



The
Magic
Candle
II

THE FOUR AND FORTY

PARAGRAPH
BOOK



MINDCRAFT

1

Acorn says, "Are you new to Oshcrun Island? Well, of course you must be! We all are! Unless you've been hiding beneath the mountains for centuries, and, no offense, but you don't really look old enough for that! Anyway, I'd like to welcome you to Ketrop and invite you to look around. I wouldn't want to brag—I'll leave that to the mayor—but I can say that we're very proud of our humble little village. We have shops that sell goods you can't find in Telermain!"

2

The courtier Alex says, "Yes, King Rebnard keeps several wizards around Castle Oshcrun. I'm sure you know most of them—you could hardly have reimprisoned Dreax without their help."

You manage to keep smiling. It's supposed to be a pleasant conversation in King Rebnard's court, you remind yourself, biting your tongue and thinking pleasant thoughts about nights in the woods under Deruvian stars. You ask Alex, "Is the great wizard Ziyx in the castle?"

"No," replies Alex, "Ziyx has retired from active service. He lives in a tower on an island northeast of here. The gods only know what he's doing there—it couldn't be anything of importance. Even wizards get old, you know."

You bite your tongue again. This conversation had better be worth it. Ziyx was old when he served Rebnard's great-grandfather, as you know. And he would still be old, and active, when everyone in the courtroom—Alex and you and Rebnard himself—were long in their graves. The thought that the Great Ziyx would not be doing something important . . .

"What of Eflun?" you ask as politely as you can.

"Eflun?" Alex repeats. "I believe that he's around somewhere, unless he's gone back to Deruvia, or off exploring Gurtex. Of course, the Great Truk is the king's court wizard now. His furniture transformation spells are very entertaining. And Rimfiztrik is puttering about the castle, as well."

Alex looks around the courtroom, as if your conversation is over. You silently agree that it is, and walk away.

The tavernkeeper is tall. And big. His beard is white, his eyes are red, and his skin has a greenish cast. He laughs as he watches you look him over. "What do y' think, stranger? Be I half-orc? Half-troll? Couldn't be half-goblin, at me great size! Gods, it always be a pleasure to see strangers guess me out—me who's spent me life tryin' to guess me own self!

"But yer thirst be of more import than the name or race o' me mother or father, gods treat their souls as they deserve!" Greenpate spits on the floor, then calls for the servingmaid. "A round for us all! The stranger be buyin'!"

The patrons applaud your generosity, those of them who can manage to put two hands together in the same place at the same time.

Greenpate has not stopped talking. "It's a fine town we have here," he says, "A peaceful fishin' village, where we all make our own way."

You glance around the tavern. A fight has broken out in the far corner. Several of the patrons have passed out on the floor. Of the rest, those who do not have eyepatches or peglegs are wearing hooks instead of hands on one or both arms.

"Kind, gentle, honest folk we are," says Greenpate, "and we loves our fun." A flying bottle shatters what was left of the mirror behind the bar.

You ask of transportation out of Ussa, explaining that this quiet peaceful life, while restful for a time, will surely, sooner or later, grate against your traveling instincts.

Greenpate winks. "Ussa might be boring to any, 'specially while their bones are a-mendin'. Two ship captains make port here—they could take 'ee east or westward."

Maalaq seems impressed. "You come from the mighty Ziyx?" The wizard glares at you with the darkest eyes you have ever seen. He says: "You have found the gate of Deraum, and Ziyx believes that you are strong, brave, and trustworthy enough to enter."

Amazing that so much information could be contained in one short word!

"Since you have managed to climb my tower and break into my private chamber, I must admit that you are strong enough, and brave—or foolhardy—enough," continues Maalaq. "As for

'trustworthy,' I bow to Ziyx's judgment. I myself know nothing of trust."

The wizard reaches into his robes and withdraws a key. "Since the mighty Ziyx has decided to intrude, I hereby place the Deraum matter into his hands! Or into your hands for him, it appears. . . . This key will allow you entry. I give it to you with one final warning: Deraum is sorely haunted by the spirits of the foully slain! Venture not into Deraum without plans and preparations to withstand their terrors!"

Suddenly, you are transported to the throne room of Castle Oshcrun! As the dizziness wears off, you stare in dismay at scorched tapestries, befouled carpets, blackened windows, and . . . on King Rebnard's throne, the most hideous of demons!

"The great hero of Deruvia, I presume," hisses the demon. Its spittle burns tiny holes in the purple velvet of the throne it sits upon. "I am Zakhad, lord of Mandarg and Gurtex. You may grovel."

You stand tall and proud. Zakhad laughs. Or hisses, or shouts; a sound like nothing you have ever heard before, and nothing you ever want to hear again.

"So brave! So valiant! And perhaps I should thank you for ensuring that my lord Dreax remains imprisoned in that candle's flame," the demon grins, "allowing me to rule the East without interference. Or perhaps I should destroy you right now!" The demon hurls a great bolt of lightning at you! Reflexively, you drop to the floor as the lightning passes overhead!

The demon's scaly lips turn upward. "Grovel before me, hero! And hear my challenge! Your impudent king, his beloved queen, and their son Jemil are in my power! Find them and die, or paddle back across the sea!" In a puff of foul-smelling smoke, the demon Zakhad vanishes.

The scholar's home is warm and friendly, if somewhat cluttered, but his greeting startles you. "Why do you say 'hero'?"

Wartow smiles. "We are secluded here in Wanasol, in the shadow of the Eldens' mountain, but we still receive word of great events,

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sooner or later.” He shuffles through a stack of papers, pulls out a faded sketch, and shows it to you.

The likeness is ten years old, and far from the truth—you never looked *that* good, even after bathing—but you can see how Wartow might have recognized you.

As you hand the sketch back to Wartow, your eyes are drawn to a gold sunburst ornament embedded in the flesh of his left hand. He notices your attention. “The Sun Mark,” he says. “I have the honor to bear it until the next Sunlight Festival, when a new Marked One will be chosen by lot. . . . If you’re not familiar with the prophecy of the Orb and the Marked Ones, you can read about it in our library. . . .

“But where have you been? What have you done? How goes your quest?” Wartow pleads for information.

You tell him of your adventures.

7

Bhardagast bids you be seated. “There is so much to be learned about Gurtex,” he says, “and we have so far only scratched the surface.” His lips twitch in a small smile. “And we know that most of Gurtex’s secrets are far *beneath* its surface. Or far above, in the case of Mount Mandarg. . . .”

Suddenly, Lord Bhardagast shakes in agony. A frightful expression comes over his face. You rush to his side as he gasps, “No, no, it will pass. Please sit down. Forgive my indisposition. These attacks are painful, but infrequent and of short duration. Still, they serve to confine me to my room.” His breath is coming easier now, you see, and you relax somewhat.

“I hear that you are interested in the fate of the Four and Forty guardians of Deruvia’s Magic Candle,” Bhardagast continues, almost as if nothing had happened. The color begins to return to his face.

You nod forcefully. “The first massacre is still a mystery,” you say, “and we must assure that a second massacre can never happen!”

“Well, yes, of course, of course,” agrees Bhardagast. “And that is one of the reasons that our king is so eager to subdue Gurtex. Reb-nard is, of course, much more concerned with the might of the Forces of Darkness today than with the details of a massacre ten and more years past, but I must admit that the subject of Fort Berbezza and the Four and Forty has intrigued me personally. Investigations have been made since you bravely restored the Candle.”

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Ignoring the compliment, you lean forward in anticipation. “What have you learned?”

“What we know of the story is not pretty,” says Bhardagast. “The Four eldens were taken by surprise after the Forty other guardians had been slaughtered. We cannot know for sure whether the Four survived, although we found no evidence of their death. There are strong indications that the Four—living or dead—were transported across the Sea of Oshmar to Gurtex, along with the remains of many of the Forty.”

“Have you found any traces of them on this side of the ocean?” you ask.

“Not yet. Not for sure.” Bhardagast lowers his voice, as if to foil unseen listeners. “But there are signs of a ghost beneath this very castle . . . perhaps one of the Forty . . . a farfetched possibility.” The king’s advisor shakes his head, and his voice returns to normal. He continues, “As I say, our king is concerned with Gurtex today, not Berbezza long ago. I hope I have been able to help, and that you will visit again soon.”

As you rise to leave, Bhardagast leans forward and lowers his voice once more. “There have been signs. I have sent a small group, led by the mercenary Ben, to follow the signs. The signs lead to the legendary dwarven mines beneath the Demonspine and, perhaps, beyond the mines to the dreaded Mount Mandarg. . . .”

Another fit overcomes Lord Bhardagast! He falls to the floor! His screams bring servants scurrying into his chamber. “You must leave now,” the servants say as they usher you out into the corridor.

8

The halfling says, “Well, I’m sure you’ll see the temple of Marior for yourself, but let me tell you that it’s an awesome sight. Sitting on the point, looking out over nothing but the vast Sea of Oshmar . . . The breakers nearby, and the waves in the distance . . . Let me tell you—The temple, what’s left of it, is on solid ground. You can look at your feet, you can sit down and look at your . . . fundament? Anyway, you know you’re sitting on solid ground. But it *feels* like you’re sailing on the ocean. And it feels like you’re *happy* to be sailing on the ocean—the gods of Deruvia know I never felt that way on the long journey across the sea!”

Ozmin sees that he has your attention. “I’ve never been what you might call religious,” he says. “I’ve had jobs to do, and I’ve done

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them. Don't mistake me—I've always respected the good gods, and I taught my family the same. But I never really felt their power in Deruvia. Not until I found the ruined temple of Marior here on Oshcrun Island."

9

As the Soulspeak spell crosses the room, the ghost becomes even more fearsome, and its cries bring you even more anguish! "Leave me!" The ghost shrieks! "Leave me with my pain!"

A blaze of light makes you cover your eyes, but between your fingers you can see the ghost as an aged wizard, whirling to face each corner of the room, then returning to you. "Leave me, I say! Leave me in my shame and agony!"

A renewed wave of fear washes over you, leaving you with just enough courage to stammer: "Honorable sir, we must speak with you about . . ."

"Honorable'?" shrieks the ghost. "You mock me with the title I have lost forever!" The ghost whirls about once more, then faces you once again, and suddenly settles into its wizard's form. The blazing light dims. The Soulspeak spell has finally taken effect.

"We are the Twelve who serve the Four," the aged wizard starts to chant, waving his arms in strange patterns and turning his head in random directions. With a start, you realize that the arms have lost their hands, the head has had its eyes gouged out, and the wizard, at his death, was most probably totally mad. Gently, carefully, you approach the wizard, take his shoulders, and seat him on a convenient bench. You ask him, "Can you tell us your story?"

The wizard's ghost shudders. His arms twitch. "'We are the Twelve . . . We are the Twelve . . . I am the . . .'" He reaches out the stump of his right arm to brush your sleeve. He asks, "Have you come to save me?" You nod, knowing he cannot see you, but before you can speak, he tells his story.

"I am, I was, the last of the Twelve," says the ghost. "To my everlasting shame.

"I ran! I hid!" The wizard begins to tremble uncontrollably, and starts to glow again. Quickly, you put your arm around his shoulders and murmur soft words to comfort him. He calms down once more.

Lowering his head, the ghost wizard speaks. "My name is—was—Phokos. Of the Four and Forty guardians at Fortress Berbezza, I was the last. And the least. The Warriors Twenty died defending the gate.

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The Wardens Eight were taken and slain in the onslaught. The Wizards Twelve, saving only myself, were cut down at the very base of the Candle. Then the Four, the Eldens, were captured by Naur threats and treachery. I alone was left to defend the Candle, and I was cowering under the farthest stairwell, fearing only for my own miserable life.

"They found me soon enough," the ghost of Phokos continues. "And, most cruelly, they kept me barely alive through the voyage across the Sea of Oshmar and the trek to Mandarg. I lost my eyes, then my hands. My mind followed soon after. Then, finally, my life." A dismal chuckle comes from the ghost's trembling jaw. "But never my ears! I heard all their plans! I can tell you . . ."

You jump back in horror as the ghost rises from the bench and begins to glow. "Leave me in my anguish, or lay my soul to rest!" it shrieks.

10

You want to know a secret?" asks the orc, as he rises from his pallet and faces his corner of the cell. He stretches his arms and legs, and scratches other parts of his greenish anatomy. You try not to watch, as his guttural voice reflects from the opposite wall. "You want to know the secret of life? The secret of salvation? The secrets of Light and Darkness?" He turns to face you. "The one secret is . . ."

Suddenly, the orc grins in recognition. (At least, you hope it's a grin—with all those fangs, it's hard to tell.) At the same time, you recognize the orc! Ten years older (Gods, how quickly orcs age!), but this is the same orc who gave you the clue in Port Avur that helped you find Thorin's hammer—the first milestone on the quest to restore Deruvia's magic candle!

In unison, you and the orc exclaim, "I know you!" The orc drops to his knees. Stepping back a pace, to keep your legs out of reach of his jaws, you inquire: "Buzbiquent, isn't it?"

"Buzbazgut, it is," replies the orc. "But call me Buz. And praise the gods who sent you here!" The orc bows his head, and begins an incomprehensible muttering.

You stare in amazement. Finally, Buzbazgut concludes his prayers and looks up at you. "Secrets," he says. "There are many secrets, many that are only secrets because no one will learn their truth!" He shakes his head to and fro, fangs dripping. "May I arise?"

"Do so," you say, wondering why your permission is needed.

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Buzbazgut stands up. "Say the word," he entreats you. "Invite me to join your party. Free me from Rebnard's dungeons! I can guide you through the depths of Gurtex!"

You wait for the orc to continue.

11

Strangers!" the Altesen priest exclaims. "The prophecy is fulfilled! I know not who you are, nor whence you came, nor how you found the sacred orb—but, at last, you have come!"

You stare in wonder at the glowing orb behind the altar. Slowly, the temple fills with Altesen warrior guards. Their heads tower over you, and the points of their spears tower even farther over their heads. Plans cascade through your mind. How to grab the orb, how to evade the guards, how to escape the islands . . . But none of your plans have any hope of success.

Then you realize that the priest and the guards are waiting for your answer. What was the question?? What was the priest saying while you were engrossed in your own plans? "Will you." That's how it started. It was a simple question. You curse yourself for not listening. "Will." "You." What came next??

The warriors begin to lower their spears from the guard stance to the attack position. Gods! Those spears are longer than . . . What *was* the question?? "Will you" . . . "Will you accept" . . . "Will you accept the orb?"

"Yes!" you exclaim. The Altesens snap to attention. Their priest takes the orb and hands it to you. Its glow is weaker than you had thought, but it trembles and vibrates as if it were alive.

The Altesen priest gazes at you sternly. "We are much relieved to see our part of the prophecy ended," he says.

*"We hold the orb,
with faultless faith,
'til strangers show
their new-found need."*

He is reciting a poem, or chant, or song. The guards respond in a tuneless hum. All the Altesens seem to know the ceremony well.

*"The strangers stride
along the land,
to search for signs
of pain and power.
"On arm and head,*

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*on limping leg,
they finally find
the sacred signs.
"Offering the orb,
a touch transforms
the glowing globe."*

The rhythm suddenly changes, and the Altesen guards begin to beat the ends of their spears upon the ground.

*"When the strangers gain the touches three,
the land of Gurtex, and its islands, may be free!
A prince of royal blood, with orb in hand,
will banish Darkness with its might, and free the land!"*

The ceremony ends in silence. Somehow you had expected cheers of joy and encouragement. . . . The priest's glare is as stern as ever. "Begone! Your mission here is done! You are strangers here, and you must leave. Yet, since you seem to be the prophesied strangers of the Orb, you may seek the blessing of Senvara before you go. Farewell."

The guards escort you out of the temple.

12

Searching the bodies of the guards, you find the key to the cell. You open it, and the three halflings stream out into the jailors' room.

"Thank you! Thank you!" they shout. "Where do they keep the food?" Cabinets are opened. Drawers are spilled on the floor. The smallest halfling looks through the guards' pouches and suddenly pulls out an unidentifiable mass, squealing in delight! "No, no, Darksun!" shouts the halfling in the red jacket, "That's orcfood! Don't eat it! Don't *touch* it!" He knocks the orcfood out of Darksun's grasp.

"I've found it!" shouts the third halfling, opening a chest. "Turnips! One for you, one for you, one for me . . ." He takes a big bite, chews, and swallows. Turning to you, he says, "Thank you again. We are forever in your debt. (Chomp, chomp.) Wherever did they find these? Almost as good as Fubernel Pinks (chomp, chomp) . . . My name is Salmo. This is my friend Russet, and his sister Darksun." Salmo lowers his voice. "Darksun can't speak, and she isn't very bright, but she's the best mushroom hunter Russet and I—and Perin—have ever known or heard of. That's why we talked Garlin into sailing us to Misor. The place must be full of mushroom patches, but we didn't

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find any before the orcs found *us*. . . We'll head back for the coast. Don't worry, we'll find our way back to Ketrop."

The halflings shake your hand. As Darksun leaves, you realize that her name comes from the birthmark on her hollowed cheek shaped like a dark red sunburst.

13

Ha! You ask favor from Xent'xis? Ha! You ask from Lord of the Tundra? From Chief of the Horde of the North? From Arm of the Everlasting Frost? Ha! Ha!" You notice that several of the surrounding barbarians have drawn their bows. Some of their women are sharpening their skinning knives. You wish that you could plan an escape route, but the shine in the golden eyes of Xent'xis will not allow you to concentrate on anything else.

"Ha! You ask favor from . . ." Sounds of swords being drawn come from within the chieftain's massive tent, followed by a sudden puff of white smoke. "Ha! Ha! Ha, ha ha, ha!" Xent'xis bursts into laughter, and a chorus of feminine laughs echoes him from within the great tent.

You look around in bewilderment. Xent'xis shouts at you, "Were you frightened? Were you scared? Ha! Ha!" Gales of laughter buffet you from all sides. "Welcome to our camp," laughs Xent'xis. "The shamans have named you with white smoke as of the Children of Light, so you are welcome, and more than welcome!"

14

The ghost stares at you. Slowly, it begins to speak: "Are you . . . Yes! Yes! You are Deruvian!" The ghost's fearsome aspect fades away, and the you see, instead, the form of a slender, pale young man. He says, "Then the Candle must have survived! Praise be to the gods of light!"

"Yes, the demon Dreax is newly imprisoned, with four and forty new guardians," you reply. Modestly, you do not mention your role in restoring the Magic Candle of Deruvia.

But the young man's ghost seems disturbed. "Four and forty . . . Yes! I was one of the forty! My name was Horann!" His face brightens with the memory, then darkens. Ghostly tears fall from his ghostly eyes. He sobs, "But we failed! Fortress Berbezza was entrusted to us,

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and we failed! The forces of Darkness . . . The Four eldens were taken, and the forty guardians were slain! We failed! Can the gods forgive our souls?"

You wait patiently as the troubled spirit sinks deeper into its misery. Finally, then, it becomes calmer. "Please be assured that we mean you no harm," you say. "In fact, we may be able to help you, and you may be able to help us. Can you remember anything more about the Berbezza massacre?"

The ghost flinches. "I do not want to, and I do not care to, . . . but I can. And I must." He draws his ghostly sleeve across his tear-filled eyes. "The forces of Darkness burst into the fortress. I know not how. The Four were taken by surprise, and captured. We forty fought valiantly, or so we thought . . ."

Another pause for Horann to collect himself. How hard to be dead and unable to rest!

"Then I found myself aboard a ship headed eastward, pulling on an oar that felt like the tallest tree in Yberton," says the ghost. "I do not know whether I was dead or alive at the time. It makes no difference now. Yet I seem to recall voices. A shout that one of the Four had escaped. A murmur that candles had been prepared to entrap the other three. A command to row harder, and the lash of a giant whip . . ."

"If you are able, I pray you to send my soul to its rest," Horann concludes, as he transforms back into his fearsome ghostly shape.

15

My older brother, Ozmin, didn't really want to sail across the Sea of Oshmar. The trip was not a pleasure cruise, as you well know. But, once he arrived, Ozmin became very interested in exploring the island. As a matter of fact, he discovered the large granite quarry that King Rebnard has used to rebuild the castle! If I were you, I'd ask Ozmin to tell you everything he knows about Oshcrun."

16

Lady Subia is perfectly at home in King Rebnard's courtroom. Her dress and demeanor, it seems, could place her nowhere but in such an elegant setting. But you know better. And, as you touch hands in greeting, a twinkle in her eye tells you that she knows that you know better. You know that this elegant lady in her silken gown has

been just as comfortable—possibly more so—wrapped in furs on the highest mountain peaks or shrouded with mosquito netting in the deepest swamps. Subia the Explorer! Without her maps, you could never have managed to restore the Magic Candle of Deruvia!

The lady kisses you sweetly and precisely on both cheeks, then guides you into the shadows of the pillars that ring the courtroom, away from the general conversation. “I trust that I may speak frankly to you,” she says.

You nod. She pauses. You realize that this is a serious matter, and say, “Milady, of course you may speak frankly. But if you wish to speak *secretly*, you must know that conscience will not allow hiding . . .”

She interrupts you with a silvery laugh, which she immediately muffles with a long silken sleeve. “No, have no thoughts of treason! Rebnard and I have no quarrel, save that he thinks of me as Baby Suby, and I can’t help remembering him at ten years old, swaggering around the courtyard, dragging a wooden sword, half again as tall as he!

“Have no doubt that this entire court, here and in Deruvia, feels that Gurtex must be subdued and made powerless to threaten the Children of Light!” Subia’s smile is gone, and the twinkle in her eyes has been replaced, in turn, by a blinding glare and, now, a faraway gaze. “Yet I feel sure that there is more to Gurtex than a land full of ravaging monsters to be burnt to the ground!”

You hesitate. “Milady,” you say, “laying an entire continent to waste does not sit well on anyone’s soul. But everything we have heard about Gurtex says that we have no other choice.”

“Oh, how you remind me of cousin Rebnard,” Subia smiles, as she glances toward the king and moves farther into the shadows of the pillars. “Like him, you act when you can and think when you must. I, on the other hand, was raised as an advisor, not a commander. I think when I can, and study when I can, and explore when I can, and, to the best of my ability, act when I must.

“There are several things about Gurtex that are wreathed in mystery,” she continues. “They must be investigated before the armies arrive to wreak indiscriminate havoc on the land, lest the remnants of Light in Gurtex be destroyed forever.”

“But surely the destruction of the many hordes of Darkness is more important than the survival of a few outposts of Light,” you begin, then suddenly become unsure of what you are saying.

Subia glares at you. “Perhaps. That is certainly the way Rebnard would feel. Nonetheless, I ask you to join me on an expedition into the cleft of the Demonspine Mountains, not for conquest, but for mercy. I am certain that the ancient elven village of Llendorra still sur-

vives there, hidden from the sight of the Forces of Darkness and all other strangers. And I think I know how to find it. We can help them, if only by letting them know that the Children of Light have come to Gurtex. And, if I am correct, they can help us as well.

“Please consider this expedition, and visit me in my room if you decide to undertake it.” Subia smiles again, then moves toward another group of courtiers.

17

The small boy smiles up at you. “Could you hold your finger right here, please? I have to tighten the rigging on my toy boat.” He giggles. “Toy boat, toy boat, toy boat! Bet you can’t say that as fast as me!”

You put your finger where he tells you and chant, “Toy boat, toy boat, toe boot!” All the rigging comes loose on his little schooner as he falls onto the pier, writhing in laughter. The sailors nearby look your way, but don’t seem to see the humor. You don’t mind. Sitting down next to Timm, you begin restringing his sails for him.

Timm eventually sits up and watches you. “Be careful,” he says. “That’s really a magic ship, you know, so don’t hurt it. It’s really the *Western Star* that carried my family across the Sea of Oshmar to the Deruvias years and years and ages and ages ago. And now it’s back in Gurtex again. Almost.”

“She’s a fine ship,” you agree as you hand the re-rigged toy back to Timm. As you stand up, you notice a star-shaped birthmark on the boy’s knee below his short pants. “And the mark on your knee must be another ‘Western Star,’” you joke.

“Oh, no, that is the mark of the Northern Star!” Timm is very serious. “Same as my father’s, and Grampa’s, and everybody before them, since they came from Gurtex! Grampa’s dead now, you know, and Father’s been gone a long time. . . . Thanks for your help with the rigging.”

18

What . . . Where . . . How . . . The wizard Truk stands before you on trembling legs. “**Never** ask me to do that again,” he cries, and collapses in a heap of bony wizardly knees and elbows.

Nausea wrenches you to the floor. You have just enough time to recognize the royal carpet of King Rebnard's throne room before the remains of your last meal disfigure it forever. What spell did Truk cast to bring you here?? As you begin to recover, you gain a feeling of kinship for the dwarves you have convinced to board sailing ships across . . . but what is here?? Disaster!

You look around the throne room. Glass is shattered. Furniture is destroyed. Servants are removing a body—old Shannor, from his robes. You quickly pray the good gods to receive his soul. Another corpse lies next to you. Proud young Alex! And more bodies lie around the room—dead servants, dead guards—their fellows rush in to bear the corpses away.

What of the king? He lies slouched upon the throne. Dead? No! His chest is heaving, and you can see no blood . . . But Queen Alishia is also on the dais, fumbling for the throne and her husband, staggering, wailing, blood streaming down her cheeks . . .

Blinded! "My lady queen!" You struggle to your feet to aid your liege lord's wife, then you see more guards bring the queen's ladies to take her to her chambers. You trust that she is in good care. You must. You have no choice.

You climb the dais to see to King Rebnard, and still more servants and guards rush into the room. You hear a deep voice behind you ordering the servants: "Attend first to the wounded, then the dead. Then clean and repair the royal throne room, to restore its dignity and power. Know that your king and queen are in good hands, and worry not about their majesties." You see that, in truth, King Rebnard is well-attended, and recognize the deep voice as that of the councilor Loren.

Loren climbs to the throne and looks closely at the unconscious king. You follow Loren up the steps. His majesty's breathing is coarse, but measured. There is in fact some blood, but none is flowing. Satisfied, Loren turns to you. "It falls on me to give you the good news and the bad news," he says. "The bad news, in short, is the demon Zakhad, who claims to rule Gurtex. He paid us a visit, and you see the results. The good news is that Zakhad's mission of destruction did not succeed. Not completely. Not this time.

"The demon demanded young Prince Jemil as a hostage, and flew into a rage when the king denied him," Loren explains. "I had rushed behind the throne when the demon appeared, so I was spared the blasts of the demon's fireballs and thunderbolts. No honor for me, but at least I survive to make the best of what remains. Thank the gods that our king and queen survive!

"And thank good Shannor and brave Alex as well. May the gods of Light rest their souls! The one shielding our king and the other defending our queen . . . May the gods rest their souls," Loren repeats.

Loren's voice loses its strength, and he falls at the feet of King Rebnard. "What of the prince?" you ask. "How could the demon be denied?" Loren does not answer.

But the king hears you. "Zidoni," he says. His voice is weak, and his healers try to quiet him. "Zidoni," he says again, and none will stop his speech. "Zidoni, the First of the Four Eldens. Or his ghost. Or an evil simulacrum . . . I know not. He came, he gathered us, he called for Jemil, my prince, my son, my heir. 'Give the foreseen prince into my care,' he demanded. Suddenly Jemil appeared before the figure of the elden Zidoni. My son went to his side. Before I could call his name, both had vanished!"

The healers try to calm the king. But he will not be silenced. As they arrange his body comfortably on the throne, he says, "Find my son! Find Zakhad and Zidoni, but, most of all, find my son! And, when you have found him, take me with you to rescue him!"

19

Ibid you welcome to Llendora," says the elven prince. The other elves in the meeting hall draw their bows. "I trust that you will enjoy your stay. It may be a long stay, since strangers to Llendora are not allowed to leave."

Some of the elves giggle. Others sight along the arrows notched in their bows. Subia turns to you. "I swear that I had no idea we would be received thus!" You take her hand, grasping it with what you hope feels like confidence.

You speak to Prince Llesiton. "Your Highness . . ."

Ignoring your words, the elf continues: "Furthermore, as strangers in Llendora, you are deemed to have joined the Hunter Game. You have the opening move. You may lay down your arms and attempt to survive in Llendora for seven days," (the elven archers all begin to giggle) "or you may try to make your way out of the village and through the forest right now!"

"Amazing," you think to your frozen self, "how the horde of elves can giggle, chuckle, even guffaw—and yet the aim of their shafts never wavers!"

But the Lady Subia speaks! “Your Highness,” she pleads, falling on her knees, “the fault is mine! I should not have guided strangers to your village, nor should I have come here myself! Yet I am here, and I will gladly stay here, and even play your Hunter Game, if you will only let my companions go!”

“A touching display of human sentiment,” observes Llesiton, looking down upon the Lady Subia. “But, when I have you all here, why should I let any of you go? Unless . . .” The prince paces across the silent hall and back, while the assembled arrows point to each of the party in turn.

Prince Llesiton looks directly at you. “The Great Explorer Subia is quite a prize. The Great Sorceress Somona would be a prize of even more worth. Bring Somona to Llendora in thirty days, and I will return Subia to you. Then, and only then, will the Hunter Game begin.”

The elves march you out of the village. Looking over your shoulder, you can see the Lady Subia, still on her knees, follow you with tear-filled eyes.

20

It’s called Deadwood because we’d all rather be one or the other, dead or wood, than live here one more day. Or night.” The goblin lifts his withered left arm onto the table, then switches the attention of his good arm and his one good eye to the flagon of ale. “Balene’s left dug!” he shouts. “Had I wanted meat, I would have ordered meat!” He pulls a long greenish worm from the flagon and throws it across the room, somewhere close to the fire. Then he drains the ale remaining in the flagon. “They call me ‘Sickle,’ stranger. So did they call my father before me, before he was cut down, and his father before him, as well.”

You pretend to take a drink of the Deadwood “ale,” and try not to look at Sickle’s left arm, lying on the table in a blood-stained crescent. The tattoo on his crippled hand—a dragon, yes, a dragon, one wing on the thumb, the other bending out of sight, the tail extending out the middle finger with his one remaining claw as the dragon’s poison sting . . . At his wrist, the crescent moon is vanishing into the dragon’s maw. . . .

“Arm-wrestle for another round?” asks the goblin. . . .

21

As the Soulspeak spell settles around the ghost, its form changes. You begin to recognize . . . the sorceress Somona! But Somona cannot be dead!

“Yet, in truth, I am dead,” the stately figure says, as if reading your mind. “You were my benefactor in life, so I must warn you twice. I can do no more. My first warning is to beware the treachery of the elves of Llendora, who are responsible for both my death and my imprisonment here.

“Then I must warn you that—Hold! He comes! You must flee!” The shape of Somona fades as your party hears an ominous rumbling from the south.

22

Welcome, Hero of Deruvia!” The king’s voice brings a hush to the room. “We had heard of your arrival on Oshcrun Island. You may approach our person.”

King Rebnard lowers his voice to a conversational level. “We have made much progress here on the island, but there is still much more to be done. Your help will be greatly appreciated. For one thing, the old cellars beneath the castle still need cleaning out—with sword and axe, not broom and mop!” Rebnard chuckles. “None better than you for a task like that, eh?” Then the king’s smile shifts into a serious look, as if on a sudden memory.

“But the Forces of Darkness are no joke, as you know as well as any. The dire lands of Gurtex await. I pray to the gods of Light that the Deruvian armies will be able to subdue, conquer or liberate those lands before their power increases once more. Their forces are still weak, thanks to your success in Deruvia. But our armies are still far away, and the Oshmar voyage is long and hard. My advisors cannot predict who will prevail. The omens are mixed. Some say success. Others say defeat. Still others—I dare not think on them, lest I despair completely.”

The king gazes eastward. “The fetters of rule! Would I were free to sail across the straits and scourge Gurtex with mine own sword! But no, my friend, I am bound tighter than the least of my servants. My servant Chilek serves only his king. But I, Chilek’s lord, serve not only him, but every loyal soul here and in Deruvia.”

23 The Four and Forty

"My liege," you say, "surely this is neither the time nor the place . . ." You glance at the nearby courtiers. Banas, the duke, Rebnard's uncle. Young Alex, dressed in elegant black velvet. Are their ears growing larger?

The king recovers quickly. Clearing his throat, Rebnard says: "These ancient maps will help you in your explorations, and the castle armory is at the disposal of you and your chosen companions."

By now, the other conversations in the courtroom have resumed. One woman is particularly spirited. The king looks in her direction and says, "I'm sure you remember my noble cousin, the Lady Subia? She fancies herself a mighty explorer. And, I must admit, with good reason," he adds. "Her exploits in the past . . . but the past is past, and the future may be far different. And I fear that Subia would rush into the future before the future is prepared for her."

23

They name you Moongold for your shining golden hair," you guess, looking at the locks falling free across her forehead and the tresses flowing free past her slender waist.

She laughs. "No, there are many with shining hair and golden hair," she says, although the other women you have seen wore their hair bound up or in tight braids. "I bear the name 'Moongold' because the name must be borne. Until my grandmother's mother's spirit departed, I was 'Swift Dove' and she was 'Moongold' as her grandmother before her. Now I am 'Moongold' until my daughter, or her daughter, or her daughter after her takes the name. And until she takes the Mark." Moongold brushes her hair back to show you a deep, crescent-shaped scar running across her forehead from brow to brow.

It does not mar her beauty.

24

Ibid you welcome to Llendora," says the elven prince, "although with many misgivings. You must know how important it is for Llendora to remain hidden from the Forces of Darkness. Before I decide how to deal with you, I must know how you were able to find our village."

Lady Subia steps forward. "Allow me to introduce myself, your highness. My name is Subia. I have spent my life in study of . . ."

Paragraphs

25

A host of elven murmurs interrupt Subia's introduction. "Subia!" "The Great Explorer!" "No wonder!" "Only she . . ." Prince Llesiton raises his hand for silence.

"Your name is known," says the prince. "Obviously." A few giggles come from the other elves, but Llesiton's face remains stern. He crosses his arms upon his chest. "You are well known and widely admired for your discoveries; your repute has reached even us, here in the depths of Gurtex. Yet you have no reputation for discretion. On the contrary, you are known for publishing your discoveries to the world."

"Your highness . . ." Subia begins, then pauses.

This is the first time you have seen the Lady Subia at a loss for words. You quickly step forward. "Your highness," you say, "you speak of the Lady Subia's reputation in Deruvia, not in Gurtex. In Deruvia, Subia strove to expose the Forces of Darkness to the Children of Light. In Gurtex, as we all know, the glove is on the other hand! Subia has sought you out, not to expose you to Gurtex, but to help protect you from it!"

Subia smiles at you gratefully, then turns to the prince. "That is correct, your highness. Llendora's location is known to none but us, I assure you. And I assure you that it will remain our secret when we leave, as long as Gurtex is held by the Forces of Darkness."

"Assure? You *assure* us," says Prince Llesiton. "But will you swear? Will you swear your honor to the lost goddess Oraniana to keep our secret? If you do not swear, you are still welcome in Llendora, as I have said, but you will never be allowed to leave."

The hall is now full of elves. None of their bows are drawn that you can see, but many are strung and ready. There are no more giggles.

Subia steps closer to you. "Oraniana was a vigilant goddess, but not mean or spiteful," she says. "I say we swear."

You agree. The party kneels and swears to Oraniana that Llendora's location will remain secret so long as the Forces of Darkness hold Gurtex.

"It is well," Llesiton says. "You are now doubly welcome. We will now speak of many things."

25

The ghost's agonized screams suddenly change into doleful sobs. Your eyes begin to clear, and your fear becomes sympathy as you see the ghost as a motherly woman.

“Speak no more!” she cries. “The news you bring in your thoughts is sufficient. Allow me time to add the grief you bring to the anguish I already feel!”

You feel her agony as if she were your own mother dropping to her knees and wailing before you. Should you leave? *Can* you leave? As you ponder, the ghost rises. She repeats, “Speak no more. Your thoughts are clear to me, and far from welcome. My son, my son, my only son . . .” Choking back tears, the ghost continues, “I am Ermethra, the mother of Horann, and another of the forty who guarded the Four who guarded the Candle in Berbezza. I can remember little, save following the captors of the elden Zildoni to the utmost of my power, and hoping that Horann, the pride of my life, had somehow escaped the massacre.

“I cannot thank you for bringing word of my son. Yet I must thank you for laying his soul to rest, and beg you to do the same for my own! In return, I will assure you that the elden Zekke is trapped nearby in the flame of a blasphemous mockery of the Candle at Berbezza, and warn you that Zekke is guarded by a fearsome Naur! May the good gods be with you!”

The shade of Ermethra transforms back into the horrifying ghost. But, beneath it, you can still see a puddle of tears. . . .

