in his grasp....in his own dim way....and interpreted it as a loosening of his grip, so he had tightened it.

The trolls shifting arm had caught the frantically squirming hunter right below the chin. Vaguely, Tiago considered that Berrigus really had done him a favor. After all, if he was unable to breathe he certainly could not smell the troll hide shoved in his face.

After some frantic twisting that would have made a master contortionist proud, Tiago did manage to move himself enough so that he could once again breathe, albeit in short, painful gasps. It was enough to keep him alive (barely) and conscious (sadly), but was not enough for him to speak, or at least the soft squeaks he was able to get out were not enough to get the trolls attention any more than his weak blows against the trolls rock hard skin had. Unable to struggle any more due to lack of oxygen, he decided (?!?) to simply wait it out.

And eventually.....about the time the troll became aware of his surroundings....Berrigus did loosen his grip. Light headed from lack of air, Tiago was just starting to recover and take some interest in their unusual surroundings when Berrigus grabbed him again, pulling him to the front and near deafening him with that bellowing roar even as the trolls breath made Tiago cringe back, his eyes watering and his head snapping back and forth in time to each shake.

"In..(shake)..In..(shake)..In..(shake)..In..(shake)..*inhale*..(shake) QUIT SHAKING ME..(shake)..YOU DUMB BASTARD!!...(shake)." Tiago screamed at the general

direction of Berrigus face...his eyes were watering too much now to get much detail.

There was a brief pause, and for a second, Tiago's head started to stop spinning.

(shake)

Tiago, still in the trolls unshakable grip, glowered at Berrigus as soon as his head snapped back from that last (seemingly inevitable) shake. "We're in...*gasp*...a gods be damned..*gasp, gag*...field, you ignorant...*gag, choke*...lice ridden, shit smeared.. ..*cough, choke*.....ohh, Makra-Doman be merciful....*guttural moan*...I'm gonna..."

The shaking and the noise and the stench and the goblin ale finally caught up to him, and Tiago spewed vomit all over the troll who was holding him.

Berrigus was stunned. There was a critical situation afoot and Tiago wanted to exchange pleasantries. Slowly the troll realized that Tiago's tolerance for Goblin ale was lower than his own, and the hunter didn't actually realize the enormity of their situation. The troll waited.

In the pre dawn grayness birds began to sing. As if in answer to the bird song, the sun kissed the morning sky, first tentatively, then with a warm embrace. A small herd of giant slugs cavorted sluggishly in the field several hundred yards away. Somewhere far in the distance a dog was barking.

Berrigus waited.

A rancid steam rolled from the stoic trolls shoulders as the morning sun began warming the collected muck and hunter vomit on Berrigus's clothing. Somewhat late, a rooster crowed (apparently he had slept in this morning.) The members of the conga line, along with the other hapless patrons of the troll's tavern, slipped off to sleep one by one.

Berrigus waited.

Finally, about an hour after dawn, the stupefied troll realized that Tiago had slipped back into a goblin ale induced semi-coma. Being a basically nocturnal creature himself, Berrigus drifted into sleep. The collected detritus on his body dried and hardened, and he soon resembled a stone statue of a troll. Apparently he had once again forgotten to lie down before going to sleep.

Berrigus the troll was happily dreaming about small, furry, woodland creatures. He was gleefully smashing them between two largish rocks, though he couldn't exactly recall why (as if one needed a reason). He awoke slowly, opening both eyes but not really

moving. Several nearby voles slipped off nervously. His joints and muscles ached pleasantly from sleeping in a standing position, and he flexed them with a groan. Large slabs of dried filth flaked off of the troll's body.

The troll slowly identified a gnawing sensation, and realized it was hunger. Looking around, he spied the herd of giant slugs cavorting on the other side of his slumbering companions. Berrigus lumbered carefully through the center of the somnambulant horde (because he was simply too stupid to go around them) and began to stalk the nearest slug.

Sensing danger, the slug bolted, racing away from the troll at almost two yards an hour. Berrigus walked over to it, produced a salt shaker and some vinegar he happened to have in his pocket for just such an occasion, and began happily munching away as he walked along beside the galloping slug.

One by one his companions awoke to this bizarre scene of slow motion carnage.

As Berrigus munched happily away, applying salt and vinegar to the hapless screaming slug, he noticed something flicker into existence overhead. Not seeing any reason to stop, he continued his grisly repast as he warily watched it (well, as warily as a lumbering troll could). It didn't, to the troll, seem to be much of anything. The flickering thing wasn't attacking, and didn't appear to be edible. It didn't even offer much substance, just another 'nothing' like at the bar. Since the troll lacked the imagination to carry the thought forward, Berrigus dismissed it as nothing and continued his breakfast.

Mumbling unhappily in his sleep as the smells changed and his senses tried to wake him, Pitfall wriggled to try and curl closer against Cholera. Jolted away by the sudden realisation that she wasn't there, he snuffled, coughed and sneezed, sitting up to stare at the snot on his hands and the filthy, but empty tavern. What the hell.....

It wasn't that difficult to figure out where his comfy troll bed had gone, a line of footprints which stank pleasantly of evil darkness led off in an easy to follow direction. So, with a huffy sigh, Pitfall forced himself to his feet, checked any abandoned tankards for remnants of ale, licked whatever food and drink he could glean from the tables and bar surface and, eventually motivated to locate Cholera, stumbled along the trail.

He stopped before the blackness, looked over his shoulder several times just in case this was some joke at his expense and ended up flat on his back as a dog bounded through from whatever land lay beyond.

Through the hazy vision of his bumped head, Pitfall eyed it warily, but the dog seemed content to stare at him. It was young, chocolate coloured and what a human might

consider to be cute in a sort of clean, big brown eye, overgrown puppy way. Huge eyes, floppy ears and a very waggy tail, lanky teenage legs and a keen hold on a large stick it carried in its mouth.

Confidence growing enough to open both his eyes now and slowly back away, the enchanted goblin realised it wasn't going to eat him and stared back. The stick was coated with drool which hung down from the dog's mouth, but Pitfall thought he could make out some sort of rune carved into it. Perhaps. Or maybe just the random scratchings from bothering teeth.

"Hullo boy," Pitfall commented, eliciting some more frantic tail wagging from the dog, "Nice stick," he added, "You wanna play fetch it from the river?"

Big brown eyes threatened to lose him in their depth, but something else transferred between dog and boy. Something which made Pitfall run for the portal, hurling himself into the field and the presence of trolls and half Berrigus' clientele from the previous night.

Meanwhile, back in the tavern, stepping through as Pitfall crossed over, another form entered the tavern. A young girl, perhaps six or seven, with long dark ringlets about a pale face set with disconcertingly intelligent olive eyes.

"There are you Koko," she smiled, looking about the tavern with a disinterested expression, "C'mon boy, let's go outside."

Araulmor's sky was blue and flecked with high, wispy cloud and the girl strode with purposeful steps out into the streets. Walking just ahead of her, padding lazily, the dog took point.

Cholera, who had awakened moments before, pondered the nature of reality, or perhaps the spirituality of troll kind and their relationship to the universe as a whole. What came out was, "Ow! Breakfast time, eat slugs."

With that Cholera turned and wobbled over to where her father was just finishing breakfast and bit his foot. Berrigus howled and threw the salt shaker at her, which she picked up and began eating.

Meanwhile the kobald couple had relieved themselves, leaving two neat little piles of raw emeralds, tourmaline and sapphires, and had found some nice basalt for breakfast. The gremlins had burrowed into the field and away from the growing sunlight and could be heard chattering and arguing amongst themselves under the lush turf. The goblin was roasting some of the hapless slug for his 'female' companion, and they were talking

quietly as it sizzled on a makeshift spit.

Suddenly, with a loud, "Aaaaaaa- THUD!" Pitfall arrived. His fall was broken by the piles of emeralds, tourmaline and sapphires left by the kobalds. Berrigus looked up to where he had fallen from and saw a neat black square about fifteen feet up in the lightening sky. A girl and a dog were, from his perspective, walking 'up' into his bar just before the portal closed. Not understanding what he saw, the troll decided to forget it entirely. Instead, Berrigus chose to point at Pitfall and exclaim, "Haha, Umtim fall in kobald shit!"

The troll threw a chunk of slug to Pitfall and added, "You late, breakfast near over. Eat slug." Forgetting the boy for the moment (because there wasn't enough room in the trolls tiny brain) Berrigus pondered his surroundings.

They were in a large pasture, inhabited by slugs. It sloped gently downhill towards the east for about half a mile until it met a line of trees. A stream probably flowed there, because the land began to rise again beyond that into low forested hills. With the warming of the land, a breeze had begun to blow in the scents of sea and marsh from the northwest, along with the sound of distant breakers. The troll's keen sense of smell (for although stupid and odorous trolls have a well developed olfactory sense) could just make out the scent of burnt wood. A roughly north-south cart path could be seen running along the hill crest to the west.

"Hell yeah!" shrieked Pitfall, throwing gemstones about with happy abandon. "Hey," he looked up at Berrigus, "You weren't even gonna wake me up and tell me about this place, were you?" He pocketed as many stones as he could while talking, as if the distraction was required to entertain a troll's attention.

As a chunk of slug bounced off his forehead, Pitfall frowned. Breakfast?

"Huh?" he queried, letting his gaze wander around the scene. Cholera was here, along with a whole load of others. Pitfall shoved the slug in his mouth and lurched over to the group having breakfast.

Berrigus took stock of his small party. Pitfall was milling about, playing with the kobald shit he had collected near Tiago, who was lying unconscious in the field. The gremlins were burrowed down for the day, and probably wouldn't come out till nightfall. The kobalds, the goblin, and the female thing were finished their breakfasts and also milled about. Cholera was trying to rouse her mini mud-trolls, but they had dried in the warm morning sun and were crumbling at her clumsy prodding. Malice towards all living things, from which they had been animated, tends to fade in the light of day.

The troll took several long moments, made even longer by the absence of ale, to choose a direction. He was always wary of roads and pathways that were unfamiliar to him, and the traffic thereon, but had forgotten that fact again. "Chollie, go now." Berrigus rumbled to his daughter, and he headed due west towards the hilltop, the cart path, and the smell of the sea.

The group began ambling along with him, as if being lost in the field they had little else to do at the moment.

The cart path, when he came to it, was little more than two ruts running along the crest of the rise. In the distance at the bottom of the rise was a salt marsh, to the north, much further away, was the open water of the Sea of Mists. Along the breakwater between sea and marsh, lined up haphazardly, were several long burned shipwrecks. Had he been smarter, the troll would have realized they were several months old.

Berrigus just stood there and enjoyed the lovely pastoral scene of carnage for several long minutes. Finally the troll spun about three times, took his bearings, and headed northward in the exact opposite direction of Araulmor. The motley collection of barflies followed mindlessly.

The cart path wound lazily along the crest of the ridge, and the troll followed it northward and downward. The hill ended gently where a small stream, perhaps the very one that had flowed along the field they had left, entered the salt marsh. The open land ended there too, because after the road crossed the stream it headed up a forested slope on the other side. The troll could hear the pleasant tinkling of furious swordplay coming from somewhere up ahead amidst the trees, and approached cautiously.

Yeah, well as cautiously as a half ton of lumbering troll could anyway.

The first thing he really began to notice was the lack of noise around him. It had been such a constant thing for what seemed like such a long time, that it's sudden absence was almost a physically jolting experience.

Tiago sat upright in a quick jolting movement, and blinked owlshly around him.....at an empty field. Squinting at the bright light, the southern hunter slowly clambered to his feet. He swayed a bit, as the last ragged remnants of his hangover reminded him that they were still hanging around.

A few deep breaths later and he began to take more notice of his surroundings. It was true, he was alone. But there was also ample evidence that others had been around.... matching his hazily returning memories. And their trail away would have been a distinct one even to the uninitiated.

Stretching and letting out a deep yawn, Tiago then began to amble down the group's backtrail. He had no real idea where he was anyway. He might as well see where the others had gotten off to and he was confident that his long stride would soon catch him up to them.

The Pirate's Gambit

The ringing of swordplay was a soothing sound to Gavin. As he and his sole surviving crew mate, Yorrie the cabin boy, practiced it gave his mind a chance to wander.

It had been a long couple months of recuperation for him, aided by the lad he now sparred with. His captaincy, the Seven Fingers, lay in ruins along with several Araulmorean vessels and the galleon they fought over. His surviving crew, the ones that they thought could make it, had been carted off to stand trial in Araulmor by the Royal Guard. Their incompetent insider, who was supposed to cripple the man-of-war, was led off with them. Gavin wished only the worst for the troll known as Thorax, may he rot in hell for not scuttling the warship sooner.

Gravely wounded, Gavin had been left for dead. He remembered the words the witch had chanted so long ago, "...and grafte yon laurel unto thy bones." Gavin hadn't understood it then, but the long years had taught him. The spell, once again, had saved his miserable life. His wounds were healing.

Being for all purposes a noncombatant, the guard commander had decided not to have the cabin boy hanged. He had not helped Yorrie either, the lad had just been left behind. Once the soldiers had left Yorrie did the only thing he could, he saw to his captain.

So the pair of them had spent the last few months recovering. They took what they needed from the farms that the guard had burned, and stole from the ones they hadn't, and they practiced fencing, which was what they were about this very moment.

The pair's swordplay was rather rudely interrupted. The interrupting scent not so much tickled at Gavin's nose as punched it with a mailed fist. At the same time Yorrie's face screwed up in a funny way. The image of bright sun shining on a village midden heap laced with whale dung, dead fish, and live polecats came to mind.

Gavin looked at the boy and whispered, "Troll."

The thought of Thorax Blackheart somehow escaping and returning sent shivers all the way down to Gavin's keel. Swords at the ready, the pair turned windward together towards the brush separating them from the road. "Show yer'sel, troll!" Gavin demanded.

Approaching the sounds of swordplay cautiously, Berrigus was surprised when they suddenly stopped. A loud human voice bellowed to him, "Show yer'sel, troll!" For several long moments the troll thought about taking the noble route and simply slinking

off. Then the thought crossed his tiny mind to burst forth in a blind surprise attack, taking his opponents by sheer brute force.

Berrigus split the difference and, Chollie under one massive arm, sheepishly stepped out from the brush. The straggling party stepped out behind him, being sure to place the lumbering mass of the troll between their own precious hides and any source of danger.

The party was faced by a middle aged man and a stripling youth, both well armed and battle hardened. The pair were dressed as fishermen from the waist down, with loose breeches tucked into their bucket boots. The youth was shirtless and his body glistened with perspiration, the man wore a loose flounced shirt and had barely broken a sweat. Both of them wore several pricey pieces of jewelry.

The pair, in turn, appraised the party of barfly misfits presented to them. The troll, to Gavin, wasn't nearly as repulsive as the last one he'd encountered. (Of course, that's like saying being disemboweled by a sword isn't nearly as bad as being disemboweled by an axe.) He was over nine feet tall, massive, and stunk to high heaven. He was dressed in several intermingled layers of animal skins and rags, plastered together with copious amounts of filth. The outermost layer seemed to be an innkeeper's apron made from an entire ox hide.

If the troll was strange, the party that accompanied him was truly bizarre. The troll held an equally filthy child troll under his arm. There were a pair of kobalds, strange rock-like gnomes that normally dwelt far below the ground. Peeking out from behind the other side of the troll was a goblin, a trollop of undetermined species, a cute, curly headed blonde boy and what appeared to be a hunter, dressed in the style of the southern forests, who was just joining them from behind.

Berrigus put Chollie down and stood back up.

"Whar ye about, troll?" Gavin demanded. Berrigus's tiny mind translated the query as Gavin waited, giving him time to think.

Berrigus considered several different answers, a few of them actually true, before settling on the easiest. "Berrigus go home."

"An' were might tha' be?"

A pained look crossed Berrigus's face as he realized that this fool wanted to play twenty questions. He considered just stomping the sailor, but decide to play along until he could hit him from behind unawares. "Araulmor," the troll replied.

"Ha! Ye lyin' bastard, Araulmor lies to the sou'. Yer headed nor' on tha' road."

Berrigus pointed roughly north and stated, "Araulmor."

Gavin aimed his sword and deftly pointed almost due south with it. "Araulmor," he replied. His companion, the former cabin boy Yorrie, mimicked his action.

Turning to his group Berrigus asked, "Where bar?" Thinking he meant the nearest, one of the kobalds pointed east and the other southeast. Understanding troll a little better, the goblin pointed south. His female companion, perhaps inexplicably thinking of a sand bar, pointed westward toward the Sea of Mists. Cholera pointed straight up into the air. (In her defense that **was** the direction she'd arrived from.)

To Berrigus's dismay nobody else pointed north.

Pitfall didn't hear most of the conversation, he was just aware it was going on around him. The expensive adornments about the two men drew all his attention and he stood, behind Berrigus, peering wide-eyed around the troll's leg in awe of the collection. Clearly the wrecks below had been plundered to great profit already, and he couldn't see people like that giving it up easily. Perhaps if Berrigus hit them over the head, they might be easier to rob though.

He slowly tuned into the discussion just as it was ending.

"We're going home already?" Pitfall asked, with an obvious dismay in his voice, "What about the treasure?"

Tiago caught up to the others just in time to see most of them pointing off in seemingly random different directions. And also just in time to hear Pitfalls question. To add to the confusion, there were a lot of people in the group now that he did not recognize. Tag alongs, he supposed, but it made him wonder what else he might have missed while under the full affects of the alcohol.

"A treasure, you say?" he asked with interest as he ambled up, "My head, I must confess, still aches, but a treasure would seem to be just the cure for such a malady. Do you not think?" Tiago asked aloud.

Berrigus glared belligerently at the sailor, preparing to bash his head in despite the rather lethal blade he held. Then, slowly, the word 'treasure' spoken by Pitfall and then echoed by Tiago melted it's way into his thick skull. He began to rub his aching noggin, massaging the word 'treasure' deeper in. By the time the word actually touched his feeble brain the sailor had begun speaking again.

"Ay, treasure it 'tis, fair game for any who reach yon galleon stove up on tha' reef. An' 'eer's poor me wi'out a vessel in which to fetch it." Gavin's eyes glinted as he told his tale, "'Twould be weeks 'afore tha' lad an' I could make me barque seaworthy, an' by then 'oo knows. Anyone could 'appen upon it...." He paused momentarily to set the hook and then added, "...'Course if'n I 'ad's me tha' strong back o' a troll I could set's tha mast, sail out ta retrieve tha seven chests o' goblin's gold, an' be in Araulmor on tha mornin' tide."

He waited while the troll thought, looking down and idly disturbing the dirt at his feet with a booted toe. When he felt the hook set he added, "'Course tha' wind would 'ave ta favor us..."

Bewildered, and with his head visibly steaming from all the unwanted thoughts, Berrigus looked to his friends to give him their advice. At first he considered beating it out of Pitfall, but decided against idle fun and addressed the whole mob of barflies, "Walk home or get gold?"

Tiago's mind was well wrapped around that same question, having already embraced Gavin's explanation.

Cholera hadn't been paying much attention while the man in the funny shirt talked. As a matter of fact she had quite forgotten that her hand still pointed to where she had arrived from, which was straight up. She was just realizing that her fingers were getting numb.

Pitfall lived in a very basic world. So far he was far from the home he knew, with only the vague promise of treasure to hold onto and the group of creatures he was trying to contend with kept altering.

Berrigus, as usual, didn't understand any of it, and he just passed wind. The huge troll grinning stupidly.

The seafarers were still in defensive positions covering each other from the party of turbulent barflies. Gavin whispered to Yorrie, "What d' ye be thinkin', lad?"

"Dunno," the boy replied, "but 'tis a fair shake we steer clear of this bunch, aye?"

"Aye," Gavin agreed, "but 'an i' twould be a good thing to 'ave the troll a 'elpin' us ta set tha' mast, what?"

Turning his attention back to the Araulmorean barflies Gavin said, "As I were sayin' , wi' a little 'elp we coulds all be on our way ta' Araulmor on tha morrow, and rich as kings ta' boot. If only we two 'ad some strong backs wi' us....."

Berrigus remained grinning stupidly, either he hadn't understood a word the mariner had said, or he was still concentrating on his wind breaking efforts. The Kobalds, Cholera with yet another small mud troll, the goblin, the female thing and the rest of the group looked to the troll.

The gremlins had finally caught up with the group after their nap, and had somehow managed to acquire a pixie which was tethered to one of them by a string. The hapless creature buzzed and flitted about helplessly like an insane animated toy balloon. It was shedding glittering dust that danced rainbow like in the midday sun.

"Pretty!" exclaimed Cholera, and the gremlin presented her with the end of the string. The pixie continued to flutter about, unable to free itself from the knotted string. The toddler grinned as she watched it.

Finally, with a loud "BRAP!" to announce himself (it WAS the gas that had preoccupied him) Berrigus asked again, "Walk home or get gold and ride boat?"

"RIDE BOAT!" Cholera exclaimed in her little outside voice, startling the pixie. The tethered captive redoubled her efforts to free herself, but to no avail.

"Get the gold! Get the gold!" chanted Pitfall from a position he deemed safe, somewhere off to Berrigus' immediate rear. Smell really didn't phase him, in fact the scent of a troll was strangely comforting in a world which seemed to enjoy throwing bizarre situations before him, a constant in the terrifying randomness of it all. Perhaps, he considered, if he was lucky, Cholera might even carry him some of the way.

He watched everyone else with furtive glances, ready for trouble, ready to dive for cover should it happen. In his mind, images of gold tripped by with intoxicating flavor and clarity. He wanted the shiny things, wanted them very much, but there were a lot of others here who wanted the same.

Tiago had spent so much time being confused recently that he was beginning to accept it as a more or less natural state of affairs. And being blasted frequently by a variety of noxious odors from Berrigus and Cholera probably wasn't helping any either.

But one thing he did know was that the coin in his purse was near gone and that a sudden excess of extra coin could go a long way to solving many of his current problems. So he pushed away the odd events of the last few minutes, gave those around him a wary look and chipped in, "I, for one, think it best to fill our pockets with gold and make a quick one of it."

Finally, faced with the choice between a grueling, albeit pleasant weeks long stroll through bucolic pasture land dotted with pristine cottages that he would hate and a days worth of sweaty hard labor followed by another days travel by boat with his pockets lined with gold which sounded fun, common sense won out. (Not saying it didn't take a while, but Berrigus really couldn't see a down side.) “Okay,” stated the troll, “get gold, ride boat.”

Safe and Sound Back Home Again

The small barque hove into view of the Mercari quay around the northern point of Araulmor harbor chasing the twilight. It had been christened, upon it's birth two days before, as the Eight Fingers.

Gavin felt the spray in his face as he turned her bow to the east, his target in view. He was more than eager to rid himself of his current cargo of passengers. It was not that the troll smelled bad, so much that it would forget to stay still in the center of the boat and throw off the balance of the little barque. His companions were almost as bad.

First there was the daughter. Now she was imagining herself as a pirate wench, and not so badly either. Gavin understood that she modeled herself after a woman she had met named Lilac in a silk shirt, tight pantaloons, and bucket boots. Right now her scantily clad, buxom form was leaned over the bow, a captive pixie sitting morosely on her soft smooth shoulder. The wind ruffled her hair pleasantly, pasting the silk shirt against her ample bosom. Gavin shook his head violently to clear it. She still smelled like a baby troll that needed changing and sounded like one as she exclaimed, "pretty fishes!" for the eighty third time.

The kobalds had decided to return over land, since they sink, but the goblin and his companion were here. The pirates had been subjected to goblin dirges from him and lewd looks and propositions from 'her' (he thought it was her anyway). The hunter and the blond kid had gotten into his stash of loka. They were both passed out, but not before the kid went through the hunter's pouch. The gremlins were huddled next to the troll in the center of the boat as far away from the water as they could get. Considering their fear of water it was a wonder they hadn't joined the kobalds.

But now he horrid trip was almost over. The only good part was the gold, which he had begrudgingly shared with the barflies (well, at least three of the chests anyway). He had kept enough for himself so that the Nine Fingers would be a fine, bonnie great ship indeed!

Berrigus stirred. A stupid grin crossed his face as he loudly broke wind. Again. The gremlins grimaced as their survival instinct fought against their fear of water. "Aye," thought Gavin, "'tis a fair day I'll be rid o' this bunch indeed." As if on cue Yorrie began striking the sails.

Finally the barque glided up next to the quay, kissing it ever so gently. Yorrie ran foreward and tied up the bow as Gavin tied up the stern. Returning, he kicked the little blond kid, then the hunter, and finally the troll (not that the troll was sleeping, he just felt

like it). “We're in port!” he exclaimed loudly, “You stinkin' lot gerroff me bloody boat!”

Grumbling, Berrigus picked up his chest of goblin gold, yelled “Chollie, troll be!”, and with a mighty groan from the abused timbers stepped onto the quay. At her father's command the little trollkin took her true form, disappointing several nearby sailors. One of them retched loudly. The pixie just sat on the trollkin's shoulder looking disgusted. Cholera picked up her own little chest, which was full of the tasty chocolate coins, (the 'other' kind of goblin gold that the group had found amidst the wreckage) and toddled off behind her father.

The trolls were almost knocked over by the gremlins scrambling for dry land. The goblin and his companion stepped off arm-in-arm after the melee'. They strolled down the quay, apparently going to find somewhere to lighten their now heavy purses.

All a Troll Could Want

The past few days rotting in the Troll King's dungeon had taken all the fight out of Thorax. Not that the troll minded rotting, he rather enjoyed that part, but it reminded him that he had failed miserably at his task. As if to add insult to injury, the bastards had WASHED him that morning before his execution.

Now it was mid-morning and Thorax, bound in heavy chains with royal guards, some of them his ex comrades, prodding him, was led to the gallows. He lumbered slowly up the stairs, and the executioner warily fitted him into his noose. Rope in place and secured, the executioner read his crimes to the crowd in a loud but dryly monotonous voice.

"Found guilty of high treason against King Blog and the Rotting Throne, conspiracy, destruction of property, and the lesser charge of murder, this troll, by the name of Thorax Blackheart, will hang by the neck until dead."

Thorax faced his fate, and glared at the crowd. The Trolls cheered, always being up for a good hanging with a lively victim. "I hope he lasts a while," one of the onlookers commented to no one in particular, "the last one stopped twitching before lunch." Thorax, unseen and unheard due to the crowds cheering, mouthed a complicated series of words that no troll should ever have known. The muttered spell took hold, and his demeanor changed as the gallows floor fell out from under him and the rope tightened around his thickly muscled neck.

The rope broke.

The bound troll tumbled to the cobbled courtyard in a fall that would have broken the bones of lesser creatures. The chains binding his arms to his sides fell away like melting butter and the guards faced not a cowed prisoner, but a seven foot tall, quarter ton, and very irate troll.

Needless to say mayhem ensued. Amid the screaming, panicking crowd of troll citizens and the pleasantly cursing soldiers, Thorax slammed headlong into the gallows. (Headlong literally, as he smashed one of the supporting beams with his thick skull.) The platform tottered, then toppled down into the confusion, adding to it considerably. Before the guardsmen regained composure, the troll slipped off very un-troll like. Within moments he was lost to the maze of winding side streets in the Troll capital.

Several hours later found Thorax hunkered down inside a small overturned launch

amid nets and cargo in an unused alley near the city quay. Wards and spells kept his whereabouts safe from the searching constabulary as he awaited the ship that would arrive at dusk to carry him away.

Berrigus wiped the counter of the bar, his bar, as he enjoyed the mid morning quiet of Dundalk. It would be several hours until he opened, but he liked to start early and work slowly. He always worked slowly in contrast to the frantic pace of the rest of Baltimore. The troll smiled as he worked, remembering the lovely fight of the night before. The place still smelled of the dried blood and spilled beer.

A loud knock rang through the empty bar, someone was at the front door. Berrigus sighed, it was probably the cops with a hundred question he would have to answer. Just thinking about thinking that much gave him a headache as he trudged to the door. Bending his seven foot frame down till his eye was even with the tiny peephole he peered out.

Berrigus stood up sharply and shook his head violently. At first he wondered how he had gotten outside, then realized that he was still inside. If he was also outside that would mean there were two of him, and that was silly. It must be another troll outside, his image distorted by the crappy optics of peephole. This thought process took an excruciatingly long time, and the knock boomed again. Berrigus opened the door.

“Berrigus?” the other troll belched.

“Thorax?” Berrigus grinned greenishly. It was his cousin Thorax. “You slimy bastard, come in and have a pint,” he said as he grabbed Thorax’s collar and dragged him inside.

Thorax took down two chairs at one of the tables and Berrigus got two large steins and filled them with ale. Sitting down, they both sipped their drinks noisily and pondered each other; two trolls deep in thought. This took a while, and Berrigus got up a few times to refill the steins as he remembered their last meeting.

Over twenty years ago Berrigus had been banished from the troll kingdom by King Cephalus himself. He had been caught sleeping with the Princess, Ruphia, that he had been assigned to guard. Stripped of bludgeon and impaler, the traditional arms of the palace guard, he had been cast into the mundane world of humans. At first it was hard for the noble troll, but he had gotten a job crushing cars at a local junkyard after the hydraulic press broke down. He found his ‘niche’ doing with ease what to mortals was back breaking work. Needing little from this gentle world, he quickly saved the money

he received and in less than a year had a small nest egg. That was about the time his cousin Thorax showed up with a baby troll under his arm and a small purse of gold. It was the last time he had seen Thorax.

The human world was difficult enough for the outcast troll, but doubly so as a single parent with an infant trollkin. His nest egg, and the money that Ruphia had sent to help with the child dwindled. Finally, to offer at least a stable home, bring in some cash, and do something he was actually good at, Berrigus had opened 'Under the Bridge' tavern. It was, ironically, located under the Key bridge right on the water. Trolls are not known for their imagination.

It was a lovely, condemned establishment that he had gotten for almost nothing. Depending on the prevailing wind it either stank of rotting fish, several kinds of industrial waste, or Berrigus's personal favorite- sewage treatment. Today the wind was coming straight down harbor from the pyrolysis plant. That thought, once finally noticed, brought the trolls mind back to the present, and his visitor.

Berrigus looked across the table at his cousin, the troll had aged. Gone was the youthful look of murder in his eyes, replaced by cynical brutality. His teeth were rotting and falling out, his skin was wrinkled like wind blasted leather, and his greasy locks of hair were gray and falling out in patches. At least he had aged well. "Your looking good," Berrigus offered. They finished another pint as Thorax thought of a response.

The soft human world had taken it's toll on Berrigus. In order to fit in he had learned to bathe and comb his gnarled locks. His teeth, although greenish yellow, were all in place and his eyes were clear and bright like polished black onyx. Gone was the characteristic troll body scent and flatulence from eating carrion. For a troll Berrigus was disgustingly clean. "Cousin," Thorax began, "it pains me to see you in such a state. I'm sorry we could not bring you back."

"Beat yourself up over it," Berrigus said, "your as much to blame as anyone else." Thorax smiled at the kind words. "The last time you showed your ugly face you caused me nothing but trouble, it's been far too long. What has dragged you into the human world, slug." He stood up and refilled the steins, knowing Thorax would think a while.

"King Cephalus is dead, Berrigus," Thorax replied minutes after he returned, "and Ruphia as well. The whole royal family was bludgeoned as they slept, save one, and Blog of the Salt Marsh has claimed the rotting throne." As it sank in Berrigus's tiny mind once again wandered about on it's own and he remembered the princess Ruphia, his one true love.

It had been a whirlwind romance. One moment he was standing next to her in the

banquet hall, doing his duty guarding her, and the next she was pulling off his armor and pushing him over the table. She was being forced into an arranged marriage and Berrigus assumed she wanted one last fling.

What she really wanted was a way out of the marriage.

Her cunning, but hasty, plot went awry. Troll plotting often did, although trolls could be Machevellian clever at times it took them time.

The pair was discovered as they were finishing, probably because it was dinner time and the table was needed. The princess was scolded for her cleverness. Blog of the Salt Marsh, the prospective groom, was not impressed and the marriage was canceled (which was what the princess wanted anyway).

The only loser was poor Berrigus, who was banished forever from the kingdom. The king was actually lenient, if he even thought for a moment that Berrigus was to blame he would have put him to death. So the palace guard was sent into the human world with nothing but his wits. It was truly a miracle he survived at all.

Berrigus looked at Thorax. If they had been standing on opposite sides of the princess on that fateful evening so long ago their fates, too, would have been reversed. Thorax knew this.

Almost a year after Berrigus was banished Thorax had shown up on his doorstep with an infant, the illegitimate child of Berrigus and Princess Ruphia. The child had nowhere else to go, as royal blood she had to either be accepted, or killed before she could pretend to the throne. Thorax had been commanded to dispose of the babe, but the princess, without the kings knowledge, diverted him. She had sent the nameless baby girl to Berrigus instead.

Berrigus had named her Cholera, one of his favorite human words, and together father and daughter adapted and grew into the human world. Interrupting Berrigus's thought like a freight train stepping in front of a mouse, Thorax asked, "How's the girl?"

Berrigus paused for several minutes until he realized that Thorax was talking about Cholera. "My daughter? She is as fine as can be expected growing up with humans." As if on cue Cholera entered.

She was hideous, standing just over six feet tall with a muscular build and ample curves. Her face was broad and her skin was pale and smooth. Bushy, bat like eyebrows flapped over her small close set eyes, which were black and shining with youth. Curls of freshly washed raven hair flowed down her sturdy back. A smile gaped open under her

bulbous nose, revealing sharp white teeth like a sharks. She was already dressed for the day in a black jumpsuit and a leather biker jacket. Her large feet were clad in heavy boots.

“Good morning, Daddy,” she said in a loud but feminine voice.

Berrigus smiled. For all her disgusting cleanliness and adaptations to the human world she was still the road-apple of his eye. “Morning Chollie,” he replied.

Thorax gasped. He quickly knelt before her and placed his forehead to the dirty floor. “Who’s the freak?” Cholera asked.

“My cousin, Thorax.” Berrigus answered. “He was the one that brought you to me over twenty years ago. I guess he hasn’t seen you in so long...”

Like a semi making a hard left turn Berrigus’s mind started adding the pieces. Cholera was the granddaughter of King Cephalus. The entire royal family had been murdered. Berrigus’s daughter was the sole legitimate claimant to the Rotting Throne.

Cholera was the Troll Queen in exile.

Berrigus dropped to his knees and put his forehead to the dirty floor beside Thorax. Cholera’s bat like eyebrows began flapping in confusion as if attempting to carry off her eyes. “Get up, you assholes!” she boomed.

It was, ironically, the correct ceremonial command from a Troll monarch and both former palace guards rose automatically. Berrigus went to her, touched her cheek and said, “Chollie, my festering boil, your mother and her family are dead. They were murdered in their sleep.” Cholera raised one manicured paw to her mouth in shock and her father continued. “You are the sole surviving member of the royal family, that makes you the Troll Queen in Exile.”

Cholera sat with a very loud plop. Her mind raced, for a troll, and came to a different destination from the males. Berrigus and Thorax knocked back another pint as they waited. “I’m in danger,” she finally said, “Whoever killed my mother’s family will be looking for me next.”

“That would be Blog of the Salt Marsh,” Thorax said.

“You know who did it?” Cholera asked astonished.

“Of course, but since he is King now since claiming the Rotting Throne there’s no

one to challenge him,” the old troll replied. “Except you, but the trolls won’t follow you. You’re too....” He started to say ‘clean’ and then realized it was unwise to insult a queen, even an exiled one. Even trolls have their moments of clear thought. “Foreign,” he finished.

“Not to mention that I don’t really want to *be* the freaking queen,” Cholera added. All three trolls sat in rapt thought, painfully, for several minutes. Berrigus filled three steins this time.

“We have to move,” Berrigus finally said, “Thorax found us, Blog’s people could too.”

“I’ll go with you,” Thorax said.

“No,” Cholera said slowly, “we can fit into the human world, but not you. Trolls are almost unheard of here and a traditionalist would stick out like a rotting corpse.”

“You’re too kind, my Queen,” Thorax replied.

“Pig and Mucus would come along,” Cholera mused.

“Other Trolls?” Thorax inquired, “Here?”

“No,” Berrigus said hesitantly. Several explanations fluttered slowly across his mind like moths and he picked the easiest. “Some of her human friends.”

“They sound like fine people,” Thorax offered, “How shall I get in touch with you?”

“Return here. I have some contacts to make, but whoever is here will be able to direct you.”

“You have to leave, Thorax,” Cholera added, “you will draw attention to us. Return to the troll kingdom and be our eyes and ears.”

“I hear and obey, my Queen,” Thorax replied. Suddenly, realizing that he would have to venture back into the troll kingdom, he also knew his worthless carcass would be in danger himself. “One problem, my Queen?” he offered.

“What?” Cholera responded, becoming quite irritated.

“I cannot return until you ascend to the Rotting Throne, my Queen, it would mean

my death. King Blog has already hung me once, and should I return he would not miss a second time.”

Not even pondering how someone could 'miss' during a hanging Berrigus asked, “You were hung?” Cholera smiled, perhaps knowing that neither troll was familiar enough with the human language to catch the second meaning. Her mind began to form alternate plans, and difficult process for a troll guard's daughter but not a princess. She caught the tail end of what Thorax was saying.

“...treason, for I would not support nor condone Blog's actions. I and Ruphia are the only ones who know you two exist at all.”

“Excellent so far,” Cholera said. “Thorax, you still draw attention to us. Lie low in the city and return tomorrow for then I shall have worked out an alternate plan.”

“As always, my Queen, I obey.” He embraced Berrigus.

“Don't wait another twenty years,” Berrigus said.

“No,” Thorax replied, “it will be either tomorrow, or never, I fear. Good-bye, my friend.” Cholera too offered the old troll a hug. At first he was stunned that the Queen would offer such to one as himself, but he took the offered embrace.

With a quick twist of her massive shoulders she snapped the neck that the rope could not. Thorax's limp body thudded to the floor.

“Neat trick,” Berrigus offered, “Long live King Blog.” Both trolls, father and daughter, laughed. “So we're staying in the human world?”

“I know no other, and we both would be outcasts in the troll kingdom. I would be an unwelcome queen, and you an aging courtier. Both trapped in lives we do not wish. At least here we are free and have friends, ale, and lovely bar fights every weekend.”

“All a troll could want,” Berrigus said wisely.

“All a troll could want,” Cholera echoed, “Now let's dump this body before the cops show up.” Together they carried the expired old troll out the door.

Trolls could be Machievellian clever, it just took them time.