



Skalawags

A fantasy adventure by Steven M Phillips.

A bunch of rouges have graduated from the school of Skalawag and banded together to seek fame and fortune. Well fortune mostly.

From their hidden lair under the Fattened Pig Inn, they enter into perhaps their most challenging mission yet. But where have all the villagers gone?

Credit to Remley Farr and Jeff C. Stevens the writers of many good D & D campaigns, this story is based upon their work 'The Madhouse of Tasha's Kiss.'

Cover art by @spooklgp

Investigation

They are a bunch of rogues.

Having graduated from 'The Scandalous School of Scalawag,' a group of recent graduates decide to form their own thieves' group. Working loosely under the thief's guild in Westomere they have set up their main headquarters in the basement of 'The Fattened Pig Inn.' The owner enjoys the cut he gets from the gang and loves to regale his regulars with tall tales of their deeds.

The inn itself lies on the crest of a hill overlooking the Great Head River in the small market town of Oakscrest. The town lies just over a day's ride from Westomere and therefore just outside its jurisdiction. Occasionally the rulers of Westomere decide to try to collect taxes or impose new laws on the town. The citizens however are used to doing things their way and are willingly play along with these decrees, knowing full well that after a few months things will revert to normal and the taxes will go unpaid or the laws will go unchallenged, as the town is not significant enough to warrant attention.

The 'lair' is made up of one large room where they sleep, train and store loot. Although a basement it is well constructed and has several specialist features, including hidden escape routes, in case the new ruler of Westomere decides to take an interest in the town.

The gang is made up entirely of rouges, though many of them have chosen to take up a variety of specialisms to complement each other's skills.

Having worked together for almost a year the gang have taken on several successful jobs and made a fair profit along the way. Their most recent enterprise was to waylay a rich nobleman's carriage as it made its way between the Lord's summer and winter estates. The journey it would take passed close to Oakscrest so the gang decided to impersonate a famous local highwayman who had been active in the area.

The job went well and soon afterwards the gang are returning to their hideout to count their loot and assess goods taken for value.

"At last, we're home, Oakscrest looks just as fine as it did the first day we arrived." Chester 'The Chisel' scampered forwards to the bridge crossing the Great Head River. Always eager, the diminutive rock gnome's curiosity made him appear to constantly be in a rush to get to the next thing, his gaze shifting from one thing to the next as he tries to analyse everything in sight. He is a young-ish Gnome from a traditional Rock Gnome community. He has a passion for invention, plans, mechanisms and technology - hence his array of thieves', tinkers' and carpenters' tools. He's a jolly curious type at heart with a ready humour but can also apply his art's deceptive demeanour whenever necessary, fooling the innocent, and robbing the deserving - just for "giggles". He generally spends the money he wins (by cheating at cards or dice) on sourcing parts and then building new mechanisms - he would ideally like to make a breakthrough on building machines that Gnomes can fly in. His teacher back in the village had said that was too fanciful and he should focus on simple clocks and household items...That said, you wouldn't bet against Chester- he's got an uncanny knack of coming out on top with that big brain of his- and maybe he'll build that machine and fly off into the sunset- one day!

But why the Scalawags?

Well, they say curiosity killed the cat, and it nearly did for this gnome. Seeking adventure and patronage for his machines (and getting away from his annoying "we know better" family), Chester fell in with bad company. He was a tad too trusting in those early days, accepted tools, parts and money that he shouldn't. And before he knew it, there was debt and only one clear way of getting out of it...Yes, he has now applied his (master) mind and (mixed success) mechanisms - to CRIME! "Come on Verigar, not far for your old legs to go now, just over the bridge and were home!"

"Alright Chester, we can take our time, the 'Pig' is not going anywhere. Hey Mole, how much do you think the haul is worth it looks pretty heavy." Verigar, an elderly dwarf, kept up his slow and steady pace as he turned to his elven companion.

"Got to be at least 500 gold, that lord and his lady had a fair amount of jewellery stashed on their persons. Good job you spotted that they had the chest hidden under the seats of the carriage. You have a sharp eye for detail my friend."

“You’re the one who made it possible, your disguise was uncanny. If I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn I had been in the presence of Ralavaz ‘the night blade.’ It’s a good job that he is imprisoned, if he knew you were impersonating him... Well, let’s just say even Doug here would soil his britches.”

Doug ‘Oles was the crew’s muscle. A goliath from the frozen mountains of the north. He had left his clan in shame and become a pit fighter before turning to a life of crime and training at Scalawag. He towered above the others of the party at nearly seven feet tall. Shaven headed and bare chested, he was heavily tattooed to try to cover deep scars across his skin (from a bear which he had fought in the arena) and across his soul. “What you saying ‘bout mees? I never soil troosers. I crush dis Ralavaz and his mighty blades. Him not worth daa worries. Look ahead da watch tower comes into sight. We are home.”

The company cross the wooden bridge leading into town as the shadows of the day begin to lengthen. They pass the outlying fields of cabbage and corn as the main buildings of town come into view. A cart stands abandoned at the side of the road. “Hold up. Something is wrong.” Verigar pauses to look inquisitively around. “What day is it?”

“It is day after market.” Doug grumbles in his low thick accent.

“Curious. There should be people around. We cannot see anybody about. Usually at this time the farmers are gathering the tools from the fields and people are moving about their business or rushing home from their jobs. Can you see any one about?” Verigar unconsciously begins to puff on his pipe, as he is want to do when his mind is working at a problem.

Chester dashes off towards the watch tower on the edge of town, “I’ll go and see if I can get a better look.”

Aehorn swiftly follows him protective as always. Her deep skirts whipping around her as she runs.

“This cart seems to have been abandoned. From the wheel tracks, indentations in the dirt and weathering around it, it looks to have been here for a couple of days or more. What say you Mole?” Verigar asks.

“Well, if it was market day yesterday then farmers and traders from all the outlying lands would have been in town. They usually unload their carts and take their horses up to the stables near the inn. Could be if we head up to topside, we might find some more information. I’ll send Tomar to scout ahead.” The Mole snaps his fingers and his owl flaps out of its dimensional pocket, spreads its wings and flies into the sky, slowly circling the town.

Chester and Aehorn dash back to the party and report that from the top of the watchtower they could see across most of Oakscrest but there are no signs of anyone moving about. The normal animal life was evident but no signs of the people who live here.

“I go look at houses up top. You come.” Doug heads towards the hill rising up to the top side of town. The others share a cautious look and head to follow him.

The village is built in two halves, Topside is where most of the larger houses are, built on the ridge of a low hill, and the ‘Pig’ Inn stands at the highest point with views out over the surrounding lands and river. The lower half of the village is affectionately known as ‘bottom’. It is where the majority of traders have their shops, the general store, livestock traders, forge, butchers, bakers, chandlers and of course the market square itself. The boat house and warehouse are built on the banks of the Great Head where there is a smaller bridge leading across the water, used mostly by local woodsmen coming in from the logging camps.

Nailed to the corner of the first house they come to is a large sheet of paper fluttering gently in the breeze. It advertises a show that is coming to town featuring a Female jester. Her face is painted large in the middle of the page. “It says that the show will be on for a few days, no dates. Any of you heard of this Tasha the Jester?” Verigar hands the poster to Aehorn who takes a long slow look.

“One of the best nights of my life. I saw Tasha perform a few years ago when I was in Westomere. Don’t ask me for details the night is all a bit hazy but I can remember laughing so hard I cried. If she is coming to town, we should make a night of it. She is famous and very beautiful. Might even be some coin to be had if you know what I mean!”

Lots of people in crowds, plenty of pockets with coin in them, they all knew what she meant. As they continued up the hill towards the inn, they spotted several more posters nailed to posts or plastered onto side walls. All of them depicted the beautiful, laughing, painted face of the jester.

The side streets were just as deserted as the main thoroughfare, between some buildings washing was strung up fluffing about in the wind. Tamor swept back down from the skies, hooting as he came and landed with a great flapping of feathers back onto The Mole's shoulder. "He says the town is empty. No people anywhere. What is going on?" The Mole looked worried.

"Let's head back to base and see what we can figure out. We need to stash the goods anyway." Verigar stomps up to the main door of 'The Pig' and peers through the window. "Strange seeing it deserted like this." Then he pushes through the door and they all head inside.

The main room of the inn looks as friendly and inviting as it always does. However, the lack of customers is unnerving. Mugs and jugs stand uncollected on the tables along with dirty food platters, it was not like Big Al to leave his place without cleaning up first. On the bar a stack of fliers advertising Tasha the Jester stands, and many of the tables have several scattered over them.

Doug yanks the secret panel in the floor of the back room open and they all make their way down the stairs into the 'lair.'

The staircase opens into a large room. The walls are divided up into various areas to suit its owners, there is a large oak table piled with vases and bottles, tubes and metal instruments; Verigar's study area. Between this and a neat curtained off area stands a bookcase housing many rare and valuable tomes on the sciences, astronomy and medicine.

Behind the curtain is the Moles domain, costumes stand in racks and upon mannequins. A dressing table with a variety of makeups and tinctures. The tools of an artist of disguise. The Mole can sneak into anyone's lives to ferret out useful information, for a price.

Doug likes to work out. His area is stacked with various weights and weapons which he uses to sculpt his body and hone his deadly skills.

The tidiest area is probably that of Chester. He has a small worktable next to which is a cupboard containing a multitude of small draws. They are full of small cogs, springs, coils and wires. When he is not honing his skills of thievery he is tinkering with machines, constantly inventing devices to help and irritate the rest of the crew. The last thing he made before they left town was a ring containing a small clockwork spider. He goes to his work bench now to check the spider is still properly oiled and functioning. Upon the wall behind his desk are the sketches and plans of his greatest work and constant obsession, a flying machine, so far untested.

Aehorn has an area set aside with the only window in the room above it. It lets in just enough light from street level to allow her to grow and cultivate her precious rare plants. She is a Tiefling and stands out in a crowd, as her purple skin and horned head are rare in this world. Most see her as some form of demon and avoid her, but her friends know she is gentle and kind-hearted. She trained as a druid, but in her past she carries a dark secret. So far, she has not divulged much to any of the party. All they know is that her plants make a variety of poisons and cures which have saved their skins many times. Her kind manner and easy smile have lulled many a man close enough for her to use her dexterous fingers to slit their throats or rob their coin.

The room also contains an area with comfortable chairs surrounding a low table where they relax and plan as well as a hidden safe buried into one of the walls. Over the course of the year, they have enlarged the tunnel network, which was originally here, to create a set of passageways under Oakscrest reaching into the forest to the north and down to the dock by the river.

"It seems that perhaps the only course of action is to search the town and try to discover where everyone went. My best guess is that the disappearance has something to do with this Tasha. It is the only new thing in town since we left. Get your keys out so we can unlock the safe and put the jewels away." Verigar pulls a small key from his waistcoat pocket attached to a thin silver chain and opens the hidden wall panel to the safe.

The others all follow suit, producing their keys and their loot is stashed safely away in the vault.

"Before we go, I am intrigued to know what has happened to all the horses. Can we check on the stables first? I fear if the animals are untended something bad could happen to them." Aehorn suggests as she puts her key back in the necklace around her neck.

"I like the horses, even though they are big and a bit scary. Let's go." Chester swings his pack of many pockets onto his back and dashes off up the stairs. The others follow more slowly behind, Doug checking that his weapons are loose in their scabbards.

There are three horses and two ponies in the stable yard down the street and a couple of fine horses in the inns stable building. All of them are severely dehydrated and hungry. They look to have been untended for a couple of days. Verigar suggests taking them down to the livestock pens by the auction house as there is a large trough filled by a small spring there, as well as a store of straw and feed for animals. The party lead them down the hill and tend to them. "They could come in handy if we need a quick escape. Once they have had a chance to drink and rest, they will be ok. Doug, close the gate behind you it's time we found out what is going on."

"So where is this, Tasha?" Verigar asks.

"We saw a big tent set up on the green over that way," Chester pipes up.

"Tomar also says that there is a big tent over that way." The Mole confirms.

Aehorn says, "The tracks are faint, but many people headed out that way we should approach with caution."

In a well-practiced formation, they move out. Suddenly, their movements were silent and they signal to each other using small signs with their hands. They quickly moved over a low hill to the south of the town using the cover of the tall oak trees to hide them. Once at the tree line, they regroup. On the village green - often used for travelling artists to perform - stands a large circus tent decorated in a patchwork of red, white and black squares. The entrance looks to be on the far side from their current position. Verigar signals to Doug to approach.

The tall goliath smoothly steps from the trees moving swiftly through the low grass to the tent wall. He pauses and cocks his head as if listening intently. Then he moves his fingers swiftly in a series of subtle signals to the rest of the party. "Child crying inside. Will check it out." Then he moves off around the canvas structure.

Seconds later he comes back into view and waves the party onwards.

They all gather by the split in the fabric which marks the entrance to the tent. All of them can hear a snivelling crying coming from a child inside. "I no good with children. Send the little one in first." Doug points at Chester who nods and rolls through the doorway.

Chester comes to his feet and dashes across the open area inside the tent looking to find cover. Low basic wooden benches line the walls of the tent and in the centre of it stands a magnificently carved waggon. He stops in his tracks gazing at the intricate details. The waggon stands high off the ground. A single ladder leads up to a door in the middle of the side. The wheels are almost as tall as Doug and look to be attached to some form of curved metal suspension unit. The wagon itself has a bulbous curved metal roof holding a large sign proclaiming 'Tasha's Kiss' in bold red lettering. The walls of the wagon are carved in signs and sigils of creatures performing ridiculous tasks, goats cooking, spiders knitting, squid like creatures performing surgery, but all are done in such a fine comic hand that the effect is hilarious. The entire outside of the wagon is gilded in gold.

"Wow." Chester states into the silence.

"Who's there?" a small quavering voice enquires from behind the waggon.

"Just me, little old Chisel." Chester begins to slink slowly around the waggon to see behind it. "Just coming around to take a look at you. Nothing to be scared of. What's your name?"

A dirty child steps out of the shadows behind the wagon. His clothes are filthy and he is clutching a blanket to his chest. "I'm Gentry the baker's son. I seen you about. You lives up topside don't ya."

By this time the others have stepped into the tent having heard the voices inside.

"Gentry is it? Your mother makes fine breads. I have enjoyed many of her raspberry pastries on market days. What has happened to everyone son? Tell us your tale and leave nothing out." Verigar takes a seat on the benches as Chester leads the boy over.

He is about ten years old and he tells a fine tale. The villagers all came down to see the show a couple of nights ago. All the adults went into the tent and stood chatting or sitting on the benches. Gentry got bored waiting so went outside to play swords with a stick he found. He spent a while hacking at the tall nettles by the river and he didn't notice that it had gone quiet inside the tent. When he had finished vanquishing his stinging foes he came back to the tent and saw a few of the folk walking up the steps into the wagon. The door swung shut behind them and he couldn't open the door no matter how hard he pulled on the handle. "I been back home a couple o' times to get some food, I don't suggest you try tomatoes and peaches, it tasted very weird. I thought that it would be ok, but it was foul. I just been sitting in here mostly, waiting for everyone to come back out."

"How many people would you say live in Oakscreech, Gentry?" Verigar asked sucking on his pipe.

"Fifty-three sir."

Verigar knew the number to be around seventy plus all the people who were in town for market, "Hmmm, and everyone went in there?" He points at the wagon.

"Yes sir. Well, I didn't see them all but that's what I think."

"One more question. Why can you not open the door?" Verigar looked quizzically at the snivelling child.

"I just can't sir. Maybe it's locked or som'it."

"Hey kid, are you any good with horses?" Mole butts into the conversation.

"Oh yes sir. I love looking after horses. Have you got some ponies I could tend to? I'm sure I could find some apples for them."

"Take a look in the cattle corral by the general store. You stay there and guard them, feed them and make sure they are groomed, and we'll give you a couple of coppers for your time." Mole winks at Chester.

"Are you going to find my parents?"

Doug looms forwards, "If them in there, we get out. You want we get."

"Thank you, sirs. If you see my sister just leave her in there, I don't like her anyway. See you later. Bye." Gentry runs off out of the tent leaving the others in silence once again.

"The kid makes anger in me. I not know why." Doug frowns deeply.

"He was really annoying, that's why. Come on Doug, see if you can get the door of the wagon open." Aehorn gestures for the big man to go ahead.

Entrances

The door opens after a hard tug. The child, gentry, must just have been too small and weak to unjam it. Doug takes a quick look inside. "Empty. It is pretty, come take look."

Cautiously at first, they all make their way up the steps and into the wagon. The interior is just as luxurious as the outside had been. There are long cushioned benches with red velvet and throw cushions of many different sizes and colours. A large wardrobe stands along one wall its door slightly ajar. Taking up the entirety of one end of the wagon is a theatrical make up table. The Mole moves in to investigate.

On the tabletop is an array of different makeups and applicators, The Mole quickly pieces together three bags of these, "Should be able to use this stuff to make simple disguises, I have plenty already, any of you want some?" He passes the bags around the others and continues to search the draws, tapping on the back panels and drawer bases for hidden compartments. He discovers a pouch with 50 gold coins and a red satin dress taped to the bottom of the table. "Here you go Aehorn, you will look good in this if we ever need to dress formally for a lords party."

The Tiefling holds the dress up against her as she poses in front of the large mirror.

"The red matches your eyes perfectly." Chester says peering over her shoulder and seeing what she sees in the reflection.

"There is a bowl of fruit and bread here. Everything looks like it was fresh today, yet there has been no one here for at least a day. Intriguing." Verigar settles onto the bench sinking back into the cushions as he starts to puff on his pipe once again.

"What do you think, old man? Poison?" Chester picks up a juicy red apple.

"Give me. Not had snack since morning." Doug deftly catches the apple as Chester throws it to him. He crunches into the fruit, munching loudly. "Is good."

"Curious, I wonder what other delights abound in here?" Verigar begins to search the seats for clues. He finds a few coppers down the back and shifts his attention to the scatter cushions. One of them seems to be weighted strangely so he unpicks the seam with his knife and pulls the stuffing out. He finds a small glass vial labelled 'potion of climbing.' "Could come in handy. What's in the wardrobe?"

Chester peers curiously inside. "Nothing. Just a big black hole with stairs going down."

"Hmmm, shift over Chester let me get a look." Verigar budes past to peer into the wardrobe. It stands around six feet tall and just as long though only a few feet deep. The walls of the interior are made from beautifully polished oak panelling. There is no floor to the wardrobe just a set of stairs leading down into blackness. Verigar glances back at the floor of the waggon, then into the hole once again. "I would say from all the scuff marks on the floor of the waggon that many people walked this way and then headed down the stairs. From what I remember, the underside of this waggon stands above the ground, you could see under it. This staircase appears to go down further than the ground outside. I deduce that this must be some form of portal into another dimension. Fascinating. Follow me and tread carefully." The dwarf begins to descend the stairs, pausing frequently to run his hands over the wooden walls or to tap at the steps.

Even with excellent night vision it becomes hard to see detail in the dark so Chester lights a candle. He tries hard not to imagine that this must be what it would be like to be in a coffin, surrounded by wooden walls, deep in the earth.

The stairs descend about 60 feet before levelling out into a corridor. "The walls seem thin, just like those of the wardrobe above. I wonder what might be on the other side?" Verigar says, always questioning.

"I find out." Doug smashes his fist through the left-hand wall then pulls his arm back out. "Looks dark through there."

Chester stands on tip toes and pokes his head through the hole, he squirms about to look up and down and then drops back to the floor. "Can't see nothing. Black is all."

"Could you breathe?" asks Verigar.

“Yep.”

“Was it hot or cold?” the dwarfs questions seemed sometimes to never end

“Neither, it was ok, just like in here.”

“Has anyone got something we can throw through the hole?” Verigar’s mind seemed to be racing ahead of the others.

Chester quickly reaches into one of his many pouches, sticks his hand through the hole and drops a ball bearing. “One big dragon, two big dragon, three big dragons...” He begins counting off the seconds listening for the bearing to hit the ground.

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After a few more seconds of silence there is a thunk and a rolling noise from the ceiling just like if a ball bearing had landed upon it.

“This place is more and more fascinating. Let us continue.” Verigar leads on once again.

After about forty feet, the corridor comes to an end at a staircase leading upwards. By the time they reach the top the old dwarf is panting heavily and leaning on Doug for support. “My, my, we must have climbed a good two hundred feet. I’m glad that this is not real otherwise we would be standing high above the roofs of the village by now. Check out these doors.”

The staircase opened into a small area, still panelled in the same polished oak. The wall opposite the stairs had a set of large intricately crafted brass doors. The decorations depicted scenes of people on stage, some gesturing, others performing various acts of skill: rope walking, sword swallowing, lion taming to name just a few. Many of the portrayals were of jesters. A thin beam of light came from between the two doors.

The party could just make out some sounds of voices from beyond the threshold and the occasional shadow moved across the crack of light.

“It seems that this is where we go next. Doug, lead the way.” Verigar gestures for his big companion to push the doors open.

The company step into a large well-lit room. At the far end are three tables, each with two chairs. At the table to the left sits a man, opposite him is seated a diminutive lady who is moving her fingers in front of her as if weaving the air itself. Occasionally the man laughs, he even turns to the newcomers and says, “This is great isn’t it. Why don’t you come over and take a seat?”

The table in the middle of the room has a small lady sitting in the chair furthest away. The seat opposite her is unoccupied. At the other table an old woman sits with her back to the party. She seems displeased with her companion at the table and gesticulates wildly whilst complaining, “Why do I have to choose. I have been standing for hours I just want to have a nice sit down. Stop waving your fingers at me and let me rest.”

The strangest thing about the finger weaving women was their faces, or lack of. The skin was completely smooth, no eyes, ears, mouth or nose. Apart from the three who are seated there is another lady standing to the far right of the room near a large alcove leading to a doorway. The only other lady walks up to the party and stands before Verigar. She carries a large book and a pen. She opens the book and prepares to write. She gestures towards the empty chair with her pen and the party hear her speak, though she has no mouth.

“Welcome gentlemen and lady, my name is Josephine. Won’t you take a seat at the table and we can begin sorting you.”

“What you mean sort?” Doug grunts.

“Merely that in order for you to continue from this room we need to sort you. Some will exit through the door on the left and some through the door on the right by my companion over there.” Again, Josephine points with her pen.

The man on the left begins to stand up and The Mole heads over to talk to him. “Hey there, I recognise you from around the village. How goes it?” he asks.

The man turns and smiles warmly at The Mole, “Great to see you, and it is even better to be here. This is just so fantastic. I can’t wait to see what wonders are through the door.” He begins to turn away.

“Hold on there. What is so fantastic about this place?” The Mole asks.

“You once bought me a drink in ‘The Pig’, now let me return the favour. Take a seat and let the lovely lady into your mind. It feels fabulous. Then you can come with me to see Tasha.” The man turns and practically skips over to the left-hand door to wait his turn to go through.

Verigar has wandered over to the right-hand door. Just like the other it is carved in the likeness of a laughing clown, its mouth wide open in laughter. Both doors are painted and decorated to give the clown a realistic appearance although the colouring is different. The faceless lady standing by the door is about the height of Chester – a gnome – her dress is neat and decorated around the hem with intricately woven flowers. In her hand she holds a baton. Attached to the end is a blue crystalline shard of glass. She does not seem bothered that Verigar is adjusting his spectacles and getting uncomfortably close to her as he examines her weapon.

“It looks like there is lightning trapped in this. Very clever. If we don’t do as you ask Josephine, I suppose you will use this on us?” He takes a closer look at the other ladies. All of them have a similar staff close to their hands.

“No. They are for our protection.” She replies.

“And why would you need protection?” Verigar asks.

At this point Chester has become a little bored and wants to find out what all the fuss is about. He has wandered over to the table where the man had been sitting and he takes a seat.

“Very rarely someone might not agree with our decision for which door to go through. Things sometimes get violent, as is human nature. We carry these to see that no harm comes to us in our duty to Lady Tasha.”

“But there are three doors. Surely people just leave if they are unhappy.”

“Doors we came in have gone. Just a pretty wall now.” Doug says as Verigar turns to see what he means.

Sure enough, the doors they entered by have been replaced by a solid decorative panel, matching the doors but obviously just a part of the wall.

Chester begins to laugh. “Guys you have got to try this. It’s like a smile in the mind. I really want to go through this door here. I can’t wait to see Tasha.” He gets up and heads to stand with the man from the village. Waving for his companions to come over and join him.

At the same time, the grumpy old lady stands up and says. “I don’t trust them. Wagging their fingers and being all weird. If I have to go through a door, I’ll go through this one, seems like everyone else is being a bit silly about all this.” She stomps over to stand next to the right-hand door.

“I don’t want to be negative, but it seems we are trapped. We came to find out where everyone went. Well, it seems they came here and if we want to know more, we must choose a door. Chester seems caught in some sort of spell so I say we go with him and see if we can figure this all out.” Aehorn looks to the others expecting some sort of argument.

“You are right. The only way we will find out what is going on is to go and see the boss. That seems to be Tasha. So, I agree, let’s follow Chester.” Verigar motions for them all to head to join Chester.

Josephine walks with them writing in her journal. Then she speaks once more into their minds. “You have been sorted. Proceed through the door and enjoy Tasha’s house. Come back soon for more enjoyment.”

A doorway opens in the clown’s mouth and the villager steps through, Chester close on his heels, “Come on, this is going to be fun.”

The others all file in behind him.

They find themselves falling through a dark void before hitting a stone floor. Although it felt like the drop had been large, they are all fine, and after disentangling themselves from each other they look around this new room.

The first thing to strike them was that there were no walls or ceiling. Just blackness. There were no lights hanging from above, yet light poured into the space. The floor was of rough stone slabs.

The second thing was the noise. The sound of a man screaming and at the same time the same voice laughing hysterically. They look upon a hideous sight.

A large primitive looking man stood in the centre of the room. His huge muscular body was naked to the waist. Many hooks pierce his flesh attached to chains running up into the darkness. Along his spine a row of large nails protruded, and his arms carry the scars of recent cuts. All these wounds bled, giving off a faint green miasma clouding the air all about him. In his hands he holds two further chains which he is using to pull at the flesh of a man kneeling before him. As he pulls the supplicant seems to tear, one version of itself raising out of its own flesh screaming in agony. The person of flesh meanwhile seems enraptured by this splitting, laughing uncontrollably in ecstasy.

The sight is horrific, Doug stands motionless, a fear he has never encountered before crippling his movement. Chester collapses to the floor unconscious.

The villager steps forwards. "This looks amazing. If you lot don't mind, can I go next?"

Verigar hangs his head in disgust. He has read of deeds like this. Of people who have studied the dark arts and can separate men from their souls. Usually, they do it a piece at a time, pulling away the bad memories, often helping people in distress, this was something else. Wholesale separation of a soul from its body. Repugnant.

The creature pauses in its work and turns to the party. "Welcome, I'll be with you in a minute. Just wait patiently and watch a master craftsman at his work." The voice of the creature is smooth and well educated, a vast contrast from his looks. He turns back to his grisly task, guiding the soul further from its body as more screams of pleasure and pain emanate from the twin figures being torn asunder by his hooked chains.

The old dwarf has seen enough, and he draws back his bow to fire an arrow at this monstrosity.

"Oh, Verigar you should know better. Let me take away your pain, your weakness. You could be strong. I can make you strong. Your family would accept you back with open arms." The creature speaks kindly though he does not pause in his work.

Verigar looses the shaft but the arrow flies just wide of its mark. He turns and runs for cover expecting retaliation. In the far side of the room is a stack of crates containing glass jars which he ducks behind.

Aehorn, seeing that nothing can be done for her companions, follows Verigar's lead and ducks behind a table covered in glass jars, she fires an arrow but it clinks against the chains surrounding the beast and shoots off into the darkness.

The Mole has assessed the situation and ducks back around the corner, he checks on Tomar and prepares a spell. This could be tricky.

The screaming and laughter halt abruptly, the man on his knees slumps to the ground, dead, as his soul is ripped free. The chained beast grabs a jar from the table and the soul he has taken drifts inside it. He deftly screws the cap on before gesturing to the villager to come to him. "Kneel friend. Let me take your pain." With these words he slams the hooked chains through the man's flesh and begins his task again to wails of agony and cries of pleasure.

Both Verigar and The Mole take note of the jars on the table, many of which contain the greenish glow of captured souls.

Born Amrod Noldoli into a noble elf family, The Mole never felt that he fitted in to their society of order and tradition. He learnt the secrets of others, learnt how to lie and deceive, which led to their inevitable distrust and rejection of him. He absconded to make his own way in the world and left his name behind him.

He began his life as The Mole finding his nimbleness and patience to listen meant he found out more than others might. He took on work with minor criminals and helped them scale up their business. He went by many names, often changing his appearance and playing opposing forces off against each other to his own ends. He brought down the evil 'Silent Blade' crime syndicate when their crimes became abhorrent to him, their overconfidence and his burgeoning skills of disguise and murder ending their reign of terror.

On learning from the Guild that the famed 'Wagrus the blind wizard' had been captured and arrested, he managed to get himself imprisoned alongside him. Eventually they shared a cell and over weeks of careful instruction the old wizard unveiled a world of magic and illusion to him. In return The

Mole kept him alive and protected the old man and when their chance came, he helped the old man escape.

Now he calls upon the arcane arts he learned so long ago to conjure forth an ethereal hand which he sweeps forth to knock the jars from the table. They splinter and shatter upon the cold hard flagstones and a cloud of glimmering green vapour rises into the air circling about the room twisting about like ribbons in an imaginary wind. He hears whispered voices running through his mind, all repeating the same phrases over and over. "Thank you, we are free."

The man/beast turns from his work, "You could have lived an innocent life. Married into the noblest of elven families. Your parents could have held their grandchildren in their arms without shame. Your life of crime has brought them low and they now live on the edges of society. Let me cut away this disgrace from your soul. Let me help you." The creature's voice is soft and gentle, caressing The Mole with compulsion, but he resists.

The sharp eyes of those of the company who have not been driven mad by the sights of the room, see that the monster still holds one jar, which he places carefully in a pocket next to another larger sealed glass container.

Verigar signals with small hand movements for The Mole to do that again. He steps out from behind the crates and asks, "Who are you to take the souls of these people?"

The Mole begins to whisper to his owl.

Aehorn assesses the situation and fires an arrow at the beast. It hits the shoulder and a small amount of green gas leaks free into the air.

"I am Deggmir, Winnower of souls. It is my faithful duty to supply Tasha with a constant supply of nourishment. Do not think to distract me from my task. Your turn will come." Again, he pulls at his chains tearing free more of the villager's soul as screams and laughter fill the air.

Aehorn feels sick to his stomach with all this misery and just want to hit someone, anyone.

Tomar flies through the air circling Deggmir once. As he glides, The Mole sends forth his magical hand to pull at the pouch carrying the jars, it falls free spilling its contents across the floor. Tomar swoops in and snatches the first jar in his talons, carrying it back to The Mole. As soon as the jar is in his hands, he smashes it to the ground.

A large cloud of green miasma raises up, it takes on the shape of Deggmir, though it is less substantial. The apparition's tongue flicks out like a whip and lashes The Mole across the face causing him to stumble backwards. Verigar rolls dexterously across the floor, grabbing the last jar and hurling it through the air. The jar bounces on the hard floor and rolls to a stop by The Mole's feet.

The elven thief smashes the jar with the butt of his dagger as he dodges another attack from his assailant. "Thank you, we are free." The hand holding the dagger tingles briefly as the knife glows a soft green, the blade appears to melt and reform, glittering more brightly than before. The freed souls have gifted their rescuer with a magical weapon.

Verigar shouts to his friends. "I think a hasty retreat might be in order. Head to the door in the corner and grab Chester whilst you are at it."

Aehorn turns to follow the dwarf, who is pulling Doug behind him, with a murderous look in her eyes.

Changes

They collapse through the door into a corridor. Aehorn walks quickly away from the others to sit by a doorway at the far end, as far as she can get from her companions. "Stay away from me. I know not what I will do if you come close, but I fear it will be bad." She closes her eyes and places her hands palm down on the cool stones of the floor, visibly trying to calm herself.

The Mole suggests they all take a rest and assess their wounds. He shakes off the horrors of the room they were in and insists he will keep watch whilst the others plan, organise and recover. All find it hard to ignore the sounds of muffled screaming and laughter coming through the doorway.

A while later, Aehorn stands up and wanders over. "I do not know what came over me, but it is passed. How are you Doug?"

"I not seen anything like dat afore. Dis place I do not like. Perhaps through one of dees doors we find villagers and escape before bad stuff happen."

They all turn at the sound of Verigar's voice, "I have been studying these doors. Although they are from the same mould the decorations are all different, perhaps a clue as to what lies beyond. You will notice that both the doors on that side of the corridor have slightly metallic paint on the noses, you can see your reflection if you look closely. The door we came through is your standard red nosed clown except for the single tear running down its cheek, perhaps a sign of the pain of that room. At the end of the corridor, where Aehorn was sitting, the clown appears to be made in parts, a red upper lip with black lower one, one eye painted blue whilst the other is green. I suggest that both the doors with the metallic noses lead to the same room. The choice of door we go through I leave to you."

Chester moves to the clown door to the right of where they entered the corridor and on the opposite wall. He studies his own reflection for a moment moving backwards and forwards, side to side. "It distorts your shape in weird ways, one moment I'm short and fat, the next tall and thinner than The Mole." He smiles to his companions. "We should try this one." He steps through the doorway.

The others quickly follow, not wanting to be alone with the strange noises of torture and mirth.

Beyond the portal the companions find themselves in a mirrored corridor. The reflections they see are of themselves, but not. They move exactly how a reflection should but show different versions of themselves. The way the mirrors are aligned makes it hard to tell exactly what is mirror and what is open space, the whole effect is disorientating and gives a sense of nausea.

"Stand exactly where you are. No one move. Let me take a good look at these mirrors." Verigar steps close to his own reflection which in turn steps close to him. It is him, except the reflection is taller somehow, its bearing more regal. The back is straighter, the beard though just as long as his own shows less grey and is braided into two with ornate golden beads at the ends. Where Verigar carries the tools of his trade his reflection holds in its fist a mighty flail and strapped across its other arm is a shield with an ornate crest painted upon it. "Hmm, this appears to be me as I always dreamt of being when I was a boy. A strong dwarven warrior, worthy of my position in the clan. A very clever illusion perhaps. The lips even move as I speak."

The others of the party all peer at their reflections, marvelling at the differences and similarities to themselves.

"We should move, this place is making me feel a little sick. I find it disorienting to see so many reflections. How will we find the pathway through?" Aehorn asks.

"I have string. I always find the best way with mazes is to always turn left. If we go wrong, we just follow the string back to the last junction and try a different way." Verigar quickly ties his string off on the doorway and signals for the others to move off.

Aehorn leads hand extended in front of herself to feel for the end of the corridor. Several times she thinks she has reached the end only to find her hand passing onwards into air in front of her. Final her image looms before her, arm outstretched. Her hand touches a cold hard surface and then she is no more.

"Aehorn are you ok?" Chester asks. "You suddenly changed."

Before him stands Aehorn, only she is wearing a long flowing robe of green, trimmed with beautiful depictions of flowers and trees all around the hem and bodice. This is not the greatest difference, she now appears to be heavily pregnant, cupping one hand over the bump protectively as she peers all around herself. "Who are you? Where am I? I do not want this, nature is twisted in this place." She sees her reflection (which is the version of herself we all know) and reaches out to touch the glass.

"Don't touch the glass." Aehorn shouts, she has returned to normal and seems to be panicked. Chester reaches to calm her.

The Mole reaches into one of his pouches and removes a ball bearing. He deftly moves it between his fingers dexterously manipulating it in and out of sight. Then his wrist flicks and the ball flies through the air to smash the glass of the mirror through which Aehorn had been transferred. As the shards finish tinkling to the floor, sending a myriad of crazy reflections around them, a voice elsewhere calls out. "Oi, is that you lot from before? I been wandering about in here for ages. Anyone know the way out?" It sounds like the argumentative old lady from the sorting room.

"Stay where you are madam and we will come to find you. Don't touch anything." The Mole replies.

"I got no intention of touching anything lad. It all looks like crazy magic to me. Can't trust magic."

As the party move forwards following The Mole, Aehorn reaches down to wrap a shard of the glass in a handkerchief. She wraps it quickly and tucks it into her pack then quickly steps over the rest of the shards to follow the others, being extra careful not to touch the mirrors all around her.

Looking to either side of himself Doug can not help noticing the definition on the muscles of his reflection. Glancing to his own arm he feels that he himself is somehow inferior to the version he can see in the glass. He takes the pack from his back and twists the straps around his hand, repeatedly curling his forearm up to his shoulder, studying the way his bicep flexes. It is only Chester's insistent cajoling and pushes which keep him moving with the others, as he becomes lost in a mindless workout.

The Mole detects a junction in the corridor and cautiously peers both ways around it. He holds his rapier in front of his body. "Put that away before you hurt someone." The old lady is standing just to his right. "No point in going back this way lad. Nothing but mirrors. Try the other way." He reaches out and grasps the woman's arm. "Ouch. No need to be so firm. I'm real, just as you are. It's these freaky reflections you gotta worry about. Now get moving, I've been here long enough." She points opposite her down a further mirrored pathway.

"Best do as she says. Let us keep going." Verigar says from behind The Mole.

The company continue to follow the walls around to the left and soon find themselves in a dead end and must back track. As he continues to stare into the multitude of reflections, The Mole begins to imagine he can see other things flickering amongst the reflections of himself and his companions. He brushes at cobwebs which stroke his face and turns to feel a breeze against his cheek.

"What are you doing Mole. Why do you keep stopping?" Verigar asks.

"Do you see the pretty lights Verigar. She whispers to me." The Mole seems to be seeing and hearing things which Verigar cannot.

"Move back lad. Stand with Aehorn, I think she might need your assistance." Verigar turn and winks at Aehorn signalling quickly with his fingers for her to look after The Mole.

The company move onwards again, Verigar following his plan and unwinding his string. Soon they reach a carved clown doorway. "Perhaps we should make the area safe in case we need to return in a hurry."

The old lady wastes no time and disappears through the portal. "Oi, not so fast you big purple mushroom." The Mole quickly gives chase and Aehorn follows on his heels protectively.

Doug swings the pack he has been repeatedly lifting up and down into the closest wall sending shards of glass skittering across the floor. Verigar stabs his rapier and Chester slams the but of his dagger shattering a series of mirrors to the floor.

"Perhaps we should take some shards with us. They could prove useful." Verigar suggests studying his reflection on the floor.

"Not me. I look puny in glass." Doug hefts his sack and steps through the doorway.

"Your right Verigar we should." Chester waves for Verigar to grab a shard by his boot.

The grizzled dwarf carefully reaches down and as his hand touches the glass his whole self-shimmers and the dwarven hero is peering down at a wizened dwarf who looks less valiant than himself. "Who are you?" Chester asks. "Where is Verigar?"

"I am Verigar you pathetic gnome. Where am I?" The Dwarf who looks a bit like Verigar asks, hefting his flail as if testing its weight. "Is the gold this way?" He points at the door.

"Yes?" Chester replies questioningly. He thinks he may have just seen a giant bunny rabbit, carrying a golden egg, leap through the doorway.

Verigar steps through the door leaving a confused Chester behind. He glances nervously around. What was that noise? It sounded like slithering. He opens his hand to feel the rain and his dagger falls to the floor. What rain, the sun is beating down on his face and the flowers are all swaying in the breeze. He reaches to pick up his dagger and as he does so he touches a shard of glass.

Chester the Bard gently strums the strings on his lyre. Perhaps he could write a song about confusion. This place seemed horrible. Broken glass everywhere and a weird clown face surrounding a doorway. Well, doors were meant to be walked through...

It took a long time for the chaos which ensued in the corridor to get sorted. Old Gram stood away from the others listening to the arguments of youth. What did it really matter in the end who you were? It was what you did which counted.

Eventually the young ones sorted themselves out. Verigar Gloryseeker was a noble Dwarf who had won many battles and lead his clan to become one of the wealthiest in the hills of his homeland. Ser Chester of Chiseling, a renowned bard famous for his clockwork ballads, was currently working on 'a symphony to the gnome in the sky.' Both characters seemed to easily accept that they had replaced other versions of themselves in this reality. "I can carve a name out for myself here, just as easily as anywhere else." Verigar bragged.

Chester agreed, "And I can write a song of your victories."

The others seemed shaken by the changes in their friends but accepted them for who they now were. Doug seemed preoccupied with trying to improve his muscular physique and kept picking things up and lifting them, including a disgruntled Chester. Aehorn, having briefly delt with the changes of the mirror herself, began to plot a way to get her friends back whilst outwardly agreeing with the others to continue their quest. The Mole seemed distracted as he kept turning his head to sounds the others could not hear and brushed at his clothing like he was flicking away insects.

"Once more through a door my friends, once more." Verigar charged through the doorway at the end of the corridor with the face of many colours.

"Go on then, I'll follow you lot then." Thought Gram to herself. "Can't be any madder in there than out here."

How wrong she was.

Chimera

The companions stumble through the doorway. A moment of disorienting blackness had swallowed them all and now they stood in a dark room.

Shadows engulfed the edges of the space. The only light came from a single white beam, which shone down on a lone figure seated in an ornate wooden chair. A clanging came from behind them as the clown portal's mouth closed, sealing off their exit.

"Can you see the fairies?" The Mole sniggered.

"Shut up imbecile." Verigar had no time for this. "Who are you?" He called to the seated figure.

Slowly the man unravelled himself from the chair to stand tall before them. He carried a vast array of weapons which seemed to shift in his hands, one moment a flail, the next a dagger, then a rapier, then a bow. His clothing seemed to shift and shimmer, differing forms of leather armour. His face was striking. The more Verigar stared at it the more he got the feeling that he was looking at himself or The Mole or perhaps the tattoos on Doug's face.

The man seemed to be a representation of all of them, even Gram.

"Give to me a treasured memory and I will let you pass." The voice seemed to resonate around the room echoing off distant walls, unseen through the darkness.

"What if I don't?" Verigar roars as he begins to swing his flail pacing towards this new enemy.

"Then you will stay here. A memory is all I want; you will not even know it is gone. I will replace it with one of my own." The figure takes a pace forwards drawing a pair of daggers from their sheaths and spinning them through its fingers. "Shall we dance little man?"

Verigar closes the distance between them and swings his flail wide in fury, narrowly missing his nimble foe who steps back whilst humming a tune to himself.

"Does anyone want to pass? A treasured memory is all I ask. I don't want to fight you anymore. A memory to go through the door."

The figure turns to face The Mole who shouts over to him, "The memory of my first kiss, you can take that."

"Not good enough. You know she had bad breath and you did not care for her. Make it something special..." The mans voice calls out. "Let Chron take it from you."

"Alright then. Take my memory of when I took down the Silent Blade syndicate." No sooner had The Mole spoken the words than he suddenly remembered the time when his first love was slain by a demon. The elf's hand reaches into his pocket to stroke the lock of hair he keeps there to remind him of her.

"You may pass." The man calls dodging another wild attack from Verigar.

"Take my memory of the first loaf I baked after marrying my husband." Gram calls.

"You may pass."

Chester shouts out, "My first piano lesson!"

"You may pass." The man points to two doorways which have appeared either side of the room.

"Help me out here. This man is a devil and he needs to be killed! If it dies, we can all pass!" Verigar slams his shield into the man knocking it back into the chair.

Doug moves fluidly across the floor, casting his net to entangle the man and then following up by slamming his short sword through its chest. The figure slumps down as he pulls his weapon free, flicking blood across the floor.

"I am with you. He dead now. Which door we go through?" Doug asks turning to Verigar.

Chester begins to babble he sees before him that the man was himself and his companions killed him. As his mind tears, he runs wildly about the room shouting unintelligibly.

The figure on the chair stands up once again, the net falling to the floor at its feet. "All I require is a memory. Dwarf, what will you give?"

"Nothing but the taste of steel." Verigar swings his flail hitting the figure square in its scared and tattooed chest.

It staggers back.

Aehorn fires her bow and the shaft appears protruding from the figure's left eye socket. Once again it slumps into the chair.

"I would give the memory of my first kill!" She yells in victory.

As the figure stands once again it says, "You may pass." And Aehorn recalls the time she was at a wedding dressed as a toadstool. She shakes her head in confusion and moves to try and restrain Chester before he does himself harm.

Doug roars in anger. "Kill me would you. I'll kill you all." He rushes for Chester as he is scampering past. Grabbing him by the throat, he holds him high in the air. The gnome's feet kick weakly at the Goliath's chest as his face begins to darken.

Verigar draws on all his years of experience leading the dwarven clan in battle and calls to Doug, "Soldier. Drop that gnome. Our true enemy stands before me. With your strength we can win this day. I tell you to attack, with me!"

Something in the tone of his voice must have struck a chord with Doug's maddened brain for the big man drops Chester, who is quickly pulled away by Aehorn, and turns to once again face Chron.

"If you attack the deal is off. A memory and you can pass."

Verigar scans his companions. He sees that they are in no fit state for prolonged combat. "The day I first held an axe in anger."

"You may pass."

The figure sits down in the chair idly throwing one leg over the arm, sheathing its weapons.

Verigar heads towards the door to the right. The companions follow.

Rest

They enter a luxurious bed chamber. A large circular bed fills the centre of the floor covered in satin sheets with a chequered red and black pattern. On the walls are many shelves, all containing miniature models of towns and villages. The far wall has long grey billowing curtains upon it. There is a dressing table with various bottles, vials and instruments for makeup. Three pedestals hold interesting items on prominent display.

The Mole heads straight over to a sparkling short sword, its blade is etched with mysterious runes and there is a massive green, emerald set on the pommel. He grabs the handle and lifts the sword high, swinging it through a series of movements to test its weight. The sword starts to quietly sing. Its voice is pleasant and grows in volume the harder he swings it.

“Cool, a singing sword. What do you all think?”

“How come you find all the good stuff? Check out this mirror.” Aehorn moves to another pedestal and grabs the mirror resting upon it to look at herself. “What magic has this got?”

As she looks upon her own shimmering reflection it begins to warp and distort. Showing her image in the most grotesque and hideous ways. Aehorn throws the frame to the floor in disgust. “Should have known not to look at mirrors in this place after last time!”

On the last pedestal sits a small porcelain teacup. “I take dis. Want magic item I do.” Doug stuffs the cup into his pack. “Verigar, what you doin’?”

The Dwarf has jumped onto the bed and appears to have closed his eyes for a nap. “These are soft sheets worthy of a royal bed.” He mumbles.

The Mole moves over to rub the sheets between his fingers. “Hmm, with the size and quality probably worth about 100 gold new. Get up Verigar and stuff them in your pack.”

The Dwarven fighter looks up at them all. “Don’t any of you need a rest. You should always grab a rest during battle wherever you can.”

“You make good point little big man. I rest now. Do hard work out earlier. Muscles need time to recover.” Doug sits down on the floor and takes a snack from his pack.

The others decide a short rest is a good idea and they lounge around.

Chester takes a closer look at the models. They are intricately made and show a variety of towns in minute detail. The one near the foot of the bed catches his eye. It appears to be slowly moving, small pieces detaching themselves and then reassembling, slowly a small town is forming from a blank rough block. “Here lady, Aehorn isn’t it? What do you make of this?” He waves Aehorn over.

“That looks just like Oakcrest, a miniature version of our town. It must have something to do with all this madness in here.” She grabs her dagger and viciously hammers at the miniature town. It breaks apart into many small shards but as soon as she stops smashing, it begins to float up into the air, reassembling itself once again into the town they hail from.

When she looks at the other models, she realises that she recognises some of them as well, familiar from her travels. “Oh gods. This must be towns that Tasha has visited. The people she must have taken...” Even worse than this unfinished thought was the fact that stacked neatly in the corner were many more blank blocks yet to be moulded.

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As Verigar drifts into a warrior’s shallow sleep he begins to dream.

He sees himself standing in an encampment of warriors from his clan. They are in the lands near his home in the hills. A messenger runs up to him. “Sir the reports say that the trolls have grouped together and are heading towards us. What are your orders?”

Verigar begins to suck at his pipe as he paces. “So, they want vengeance for some past trouble. They are heading towards the canyon lands hoping to take the quickest route past us to take out our families. I say sent the rear guard to stand with the old and the young we left behind. Move the main force into the canyons where we can hold a defensible line against them. All crossbowmen to the rock above for an ambush. Let’s try that.”

“Sir, are you sure? Shouldn’t we attack them before they reach the canyons where we can surround them and separate them. Take them down one at a time.” The messenger looked unsure of himself.

“No, No. In the open the trolls will be able to escape or break through our flanks.”

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Verigar’s eyes snapped open. ‘They will be torn to pieces. They need the rear guard to bolster their numbers and, in the canyon, the tough hides of the trolls will protect them from crossbow bolts it would be a massacre.’ He needed to get back to himself.

As Chester dozed, he dreamed.

He sat in his usual chair overlooking the factory. Another large order has come in from the kingdom and it was all hands to the tools as the workers scurried to fulfil the order.

“Come on son, play a tune to rouse the workers, you know they work best to a rhythm. When you play we always get 20% more productivity. Without you, we won’t make the order in time.” His Mother pleaded with him.

“All right, all right I’ll give it a go. Music was never really my thing. Did I tell you about my designs for flying gnomes?”

“Stop stalling Chester and play. That’s an order.” His mother’s tone left no argument.

He stood up and began to sing.

His voice had no confidence and his tuning was out, but the words were catchy.

A nearby worker began to clap along.

He sang louder repeating the chorus again. Other workers began to sing along. Slowly at first but then with more and more pace, workers turned from their tasks to join in his song. A party atmosphere was erupting around the room.

“No, no! What are you doing? They need to work.. .”

Chester woke up with a start. This would not do. He needed to be home to help the family business.

“Gods, this bed is awful. It keeps moving. It was sort of nice to start with but now I feel seasick. Mole, help me to take the sheets off, can you?” Verigar staggers to his feet and begins hauling the sheets from the bed, which Mole stuffs straight into his pack.

They stand back in horror at what they see.

The bed itself is constructed from some sort of magical shield which ripples and moves as faint green forms within push against the boundary containing them. Those who had faced Deggimir recognised them immediately. Souls.

Trapped souls.

The Mole reacted immediately, drawing his new sword which began to sing with many discordant voices. “Smash it and release the souls!” He yells in time with the pulsing music of his sword.

He and Verigar reign down blow after blow on the magical barrier until it weakens and shatters. “Thank you...” The souls whisper as they float free, disappearing into the ether.

“I not rest here anymore. Must find way out before I go crazy.” Doug moved to head to the next door.

“Wait a moment will you.” Verigar motioned for Doug to stay. “I must leave, I am not the Verigar you need.”

“I’m not the Chester who belongs here either.” Pipes in the young gnome.

Verigar reaches into his pack and pulls out a shard of glass from the mirror room. He looks into it and puts his palm against it.

“I’m glad to see you all again. I never want to fight another troll as long as I live.” Verigar Threadseeker was back. He throws the shard of glass onto the floor and raises his boot to smash it beneath his heal.

Chester suddenly dives across the floor to grab the shard. As he rolls away from Verigar’s impending boot it is obvious to all his friends that he is the tinkering youth they all know.

Dinner

"I presume you all looted the room whilst I was gone. So, what's behind the curtain?" Verigar asks.

"I not think to check. You brains. You check." Doug motions for Verigar to lead the way.

Behind the curtain is another shimmering magical shield. Through this the company can see a young girl standing close with her eyes screwed shut. Behind her stand two hideous monsters. She appears to be crying.

"Right. If we smash the shield those monsters will get lose. If we don't that poor girl will eventually die of terror. That's a nice new sword you have Mole. Why don't you do the honours. Everyone else get ready." Verigar begins to puzzle his way around the problem.

Aehorn quickly scans the field of force before her. "There may be another way. Like that switch there on the wall." She points to the side where there is a large switch set into the stonework.

"Well done. We will try that first." Verigar takes a pull on his pipe and loosens his rapier in its scabbard. "Mole your shiny new sword will still be handy if those beasts get loose. Flick the switch Aehorn. It's time for action."

The Tiefling flicks the switch down. The magical shield dissipates, and Doug reaches forwards to grab the girl.

The horrors rush forwards and Aehorn flicks the switch again. The magic field rematerializes trapping the unnatural beasts behind it.

"That was easy. Who are you girl?" Verigar enquires of the small red-haired child.

"I'm Tabitha, my mam bakes bread. I seen you in town before." Gram comes over and scoops the girl up in a protective embrace, cooing in her ear telling her that she is safe now.

"She Gentry's sister. He say leave her, he not like her." Doug rumbles.

"You leave her to me big boy. I'll keep her safe." Gram turns her hardest stare on Doug, who slowly backs away grumbling.

"If we are all finished, shall we keep going? I want to try out my new sword." The Mole starts towards the door.

Verigar moves to follow noting that this doorway seems to be depicted as a slightly more overweight version of the clown's face than they have seen so far.

Once through the portal the party are faced with a large, long banqueting room.

The central length of the room has a long table running along its length. Around the table are seated many people they recognise from the town and from market days. Everyone is dressed in fine clothes cut in the latest of fashions but looking out of place on these working people. Everyone is happily tucking into the foods laid out before them. Platters of meats, plates of vegetables, steaming tureens filled with aromatic stews as well as cakes and pastries of every kind imaginable.

At the far end of the room are a set of heavy curtains.

One of the dinners turns towards the company and calls to them gesticulating with a half-eaten goose leg. "Come take a seat, the food is to die for. You must try the glazed ham."

Doug immediately steps forward to grab a thick juicy slice of meat from the closest platter.

Verigar however shouts to the others as he sprints across the room heading for the curtains. "Come on, no time to waste. Nothing here is a threat. We go to find Tasha and end this madness."

Aehorn glances at a strawberry tart longingly but runs after him followed by the others. Doug pauses to swallow his mouthful. For a moment he feels a little fuzzy, but he shakes his head and wipes his greasy fingers down his front as he dashes to catch up with the others.

Through the curtains they find a hot, steamy and very busy kitchen. As they enter the chefs all pause in their tasks, turning to look at the intruders in their realm. It is incredibly loud in the room, the centre of which is filled by a large machine which is grinding, clanking and hissing as it churns out a series of pies onto a conveyor belt. As a large female chef steps towards the party, she shouts over the cacophony, "Back to work everyone, the dinners won't prepare themselves!"

Several things are immediately apparent to our group of rouges.

First, the chefs are all humanoid farm animals, goats, chickens, cows, sheep. The head chef is an exceptionally large, black and white milk cow. The image of her standing there, with an apron barely covering her udders was to scar The Mole for the rest of his days.

Second, overhead there was a series of chains transporting fattened people to the grinding machine, where they were dropped – alive – into its infernal mechanism, their screams did not last long.

Lastly, the machine was churning out pies, made from these people.

“So, I hear your hiring chefs of the finest quality. I am here for the job.” The Mole steps forwards towards the head chef. “I see some of your pastries have soggy bottoms, slightly less gravy in the fillings and a few minutes longer in the oven should help with that.” He walks towards one of the tables on which a Goat is busily garnishing some fruit scones. “Hmm, if you were to dust those with some icing sugar the sweetness would nicely complement the tartness of the berries.” He spotted an un-used apron and began to put it on. The animals all around the room slowed in their work to stare at him.

“If you’re here to work then grab a ladle and get stirring the stew. Have you lot got any skills? If not get out, if you have, then prove your worth.” The cow gave the rest of the party a stern look and slapped her rolling pin against her palm.

Chester slipped into the shadows at the edge of the room and began to make his way towards the back whilst everyone else’s attention was turned away.

“I say it looks like your machine there is running below maximum capacity. I could have a quick look at it and improve the efficiency of your enterprise.” Verigar began to step forwards towards the machine. “Doug could you bring the tools.”

The cow stepped into his path as all the other animals ceased in their work holding various knives, mallets and rolling pins, which looked much deadlier than you would imagine kitchen implements should.

Whilst all the ‘chefs’ attention had turned to Verigar and Doug, Aehorn began to move around the opposite side of the room to Chester towards a door at the far corner.

The Mole stepped up to the head chef murmuring an incantation. “Your eyelashes are beguiling my dear. How do you get them so long? They frame your eyes beautifully.”

“You are a charming man. Perhaps later we could have dinner together, when my shift ends?” She replies reaching out to stroke The Moles high cheek bones.

The Mole holds back his revulsion as Doug and Verigar press forwards towards the machine. “That sounds delightful my dear. I’d love to see you in something figure hugging. Wear your finest dress. I’ll bring a fabulous wine. It will be udderly delightful.”

As he said those fateful words, he knew his spell of charming would not hold for much longer. He could hear Chester snigger at the far side of the room.

Verigar reached into one of his many pockets and threw a hand full of ball bearings into the hopper at the top of the machine. Doug smashed his sword into the machine’s workings and all the party ran, dodging this way and that through the room towards the door. The animals turned as one to attack but their cries were lost in the cacophony of noises from the now groaning and sparking machine.

As clouds of steam began to fill the room the companions dashed for safety, dodging through a storm of thrown knives and pans to leap through the open maw of yet another laughing clowns face.

Battle

They all land one atop of the other in a dark room. The only light comes from a single candle hovering just metres away in mid-air. Under this candle works an old lady, sweeping her broom back and forth trying to clear the broken crockery from the floor. Every now and again they can hear dishes falling to the floor out in the darkness somewhere.

“Oh, hello. It’s not often I get visitors down here in the bin. Stay close now. Bad things happen if you step out of the light.” The crone says in a cracked and wheezy voice.

“Hello there. Who might you be?” Verigar asks.

“I’m just a humble cleaner. I clear the floor of all the plates and pans which Tasha discards. The name’s Jolean. It’s nice to have some company. Keep up now you don’t want to get left in the dark.” Jolean continues to sweep the floor slowly moving away, the candle keeping pace with her.

Chester quickly lights a candle and places it on the floor. “Anyone got any more candles? I only have a few. What do you think is in the darkness?”

The Mole peers out into the depths of the room. He can vaguely make out shapes just beyond the reach of the light swirling and flying around at high speeds. “It looks like there is a swarm of something flying around out there in the dark. Whatever it is there seems to be a vast number of them. Best to stay in the light.” He reaches into his pack and lights a torch.

The company quickly organise themselves and begin to follow the old lady around the room. Chester lights a candle periodically and places it on the floor, lighting a trail of light behind them leading back to the door.

“Hmm?” Verigar ponders as he puffs on his pipe. “The room appears to be circular. The floor is tiled in black and red tiles. The wall has a patchwork of white tiles upon it with the usual black void we have seen in the other rooms in between. If you look above, there appears to be a platform suspended above us and all these plates and platters are falling from up there. I think we need to find a way up. Any good ideas?”

“Even Doug couldn’t throw something up that high. Must be something in here to help. Why don’t we scout around the walls and see what is to be seen?” Chester starts to scamper after the old lady. Lighting candles as he goes.

Doug and The Mole head out towards the centre of the room carrying torches trying to get a better look at the platform above.

“It is long way up there. Only just see it.” Doug nudges The Mole out of the way of a falling plate just in time. “What is dropping these?”

“Something that is very hungry.” The Mole replies.

Verigar pulls his spectacles lower as he examines the tiles on the walls. Holding a candle close to get a good look. The tiles baffle him as he can see no way in which they are attached. Each tile floats in space. There is no wall they are attached to, yet they delineate the walls of the room. He moves his hand slowly around one passing his hand in a full circle around it and behind it. Then, very carefully he places his palm against it. The tile pushes back slightly against his hand and then as he moves away from it the tile rotates to lie horizontally, like a small shelf or step.

“Over here. I think I may have found something.” Verigar moves to the side, as his companions head over to join him. He pushes against another tile and it too rotates to lie parallel to the ground. “I think we could use these as steps. I’ll lead the way. You watch my back. Gram can you stay down here with Tabitha?”

The grumpy old lady agrees and moves off to gossip with the cleaner.

Slowly, Verigar leads the way upwards, turning tiles as he goes. Some of the tiles float further out into the room away from the wall. None are easy to balance upon. The going is slow and everyone helps to activate tiles and assist each other to keep balance. Eventually they make it to the level of the platform and they each leap upon it before they lose confidence. The sight before them, they did not expect.

The platform itself is circular and around a hundred feet wide. Upon it are several curved tables heavily laden with a feast. A stone throne floats around the tables moving clockwise like the second hand on a timepiece, sweeping inexorably onwards. Upon the throne sits an abomination.

She is dressed in the torn rags of a jester, red, white and black patchwork cloth covers her emancipated form. Her arms and legs reach out, extended spiderlike around her reaching constantly for food from the plates on the heavily laden tables. Always in motion, her hands transfer fists full of food to her mouth. Her face looks to once have been beautiful but now her jaw constantly gnashes at everything placed into it, her teeth have shredded her lips leaving her with a hideous smile, the stains of fallen foods and grease mar her chin and the front of her clothing. It is obvious to all that this creature may once have been the beautiful jester, Tasha, but that now she is a possessed creature from the seven hells, and she needs to be returned to the hellish realm from whence she came.

Aehorn rolls fluidly forwards, under the table before her, quickly assembling a trap in the path of the throne.

Verigar steps in to block the throne from moving past the trap pulling his rapier free of its scabbard.

Doug moves around the back of the throne hoping to grab Tasha and pin her to the chair so his comrades can take her down.

Chester and The Mole move before the throne aiming to get ahead and into the centre of the dais to react to whatever comes their way.

“My, you all terribly busy. Why don’t you stop a while and have a bite to eat?” A sumptuous silken voice speaks into all their minds.

Doug spots a leg of ham nearby dripping with a glistening glaze. He begins to reach out.

“So, you’re the famous Tasha. Your posters were a lie, you are not nearly as pretty as we were led to believe.” Verigar goads her hoping to keep her distracted as Aehorn finishes assembling her trap.

The abomination which used to be Tasha continues to feast, unstoppable in her gluttony. Her throne floats closer, her legs dangling to either side brushing the floor. Chester and The Mole duck behind the tables hoping to remain unseen.

Then there is a soft click.

A gentle ‘ting’ and the trap is sprung. Resembling a trap used by hunters to catch bears the large metal jaws snap shut onto Tasha’s leading leg, clamping hard into her flesh.

None of our brave adventurers will ever speak of the spike of pain they felt in their minds at that moment. Doug stumbled and fell to his knees as darkness fell like a curtain across his mind. The others could do nothing but cover their ears, though there was no sound, the pain they felt was projected into them like a knife wielded by a drunken, blind brain surgeon.

As his vision cleared, Chester found himself standing directly in front of Tasha. Just a table of food between them. His only thought is to get her away from himself. Jerkily at first, he raises his hands, speaking the words of power he learnt long ago.

A thunderous wave of force blasts forth from his outstretched palm. Everything before him is blown backwards as a concussive wave rips outwards. Aehorn is safe under the table as platters and plates jugs and bowls containing all manner of foods and drinks are thrown into the air splattering Tasha, Verigar and Doug.

Tasha is flung from her perch and rolls over the edge of the platform. Doug and Verigar fling themselves flat to the ground scrabbling to grasp onto the tiled floor and stop from rolling into the darkness below.

As silence once again descends on the scene Aehorn just makes out claw like fingers grasping the edge of the platform before they disappear beneath. Everyone can hear a scuttling scratching sound from below. Like a giant spider scuttling on the underside of the high podium.

“Quick, prepare yourselves. I don’t think The Mole killed her and she’s going to be incredibly angry.” Verigar shouts to his companions.

The scrabbling sounds from below appear to be moving to the south of the platform. Doug rushes to confront the beast should it reveal itself. Aehorn and Chester draw their bows as The Moles sword starts to sing.

There is a moment of calm and then the demon clammers back into sight. As one the company attack.

The fight is surprisingly short. As the blows begin to rain in it is obvious that Tasha is no match. She begins to spew forth captured souls. The room heats up as though it is an oven but the companions do not relent and are dogged in their pursuit of retribution.

As her body collapses to the floor, it slowly resumes its normal proportions. Once again, the fair jester is restored to the world.

The platform suddenly tilts sending the companions rolling into the darkness.

Then with a gentle popping sound they find themselves flung onto the ground within the Circus tent, along with a myriad of other citizens. For a while, there is chaos. People move about searching for loved ones or mourn their losses. Somehow the company finds itself on the outer edges of all this. Watching on as families find each other. The town sheriff, Ruth Willowmane, appears and takes charge. Sending some people back to town, others she gathers together – strangers from distant lands – some she sets to creating shelters for the homeless. Eventually the gang head back to the tavern where Big Al is rushing to keep up with demand, as a party has broken out to celebrate everyone's freedom.

It was not until late into the night when most people were deep in their cups with some beginning to return home that the rumours of the saviours began.

"I saw old Gram running through the dining hall chasing a giant goat with a rolling pin." One man said to a small crowd.

"I thought I saw her rescuing little Tabitha, the baker's daughter, from a man covered in chains." said another.

And so it was, that their deeds went unnoticed by most of the town folk. If you're a band of sneak thieves and rogues it does not do to be famous heroes.

Later that week, the sheriff stopped by the inn and quietly thanked the gang for their help. She played awkwardly with her golden hair as she spoke to them. "Gentry told me that it was you who saved the town. Your help is appreciated. I know what you do and although I do not always agree, if you keep your crimes outside of my jurisdiction then I will turn a blind eye. As long as, when I need your help, you are always here for the town."

Doug winks at her and says, "Always here for you sheriff. Anything I do, I can."

"I have heard a rumour that the leader of a local gang is free and might be returning to the area. If you hear anything about Ralavaz or the Night Blades, be sure to let me know."