The Enemy of My Enemy

Act I

The Darkening Days

The Story So Far...

The nation of Anar holds a yearly festival that draws people from all over Hegramund. On the night after the autumnal equinox, and for a week thereafter, a huge carnivore is shown on the fields for north of Tahou, at a specially built fair ground near the Daroga forest. This gala even—is called the “Darkening Days” Festival (Oina a Barous in Vayson)—is a celebration of harvest and bounty, commemorating the first years after the sons of Anar fled southward across the Chah Mountains to escape their wicked homeland. The land of prosperity they found has long been sought after by their numbers increase, yet Anar and her allies have long held Vassagonia at bay, partly due to alliances with nearby nations. It is incidental that the last attempts by Vassagonia to overtake Anar failed, and the enemy forces withdrew on the autumnal equinox—all the more reason to celebrate this time of year.

Within a few decades of the carnival’s start, neighboring nations realized the lucrative potential of deploying their wares and offering their services at such a gathering. In time, travelers and merchants from as far as Lancia begin to arrive. Anar, too, realized the potential in this, and started charging a nominal fee to vendors and guests at the event. All the white Vassagonia washers washed away...

This year’s event in the year MSS0 is unprecedented. Virtually all corners of Hegramund are represented, and the population of the event is well over seventy thousand. Adventurers and commoners alike have come to partake of the festivities, and one of the main attractions is a heavily guarded area on the northern edge of the fairgrounds—just a mile or so south of the main stand of trees in the Daroga Forest.

In this part of the fairgrounds, a mock fortress has been built out of lumber. It is in this structure that one of the highlights of the carnivore is taking place. Despite the heavily armed Anari guards that stand as the ready all around this place, people are living up for a great distance to go inside. After inquiring from the people in line as to what the draw is, the local folk you ask are only too happy to announce the reason for this structure and the security. The president’s daughter, Ameesha, has been blessed with some strange gift of foresight, and she is sharing this gift to all who come—free of charge!

The few outside the tent is very long, but free detractions are unheard of, especially when others charge upwards of 200 Gold Crowns for such a thing. It is said that Ameesha can see the future, tell about events that are coming soon, and even see people past from simply touching it, and discover the location of lost objects.

The guards check each person who approaches the gates for weapons thoroughly. If armed, the person’s weapons are disassembled and a number. Then they are passed to the exit gate, where the person can reclaim them with the matching voucher.

As you look around you notice that you stand amidst a group of apparent adventurers. From the progress of the line, it appears you will have to wait at least another hour before you reach the gates to the makeshift fortress.

The Players (in order of appearance):

A Telchoi Warrior

Makala

Strength : 14 (+2)
Dexterity : 16 (+3)
Constitution : 12 (+1)
Intelligence : 12 (+1)
Wisdom : 10 (+0)
Charisma : 19 (+4)

He wears a black, sleeveless tunic belted with a simple cord that shows off his massively muscular arms, and the majority of his chest. A loose black cloth scarf is around his neck, and a belt pouch at his waist. His pants are loose and flared, his boots thick and sturdy, he wears no cloak.

A Kai Lord

Sol Hawk

Strength : 15 (+2)
Dexterity : 13 (+1)
Constitution : 18 (+4)
Intelligence : 14 (+2)
Wisdom : 11 (+0)
Charisma : 12 (+1)

DESCRIPTION: Sol Hawk is a young man bearing the traditional Sommlending features. His eyes are sparkling and blue - his hair is shoulder-length and blonde. Sol Hawk stands 5’11” and has a fit if not muscled build. Finally, Sol Hawk wears the distinctive green cloak that marks him as a Kai lord.

A Vakeros Knight

Arcadian

Strength : 19 (+4)
Dexterity : 10
Constitution : 18 (+4)
Intelligence : 12 (+1)
Wisdom : 10
Charisma : 14 (+2)

At 16, he was knighted into the Order of the Knights Triumphant, and his determination to defend his country from its enemies and from all the forces of evil was commendable. As he reached the rank of Knight-Aspirant and swore his allegiance in front of both his Baron and the King himself, to obey their word and to protect them and their country forever. It was also natural for him to then choose to uphold the Code of Right, to work against the forces of evil and tyranny whenever they may be found.

A Ruanese Knight

Sir Victor

Strength : 19 (+4)
Dexterity : 10
Constitution : 18 (+4)
Intelligence : 12 (+1)
Wisdom : 10
Charisma : 14 (+2)

Sol Hawk stands 5’11” and has a fit if not muscled build. Finally, Sol Hawk wears the distinctive green cloak that marks him as a Kai lord.
**Rules and Runings**

**Character Creation**

5. Your gold is your own—buy whatever you want (except for superior quality items), and keep what’s left over. Be aware that master-crafted items cost a lot. If you want a master-crafted sword, a block of wax, a chicken, and 6 Laumspur potions... well... be it. Just be aware that chickens hinder stealth checks...

6. Everyone has a Laumspur potion for free at the beginning. 2 Brotherhood mages have 2 Laumspurs. Dessi Mages have any 2 potions from the alchemy Elder Art list in addition to the Laumspurs.

7. Here are typical Dessi addenda:

   - Elder Art addenda: The following is an additional power for the Dessi Mage (and anyone else who can use Evocation):
     
     **Evocation:**
     
     **Spirit Ward (4/roll/round):** By inscribing a pentacle in the ground, the Dessi Mage can protect himself from being harmed by any undead(s), spirit(s), or ghost(s). Any such creature that makes a Will Save vs. the Dessi’s standard elder art DC, or be unable to enter the pentacle to cause harm to the magician. If the creature successfully makes it Will Save, the Dessi is unable to use this ability on it for 24 hours.

    **Successful application of this evocation power requires an Occult roll of DC 20 to inscribe the pentacle, and the roll will be made secretly by the narrator. Every five levels the magician can extend this protection to one

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Makala had been passing time during the day by engaging in staring contests with each of the guards around the compound; hours of standing around doing nothing had made him restless. Though he was quite adept at remaining still for hours whilst hunting what rare prey could be caught on moonless desert nights, meditating in his private chambers, or closing in on an unsuspecting foe, for those he had had the trivil of the hunt, the thrill for the power in his blood, and the lust for the kill respectively. This day there were only the flies and the throongs of people, foreigners come to Anari for the festival that crowded, sweat and stunk together into a place not large enough to hold them all. The passage of the day into night did not disturb sour his mood even more, for the cooler air drew even more people who thought to join the line. To think that he, Makala, battle hardened battle chief of his tribe, peerless assassin, uncanny hunter and tracker, was to stoped to remaining still and obeying this man-made laws... chafed. Still, having to accept the laws of other nations was something he had known he would have to live with when he set out on his SoulSearch.

Someone bumped into him from behind and Makala slowly turned around to stare at the wretched man, who from his appearance seemed to be Durenese. Although Makala was only a few months into his SoulSearch, and had never been so far from Durenos, the bronze skinned Telchii knew from certain previous experiences what their kind looked like. This old skin was colored a deep pinkish hue from being in the sun all day, and it would undoubtedly hurt him during the night. Those nothrooms... so weak, in mind, body and soul. With that contemptuous thought Makala crossed his massive arms over the other, and glared at the man, who slowly backed away from him with a muttered apology.

With a disputed shake of his head that caused a few long strands of his carefully combed long, dark hair to flick into his face, he turned back around, to glance at the compound. As he noticed the guards collecting weapons, Makala’s hands unconsciously went to the hilts of Fang and Fury, the thick and massive bladed scimitars strapped to his sides. He felt no concern in giving them up all at on not only would he receive them back upon exiting the tent, Anari was a secure place; and even though the fair was a large event there were more than enough guards in case anyone, especially all the visiting foreigners, decided to cause trouble. Besides, his fists and unarmed capabilities were more than enough should a brawl break out.

His eyes again came back to the compound that housed the daughter of this nation’s ruler, Ameesha. Being no stranger to powerful sorcery housed the daughter of this nation’s ruler, Ameesha. Being no stranger to powerful sorcery, he could not resist these visionary powers; thus while he had simply intended to pass casually through the fair whilst on his way through Anari, learning what he could during his Search, he could not resist the lure when he heard about her. Seeing the ruler, indicated that this was more than a simple interest, to glance at the compound. As he turned back, to glance at the compound.
**Rules And Rulings**

**Character Creation**

- other person. Using this power takes one full round.
- Sorcery:
  - Force Field
- Protection of the Densi Mage’s level x 1/2 Wisdom bonus.
- 8. Going on FP’s guidelines, generate a character under whose thread is your character’s name. Simply post a new topic, and if your name is going to be Pensive Badger, use that name as the subject line. All dice rolls for generation go in that post.
- 9. Telchos Warriors are considered proficient with the spear and whip.
- 10. All characters know North Speak unless their title is a name that goes with the spell and who.
- 11. All characters know North Speak unless their title is a name that goes with the spell and who.

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Solv Hawk has been called into the Master’s Chambers, located high inside the spire that is the Tower of the Sun. Bright Star is waiting for him, dressed in the traditional Kai garb reserved only for those masters who have achieved the rank of Principal.

“You call and I have come, Master,” says Solv Hawk, draping to one knee before his superior.

“The Grand Master has had a vision and by my own powers I have confirmed it. To the south in the land of Anari, there is a disturbance.”

“A disturbance, Master?”

“The nature of the threat is unclear, but we both have come to suspect that the implications of this threat may have dire consequences for Sommerrun.”

“In what way, Master?”

“I am afraid I am not at liberty to discuss the details further.” Bright Star looked away, his eyes wandering as if witnessing the various possible futures that might result from the events in play. “However, Vassagopian is a constant threat to this area of Magnamund, and so the threat may come in the form of a Vassagopian spy or an attack of some description.”

“Vassagopian. This is why I was chosen.”

“Yes. Your skill with their language is considered to be a great asset by the Grand Master and myself, and your skills have been growing rapidly. You are ready for this solo mission. We ask you to proceed to the Republic of Anari, where you are to uncover the nature of this threat. Return word to us immediately if the threat is potential in nature or does not in truth exist.”

“And if the danger is already in motion?”

“You are a Kai Guardian. By the way of Solari, you will find a way to stop it at any cost.”

For four days now Solv Hawk has been in Anari, and has thus far found no signs of the supposed threat. Visions are not always faithful, this is true, but then the Grand Master was rarely wrong.

At the very least, a highly populated area such as this would provide him many chances to hunt for clues and hear the local gossip - and at best, perhaps this Ameesha could be legitimate and would be able to put him back on the trail of the hidden enemy that he has vowed to discover.

Solv Hawk removes his bow, then his rapiers handing them to the yawning guard in exchange for his claim ticket. He will be next into the tent...

* * *

Though many see the Vakeros Knight’s refusal to stand for any great length of time as laziness he sees it as a way to keep his strength. When others stand, either gawking at the numerous posters or guards or talking to each other about what the expect to find in the tent, Arcadian chooses to sit cross-legged.

Not all Vakeros partake in meditation. In fact a passerby is far more likely to see a Magician of Densi meditating than a Vakeros Knight. One of Arcadian’s masters at the School of Daernath taught him the importance of meditating when he was very young. Arcadian rarely received insight from the act as his master had wished. And he absolutely never gained peace of mind from him, however this never deterred him.

Meditating brought certain other advantages to the mind. Some how it allowed him to clear his thoughts and sometimes the sparse memories he had of his parents were slightly clearer than normal. Arcadian’s mother had died at his birth and his father when he was but a boy. Any small glimpse of his past he was able to regain brought small comfort, but a comfort it was.

Arcadian is jarred from his meditation as the person behind him taps him on the shoulder. The line moves forward some and the Vakeros accommodates it. The sun begins to set, each passing minute it seems as if the sun has...
After a long horseback trip through many different lands, occasionally interrupted by brigands, which was useful for keeping his sword-arm active, Sir Victor finally arrived to the southern realm of Anari. He knew about the Darkening Days festival, and believed it would be a perfect opportunity to reach the ruling council and complete his mission, without drawing unneeded attention to himself.

As he crossed the fair grounds, marveling at the sights and sounds of this land and of the myriad representations of people from all over Northern, and even Southern Magnamund, Sir Victor finally came to a heavily guarded large wooden structure, built to resemble a fortress. Judging by the lineup of people waiting to get in, he was intrigued and asked some people waiting for their turn, to learn what all this was about. A young couple from Palmyrion, although a bit awed by the size of the knight’s warhorse, were only too happy to oblige:

“The President’s daughter, Lady Ameesha, has the gift of foresight, and everyone is allowed to get a reading free of charge!”, says the young man.

His wife eagerly adds “We want to know if our coming child will be blessed and healthy.”

His turn is soon.

* * * * * 

The knight thanks them and walks away, leading his horse to the back of the line. He doesn’t put much trust into those mystic powers, although he knows better than to antagonize people simply for their beliefs. Sommerlund is renowned for the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star based in Toran, and even if nothing beats a strong sword arm, the brothers’ arcane powers do have their uses. Sir Victor remembers well the lightning bolts and words of power used to devastating effect by the Brothers at the battle of Ytse field, where the grand army of Sommerlund routed an army of foul Darkspawn, and knows to respect their power, even if they’d rather act behind the scenes.

This is exactly what I needed! I can meet with the President’s daughter today and arrange for an audience in the next few days, hopefully sooner than later. Time is of the essence.

Sir Victor joins the end of the line and waits patiently for his turn. Of course, this far south from his beloved homeland, the sun is a lot stronger than what he’s used to, and he sweats profusely under his gear. Now I wish for a northern breeze to cool off, he thinks as he advances in line. “At least the coming evening should bring some relief, fresh food, and a bath, right old girl?” he says as he pats his warhorse’s flank.

* * * * * 

The guards were about to escort Sol Hawk through the first gate and into the compound when a commotion arose inside. It began with a few muffled shouts, drawing looks of concern from the guards outside the gates. Then one of the guards on the small parapets turned and shouted, “Trespasser!”

The crowd below where you are standing is transfixed by the cry, some mumbling to their neighbors about what this could mean. Others passing by stopped to see what all the fuss is about.

The guard raised a loaded crossbow and fired, as did the other guards in the other three forward parapets. For a second nothing happened. Then there was a scream as one guard was hit by an arrow in the chest and fell over the railing of the parapet and into the crowds. This was enough to send the populace into a frenzy. From inside the...
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compound an alarm bell sounded. The guards in charge of holding the gates at the front abandoned their posts and drew weapons, rushing in. Another guard fell from a parapet in silence, for an arrow has lodged in his throat.

People were panicking now, unsure of what this meant. More guards are trying to come through the crowds, but their efforts are being hindered by the outflow of people trying to escape the scene. It will be a couple of minutes before they arrive.

A stout Bor Gunner pushed from his place in line and barged through the now unguarded gate. “Good! It’s about time this place became exciting!” he cried as he pulled a pair of pistols from his hips.

* * *

Arcadian gave a roar and drew his blue steel sword. He pushed past the civilians trying to keep the gate clear, with the intention of getting to the fight inside. Luckily for him only about three or four people were in line in front of him when the alarms sounded and the guards began to fall over dead.

Within a few minutes Arcadian was through the archway after almost tripping on a Kair Lord standing there. The second he pushed through Arcadian turned around. The Vakeros had been to the northlands of Sommlerund many times and he knew that there is a place where there is no match for the might of the Kair Lords. They were to the north what the Vakeros were to the south.

“Come Kair Lord.” bid Arcadian. “Many innocents are trapped within the first gate and I hear steel on steel!”

With that Arcadian turned once again and disappeared beneath the archway, prepared for what may lie beyond the arch.

* * *

The line continued to move extremely slowly, and Makala continued to get more and more impatient. The next to enter the compound was a green cloaked man, after which there were a few more raggedy looking folk. Closing his eyes, his pushed out all the smells, the sounds, and the discomfort of being pressed amongst so many people. Taking a deep breath he practiced a meditative technique he had learned during his training as a battle-shaman years ago to calm his mind.

As he did so he noticed a glint of torchlight on metal from the corner of his eye; lazily turning his head he saw a knight walking through the throng leading a rather feisty looking steed. There was little use for horses in the desert, but Makala could tell that this particular breed was a fine specimen indeed. However, before he could appraise the mount or its armor-clad mount further, a sudden commotion caught his attention.

Makala’s mind snapped out of its trance and he came back to the present fully on alert, just in time to see a guard fall to the ground with an arrow lodged in his throat. Things seemed to be happening fast! He saw an armored man dressed in armor that seemed to gleam blue in the torchlight rush past with a drawn blade that too appeared to glint blue. A southerner! But he was gone before Makala could greet him and ask what ho.

Makala placed both hands on the hilt of his deadly scimitars belt at his lean, yet heavily muscled waist, and assumed a cat like crouch; to any watching he might be relaxing, but in reality he was on the cusp of readiness, prepared to either charge, run, or leap, whichever might be required. When a dwarf of the outflow of people left the line and dashed forth drawing two odd and knobby looking pieces of metal, Makala agreed with his sentiments. I agree, about time things got exciting.

The Telchoi remained in his place however, a chiseled island of clam in a sea of panic. He would wait and watch before he acted. For after all the commotion could be anything from a wild animal or an over zealous fan of Ameesha, to a hired killer. It could also all be a fatal misunderstanding.
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As soon as he heard the commotion, Sir Victor’s senses were on full alert. This can’t be good... he thought to himself, as he tried to see what was happening over the crowd, yet this wasn’t a problem, as his head towered over the rest of the people. However, as soon as he heard the first crossbow bolt being shot, his battle instincts took over, and he unsealed his huge broadsword.

As he strode through the panicking crowd, which was streaming around him, Sir Victor noticed the other warriors which were also immune to the wave of panic which swept over the throng. He recognized the green cloak of one of his countrymen, a Kai Lord, and the blue steel armour of one of the famed Vakeros. A short, stocky form also strode out of the crowd and cried: “Good! It’s about time this place became exciting”! A Borese Dwarf! While I agree with his sentiment, I don’t like the implications of this disturbance. There was also a very dark-skinned, exotic and dangerous-lookingFortunately, the unfolding events calmed from his position.

“Bite Lance, you stay here”, he tells his steed as he calls out to the warriors. “Fellows, the guards need help and we must ensure the princess’ safety! Follow me!” And with these words, the knight strode into the compound, shield and weapon at the ready.

In an instant, the Kai Lord known as Sol Hawk recognized the Vakeros warrior for what he was - a fellow brother-in-arms. A brief nod and a smile were his only response - there was no time for more and no time to recover his weapons. Instead, he grabbed a handful of arrows from his quiver and was immediately inside the compound with Arcadian at his side and with others close behind.

It is well known that a trained Kai Lord cannot be ambushed. Sol Hawk’s senses were at their height as his sharp eyes searched for the daughter of the President and for the source of the disturbance. There was no detail that escaped his notice - every small nuance was observed, and the Kai’s quick reflexes let him avoid it. Before the Kai could aim and return fire, he was gone.

Sol Hawk, Arcadian: The doorway is open and unoccupied. It could be an ambush, it could be all clear. That’s for you to decide and risk.

Sir Victor: You are close behind them. This next round after they enter, you can enter. Since you are a bit further back then they are, you can see shadows moving around on the second floor, silhouettes on the windows to be specific.

Makala: You can enter at any time if you wish. No one else is coming forth to help, even after the knight’s call to defend the princess. You have a message in your inbox.
Rules And Rulings

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Then Sol Hawk's Sixth Sense flared and a crossbow bolt came whistling at him from the doorway of the building. "Look out," he said in a hushed whisper to his Vakeros companion, then he leaped out of the way with the grace that Kai Lords possess.

Perhaps it was the burning fire in Sol Hawk's eyes or perhaps it was the fact that the deadly bolt had been avoided so easily - whatever the reason, the man at the door showed fear in his eyes and fumbled to escape into the building.

"Come," Sol Hawk whispered again to the Vakeros, if indeed whispering could have any benefit after the crashing entrance of the loud and brave dwarf. The President's daughter - who else could have targeted this ambush be?

In an instant, their suspicions were confirmed - the sounds of a desperate struggle and a young lady in distress issued from the second floor of the structure - then the unexpected sounds of explosions. Sadly, Sol Hawk noticed the many guards, now all dead, that failed to protect her, and he doubled his caution.

With Arcadian nearby, Sol Hawk ducked low and entered the structure - he was prepared this time to strike...

As he entered the compound and noticed all the dead bodies, Sir Victor couldn't suppress a feeling of sadness for the brave guards who gave their lives defending their royalty, let's make their sacrifice count for something!, he thought, and continued purposely towards the doorway, where a shadowy figure had just appeared to unleash a crossbow bolt at the two warriors he was following. Typical assassins and scum, striking from the shadows. We'll see how they fare in a direct confrontation...

Suddenly, a woman's screams, followed by two loud explosions, drew Sir Victor's gaze up to the second floor, where he noticed struggling silhouettes against the window.

"Quick, men, we must get to the princess!" he called out to the Vakerers and the Kai lord, and followed them inside as fast as possible, despite the risk of ambush.

As Arcadian and the Kai Lord enter the building Arcadian turns for a split second and motions for the knight behind him to hurry.

Nearly all the people had retreated away from the compound and only he and a few others remained. Makala stood calmly, driving out the sound of the screaming from his mind until there was stillness akin to the calm before a storm. He saw the knight proceed swiftly towards the open gate with the other duo a few paces in front of him, and then suddenly a black garbed figure leaped into the doorway's middle and fired a second round.

"My lord, please dodge!" he leaped out of the way with the grace that Kai Lords possess.

What exactly was going on? Did he really want to enter, or let the Anari military handle this?

Commentary and Observations...

Player: Alasi /Bryan
Character Name: Arcadian
Gender: Male
Class: Vakeros Knight
Race and Nationality: Dessi
Level: 7
Experience: 21,000
Adequacy: Good
Attributes (Score Modifier)
Strength: 15 (+2)
Dexterity: 13 (+1)
Constitution: 18 (+4)
Intelligence: 14 (+2)
Wisdom: 11 (0)
Charisma: 12 (+1)

Saves: (base save ability mod misc mod total)
Fortitude: 5 (+4 Con) +9
Reflexes: +2 (+1 Dex) +3
Will: +3 (+1, Enchanted Childhood, +0 Wis) +4
Base Combat Skill: +5
Base Cobalt Arms Combat Skill: +7/+2
Base Magical Combat Skill (if applicable): +5
Psychic Attack Bonus (if applicable): N/A
Psychic AC: N/A
Initiative Bonus: +1 (Dex), +2 (Daernath) +3
Base Movement: 30
Endurance: 78/78
Willpower (if applicable): 31/31
Corruption (applicable right now only if you play an evil character):
Armour Class: (10 +Dex +Armour +Shield +Misc )
10+1+7+0+0= 18
Armour Type: Armour Check Penalty, Chance of Spell Failure
Blue Steel Chainmail Wastcoat: -2, 0%
Skills (alphabetically, please)
Ability (Ability Mod), Ranks, Misc., Mods, Total)

CLASS:
Concentration (Con), 1, 2, 4, +7
Diplomacy (Cha), 1, 2, 1, +6
 Heal (Wis), 5, 0, 0, +5
Intimate (Cha), 3, 0, 1, +4
Knowledge (arcana) (Int), 2, 1, 2, +5
Knowledge (geography) (Int), 2, 0, 2, +4
Knowledge (history) (Int), 2, 0, 2, +4
Knowledge (noble and royalty) (Int), 0, 1, 2, +3
Knowledge (religion) (Int), 0, 0, 2, +2
Knowledge (warfare) (Int), 2, 0, 2, +4
Occult (Int), 6, 2, +11
Perception (Wis), 4, 0, +4
Ride (Dex), 4, 0, +4
Sense Motive (Cha), 6, 0, 1, +7
Speak Language (North Speak)
Speak Language (Elithreth)

Class Features (Ability: Effect)
Cobalt Arms
Enchanted Childhood - +1 bonus to Will throws. Free rank in Knowledge (arcana) and Concentration.
One People - Transfer Willpower to any other Dessi character, full-round action.
Partial Magical Combat - 3/4 of class level as his Base Combat Skill when attacking with his Elder Arms or his Battle Magic.
Garb of the Vakeros - Mastercrafted Studded Leather +1.
School of Daernath chosen.
Battle Magic - Power Grace - Occult DC 20, 4 Endurance. Base Magical Damage + Cha mod if hits.
Counterspell - Broodhess ability. Counter spells, see LW:RPG page 19.
Elder Art - Sorcery
Mythic Maneuver - Battleblade - +1 bonus to attacks and damages when using a blue steel weapon.
Garb of the Vakeros - Mastercrafted Chainmail Wastcoat +2
Battie Magic - Penetrate - DC 20, 2 Willpower 3 Endurance. Base magical damage as a bludgeoning damage and is moved 10 feet away from caster.
Battle Magic - Blazing Aura Occult DC 22, 4 Willpower per round. Blazing aura, +2 bonus to Intimidate. Lasts number of rounds equal to Vakeros' class level.
Cobalt Freedom - Blue Steel Armor has its Max Dex Bonus improved by +2 and he regains 5 feet per round of lost movement rate.
**Rules And Rulings**

**Charge attack (unarmed gauntlets) at shady figure: +2 att., -2 AC, d6 speed 80ft (40ft base) Attack: 17, damage: 0**

**Combat time.**

Everyone can roll initiative now.

Sol Hawk and Arcadian: The person at the foot of the stairs is about 30' away from you, just within distance to move and attack. If you do decide to attack, go ahead and make attack/occult rolls and appropriate damage rolls if necessary. Sol, the translation of what he said is in your inbox.


Sir Victor: I've left the choice up to you. You can engage the warrior that Makala attacked (close enough to move to him and attack), or you can enter the building.

**Makala: Nice move. If you decide to stay in combat, just keep attacking.**


Though the breaking glass is in Sol and Cade's section, everyone heard it.

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**Act I – The Darkening Days**

For though the Anari were a heroic and good people, they could very well hold him for questioning; and being held in a cell of any sort was an abhorrent idea for Makala. Even as these thoughts raced through his mind the Telchii's eyes caught a sudden flash of light and movement in a shadowy corner of the compounds outer walls; a dark garbed man aiming his weapon at the knight.

The time for thinking was over, and Makala exploded into action. The world seemed to blur as he accelerated incredibly fast from a standing still into a full out run, moving at phenomenal speed. One hand came up to raise the black scarf to his face so that it covered everything from lower chin to his throat, and the other came to rest on the hilt of Fury, one of the two unheathed scimitars on his belt. Closing with the killer in almost an instant, Makala leaped at the shifty figure from a few paces away, and lashed out with a kick at the apex of his leap before hitting the ground, rolling smoothly, and ending up on his feet.

---

Sol Hawk pushed past Arcadian as he entered due to his inability to be ambushed. The Vakeros was close behind, looking left and right in the room they just entered for any signs of danger. One hand was on his blade, another was ready to unleash his magic if necessary.

It took a second for their eyes to adjust to the room. It was only lit by four small floor torches in each corner. Inside the room were a half dozen guards, including the ones who had manned the gates. All of them were dead, however. Most by well-aimed arrows, but one was laying face-down in his own blood, probably from a slash to the throat.

Above them the muffled sounds of screaming ended abruptly, and there were several cracks and thumps as whoever was up there moved around hastily.

The only exit from this room was a stairway with a thin veil across it, directly in front of them at the opposite end of the room. The veil was moving slightly as air currents drafted between floors. As the veil moved, Sol Hawk noticed a figure standing on the steps behind the veil.

There is a low thunk and something whizzes through the air. Sol Hawk instinctively turned to dodge it, pushing the surprised Arcadian away as he did so, but the bolt is too well-aimed. The Kai’s reflexes caused it to lodge in his right shoulder instead of his right lung. Sol : -3 EP

Arcadian was momentarily confused as his fellow shoved him roughly, but he soon realized what had happened when the Kai grunted and grabbed his shoulder. The figure behind the veil tossed the crossbow down into the room and entered the room with scimitar drawn.

"Ota ek banou kosh-kat!" he shouts in a strange tongue. After that, he merely stands with the scimitar defensively in front of him.

From above, there is the sound of breaking glass and shouting in the same strange language.

---

Sir Victor was almost in the building when he heard something behind him. He turned and saw the strange savage fellow who was in line with him moving unbelievably fast toward the wall. He watched as the man leaped and rolled, coming to stand with flat outstretched. It was only then that Sir Victor saw the figure hidden in the shadows, who staggered from the savage’s blow and dropped a crossbow, which misfired and sent its bolt whizzing into the air.

Faced with a choice, Sir Victor prioritized the situation instantly.

Makala’s attack caused the man to stumble backwards and drop his weapon. It misfired, and the black-garbed person quickly recovered and drew his scimitar, turning it once to show he was no stranger to bladed combat. Still, he kept his distance. Apparently he knew his opponent was quite adept even without weapons drawn.

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**Commentary and Observations…**

**Character Name: Arcadian (cont'd)**

**Weapons**

(Weapon, Atk Bonus, Damage, Critical, Range, Dmg Type) Blue-steel Sword, +2 (Str), Base magical damage, x2, 0, Slashing
Bluevein Dagger, +2 (Str), 1d4, 19-20/x2, 10 feet, Piercing/stabbing

**Equipment**

(If the Telchii) Backpack, , - , 2lbs
Blue-steel Sword, Weapon, 3lbs
Bluevein Dagger, Weapon, 1lbs
Khanjar, Weapon, 1lbs
Bluesteel Chainmail Waistcoat, Armor, 20lbs
Explorer’s Outfit, Special, 8lbs
Belt Pouch, , - , 1/2lb
(5) Sunrod, Backpack, 3lbs total
(4) Trail Rations, Meals, 4lbs total
Waterskin, Backpack, 4lbs
(3) Laumspur (4d4+4), Backpack, 0lbs
Scroll (A sketch of Ameesha’s face), , - , 0lbs

**TOTAL WEIGHT: 46.5**

**CURRENT LOAD: Light**

**Horse, light (Carrying 57lbs)**

**Equipment:**

Saddlebags (8 Items)
(4) Meals, Backpack, 1lbs ea
Hemp Rope, Backpack, 10lbs
Bedroll, Backpack, 5lbs
Waterskin, 4lbs
Riding Saddle, 25lbs
Saddlebag, 8lbs
Bit and Bridle, 1lb

**Money and Treasure: 382 Gold Crowns**

**Background:** Little is known about Arcadian of Dessi. A young man of 19, Arcadian, or ‘Cade’, as his closer friends often called him was accepted into the order of the Vakeros Knights at a startling young age. His persistence and diligence to the order impressed his superiors and he rose in rank without difficulty, quickly surpassing those around him.

The summer before his fourteenth birthday his father and mother both died. Cade’s older brother Hakan had told the younger boy what became of them or how they died. Arcadian lived a life of fear and doubt, he was forced to grow up sooner than his boyish nature wanted. Refusing to relent in his training he used his anger at the loss of his parents to fuel his determination to become one of the best. And become one of the best he did…at a bitter price.

Though his allegiance is towards Iahir and (even more so) Salon, there is a bitterness inside him now that eats away at his soul. His anger often enforces him to brash decisions and his pride consumes any bit of humbleness that once could have existed in his heart. Whether his obstinate ways can be mended or not has yet to be seen. He is now 19 and an excellent warrior in his prime. His sword is swift and his battle-magic deadly. Yet no matter how many vile creatures he vanquishes, he cannot find a way to quench the shadow that flickers patiently within his own soul.
**Act I – The Darkening Days**

Arcadian hit the ground hard when the Kai Lord bowled him over. Within a second the Vakeros was at his feet; sword in hand. Arcadian could see a figure behind a veil, draped on the opposite side of the room.

The Kai Lord fell back, clutching at his shoulder as the figure behind the veil tossed his crossbow aside and entered, scimitar drawn. Arcadian looked down at the Kai Lord and said, " Heal yourself if you can." He turned to the masked figure with the scimitar, "He's mine."

Cade wielded his sword with skill and fury that caused the assailant to momentarily hesitate. Seeing the lapse in guard Arcadian rushed forward and swung with his sword, aiming for the assassin's neck.

Sir Victor didn’t hesitate, as soon as he saw an enemy he forbade him to leave an enemy behind him, and the Kai, Vakeros and Dwarf could always deal with what was inside the building...for now. And that dark-skinned warrior might need his help too.

Letting out a battle cry and hefting his massive broadsword high in the air, he rushed the assassin and swung a skillful blow which connected solidly, spraying blood high in the air and onto his shield. The fight was on.

Makala calmly gazed at the black garbed warrior who stood opposite him; both men in fact, appeared quite similar in appearance at first, for Makala himself was garbed in black flaxen pants and a sleeveless black tunic. The long black silk scarf he usually kept wound across his neck and shoulders now covered the majority of his face, leaving only his glittering dark eyes bare as they bored into the attacker.

"Why are you here? Whom do you represent?" he rasped coldly in fluent North speak, the cloth across his features hardly muffling his voice at all. From the corner of his eye Makala saw the knight charging, the man in front of him turned to meet the threat but he had been distracted and hesitated for a split second, during which the knight struck true with his sword. Even as the blood began to flow, Makala's hand dropped slightly moving out of the shadows and towards the others.

"Do not kill him knight...he could hold answers that could be useful." Makala rasped, twirling his broad-bladed and exquisitely forged scimitar, and struck his opponent's weapon just near the tip of its hilt, and then gave a vicious twirl.

"Menteyesana des Ean" Sol responded to the words of their adversary. The man was shocked to the core - Sol Hawk was fully fluent in his own mother tongue. With superhuman determination, Sol Hawk yanked the arrow from his shoulder blade as if it was nothing. The Vassagopian cringed as the two warriors advanced.

Sol Hawk took an arrow and levitated it in his hand - it was aimed at the Vassagopian's heart. However, the arrow never landed - falling benignly back into the Kai Lord's open hand instead. Sol Hawk winked, gripping the wound in his shoulder.

"Heal yourself if you can," said Arcadian, "he's mine."

Sol Hawk stepped aside as the furious Vakeros charged into battle.

Taking the wise advice of his comrade, Sol Hawk put his hand over the wound and felt the familiar warmth of his Kai powers coursing through the wound, healing it instantly +4EP as the blue wound of Arcadian came to bear.

---

**Commentary and Observations...**

SV: So did you get the RPG book yet Sol?
SH: Ha ha, just getting excited about being a real-live (sorta) Kai Lord! This is too cool! Good luck to us all! And what's with that CRAZY dwarf? As long as we stay away from that bor-musket, he may be a fine ally! I like his style!

Sir Victor, alas - not yet - too poor! But it is on my list as soon as I get my head back above water! Feel free to tip me off if I do something out-of-keeping with the rules - I'm sorta faking it right now, well, you'll try to keep an eye out for you. At least you don't need rules for the narrative part of the game!

KL: You'll find out about what role the dwarf plays soon enough...

Nothing like screams and gunfire to get the heart racing, eh?

AR: That dwarf sure is a fast little bugger. He didn't enter the compound much sooner than I and already he was on the second floor? Oh, O He must be wearing much armor, eh?

**Ghost Bear**

- An adoring fan of "The Enemy of My Enemy." He plays in another Lone Wolf game called "A Phoenix Rising" as a Kai Lord.
- He was running full force with reckless abandon. No caution whatsoever. Yeah, he was on the second floor fast--you'll see why in the next post. Not many obstructions to navigate.
- He was full of theVakeros Companion were exercising at least a bit of caution!
- And yes, the fact that he got up there so easily gives me some satisfaction - I am hoping therefore that the way will be relatively clear for us... either he hacked the baddies as he went or there were none!
- If we live, I will buy that dwarf a drink!

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**Sol Hawk**

- Perception Check on the way

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**Sir Victor**

- So did you get the RPG book yet Sol?
- He was running full force with reckless abandon. No caution whatsoever. Yeah, he was on the second floor fast--you'll see why in the next post. Not many obstructions to navigate.
- He was full of theVakeros Companion were exercising at least a bit of caution!
- And yes, the fact that he got up there so easily gives me some satisfaction - I am hoping therefore that the way will be relatively clear for us... either he hacked the baddies as he went or there were none!
- If we live, I will buy that dwarf a drink!

---

**You are fine, Sol Hawk, ignore me.**

SH: Thank you for the info - it does help! I thought I remembered the Scimitar to be a finesse weapon. I hope I am correct! And yes, that is why I chose to pick it up.
**Act I – The Darkening Days**

Arcadian frowned visibly as the cloaked man turns his head aside at the precise moment to avoid his blow. However, the sword did not return unwound and the blade struck the man’s shoulder. Thrusting around Arcadian held his sword in front of his body, prepared to defend his life.

Cade’s eyes never left his enemy’s, as the Vakeros waited patiently for his move.

\[\text{**Arcadian moved to the stairs, undaunted by the warrior’s bravado.**} \]

The Kai held an arrow in his palm and willed it to move. A soft glow surrounded his shoulder. Instead of opting to pull the bolt free and heal himself. A soft glow surrounded his shoulder.

"Marok banou," the warrior growled, twirling his blade, then spinning with the scimitar held high then sweeping it down low at Arcadian’s legs. The Vakeros hissed in pain as the attack drew blood, but not much. Arcadian: -5 EP

**Something clangs against the building outside, near where Sol Hawk is.**

Meanwhile outside, Sir Victor detoured from entering the building and walked briskly toward the stunned warrior that Makala had punched. From behind the shield came a massive upswing of the sword, catching the black-garbed man in the left side of his chest. The blow was so fierce that the man crashed backwards into the wooden wall of the compound. Seizing the opportunity, Makala drew his own scimitar and in one clean motion looped it around the mysterious warrior’s own weapon and performed a flawless disarming twirl. The weapon went careening through the air and clattered off the wall of the building with a clang.

The man collapsed and clutched his side, his breathing ragged, as blood trickled over his fingers. Makala began edging along, already breathing ragged, as blood trickled over his fingers. Makala began edging along, already sure of his next move.

**Arcadian hissed in pain from the blow of the scimitar but remained unainted by the attack. The Vakeros held his own blade in front of him and whispered the words to the charm ‘Battleblade’. A radiant blue-white lightning springs along the blade of Cade’s sword length.**

"You’ll pay for that Vassan scum," growled Arcadian. "Make whatever prayers you may to your pathetic gods now."

**Arcadian stepped forward with his shimmering, electric blade and struck with a vengeance.**

As the Vakeros closed for the fight, Sol Hawk quickly returned his arrows to his quiver. The Vassagonian was fast – very fast. It would not be wise to underestimate him.

With his own scimitar before him, Sol Hawk’s eyes became focused. "By the grace of lehfir and by Kai’s power, I bind my will to thee." The weapon vibrated with energy in his hand, radiating a psychic fire for those that would see it.

Then the psychic fire began to burn all around him, reaching out to the Vassagonian’s scimitar, studying its movements. Balance, Counter-Counter-Counter. The psychically aware, it was as if long, green tendrils of force were emanating from the Kai’s body, reaching for any weapon that could threaten their master. In a defensive posture, Sol Hawk began to move toward his foe and readied himself then for what fate would bring.

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**Commentary and Observations ...**

**KL:** I just want to give you an idea of what I might post the next few days, since I’ll be on vacation for 2 days.

Away from home: 9am-6pm CST, but checking posts and writing story

**SH:** Ah, I see how Concentration works for Strafing Will... the check has a DC equal to the opponent’s AC. Simple!

**SH:** I don’t think it takes an action for Power of Pure Mind to become active, but it only works when Sol Hawk “fights defensively” - so as a result, I am having him fight defensively this round, although I believe Power of Pure Mind will only matter if Sol Hawk is himself attacked.

This was my interpretation and is reflected in the current post.

**Just to clarify.**

**SH:** Was the shout heard from upstairs female?

**KL:** No, and it wasn’t in north common either. More like a quick word or two, but very loud.

Too muffled for a perception check to make it out.

Also, if you pass an acrobatics check at DC15, I’ll allow you to leap over the crippled warrior since the “top half” of the stair entry is clear. From there, you can move on up to the top of the stairs and see the second floor.

Of course, if you fail, you and the warrior are going to become entangled as you land on top of him...

I’m all for heroics...but I like blunders, too.

**SH:** Ah, I see how Concentration works for Strafing Will - so as a result, I am having him fight defensively this round, although I believe Power of Pure Mind will only matter if Sol Hawk is himself attacked.

**KL:** I think of Chevy Chase and a flight of stairs on SNL.

**SV:** Hey Sol, remember that your Kai Lord can use psychic combat. You can take one psychic action in PC (such as raising a shield or attacking), which is basically a free action, and automatically hits anyone not psychically shielded for 2d6 points of damage, which you can do every round.

**KL:** Very good point. And keep in mind that it is in addition to everything else.

That is, you can attack using Mindblast, use strafing will, and launch a psychic attack. When you have Warmth of the Sun, you know we will!

**SH:** Really? Wow! Sir Victor, I totally need to grab a copy of this book!

Well, if it automatically hits, and it is a free action, too, here’s the damage:

**Dice Roll:**

**Original Roll String:** 2d6\[6\] 6-Sided Dice Results: 3, 2 (Total = 5)

We will say that it is used on the same person that Sol Hawk uses his scimitar on.

**KL:** Typically, psychic attacks involve an attack roll, which is calculated as follows:

\[d20 + charisma bonus + character level\]

If the opponent has a shield in place, the attack roll is compared to their psychic AC. If it hits and they have a shield, it grazes away at their willpower. Once their willpower is gone, so is their shield.

Unshielded characters get blasted hard. No need to reroll an attack on this guy. He’s pretty much gone.

Each psychic attack costs 2 WP to use.

**SH:** Thank you for the clarity! If Sol Hawk faces an opponent upstairs, I will adjust his WP appropriately. I think I will note this on my char sheet for later reference, too.

Thanks for the info, KL!
As the now disarmed warrior stumbled back, Makala sauntered forward and, keeping his scimitar pointed down and at his side, twisted and kicked him in the side of his head; with fluid speed the Telchoii followed through with an explosive punch to his chest. Bringing Fang into a defensive position with a smooth twist, Makala stepped back and contemplated his adversary, firelight rippling over his massively muscular arms and torso.

"Who sent you? Why are you here?" he rasped again, without emotion. The brow-skinned Telchoii's eyes flicked over the area, ever ready in case there were any other foes lurking about; years of constant training had developed his senses and reflexes to a keen edge, and there were few, if any, who could ambush him if he was alert. Still, some of this warrior's compatriots might try to escape after they accomplished what they came for, whether they succeeded or not, and the powerful Telchoii wanted to be ready in the event of such an event occurring.

Sir Victor quickly understood what the Southernman meant to do, and saw the wisdom in keeping a prisoner for questioning. You're right, good thinking, he replied, and he promptly dropped his sword and proceeded to smash theassin senseless with his gauntlets.

Arcadian switched sword hands and activated part of his Vakama'Re training, causing the bluesteel blade to dance with tiny pulses of lightning. He raised his now-empty hand downward, straight and over the Telchoii's black-wrapped leg. It struck with a small flash; cloth and muscle sliced open easily, and blood began to pour from the wound. Another hand-switch was followed by a second low attack, opening a twin gash on the assailant's opposite leg.

As the Kai focused his will upon the edge of the battle, he had procured, he advanced toward the stairs, ever ready for anything. The mysterious warrior collapsed from the wounds on his legs and lashed out feebly at the Vakaros, who deftly blocked it with his own glowing blade. The warrior reached up with his free hand and pulled down his mask. A slicked black moustache and small vertical goatee accented his tanned face.

"Mortak ai, banou var. Ta Klee-asha nay na-mortaki!" he said defiantly.

Upstairs there was a final shout, then silence. The warrior smiled triumphantly.

Sir Victor dropped his sword and landed a crushing blow upside the warrior's cheek, tearing the skin under the eye open with his great strength. The coweling man shouted "Klee-asha nay na-mortaki!"

Then the man pulled down the wrap across his mouth and spat a goblet of red saliva on the ground at the knight's feet, clearly an insult. "Amrou-ta vess!"

The Telchoii lashed out again with fury before Sir Victor could retaliate, and after his second blow the black-garbed warrior's eyes rolled into his head. He slowly fell to one side, possibly dead or close to dying.

Behind them, the shouts of the Anari guardsmen grew louder and closer. Within seconds they would probably be through the crowds of people and into the compound.
### Rules And Rulings

(Pro) Words to
Arcadian
(Move) to the stairs
(Standard) fight
warrior on the stair in
defensive manner (-
2 Atk, +2 AC, Power of
Pure Mind is in effect)
(Free) Unleash Psychic
Attack on the Vassan
Warrior

OOC: With this guy in
the way, I am not
sure how easy it
would be to run up the
stairs. There is no
way to get past this
round, Sol Hawk
strikes with his
scimitar instead while
fighting defensively.

OOC: If he does see
an opening, he will
run for it, giving up
an opening, he will
OOC: If he does see
an opening, he will
run for it, giving up
an opening, he will

Attacker 1 hit = 29
Attacker 2 miss = 7
Attacker 1 damage = 11
Attacker 2 damage = 11

Makala will search the
man for anything on
him, like a note or
something. I don’t
know if you want a
search roll, but if so
Makala will take his
time (i.e. take 10 if
possible). He will also
repeat his earlier
request in all
languages he knows
(telloc, southernth, and
north speak)

### Act I – The Darkening Days

“Vakeros,” said Sol Hawk, “Help me reach her. Can you hold off this warrior?”

Sol Hawk moves toward the stairs now, ever mindful of the warrior’s position - waiting, waiting for a chance to make a run for it if the Vakeros can provide...

* * *

Seeing that the assassin was no longer a threat, Sir Victor hurriedly picked up his sword where he let it fall and told his fellow warrior “I can’t help him now, he’s yours if you want him,” before turning his back and running as fast as possible inside the structure, hoping against all hope that this encounter didn’t delay him too much.

* * *

The defiance in the mysterious man’s voice was evident even though Arcadian didn’t understand a word he said.

Arcadian nodded at the Kai Lord, “Go, Kai Lord. Help the princess. I can handle this one man easily enough.

The Vakeros circled the crippled man, now unmasked. The man let loose a string of hateful words which Arcadian did not understand and probably wouldn’t pay heed to even if he could.

“I see you are intent on dying,” said Cade slowly, “my pleasure.”

Arcadian raised his sword above his head and twisted it expertly, preparing to strike the man down.

* * *

Makala nodded to the knight, as he dashed and twirled it expertly, preparing to strike the man down.

* * *

With these cryptic words, Makala sheathed Fang with a smooth motion, and turned his attention fully to the wounded warrior. Reaching a hand up to his own face, the Telchoii lowered the scarf until his deep brown and rugged features were visible, which he then proceeded to thrust into the face of the warrior. Reaching a hand down over the man’s garb, Makala began patting the man over the head-wrap off, hoping to find anything that might give him a clue as the attackers’ purpose.

* * *

Arcadian seemed to get the gist of what the warrior was saying, even if he could not understand the words. The Vakeros swung his blade downward at an angle, then twisted it before the warrior could block, turning the slash into a lunge. The tip pierced the face of the warrior. Reaching a hand down over the man’s garb, Makala began patting the man over the head-wrap off, and Cade wondered what was happening until the Kai came to stand by his side. Then it dawned on him.

Sol Hawk reached out with the claws of his hand down upon the man’s throes.

### Commentary and Observations

**HOUSE RULES**

By Kai Lord

Some rules are borrowed.

New edits are in yellow
Old edits are in blue

1. No evil characters. Maybe next time....
2. The following classes are allowed if someone were to drop or be dropped:
   - Brotherhood Mage
   - Dessi Mage
   - Herbalish
3. The following weapons can be used with finesse instead of force (that is, add Dexterity bonus to attack rolls instead of Strength bonus):
   - Dagger
   - Short Sword
   - Scimitar
   - Rapier
4. Unless armored, you must buy some form of clothing. If you opt for a waistcoat or breastplate, you also have to buy clothing to cover the rest of your body.
5. Use the following potion price list:
   - Potion of Laumspur 750GC per single dose.
   - Potion of Alether 200GC
   - Potion of Gallowbrush 175GC
   - Potion of Laumspur 125GC
   - Rendalim Elixir 275GC
   - Tauonor Water 400GC
6. Healing potions restore the following:
   - Laumspur = 4d4+4
   - Rendalim = 6d4+6
   - Tauonor = 30
7. If either side (or both) is surprised in combat, it will be noted.
8. Fumbles: Just like you reroll to determine a true critical hit, you also will reroll to determine a critical fumble. If you miss on the reroll, something bad has happened.
9. I will try to post once a day (except Saturday and Sunday), typically at around 8am-10am Central Time (GMT-6). Please try to do the same (post once a day, not post at the same time as me). Let me know when I will need to NPC your character due to planned absence.
10. We are not on an experience-based system. Therefore you go up in level by participation and role-playing. As a bonus, innovation and creativity result in various benefits ranging from bonus skill points or max EP at level-up, or they could result in me ignoring the critical roll from my monster as it bears down upon you. It might even result in better equipment or arms.
11. Don’t be unruly or rude. Do not be profane or obscene. I don’t want to boot or ban anyone.
12. Separate player and character. Don’t use your character’s words or actions to attack a player. That being said, don’t take what a character says to your character as being directed at you, the player.
13. Mordenkainen’s Faithful Watchdog Rule: If you didn’t say it, it didn’t happen.
### Rules

Cade, Hawk, Sir Victor: He is dead, and the way is clear to the second floor if you wish to go up there. We're officially out of combat for now.

Makala: Your call as to combat for now. We're officially out of the second floor if you wish to go up there. We're officially out of combat for now.

- I need to speak to you.
- I will not a Perception Check in case I need it.

### Act I – The Darkening Days

The warrior was overwhelmed with both physical and mental pain, and he began to slowly back up the stairs. Suddenly, he reached into the folds of his attire and pulled out a khanjar—a single edged knife with a backward curving blade. He rasped "Azi Klee-" and plunged the blade into his chest. With a wide-eyed stare, he convulsed twice and lay motionless.

Sir Victor of Ruanon rushed into the room then, seeing the carnage that lay within. The fallen did not distract him, for his attention was focused on the far end of the room. He continued on over to where the Kai and Vakeros were standing. They had apparently met up with one of these dark-clothed fighters as well, and from the looks of it they had come out on top.

Meanwhile, Makala watched as the knight entered the building, then crouched down and started searching the assassin for any information that might prove useful, trying to reuse the man by speaking to him in different languages. The Telchoi had no luck getting verbal information from the man, but he did find a couple of rolled up pieces of parchment—one containing a drawing of the compound, and another with a sketch of a young woman on it. Perhaps it was Ameesha? Both documents had strange script on them, consisting of squiggles and dots. In another part of the garb, the savage found an odd curved knife.

Looking over his shoulder at the gate, the Telchoi could see the Anari guards finally getting clear of the thinned-out crowd. A contingent was rushing toward the compound.

---

Cade's initial shock at the mysterious attacker’s sudden suicide quickly wore off as the Vakeros turned to the task at hand. Arcadian shot a quick look at the Kai Lord and then with sword still in hand took off up the stairs. As he neared the top of the stairs he slowed his pace and kept his ears open, hoping to hear either the princess or the dwarf who had ascended the stairs before.

One of Cade’s strong traits was that he knew when to be brash and he knew when caution was in order. His senses were keenly aware of all around him and he was prepared for an attack from any direction.

With a grunt he reached down and grasped the cut on his leg. It was bleeding profusely and Arcadian swore under his breath. Any hindrance he considered a weakness and in the mind of a Vakeros there is no room for weakness. He grit his teeth and reluctantly pushed the pain from his mind.

---

As the mysterious warrior falls in a clump, a knife in his heart, Sol Hawk briefly nods his thanks to the Vakeros and is up the stairs immediately even as the Sommlending knight enters the room.

Carefully, very carefully he approaches the second floor with speed and also caution. He remembers how easily he was attacked, even though he knew the attack was coming, it had not protected him from the crossbow bolt.

The stairway is dark - Sol Hawk knows that the bewildered angry townsfolk will be here soon - he must know that the lady Ameesha is safe.

---

Sir Victor entered the room and saw that the Vakeros and Kai Lord also had had opposition inside, and he nodded inwardly at the apparent ease with which they dispatched this assassin. They also seemed to know that speed was of the essence, and as they rushed up the stairs, the knight followed on their heels.

### Commentary and Observations

#### More House Rules

By Kai Lord

14. If a player doesn't post for 3 days (or sooner if the story needs to be advanced), I will take their character as an NPC. People sometimes get busy and are unable to post that they will be busy. I will play the PC/NPC based on previous posts until such time as the owner can post again.

15. Concentration checks for Strafing Will can cause critical damage on a roll of 20.

16. There can be no more than 4 free actions per single combat round.

17. (Secret till now) At my discretion, I award and use Fate Points. This is a figure that is kept by me wherein I intercede to keep something really bad from happening, or allow something truly spectacular or effective to happen. Every character starts with 2 FP, and they get 1 FP each time they level up. By playing excessively well, you may gain a bonus FP.

Two examples are Sol Hawk’s quick thinking to blast out of the netting and Arcadian’s idea to wait in ambush in the room until the enemy crept up the stairs. I made the gunshot an auto critical on the bracket where the net was held, and (secret till posted) after Cade struck his attacks.

It may be that I include an extra attack or action in your narrative, or keep an enemy from hitting you with a massive critical. You never know.

If you do something creative that I was already thinking of, then I may augment it with a Fate Point. However, asking for a Fate Point to be used in a given situation will almost surely keep it from being used.

KL, your narrator
Act I – The Darkening Days

Arcadian rushed up the steps to the upper room, his sword ready for more action, and his eyes scanning everything he searched for potential threats. The Kai was close behind him, trying to see as well, but not having much luck with the Vakeros standing in his way. As Sol Hawk moved beside Arcadian, he saw what it was that had numbed the cobalt warrior’s senses.

The room was filled with death, and the floor was spattered with blood. Nothing—not the beautiful tapestries that lined the walls, not the gilded furniture (that was overturned), nor even the smell of extravagant Anari spice incense—could overcome the grisly sight on the floor. Arcadian looked around, from one broken window to another, piecing together what happened. Sol Hawk merely stood at the bodies, his knowledge of healing and anatomy revealing to him that the wounds were precise and efficient.

At one time, just moments earlier, there were probably a half dozen guards in the room, probably stationed by the windows and the overturned table at the end where Ameesha undoubtedly sat. All of them were in the middle, primarily by bolts to their thighs or hearts. The guards who were lying in the middle of the room were felled by scimitars probably, as was the poor couple who happened to be visiting Ameesha at the time. They were young, possibly just married or soon to be. Were they there to see their life together? To see if they could have a child? No one would ever know now.

On his back in the very center of the room lay the dwarf, a khanjar protruding from his chest. His arms were spread wide to his sides, the pistols still in his grip. A black-clad warrior like the one the Vakeros and Kai had fought lay near one window, a lime-sized hole in his chest where the pistol’s slug tore through him.

There was no sign of the princess, and Cade instinctively ran to one of the windows past the knight—who had just climbed the stairs—and saw with grim realization what had transpired.

Sir Victor saw the two adventurers sprint up the stairs, and he followed closely behind them, taking a moment to negotiate the obstacle of the dead warrior that lay on the stairs. As he entered the upper room, he saw first the Vakeros rush to a window. Then he turned and stared at the scene before him. The Kai was standing in mute shock, seemingly oblivious to the armored man who had just walked to his side.

Makala stood and walked to meet the authorities as they began rushing through the gates and setting up a perimeter inside. A tall man with chiseled cheekbones and an angular nose approached him and held up his hand. “Halt, Teitchis,” he said officiously. “I have some questions for you.”

The savage narrowed his eyes at being treated so, but he knew enough of the Anari people to not be surprised. After all, a major political event had just occurred. He supposed that he could overlook the pompous air of the man, given the circumstances. However, he ignored the order to stop walking.

“This was on the body of that assassin over there. I cannot understand the scrawl on it.”

The officer eyed the documents carefully. “This is Cloesian script,” he said with a disdainful frown playing across his face. “You say that man there,” he pointed to the warrior, “possessed these? Unlikely.”

Makala bristled. “There is a knight from the north inside who can attest to these statements. And a Kai.”

The officer looked toward the building. “Very well,” he said, watching as his men raced inside. He assigned a man to stand with Makala and turned to enter the building himself.

“Do not leave. You are a witness, and we’ll need to take your account of events.”

The carnage was incredible. At first Sol Hawk was stunned—he had witnessed battle before, but somehow the calculated brutality of the event, the thoughtless slaughter of the innocent has filled him with a kind of hopelessness. It was only a moment ago that he and his ally fought bravely—he had been elated that at last he had happened upon the very place he had needed to be in order to carry out his mission and halt the dark actions of a hidden enemy. Somehow in the heat of battle, the deadly killing had sunk in—now it had. Dozens upon dozens of dead warriors—not, not warriors, people.

He, a kai Guardian was here now—but it had counted for nothing. These were his thoughts as Arcadian searched the blood-soaked room. These were his thoughts as the Sommending knight he had seen earlier arrived. At another time his kinsman might have greeted him, or Sol Hawk would have gladly greeted him...but Sol Hawk’s despair seemed then to permeate the space as surely as did the stench of blood.

Then the dwarf. Sol Hawk had been disdainful toward him, then amused, and finally impressed. Now it did not matter, for he was dead. Across from him was an enemy—a large wound opened in his chest by some unknown weapon. Sol looked down to the dwarf's gun—the explosions from before—was this a dwarf of Bor? It began to make sense. Sol remembered legends regarding the far-southern land of Bor and the artifacts its inhabitants knew how to create. This was a Bor mukeet and this was its wielder. A deep respect began to well up in Sol Hawk as he realized that the dwarf had died trying to save the President's daughter, Ameesha.

Ameesha was not here, but still in shock, Sol Hawk barely noticed. To him she had died along with all the others in the room. Instead, as if still in a dream where the voices of his new companions swam around him amidst the backdrop of the approaching Anarians outside, Sol Hawk approached the dwarf and knelt to give him his last rites.

Sol closed his eyes and laid one open hand upon his chest. Wait—what was this? Was the dwarf alive? Sol Hawk couldn’t be sure, so badly hurt was this man, but out of a deep inner need to save at least one soul from this horrible catastrophe, Sol Hawk then focused all of his healing power upon him, calling upon the great god Kai himself to transfer his strength into the small courageous shell.
Rulings

And

Rules

This was premeditated, Cade turned back to the window and saw that the dust was almost out of view. The horses were fast.

"My name is Arcadian. We don't have time for further introductions. We must make haste."

remained facing the window but his face was now adjacent to the Kai Lord, showing the other man that the Vakeros

Arcadian sheathed his sword with a deft maneuver and slightly turned his head towards the Kai Lord. His body

"Thank you for your help Kai Lord. Aid the dwarf if you can but we must hasten," said Cade, matter-of-factly. "They are

of dust along the road, disappearing in the distance. The Vakeros kept his eyes on the dust as he spoke. As the Kai Lord

Arcadian didn't need to turn in order to visualize the bloody figure of the downed borese. His imagination knew the

Why?

Arcadian's eyes quivered slightly as he brought his chin back up to gaze out along the road where the kidnappers were

I'll kill them. Arcadian's hand lowered to the slash across his leg. He grasped it tightly, feeling the hot blood coursing

over his skin. His hand shakes as he grasps his wound tighter, ignoring the fresh blood and the pain that came with it. For

the blood of one of the kidnappers was strewn across it. Nearby, next to the most condensed of the hot blood was a hole in

the wall. A bullet hole. It was apparent that it was the dwarf had gotten off one final shot before collapsing.

I'll kill them all.

Sir Victor reached the room at the top of the stairway and took in the scene of murder and carnage that lay before him. He

saw the bodies of the Anari guards and the dwarf, who gave up their lives valiantly in defense of the princess, at least those

who weren't killed instantly by the well-placed crossbow bolts of the attackers.

His first reaction was disgust...he was used to direct confrontations over open battlefields, not the work of assassins

He saw the Kai Lord kneel beside the body of the dwarf, to see if he still breathed.

Sir: Things are getting a little antsy

"* * *

Arcadian stared out the window, deep in thought, piecing together what had happen—\-and vowing to himself what would

happen should he ever meet up with those responsible for this kidnapping. He heard a commotion downstairs, but

knowing that he and the Kai had taken care of the only remaining black-garbed warrior, he ignored it.

Sol Hawk moved to the dwarf and knelt, feeling for any traces of life. He found none, but still he tried all within his

power to help the fellow. In the end, nothing happened however. He bowed his head in both sadness and reverence as

I should have subdued the masked man faster and been up those stairs sooner. How could somebody do this to an

innocent girl such as this? Isn't there enough wrong in the world?

A vein materialized on Arcadian's forehead and the Vakeros's gaze lowered to the oak windowsill in front of him. The

blood of one of the kidnappers was strewn across it. Nearby, next to the most condensed of the hot blood was a hole in

the wall. A bullet hole. It was apparent that it was the dwarf had gotten off one final shot before collapsing.

Arcadian clenched a fist and brought it up to eye-level. His eyes narrowed, showing a hardness that one does not typically see in eyes of a good man. His breathing had shallowed since his rapid ascent of the staircase but it remained audible. However his breathing was not from exhaustion nor exhilaration but from frustration.

I should have subdued the masked man faster and been up those stairs sooner. How could somebody do this to an

innocent girl such as this? Isn't there enough wrong in the world?

"Do any of you know this person?" he asked the trio. After seeing they didn't, he shrugged and sighed and scribbled

something softly, then looked at Sir Victor after the man left. With a slight bow in greeting, he asked if the knight could

see the Kai Lord kneel beside the body of the dwarf, to see if he still breathed.

Sir: Things are getting a little antsy

"* * *

Sir Victor turned around and headed for the stairs out of this chanel house.

* * *

A group of Anari soldiers entered, followed by a thin man in plain brown robes. He busily went around the room as the

soldiers moved the adventurers aside, and with a small quill he dipped into an inkwell strapped to his wrist and wrote

something. Then he went to the windows, noted a few more things on the parchment, and left. When he did, the

soldiers went about their business checking the bodies, particularly the intruder's. They were busy doing this when a

man with a more distinct appearance entered the room. He drew salutes from the soldiers, indicating he was in charge

of this situation.

"* * *

"I'll kill them all."

For what they did to me, and to avenge the unnecessary terror of that girl.

"This is the window through which they made their escape. Did you see in which direction they went? Perhaps after we

deal with the authorities, we'll be able to give chase with the help of the tracking skills of the Kai."

And with these words, Sir Victor turned around and headed for the stairs out of this chanel house.
"My name is Command Captain Ihmra'zir al-Marashi, the head of security for the North Sector of the festival. Just so you know, these are some of my finest men that have fallen in duty." He frowned, his face mixed with irritation and regret.

Voices and horse sounds from outside the windows drew the trio's attention from the captain.

"Those are my trackers. They were dispatched a few moments ago when the disturbance began. No doubt those responsible will be apprehended by morning!" Still pacing about the room, he continued. "It appears from what evidence we have so far that the perpetrators were from Cloeasia, though such a thing is highly unusual, it would take them weeks to travel around Vassagonia—none of them would dare cross the sands to the north."

The soldier sent by Ihmra'zir a minute earlier returned with the Kai’s weapons he had checked at the gates, and a brooding Makala in tow. The Telchili joined the other three adventurers already in the room.

"You four are of vital importance to me—to Anari as a whole—because you were witnesses to this, if only witnesses to part of it. You four will need to assume Anari disguises before leaving here. I have already made arrangements for a small caravan to carry both you and your equipment to the capital.

"So that you feel secure on the way to Tahou, I shall pull an escort of sixty Anari cavalrymen from the festival for this journey. Do not fear—such a well-planned attack, it would be wise to assume your lives are now in danger for having witnessed it. This was a cowardly attack against a handful of men, using dishonorable tactics.

"With such a well-planned attack, it would be wise to assume your lives are now in danger for having witnessed it. This was a cowardly attack against a handful of men, using dishonorable tactics.

"But I would prefer to travel with your men in pursuit of the princess."

The Vakeros motions toward his wound. "I owe each and every man who took part in this kidnaping a debt of blood. This is not a debt that I can just walk away from while retaining my honor. The man who inflicted the wound killed himself rather than face me. This is not an honorable reconciliation for my wound and so another must pay the debt."

Arcadian made sure that his words did not provoke a fight.

"Arcadian nods at Ihmra'zir."

"Pardon me sir," said Cade carefully. "But I would prefer to travel with your men in pursuit of the princess."

"Ihmra'zir smiled warmly, and his words exuded an air of confidence that he was right."

He looked across the plain at his men, who were probably almost a mile away now. "All of my horsemen are armed with gallowbrush-tipped arrows and bolts. All they have to do is get close enough to fire upon the enemy, and they will fall. No assassin, however skilled he may be, can withstand the dose we use."

He looked down at the cut on the Vakeros’ leg. "In Anari, our justice system is different than most, and it is one throwback to our Vassagonian heritage. When a man has been wronged, he is entitled to seek damages. We call it Ameesha, which means 'to harm.'"

"If I do hope you can see that you can be much more useful if you come with me. You will have your vengeance, but not this night."

Ihmra'zir smiled warmly, and his words exuded an air of confidence that he was right.

Sir Victor nodded at the captain's words, and took this opportunity to speak up: "I've heard from Sommerlund by my Baron to speak to your President, as we have information regarding the security of your state. I'll gladly follow you and your men to Tahou, if you guarantee that I'll be able to meet with him and fulfill my obligations. As for whether or not your men will be able to capture the assassins and free the princess, only time will tell if they'll be successful or not. However, I would also like to see this through to its conclusion."

With that said, he took the opportunity to wipe his blade clean on the dead assassin's clothing before sheathing it.

"Sol Hawk channeled his powers into the body of the dwarf - nothing could save him. "Your lives were wrongly taken. This will be answered for," said the Kai quietly. With this, he took the Bor Musket and slung it over his back by virtue of its long strap."

Arcadian revealed that the enemy were still in view, Sol Hawk's attention returned to the matter at hand. His senses sharpened as he realized that the lady Ameesha could still be alive.

"We may reach her yet," agreed Sol Hawk, regarding Arcadian. "I am with you, brother." He turns, too, to the Sommlending knight. "I may have ways to find them before the trail becomes cold," says the Kai to the knight, "Let us make haste then. We go together."

Even as Sir Victor turned to leave with the others not far behind, they found that the Anarians had already arrived. At once the room was full of guards and shortly after, the Captain Ihmra'zir had entered.

**Act I – The Darkening Days**

**Commentary and Observations**

**KL:** Yes, that’s why I posted here with the captain’s login. That’s the fun— and dangerous part— of RPing. CCAM (as I abbreviate him) is just doing his job: detain witnesses for questioning— by any means possible, get official statements before the judicate in Tahou since this is a high political crime, suppress rumors, and send scouts/trackers to find and apprehend the enemy.

**SH:** Yes, a very good point! It might be exactly the wrong thing not to follow and save the princess - the Cap’n definitely wouldn’t give in tho, and his confidence is surely over-inflated, but how do we get that to work for us? Or on the other hand, we might really need to see what his has to say and what the President has to say - although it seems they know as little as we, maybe we will receive indispensable clues and allies - the Captain is clearly not ready to ally with us... yet!

**SH:** Ha, ha, yeah I liked the Kai Monastery line - I played off it a little. Sol Hawk would find it quite impossible, and he might well be dead by the time the big massacre comes (is it 50 years later?) Still, who is to say?

And yes, GM, very creepy the way you posted as the Captain in the OOC topic - very creepy!
Act I – The Darkening Days

"I apologize," said the Kai as Arcadian and the Captain had their discussion, "but I believe my friend is correct. Time is of the essence. I remind you that only myself and my companions were able to survive where your highly trained elites failed by the dozen. You need us. Your men are certainly very brave, but I fear that they do not yet even know what they are facing. Your best guards, by your own admission, sir, were all murdered by no more than a handful of these Cloasians. Your horsemen will be ambushed in the forest. We have never seen the faces of their killers or the princess.

With all due respect, Captain al-Marash, you may have just sent your riders to their deaths - and with them, any hope for Lady Ameesha's safe return. It is not too late to rectify this situation should you turn myself and my Vakeros companion upon the trail.

"I am called Sol Hawk," he said then, "Please understand that I have arrived here through no accident, but at the bidding of the Kai Grand Master. Through his wisdom, he perceived these events before they occurred and dispatched me at once. Your horsemen may well still carry the day, but only with our help. By this decision, the honour of your lost lad can be restored, as can the success of my mission."

Sol Hawk paused and thanked the guard who had returned his weapons to him.

"Captain," he continued quietly, "Join us. You have a stake in this as surely as we. It is unjust if it is protocol that binds you, but do not allow it to suffocate that which your heart tells you to be true. Indeed, can rules and regulations ever serve if those they are designed to protect are murdered and raped within your own forests, even as we plan and talk over Chia Cheer? Indeed, our path, and surely also the fate of those under your charge, lies with your decision. Because we have talked long, I am no longer able to pursue with the necessary speed unless I have your assistance, and so I choose to abide by your will. As a Kai Lord, you know that I do not lie. So tell us now - will you release us to pursue and bring to justice those criminals who stole away the very jewel of Anari?"

Sol Hawk's eyes were soft with compassion - there was a slight but sad smile on his face as he looked to the Captain for his response. * * *

"The Kai Lord is right," said Arcadian, "The moment your men reach the edge of the woods they will be ambushed and they will die. The ones who captured your princess will not let themselves be captured after perfectly planning out every detail in their operation."

Arcadian continued slowly, trying to not diminish any respect or authority from the captain.

"You seem to be a level-headed man," said Arcadian as he returned to the window. He watched as the Anari pursuers disappeared completely from view.

"Like Sol Hawk offered, with us. We shall need light provisions and horses if we are to pursue them. And we cannot do it without your aid. Dusk has gone and within a few moments darkness shall be complete. Pursuit without aid at this point is folly."

Cade sighed with irritation, "The choice is yours. But know this, when I pay my blood debt it shall not be in an arena designated by judges. It will be in mortal combat, in a place moderated only by the gods."

As Arcadian waited for an answer he briefly searched the dead body of the Cloasian and the dwarf. He regretted ravaging the body of the dwarf but he doubted that he would be using any of his belongings any time soon. With great care Arcadian removed the khanjar from the dwarf's chest, wiping the blood on the clothing of the dead Cloasian. With care he inspects the blade before thrusting it in his belt.

Arcadian knelt upon both knees in front of the body of the dwarf, a sign of great respect in Dessi. His eyes closed, he recited the words from the Knurla, a Vakeros prayer for those who have fallen in battle (Jungle of Horrors, section 46).

"Ishir dice, coloro che in tensione dal dado della spada dalla spada. Solon dice, coloro che muore dalla spada è assegnato l’più alto delle sedi nel Shangri-la. Resto nella pace."

Arcadian bowed his head, "Amen." * * *

Makala watched the exchange in silence. These people talked too much. At first opportunity, he spoke up and gave his thoughts. "Would we not be fools to also ride into such an ambush? Four of us took out two of them. If they truly want to bring to justice those criminals who stole away the very jewel of Anari?"

"If I were to visit Dessi or Sommerlund, I would understand that their ways were different than my own. Each nation has certain procedures in place for events that occur. So it is with Anari."

The others looked at him, and he returned their stares without so much as a blink before continuing. "By the time we procured horses and rode forth, likely the trackers would be dead. How can a force of four or five hope to succeed in ambush where a score of horsemen fail? We must use their tactics, not force."

"Two more guards came into the room, in addition to the scribe in plain robes, who began writing more details of what the scene looked like. * * *

The smile on the captain's face wanes as the Kai and Vakeros voice their desire to pursue. When the finish, he speaks. "If I to visit Dessi or Sommerlund, I would understand that their ways were different than my own. Each nation has certain procedures in place for events that occur. So it is with Anari."

The knight spoke then, and the captain nodded in affirmation. "Indeed, you would see President Kubudie on the same day in which you arrived. Within a day or two after that, you would be allowed to leave. During that time you would be guests in the palace, not necessarily locked in a room for the duration, but required to stay on the grounds nonetheless. As a knight, I'm sure you know all about rules and regulations and such, no matter how much you understand their intent."

The savage then spoke, seizing the opportunity to add his rare words to the discussion. Ihmra'zir sighed. "Should I have so little faith in the armies of your respective nations? My men will not die in an ambush. They are tracking, and when the time is right, they will be the ones to ambush. Are the Kai and Vakeros immune to surprise? Could a well-planned assault on the monastery by some dark force with superior numbers not cause it to fail?"

"My men here were ambushed. Be they elite or mundane, they fell prey to an enemy who took advantage of weaknesses. All people have weaknesses."

Command Captain Ihmra'zir folded his arms and regarded the four before him. "Before the night fully sets in, riders from that tracking party will break off and alert border posts to seal off the nation, allowing no one to leave or enter without the proper documents and authority. Things are in motion now that will resolve this problem."

"The guards in the room caught the tone in their commander's voice. He frowned and swallowed. "I had hoped it would not come to this, but I must advise you that joining me on the journey to Talus is the wisest decision. There are two ways to get there. On a horse, or across a horse. Now, come with me...unless you have something to hide, there should be no reason not to."

"We moved almost imperceptibly, and all the guards stepped what they were doing. The scribe looked from side to side and backed up to the far end of the room, his quill poised to write."
Act I – The Darkening Days

The Vakeros stood, turning from the dwarf's body and facing the captain with a firm and unyielding position.

Arcadian's soft smile never left his face as he spoke slowly. "You do not have much to gain by threats. Let us be clear on one issue only, if the rest cannot be resolved as of this moment: I will not be unlawfully detained by you nor your men. I have done no wrong nor committed no deed other than to make a better attempt at saving your princess than your best men could."

"I am not undermining your wishes as anything less than a national emergency, but it is an issue that only affects me because I choose to let it. My body will not be draped across a horse and my hands will not be bound as long as my soul rests within my bosom."

Arcadian tried to sound as wise and unthreatening as he could manage, "let us discuss this without pointless threats."

"No matter the outcome of the conversation in this room, captain," said Cadre, "your men will show up empty-handed at best, or not show up at all at worst."

* * *

Sol Hawk shook his head at the angry words that have been spoken. "Indeed, Commander Captain," Sol Hawk says with a weary smile, "you have no need to order us when we have already freely agreed to be bound to your decision. Please be angered no longer - I believe you will find that we are not the ones to whom you truly bear it."

"Arcadian, this man has suffered a loss. I am certain he will tell us how to put paid to our mutual enemy... in time. I am not so sure I agree with all the reasons given, but most likely the lady Ameesha has been taken for ransom - if they wanted her dead, she would be so surely already. For this reason, I believe we may have at least some time. Commander Captain, I do hope that your men return - by the grace of Ishir I hope they will succeed where the lady's elite bodyguard did not. I suppose it is fair to say also that their right to vengeance is greater since they lost many noble comrades. I regret that we may not join them, but I cannot begrudge them their chance.

"Commander Captain, it may persuade my Vakeros friend to come peacefully if you can compromise with us on one matter, and it is only this: although I am sure that your trackers will not return without the President's daughter, will you do all you can to empower us to the task should they fail? Should they return to the President's Palace during our stay with the fair lady in their presence, I will humbly apologize to you before all for any offense I have unwittingly committed. Can we agree on this small matter?"

Sol Hawk approached the door, passing the large silent man on his way. "You may be right that it will be dangerous to pursue," he said to the southerner, "but unfortunately, I foresee that we will all be headed for that very danger whether we delay it or no. If we cannot follow at this time, let us at least make good use of the while to share what little we know with one another and make plans for what is soon to come."

And as a matter of fact, Sol Hawk thought to himself, Kai Lords are immune to surprise as all good hunters are. Yet somehow the comment about an attack on the monastery filled him with a vague foreboding. Could this have been the danger for Sommerlund that his Master had foreseen? As he regarded again the blood and the corpses all around, he contemplated what it would be like should such an attack ever be launched upon the monastery of the Kai... with his brave comrades dying all around him at the hands of the Cloelians or some other deadly foe. He put the images far from his mind - that could never happen. Why was this battle scene having such a deep affect? He resolved to redouble his determination to bring the killers to justice and get the truth to his Kai Masters as soon as possible.

* * *

Sir Victor had been following the exchange and nodded at the wise words of his fellow countryman before finally speaking up:

"I think this room has seen enough bloodshed already, and further conflict between us would only serve our mutual enemies. Cooperation is the key here. I think the four of us could greatly help you rescue the princess in the event of your man's failure, and since you so strongly believe in their abilities, I'm also willing to trust your instincts. To show you do all you can to empower us to the task should they fail? Should they return to the President's Palace during our stay with the fair lady in their presence, I will humbly apologize to you before all for any offense I have unwittingly committed. Can we agree on this small matter?"

With that said he turned to the hot-blooded Vakeros Knight to try to sway him to obey the Captain:

These men are not looking to detain us, they are merely doing their job. You would gain nothing by opposing them. Trust me, and you'll get your chance at revenge, but now is not the time for foolhardiness. These men are not looking to detain us, they are merely doing their job. You would gain nothing by opposing them. Trust me, and you'll get your chance at revenge, but now is not the time for foolhardiness.

"If my trackers succeed, I will lobby for a reward for your part in this. Combined with a Writ of Recognition from the president, which commands merchants in Tahou to sell their wares to you at sixty percent of their base cost, you should be able to outfit yourselves nicely.

"If they fail," he said reluctantly, "I will wouch for your skills to the president himself, in your presence. His Majesty holds me in high regard, so my conference of trust in you will count a great deal. I am sure that you would be outfitted for whatever journey you chose."

He dismissed all but two of the guards, who stood at the windows. He then motioned the four to follow him to the other end of the room. The scribe who had been huddling there quickly jotted something on the text-covered parchment and rushed off.

"When we arrive in Tahou, I will ask my men to escort you to the judiciary. The president normally presides over all questionings," he adds, seeing the knight's expression change. "You can speak to him then."

He sighed. "I, on the other hand, will be facing the military command tribunal to answer for what has happened. I am ultimately responsible for whatever happens," he says softly, yet without tremor or sadness in his voice. Like a true soldier, he accepts his fate.

"Your disguises are being brought in below us. You may change down there while my guards move all bodies to this floor. They will be lowered out the windows where no citizen can see. When we exit the compound, just follow my lead until we reach the central command tent. From there, we'll saddle up in the stables and ride out."

A quarter hour later, the last sack of the group's equipment was hefted out to be transported on wagon to Tahou.

Command Captain Al-Marash entered the room and regarded the four. With the sand veils in place, it would do. Well enough to fool the people outside anyway.

The guards left with the body of the dead girl, and as the false pronouncement of events was heralded outside by the scribe, the crowd cheered at the good news.

Sir Victor, you need not worry about your horse. It has been "impounded" at the stables to help with the ruse. Once there you will be reunited.

On the trip to Tahou, take note that you will not have AC bonuses due to armor, but you may retain all weapons.

Rules And Rulings

Oh and KL, I will go ahead and add the khargar to Makala's inventory.

Sir Victor, you need not worry about your horse. It has been "impounded" at the stables to help with the ruse. Once there you will be reunited.

Commentary and Observations

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Also Sol, the ability of the kailords with hunting 5 and of all telchos warriors to be immune to surprise technically means that they do not lose their dexterity bonus to defense if caught by a surprise attack (i.e. if they are flatfooted). That is why the kai in the monastery was caught by surprise in lone wolf game book 1 and killed; they were surprised; but reacted faster than most would have. But the numbers were too overwhelming in the end.

I see - so I am never flatfooted. It is good that a Kai can never be ambushed - of course, just because you always see the attack coming doesn't mean you will not be attacked anyway - and yes, the thing about numbers is hard to get around...

(Ten Bands hiding in wait to Ambush Lone Wolf)

LW: Come on, I know you guys are there!

Bands: all jump LW anyway
Act I – The Darkening Days

Mhmra’zir looked at the four and nodded slight. “I have been thinking of all that was said, and all that could have happened upstairs. If only the young recruits that are sent to me to train had your skill and puissance,” he said to Makala.

“... your compassion and devotion,” he said as he stood in front of Sol Hawk.

“... your sense of duty and honor,” he said to Sir Victor as he moved in front of him.

“... and your determination and fervor,” he said as he laid a hand on the Vakeros’ shoulder.

“If they had those qualities, then Anari could invoke Vassagona,” he stated proudly, “instead of living in her sword’s shadow.”

**

Glad to be out of his armour for some time, yet feeling slightly vulnerable all the same, Sir Victor decided to finally introduce himself to his new-found companions, while to dispose away the time spent traveling to Tahou.

“Let me introduce myself. I’m Sir Victor, Knight-Warrior sworn to the Crown of Sommerlund and the Baron Vanauland of Ruuan. This is the farthest I’ve ever traveled away from my home country, and I’m certainly enjoying the sights so far, despite the unfortunate events which have just transpired. I’m familiar with Vakers from Dessi, and I’m no stranger to my fellow countryman’s order of the Kai,” he says, and then turns to look at the Telchoi, “but I’ve never seen anyone with such dark skin before, nor with your impressive fighting techniques. Where do you hail from, warrior?”

**

Arcadian felt quite at home upon the back of the Anari mare. It was times like this he wished that he had a stead to call his own. For some reason the Vakers weren’t content to choose one from the stables of Elzian, that a mount would be provided to him sometime in the future, by fate. Not by his own choosing.

The Vakers was as happy as Victor to be out of his armor. Arcadian knew that sometime soon he would be able to get some new, more expensive armor from the smiths of Dessi but he hadn’t decided if he would except it or not. He knew for certain he would never wear plate. Most of his travels involved the warmer parts of the world and plate armor would never do. Cade rode up next to the Kai Lord, noting the Bor musket that was now draped across his shoulders.

“I am not sure about...” Arcadian answered. “Sol Hawk was your name right?” Arcadian confirms. “I apologize that we were not formally introduced before. It seems we have both been thrown into a situation quite out of our hands.”

Arcadian let the reins drop, and guided the horse solely by the subtle movement of his knees against the horse’s side. Cade had long been an expert rider and was no novice in the saddle.

“I have not been in Anari long. Do you know how the long the ride to Tahou is?”

As Cade waits for the Kai Lord’s answer he silently wonders when the caravan shall make a stop for water. His waterskins could use some filling and his wound has started bleeding again.

**

Makala had been mostly quiet during the questioning, surveying the grisly scene and the reactions, and silently honoring the valiant dead, including the guardsmen and the dwarf. He had also been observing the others; the one called Sol Hawk was apparently a Kai Lord Makala had realized as he talked with the guards outside the compound. The distinctive green cloak worn by the man had made Makala come to the conclusion. Much had been made of these warrior monks, yet were they all they were made out to be? It remained to be seen.

The southerner (by the standards of Northern Magnamund at least) was a Vakers warrior-mage Makala realized as he heard him intone a chant to the dead. The shaman’s of his tribe had been sure to teach Makala about the other powers in Magnamund, especially the ones with sorcery at their disposal; the elder magi of Dessi and their descendants, as well as their Vakers bodyguards and commandery, had been at the top of the list. One thing, seemed more than a little hotheaded; a trait that oft got one killed in the harsh and unforgiving wastes of Telcho. He would need watching.

The Telchoi had been intending to go to Dessi next, in fact; after Anari, since he wanted to see first hand the wonders of the kingdom of the elder magi and pay the respects of his own elders and himself, to them. However, there was a certain delay that would be needed.

As for the knight, his tabard and accent indicated he was from Sommerlund, same as the Kai lord. Makala had little love for knights; he could not imagine how they, or anyone in fact, could fight to move and fight in such cumbersome armor, especially when he himself, and the other trained Telchoi warrior-shamans fought with no armor at all! Still, the man had proved to be valorous, trading into the mouth of danger instead of running. He was worthy of... respect, at least.

As the decision was, finally, made to leave the princess and her captors to the Anari trackers, Makala saved a last glance to the window, and the dark night. He had toyed with the idea of tracking them himself at first; not to ambush them of course, for powerful though he might be, he was little match for thirty men. Still, alone he might have been able to sneak into their camp at night, and make away with the princess, perhaps even slitting the throat of as many as he could while he was there. Makala was, of course, no stranger to the ways of an assassin. But it was too risky, and more than that, he had little incentive to help... yet.

He would agree with the respectable commander, Ihmra’zir, and go with the others to the capital. For one thing, this was a golden opportunity to meet with the rulers of this honorable nation, and a possibility to make acquaintances, which was one of the purposes of his Soulsearch. Apart from that, loath though he may be to admit to such, the Telchoi was intrigued by the recent going ones... this was certainly a good way to relieve himself of the boredom that had been plaguing him for the past few days.

A few hours later the Telchoi found himself riding near the back of the entourage, surrounded by Anari guardsmen, negreting his decision a bit; not only did he have to ride a horse, instead of walking on his own feet, but he felt constrained...crushed, but the presence of so many people.

He was broken out of his reverie by the booming voice of the knight, Victor, as he named himself, introduce himself and turn to Makala with a question. The Telchoi, though not feeling rather talkative as was his norm, was pleased by the man’s frank question, as well as his praise. “My name is Makala, and I hail from a land called Telchos...it is far to the south of here, and I am not surprised that you have not heard of it. Makala rapped in his deep voice, offering a half smile to the knight. “As to what I was doing here in Anari, well, minding my own business I would say.

His tone turning more serious, he continued, “To tell you the truth...Victor, I am three months into my Soulsearch; the closest term in your language would be...quest. For a year and a day I am to travel the land, and find ways to make allies and trading partners in other nations. We Telchoi do not have much of our own, though only a fool would call us poor by any means.

Commentary

SV: Arcadian wrote:

Arcadian knelt upon both knees in front of the body of the dwarf, a sign of great respect in Dessi. His eyes closed, he recited the words from the Khunta, a Vakers prayer for those who have fallen in battle (Jungle of Horrors, section 46).

I also liked the way you referenced Dever’s cannon to add a bit of colour to your character! I will keep my eyes open for additional references in the series that might be of use!

(We Kai have it easy of course - since the series is all about us. Sommerlending knights, I am not so sure about, Telchoi I don’t remember from the original series - were they in the Grey Star books?)

All: It isn’t that easy as a Vakeros. Pretty much all I have to go on is the adventures LW had with Palido.

SV: Telchoi was never featured in any gamebooks, but Joe wanted to include a trip there in the last 4 books, 20–32. Unfortunately those were never written, so Joe was pretty happy to see the Telchoi warriors come to life through the RPG instead.

Lone Wolf met a few knights of Sommerlund on his travels, such as Rhysgar in Fire on the Border.

BTW Sol, I just read your last post, but we’re not in MS5000, we’re in MS1001: Quote:

This year’s events in the year MS5001 is unparalleled. Virtually all corners of Magnamund are represented, and the population of the event is well over seventy thousand. Adventurers and commoners alike have come to partake of the festivities, and one of the main attractions is a heavily guarded area on the northern edge of the fairgrounds—just a mile or so south of the main stand of trees in the Daroga Forest.

Quote:

Since his skill tone already mostly matches that of the Anari, Makala will decline a disguise, unless the commander insists. Thus he is still clad in his simple wool-cord belted, black cloth tunic.

OOC: Flash forward: The journey is underway, and you are hours into the trek southward, riding next to the wagon that contains the girl’s body and your equipment. Ihmra’zir is at the lead, and the Anari cavalry are all around you.

Feel free to talk amongst yourselves. Add relevant actions to the above if you’d like, in your next post.
Act I – The Darkening Days

Turning to regard the knight, Makala leaned closer and murmured for his ears only, "But enough about me. I doubt you mean to hear the entire story of my life in a single night. What make of you this current situation? Something does not sit right with me...why are we escorting a dead girl to the capital, instead of burying her, or returning her body to her family? Though Thra’mazi appears to be an honest man, as most Anarians are, what would stop him from laying the blame upon us, to save his own skin? Are we witnesses, knight, or are we prisoners?" Makala leaned away, and glanced around him suspiciously, even as he waited for Victor to reply.

Sir Victor took in Makala’s words with great interest, for quests were always a noble endeavor of knighthood orders throughout Northern Magnamund. He was also thankful for the Telchoi’s forwardness, despite any early misgivings he might have felt at first.

"Well met, Makala. I hope your year of...soul searching...brings its just rewards to both you and Telchoi.

As for our current predicament, I doubt we’re in any danger from the Anarian authorites themselves. The Republic of Anari already has enough obvious and powerful enemies without antagonizing its allies, no matter how distant they may be. Desi and Sommerlund are powerful countries, bastions of light against the darkness which threatens our world, and I also believe that Desi has often helped Anari defend its borders against the invading hords from Vassagonia. I myself am on an official mission from my country, and it wouldn’t help the Anarians’ cause to accuse a diplomatic envoy of such foul deeds. Such a diplomatic faux pas would certainly harm Anari’s reputation for justice, and I believe that we are above reproach in this situation."

Sol Hawk was relieved as the Captain seemed to relax his bravado and the Vakeros seemed also to take this as a favourable reaction. Sol Hawk nodded politely at Captain al-Marashi’s praise, but contemplated the meaning of the Captain’s wish to invade Vassagonia. Was this the subconscious desire to strike back at an oppressor, or was there more to this situation than had been at first revealed? Outwardly Sol Hawk gave no sign of his concerns, instead he conducted himself in a diplomatic fashion.

"I thank you for your support," the Kai added, "Sommerlund and its Kai Elite consider your country to be as a sister to ours. In these darkening days, ours, the lands of freedom, must be alert to the machinations of those nations that would vie for their own advantage at the expense of the free. We will do what we can when the time is upon us to find the princess and discover the circumstances of her capture."

The crowd pressed upon them from all sides as they exited the shelter into the night. All of the music and merriment had long ago ceased and the people were frantic at all of the death, many now having returned to the scene where previously they had fed.

With guards on all sides, Sol Hawk, Sir Victor, Makala, and Arcadion moved to the place where the caravan had been prepared. All save Makala were dressed as Anarian Guards – under the cover of darkness, the distinct foreign features among them were impossible to see.

Two guards brought the girl’s body on a makeshift stretcher. "Make way for the princess," booms one. The citizenry showed distress as the girl’s body was brought out – purposefully she was moved outside the range of torchlight.

"Ameesha, Hfady," wept an old crone, "Is she dead? By the gods, she is slain!" A frantic murmur went up and the four felt the force of the crowds pushing on them at all sides. "Back now," said Sol Hawk as he presented his rapier, "easy, back now!"

The Commander Captain appeared at exactly the right moment. "Fear not," he said, "She is fine and is merely resting after her ordeal. We gave no paid to those rogues – my men fought with bravery and vanquished the few!"

A cheer went up as the body of the girl was then hurriedly loaded into one of the wagons.

"Even now my elite trackers and horsemen are moving to cut down the last of those cowardly curs. Surely they thought to find some gold or some treasure, but instead they found only the brave steel of Anari and death!"

The crowd seemed to love this. Sol Hawk and his new companions joined the caravan – it began to pull out even as the crowd cheered them on – children ran in the dark alongside the now speeding wagons, yelling "Long live Anari! Long live al-Marashi and his brave men!" Sol Hawk gave them a wave, then spurred his horse forward as the caravan left the site of merriment and death behind.

It was night as they rode toward Tahou. Sol Hawk greeted Arcadion as he came near on his steed.

"I have not been in Anari long. Do you know how the long the ride to Tahou is?" asked Cade.

"I would say we will arrive at the palace in the morning," he said, "We are going by the most direct route. You are Vakeros, are you not?" he said, "Your fighting style is unmistakable. I must say that your sword is faster and bites more often than many I have known.

"I have some concerns, of course, about the kidnapping of the princess," he says in a low voice, loud enough to be heard by Cade, Makala, and Sir Victor - hopefully outside of the Commander Captain’s earshot, "but it may lend us some clues as to who her attackers truly are."

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"For the first, if it was Vassagonia, it surprises me greatly that this vast desert empire would send such a small force rather than simply invade. Perhaps they are intent on blackmail. Perhaps they want to force a surrender without a fight. The dialect of the man we fought inside the structure was reminiscent of the dialect that exists in northern Vassan, so I would say he would have been born there and most likely living in that region now. However, his last words to you, "Mortak ai var, banou. Ta Klee-asha nay na-mortak," actually mean "I may be dying, Blue. But Cloesia will never die!" From his own lips, it seems that he fought most certainly for Cloesia.

"Cloesia, like Anari, lives in the shadow of Vassagonia. I know something of the politics of this region in part because of my training for this mission, in part because of my time tending prisoners in the dungeons of the Kai monastery. I was also able to pick up most of the Vassagonian language during this time and even made some friends among the prisoners. I suppose my Master did not always approve, but these conversations over time have provided some insight into the strife of this region for me.

"Cloesia has no allies and its ruler has no heir. From what I understand, their army is not up to the task of repelling a Vassagonian assault - these conversations over time have provided some insight into the strife of this region for me.

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Commentary and Observations

Sir : Thank you, Sir Victor! Nice catch! Let's see if I can reword a little...

Do they speak the Vassagonian Language in Cloesia? In Anari, it seems that they are speaking North-Speak.

Trying to reconcile the alphabets of Vassagonia may well come up in the future.

JL: Yes, they speak a variant of Vassan (I just find it easier to use the alphabet name...saves a few letters in typing), which is closer to the original language to understand the general meaning.

Most everyone in Northern Magnamund can speak what I call "North Common". Basically, consider it English. Lots of people in various countries can speak English, but it’s hard to find an English speaker who speaks, say, Swedish.

So, all the nations "around" Vassagonia (Kakush, Anari, Cloesia, Casior) speak the same language. Other nations like Desi and Slivia and Volarian have a higher chance to speak Vassan than someone like Licnia.

* * *

Makala nodded to Victor, then listened to Sol as he spoke his thoughts: "So you say Vassagonia is attempting to cause war between Anari and Cloesia? I do not know...everyone here is far too eager to point a finger at Vassagonia, or so it seems to me. Perhaps it is Cloesia attempting to give the Vassans a bad name, or perhaps there is something else afoot. Some other nation or group, seeking to weaken this area of Magnamund," he rapped.
**Act I – The Darkening Days**

"Whatever the case, we should be on our guard. A quadr of foreigners such as we are here, all hailing from different lands, all present at the same time of the kidnaping...all too easy to point the finger at us I say."

Makala, slightly agitated, broodingly, thought the Telcheloi did not really think the Anarian guard would blame them for the incidents, it did not hurt to be prepared for any possibility. Survival was a lesson instilled early on into every Telcheloi, those who were slow to learn usually did not survive the harsh wastes that made Telcheloi one of the hardest places to live on in Magnamund. And whatever the case, one thing was for certain, the Prefect's daughter was missing, his men were dead. He would want answers, and he would want them fast.

* * *

Arcadian listened to the Kai Lord with abject interest. Sol Hawk's theory made sense, almost too much sense. The Kai Lord's ideas struck a theory in Arcadian's own head.

"Perhaps this is Cloesia's way of preparing for a coming onslaught from Vassagonia. With the princess in their hands they could prove to possess a valuable bargaining chip in a possible war. Perhaps Vassagonia would agree to leave Cloesia to herself, at least for the time being."

Arcadian lowered his voice as much as he could while he continued. Just in case any of the guards could hear his words he did not want to provoke the Anarians. At least not yet.

"Your words distress me, Makala," said Arcadian, "If indeed the command captain intends to turn us in as blame for the princess's capture in order to take heat off of himself we shall be...in an unpleasant situation."

Arcadian glances over the heads of the Anarians, "however I do not feel this is the case. If this is Ihmra'zir's intention he would have had our weapons secured and we would not be dressed as Anarians. Though his decision to travel to Tahou may perhaps prove to be unwise, I do not believe that he bears any ill will towards us."

"I will not take this with you as I see all of you to be trustworthy. At least as trustworthy as I can ascertain without knowing you. Something isn't right about this kidnapping. The attackers knew everything that was going on inside and outside of that compound. They had every detail perfectly planned out and the only thing they were not prepared for was members of the crowd attempting a resistance."

"Something lurks at the edge of my mind. And I have a dire feeling that there is more going on here than we know. I would advise you all to keep your eyes open and your ears alert. I had better reason for regretting a ride to Tahou than simply revenge."

Cade glanced towards Ihmra'zir, who was riding up near the front, what is it that you are not telling me?

Arcadian made sure that the dagger he took off of the dead Cloesian (or whatever he was) was tucked in his belt securely. This accomplished he drew his blue-vein dagger and tucked it in a special sheath he had for hid on his back, adjacent to his waist.

He smiled as he thought to himself, you can say whatever you want about the Vakeros. But you will never, ever find one unarmed.

Cade calls up to Ihmra'zir, "when shall we stop for water? My wound needs cleaning so infection doesn't set in."

* * *

"I agree," said Sol Hawk to Arcadian, "I do trust the Captain Commander. He appears to be a good man. Unfortunately, I cannot say what his superiors would have in store for us, and I also think that if they ordered us to be jailed that Ihmra'zir would go along with protocol."

"Makala, you bring up a very wise and sobering point. We are all outsiders here, and it may be easier to be lied. Unfortunately, the outsider you do not know may seem to be more of a threat than the enemy with whom you are familiar."

Sol Hawk takes in the visage of the very large man. "I take some simple pride in my familiarity with Magnamund," the Kai Lord said, "but I cannot say from which people you hail. Clearly I can tell that you are a warrior - the way you carry yourself, and the way in which you move tells me this much. Your dark skin tells me that you are from some of the countries with which I am familiar. Tell me, where are you from? My curiosity has gotten the best of me - I hope you take no offense at this question."

* * *

Arcadian nodded when Sol Hawk mentioned something about Ihmra'zir following protocol even if it meant the captivity and the prosecution of the Vakeros, the Kai Lord, the knight, and the warrior.

"Leave it to the Anari to weigh laws over justice," said Arcadian, trying not to sound too condescending. "I value your opinions Kai Lord, but though I suspect his motives are not towards us I do not go as far to trust him.

The caravan continues to move forward and Arcadian adjusts to his horse's movements. Absent-mindedly he is aware of Ihmra'zir following protocol even if it meant the captivity and the prosecution of the Vakeros, the Kai Lord, the knight, and the warrior.

"Among the Vakeros the concept of honor is more highly weighed." Arcadian tried not to sound too boastful of his heritage but it showed through. This is no character flaw of Cade however, it is a trait of many if not all Vakeros.

Cade sighed, wondering if Ihmra'zir had heard his request. The command captain had given no response and the guards that surround the company have not offered an answer either.

Ah well, they have to stop for water some time.

Arcadian tore a strip of cloth from the clothes that were provided to him by the command captain's men. He used it to wrap his wound. He knew however that makeshift bandage wouldn't last forever and that the injury would have to be dressed properly as soon as possible.

He glances around, letting his eyes pierce the darkness. How long until dawn?

* * *

"Allow me to help with your wound," said Sol Hawk, "We Kai have some ability with such matters." He takes the cloth from Arcadian, then removes the Laumspur from his pack. He wets the cloth with a small amount of the liquid and gives it to the Vakeros as they ride.

"Bind the wound with this," he said, "It will not have the same healing properties as a full dose, but it will prevent infection from setting in. With some rest, your wound should heal itself. Here, take this potion," he says, handing Cade a vial of potion.

"Ah, and by the way, your horse says that her name is Iri."

---

**Rules And Rulings**

I assume that the small amount of Laumspur used from the bottle would not heal BP - also, Alasi, go ahead and add the potion to your Action Chart. I will remove it from mine once you have done so.

For that matter, I will use Warnth of the Sun to heal myself back to full at this time (2nd time today).

---

**Commentary and Observations**

KL : Forgot to answer the rest of your questions. Anari was founded by descendants of Anar, who came from Vassagonia to escape it. Think pilgrims coming to America, only without the ocean. Cloesia was founded by traders and exiles. Now that they have wealth, Vassagonia wants them. Cassaron was a city-state founded along a major trade route. I would think Vassagonia would want them, too. I'm sure they'd like to rule the lands, but their spread is quite hindered.

They are bordered by a heavily armed mercenary state, a swamp controlled by an unknown Darklord, Cassaron (on the other side of which is a strong ally of Sommernland). Slovia (allies with Anar), Anari (allies with a lot of nations), Kakush (friend of Deiss), and Desii itself.

Since they can't expand, they just grow in power. And as they grow in power, other allies who seek power will seek them.... But that's a few decades away, when they start siding with the Darklords.

The Talon mercenaries aren't mentioned much, but with a name like "kashuar", it can be safely assumed that they are of Vassagonian descent.

One more thing: Don't read too much into CCLM's remarks regarding invading Vassagonia. Sol. All he was saying was that the caliber of recruit he had been getting in recent months and years were soft and inadequate for a sufficient military force.

If all his recruits had the combined traits of four, then they would be true soldiers. His reference to Vassagonia was merely stating that—for a change—they could go on the offensive instead of merely having to repel invaders all the time.

Sh: I had a feeling - but boy! He was making me nervous!

And yes, I agree - WE FOUR DA BOMB!

Yeeeee-aahhh Boyeee!

Ali: Don't get cocky!
Act I – The Darkening Days

Arcadian watched with frustration as the moon rose, reached its zenith, then started to lower toward the horizon again. The Anari cavalry stopped as a dust cloud appeared on top of a hill to the south of them. The Command Captain rode forth as the group of adventurers looked at one another in dread.

In a few minutes, it was clear that danger was not coming to them—one of the many Anari patroits around Tahou approached. They must be nearing the city. After a few minutes of talking, the captain trotted back to his men.

“We stop for a half hour once we reach the hills.” He rode a bit further back to the disguised riders. “We reach Tahou before sunrise. The main group of cavalry will break off and return to the fairgrounds. Follow me to the capital, and don’t think of trying to go off on your own.”

He smiled and looked at Cade. “Just a couple of days. Then you will be free to go about your business. You have my word.”

* * *

The dark was turning to gray and Arcadia knew it was only a few more hours until dawn.

“Thank you, Kai Lord,” said Cade gratefully, “you have proven to be a valuable ally and even moreso a friend.”

Arcadian wrapped up his leg as Sol Hawk had bidden him. The Vakeros was surprised that he didn’t feel sleepy at all. The laumspur had served to rejuvenate his mind if nothing else.

As they rode on towards the distant hills Arcadian leans down and whispers into the ear of the mare, “we shall be good friends, you and I. Have strength Iri, you shall rest soon.”

“How did you know my horse's name?” asks Arcadian, “and how did you know that I desired such an answer?”

Though I have heard much of the Kai Lords you are only the second one I have met and I do not know much of your powers. I know you do not practice magical arts yet you seem to have power. Can you read my mind?”

In most circumstances Cade would be furious at the prospect of someone reading his mind. Yet for some reason this Kai Lord intrigued him and caused him to forget his usual brash retaliation.

“It is custom of many monk cults of Magnamund to forbid marriage or love of any kind. But I heard that this is not true among the Kai? The concept is disputed among many and I always wondered what was the truth.”

* * *

Sol Hawk smiled. “There may be a mind-reader among us, but it is not I. As a friend to animals, I merely noticed the joy you take in your fine, strong mount. It was Iri who must have realized your wish, for she volunteered her own name. For my part, I merely relayed it.”

As the morning star appeared on the horizon, Sol Hawk realized that they must be near their destination. As the cloud ahead vanished, the faraway lights of torches could be seen – no doubt the first patrols of the early morning – they were nearing Tahou.

“And you say you have known a Kai Lord before?” mused Sol Hawk, “Some of my brethren have been known to journey as far as Dessi, although I am sorry to say I have not had the pleasure. Tell me more about the Kai you once met.”

“*I don’t have much to tell.*

Arcadian was beginning to enjoy himself. The pain in his leg had lessened considerably and any dark thoughts of paying his blood debt had momentarily lapsed from his mind.

“His name was Rune Strider. I was traveling with a female companion east of the Bavari Hills when we were ambushed by a band of Lanapo raiders. A skirmish resulted in three dead/Vassan and my companion and I had south, towards Herdos. They tracked us for three days but we managed to elude them on the morn of the fourth night.”

The sky began to lighten as Arcadian continued, “we reached Cerios, a town north of Herdos and it was in the tavern there that we met a man cloaked in green. He told about how he was traveling to Elzian with a marked letter for the Regnanti. To this day I do not know what the letter contained but the escort thought it was important.”

“To make a long story short my companion and I escorted him south and into the heart of Dessi. We reached Herdos and took passage on an airship to Elzian. There we parted ways. I don’t remember much about him save his name was Rune Strider and that he could move objects with his mind. I watched with my own eyes as he drew his sword from its sheath without using his hands.”

Arcadian smiled softly as he remembered, “in my youth I begged and begged for him to teach me how to perform a trick but he just laughed.”

The Vakeros paused for a moment and then laughed out loud,” now that I look back on it he was a queer fellow. My companion was convinced that he was touched in the head. At the time I supposed I thought him as well. To tell you the truth now that I think on it he was probably wiser than I will ever be.”

* * *

Sol Hawk enjoyed the tale thoroughly. “Although I never met the man you tell about,” he said, “I am sure I would have been pleased to have known him. Interesting – by tradition, Kai Lords always return to the monastery at least once a year during the Feast of Fehmarn – only the most dire emergency could keep a Kai Lord away... I wonder what became of this brave yet eccentric individual you knew as Rune Strider...”

Sol Hawk took his meal then - it was surely a welcome change of fare for one who was used to living off the sometimes bare offerings of the land.

* * *

“To be quite honest my companion and I were in his presence for only a little more than a week.”

Arcadian decided to change the subject quickly. Ever since Sol Hawk asked about the Kai Lord the Vakeros had become antsy about the subject.

“You say you have never been to Dessi? ‘Tis a shame really. Elzian is the gem of the country, a beautiful city unmatched by any in Magnamund. Though Elzian is the capital of Dessi it is far dwarfed by many cities including Anasundi. Few have the privilege of living there.”

Commentary

KI. This has been fun reading material. I love how everyone is guessing and trying to piece things together. Keep it up. As clues appear, things will fall into place.

MV: Very nice story about the Kai Lord called Rune Strider! It made me seem very real, and also very wise like a Kai. The queer part is also interesting - who is he? I was not prepared to answer! So I simply said that he had been long gone. Who knows? Perhaps a nice little story hook for another day.

And Dessi sounds fantastic. From reading LW, I have little memory of it save the Tower of Truth, so your descriptions really brought it to life! Well done.

Alt: Um, the part about the fountains and the gardens... I made that up. lol.

EDIT: I just reread everything we have posted so far and I am beginning to wonder... What would have happened if I had ran away with the rest of the crowd? lol.

Arcadian wrote:

You sir, I challenge you to a duel!!! lol.

Arcadian, who is feeling left out.

No hard feelings! We don’t have to fight (since I’ve totally get my ass kicked)!! You will always be the Vakeros Warrior with the most svenne!

Your pal, Sol Hawk

Alt: You don’t know that you would get your ass kicked. I haven’t looked to see how developed your psychic combat is but I am owned when it comes to psychic battle. In other words, no defenses. lol.

Anyways, what does ‘svenne’ mean?

SV: At least you have a willpower cushion, and next level you’ll be able to raise a shield, IIRC. Makala and I are sitting brains, ripe for the picking.

Alt: How will I be able to raise a shield? Explan.

lol. Sorry I am still very new at d20. Which means it probably isn’t a good thing that I am teaching my girlfriend. Ah well, we will get through it. I should convince her to sign on and get to you know you guys in the OCC area.
Rules And Rulings

Act I – The Darkening Days

Arcadian seemed to drop into a state of bliss as he continued his story, "there is a place near the center of the city where there is a myriad of luxurious fountains set up in the gardens. The Gardens of Elzian was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen, and I have been to many places in the world. Flowers and foliage from all over Dessi litter the areas between the golden fountains. It is enough to take a man's breath away. When you enter the Gardens of Elzian it is as if you have stepped off Magnamund and found yourself in an entirely different world."

The Vakeros momentarily closed his eyes and tilted his head back slightly, as if taking in the memory as much as he could before he turned to other tasks.

Not much longer...

"Have any of you ever been to Tahou?" asked Arcadian.

---

"I was about to ask the very same question!" booms Sir Victor with a hearty chuckle. "This is my first trip to Anari. In fact, I haven't had much chance to travel far from Sommerlund before. I've been to Durenor once by land, so I've crossed the Wastelands and Ragador. But I'm as far south as my steed has ever taken me. I wonder what sights will greet us when we reach the city? I've heard many tales along the way, and can't wait so see for myself whether they're true or not. The walls and fortifications are said to be very mighty indeed."

---

"Sir Victor, it is my first trip to Anari as well. The truth is that I have spent most of my years at the Kai Monastery. It was the communion with all aspects of the world that most fascinated me concerning the ways of my order. Others of my brethren are much battle-hardened, to be sure, but for myself, I have always preferred the quiet ways of nature. Even so, when I was initiated as a full member of the Order a year and a half ago, I began to realize that my abilities were advancing to the point where, in recognition of my vows to defend Sommerlund, they would best be used in service of that end. I began with missions within our borders - on one occasion, I actually did assist with gaining intelligence regarding a bandit raid in your home territory of Ruanion. I thought I was journeying to the far south at the time, when in reality, I was as a child playing in his own backyard."

"I look forward, Sir Victor, to seeing this city for the first time beside a fellow of Sommerlund. Perhaps we shall walk these mighty battlements together before our time in Tahou is finished."

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"I think that the best thing for us to do while in Tahou is to stick together as much as possible," said Arcadian. "And when questioned by the president and his viziers make sure that you tell the full truth in everything that you say. Try not to embellish anything. If there are inconsistencies in our stories it may make us look guilty."

Sir Victor replied, "Those are wise words indeed, Vakeros, but to believe that a virtuous knight such as I would say anything less than the full and absolute truth belittles my knighthly vows. By the way, I don't think I heard you before, what did you say your name was again?"

"I apologize for any insult you may have taken, I did not mean to offend your honor," said Arcadian.

"And my name is, Arcadian, I apologize for not giving it to you before."

Arcadian turned to Makala, "you have been very quiet, southerner. Why don't you tell us something of your home?"

---

"I am called Makala, and I am of the Var'kar...the Scarab Clan if you will. My clan and my home is in Techlos, a land far to the South. I have taken leave from my people in order to complete my Soulsearch, a personal quest for discovering my true mettle, and to learn more about the world." Makala replied to the Kai known as Sol Hawk. Thereafter, the Telco quieted down and simply listened to the conversations of his traveling companions, while keeping a watchful and ever alert eye upon his surroundings.

The moon traveled across the nighttime sky from end to end, yet the journey continued, and Makala pondered some more upon what might lie ahead. But not too much, for that was not his way, nor of his people. Come what may, he would meet any challenge in the most efficient and absolute manner possible.

Makala listened with interest about the Vakeros's tale about his homeland; truly Elzian was known to be a wondrous land, and it made the Telchoii want to visit it that much more. When he asked Makala about his own homeland, the Southerner replied in his customary rasp, "My land is a harsh place; compared to Dessi or Sommerlund it would seem an unforgiving one. We have precious few resources of our own, and water especially is a scarce blessing for us. But we persevere; the land strengthens my people in both body and spirit, and keeps us ready for any foe that dare to place eyes upon what little we have."

The Telchoii stopped then and listened with interest as the Kai asked the captain about the contents of the parchment Makala had given to him. Though he was quite sure it had contained only notes about what Ameasha might look like, or any other similar information, there might yet be a clue contained therein.

---

The knight was enjoying the ride, but wished he could be sharing it with his loyal Bright Lance. Hopefully, he'll be reunited with her soon, and the Anarians will have groomed her properly, as befits such a noble steed.

"Captain Marshal," said Sol Hawk as he moved to the hill where the Commander Captain surveyed the path ahead, "I must commend you upon bringing us this far without any further incidents. You obviously know these roads very well. I saw a dust cloud on the horizon earlier. What do you make of it?"

"The men we fought claimed to be fighting for Cloesia, but they seemed Vassagonian to me. I am not sure what to make of this. From your reactions, it seems to me that you have faced these men before, or at least have your own thoughts about their plot. You also mentioned obtaining some written documents that the assassins carried. Pray tell, what was written there?"

Sol Hawk searched the horizon for a hint of the coming dawn. Fortunately, he had been sleeping during the mornings and doing all his traveling at night since he left Sommerlund, so he was not in the least tired. "I am looking forward to my first glimpse of Tahou."

---

"Without having fought one of the assaillants, I cannot be sure of where they were from," the captain said in answer to the Kai's inquiry. "If they were indeed Cloesian, then they were highly-trained mercenaries. The Talons of Rashuur prefer direct combat, and Cloesia has no military to speak of."

He pondered a moment. "It is possible that they hired someone to train some of their people to pull this off. After all, the Talon contract expires soon."
Rules And Rulings

OOC: Sol, I was a bit vague in my description. The dust cloud was the Anari patrol topping the hill and heading to meet the cavalry in order to ascertain their intent and credentials. Sorry.

OOC: Go ahead and add any flavor text you want to. In 24 hours, I'll get the post up about traveling through Tahou and meeting the judiciary and president. I just don't feel creative right now, so I'm not going to post sub-par filler instead of decent narrative.

I guess there isn't much else for us to do until KL gives us the thumbs-up to start the second chapter. I just want to take this opportunity to tell KL that I have really enjoyed this game thus far and that you are an excellent storyteller. I feel my imagination was as brilliant as yours.

One more thing, I know this isn't the place to ask, but how do we gain levels exactly? Are we not using experience at all? Will my imagination was as brilliant as yours.

OOC: Also curious - have ANY of the Captain's men stayed with us into Tahou, or did they all leave us in order to return to the Darkening Days Festival? If any stayed, please describe them plus Sol Hawk's impressions about them...

Arcadian: Levels are gained at certain points in the story (I don't use experience for several reasons). At the end of Act II, everyone will gain a level. Trust me—by then, you will have earned it.

Kamilah will still be level 7 at that time, so she will always be one step behind you guys.

Roughly 1 level every 2 acts. Sometimes each act causes a gain in level—later acts especially.

Sol Hawk: To the populace, CCIHF is just another soldier. However, a caravan headed to the palace draws a few stares. Six men remained. Fifty-four soldiers. However, a caravan headed to the palace draws a few stares. Six men remained. Fifty-four were sent back to the festival. The caravan consists of 3 wagons: provisions, equipment, and princess decoy (changes were made at the last minute as to what went in what wagon).

The men are basically boring, to be quite honest. It is easy to see that the caller of soldier that Tahou is getting as recruits is lastcluster compared to veterans like the command captain.

Your impression of them is neutral—neither hostile nor friendly. They are just like a stranger on the street.

I'm locking this thread now. Act II will be active once I post. Thanks for playing.

Act I – The Darkening Days

He dismissed it with a wave and a sigh. "All evidence points to them, though. What reason would Vassagonia have to frame a country whose army will likely leave soon?"

Ihmra'zir called for the camp to break, and the men around him snapped to work. He addressed the Kai's final question. "The documents had a sketch of Ameesha and a map of the compound. That can only mean that they were spying when the fairgrounds were modified to house the princess. And that they have seen her, or hired someone who has to draw a picture."

He stood and brushed himself off. "And that means that likely someone around you now is a spy as well. Stick together."

As the group advanced over the hills, the spires of Tahou could be seen first. Each new hill they topped revealed more of the city, until at last they were on the plain that stretched in all directions around the city. The tall red and gray stone wall that surrounded the city became ever more massive. The Sommlending were reminded of Holgrand, whose walls were well over a hundred feet high.

Above the walls, the colorful minarets and spires still reached skyward. Flags fluttered lazily in the winds at that height, and small bridges connected some spires to one another. At night, the city was probably breathtaking.

They drew closer, and the walls occluded the rest of the city. Ihmra'zir gave orders for all but a half dozen cavalry to return to the festival, which they did without hesitation or delay. The force rushed off to the distance whence they came.

As the small caravan of three wagons and eleven riders approached the large moat that was being constructed around the city, two guards exited a gatehouse.

Ihmra'zir called for everyone to stop and then he rode forth, talking with the guards. They saluted and grabbed a green flag, waving it at the sky...or so it seemed. Far above on the walls, a green flag waved in answer, and the guards motioned the captain back.

Huge counterweights and chains and gears were set into motion. The immense rumbling and noise was probably intense over on the other side of the chassis, for it was quite loud by the gatehouse. A massive wooden drawbridge lowered silently, held in place by twin chains that were the length of a man's leg. The drawbridge slammed into the ground with a heavy thud, sending a conclusive wave through the earth that shook the horses.

A large iron portcullis began to open on the far side, and the guards motioned Ihmra'zir across.

Sol Hawk looked up at the height of the entrance. He whispered in his horse's ear - this seemed to calm it. As they rode forward, he realized that they would not get out without the President's approval - the gates were so heavy and huge and the towers were so tall that all of them very well could have been locked upon the entry to their tombs...

He dismissed this thought at once - perhaps Makala was starting to get to him. The President would definitely not use them as political bargaining chips... or would he?

Though Sol Hawk did not know it Arcadian was having some similar thoughts as they crossed the threshold to the city. The Vakeros had had a bad feeling about entering Tahou since Captain al-Marash had first suggested it. Arcadian tried to shrug off his doubts but something lurked in the back of his mind.

Something isn't right.

Arcadian glanced at Sol as they entered the city, and he realized that the Kai Lord was as anxious as he.

May your tides of fortune be gracious to me Ishir, thinks Arcadian to himself.

To say that his first sight of Tahou impressed Sir Victor would be an understatement. Dozens upon dozens of minarets could be seen over the walls, which were very massive and ancient themselves. Sir Victor nodded to himself, Very strong and defensible, this city could resist to quite a siege! He couldn't want to enter the city and pace its mighty walls.

As the gates were opened, the loud rumbling spooked the horses, but Sir Victor was an expert rider and easily calmed his mount. With that, he followed the guards inside the city.

As the large group crested the final hill Makala slowed his mount (with some difficulty) to a trot, and gazed at the magnificent city. Tahou is quite the jewel...perhaps coming here may prove profitable after all. He thought. If the princess were to be returned safely, the president might be inclined to reward them for their valiant attempt at a rescue; Telschos could very well use an ally such as Anari.

With a soft cry Makala ended his reverie and spurred forth his mount towards the open gateway, and on into the gleaming city itself.

Sol Hawk took the opportunity to see how the populace reacted to the Commander Captain and his men. Did they fear him? Did they love him? Or something in between? Nothing escaped the Kai Lord's eagle eyes.
OOC: And off you go. Feel free to pick a seat wherever you prefer and start ordering. Later in the afternoon you'll have to find a horse so you can cross to Anari on the morrow.

The Hero for Act II, Scene I:

**A Sage of Lyris**

**Simyn of Quarlen**

Strength : 10 (+0)
Dexterity: 18 (+4)
Constitution :13 (+1)
Intelligence :18 (+4)
Wisdom : 12 (+1)
Charisma :14 (+2)

Simyn has red hair and green eyes. His most striking feature is his pointy moustache, which he is rather fuzzy about. He has a not so pointy goatee beard. He is dressed practically when traveling and prefers bright colors. He is 23 years old.

OOC: First post. Worth waiting for and it begins in an ale house. Splendid. Nothing beats an old classic. By the way didn't I buy a horse when I equipped my character. Has he died of heat stroke?

As for the beginning: Well, it may have started in a bar, but that was only a temporary thing. Real adventures never start in bars in my games—they're always the result of being in the right/wrong place at the right/wrong time. That being said, Korlaeth and Kamiah won't be finding any fights or hooks where they're at (Act II; Scene II).

No promises like that toward you.

OOC: Okay, I forgot about the horse when I wrote this last night. My son was testing my sanity, so I was a bit unraveled at the time.

* * *

**OOC: And off you go. Feel free to pick a seat wherever you prefer and start ordering. Later in the afternoon you'll have to find a horse so you can cross to Anari on the morrow.**

**The Enemy of My Enemy**

**Act II**

**Scene I: The End is Near**

His long journey to Barrakeesh completed, the sage Simyn of Quarlen was heading home to Lyris. For a week he had visited his friend and fellow scholar, Marcovius, learning about Vassagonian artifacts that had never been recovered. Happily he booked passage to the Teph Trail with a merchant caravan. For a couple of weeks they lastly moved across the sands, following the markers that were stuck into the sands every half mile or so—the only designation that they were on a "trail" to begin with.

He learned quickly that the Vassagonian people were sort of standoffish toward foreigners for the most part, but these merchants were not Vassagonian. They were from Casiorn, and they were more than happy to exchange tales and information with him on the long journey across the sizzling sands.

At last they reached Chahdan, where Simyn was forced to part ways—the caravan was then turning northward along the Teph Trail, then heading home after a very successful trading expedition. The sage bade them farewell and entered the city of Chahdan, realizing he would need a horse to take him the rest of the journey southward to Anari and then on home. Sure, it would have been easier to stay with the caravan, since their destination was just a short way from his home, but Simyn had time...and curiosity. He wanted to explore and see something besides sand.

The noontday sun beat down upon him with its intensity, for early autumn meant nothing where temperatures were concerned. He had to find someplace to pass the heat of day, for only a few people moved about the streets during the midday hours.

He saw three people scurry into a building with a sign over it that read "Barus" with a crude painting of a mug of ale on it. It was as good a place as any, and the fact that three people went into it had to count for something.

Simyn pushed open the door and waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark interior.

* * *

Simyn quickly found out that no one wanted to talk. His features and attire marked him as an outsider, for often times when he would look across the small gathering of folk in the room, he would see glances quickly being averted or heads turning back toward something suddenly important. Apparently they were more curious about him than he was about them.

The bartender didn't seem too talkative, either, responding only with nods and grunts—maybe an occasional word or two. Simyn quickly became frustrated and was about to turn and leave to find somewhere else that he could gain information on the region.

"Don't mind them," came a voice from next to Simyn. Someone had just seated themselves a couple of stools away from him and motioned for a drink. "We usually don't talk much to foreigners, because we have enough troubles as it is. Don't need to get entangled in anything you're carrying behind you." He cocked an eyebrow and shrugged, then gathered up his mug and went to a darker corner.

Simyn decided he would rather sweat a little and make some progress than he would to merely sit in some ordinary inn with a bunch of staring locals. He threw a silver piece onto the counter for the watery ale and departed, mounting his horse and heading onward through town. Thankfully, the vacant streets allowed him to make good time through the city. Had the sun not been so bright, he might have been able to look upward at the architecture without getting blinded.

The exit gates were not nearly as elaborate as the entrance gates were, but they had a watering trough beside them. The guard posted there motioned to the trough and a sign written in Vassagonian, which Simyn could easily read:

"No more cities for many miles...drink now."

He waited for his mount to finish drinking, then exited the city southward toward the vast Chah Mountains. At the first marker a half mile away, there was a sign pointing in two directions.

*To the left* (east) it said "Chah Pass - 125 miles to Anari border"
*To the right* (west) it said "Gold Trail - 160 miles to Anari border"

From his knowledge of the land, Simyn knew that the Chah Pass crossed the mountains, hanging as close to the valley floors as possible, ending up in Zita. The Gold Trail was a long barren stretch that hugged the foothills near the mountains, ending up in Resa.

He looked back toward Chahdan, considering turning around and heading back northward along the Teph Trail and from then on homeward. It was then he noticed something odd. More riders were coming from Chahdan at a trot, astride dark steeds. He squinted and made out perhaps three.

His hand rested on his weapon, and he felt a small surge of adrenaline as he was pressed to make a choice while these riders came closer. Perhaps they were merely impatient travelers like himself, but something inside him warned him that optimism could be deadly in Vassagonia.

* * *

From his backpack Simyn pulled out one of his most prized possessions. It had been give to him as a gift from the most skilled lens maker in Quarlen. Two years ago Simyn had defended the craftsman's daughter's virtue from two lecherous and very inebriated mercenaries. For Simyn it had meant the eternal gratitude of a loving father and for the mercenaries that they had to take a swim into the river Quarl, not a pleasant prospect.

Simyn enjoyed the workmanship and the beauty of the spyglass for a short moment before he raised it to his right eye. Before he acted he wanted to take a closer look at the three horsemen.
**Act II, Scene I – The End is Near**

With the far-reaching abilities of the lens he was using, the sage quickly counted five men, one of which had a red sash on. He knew this one was a Sharnazim, and they were not known for pleasantness and conversation skills. The men were moving along at a trot, so they would arrive shortly. Doubts less if he could see them unaided, they could also see him.

Simyn lowered the tube, not entirely sure of what to make of this. Were they looking for him? Or were they just passing through? "Quizzing without answers are best unpondered" the sage said to himself. "Come on, girl. Let's head for the hills." Simyn said to his mare. "If they want something with me, they better catch up with me first."

"Halt!" shouted the rider in Vassan as he drew nearer. Simyn had chosen to "ignore" the riders and press onward along his chosen path. In actuality, his senses were highly alert, and he knew from the sound of hoofbeats behind him that the riders had increased their pace to a gallop.

The Sharnazim pulled his horse alongside Simyn's. Nonchalantly, the sage looked over, not stopping his mount. This caused the Sharnazim to sneer and pull down the thin black mask that kept sand out of his nose and mouth.

"I said stop your horse, Feyata," said the man, switching to North Common. Simyn lowered the tube, not entirely sure of what to make of this. Were they looking for him? Or were they just passing through? "Questions without answers are best unpondered" the sage said to himself. "Come on, girl. Let's head for the hills." Simyn said to his mare. "If they want something with me, they better catch up with me first."

Simyn slowed down his pace, when he noticed that the riders were intent on following him. "Excuse me, but I don't speak Vassan" he lied. "What was the last thing you said, I didn't really understand you there?" Simyn continued trying to play the part of a silly foreigner. "Have I broken some law?"

The Sharnazim motioned for the other horsemen to block the road that Simyn was on. He forced a smile, but his eyes belied his mood. "Feyata. It would mean, ah, foreigner." The others suppressed laughter at this.

"You have broken no laws, but in Vassagonia that can be just as bad as breaking them, depending on who you bother. That being said, the road ahead of you is, ah, too dangerous to travel. There are many rockslides and cultivations that hide in the mountains. Surely a Feyata such as yourself would rather take an easier route, such as the Gold Trail."

One hand rested on his saddle horn, the other rested on the pommel of one of his scimitars. It was clear that his suggestion was somewhat more of a command and not a piece of advice. He was apparently trying to intimidate Simyn.

"My dear sir" Simyn said in Vassan this time. "I don't like threats or being insulted." Simyn's hands went down to the hilt of his rapier. "I thank you for the kind advice, but I am not without resources of my own. I'm more than able to handle hooligans. In whatever shape and form they appear, my dear sir. So if you could be so kind and let me pass, because it would be to the advantage of all of us."

The Sharnazim smiled in appreciation of the ruse. "So...Feyata...you understand our language," he said in Vassan. "Very well. But that changes nothing."

With a flick of his wrist, the two horsemen further up the road from Simyn turned their mounts broadside and pulled small hand crossbows from underneath their loose clothing. Those back further down the trail did the same.

"Grave weed," said the Sharnazim. "I wish to see how well you can handle a, ah, hoodlum. My men will shoot your horse if you do not face me in one to one combat. If you win, you have my word they will not attack, for their loyalty is true...but you won't win."

He dismounted and haded the reins of his horse away to one of his men. "Now, pretty Feyata, let us rain blood upon the sands."

With a flash of motion he drew his scimitar. The curved blade reflected the noon sun as he twisted it beside him, his own loose clothing flowing around him as he readied himself.

Simyn dismounted his horse carefully. When on the ground he removed his backpack. He drew his rapier and his poignard and said between clenched teeth: "This is a fight till the death or only to first blood? Both suits me fine."

Fortune Favors the Focused Mind (Can re-roll one
and is made with the full Combat Skill.)

### Step 1: The Long and the Short (Simyn has learnt to wield a Poignard and a mastercrafted Leather Armour for free. Can return to Quarlen for more equipment.)

Sagacious Concentration (Can see magical auras, Invisible Creatures and shapechangers for what they really are. If concentrating for two full rounds and succeeding with a DC 20 Occult Rul, Simyn can determine a spell by name and effect. Sagacious Concentration can only be used for a number of rounds per day equal to Simyn's Concentration Rank which currently is 7.)

The Sword is as Mighty as the Pen (Simyn uses his Sage of Lyris Class Level as Base Combat skill when using Poignards and Rapiers).

Excellence

Path of Heroism

Step 1: Evasion (If a Reflex Save is made that ordinarily would give Simyn half damage, he instead takes no damage. Can't be used if Simyn is helpless.)

Step 2: Uncanny Dodge (Never loses his Dex bonus to AC on account of being flat-footed. Must be totally immobilized for that to happen.)

Step 3: The Long and the Short (Simyn has learnt to wield a Poignard in his left hand and gives him an extra attack with -5 from Base Combat Skill. It also gives +2 to disarm attempts. The first attack Simyn does with the Poignard usually surprises the opponent and is made with the full Combat Skill.)

### Commentary

- **Player:** Redbeard
- **Character Name:** Simyn of Quarlen
- **Gender:** Male
- **Class:** Sage of Lyris
- **Race and Nationality:** Lyrisian
- **Level:** 7
- **Allegiance:** Good

**Attributes**

- **Strength:** 10 (+0)
- **Dexterity:** 18 (+4)
- **Constitution:** 13 (+1)
- **Intelligence:** 18 (+4)
- **Wisdom:** 12 (+1)
- **Charisma:** 14 (+2)

**Saves:** (base save ability mod misc mod total)

- **Fortitude:** 2 + 1 + 0 = 3
- **Reflexes:** 3 + 4 + 0 = 7
- **Will:** 5 + 1 + 0 = 6

**Base Combat Skill:** +5

**Initiative Bonus:** +4

**Base Movement:** 30ft

**Endurance:** 39/43

**Armour Class:** 20 [10 + 3 (armour) + 4 (dex) + 3 (class) + 0 (mag)]

**Skills**

- **Name Rnk (Total):**
- **Acrobatics (Dex):** 4 (+8)
- **Bluff (Chk):** 9 (+11)
- **Concentration (Con):** 7 (+9)
- **Craft (Weaponmithing) (Int):** 6 (+10)
- **Diplomacy (Cha):** 7 (+9)
- **Knowledge (Arcana) (Int):** 9 (+11)
- **Knowledge (Geography) (Int):** 9 (+13)
- **Knowledge (History) (Int):** 9 (+13)
- **Occult (Int):** 10 (+16)
- **Perception (Wis):** 10 (+11)
- **Ride (Dex):** 4 (+8)
- **Sense Motive (Wis):** 6 (+7)

- **due to Synergy bonus from Knowledge (Arcana).**

- **Languages:** Vaderish, Northspeak, Nael, Vassan.

**Class Features**

- **City of Origin:** Quarlen (Gains a mastercrafted rapier, a mastercrafted Poignard and a mastercrafted Leather Armour for free. Can return to Quarlen for more equipment.)

- **Sagacious Concentration (Can see magical auras, Invisible Creatures and shapechangers for what they really are. If concentrating for two full rounds and succeeding with a DC 20 Occult Rul, Simyn can determine a spell by name and effect. Sagacious Concentration can only be used for a number of rounds per day equal to Simyn's Concentration Rank which currently is 7.).**

**Excellence**

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- **Path of Heroism**

- **Step 1: Evasion (If a Reflex Save is made that ordinarily would give Simyn half damage, he instead takes no damage. Can't be used if Simyn is helpless.).**

- **Step 2: Uncanny Dodge (Never loses his Dex bonus to AC on account of being flat-footed. Must be totally immobilized for that to happen.).**

- **Step 3: The Long and the Short (Simyn has learnt to wield a Poignard in his left hand and gives him an extra attack with -5 from Base Combat Skill. It also gives +2 to disarm attempts. The first attack Simyn does with the Poignard usually surprises the opponent and is made with the full Combat Skill.).**

**Fortune Favors the Focused Mind (Can re-roll one failed Save, once per day, but must abide by the new result)
"Death," replied the Sharnazim, unaware that Simyn was about to attack. The weapon bit into his shoulders twice, and then something he had not previously sensed. He grunted and countered, flashing the scimitar at the same time that he drew his own offhand weapon, a khanjar. The scimitar flashed in the sun, but Simyn was prepared for the wild attacks. His ability to dodge such slashes of years of training came in handy, even when the Sharnazim raked with the khanjar held backwards (like a hoe) across Simyn's misdirection.

The sage simply was not where the Sharnazim had attacked, even though he had utilized the specialized combat form of the Serpent. He stepped back and prepared to fend off the Feyata's skewering attacks with his other combat form of the Mirage.

* * *

The Sharnazim missed him this time, but Simyn saw that the Sharnazim was an able fighter and took a more defensive stance. Again the sage gave the Vassan fighter three rapid thrusts, everyone hitting their mark although the last one did it barely. Simyn was more satisfied this time around, because he had done more damage this time around.

Simyn twisted his blade in wide arcs in front of him--a tap on the Sharnazim's scimitar, then a thrust at a different angle drew blood. Again the tap, then downward into the man's thigh. Thrust, retrieve.

The Sharnazim swung his scimitar in order to swat the rapier in his leg away, but Simyn was too fast. He pulled free and slashed across the man's shoulder with the poignard.

Unfazed, the leader of this small gang surged forward at the sage, pawing out with his own steel. He simply could not penetrate this blade. A chance to test the traveler's defenses. He belated himself for his clumsy display of swordsmanship. What type of message was he sending to his men? They were loyal only because of his prowess with a blade, yet this puny warrior had wounded him six times so far!

He shouted something without drawing his eyes from the Feyata. "Odari! Find Beyalo!"

* * *

Thus far Simyn had outmatched his opponent by far. Growing tired of the exercise, he tried to wrest the scimitar out of the Sharnazim's hand. Locking the scimitar with his rapier and the poignard he tried his best to match the strength of the desert warrior with his own grace and speed.

* * *

One of the horsemen whipped his mount and turned back toward Chahdan. In light of the situation, Simyn employed a tactic he had performed many times before.

Simyn locked his weapons around the scimitar and tried to wrest it from the Sharnazim's grasp. However, Simyn had trouble locking his weapons around the curved blade. His opponent rotated the scimitar and slid it out easily, then slashed out with a thrust to the sage's head.

The blade met empty air, but the Sharnazim was prepared for this and drew it sharply to the side, a move which forced Simyn to open himself up to the simultaneous attack from the wicked curved dagger. It slid across his chest with a stinging burn. (-4 EP)

The Sharnazim laughed in triumph, a cruel sound. He danced back and sprang forward again, ready for the sage's next attempts to harm him.

* * *

"So, the bee actually has a sting, but you're up against a hornet, so you'd better watch yourself." The wound wasn't great, but it hurt a lot. Simyn went back to fighting in a defensive stance, but it seemed the Sharnazim had hurt his confidence, because Simyn only scored one hit.

* * *

The Sharnazim fell victim to Simyn's first thrust, but he moved to one side sufficiently to lessen the damage. He countered with a violent thrust of his own that narrowly missed the sage's abdomen. Reversing his motion, he turned the thrust into a slash with a flick of the wrist. It slammed into Simyn's ribs, and the Sharnazim took a step back and extended the arm with the khanjar in it. The dagger flew straight toward Simyn's shoulder, barely missing it. (-5 EP)

Bleeding from numerous wounds, the Sharnazim glanced over his shoulder and saw that Beyalo would never get here in time. He backed up a bit, unsure as to whether he needed to continue or quit and face the dishonor from his men.

He had underestimated his opponent, whose strange weapons moved faster than his scimitar. He should leave. A quick glance toward his men with their crossbows fixed on Simyn's horse showed that they were wavering in misdirection.

He pulled his other scimitar free. He had not yet mastered the style, but he had to try.
**Rulings, Comments**

- You get a free attack since he just turned and ran. Then you can try to stop him or let him go.
- Level 9 Sharnazim (2) - AC: 13 (11 flat-footed) EP: 33/71 Initiative: 15
- Making an Intimate Check.
- They left his body and the horse was just meandering about.
- I'm searching the warrior's corpse and then I'll take the route that I was warned against taking. I want to satisfy my curiosity.
- If you investigate the glow, you'll need to know how you approach (mounted/on foot, on the trail/through the rocks, etc). If you just trot along the trail into the glow or turn back, I can handle that, too.
- Just in case I'm rolling a Stealth check.

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**Act II, Scene I – The End is Near**

The sharnazim was beginning to weaken. Simyn's opponent wasn't as sure of himself as he had been at the start of the fight. Another two of Simyn's thrusts hit home, but the Vassan warrior was well-aware of the pointy implement in Simyn's left hand and parried Simyn's left-hand thrust.

* * *

The Sharnazim winced as the pointed blade skewered him yet again. He saw the small dagger coming this time, however, and used his newly-drawn scimitar to block it before it could rake across his face.

"Kill him!" he shouted to his remaining men. They looked at one another and hesitated. "Kill him!" he shouted again at their insolence. They did not move. The Sharnazim cursed and swung wildly at Simyn, who easily blocked the clumsy attempt. Then he turned and started to run to his horse.

* * *

Simyn gave the sharnazim another wound, but the warrior was out of his reach now. The heavily wounded man shouted out an order, which his followers seemed hesitant to follow. "I have no quarrel with you. You have seen me fight. Those crossbow bolts may in deed be tipped with graveweed, there is a chance that you hit me, but then again, you might miss. I'm willing to take that chance, are you? I would be furious if you missed me."

* * *

"The Sharnazim clambered onto his horse and yanked on the reins, making the irritated beast snort. He slapped it on the rump with his scimitar and turned back toward the road to Chahdan. One of the men with crossbows pointed his weapon right at Simyn and fired.

The sage ducked in fear as he heard the bolt whiz over his head. He looked up in anger and prepared to pounce upon the man, but his companion with the other loaded crossbow only pointed. Simyn turned, confused.

The Sharnazim had stopped beside the other man, the rider who had stayed while his companion rode back to Chahdan. As the Sharnazim fumbled weakly for the bolt protruding from his upper back, the other man pulled out his scimitar and slashed it hard across the Sharnazim's neck.

The man whom Simyn had been facing fell off his horse, dead before he hit the ground.

"We do not tolerate cowardice," explained the one who had fired his weapon, in answer to the unspoken question. "Besides, the fight was to the death. He chose to flee, so I fulfilled the terms of the duel."

He moved his horse to stand near the body. "If you take the mountain trail, I can not guarantee your life. The Gold Trail is the safest by far, foreigner." The three of them turned their mounts and trotted back along the trail to Chahdan.

* * *

Simyn was somewhat surprised. He hadn't expected this. He had been intent on letting the desert warrior run, but that he would be killed by his own, wasn't something the sage had expected. "Different countries, different customs." These desert warriors seemed to value bravery, a lesson that could be useful in the future. Simyn stopped pondering the customs of the Vassagonians and returned to the matters at hand. Since the warrior could carry something useful, perhaps even some clue to the reason why they were so intent on making Simyn follow the longer route, he began searching the body of the fallen warrior.

* * *

As he watched the trio ride back to Chahdan, Simyn was reminded that Vassagonia was a harsh country. For an empire such as it to have thrived so long with such customs, it must have a vast army. Moreover, for that army to never be able to conquer a tiny nation such as Cloeaasia to the north, their army must be superbly adept.

Simyn checked the fallen man, noting that the site around the bolt was already puffy and reddish-black. Indeed it was graveweed. He avoided the wound as he searched and found 24 Crowns and a tattered parchment on the man. Opening the document, he noted crude Vassagonian script:

"Ahomed, detain anyone heading southward out of Chahdan long enough for us to prepare. Do not kill anyone unless they avoid the Gold Trail."

The saddlebags on the horse provided no new information, just a couple of extra water skins and grain.

Simyn glanced along the road that eventually wound its way into the mountains. What was so forbidden about that path? Was Vassagonia planning something?

* * *

For the rest of the day, Simyn traveled onward. The trail became more rocky, much to the satisfaction of his mount, which had a rough time negotiating the sands. After traveling at a slight slope for a couple of hours, Simyn stopped long enough to watch the sun set behind the mountains behind him. The sands were ablaze with the late afternoon light, the beauty of the desert for a moment obscuring the harsh people who lived within in.

With a sigh, Simyn turned his mount back along the trail. Soon he would be forced to make camp for the night, so he began looking for a decent site. Two hours later, he saw a glow coming from up ahead, light reflecting off the slopes around him.

* * *

Not sure of the nature of the mysterious glow, Simyn silently dismounted the horse. He led the horse into the rocks and left it in what he deemed a secure place and tried to move silently towards the glow using the rocks as cover. Simyn was a curious nature, but that didn't mean that he couldn't use caution when it seemed necessary.

* * *

Tying his horse's reins to a rock, Simyn moved as quietly as he could along the rocks to see what was causing the glow. Unable to see his footing some of the time, the sage slowed his steps, and after a half hour of walking, he still hadn't found the source, though the glow was very intense.

He stopped and listened, hearing what sounded like several armorers—the intermittent banging of hammers on anvils. Horses whinnied, and several shouts carried through the mountains to the sage's ears. Now he was highly intrigued.

Moving along, as quickly as possible while being quiet, he finally topped a small rock face and saw the source of the glow. His jaw dropped in shock as he understood the stranger's warning earlier in the day after the duel.
Act II, Scene I – The End is Near

In a large flat valley below were a few hundred tents and campfires. More men than could be counted were moving about down below, and Simyn estimated that there must be at least a thousand people in the encampment. He scanned the edges of the valley and saw the trail he had been on came around a bend, topped the ridge a few hundred feet further to his left, then hugged the cliff wall and disappeared into the valley below. There were so many people spread out over the area, that Simyn could not follow the trail and soon lost track of where it was, let alone where it exited.

As he gazed at the army and wondered what it could foretell, he heard a noise from somewhere to his right. Two Sharnazim– clad in the traditional black garb with red sashes accenting it--were ambling along as best they could, patrolling the rim of the basin where their army was camped.

Simyn eased back down and waited for them to pass, hoping he was hidden well enough in the shadows to avoid detection. The guards were preoccupied, and their night vision was poor since they were in an artificially lit environment, so they passed the sage right by, talking about how they were tired of sitting around and waiting in the valley.

* * *

Simyn was baffled by what he had seen. It was clear that Vassagonia had amassed an army and for what purpose? It seemed probable that the desert empire was on the war path again. Which country would be invaded this time?

Simyn didn’t feel like asking anyone in the camp, so he decided to leave as quietly as he could. The Sharnazim had been right, he should have chosen the other path.

* * *

The sage moved hastily away from the encampment, pondering why a small army was situated a few dozen miles from Anari. No force that weak could ever withstand the Anari cavalry, for they were one of the reasons that Vassagonia’s empire was boxed in.

On the return journey, Simyn took an alternate route which allowed him to climb atop a rock protrusion and see if he could see Chahdan. What he saw left a knot in his stomach, and he knew that he had to act fast or be trapped.

Stretching across the sands were two trails of torches heading into the city of Chahdan. Another larger line of torches had just emerged from the city, and there was the distinct possibility they were headed his direction.

As Simyn reached his mount, he noticed the beast was spooked. As he touched it, the animal jerked back slightly, its eyes wide. It let out a short shrill cry and backed away, bugging on the rock that kept it in place.

* * *

Simyn realized his horse was not backing away from him, but from someone else. He paused and in the short span of silence heard a rock move slightly behind him. He drew his two weapons and spun around in time to see a dark shape moving toward him, silhouetted in the glow upon the distant rocks.

"Your head will secure my promotion, spy" said an eager voice as a young Sharnazim scout scrambled to maintain his footing. He swung his blade and missed, thanks to Simyn’s quick reflexes.

* * *

Being prepared, Simyn quickly engaged the young warrior. Having no problem to match the young sharnazim’s speed, the sage quickly struck him thrice. First he gave the youngster a cut across the chest with the rapier, followed by a quick thrust in the stomach with the poignard, followed by a rapier thrust that hit the sharnazim’s left shoulder.

* * *

Simyn far outmatched this opponent. Even in the darkness, his attacks were on target, and the young Sharnazim soon had a trio of wounds to show for his poor skill at sneaking up on a foe. Undaunted, the Vassagonian lunged again at Simyn, who easily parried the strike with his off-hand.

The Sharnazim grunted as he fell off-balance from the deflection, and he staggered and slipped on the loose rocks. What had started as an opportunity to advance his status had quickly become a mistake that left him in a position to be slain.

* * *

As Simyn suspected the young warrior was as inexperienced as the sage had believed. A quick rapier thrust followed by a stab in the guts from the poignard. The sharnazim was now heavily wounded and had no chance to defend himself. Simyn ended the fight with a thrust throw the chest of the young warrior. A short second the warrior looked at Simyn in disbelief, not really understanding that he took his dying breath. Then he fell forward with a thud, dead.

Simyn felt sorry for the poor bastard. He had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But there was no time for regrets. The sage quickly hid the body and looked it through for interesting items.

* * *

Simyn patted down the corpse to see if there was anything of value on it, and not surprisingly there was not. He dragged it quickly behind a large boulder and mounted his horse. Hoping his mount wouldn’t throw a shoe on the trail, he spurred it onward to beat the line of soldiers back down to the foothills. He realized he would never reach the Gold Trail in time, so Simyn diverted his mount into the rocky wilderness to the south. He stopped a couple hundred yards off the main road and made sure his horse was hidden behind the terrain. Then he crouched down and watched as the army marched past.

From his vantage point up on the mountainside, the army appeared much smaller than it was. There were thousands of soldiers, many of them Sharnazim, marching up the trail that led through the mountains to Anari. It seemed that Vassagonia was getting her pieces in place for some grand military game of conquest. Several wagons with covered materials (lumber?) rolled past.

Simyn shook his head as he finally quit watching after an hour and sat down, his back upon a smooth rock. With the allies that Anari had, why would Vassagonia attempt this? Were they even going to attack Anari? Perhaps they were building a new fortification in the valley. A garrison to prevent...prevent what? Was Vassagonia sealing its borders to all outsiders?

Simyn considered this. If the Vassagonians sealed their border, then he’d be trapped, which meant he was as good as dead. Taking a meal from his saddlebags, he began to munch on the dried food as he prepared to rest for the night. It would be pointless to carry on. He put a feed sack around his horse’s muzzle and then gave it some water before huddling behind the rock and sleeping.

* * *

Simyn’s horse woke him, making soft snickering sounds and whuffling noises. He opened his eyes slowly, then remembered the army from the night before. He cautiously peered over the rock, aware that he would be quite visible if he was not careful. Nothing was there. No army. As far as he could see up the trail, there was no army. All was silent toward Chahdan, as well. Scratching his head and longing to bathe, Simyn remounted the horse and moved back out onto the trail.

* * *
Act II, Scene I – The End is Near

Simyn pondered his next way of action. The army had moved in utmost secrecy or at least tried to. Since the army probably hadn't moved down the trail just to return the same way during the night, Simyn guessed that the mountain trail was free to travel again. Perhaps he could even get a clue to what the army had done up in the mountains. It could be dangerous, but the sage was really curious. Perhaps he could find some interesting clues in the old army camp, or what was left of it. If the army was intent on hiding as Simyn believed, he guessed that they had tried to eradicate any traces of their last camp place. They might have tried, but Simyn didn't really believe that an army so big could do that without leaving any traces. Eagerly he spurred his mount up the mountain side again. He might find some clues, he might not, but at any rate it was the shorter route and by now he was really longing to leave Vassagonia.

* * *

The sage employed a tactic of riding a bit, then stopping and listening. The first six times he did this, he heard nothing. The seventh time, however, he heard distant hammering and shouts.

The terrain looked different in the morning light, but he recognized the small 'trail' (if you could call it that) where he had abandoned the road and tethered his horse last night. He trotted a bit further and stopped. The shouts were concerning 'beams' and 'brace-posts' and other less-than-translatable Vassagonian idioms that dealt with construction.

He was about to reach into his pack and get his spyglass when he heard a shrill whistle pierce the morning air. He also noticed, to his dismay, the hammering and shouting stopped when the whistle did. A new voice started shouting, and a face pecked over a large rock formation a quarter mile ahead. This person blew the whistle again and shouted loudly, “Intruder! Outsider! Mount up!”

* * *

Simyn cursed loudly and turned his horse around. “Curiosity will kill me one day, but I don’t want it to be today, so I guess it’s up to you girl!” Simyn said to his horse as he rode down the sloping path. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Simyn hadn’t seen what they were building in the mountains and he silently prayed to Ishir that he would never poke his nose in matters where it didn’t belong so she could kind enough to let us escape.

* * *

Simyn whirled his mount around and hoped his fear was known to the horse. The animal jerked a couple of times at the sudden movement, then bolted down the slight slope, whence they came. Sparing a glance over his shoulder as he leaned low to the horse, Simyn saw the riders—at least a hand of them—pursuing, some waving their weapons in the air as they rode.

He knew he was a match for a couple of them, but against so many, he was left with only one valid option. He turned to face the horse, and urged his horse to go faster. He never spared another glance as they left the slope and reached the sands. The horse was already tired, and hitting the difficult terrain made it snort in disagreement. Simyn did not let up, however. He kept riding until he reached the fork that led left to Anari or right to Chahdan.

Without hesitation, he jerked hard on the left side of the reins. The horse turned and kicked up a spray of sand as the sage headed southward. When he looked up, he saw the riders still behind him, with not much of a change between them in distance. Cursing and hoping his horse could last in the rising Vassagonian heat, Simyn pressed close to the animal’s mane to resist drag from the wind and speed his escape.

After a quarter hour of steady galloping, Simyn looked over his shoulder once more, and was relieved to see no one there. Sweating heavily, he slowed his horse, which went from galloping to lumbering along sluggishly quite quickly. He knew the beast was exhausted, and since he could see no one, he dismounted and pulled out a small basin from his saddlebags. Taking a long swig of water for himself, he poured almost all of the rest into the basin.

His horse snorted again and began drinking thirstily. The sun was still not quite over the mountains to his east, but Simyn could already feel the heat rising. He looked all around for some type of cover from the harsh midday sun that would come, but saw nothing at a glance.

* * *

Simyn sat down and picked up a larauna fruit from his backpack. He ate it in silence. Why hadn’t he bought more supplies when he was in Chahdan? The fruits he had would only feed him through the day and then he would be totally out of food. The sage couldn’t think of any worse places to be out of food than the Vassagonian desert. Perhaps he would be lucky and meet some travelers on the way or perhaps he wouldn’t. Simyn thought about the prospect of returning to Chahdan and he decided against it. He was probably one of the most wanted men in this part of the desert empire. Simyn filled his waterskin and re-mounted his horse. He needed to find a good shelter but where?

* * *

Simyn searched the nearby cliff faces and rock formations for a cave or some form of tunnel. Sadly, he found nothing. The heat grew in intensity, and the sage was forced to take off his heavier clothing. He knew very little of how to survive in such a hostile environment—in any environment really, for such was the way of the learned sometimes. He had read books, though, so he knew to keep on some clothing to absorb the sweat and help cool him down. Luckily, a slight breeze blew in from the north, and in the distance (to the south), Simyn could see clouds forming up above the mountain peaks.

Apparently there was a warm moist air current that carried over this part of the desert—probably from Ruanon or even Lyris. It hit the slopes and was forced upward into cold air, where it was condensing. That meant that Anari was not far. Perhaps another day of riding,

Simyn looked as his horse, which was having a tough time staying in the shade under the outcropping where they were. The sage dreaded the evening, for he knew the sun would be moving more into an angle to strike them directly once it went westward over its zenith.

With a grim sigh at the lack of provisions, Simyn decided he would have to sleep through the day and travel at night, for that was simply the best option. Perhaps at night he would stumble across some desert creature that he could be fortunate enough to catch.

But could he make himself eat it?

* * *

The sun finally crept down over the mountains far to the west, and the change in the air was noticeable. He was hungry and thirsty, and he longed for a bath so that he would feel civilized again. His once bright attire was now rather dingy and drab, even tattered and worn in places. With a sigh he gathered his gear and mounted his horse.

Rather than gallop, Simyn opted instead to trot along. If he exhausted his horse, there would be no water to give it. Drearily he moved along the trail, marker after marker, knowing that Anari’s northwest town of Resa awaited him with a warm bath and hot food.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

After four hours of riding, Simyn stopped to rest his aching rump and back. As he climbed down from the saddle, he heard something in the slopes to his left. Rocks clattered down the mountain for no reason. He peered cautiously at the dark slopes, seeing nothing but shadows running together.
Simyn sighed. Caught in a trap. Without knowing the numbers of Sharnazim the sage couldn't calculate his chances of survival. He wouldn't sell himself easily though and he still had one ace up his sleeve that he hadn't used yet. He looked towards the sky. They couldn't be seen in the light of day, but the sage knew that they were there and their might was his to command. "Let the wrath of the heavens rain down on you!" he shouted in Vassan and performed the spell. With satisfaction he saw how fire in the form of a shooting star came down and struck the sharnazim warrior closest to Simyn.

* * *

The clouds brightened a bit as the firelight fell from the heavens. The thin stream of fiery light shot through the clouds, causing the clouds to part in a circle around it as it shot through them. It smote one of the advancing shadows and surrounded him in its glow. He shrieked and dropped his weapon, for his clothing was now on fire.

Simyn watched as the glow illuminated the mountain slope, and he saw the archer crouched on a small ledge. The man shouted something and threw his bow down, scrambling away into the darkness.

The other two figures leaped to their fellow's aid and pushed him into the sand, throwing handfuls of it on him to douse the flames. By now, he was screaming loud enough to wake sleeping babes in Navasari!....

Simyn had the advantage for the moment. He decided how best to use it.

* * *

"If you think I will stop with that you're wrong you sneaky bastards!" the sage said to himself and prepared a spell again. Perhaps this would scare them off, else he would just have to charge them.

* * *

They never saw it coming.

While helping their friend douse his flames, the Sharnazim neglected to notice the fire streaking once more from above until it was almost upon them. As the sky lightened around them and their shadows became visible on the sand, one looked up while the other leaped as best he could away. The fiery beam struck the gawking one with a loud whooshing noise.

He screamed as his fallen friend had, clawing at his attire to remove it before he became too badly burned. He fell to the sand and began wriggling and calling for help, but that help would never come.

The other Sharnazim who had rushed Simyn was already running back toward the safety of the mountains, trying to find some rock to hide under or some hole to take refuge in until this fire-commanding demon had left.

The first person Simyn had struck rolled around weakly and moaned, while the second one still yelled for help and tried to remove his clothing.

* * *

Simyn drew his rapier and poignard and left his hiding place. He didn't really want the man to burn to death so he tried to do the right thing; give the man a swift clean death.

* * *

The sage moved to the burning man and calculated his attack, waiting until he had a clear shot at the heart. Before smothering the flames of the now-dead man, Simyn placed his foot on his first attacker's ribs, just underneath the chest muscles. Bracing his poignard against his boot as a guide, he thrust downward quickly, piercing the heart.

Repulsed by the smell, Simyn heaped sand on the bodies after the most basic and quick of searches. Neither man had anything with him.

Since I speak the man that soon will be dead is helpless, I try to perform a killing blow with fortitude save DC 14. If I possible I'll do the same thing with the other sharnazim or just attack him outright if he's still struggling. If this can be done I'll search their bodies and check the area for supplies. Perhaps they have been so considerate to leave food for a starving sage.

* * *

With the flames of the now-dead men, Simyn returned with the pack and mounted his horse, setting southward once more.

After eating a handful of the fruit and taking a long draught of water, Simyn returned with the pack and mounted his horse, which held learned quickly it had best sleep now if it was to get any rest at all.

* * *

The sage crept back as far as he dared into the cave until the sun helped illuminate the far reaches. Something was in the very back, which was only around 60' from the mouth and around a slight bend.

Simyn made out a rough human form, and he called out to it. Nothing moved. Emboldened by his latest encounters, and driven by his insatiable curiosity, Simyn edged closer and discovered that the human form was nothing more than a skeleton. With no sun to bleach the bones, they were a dingy brownish-black from where the body decomposed, apparently long ago, for no smell emanated from the corpse.

Simyn noted that there was a broken arrow protruding from the ribs, and that the thigh bone of the right leg was snapped clean in half. The wounded wretch had gotten himself mortally wounded and crawled in here to die. Simyn could not suppress a shudder as he realized the outcome of the ambush the night before could have left him in much similar shape.

Wary to touch the body for fear of catching some lingering disease, Simyn instead pecked around in the possessions laid off one side in a small simple sack. There was a stoppered but broken bottle (maybe he chose to pack the wrong potion instead of Lämpiput?), what was once probably an apple, a handful of coins (10 Crowns), a dried inkwell, a stylus, and a rolled up parchment that was cracking due to age and poor air quality.

I'll rest and explore the cave later if possible. Simyn has really earned his hopefully(!) long nap. It has been very exciting. Good Job Kai Lord!

Rulings, Comments

Let the bastards come I will not sell myself cheaply. Perhaps this will scare them. I assume that I cast the spell when one of them is in range.

It appears you have used a fitting display of power to overcome this ambush before it even really began—well done. Minimal effort, maximum effect.

The first one you struck is badly wounded. The second one is becoming more wounded because he has never learned how to roll to smother flames. In another few seconds, he will burn to death.
Act II, Scene I – The End is Near

Simyn quickly pocketed the gold coins and took a careful peek at the parchment, trying to touch it as little as possible. The sage was always curious and especially of things written. Perhaps he could get a clue to the identity of the man or woman who had died here.

The sage carefully lifted the dry parchment from the container, which served as its tomb much the same way this cave served as the tomb of whoever this was. Even curious for knowledge, even if it was meaningless or mundane, he moved back to the mouth of the tunnel and carefully unfurled it, causing small flakes to fall off the edges as it crinkled open. The writing on the pages was faded and hard to read because of the creases and cracks across the symbols, but Simyn immediately recognized the Vassanian script, though it had a bit of variation to it. Perhaps it was from one of the neighboring nations that used the same characters in their language.

He spent some time looking at it, deciphering as much as he could. Satisfied with what he could make out on the parchment, Simyn spent the rest of the day sleeping.

Something crawling on his hand woke Simyn. He jerked awake and saw a brown sand spider cautiously creeping along his left wrist. With a jerk of fear and revulsion, the sage slung the spider off his arm and stood quickly. It was already night. He had lost precious time.

Cautiously he led his horse from the cave and watched the surrounding rock face, listening with his ear cocked to hear any bowstrings snapping in the night air.

Silence.

He chanced it and got onto his horse, riding along the trail at more than a trot, chewing on some of the dried meat he had found in the Vassanian’s pack the night before. It wasn’t much, but it would have to do. The sage felt sorry for his horse, which had had nothing to eat all day. He patted its neck and promised good grains and cold water once they reached Anari.

Silence.

In summary, north = open desert; rocky areas are covered with trees, most of the hillocks around the range. Below the south Chah range is the Daroga forest, which is growing steadily northward, so that most of the hillslopes around the rocky areas are covered with trees, despite the proximity of the desert.

In summary, north = open desert; west = savannah; south = guarded gate; east = high hills with thickening forest.

Your best bet for entry into Anari would be sneaking around in the Daroga forest, waiting until patrols pass by, then sneaking around in the Daniga to avoid being seen till such time that you can exit and carry on about the tall fence runs the entire length of the border....

He gestured at the guards beside the gates. “Go get this man 2 buckets of water from the well, and a week’s worth of food for your commanding officer and that’s urgent!” Simyn wasn’t very fond of the idea of staying on the Vassagonian side of the border.

The guard looked Simyn down and up, showing apparent disdain. How could anyone so unkempt bear news of any importance? Simyn’s bedraggled appearance and urgent tones failed to impress the guard. The two men in the towers above stood a bit more attentively, one propping a slim crossbow on the railing, though it was only intended as a threat for it was not aimed at anyone. Simyn’s bedraggled appearance and urgent tones failed to impress the guard. The two men in the towers above stood a bit more attentively, one propping a slim crossbow on the railing, though it was only intended as a threat for it was not aimed at anyone. Simyn’s bedraggled appearance and urgent tones failed to impress the guard. The two men in the towers above stood a bit more attentively, one propping a slim crossbow on the railing, though it was only intended as a threat for it was not aimed at anyone. Simyn’s bedraggled appearance and urgent tones failed to impress the guard. The two men in the towers above stood a bit more attentively, one propping a slim crossbow on the railing, though it was only intended as a threat for it was not aimed at anyone. Simyn’s bedraggled appearance and urgent tones failed to impress the guard. The two men in the towers above stood a bit more attentively, one propping a slim crossbow on the railing, though it was only intended as a threat for it was not aimed at anyone. Simyn’s bedraggled appearance and urgent tones failed to impress the guard. The two men in the towers above stood a bit more attentively, one propping a slim crossbow on the railing, though it was only intended as a threat for it was not aimed at anyone.

Simyn noticed guards in the two towers on either side of the gate watching with bored amusement. On the other side of the fence, he heard hoofbeats of the patrols going back and forth, and voices of men talking.

Go back?!

Silence.

The gate opened slightly to allow him passage. In a moment, an older man with a pock-marked face tanned by years of duty appeared. His hands rested on the pommels of two jewel-encrusted scimitars as he strode to meet the sage.

“Orman tells me you have news of Vassagonia that we must hear! What is it then?”

Simyn related his account of witnessing the small camp in the mountains, and how a massive army moved into position at that camp overnight. The commander listened with stony composure, showing neither excitement nor disbelief, neither accepting nor rejecting the news.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll send word to the Eastern Daroga outpost at sunrise. However, this changes nothing. President Kubudei has decreed that the border be sealed under national security and emergency protocols. Unless you have papers signed by Kubudei or one of his designees, you will have to return to Chahdan.”

The man turned to leave, not waiting for any debate or discussion.

Simyn sighed heavily. “If I am to return to Chahdan, could you at least sell me some food and supplies? My horse hasn’t eaten in a while and I’m starving. I’ll pay you handsomely.”

The commander stopped at this. “We’re an army, son, not a general store. Still, you don’t look like you’ve had too pleasant a trip....”

He gestured at the guards beside the gates. “Go get this man 2 buckets of water from the well, and a week’s worth of food for both him and his steed.”

Minutes later, Simyn was fully stocked, the saddle bags of his horse bulging with provisions. Apparently this military ate better than most.

Under the watchful eye of the guards, Simyn headed northward for a couple of miles, mindful of the sun rising—If this was the fall, he would hate to have been wandering the desert in summer!

The sage pulled out his spyglass and turned around to look at the outpost. No one was checking to make sure he wasn’t stopping. He reconsidered what awaited him in Chahdan. There had to be a way into Anari....

The sage was grateful for the food. As he wondered about the next action he ate. He began checking out the surrounding environment. Perhaps he could go around the guards in some way. He briefly considered bribing the guards, but these guards didn’t seem to be the types who reacted to bribes in a positive way.
I await nightfall, try to put something on the hooves of my horse and set out on my mission to pass the border.

I started this at 11am today, then fell asleep in my chair for the next 6 hours. Now I'm back home from eating and can post. Ahh, the joys of overcoming nightshift on the first day off... Stealth Check. I'll determine opposed Perception checks. Note that the time and weather may have been adjusted from the info I gave you earlier. As we get closer to merging all groups, I can better gauge the time frames.

Time: Midway between sunset and midnight, waning gibbous moon.
Date: Raidho 26 (roughly Sep 26)
Weather: Partly cloudy, light wind from NW.

I need to better explain what this border is like:

The fence is on the top of a small rise, and it stands about 4' high, with crossbeams approximately 1' apart. Given the angle, the horse would have a tough time jumping it, especially wearing socks.

The tower is indeed bare-bones. It has 4 corner-posts, each leaning slightly toward center. There is a crude staircase leading to the second floor, and another staircase leading to the third floor, where sits a large bell and a torch. The bottom is open, with the four corner-posts being at the four corners of an imaginary square, so that riders along the border can pass under it with no difficulty, and riders across the border likewise can get straight through.

Here are the following DCs that are relevant. If you do something not listed here, I'll determine the DC:

- Mount horse and jump over fence: DC25 Ride
- Mount horse and rush past the border: DC15 Ride
- Sneak up on guard: DC18 Stealth (alone)
- Sneak up on guard: DC20 Stealth (mounted) + DC18 Ride
- Mount horse and jump over fence: DC25 Ride
- Mount horse and rush past the border: DC15 Ride
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Time: Midway between sunset and midnight, waning gibbous moon.
Date: Raidho 26 (roughly Sep 26)
Weather: Partly cloudy, light wind from NW.

We're going to handle this one the old way. Roll a 1d8 to determine which direction you've gone in--I have already assigned what the compass points are.

Also, feel free to flesh out your post a bit if you'd like. I know all you need to do is roll, but in a short while, you'll be making some heavy decisions again.

Time: Near midnight, waning gibbous moon.
Date: Raidho 26 (roughly Sep 26)
Weather: Partly cloudy, light wind from NW.
Simyn rode for hours, happily surprised that no one had captured him...yet. He wouldn't let himself be too optimistic, for it might cloud his judgment. The sage yawned, realizing that he was very tired. His sleep pattern was all messed up, for he wanted to sleep and stay awake at the same time. Rubbing his eyes, he looked for some signs of civilization, but this forest (the Daroga forest, if he remembered correctly) stretched out far across the Anari northern border. He looked skyward to see if there were any stars visible to guide his path.

The canopy of trees covered most of the sky, and what they revealed was partially obscured by clouds. In frustration, Simyn turned his horse in the direction he thought was south.

* * *

Simyn felt relieved. He had just been through one of the most terrible ordeals he could remember. It seemed that the last days had been all about running and evading guards. First he had been hunted by the Vassagonians and now by the Anari guards. He dismounted for ten minutes rest, where he removed the rags from his horse's hooves. He looked the old mare into her eyes and she looked back at the stupid human. The sage smiled at her brown eyes. "You have served me well, old girl. I owe you more than you ever can understand. I will give you a royal treat when we're safe in Tahou, or wherever safe is on this crazy orb." The sage opened up his backpack and began rummaging around. "I think I have an apple somewhere. Ah, here it is. You have deserved this, old girl."

He gave the apple to the old mare, who happily ate it. The sage gave the horse a pat and mounted her again. "I have neglected to give you a name, old mare. That is a mistake that must be corrected. I will name you Starfall. Come on, Starfall, we're not safe yet. I won't slow down before we're safe in Tahou." With that Simyn rode on, tired but happy. He literally wasn't out of the woods yet, but he was confident that he would survive anything that fate would put in his way.

* * *

The figure that if he was headed south when he crossed the border, and he turned roughly east, then if he turned to his right, he'd be heading south again. That is, of course, unless he had drifted a few degrees away from due east, in which case he could be heading southwest. Sighing, he knew that at least he wasn't heading north, back toward the border.

His mount, Starfall, didn't slip on the slopes nearly as much now that the socks were off. Creating a heavily forested hill, Simyn saw something odd, but familiar.

In the middle of the forest, there were torches—just a few—set into the ground, far ahead in a deeper-than-usual valley. In the light of the torches, Simyn could make out all manner of tents. Milling about around these tents were black-clad soldiers.

Memories of his close encounters with the Vassagonian army made him shudder, but he looked closer as one person exited a well-lit tent. The sashes these men wore were green. Tying Starfall to a branch nearby, Simyn eased away to get a better vantage point, hopefully seeing something that the trees between him and the campsite had obscured.

Moving cautiously along on his belly, careful not to make too much noise, the sage slowly moved until he was able to see a long flag in the middle of the camp. It had two green eagle's claws, seen from the bottom— as the eagle's prey would see it.

Cloeasia? Camped out in Anari? What was this all about?

* * *

The banner of the army belonged to the Talions of Rashuur, a mercenary band with a six hundred year long contract. Simyn was no expert on Cloeasia, but remembered reading about it once. So the question was, what were the mercenaries who should be protecting Cloeasia doing here in Anari. The sage began to suspect that he had taken a wrong turn somewhere. He shook his head in disgust. This was a riddle he couldn't solve and he wasn't really ready to stick his nose into other's affairs again. Simyn swallowed his curiosity and returned to Starfall. He mounted the horse and took a long detour around the camp. He had been lucky this far. He had escaped the Vassagonians and the Anari. He wasn’t up for the prospect of being chased by Cloeasians because he was snoozing around.

* * *

Simyn remembered quite a bit about the Talions of Rashuur, and he knew that they were loyal to a fault. For thirty generations they had lived in Cloeasia, and many had families within the nation, which would make matters quite complicated should the contract not be renewed. For over a century, Vassagonia had tried to lure them into breaching the agreement, offering wealth beyond imagination. Nothing worked.

In a fit of rage, the ruling Overlord of that region launched an attack upon Cloeasia. He lost so many men in the assault that a neighboring Warlord seized the opportunity to overthrow him. It is rumored that with no army left and no home to return to, the Overlord wandered into the desert and died.

However, with the contract set to expire so soon, and with the Zultan unable to possibly match Vassagonia’s standing offer, it seemed that a change in control was imminent, and that the Vassagonian empire—after years of stagnation—would finally expand.

Still that did not answer why a small group of Talions were hiding in Anari. If they were seeking to ally, why slink about? And if Vassagonia was preparing to overthrow the Zultan, using his own men against him, why was there an army of over ten thousand massed just a few dozen miles to the north?

As Simyn started to move back the way he came, something whizzed over his head. And again. He knew that sound all too well.

Someone was shooting arrows at him...again!

"They saw us!" said someone behind Simyn, startling him. "Get out of here!

Simyn looked up to see the night come alive as guards who he had never even noticed broke out of their hiding places. Their attire was strange, consisting of tattered strips of cloth. Simyn wisely stayed put and motionless as they rushed past. In the forest behind him, he heard screams a few seconds later. Looking at the camp, Simyn could see that everyone was armed and looking toward the dark, waiting to see what happened.

The strangely-attired beings came back and walked down into the camp, apparently giving a report of what happened. Simyn did not hang around to see what happened. He moved back through the thicket to Starfall, mounted up, and moved as quietly as he could in the beginnings of a large circle around the camp.

To make matters worse, it began to rain. At least his horse's footfalls wouldn't be heard as easily....

As Simyn moved slowly through the forest, he noticed a torch or some sort of light heading his direction. He diverted his path and saw a wiry man, with long dark hair and characteristic facial hair holding a torch and riding fast back toward the camp.
Rulings, Comments

The sage continues on his endless quest with more questions than ever. I haven't been reading the main thread at all, so I have no clue at all about any references made to it. My own thread has been so exciting.

Basically, enter here, or try to find somewhere else.

Act II, Scene I – The End is Near

It seemed that Simyn was not the only one trying to remain hidden in the forest this night. Some sort of other party had been spying on the Talons as well, but they had been detected. "Oh lady Starfall" the sage said to the old mare, "is there somewhere in this crazy world where we could camp without finding a band of armed men in the process? And now it begins to rain as well."

Simyn watched the man ride by, thankful that in his haste, the rider had failed to notice him so close by. Wherever he was going, he was in a major hurry. The sage sighed and patted Starfall on the neck. He might as well go in the direction the man had come from.

The rain was not so much a hindrance as it was a sheer nuisance. In the distance, southwards a bit, the lightning was intense at times. Thunder peeled through the sky, and as Simyn got further south (or was he headed east? Who knew at this point? Who cared?) he noticed some large structure--no, a perimeter wall around a series of structures--in the distance, on the plains before him.

It was too small to be Resa. Perhaps it was a new settlement? The sage could not be sure, but he was surely going to find out. Had the rider come from here? Simyn could not be sure because--wait...

Another couple of horses galloped past, and the riders paid Simyn no mind. They had come from somewhere around the west side of the perimeter, so the sage headed in that direction. After a few minutes of searching, he found a gate in the high wall that stretched for a long distance. The rain had become a hindrance now, for the sage could not hear his own horse snorting, let alone anyone waiting in ambush on the other side.

He turned Starfall around and decided what he wanted to do.

The sage felt terrible. It was raining and he feared that he would catch a cold if he would spend more time outside. The gate was as good an option as anyone so he rode forwards and began exploring it. He had no idea what settlement this could be. Was it deserted? Or was it inhabited? Perhaps he could find food and shelter inside or would he only find death and danger. The naturally optimistic sage didn't feel lucky tonight.

Simyn entered the walled area, tethering his horse just inside to prevent anyone from seeing it outside. The array of buildings was confusing to him, but he focused on the glowing area in the distance. Judging by the flickering light, something large was burning. He was curious to know what it was, so he pressed forward, hungrily as the rain got harder. As he rounded a large building, he saw a strange sight. In the middle of a road lay many dead bodies. To the right of them was a burned building--still smoking--and a partial net that once hung between the two buildings. It was now singed and had fallen loose from the burned building.

Straight ahead a man on a horse trotted up to join a group of people--possibly a Kai, a couple of Vakeros, and a knight of some sort. They were huddled over something, staring southward and talking. At the sight of Simyn, they readied themselves.

They were obviously just fresh out of battle and still wary.
Act II, Scene II – Just in Time…

Koralith looked behind him as the stream of horsemen went to the border station where he had just come through. They turned north and south and began galloping along the border for some reason. It was certainly unusual, especially at this time of night. In another few minutes as he sped along the trail, waiting to find a side road heading northward or northwest, he was forced to move off the road again as another contingent of the famed Anari cavalry charged past him. He stopped for a minute and looked back whence he came. Was there some sort of trouble? Certainly not, for they would have asked a Vakeros for help. He had just come through there, and nothing was amiss. With a shrug, he moved back on the trail, ready to pull aside for more riders.

They never came, however, and the Vakeros rode another hour before he found an inn. He was tired, having ridden all afternoon, and so he stopped and rested for the night. The next morning, he walked downstairs to find several grumbling foreigners seated at the various long tables. Seated at one of them was a female Vakeros, with no one sitting anywhere near her for some reason. She ate her meal in silence, showing no signs of care.

* * *

Koralith walked down in his typical "on assignment" garb, drab breeches and a baggy shirt and tunic to hide his bluesteel chain. Expecting an early start, he carried his backpack over his shoulder and his wool travelling cloak over his left arm. A dagger at his waist is his only visible weapon, its hit wrapped in a long strip of leather to hide its construction.

He set down his cloak and backpack near Kamilah's table, and when she glanced up, he gestured at the seat across from her. “Mind if I join you?” he speaks North Speak with a slight Anari accent, and to all casual observance is a local traveler.

* * *

Kamilah, startled and taken back by the man who had improvidently set his things near the long table where she had found comfort, was quick to take notice. Peeking her finely shaped brow the young woman repositioned her small yet well-proportioned figure in the uncomfortable wooden chair.

With scarlet lips Koralith prepared to utter untruly comments to the appallingly attired man, yet with a feeble change of heart she gestured to the man quaintly, nodding her head to assure that she had granted him permission to take his seat. This was something she despises being bothered by rancid human figures keeping conversations with strangers concise.

With minute digits the woman plucked strands of auburn hair behind her hair while staring at him keenly.

“What is it that you want traveler?”

With hues of misty blue the gaze continued, her voice was delicate yet demanding and fierce in the same manner.

“Is money what you desire, surely it is for your garments are dirty, your face dirty and hair gone astray, I’d take you for nothing more than a lowly beggar.”

A smirk formed across her lips and her eyes became vibrant; there was no doubting that she loved a challenge here and there.

* * *

Koralith sits, a small smile playing across his lips. “It seems Dessi’s courtesy is somewhat less than usual…” He props his feet on a second chair next to him, and grins mischievously at Kamilah, “The beauty of its women, however, is somewhat proportioned in the uncomfortable wooden chair.

Continuing to grin at Koralith, he nonchalantly withdraws a dagger from his belt, its blade glistening blue in the slatted sunlight streaming in through the east window. He looks over the blade critically, appearing to search for imperfections while still half-smiling at the lady across from him.

* * *

As Koralith takes a seat, the innkeeper comes up and sets a plate of food in front of him. The barmaid isn’t far behind with a glass of some type of juice.

From the grumbles around them and the sour faces on many people with packs set beside them, it is clear that something has happened—which Koralith despises being bothered by rancid human figures keeping conversations with strangers concise.

Closed for some reason,” replies a mercenary-looking fellow near the door. “Might as well come on in and have a seat. The guards say it’s temporary.”

The innkeeper shook his head. “Last time they shut the border, it took two weeks to reopen it.”

The Hero:

A Vakeros Warrior

Strength: 10 (0)
Dexterity: 19 (+4)
Intelligence: 14 (+2)
Wisdom: 10 (0)
Charisma: 14 (+2)

Koralith mastered the talents of combat—his natural grace and speed nearly gained him entrance to the Valos. However, his unprecedented facility with language, combined with his natural ease in social situations, gave his teachers a much stronger inclination to use his talents elsewhere. He was thus quietly moved to the Kerion College and swiftly learned the arts of disguise and deception.

The Heroine:

A Vakeros Knight

Strength: 12 (+1)
Dexterity: 16 (+3)
Intelligence: 16 (+3)
Wisdom: 13 (+1)
Charisma: 14 (+2)

Kamilah was very young when she was accepted into the Valos School of Dessi. She became fast friends with another Vakeros named Arcadian. The two became fast friends but after a short time she distanced herself from him. Time passed and somehow they managed to put their past grievances behind them. The two were inseparable. However after a romantic relationship Arcadian unexpectedly left the college and did not return. Vowing to return one day she set off east, with little bearing to where she was going or why.
“Two weeks!” shouted the newcomer who still stood in the doorway. “I ain’t got time for this! I’ll cross the mountains.”

The mercenary shook his head. “They’re everywhere, Anari has a huge cavalry, and they’re all patrolling non-stop.”

The large man grumbled something and exited the tavern.

None of this shouting seems to bother Korlaeth, though Kamilah finds it somewhat uncivilized to communicate in such loud means when everyone is within earshot to begin with. They continued their meal, knowledgeable that they were both now “trapped” in Anari until such time that the border was released from patrol.

* * *

Kamilah’s luminous orbs shift to the door of the inn, there she sees a man standing in his own filth. She quickly draws her eyes away as she finds little interest in any man who takes pride in listening to his own nauseating voice. Instead she turns her attention to the man still seated before her, the same man with what seems to be a coy smirk playing across his wind-chapped lips. Kamilah’s first reaction would be to wipe the ridiculous looking smirk off his grim face without so much as blinking, but yet again she refrains. Her interest shifts as her gaze becomes concentrated on the dagger he has fumbling about his unwieldy fingers. The dagger she noted was a blue steel blade, how is it however that he possess a Vakeros blade? It can’t possibly be that his common form is one of the few gifted Vakeros? She looks to the meal placed before her and quickly pushes it aside.

“Dessi’s courtesy isn’t my concern.” Kamilah states rather dryly her patience growing short.

“And as for that matter don’t for one second tie my actions to the rest of Dessi, and if sir you don’t like my tone then I’ll be happy to point you towards the door.” Her voice rang with abject annoyance.

She quickly stopped herself from acting to hasty and held her tongue, at least for a moment. Kamilah longed to know how or why he held a blue steel blade. The young woman then let her tensed shoulders relax as she crossed her arms legs beneath the table. Resting her palms upon the table her gaze becomes fixated on the light streaming from the far window, the same light that made the overall appearance of the dagger nothing less than stunning.

“So you’re a Vakeros traveler?” Her tone quickly changes from annoyance to intrigue as she pauses for the man’s response. “If you are not, speak now and I shall kill you in vengeance for the Vakeros you took it from.”

* * *

The smirk remained on Korlaeth’s lips as Kamilah rather archly responded to his comments. A slight narrowing of his eyes is the only hint that there is anything else going on in his mind. Suddenly the smile faded.

“My lady, I’m afraid people will judge our homeland by us however we might wish it otherwise.” he spoke now in his mind. Suddenly the smile faded.

He grasped his dagger firmly by the hilt, throwing it into the air to spin once, twice...and he caught a small club, made entirely of the same blue steel. He set it on the table before him and looked pointedly at Kamilah.

“So, what brings you to this fine national...prison.” he asked curtly.

He grasped the dagger firmly by the hilt, throwing it into the air to spin once, twice...and he caught a small club, made entirely of the same blue steel. He set it on the table before him and looked pointedly at Kamilah.

“So, what brings you to this fine national...prison.” he asked curtly.

* * *

From outside, the thunder of hooves sounded, as if many horses rushed past all at once. Several people in the inn stood to see what was going on, but the two Vakeros merely sat and continued their conversation. Only the barkeeper saw the dagger-to-club transformation thanks to the distraction outside, and he made a warrant sign across his chest before walking into the kitchens.

* * *

Kamilah looked away from the man as their conversation continued. She fell into silence as she contemplated how to answer his obtuse remark. Kamilah paused and turned her head to watch and study the various faces and groups of angry people gathering and conversing. With her eyes still darting around the inn her lips parted.

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**Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...**

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**Commentary**

Player: Falling Phoenix  
Character Name: Korlaeth  
Gender: Male  
Class: Vakeros Knight  
Race and Nationality: Dessi  
Level: 7  
Experience: 21,000  
Alignment: Good  
Attributes (Score Modifier)  
Strength: 10 (0)  
Dexterity: 19 (+4)  
Constitution: 16 (+3)  
Intelligence: 14 (+2)  
Wisdom: 10 (0)  
Charisma: 14 (+2)  

Saves: (base save ability mod misc mod total)  
Fortitude: +8 = +5 +3  
Reflexes: +6 = +2 +4  
Will: +4 = +3 +0 +1 (enchanted childhood)  

Base Combat Skill: +5  
Base Cobalt Arms Combat Skill: +7/+2  
Base Magical Combat Skill (if applicable): +5  
Base Magical Damage: 1d8  
Initiative Bonus: +4  
Base Movement: 30  
Endurance: 74  
Willpower (if applicable): 26  
Corruption (applicable right now only if you play an evil character): 0  

Armour Class: 10 +Dex +Armour +Shield +Misc = 10 +4 +7 = 21  

Armour Type: Chainmail Waistcoat +2 (-2 Armour Check Pen.)

Skills (Alphabetically, please)  
Ability Ability Mod Ranks Misc. Mods Total  

**CLASS:**  
Appraise (Int) 1, 2  
Bluff (Cha) 7, 2  
Concentration (Con) 1, 3  
Disable Device (Int) 6, 2  
Disguise (Cha) 10, 2  
Escape Artist (Dex) 1, 4  
Forgery (Int) 1, 2  
Gather Information (Cha) 6, 2  
Heal (Wis) 0, 0  
Intimidate (Cha) 5, 2  
Knowledge (arcana) (Int) 1, 2  
Knowledge (geography) (Int) 4, 2  
Knowledge (history) (Int) 2  
Knowledge (religion) (Int) 2  
Knowledge (warfare) (Int) 2  
Occult (Int) 7, 2  
Perception (Wis) 5, 0  
Ride (Dex) 1, 4  
Sense Motive (Cha) 2  
Sleight of Hand (Dex) 6, 2  
Survival (Wis) 1, 0  
Stealth (Dex) 3, 4  

---

**Rules, Rulings**  
OOC: Yes, I know that only 4 of the 7 have the appropriate papers to leave or enter the country. This will not be an issue later on.

I haven’t read in quite awhile so I’m still a little rusty, though be patient I’ll get the swing of things soon enough, or at least I hope.
### Rules, Rulings

**Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...**

"I'm journeying, looking for something...only I'm not quite sure what it is that I'm looking for." Her tone dropped and almost rang with empathy. The tension in the air slowly faded as Kamilah once again isolated herself from those around her. Her slender hands fell into her lap where she adjusted her emerald tinted blouse, repositioning her belt and short sword in the process. Kamilah's eyes then turned to the surface of the table where she looked at the club that was now presently before her, it was obvious by her expression that she wasn't impressed however it did mean that he was indeed a true Vakeros giving her no reason to quarrel with the man; at least besides his stench and appalling appearance.

"So stranger what about you? Is there any reason you've brought yourself here?" She asked indirectly while forcing a slight smile. Something was lingering in Kamilah's thoughts as it was easily seen through her dismayed eyes.

"Well whatever the reason, I suppose you've got little choice but to be here now." She stated this without emotion as she slunk back in her chair looking rather tranquil.

**Kamilah's tranquil attitude dissolves completely as the man approaches her and the stranger. Her first instinct was to rise from her chair and face the man but she held off and stayed seated. Underneath the table she drew one of her shortswords and waited for the man to come closer. She stayed seated. Underneath the table she drew one of her shortswords and waited for the man to come closer. She only got up as he gestured over his shoulder, but in only a moment, the mischievous glint had returned and his fingers stopped tapping.

"So, my lady, would you care for the company of a 'beggar' in your search?"

**Kamilah's continued to gaze at the club, his fingers still tapping. A look of sympathy entered his eyes, barely visible, but his voice softened as he answered her question, "Work from home...you know how it is..." His eyes grew distant as he gestured over his shoulder, but in only a moment, the mischievous glint had returned and his fingers stopped tapping.

### Commentary

**Character Name: Korlaeth (cont'd)**

**Class Features**

*(Ability: Effect)*

- Cobalt Arms
  - Enchanted Childhood: +1 bonus to Will throws. Free rank in Knowledge (arcana) and Concentration.
  - One People - Transfer Willpower to any other non-Dessi, full-round action.
- Partial Magical Combat - 3/4 of class level as his Base Combat Skill when attacking with his Elder Arts or his Battle Magic.
- Garb of the Vakeros - Mastercrafted Chainmail Waistcoat +2.
- School of Keron Chosen: One free rank in Appraise, Bluff, Disable Device, Disguise, Escape Artist, Forgery, Gather Information, Sleight of Hand, Stealth, Survival; all these are now class skills.
- Counterspell - Broodhood ability. Counter spells, see LW/RPG page 19.
- Elder Art: Enchantment
  - Mystic Maneuver - Spell of Steal's True Form: 1 WP, change bluesteel weapon into any other weapon in the LW/RPG Core Book.
  - Garb of the Vakeros - Mastercrafted Chainmail Waistcoat +2.
  - Battle Magic - Clayr - DC 20, 2 WP, 2 EP; +20 on next skill check, Will save, or attack roll; in readiness for maximum of 3 rounds, and while in readiness, may be counterspelled without a check.
  - Cobalt Freedom - Blue Steel Armor has its Max Dex Bonus improved by +2 and he regains 5 feet per round of lost movement rate.

**Weapons**

*(Weapon, Atk Bonus, Damage, Critical, Range, Dmg Type)*

**Equipment**

*(Name Type Weight)*

- Bluesteel Dagger, Weapon, 1 lb
- Bluevein Dagger, Weapon, 1 lb
- Bluesteel Chainmail Waistcoat, Armor, 20lbs
- Backpack, 2 lbs
- Bedroll (bp), 5 lbs
- Winter blanket (bp), 3 lbs
- Scholar's Outfit (worth), 6 lbs
- Thief's Tools (bp), 1 lb
- Waterskin (bp), 2 lbs
- 2 meals (trail rats.) (bp), 2 lbs
- Chalk (pocket)
- Flint and steel, (bp)
- Whetstone (pocket), 1 lb
- Waterfowl's (bp), 4 lbs
- Light Warhorse w/ saddle, bit, etc.
- Saddlebags
- 2 sundries
- 2 days' trail rations.
- Waterskin
- Disguise kit
- 4 sets caltrops
- Melee w/ pack saddle
- Explorer's, artisan's, courtier's (w/ jewelry), and peasant's outfits
- 5 sundries
- Shovel

**TOTAL WEIGHT: 50 (30 if he dumps the backpack)**

**CURRENT LOAD: (L/M/H) M (L if he dumps the backpack)**

**Money and Treasure: 6 GC, 2 sp, 7 cp, 32 Lune**

**Background:**

Korlaeth was born and raised by a rather well-to-do family, and brought into the Vakeros Colleges at a young age, as all are who have the magic singing in their blood. He mastered the talents of combat as well as any, and his natural grace and speed nearly gained him entrance to the Valois. However, his unprecedented facility with languages, combined with his natural ease in social situations, gave his teachers a much stronger inclination to use his talents elsewhere. He was thus quietly moved to the Keron College and swiftly learned the arts of disguise and deception. He has since served Dessi in such far-reaching countries as Vassagonia, Cloeaasia, Nyras, and Lancia, seeking any information necessary to protect his homeland from its enemies. His most recent assignment has taken him to Anari, where he is about to become embroiled in the events there...
Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...

Kamilah forced a smile and without turning her head towards the thug she gave a soft laugh. Her attitude towards the man was one of complete ignorance and lack of respect... and she made sure he knew it.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what a ‘coffer’ is. And as for my gold? Come and take it if you can.”

The Vakeros warriress tightened her grip on her weapon, “I would advise you to leave now. If you stay I will send you to the hellgates.”

* * *

A moment of shock passed across Korlaeth’s face when the brigand sealed the door and made his demands. As Kamilah spoke, Korlaeth slowly stood, his movements slow, deliberate, and suddenly oozing with absolute confidence. He wrapped his fingers around the hilt of the club as he stood, letting it hang loose from his hand by his side as he turned around. A smile quirked at the corners of his mouth and he leaned back against the table, carefully to one side so as to be entirely out of the way should Kamilah move.

“Vor, my friend,” his words are all relaxed confidence.

These people obviously pose no danger to him whatsoever. He waits for Vor to glance his way, then flips his club into the air, much as he did before with Kamilah, and catches the haft of a spear, point aimed right at Vor’s heart, “are you sure you don’t want to reconsider?”

* * *

The man advancing on Kamilah smiled lecherously as she said he would have to take the gold from her. When she added her threat, he hesitated somewhat and looked at Vor.

Vor was in the midst of facing down his own foe, however. He merely glanced at Korlaeth in disgust... until the club shimmered and elongated into a spear. His eyes widened and his mouth gaped. He let go of the bartender’s shirt and held his hands up, moving a step toward the door.

“Now, now,” he said, smiling nervously. “No need to get hasty.” He took another step and stopped at a frown from Korlaeth.

His two underlings looked to him for direction. “Get ’em boys?” he shouted, then cowardly dropped to the floor. His two underlings looked to him for direction. “Get ‘em boys!” he shouted, then cowardly dropped to the floor.

The man near Kamilah hesitated and took a tentative step toward her, unsure who he feared more—his boss or this seething woman. Had he seen Vor drop, he probably would have known who to fear more.

The man in the corner with the remaining patrons took a couple of steps before he was tripped and pounced upon by Kamilah. These people... and they were apparently inspired by the Vakeros’ courage.

* * *

As the man approached Kamilah she leapt from her seat, shortsword blazing blue in the light that flooded the room from the window. With lightning quick reflexes she stabbed the blade forward, in an attempt to kill her foe. She gave a grunt of satisfaction as her blade cut flesh.

* * *

As Kamilah leapt from her chair, Korlaeth bolted toward the door, quickly rounding the counter and sticking his spear to Vor’s throat.

* * *

In a blur of motion Kamilah stood and slashed with her sword, catching the man completely by surprise. The blade bit into his collarbone, severing it in a spray of blood before sliding across his chest. Using the momentum of her strike, Kamilah pulled the blade back and thrust it through the man’s abdomen, just below his ribs. He cried out in pain and fell back from the sudden onslaught, tripping over a chair and landing hard on the wooden floor, blood flowing freely from his wounds.

Korlaeth leaped over the table and dodged around a chair to intercept Vor before he could scramble away. The man yelped in surprise as the Vakeros landed in front of him. Korlaeth tried to plant the tip of the spear at the man’s throat, but Vor’s erratic movements prevented that. The robber heard a crash behind him and looked in time to see his henchman fall to the floor, quite near death.

### Commentary

Player: Ashly
Character Name: Kamilah
Gender: Female
Class: Vakeros Knight
Race and Nationality: Dessi
Level: 7
Experience: 21,000
Allegience: Good

Attributes (Score Modifier)
- Strength: 12 (+1)
- Dexterity: 16 (+3)
- Constitution: 12 (+1)
- Intelligence: 16 (+3)
- Wisdom: 13 (+1)
- Charisma: 14 (+2)

Saves: (base save ability mod misc mod total)
- Fortitude: +6 (+1, Con) +6
- Reflexes: +2 (+3, Dex)(+1, Valsos) +6
- Will: +3 (+1, Wis)(+1 Enchant. Childhood) +5

Base Combat Skill: +5
Base Cobalt Arms Combat Skill: +7/+2
Base Magical Combat Skill (if applicable): +5
Psychic Attack Bonus (if applicable): N/A
Psychic AC: N/A
Initiative Bonus: +3 (Dex)
Base Move: 30

Endurance: 61/61
Willpower (if applicable): 36/36
Corruption (applicable right now only if you play an evil character):

Armor Class:
- (10 + Dex + Armour + Shield + Misc )
  20 = (10 + 3 + 7 + 0 + 0)

Armor Type: Armour Check Penalty, Chance of Spell Failure

Blue Steel Chainmail Waistcoat: -2, 0%

Skill: (Alphabetically, please)
- Ability (Ability Mod), Ranks, Misc., Mods, Total

CLASS:
- Acolyte(Dex), 6, 1, 3, +10
- Concentration(Dex), 5, 9, 1, +6
- Heal(Wis), 4, 0, 1, +5
- Intimidate(Cha), 5, 5, 0, +7
- Knowledge(archana)(Int), 3, 0, 3, +6
- Knowledge(geography)(Int), 1, 0, 3, +4
- Knowledge(history)(Int), 2, 0, 3, +5
- Knowledge(religion)(Int), 2, 0, 3, +5
- Knowledge(warfare)(Int), 2, 0, 3, +5
- Occult(Int), 0, 3, 0, +12
- Perception(Wis), 4, 0, 1, +5
- Ride(Cha), 4, 0, 3, +2
- Sense Motive(Char), 3, 0, 2, +5
- Speak Language (North Speak)
- Speak Language (Elideth)

Class Features
- (Ability: Effect)

Cobalt Arms - Blue-steel weapon.
- Enchanted Childhood: +1 bonus to Will throws. Free rank in Knowledge (archana) and Concentration.
- One People - Transfer Willpower to any other Desser character, full-round action.
- Partial Magical Combat - 3/4 of class level as his Base Combat Skill when attacking with his Elder Arts or his Battle Magic.
- Gait of the Vakeros - Mastercrafted Studded Leather +1
- School of Valos - Battle Magic (Battledance): Occult DC 15, 2 Willpower, 2 Endurance. DC 18 Concentration check each following round. Base move speed = 40. Double Dex mod to AC.
- Counterpell - Elder Art (Elementalism): Earth, Air, Water, Fire, 4 Willpower.
- Mystic Manouvres (Twin Blades): Second attack at Vakeros’ full Base Combat Skill. -2 to all attack rolls. No magic.
- Battle Magic (Splinter): Split an item of less than 10lbs (per class level).
- Occult Check.
- Battle Magic (Flameshaft): Occult DC 16, 1 Willpower, 3 Endurance. 120 feet of the Vakeros. Deals base magical damage plus Charisma mod as fire damage.
- Cobalt Freedom: Blue Steel Armor has its Max Dex Bonus improved by +2 when worn and he regains 10 feet of lost movement (Valos college).

Weapons
- (Weapon, Atk Bonus, Damage, Critical, Range, Dmg Type)
  - Blue-steel Shortsword, +3 (Dex), Base magical damage, x2, 0, Slashing
  - Blue-steel Shortsword, +3 (Dex), Base magical damage, x2, 0, Slashing
  - Bluevein Dagger, +3 (Dex), 1d4, x2, 10 feet, Piercing/Slashing
Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...

He covered on his back, hands before him shaking frantically. The weapon he had been holding dropped from his hand and clattered on the floorboards. "Nol! Nol! Mercy, m'lord!" he pleaded.

Over in the corner, the few small vengeful mob had overpowered the remaining criminal, who lay bloody and bruised on the floor. One of them moved to open the locked door.

Kamilah sneered and bent down, whipping the blood from her blade on the bleeding man's cloak. The man lay, shaking and sweating. The gash beneath his ribs bled deep. He tried to hold the wound closed with his hands but the blood washed over his fingers.

"You are dying," said Kamilah, heartless and cold. "And even if you weren't, I would show you no mercy. You were willing to sacrifice the lives of the innocent to fill your own pockets. You do not deserve mercy."

Kamilah smiles, "You are mortally wounded, and have a few moments left before you bleed to death. Magnamund will be a better place without you."

The Vakeros sees the man named Vor cowering before Kamilah.

It seems the third man has been disposed of... she says, seeing that the others in the tavern have subdued one of the thugs.

"Kill him, Vakeros," says Kamilah heartlessly. The anger within her has not lessened and the knowledge that her attacker was so easily subdued has only further enraged her.

Kamilah moved his spear point to press firmly against Vor's neck, the haft running alongside his lower arm. "Justice is not mine to dispense in these lands, thief." He gestured with his free hand at Vor's waist, "Your money pouch please." He kicked Vor's weapon away from him and looked up at the Innkeeper, "Would you be willing to hold this man for me until the proper authorities arrive?"

Kamilah looked back at Vor as he smiled grimly and pressed the spear point a little more firmly.

To say that Kamilah was unhappy at Kamilah's mercy towards Vor was an understatement. Though her anger showed in her face the young Vakeros made sure it was not shown in her actions. Without looking at the man she had just mortally wounded she searched his body for gold or any other useful items. She ignored the man's weapons, her own twin blades were immensely superior in craftsmanship.

When she was finished she walked over to Kamilah, "you should at least cut off his hand. Restitution must be proper in such a situation."

The barkeeper rushed to the kitchen and returned with some rope, which he then used to start tying up the two remaining thieves to the support posts in the center of the inn. He then asked the barmaid to go to the border just a few miles away and return with the proper authorities. She raced out the back door to obey.

The barkeeper was visibly relieved. "Many thanks to you, stranger," he said, offering his hand to Kamilah. He glanced timidly towards the scowling female, "And to you, as well," he added, scared to do more than just look at her briefly.

"As for the inn, I'm afraid she'll be closed the rest of the day. All of you will have to go about your business now and then head out the back door."

As the patrons begin to leave, the two Vakeros overhear them talking about heading north the rest of the day to the Darkening Days Festival.

Kamilah looked at Kamilah as she watched the brigand die and asked him to stay Vor in that heartless tone. He shook his head slowly, sadness evident in his eyes, "It's not my place to dispense such justice here."

He took Vor's money pouch, removing 6 of the Gold Crowns and handing them to the Innkeeper as he accepted the proffered hand, "For the trouble they've caused."

Character Name: Kamilah (cont'd)

Equipment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>(Name Type Weight)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue-steel Shortsword, Weapon, 2lbs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-steel Shortsword, Weapon, 2lbs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluevein Dagger, Weapon, 1lb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-vein Chainmail Waistcoat, Armor, 25lbs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belt Pouch, - , 1/2lb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explorer's Outfit, Clothing, 8lbs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Backpack, Special, 2lbs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Launspur (4d4+4), Backpack, 9lbs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal Whistle, - , 0lbs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL WEIGHT: 37.5
CURRENT LOAD: Light

Money and Treasure: 283 Gold Crowns, 4 Silver Pieces

Horse, light (Carrying 48lbs)

Equipment:
Saddlebag (8 items) 4 Meals, Backpack, 1lb ea
Silk Rope, Backpack, 5lbs
Bedroll, Backpack, 5lbs
Riding Saddle, 25lbs
Saddlebag, 8lbs
Bit and Bridle, 1lb

Kamilah was very young when she was accepted into the Valos School of Desser. She was a capable learner and excelled at the use of magic more so than many of her fellow student Vakeros. She was one of the very few female Vakeros in the college but that only made her determined to do better and did not hinder her in the slightest.

After two years of training she became fast friends with another Vakeros named Arcadian. The two became fast friends but after a short time she distanced herself from him. The young warriress had always been a loner and when she felt herself becoming attached to the older boy she quickly put an end to their friendship. Time passed and somehow they managed to put their past grievances behind them and become friends again. The two were inseparable. However after a romantic relationship Arcadian unexpectedly left the college and did not return. When Kamilah inquired the professor of magic there at the school all he would tell her was that he was away on assignment.

Months passed and Arcadian had not returned. Kamilah had greatly distanced herself from those around her and after a short while could not bear to stay in the college any longer. Vowing to return one day she set off east, with little bearing to where she was going or why.

Commentary

Rules, Rulings

Kamilah: He has died from shock due to blood loss internally. On his body you find a dirty pouch with 18 Lune in it.

Korlaeth: The pouch from Vor has 32 Lune and 10 Crowns.

If you wish to head to the Darkening Days Festival, a full day's hard ride should put you there, with a stop by Tahou for late lunch. In simultaneity terms, you should put you there, with a stop by Tahou for late lunch.

Months passed and Arcadian had not returned. Kamilah had greatly distanced herself from those around her and after a short while could not bear to stay in the college any longer. Vowing to return one day she set off east, with little bearing to where she was going or why.

Kamilah: The pouch from Vor has 32 Lune and 10 Crowns.

If you wish to head to the Festival, a full day's hard ride should put you there, with a stop by Tahou for late lunch. In simultaneity terms, you should put you there, with a stop by Tahou for late lunch.

As the patrons begin to leave, the two Vakeros overhear them talking about heading north the rest of the day to the Darkening Days Festival.

Kamilah looked at Kamilah as she watched the brigand die and asked him to stay Vor in that heartless tone. He shook his head slowly, sadness evident in his eyes, "It's not my place to dispense such justice here."

He took Vor's money pouch, removing 6 of the Gold Crowns and handing them to the Innkeeper as he accepted the proffered hand, "For the trouble they've caused."
Hey guys, its Ash...It's been awhile I know. As Bryan said it's been busy for us these last few days.

**Rules, Rulings**

If it becomes important, the mule is tied to my saddle by a rope with a knot that I can tug once to let it go.

Keep the conversation going. Twist yourselves if you like. It's apparent already what the personalities are. I'll progress you two as the main group progresses. By the time I finish with their next post, it'll be roughly noon for them, too.

* * *

**Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...**

Korleath gathered his belongings quickly, and looked over at Kamilah, “If you’re headed for the festival, you’re welcome to travel with me.” He then headed out the door to collect his animals.

* * *

Kamilah walked outside, behind the other Vakeros and retrieved her own steed. After she climbed up on the saddle she looked over at him and nodded her head.

“Maybe I should go with you. After all, that merciful attitude you have might get you killed.”

* * *

Korleath looked at Kamilah as he finished adjusting the load on his mule. He swung up into his horse’s saddle and grinned, his good humour apparently restored, “Which would be a pity...wit and charm are in such short supply these days.”

He twirled his blue spear and placed the dagger in his belt sheath. Still grinning, he nudged his horse down the road at a walk, the mule trailing behind.

* * *

Kamilah’s smile did not disappear as she retorted, “my father used to say that charm and foolishness came hand in hand. We shall see if he was right.”

“And you had anything but your wits about you when you saw me in the inn.”

Her words were not suggestive but placid, as if she was stating only fact.

* * *

The two Vakeros journeyed northward along the road to Tahou, their brief conversations always tinged with hints of verbal fencing and one-upmanship. It was the way of the Vakeros—to drive to excel. Whereas the Kai were usually modest in their power, a Vakeros usually embraced it, manifesting it in their actions and words.

After riding for just over six hours, they began to traverse the ring of hills that surrounded Tahou. The city sparkled in the noonday sun, and the two warriors reined their mounts to a halt a few hundred yards back from the moat, which would one day make the city more defensible.

They decided to make camp for lunch outside the city on top of one of the hills. A passing patrol questioned them briefly, then continued on. Korleath estimated that they would reach the festival grounds after nightfall—and possibly after it had closed for the night—but they could sleep on the grounds around the area like a large percent of the population did until morning.

Then they could explore the largest gathering of merchants and sights in the entire northern continent.

* * *

Korleath looked over at Kamilah as they tapped the rise, “My dear lady,” his gesture took in the entire city, “welcome to Tahou, home of the softest Vassagonians in the world.” His nearly omnipresent grin reasserted itself here, “or so the ‘true’ Vassagonians say.”

He admired the city as they ate, “I should dearly love to see this ‘Cauldron’ of theirs some day. Seems a pity to come so close...” he trailed off, a slightly wistful look in his eyes.

* * *

Kamilah shrugged, “you could stop in Tahou if you wanted. I’m not heading anywhere specific, at least not for the moment. Hell, I don’t know why I am traveling with you at all.”

She finished her meal and whipped her mouth with the edge of her cloak, “come on, let’s go. We still have a few hours until night fall.”

* * *

The duo traveled onward through the afternoon hours, leaving Tahou behind. Their destination was a large group of buildings to the north, close to the Daroga forest. Oddly enough, there were no patrols to stop them at regular intervals. Perhaps it had something to do with the heavy military presence on the borders. Why would the border of Kakush be sealed though? Was the entire nation sealed off?

After riding for just over six hours, they began to traverse the ring of hills that surrounded Tahou. The city sparkled in the noonday sun, and the two warriors reined their mounts to a halt a few hundred yards back from the moat, which would one day make the city more defensible.

They got closer and noticed there were no tents pitched all around the festival. It was supposed to still be going on, but why was everything vacant? As the two riders slowed their mounts, Korleath rubbed his eyes and commented that it was close to midnight.

Kamilah’s attention was drawn however, to a couple of riders who were rounding a corner of the large walled-in festival grounds.

* * *

Kamilah, with auburn hair blissfully blowing about her façade, narrowed her eyes quite quickly as she took in her surroundings. It was immediately clear to her that the air seemed stale, intuition telling her that something just wasn’t right. She jerked the reins of her palomino mare bringing her along side her fellow traveler. She looked to him at first wondering what his thoughts were on the current situation.

Where was the festival? she wondered, is where it’s to be held right?

Thoughts swarmed about in Kamilah’s mind and the contemplated possibilities were endless. She looked into the distance her eyes narrow; it looked as though there were riders in the distance. Trying to better make out their forms she affirmed that they were indeed riders. However there were still far too many questions left unanswered for the young girl to feel at ease. She gently patted the sun-bleached mane of her horse signaling her to gradually pick up the pace. She rode slightly ahead of Korleath’s mount and then came to a halt before him, preventing him to go any further.

“There seems to be riders in the distance, and you know as well as I that something here just isn’t right.”

Her sarcastic outlook had disappeared and her tone was quite stern as she looked to Korleath. The sincerity in her voice was as sound as it was imminent; portraying a façade of earnestness that she had earlier refused to let her persona reveal.

* * *

Korleath started when Kamilah moved into his path. His mind had been on the same questions she had...where was the festival? What’s going on?
Rules, Rulings

Distance between you and the two riders is approximately 100 yards. Decide what you're going to do, and roll initiative and relevant rolls if you are going to engage in combat. They'll probably be upon you in a couple of rounds, giving you time to do any action(s) that require a round to perform.

Intelligence Check is 9.

You can make a basic Intelligence check to determine what was unusual about the battle cry. The man's blade struck your weapon instead of you. Remember to reference p 143 for mounted combat rules...due to the familiarity you have with your horse, the Ride DC is 15, not 20. Unless of course it is a warhorse.


Round 1 begins.

Korlaeth, you are clear for melee or magic combat as the warhorse has thrown you off, the saddle. If you fail, the Ride check at DC15 to stay in the saddle. If you pass, you are clear to engage in melee or magic combat as you see fit.

Kamilah, you need to make a Ride check at DC15 to stay in the saddle. If you fail, the horse has thrown you off, and it'll take a move action to stand back up. If you pass, you are clear to engage in melee or magic combat as you see fit.

Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...

He followed Kamilah's gaze then, his face taking on a somber cast. "Well," he said finally, and he looked at Kamilah meaningfully, "perhaps they'll have some answers."

He raised his voice then, switching back to North Speak. "Ho there!" His hand strayed near the hilt of his dagger, and he nudged his horse to stand side by side with Kamilah and her mount, facing slightly outward, so as to maximize their combined field of view while still facing the riders in the distance.

Something whizzed past Korlaeth a second after he called out. Then the riders sped into a gallop, and something above them flashed in the scant moonlight—they had their weapons drawn. The distance of the riders was hard to judge because of the night, but it was clear that they were not trotting forward to chat.

Korlaeth flinched back in surprise at the object that narrowly missed his face, starting his horse back a few steps, "or not..."

He looked over at Kamilah, a grin quickly filling his face, "Well, my lady, shall we give them the warm welcome they've asked for?" He drew his dagger, which was quickly replaced by a blue-steel lance. He quickly let loose his mule, wheeled his horse and spurred it forward, bellowing loudly, "Forward men! Let's show these ruffians what we're made of!"

Kamilah watched with nonchalance as her companion shouted his bluff. She turned to watch as one of the men peeled off and raced back toward the fairgrounds on his horse. The other kept coming forward, and it was unclear which one he would strike when he came close enough.

Only seconds remained before he attacked one of them.

Her horse pranced about in a circle, obviously agitated but Kamilah remained right where she was. "Fool!" she hissed as Korlaeth bore down upon the riders.

For all they knew the attack could have been dispelled but now that the male Vakeros had changed off there was no stopping a fight. Why should I risk my life in a situation he created? Kamilah battled with herself and her own reasoning for staying behind. Her horse continued to prance around and gave a little whinny.

"Damn you Korlaeth..." muttered Kamilah underneath her breath, "you won't live long if you keep up this dangerous dance with death at every given opportunity."

Korlaeth reined in as his lance was deftly batted aside by his opponent's scimitar. He watched Kamilah gallop after the other rider, grinning to himself as he prepared to face his own fight.

Kamilah reined in as his lance was deftly batted aside by his opponent's scimitar. He swiftly turned his horse to face his opponent, wondering at his unusual battle-cry. He concentrated briefly, and his lance became a spear. He watched Kamilah gallop after the other rider, grinning to himself as he prepared to face his own fight.

The rider that Korlaeth faced hesitated, probably wondering what happened to the weapon the intruder had just held. Still, he advanced, his horse jerking its head constantly in protest. Leaning dangerously far to one side, he swung wildly, barely missing Korlaeth's horse's ear as he tried to hit the Vakeros. The tip of the scimitar barely grazed the man's blue armor.

Korlaeth nudged his mount closer for his own (hopefully better) attack.

Meanwhile, Kamilah covered much ground as she pursued her target. Nearing the corner, she eased up on the chase, not knowing what she may be headed into. Lucky for her that she did, for around the corner came the rider she had been after, plus two more riders.

The horses on both sides were startled, and one of the three raised up in the air in fright, throwing the rider from his saddle with a startled cry. The other two managed to pull their horses to either side to avoid a collision. In the ensuing chaos, the riderless horse bolted off to the northeast.

Kamilah's own horse jerked up in surprise, and she tried her best to keep it under control.
Kamilah barely managed to stay in the saddle as her horse bucked. As soon as the steed’s forelegs returned to the ground she drew her sword short and using her battle magic sent a shaft of flame at the nearest mounted warrior.

Korlaeth pulled on his reins and Valsa (the horse) reared back, flailing his hooves at the enemy. One struck hard (7 damage), but Korlaeth slightly underestimated the ferocity behind the blows. Thrown off balance, he grabbed at the reins with his spear hand in order to stay in the saddle, unable to bring his own weapon to bear.

Kamilah’s familiarity with her horse proved useful as the beast reared up and threatened to throw her off in its surprise. She settled back to the ground, letting loose of the reins as she did so in order to wield her magic. Quickly she completed the series of gestured with her free hand that enacted the magic. She leveled her sword at the rider to her right and rotated the blade horizontally. Immediately the weapon pulsed with a light as fire shot down her blade’s length and leapt to strike the rider on the shoulder. I rolled the ranged magic attack roll—it obviously hit. Also, by casting once the horse hit the ground again, you avoided the Concentration check.

He screamed wildly and threw his arms up to flap and slap at the flames, even though they had already seared his flesh and muscles. His horse bucked and jumped away from the Vakeros, causing the man to fall off and land hard on the ground, his loose clothing now in flames.

The other rider took advantage of her drawn attention and lashed out with his scimitar, slamming it down hard into her left thigh. *Kamilah*: 5 EP The initial rider who had fallen off his horse had now drawn his weapon and regained his footing. He began to circle around her, but was cut off as his companion fell in flames from the saddle.

Above the din around her, did she hear someone hollering nearby about Kai?

Meanwhile Korlaeth was not having as much luck as his horse was at fending off his assailant. The muscular mount struck a mighty blow to the black-clad rider’s head, causing him to reel in the saddle and drop his weapon. Still, the Vakeros was not in a position to land an effective strike. Whatever god the rider devoted himself to obviously intervened after the horse’s shoe foot tore the bloody gash in his forehead.

Korlaeth gave a ululating Telchite battle-cry, just to confuse the enemy, and he grinned from ear to ear as his horse reared again, failing out in trained chaos. (1 hoof hit for 5 damage) Again, Korlaeth struck with his spear as his horse came down, this time landing a solid blow on the enemy rider. (7 damage)

Kamilah watched with a self-satisfied grin as one of the men writhed in flames upon the ground. Her magic had stunning effects and she was not easily disenchanted. Kamilah however, captivated by the man engulfed in flames, was taken off guard by the mounted rider who struck out with his scimitar, inflicting a wound upon her leg. In a flash of anger she drew her second sword and swung with both weapons, inflicting one, two, and finally a third abrasion upon him.

Her swings were swift as her stance became cynical making her appear venomous in every facet. The whistling sound of her twin blades soaring through the crisp air was a resonance almost melodies to her ears. Kamilah thrived in the heat of battle. Though her mind keen she focused on not only her actions but also on the events taking place in reference to the other Vakeros Knight, the same “Knight” who created the entire needless squabble to begin with.

*There’s only three men, with two wounded I should be adept enough to put them all out of there misery in a timely fashion; if I keep my wits about me. Kamilah thought to herself as the battle dragged on.*

Kamilah was already growing weary of this combat. Against challenging foes, she would not be so irritated. To think that a lesser foe would dare pit himself against her might infuriated her. Fine—she would grant them all the death they sought.

Turning toward the man who had wounded her, Kamilah drew her second weapon and leaned over in the saddle so her off hand could have a full range of motion. Her horse protested a bit, but remained still long enough for her to blades to dance in the night.

Whump, whump...whump!* The sound of her weapons sinking into her opponent was followed by a dull thud as he fell from his horse to the ground, never seeing what had happened clearly.

The Vakerine righted herself in the saddle and looked over her shoulder to see someone else on horseback rushing past. As the black-clad man galloped into the night, she heard Korlaeth drawing near.

Act II, Scene II – Just in Time…

Korlaeth turned swiftly to face Kamilah and her opponents as the one near him fled. He was sure Kamilah could handle herself, but he wanted to end this as quickly as possible. He grinned as an idea quickly blossomed in his head.

Korlaeth spurred his horse forward, rearing up near the other soldier standing on the ground. He began chanting loudly in Telchite, waving his hand dramatically this way and that. In the soldier’s mind, blackness seemed to flow from Korlaeth’s fingers, coalescing swiftly into a menacing, monstrous shadow with glowing red eyes and a gaping maw. Frost formed instantly on the ground beneath it, and a chill seemed to waft over the man. The thing hissed loudly, and begin to writhe forward, as if seeking to escape Korlaeth’s tenuous hold and engulf the soldier before it. Korlaeth smiled evilly at the man.
Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...

Kamilah watched as her second victim fell to the ground in a painful tumble. Without thought or hesitation the young Vakeros tapped the side of her horse before leaping down from the saddle, swords still in hand.

With a look of hardheartedness she kept her blades drawn before her and thought only of pursuing and finishing off the wretched man who had dared to attack her in the first place.

"Your end is near…"

Kamilah's voice trailed off as she raised her blades to strike the man not once but twice with her twin blades. The wind was blowing so slightly throwing strands of her hair about. She sighed narrowing her eyes before whispering...

"God have mercy on your soul."

Through her melancholy hues a ray of empathy was shown, but only for a moment.

* * *

As Koraltha, the last remaining man standing, Kamilah dropped from her horse and finished off the fallen man that she had just knocked from horseback. As she looked up from the finishing move, she saw the non-burned man scream in terror.

In a panic, he turned and fled toward the walls of the fairgrounds, totally ignoring the pleas of his burned friend, who had begun to rouse and roll about, searching for his weapon.

* * *

Figuring Kamilah could take care of herself, Koraltha dropped the illusion and spurred his horse after the fleeing man, raising his bluesteel spear high.

"CHAAAAAARGEE!!" he bellowed in North Speak at the top of his lungs, his smile widening to nearly split his face. He quickly caught up with the fleeing man and swung the butt of his spear at his head. CRACK! The sound of bluesteel on bone echoed through the air, and the man dropped like so much baggage.

Why must I always be subjected to this?

Koraltha was having a good time, however, in contrast to Kamilah's mood. His horse was in the man in a moment, and as the two of them streaked past, the Vakeros felt something hit the butt of his weapon with a hard whump that twisted his arm a bit, but not much for he had braced the spear against his back.

Quickly turning around, the Vakeros laughed to see the man go airborne from the blow, almost cutting a complete flip. The flaccid body crashed hard into the ground and did not move. With a shrug, Koraltha turned and saw Kamilah following.

Why stop now?

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He rushed across the plain to the walled perimeter of the fairgrounds, and after a moment he found a gate. Dismounting, spear still in hand, he pulled on the ring-handle. The gate opened a bit and then was pulled shut.

"Who's there?" asked a voice from inside.

Koraltha jerked the gate open and saw a covering fellow in black clothing. The gatekeeper let out a cry, "Two Vakeros! Sound the alarm!" and went running back into the maze of buildings, toward the glow that could be seen on the clouds above.

Yes, something was on fire alright, and they weren't supposed to know about it.

A bell sounded, and again, and again.

"An alarm?" asked Kamilah.

"Yes," grinned Koraltha, "let's go."

Rolling her eyes, the Vakerine dismounted and followed.

* * *

Immediately through the gate, Koraltha pulled himself atop his horse, Avatre, once again. Still smiling, he winked at Kamilah and kicked Avatres' flank. She leaped forward swiftly, Koraltha ducking under a skewed tentpole as he surged forward, racing toward the fiery glow with another Telchoi war yell. Somewhere in his memory, he thought he had earlier heard a cry to Kai, so he quickly finished off the shout with a roaring Sommlending yell, "For Sommerlund!"

As he shouted, an arrow suddenly stuck in his saddle, just missing his right knee. He silenced himself suddenly, his eyes immediately scanning the fairgrounds racing past for the source of the arrow. It was then that he grinned wider, for he suddenly realized the absolute insanity of galloping a horse in the middle of the night. His mind already on him, he thought a short prayer to Kai to protect him in his headlong rush. He held his spear ready for anyone who happened to be too near his racing horse.

* * *

Without uncertainty Kamilah sheathed one of her blades and then swung her small frame up and on to the saddle of her steed. Kamilah's eyes then perked in intrigue...This has certainly become interesting, she thought to herself while she tugged on the reins of Glory in order to draw somewhere alongside Koraltha.

The young Vakeros then jolted her mare with her rawhide boots, urging her to quicken in pace. Raising her sleek form from the saddle Kamilah was now coming up alongside Koraltha. Adrenaline had begun working through the veins of the young warrior as she could feel the excitement of yet another challenge coming forth.

The air felt brisk on her face as she rode into the abyss, strands of her hair whipping around and behind her in a sort of blissful dance. A light green fabric seemed to sway behind her as well. The exquisite emerald fabric was sort of a sheer like material wrapped around her waist and tied on the side of her hip, various sorts of charms hung down along the bottom of the clothing piece; it almost seemed as though this piece of her attire was worn to affirm her feminine identity.

This portion of textile was usually worn over her tight fitting pants and usually hung down at a sort of diagonal angle though now it seemed to be an ornament of the sky or a toy of the wind as it swirled and tossed around in various ways.
Rules, Rulings

So ends this Scene. From now on, join in on Act II. Wait for my next post, which places you on the map, before posting your actions. It will come later today.

Now, if I can just get that curious Sage of Lyria/Inventor of Horsesocks to the right place at the right time....

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**Act II, Scene II – Just in Time...**

Just as she was about to come up along side Korleath what seemed to be a rain shower of arrows fell down around them. This startled the young Vakeros and she drifted out from the other Vakeros knight in order to dodge the flying arrows.

“Keep changing direction... lets see just how good their aim is!” She yelled to Korleath.

Kamilah then began weaving her horse back and forth while proceeding, she was careful never to stay in one place for any length of time for she knew if these were indeed skilled archers they would have little or no difficulty aiming and shooting down an enemy that was running directly into their line of fire.

* * *

The two warriors of Dessi galloped and dodged through the incoming arrows. A few went wide, and some were close enough to bounce off armor. One whizzed close enough to Kamilah’s ear that she actually saw it a split second before she heard it.

They moved closer and closer to the flames burning in the distance, having to detour once because of some makeshift fence that had been erected between two buildings.

A moment later, they entered the source of the commotion, stunned at what they had found:

Silhouetting most all the players in this deadly game was a rapidly burning building. It seemed that some net that stretched between it and another building was just now catching fire as well. In the towers of some walled structure to their right were archers, as well as skulking about in the dark street to their left. Before them however, was a man in shining armor surrounded by these black-clad green-sashed scimitar-wielding strangers. Beyond him was what appeared to be a Kai, some dark warrior, and...

Kamilah could not believe what she saw. Could it be? Who was that Vakeros?

Whoever they were, the two newcomers knew that they had to help and secure a victory.

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Kailord presents an example of Combat using the Grid System...
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

The journey through Tahou was unbelievable, for the tower and spires reached so high that their tops could not be seen. Elegant architecture with distinct Vassagonian influence adorned everything. The myriad colors of the spectrum could be seen in several variations and combinations. The city itself was a work of art, and indeed murals covered some of the buildings.

In contrast to this vibrance, the general population was rather mundane. Common people in common attire doing common things.... The half-hour press through the morning crowds seemed to flash by in minutes, and soon the group was in front of another smaller walled section. Again the captain talked with the guards on duty and gained entrance for everyone.

Inside this smaller wall was the palace, which somehow managed to trump the beauty of everything they had seen up till now. "Gold" was the key word, for even the gargoyles high on the towers were made of gold. Trumpets sounded from somewhere, and the gates of a building off to one side of the palace opened up. Ihmra'zir called back to the rest, "Stables."

They were tethered and fed, and the wagons were offloaded at a secluded entrance that was flanked by two guards at the back of the stables. The provisions were taken back to general storage to be used as soon as possible. Ihmra'zir gave specifications of where to send the companions' equipment. And the half dozen men the captain kept behind told those in charge of the stables that this girl had died at the hand of bandits at the festival, and they should find her family for burial rites.

After that, the six cavalry men flanked Ihmra'zir and the group as they wound their way through the bowels of the palace. Checkpoints did not slow them down, for the soldiers at them instantly recognized the Command Captain and let him pass with stiff salutes. In time, he came to a large room, wherein was laid the bags containing the sacks of armor, weapons, and equipment. Around the perimeter of the room were several doors, which the captain described as personal bathing chambers.

"Please wash yourselves and relax. When you return, food will be--"

A servant brought a large silver platter of fruits and cheeses, along with several skins of liquid, interrupting the captain. He smiled and thanked the servant for his promptness.

"Apparently food will be provided before you bathe. Garments are in each chamber for you to change into. I cannot allow you before the judiciary armed. Once you have been questioned, you will be returned here. This will be your room for the next couple of nights, but you will be free to come and go throughout the palace grounds that are not blocked off by guards."

He opened a small chest on a table nearby and took out some neckchains that had smooth red stones set in them. "Wear these at all times. They show that you are guests, and therefore have roaming liberties."

With a small sigh, he turned to leave. "Just tell the truth," he said to them as he departed for his debriefing before the military council.

The doors were pulled shut by the guards posted outside, and the four were left in silence with their equipment.

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Makala rode through the city trying not to appear like an ogling savage from the fringes of civilization; while he certainly was not that, one did not tend to see such wondrous architecture in Telcho, or in fact, anywhere else on Magnamund save Vassagonia and Dese perhaps.

The Telchoi remained mostly silent throughout the journey into the bowels of the palace, even cracking a smile as he beheld the bathhouse. Though water was a rarity, he did try to remain clean as much as he could. "Thank ye for the hospitality captain. I assure you, if I speak at all, it will be but the truth. Please do let me know when there is any news from your men who are tracking the captors of the princess.

Washing his hands in a nearby washtub, Makala sat down and proceeded to dig into the food, starting with the cheese, and then going on to munch on the fruit. Once he was done, he would take a bath, but for now he would eat and listen to what the others would have to say.

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As the others were all quite impressed with the luxury of the city, Sol Hawk could not help but notice the commonality of the people. Indeed he considered the idea that the great wealth of this place seemed not to be shared equally among them. This gave him small pause, for was it not so in Holmgard as well? To him, the station of President seemed to be not unlike that of King.

As they rode by the bathhouse where many a maiden bathed, Sol Hawk noted and at first misinterpreted the wide smile forming across the Telchoi's face. Sol Hawk politely placed his gaze elsewhere, for not only was a Kai Lord a gentleman, but although he had never quite answered Arcadian's question from earlier, the Kai were encouraged toward celibacy as well.

In a not dissimilar way, the open display of gold and jewels around every corner were taken in by the young man with a kind of casual disinterest.

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"Thank you for your hospitality," said Sol to the Captain. "The food was brought in very promptly - Sol Hawk seated himself on the floor in preference to the many comfortable plush chairs, although he appeared now quite comfortable and at ease. As the Captain leaves, Sol Hawk removes his guard's helmet at last."

"Here we are at last," said Sol Hawk, musing. He takes a tour of the room, closely observing their surroundings and noticing if the windows provide any view to the outside. The food does look appetizing, but he is not ready to eat just yet, having only just come in from the road. He sheds also half of the guard's uniform, dropping it beside the sacks where their equipment is stored. He takes a look then and recovers his own belongings, including his familiar green kai cloak.

"Water for bathing," he muses, "I believe I will partake of this offering first."

With this, Sol Hawk makes his way to one of the baths - leaving the door ajar so he can hear what is going on in the main chamber.

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When Arcadian passed through the baths with the others he kept his gaze carefully from the women there. This action was not forced, but almost seemed automatic.

After Ihmra'zir left Cade gave a little sigh of relief and he quickly shed the garb of the Anari. Arcadian glanced around the room before sitting in a vacant seat. After a few moments he ventured forth and grasped one of the neckchains in his hand. He did not put it on but carefully looked it over, looking for signs of enchantments or wizardry (Perception Check 1).

After a few moments Cade abandoned the necklace and turned to the food at the table. He dutifully inspected the drinks with a quiet sniff.

Cade sighed, gazing towards the bathhouse wistfully. He badly wanted to bathe but he quickly decided to wait until it was vacant. Arcadian reached for the sack containing his armor, feeling instantly relieved at the thought of dreaming it once again. If he had to leave his sword behind he could at least keep his armor. The blue steel comforted him in a way that none of the others could ever understand.
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

The Kai was more cautious than the Telchoi, for he stopped to check the food while Makala grabbed some and started eating. The other two stood for a second, admiring the room.

Sol Hawk looked over the platter, using his Kai discipline of Hunting to perceive any taint or threats. All looked well, so the Kai began to open the tops of the sacks to find his gear. After peeling in two sacks, he saw the familiar green color of his cloak. He opened the sack wide and reached in, but his Sixth Sense made him jerk back reflexively as a sandy-colored serpent struck out from the bag!

The Kai stumbled backwards as the triangle-headed viper slithered slowly out of the sack.

Cade was also reaching for his armor at the time and noticed the Kai jerk back and scoot away. It took a second for him to realize what had happened, and then he felt something bump his forearm!

With a yelp of surprise and fear, the Vakeros pulled his arm away and examined it. There were no puncture marks—the snake had missed! An identical serpent slithered from the bag with the bluesteel armor in it. The viper flicked its tongue around and waved its head to find whatever prey it had missed.

With his mind on other matters Arcadian reached out for his armor and his hand froze as he left something on his forearm. His gaze was towards the rummaging Kai Lord and he suddenly saw Sol Hawk jump back away from the sacks.

Arcadian's blood ran cold and a tremendous sinking feeling filled his stomach. He could feel something move against his arm, only a few millimeters but it was enough for Cade to know that the object was alive. It felt cool, and scaley. Cade jerked his arm away just in time to see a large viper spring from the contents of the sack. Within seconds the Vakeros was at his feet, looking for his sword. He never took his eyes off of the snake, watching its every twitching move.

Makala glanced up in mid-chew as he saw Sol dart back; when the Telchoii saw the snake erupt from the sack the kai had been scourging in, he chuckled. Living in a barren land most of his life, Makala had seen more than his share of serpents. "Now don't tell me that Kai, masters of the wilds, are afraid of a little snake. It was probably attracted to the bright color of yer cloak. Here, if you will allow me...

With the speed faster than the serpent's, Makala's gloved hand lashed out and caught the serpent by its head; bringing it up to his face slowly, Makala paused to take a bite out of his apple while studying the specimen casually. While he may have spoken nonchalance to Sol, inside his mind the Telchoii was already whirling with thoughts of deceit; for a moment he was concerned for eating without examining his food, but then he put the thought out of his mind. His body would be able to shrug off any poison save the most lethal. Another reason he remained calm and almost jovial was for the benefit of anyone that might be spying upon them; for this was truly an attempt to render them helpless, better yet not to tip their enemies hand by speaking their suspicions out loud.

Turning his attention back to the serpent, Makala swallowed the piece of sweet fruit, and with a sinister smile started to squeeze his fist, watching with pleasure as the snakes eyes began to bulge...

Sol Hawk recovered shortly from his discovery - then confronted the second serpent that Arcadian now faced.

He moved from side to side, almost as if dancing in slow motion upon the cold marble floor. "Sssleep," he said then, moving his hand at the end of his outstretched arm with a hypnotic motion... the second diamond head feels its will diminish as it begins to sink toward the floor.

Arcadian relaxed as he watched Makala dispatch one serpent and then the Kai Lord subdued the second. The Vakeros let a small smile curve at his lips as he sat down once again.

"Fear has saved my life more than once, Telchoii," said Cade with a grin. "And I have found that there is no shame in it."

With that Arcadian turned to the food and selected a piece of cheese, broke it in half and ate it slowly, while pausing to pick at a grape or two. Though the event with the snakes was unsettling Cade had already forgotten that the snakes were there. In Dessi a Vakeros grew accustomed to near-death experiences. And this, was not near-death by any stretch of the imagination.

Cade surveyed the vast array of fruits and cheeses, some beef would go down nicely right now. Once again he turned his attention to the skins and what liquid contents might be inside. After such a long trip his mouth was parched and the thought of water brightened his mood more than mead could to a drunk.

Their passage through the city brought many different exotic sights and smells, and Sir Victor took it all in with relish and a genuine curiosity. Finally, they arrived at the palace, which was magnificent with its onion domed spires and architecture. They were brought to their quarters and allowed to wash themselves before meeting with the President, while refreshments were brought to them.

"Thank you for these attentions, captain, they're really appreciated. Of course, you can trust me with providing nothing but the truth to your authorities," he said as he reached for the food and drinks.

After a long draught of water, Sir Victor started eating cheese, when suddenly the Kai, Sol Hawk, stumbled away from his equipment bag, from which emerged a nasty-looking viper. Moments later, Arcadian the Vakeros experienced the same thing.

"Two snakes, in two different equipment bags. This is certainly odd. I don't believe in coincidence, and I certainly don't like the implications of this event. If trickery there is... Makala, we should be careful with our own bags."

Arcadian continued eating as he looked up at Victor, "I agree that chances are this is no coincidence. One snake could have passed as such but two? I think not. However, I know that if we start accusing Ihmra'zir or any of his men it will not solve anything. We have no proof that they or anyone else for that matter planted the serpent's."

"As much as I would love to find out who if anyone did this," continued Arcadian, "it would be better if we simply notified the command captain and left it at that."

The Vakeros' expression darkened some, "at least for now..."

As the snake slept, Sol closed his eyes and whispered a silent prayer. In an instant, he has beheaded the snake. With great caution, he checks each of the other bags by nudging it with his mastery of Mind-over-Matter.

"Our assassin expects us to be dead now," says Sol, "perhaps this can be used to our advantage in some way. We must be very careful, for surely we will return to see that his plot has succeeded - this may be our only opportunity to discover his identity.

"It is also very unsettling to see that this plot has followed us all the way from The Darkening Days festival - or worse, this plot may be more widespread than we at first suspected..."
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

"Random accusations will get us nowhere, except possibly the dungeons. However, it never hurts to be careful and wary. We must proceed with caution," replies Sir Victor.

With that said, he pulled out his sword, pushed his bags of equipment over, and carefully started prodding them for any unwelcome slithering intruders.

* * *

The knight's warning was not without merit, for further careful investigation revealed that their equipment also contained the sandy-colored serpents in them. With the Kai's skill at calming animals, however, they were no threat, being easily dispatched. The companions decided to save one and tie it in a sack to show the command captain when he returned.

Taking turns—so that nothing else sinister could happen should all four head to their respective baths at once—the four eventually felt clean again after taking baths in the small heated tubs. The meal on the platter may not have been their choice selections, but it was a fine sampling of food and drink, offering a few tastes of Anari culture that were never exported to other lands.

They tossed their Anari disguises into the corner of the room and put on the clothing that Ihmra'zir made mention of. The plain cloth tunics were nondescript and ordinary, yet they were made of the same fine material that the Anari guard uniforms were. Even Makala was impressed that clothing could feel so smooth, though he would never consider wearing it if not required—or forced—to do so.

In a little over an hour, Command Captain Ihmra'zir returned. The four showed him the snake in the bag, which he immediately crushed with his foot. He went pale, which was saying a lot for one as tan as an Anari native, and looked at the companions.

"Be glad you were not struck by one of these vile serpents. Their poison is quite toxic, and I have been witness to what happens to a man when bitten. Their venom drives the temperature of the prey up until the creature dies from the terrible fever."

He sighed and set his jaw in confusion. "They're native to the mountainous regions around northern Wassagania. But how could it have gotten in your sacks?" He seemed utterly puzzled. "I shall post guards both in this room and outside while we go to the judiciary, and I will report this to them."

* * *

The Command Captain led them to a large room that had a small sand-filled crater in the middle of it. Seats were placed around the man-made pit, except on the side facing the judiciary. Smooth marble pillars stretched from floor to ceiling, and the light from the sun streamed in through many pieces of colored glass set in dazzling patterns at the top of the dome. Their footsteps echoed as they walked across the floor, flanked by guards dressed in more formal attire.

The judiciary was made of three men and two women, and they were seated in a huge structure that placed them easily ten feet above those who stood below them. Behind them on a large golden throne, was a man with large blotches under his eyes. Attendants were on either side of him, doing everything from wiping his face to holding his hands.

The head judge—a female in the middle—stood and addressed the group.

"Be it known the witnesses before us now are those with knowledge of State Case L047-4..." Her composure wavered, for she knew what her next words would do. "...the kidnapping of Princess Ameesha."

Behind her, the man on the throne wailed and leaned forward with his head in his hands. The attendants began doing everything in their power to calm him. It was obvious this man was President Kubudei.

The judge continued. "You four foreigners will give a private account of your details after the captain here speaks. While one speaks, the other three will be in the chamber to your left—" she motioned toward a guarded door, "--so that they cannot hear what is being said."

Another brooding judge spoke, "For your sakes, let us hope for corroboration." He rang a small bell and the small scribe from the scene hurried in, bowed, and handed over his parchment before leaving just as quickly as he had entered.

* * *

The command captain bowed and spoke.

"Following an alarm raised by the populace at the festival, my men and I tried to get to the compound in time to protect Ameesha. At the same time, I sent men to alert the riders to head to the compound. However, the overfilled streets and panic-stricken mob hindered our progress. I heard two loud explosions as I advanced, which I later found out to be gunfire from a Bor dwarf.

"When my men and I entered the compound at last, we found the dark one and the knight—he is the heavily muscled one—finishing off a man dressed in the black garb and green sash typical of the small Cleosian special military unit we have been gathering intelligence on with our spies. The fact that they were in Anari without our knowledge probably confirms why our spies have not reported in this month—they are dead.
**Act II. Conclusion – Suspicions**

"Inside the compound, there were dead servicemen all around, and another of the black-clad warriors on the stairs to the second level. This one had been slain by the Kai and Vakeros, who had then gone to the upper level. The Bor had been slain, but not before killing one of the intruders.

"My trackers arrived then and headed north into the Darouga. I expect them to return soon with the president's daughter and more information. It was all I could do to keep these four I have brought with me from departing to save the princesses themselves.

"One final note of interest is that the bags of gear I confiscated from the four so they could travel by disguise to the capital contained sand-snakes...the fever-inducing ones found near the northern mountains."

The command captain's eyes welled up with tears. "My leader, forgive me!" he cried out. "I have failed you and do not deserve to live any longer. I ask that you take me to the arena and strike me down in payment for my failures."

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The president looked up, his cheeks wet from tears.

"I'll not slay my best officer, but I'll also not intervene in whatever disciplinary action the military takes upon you, unless it be death."

The tired old man sighed and looked at the judiciary below him. "If Cloeasia is behind this, then it is for purely political reasons. Their contract expires with the Talons this year. Vassagonia is set to pounce upon them like an elix on a sand-rat."

"And with my daughter in their clutches, they know I'll be forced to intervene! And that I'll call upon my ties to Kakush and Firalond and Slovia to help. That accursed Zultan Kularran! If he defies her just to get an heir, I'll cross the Sand Sea myself and cut his throat with his own khanjar!"

He sits back down and irritably waves the attendants away, then calls for Ihnara to step aside so the first of the four can speak.

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Without hesitation, Sir Victor advanced to state his testimony, and solemnly bowed to the assembly, before going on to describe the attack on the princess' compound and her consequent abduction, from his point of view and withholding no details.

Then, he presented another request to the assembly. "And finally, this brings me to the reason for my presence in Anari, as an envoy from Sommerlund. I need to meet with the President after this case, it's a matter of your national security, which may or may not have anything to do with what happened to the princess."

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The president nodded slightly. He knew that knights were often used for these message-bearing tasks due to their codes against laziness and questing and so forth.

"Sir Knight," said the other female judge, whose smooth young features looked strangely out of place against the older time-etched faces of her peers, "if this matter is for the president only, so be it. He may relate it to us as he deems proper."

She smiled slightly and called for the guards to prepare a conference chamber for the president and the knight. Four men saluted and moved to a room near the arena and shut the door.

"Next," said the dour male judge, who seemed eager to find some flaw in the stories.

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The Kai stepped forward when his companion had finished. The green cloak of his people billowed out behind him - he had the grace of a hunter even in this hall of politics. The judges were amazed and astonished as he walked forward for it was a rare and great honour to be in the presence of a Kai Lord.

"President Kubudei," said Sol Hawk, taking a courteous bow, "I come to your country now upon the orders of the Kai Grand Master of Sommerlund. With all haste he sent me forth to you - that I might face the danger that he foresaw, that I might be the instrument of justice required at this time by your land. Even now, my masters watch from afar, eager to see the evil rooted from its place, even now they wait poised upon the outcome."

The judges whispered excitedly amongst themselves - the young female judge blushed as she gazed upon Sol Hawk's proud chiseled features, but she hid it quickly as one of her elder and more wrinkled peers leaned forward to have a better view of the legendary man for himself.

"It was in this way that I came to journey to your land," said the Kai humbly, "Only to serve. I was enchanted at the notion that your daughter could tell the future - I had one of her elder and more wrinkled peers leaned forward to have a better view of the legendary man for himself."

"Their stories agree toward the end," said the judge eager to see them caught in a lie. "The other two shall now have the task of verifying the tales or condemning them explaining that it was more important for us to come before you - that we must not attempt to save the princess ourselves. He assured us then that his best men were on the trail - we saw these expert horsemen from the rear, even at that time galloping at full speed to the rescue."

Sol Hawk gazed to his companions. "The Captain has brought us before you that we might lend credence to his story. I thank you for your ear, President Kubudei - peace has a friend with the Kai."

***

"There's a white duvul then - Arcadian met the challenge with blue steel. I supported him with the skills granted only to the Kai. We heard the dwarf scream upstairs, even as the sound of explosions were heard. We redoubled our efforts to reach the second storey, fighting the assassin until he was against the wall. Finally, unwilling to die or face capture at our hands, the assassin exclaimed "Coesia" and killed himself there.

"We spent no further time there - we only wished to save the lady Ameeshia. We were late in this - the scene on the second floor was regrettable not unlike that below. The dead were everywhere - the dwarves, too, had been slain. Arcadian ran to the window - he saw the escape of those responsible - the princess was still alive. We were soon to flee after them, we were determined not to allow them to escape. Then the Command Captain arrived - and as he said, he did all in his power to prevent us - that we must not attempt to save the princess ourselves. He assured us then that his best men were on the trail - we saw these expert horsemen from the rear, even at that time galloping at full speed to the rescue."

Sol Hawk gazed to his companions. "The Captain has brought us before you that we might lend credence to his story. I thank you for your ear, President Kubudei - peace has a friend with the Kai."

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Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

"Command Captain Ihmra'zir al-Marash al-Ferou al-Kubudei," he announced officiously, "your men have failed."

The president stood slowly, walking down the steps one by one until he stood on level ground with the rest of the group. He walked up to his cousin—the command captain—and sighed.

Ihmra'zir straightened and started to open his mouth to say something, but Kubudei acted first and slapped the man roughly across the face with the back of his hand. The signet ring he wore ripped the skin slightly on the cheekbone. The president then backed up and spit on the command captain's boot. The judges gasped in astonishment—that was one of their culture's highest insults that could be placed upon another.

"It appears your trackers cannot detect ambushes very well. All but three were slain. How many more people must die?"

Ihmra'zir wisely kept quiet.

"You are hereby demoted to Common Guard status, and on the morrow you will receive one lash for each fallen Anari soldier under your command, plus ten for my daughter's abduction."

One of the judges spoke out. "Sir, there is a limit of twenty lashes by law."

Kubudei turned sharply. "Not this time!"

He turned and ascended back to his throne. "Bring in the other two and have them tell their stories. What they say determines their fates."

* * *

Arcadian stepped into the room and gave a slight bow before Kubudei, a sign of great respect.

"I do not wish to waste your time, sir president," he started out, "so I shall make my testament as quick and to the point as possible. I was traveling through Anari on my long track around Vascopia. I had passed through much of western Dessi and the sands of Kakush before reaching the Chah Range. It was here that I heard of your daughter and her abilities. I was intrigued as I instantly knew the question I wished to ask her."

"So I traveled north-west until I reached the Darkening Days festival. Unfortunately outside the festival a band of brigands stole my horse from me while I glanced at weapons. Despite this misfortune I joined the line gathered outside the compound, hoping perhaps to be granted a second question to Ameesha: the whereabouts of my daughter."

"I was quite near the entrance to the outer gate of the compound when I heard a commotion. Someone shouted 'trespasser' and suddenly the guards stationed around the compound started dropping like flies. I rushed into the gate, the Kai Lord right beside me. A dark-clothed man stood in the doorway to the building in which your daughter was kept. He fired a crossbow at Sol Hawk, the Kai Lord, but missed. The man left the doorway and fled inside. Sol Hawk and I rushed inside where we were fired at again. The Kai Lord took the quarrel to his shoulder and I attacked the assassin. I injured him and he struck me on my leg. Angered, I retaliated with vigor and it was here that the Kai Lord also joined the battle."

"Before I could finish him off the assassin took a knife and plunged it into his own chest. I did not understand his last words, they are of a tongue strange to me. The Kai Lord and I and several other Vakeros were able to get to the second floor to find nothing but a dead assassin and the boney dwarp, also dead. The Anari guards were also dead, though it appeared that those who were not assassinated had fought bravely and to the last. The command captain showed up and bid us return to with him to Tahou. After some quarrel the four of us agreed under the condition that he would recommend us to help recover your daughter, should his men fail."

Arcadian too a deep breath after recounting his story, "that is pretty much it, president. Ihmra'zir had us brought here and I have given my testament as fully as I can. If there is anything else you would ask of me I will answer with honesty."

"As for Ihmra'zir, I would simply like to say that his men were extremely outmatched and this was little fault of the command captain. The ambushers had everything planned perfectly. The only thing they did not account for was the possibility of members of the crowd resisting. If it had not been for the dwarf, Sol Hawk, Sir Victor, the Telchoi, and myself they would have all gotten away without any difficulty at all."

* * *

Makala watched the proceedings with silence, massive arms folded over the other in a nonchalant stance. The Telchoi did not say anything when the captain's punishment was announced; had the man been a Telchoi his punishment would have been at least as severe for his derelictions. He would come out of the ordeal stronger in spirit, and the better for it.

Finally it was Makala's turn to speak his side of the tale, and he moved into spotlight with a fluid, catlike stride that was both graceful and smooth. Looking up, he stared into the eyes of each and every member of the tribunal, and then rasped loudly, "I am Makala, of the Telchoi; a hardy race we are, living in a harsh land far to the south of the Tentarias." He let this sink in for a moment before continuing, "I have been wandering the lands outside my home for months, on a personal quest to find my true mate, and to gain knowledge of the world. As for how I came to be involved in these events, I attended the festival whilst sojourning in this fair land. Though I had desire to in taking part at first, events occurred that were soon beyond my control."

Makala paused and shrugged, the continued bluntly, "In these trying times, perhaps the princess should have been better guarded. Or perhaps she was not as good at prophecy as the rumors claimed, if she could not foresee her own abduction. What has happened has happened; the future is what must be planned for. Whatever the case, I only wish that you take my small contribution to the rescue attempt as if it were on behalf of all Telchoi; perhaps our two lands can be off more use to each other in the coming times. I would also like to add that you will not find anyone who can track across the sands better than a Telchoi. He finished meaningfully.

Makala stared again at the council members, his gaze resting on the president. Then he nodded, and backed away.

* * *

Now that they have heard all of the accounts, the judges speak quietly amongst themselves. Sol Hawk steps a bit closer to the President, turning to look at the former Command-Captain who makes no movement or acknowledgement at all.

"Honourable President," said Sol Hawk then, "I respect your decision concerning Ihmra'zir — although my friend Arcadian has spoken truth concerning the nature of the attack. The law must be upheld - Ihmra'zir understands this as well as I - but I ask that because I myself was also unable to reach the princess in time that I may take my share of the lashes."

He tears his shirt off then, casting the Kai Cloak to the floor, then bowing upon one knee. "Before we choose our next strategy, please grant me an opportunity to atone as one of you."

* * *

Arcadian was quite taken aback by the actions of the Kai Lord. The young Vakeros had seen many an act of valor and honor in his short life but he had never seen anything like this. A surge of respect rose within him as he watched the Kai Lord tear of his shirt and kneel before the judges.

"Valor is one thing, thinks Cade, but what could possess a man to offer his own back to the rod? He was not bound by duty to protect Ameesha and yet he attempts to accept punishment as if he was."

The Vakeros shook his head slightly in abstract wonder, those north of gorge must be touched in the head. However Cade kept the comments that entered his mind to himself, and waited to see what would happen next. Perhaps it was shock that invoked his silence or perhaps it was wonder. No matter the reason, Cade stood and watched.

* * *
Rules, Rulings

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

The president listened as the judiciary deliberated amongst themselves, capturing only a few words here and there. He was bound by their decision if it was unanimous, for it did not concern natural born Anari citizens.

The elder woman stood and spoke. "We will not go against the president's order concerning al-Marash, for it fulfills the law of blood for blood. We further recommend that these four be recognized for their involvement, for they clearly tried to interfere with the situation and save Ameesha."

She turned. "Mr. President, is there anything you would like to add?"

Kubudei stood and took off his headpiece, revealing an almost bald pate. He sighed and rubbed his head. "It saddens me that my military's trackers cannot rescue my daughter. By now, anyone we send will be trying to find a cold trail, and we do not know what direction they took after entering the Daronga. For all we know, they may still be in the Daronga, waiting to slay more of my men."

Down the steps he came, until he stood on the floor with the four adventurers. "You have shown a dedication to a foreign nation, even to the point of endangering yourselves. I even understand that an attempt has already been made upon your lives with the serpents."

"This troubles me, for it means whatever enemy we face has infiltrated my trusted cavalry." He rubbed his whiskers and shook his head. "You four would readily risk your lives for this? Even when dozens have failed in one day's time?"

* * *

Arcadian stepped forward, "To be honest, president, at first I was readily prepared to track down the kidnappers. But since we have spent an entire day tracking here they have quite a lead on us now. Perhaps one or two of your men would be useful, as trackers not combatants. If you allow this all I ask is that you know the men personally. As you said, an attempt has been made on our lives and I do not want to have to worry about a knife slit ting my throat while I sleep."

Arcadian sighed. He was very uncomfortable in the clothes that had been provided to him by Ihmra'zir. Though the clothes themselves were soft he felt bare without his armor.

"Despite all of this I shall still go in search of your daughter. The man who took her owe me a debt of blood which they must make compensation for. If the man who attacked me had died by my blade the others might have been left alone. However he slew himself and such in such an act his death was not worthy of paying the blood debt."

"I cannot speak for the others, though I am for certain that the Kai Lord would travel with me. However, this is not a quest we can go off on without proper planning. We will need a painting, scroll, something with the face of the princess on it. If we finally do catch up with the assassins it would be well to insure we do not rescue a fake. We will need provisions and horses."

"I might also suggest that Ihmra'zir be given a temporary leave of duty, and travel with us. He seems a good man and if he aided us in the return of your daughter perhaps he could gain your forgiveness if nothing else."

The Vakeros shrugged, "my trek west was a lonely one. And to be honest, I have nothing waiting for me. I shall offer you my aid, it is yours to accept or decline. Either way I must track them down and regain my honor."

"The danger itself does not deter me. Every man dies, not every man truly lives. I would much rather die tomorrow upon the blades of my enemies then slip into a neverending sleep in old age."

* * *

"I, too," said Sol Hawk, "am ready to take on this task - but I also have a small request, and it is this - I would like for my companions and myself to bebriefed as fully as possible upon the situation - who these attackers were, with whom they are allied, and the details regarding the current political climate. I understand that all of these things are not known, but I am sure that the government of Anari has its intelligence and likely many insights regarding these happenings. This knowledge will be necessary for our protection - and to the end of bringing Ameesha successfully home."

Sol Hawk looked to the former Commander Captain. "Ihmra'zir has my trust - and in these dangerous times, trust is a precious thing. I would be pleased also if he could be allowed to join us - he has this with us in common: a debt to settle, honour to regain, a burning desire to see that your daughter is...found."

"You four would readily risk your lives for this? Even when dozens have failed in one day's time?"

* * *

Sir Victor also agreed to the President's request without hesitation. Though his loyalties lie with Sommerlund and her people, these were rather peaceful times and her borders were safe at present. The knight felt he could currently accomplish more good and right more wrongs by helping to rescue the princess from the clutches of her abductors.

Sir Victor put one knee on the floor, bowed and then declared, "Your Highness, I would be honored to accept this task which is set before me and my companions. As Kai and 1shir are my witness, we will bring back your fair daughter Ameesha and avenge those who were murdered by the scum who dared perpetrate this heinous act of barbarity. You have my word on this, Sir President."

With that said, the knight stood back up and awaited Makala's response, even if he knew what it would likely be.

* * *

Makala inclined his head to the president and rasped, "It is as I have already said, I would be more than willing to aid your daughter, if you would but consider starting up relations with my homeland of Telchoa. If you agree to at least ponder upon this, I will do my utmost to see that your daughter is...found."

The brownskinned Telchoi gave the president a half smile, then stepped back and awaited an official reply from the grief stricken man. Then, as if it were an afterthought, Makala added, "I would also like to say, with all due respect, that you do not send any of your own men with us. The more of us there are, the easier we will be to spot; furthermore, it will be far easier for foreigners to blend in, Anarian soldiers amongst us will only make it obvious that we are investigating the missing princess. I am more than capable of tracking the quarry across the desert sands, while Victor here can handle a sword rather well. The others may also be of some use. Any troops you send with us will only burden our journey."

* * *
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Arcadian shot the Telchoii a look at Makala's remark of him being 'of some use'. But he minded his lounge and decided that he would just let it go. Some things are simply not worth starting a fight over.

If we catch up to those assassins the Telchoii will see what a Vakeros is capable of...

* * *

Kubudei sighed. "The fate of Anari--and very well this entire region--rests upon your shoulders. I can only pray that you will succeed, for aside from national interests, my wife is in grief in over this," he says, his voice trailing off.

He turned to the judiciary. "Toss me that scroll that Ihmra'zir brought." One of the silent judges heaved a parchment at the president, who caught it easily. He handed it to Arcadian. "Here is what she looks like," he says, caressing the scroll gently. "It is quite accurate."

Once more the president turned to the five behind him. "Draw up the documentation so that these four can make it through the border." He turned back to the Vakeros. "Ihmra'zir will not be fit for travel when you leave. May your blade stay wet with the blood of your enemies."

He turned to face the Kai, who stood stoically with his tunic positioned in such a way to bare his torso. "Replace your clothing, Kai Lord. You share no responsibility with this man, for he was in charge of my daughter's well-being. Shall I flay all those present simply because they were present? Surely not.

"You ask for a messenger. I shall provide one. Write out whatever document you must, and I will send my own courier to Sommerlund."

The president moved to stand before the knight, who dwarfed the weary ruler. Kubudei looked up into his eyes and spoke. "The oath of a knight of Sommerlund comforts my mind, for I know you--like the others--will give your all to return Ameesha. You have my thanks.

To Makala he said, "It is said in Anari that a man is not consider boastful if he is speaking the truth. You state your tracking skills are acute, and I shall have to place my trust in that. Though they are separated by a great distance, I think that Anari could benefit from reaching out to other nations besides those who surround her. I will dispatch an envoy to your nation to state Anari's interest in open communications and potential trade."

The president took a deep breath and paced around everyone. He clasped his hands behind his back and looked at the floor as he spoke. 'I have not forgotten your request for a private talk, Sir Knight. But first I shall honor the Kai's request for what we 'know'.

"The Talons of Rashuur are no ordinary mercenary army. At last report, they number close to four thousand, and yet the Vassagonian army of a quarter million will not attack them. Why? Because tens of thousands of Shanamzin have fallen to Talon blades."

"But, just like all mercenary armies, the Talons are bound to service by a six-hundred year contract. It expired last year. Somehow, the Zultan managed to get the Talons to renew the contract for one year. Why one year? I do not know. Our spies in the region who live to report back to us that several Cleoassians cross into the Makerim rent. This is a both odd and dangerous, for it is said to be ruled by a Darklord and populated with gourgraz...and worse.

"All evidence we have, from the clothing, to the tattoos on the bodies of the kidnappers you four killed, to the script on the sketch of the compound, to the type of material used in fletched the bolts that killed my men. All evidence points to Cleoassian involvement."

He stopped pacing and shrugged. "Why?"

The president counted the reasons on his fingers. "The contract is soon to expire, and the Zultan will use Ameesha as leverage to defend his nation. He has no heirs to his throne, so he may be looking to perpetuate his bloodline, thereby enforcing an alliance through a child. He may wish to have Ameesha's psychic power to exploit. He may be considering a ransom which would give him funds to renew the Talon contract." Kubudei threw his hands in the air.

For a long moment he was silent, then, "Steal my daughter back!" The anguish and rage of a father who would act but couldn't be cause of his station hands in the air.

"After we are finished and these people have their gear once more, make sure they have all possible items they need for their task: horses, food, weapons, equipment, whatever!"

He motioned for the knight to follow him to the room that had been secured, then stopped. "When you bring her back to me, I shall reward all of you with whatever you request within my nation's power."

* * *

Arcadian placed the scroll in his tunic and turned to the Anarian guard, "might I request that I have the same mare upon which I rode in on? I will need little for provisions. Two meals and a waterskin, perhaps a bedroll, and a couple potions of antitoxin of you have it available to you. For my horse: a saddle and bridle as well as two saddlebags. My own weaponry and armor will suffice."

The Vakeros watches as the Sommlending Knight follows Kubudei into the private room, "don't take long, sir knight. If we are to reach Daroga by dawn tomorrow we must leave the city by nightfall."

* * *

"Makaln," he said, "I shall strive to be of use in our journey. I can tell you that I should be able to find food for us in the lands that are brush or forest - my skill does not extend to the desert. Are you able to hunt in that inhospitable land?"

To the others, he said, "We will want to take food for the journey, and water - as much as can be carried since we do not know how many days we will be searching." He said this in a low voice - he did not want the President to imagine that he could be without his daughter for a week or a month...

Sol Hawk moves to the President's advisor - he is the one who has been charged with providing for their needs. "Noble sir, would you be able to take us at this time to the Presidential Storehouse? I also have some items that I will need to acquire for the journey."

Sol Hawk clothed himself to the disappointment of the young female judge. He cast a brief glance at Ihmra'zir, then did not do so again.

* * *

"Thank you, President Kubudei for letting us help you in this task. All I would ask upon a successful return of your daughter is that you grant me ask her the question I intended. That is sole enough reward for me."

Arcadian made sure that his tone was as light and unthreatening as possible. The last thing he needed was to be on ends with the president.

"I paid for my entrance to the fairground and I wasn't given the luxury of satisfying my reasoning for being there. If this gift of your daughters is indeed what the hearsay indicates that I would be in need of its promise."

Done with the president, Arcadian turned to Sol, "let us be on our way as quickly as possible. We have half a day's ride to the forest and after that we must travel slower, in order to track."

The Vakeros once again spoke to the guard, "let us be gone to stock on our provisions."

He lowered his voice considerably, "I'm ready to hunt."

* * *
Agony.

And then there was a scream. The four turned and looked at one another, puzzled. There was yet another sound of the flags snapping in the breeze, then another cry of rays of the sun struck them. Golds, greens, reds, and silvers illuminated the sky. Flags caught the wind and snapped loudly.

The saddlebags contained extra grain and treats for the horses, plus full water skins slung over the saddle. The four mounted up and exited the stables, taking their first addition to two fine horses (as the Kai could attest with his discipline of Animal Kinship).

They underwent their various rituals of preparation, then decided all was in readiness for departure. Their border passes safely tucked away, the four exited the room and followed as they were led to the stables. There was the knight's horse, already saddled, brushed, and fed. The horse that the Vakeros had requested was here as well, in the land of the sun.

Sol Hawk curled the parchment up and then inserted it into the soft leather tube. He hands it to the messenger who waits patiently. "Journey to Holmgard," said Sol Hawk, "and then wander the forest just north. You will be shot at by arrows - none will strike you, so be not afraid. You will then be approached by a man who wears a cloak the color of my own. Ask him no questions but answer all of his - give him this message. It is only for his eyes and none other. I send you with urgency. The way is long - do not stop until you have arrived. The President tells me that there are none more trusted than you. Now go, and may Ishir keep you safe."

As they waited for Sir Victor to join them once again, Sol Hawk searched the Presidential Store. He examined the armour and weapons that were there. Also he gathered food for the journey long.

"Tell me," he said then to the attendant, "Have you any arrows of fine craftsmanship?"

"Yes, yes, majesty," said the attendant in an attempt at formal northspeak, "Anything for the Kai Lord and his friends." He handed over a handful of arrows - these were obviously crafted with care as each one was tipped with gold.

"These will do - thank you," said Sol Hawk, admiring these birds and noting at once that they were capable of piercing even heavy armour. With care he added these to his quiver.

"What else will Master require? The finest potions we have - for strength in battle, for the fast care of the body..."

"My friends may have use of these as well..."

"Anything, Lord," said the man. His long black beard teased his knees as he bowed to Sol Hawk. "Many potions! But..." he looks nervously around to either side, "The President has only given permission for one potion each..."

"Only one... I see..." Sol Hawk became silent...

"Forgive Maroosh, Majesty! I did not wish to anger the Kai! Two potions each - he may have my head, but Maroosh knows that the way of the Kai Lord must not be hampered lest six decades of ill fortune fall upon Tahou..."

Sol Hawk raises an eyebrow at the curious reply. "Two potions each will be fine."

"Yes, yes! Fine potions for you and all of your friends!" Maroosh rushes out and then into chamber six where the potions are kept. After speaking at length with the sergeant, Maroosh finally directed them inside the dimly-lit antechamber - the more stone-faced sergeant said only, "Take two each," then stood vigil as they made their selections.

What else, Sire? Name it and Maroosh will provide!"

"The President has ordered that these men be given horses - and the Vakeros wishes for the horse he rode in on..." said the Sergeant.

"Horses, horses! Yes! Maroosh will bring the finest! They will be waiting, Kai Lord - awaiting for your journey with all the supplies Maroosh can find for you!"

"These few things are all I require - I believe you will find the needs of my friends equally modest," said Sol Hawk then, providing a list.

"A pleasure, a great pleasure to serve a Lord of the Kai," said the attendant once more as the party made their final selections...
Rules, Rulings

OOC: Sir Victor, I’m going to propel the story along. If you have any more info for me to act on, let me know and I’ll retrofit it into the storyline with no problems.

OOC: There are all basic normal provisions here. Anything listed for 20G or less is here. Sh, to answer you directly—there is no armor that would qualify for what you ask here. Also, the only other types of arrows available are 10 blunt (-1 damage), 10 armor-piercing (+1 to hit only), and a handful of strips useful for making flaring arrows (5 strips total).

Inside are a lot of potions. Alether and Laumspur mainly. There are (5 strips total).

How many potions may we take, two per character, or two of each kind?

Sol Hawk takes:
- Fine Horse
- Saddlebags (laden with 6 meals, 2 waterskins)
- 1 Potion of Laumspur
- 1 Potion of Alether
- 10 AP arrows
- 50 feet of rope
- Sleeping Gear
- Tether & stake (for horse)
- 6 torches

Sol Hawk drops (these may be taken by a comrade if desired):
- Artisan’s Clothing

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

“The wind’s not blowing that hard,” one of them said. It was then they realized what they heard. One by one, they remembered that Ihmra’zir’s punishment for failure was today. As they made their way slowly through the palace grounds, they rounded a stand of small fruit trees next to a large tower and saw the crowd that had gathered.

Perhaps a hundred people—mainly military, with a few servants, and a handful of courtiers and nobility—stood watching three men. Ihmra’zir was bound by the wrists to a crossbar, which was hoisted into the air just high enough to keep his feet from touching the platform he was on. Behind him, to either side, were two men with long whips. As the four watched, the man on the left moved his arm back and snapped it forward in practiced ease. There was a loud “crack” followed by Ihmra’zir wail. He shook from the pain as the red stripe opened up on his from shoulder to spine. The one on the right then mimicked the blow, cross-cutting the most recent stripe with his own.

Part of the crowd dispersed, unable to watch any longer. The four watched helplessly, feeling sympathy for the man despite how they felt for him before now. The Kai especially felt bad, for he had offered to be strung up there beside the captain.

After watching all they could tolerate, the four departed and exited the palace gates. The guards closed the huge doors behind them, and they were left on the already crowded street of Anari. All around them people scurried about in nondistinct garb. Some on horseback, but most on foot. The four waited briefly for a moment to get their bearings and decide what course would suit them best.

One of the four noticed a man in brown clothing walking their direction, never really making eye contact. He pulled a slim cylindrical object from his tunic—a scrollcase.

“1stir have mercy on the poor captain, however deserved or not is his punishment, I wish it could have been otherwise for him. I feel partly to blame for his predicament, even if we were not responsible for what befell at the fair grounds,” said Sir Victor in a sad voice, his gaze vacant. Then, taking control of his feelings, he added “It would be best if we left quickly, we have a long road ahead, and I’m sure the murderers won’t come looking for us over here!”

With that, he mounted Bright Lance, his powerful steed, and started down the street. The Anarians sure know how to take care of their horses, he thought as he approvingly noted that his mount had been well-groomed and fed.

Sol Hawk rose, the rest being most welcome. He gathers his equipment, including the gold-tipped arrows as well as his other equipment. An attendant waits - he is the same man Sol met yesterday at the Presidential Store.

Sol Hawk nodded in greeting. “The horse I require...?”

“Yes, yes, for Master,” said the attendant, “The finest horse my President can give to you.” He scuttled off to where the four horses were kept and returned at once with a beautiful desert stallion - it was of unusual colouration found only in this region of the world—red and brown and blue - its eyes gleamed like steel. As the horse’s eyes met Sol Hawk’s, he knew at once that this horse was highly intelligent, head and shoulders above others of its kind.

“What is his name?” asked Sol Hawk.

The horse itself replied, as if in Sol Hawk’s mind, even as the attendant fumbled for some made-up answer to please the Kai.

“Call me Blade,” intones the horse.

“Thank you,” said Sol then to the attendant of the President’s Store, “I will need some additional supplies.”

“Anything, Anything Majesty,” the man said with almost too much enthusiasm, “May I ask of you, Lord, a favour as well?” He got down on his knees then, and lowered himself to place his forehead upon the dusty ground at the Kai Lord’s feet.

“What do you ask?” said Sol Hawk.

“Blessings for myself and my family,” he said, “Maroosh is good man with good family,” he said, “When the darkness comes, Maroosh wishes only to be safe and safety for woman and childs. Grant this your prayer to Maroosh! Great Kai, do this small thing for your servant.”

Sol Hawk brought the man from the ground back to his feet. “You have the power. It is mine to give. But if it will console you...” he raised his hand and placed it on the man’s shoulder, “May the grace of Ishir and the might of the Kai bestow upon all their worthy a long life and safety in dark times.”

“Thanks, ten thousand thanks,” said the man, overcome with emotion, “Anari owes you great debt for your task that you do.”

Sol Hawk offers a friendly smile as he returns to his preparations - he hopes that this man’s trust is justified - surely time will tell if this is so.

Arcadian took no supplies from from the first room save some hemp rope and a bedroll. In the second room he helped himself to two of the potions of laumspur.

Never know when it might come in handy, thought Cade to himself as the four men left the palace grounds.

The Vakeros was delighted when they arrived at the stables and he found that one of the horses waiting for them was indeed Iri. Cade leaned in close to the white mare and playfully scratched her ears. He leaned in and whispered softly into her ear, letting her know that it was him. “It is good to see you again.”

As they neared the gates to the palace they encountered the whipping of the former command captain. Arcadian watched with not sympathy as Sir Victor did, but with disappointment. If Ihmra’zir had only listened to him he wouldn’t be in his current situation.
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

And Ameesha could possibly be in the arms of her father. It would have been better for him if he had travelled with us and died by the sword of one of the assassins. But now he will bleed to death under the whip and rod for his own transgression. The gods will not look favorably upon him, this is no honorable death.

A frown formed upon Cade’s face as they left Ihmra’zir behind and headed out into the city. Maybe I should return to Deosi after all. It seems that the further I travel from my homeland the more I realize I miss it. Oh to see the Gardens of Elzian again…

Cade leaned down in and for the second time that day whispered into Iri’s ear. He spoke with a soft voice that was unkindling to his nature. The boy had found solace in the horse’s presence and it soothed his worries.

“What do you think, Iri?”

Of course the steed did not reply but only kept on walking as if the young man had never said anything at all. However, Cade did not need an answer, he had already reached a conclusion himself.

I think I will. After this is all over I will go home. Maybe I left more behind than I thought I did when I started off.

Arcadian drifted off into a state of bliss. He unconsciously kept his horse moving but at the same time he was unaware of what was going on around him. His thoughts went back to his last memories of his father and all the friends he had left behind at Daernath. Presently his thoughts turned to one individual in particular but the Vakeros pushed it from his mind. Before the previous thought could come back to haunt him the voice of Sir Victor shook him from his daydreaming.

He listened only absentmindedly to the knight and hoped that he wouldn’t notice. Cade nodded when Victor had finished speaking, “I agree, Sir Knight. It would do us good to reach Daroga by nightfall.”

The sooner Ameesha is in the safety of her father’s house the sooner I can return to my past.

* * *

The hood of his cape was set so as to cover his face in shadow, yet his eyes focused on all that was around him. Nervously glancing up at the sky Murdach noticed he had been waiting for some time now. Controlling the resulting restlessness he hoped that the four foreign companions would soon venture forth from the Palace gates. Murdach fingered the scrollcase hidden deep within one of his pockets. He had already chosen its intended recipient so until he appeared Murdach continued to walk amongst the shadows of the crowd.

Sure enough Murdach noticed the gates opening and with bated breath looked up to see who was exiting the grounds. He spotted his man but before moving he waited for the gates to shut. As he approached the four foreigners Murdach tensed slightly with nervousness – he was shy of most people, especially foreigners; however he was pleased to see that his intended recipient was travelling on horseback.

Ten paces from them he quickly removed the scrollcase from his pocket and looked directly at the man he was approaching. Suddenly Murdach paused…...the man had leant forward in his saddle………What was he doing?……then he realised the man was simply talking to his mount and actually appeared oblivious to his surroundings. Finally stepping out from the crowd Murdach approached the Vakeros Knight and with both hands clasping the scrollcase, reached up under his forearms and placed it in his lap, knowing that the knight would instinctively grab it.

Glancing up at the knight Murdach showed his face yet avoided eye contact before quickly looking down at his feet again. “Vakeros…consider yourself warned. THEY have not left Anari. If you are true to your cause…then we shall meet again.”

Murdach simply retreated back into the crowds giving the Vakeros no time to respond. In fact he had been so quick he was partially scared that he hadn’t delivered the case properly. Nonetheless he raised his hood and continued wending his way through the crowd.

It was now…...all down to fate.

* * *

Arcadian was startled when a man stepped from the crowd and placed something in his lap. As the man quickly walked back into the crowd the Vakeros slowed his horse and his hand arced towards the man.

“Wait!”

But he was gone. Cade shook his head. He should have been paying more attention. Gingerly he looked at the case in front of him. Cade quickly inspected the box and decided against opening it for the present. He put it in the pocket of his robe, patting it softly to ensure its security.

Once we are outside the city walls...

Once again the Vakeros Knight drifts off in thought, to his days after graduation at the Valos College. His thoughts brought unease to his mind and an empty, sinking feeling filled his chest.

Introducing:

Murdach

Emissary of Egoliath

(NPC)

A mysterious contact who made himself known to Arcadian in Tahou. Murdach has offered to take the characters to his master, Egoliath.
They city had a dinginess about it that Cade did not like. He felt cramped, held in by the massive stone walls. An urge to be free of the
metropolis filled him and he urged his horse forward, taking the front of the four horses.

It seems this quest may be harder than I at first believed. But no matter what I must see this through. I am a Vakeros. It is my duty to
do what is right and to help the innocent.

Cade sighed heavily. It was the sigh of a man who had not tired of life but of one who has finally realized his role in life and disagreed
with it. It was a sigh that he kept to himself as it was too quiet for any of the other riders to take notice.

Ishir guide me...

* * *

After a few more minutes of riding Cade drifted slightly behind the others and took the scroll from his pocket. He read the contents
carefully before placing the note back.

It seems the gods have looked favourably upon me.

He looked at his companions and quickly decided against reading them the contents of the message. Now wasn't the time. For the time
being anyways, the knowledge would be his own.

Cade smiled. He quickly looked around, seeing if any of Kubudei's men were watching them.

He rides up to the others and whispers, "don't ask questions. Let's stop by the market place and look at the shoppes there."

Cade grins mischievously at the confused looks of the others, "trust me."

* * *

From his private chambers high atop one of the spires of the palace, Kubudei watched below as Ihm'ra'zir was flayed. He had the
window open so that he could hear the cracks of the whips.

His wife across the room winced each time the sound came up from the courtyard. Soon she was sobbing, and Kubudei left the window
as he watched the four adventurers upon whom he had placed more trust than his own military depart. More whip-cracks sounded as he
moved to comfort her.

"There now, the four I've sent will find her."

She pushed him away. "It's not that!" She stood and stormed across the room to the window. Another crack sounded. "It's that!" she
said, pointing down to the courtyard. "Must you do this?"

Kubudei frowned and rose to placate her and explain matters. "He has failed in his duty. It is the law."

"It is not the law to use two whips and more than double the amount of lashes a man receives! Why don't you go down there and do it
yourself instead of getting someone else to do it for you."

"What?" Kubudei was confused.

"Just because you're mad at him over this, you decided to punish him more. And for what?" She stood defiantly, tears of anger mixing
with those of sorrow and grief. "How will almost thirty lashes change anything more than ten will?"

Kubudei regarded her for a long moment. Another whip snapped below. She was right. He was merely an angry father venting his pent-
up emotions upon some tangible object since he didn't have the real perpetrators. "You are right," he said, moving her from the
window. He used a key to open a recessed door beside the window and pull a cord. From high on the tower, a loud bell sounded.

* * *

In the courtyard below, one of the whipmasters had just drawn back when the bell sounded. He looked up to see the president's face in
a small window. The bell sounded again and again. He began to coil his whip and motioned to the other whipmaster to do the same.

"Kubudei thinks he's had enough."

Ihm'ra'zir was lowered to the platform, though he never knew it. He had long since passed out from the shock of the pain. A sprinkling
of ash was laid across the scars in order to make them more pronounced once they healed, then his torso was wrapped in a tight
bandage to prevent blood loss.

The crowd dispersed, overall relieved, but with a few who had wanted to see more blood. In a matter of minutes, the grounds were
once more clear.

* * *

"There," he said. "Are you happy now?"

"No," the first lady said. "I want you to use laumpsur to heal the man."

Kubudei looked at her crossly. "You know that is against the laws."

She returned the gaze. "The law says no criminal is to have more than ten lashes. He had twenty-two."

Kubudei acquiesced, then changed the subject. "What about our other daughter? How safe do you think she'll be in Resa?"

The president's wife shook her head and dabbed her eyes. "I don't know."

Kubudei remembered the recent events and how his own countrymen had failed him. He decided she would be safest in Tahou, at
home. "I'll have the cavalry pulled from the north sector to bring her home at once."

---

"Sol Hawk thought. This idea seemed to appease his feverish analysis, as did the idea that the four of them would soon regain the honour of his people by returning the President's
daughter, Ihm'ra'zir's niece."

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Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

As they rode, Sol Hawk examined the Bor Musket that he obtained at the festival. Very carefully he examined it, studied it. Although he did not know fully how it worked, he did know from which end issued the fire - he was careful not to point it at any person as his eyes moved up and down the barrel, the trigger, the hammer. He thought again about the man who had once held it, a dwarf from Bor whose name Sol Hawk had not even known - another victim of the violence that was beginning to take hold from the north.

Cade motioned for them to move toward the market. Sol Hawk directed Blade at once in that direction, toward the sights and sounds of the Bazaar at Tahou.

Makala rode to one side of the group, lost in his own thoughts. He had been pleased to see the commander being punished for his transgressions; it appeared that not all of Northern Magnamund was as soft as he had been led to believe. The commander would recover stronger and more vigilant in his duties than ever, and perhaps Makala would have the opportunity to meet him again in Telchos, when the current business was over and done with.

The Telchoii watched curiously as a man emerged from the crowd and handed a scroll case to the Vakeros, and then vanished back into the crowd. Was that a message from Anari’s ruler, whom they had just met, or something else? No answer seemed to be forthcoming, and the Telchoii decided it was something that affected the Vakeros himself, not something affecting the mission.

“We already have everything we need from the royal stores, let us not waste anymore time and leave for the gates at once.” he remarked, as he saw the others turn towards the market place.

Cade sighed impatiently at Makala, “I apologize, Telchoi, but I do not have everything that I need. It would mean much to me if we were to stop before we head out.”

Arcadian is in no mood to have his wishes crossed and continued to stride towards the marketplace. He did not wish to start a fight with Makala yet he had his own reasons for wanting to visit the bazaar.

“Come with us or wait here,” the Vakeros shrugged, “it’s your choice.”

“Do not keep us waiting then,” replied Cade and turned to the marketplace. Makala, too, had noticed that they were not alone.

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“Do not keep us waiting then,” replied Cade and turned to the marketplace. Makala, too, had noticed that they were not alone.

“Your apology is accepted Makala,” said Arcadian respectfully, “and I think we should all go together. There is safety in members and you are right, those who tried to kill us won’t give up so easily.”

Cade ponders as they ride towards the marketplace, “I promise you, Telchoi, that we shall leave within the hour. I too, do not wish to launder.”

Sol Hawk nodded once. They had arrived at the marketplace. He considered the message that Makala spoke of, realizing now that the messenger was the man who had pressed against Arcadian as one of many in the crowded streets. But was the man an enemy or a friend? A friend would be welcome, but if he was so secretive, it would mean that the danger still existed all around them. And if he was an enemy, then again, danger was obviously all around. Sol Hawk chose to believe that the man was a friend - it would have been easy for an assassin to kill Arcadian at that distance by use of poison. There would have been no reason to deliver a message in such an instance, unless as a distraction.

Sol Hawk now clearly was enjoying the sights of Tahou - clearly he is more fascinated with the people of the city than he was with the gold and riches that adorned the royal buildings. He passes a small auction where a number of residents are bidding on the price of a goat. Sol Hawk kept his eyes open for an apothecary - it would be wise to purchase an antidote in case their attackers tried poison again.

As the four warriors rode through the city, a curious man furtively came to Arcadian and delivered a message. It must be something personal from Dessi, perhaps, thought Sir Victor.

“Let’s finish our business in the market promptly, so we can start out on our quest. Remember that we must make haste,” he added, to remind them all that speed was of the essence.

With that Sir Victor rode behind Arcadian through the marketplace, alert for anything which seemed out of the ordinary, for their foes could be hidden anywhere, and it wouldn’t do to be ambushed before they had even set out of Tahou.

Cade strode through the marketplace astride his horse, being careful to keep is belongings away from the thieving hands that oft find themselves in such a bazaar. He comes to a string of shops and looks carefully at each and every one.

The others assume that he is looking for a specific shop but what he is really looking for is a small engraving of a serpent beside one of the fings. Arcadian sees the Kai Lord look at him quizzically and Cade shakes his head at him.

“Just trust me.”

The Vakeros resumed his search, hoping that he wouldn’t waste too much time. It was still early morning but that left no room to dawdle. Who knows how much time the princess has?

The actions of Arcadian seemed odd to his fellows, but he had a purpose. There was a mark, a symbol, that he needed to find. Door after door fell under his scrutiny. At the back of the marketplace area (the north side), he found what he had been looking for: a small black snake symbol above the top hinge.

The store was called “Kalodi’s Tapers,” and from the sign over the door with a candle painted on it, it appeared the man dealt in illumination. How fitting for dark passageways, thought the Vakeros.
Rules, Rulings

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Sol Hawk smiled back at his friend with his usual good humour. His brown-blonde hair waved in the breeze as it peeked over his green Kai headband. He can tell that they are being watched even now, although most likely, they were in no danger for the moment in the relative safety of the bustling crowds.

While he guided the horse called Blade, Sol Hawk realized that in fact he was developing something of a tan – nothing to rival Makala’s dark skin yet, but perhaps enough to show that he was not a total stranger in these lands.

*C * *

Cade smiled as he found the shop he was looking for. The sketch of the serpent would not be easily found unless one was looking for it, and the Vakeros was looking for it. Cade dismounted and gave Iri a pat on her mane before approaching the shop. Exercising extreme caution Cade reached out his left hand and pushed in the door.

His heart began to race, not sure of what to inspect inside the doorway. As usual his instincts took over any doubts he might have had and he pushed the door completely open and walked inside.

*C * *

Sol mentally addressed his horse as he dismounted. Warn me if there is any trouble. We’ll be inside.

He follows the Vakeros into the structure, keeping an eye out for anything and everything.

*C * *

"Would you require any assistance inside that house, Arcadian, or should we wait outside," asked the knight when he saw that the Vakeros had finally found what he was looking for.

As Arcadian and Sol dismounted, Sir Victor picked up the reins of their horses so that they wouldn’t go anywhere in the marketplace...

*C * *

Cade paused inside the doorway to the shop. He turned, facing the plate-clad night and shrugged his shoulders.

"It is up to you. You may stay here or come inside. This shouldn’t take long..."

Despite what he said, Cade actually had no idea how long this could possibly take. He’d have to trust fate with this one.

*C * *

The knight decided to stay outside to keep a watchful eye over the mounts and gear, as you could never be put your faith in the honesty of every other living soul, and thieves usually loved to hide such crowded environments.

If he supposes this won’t take long, I don’t see the point in following them, as they’re both capable warriors already.

*C * *

Inside the shop, the only light came from several lit candles and lanterns, for the windows were boarded up. It took a second for Arcadian’s eyes to adjust to the flickering illumination, then he saw an elderly man rise from a corner of the room and walk over to him. The scent of spices and fragrances were heavy in the room, and as the man came to stand before the Vakeros, he was forced to wipe his nose out of irritation from so many strong aromas.

The elderly man merely smiled. Such was not an uncommon reaction. "Greetings, armored one. Are you seeking candles or torches or lanterns?" he gestured at the wide array of supplies around him.

*C * *

Cade shook his head at the elderly man. The Vakeros was uninterested in the contents in the shop. He approached the man until he was only five feet away and said only one word.

"Egoliah."

*C * *

Cade watched for a response from the elderly man, hoping that his hunch was indeed correct and the name would have significance.

*C * *

"Thank you," Sol Hawk thanks Sir Victor.

Inside he merely smiles as the old man asks them his question. He stands just inside the shop, allowing Arcadian to conduct the business.

*C * *

Makala followed the others silently, his stride fluid and catlike. Once they reached the place the Vakeros wanted to enter, Makala simply nodded at the knights comment and stood beside him, while the others entered the building.

"Handle my mount here a moment would you Victor, I do not feel at ease around horses. Frisky fly attracting critters..." he muttered to Victor, even as he handed the reins of his horse over to the knight.

Folding his powerful arms over the other, Makala walked over to the side, trying to avoid getting in the way of the throng of shoppers, even as he kept a careful eye on his surroundings, looking for anything, or anyone, suspicious.

*C * *

The old man’s eyes widen in surprise. "Egoliah," he repeats. "Are you looking for him, or is he looking for you?"

Arcadian showed the man select parts of the scroll he had obtained from Murdach. The man nodded and came out from behind the counter, speaking in hushed tones to the Vakeros. "Old Kadish will help you now. If Egoliah plans to meet you, you’d do well not to disappoint him. It’s rare he calls for anyone these days."

Kadish pointed to the stock in his store. "The path you’ll be taking is dark and long. Take what you need from my stock for a three-mile journey in pitch-black darkness. Do you have horses?"

Arcadian and Sol Hawk nodded, causing Kadish to shake his head. "Then you cannot use my tunnel – it’s too small. Look on the north wall for a stables owned by a man named Vanu. Tell him about Egoliah and tell him that Kadish has already given you light."

*C * * * * * * * *
Cade and Hawk: The man is sincere. You sense no attempt to fool or hide anything, and his offer to take supplies is genuine. His loyalty to Egoliah is apparently such that he’ll take a loss in profit to help out. Before you leave, he gives you directions to the stables, so that it should only take an hour or so to reach it.

Makala and Victor: Aside from that one youth (not the child) that stared at you and disappeared into the crowd, nothing unusual or dangerous can be seen. The people are, for the most part, too eager in their own daily lives and can only spare glances and stares as they pass.

Some are curious, others appear repulsed, some admire you. The typical mix I suppose.

Sor has taken a lantern plus related supplies. Let me know if there was a cost and let me know the weight.

Apologies for the delay KL, I have been very busy these days.

Alasi

**Rules, Rulings**

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

The Knight and Telchoi stood with the mounts outside, an intimidating duo, but the populace paid them no mind. One little boy came up to Makala and gawked in wide-eyed amazement, his little mouth open in awe. The lad’s mother quickly herded him back from the man, then started telling him about running up to strangers.

Makala’s gaze washed across the crowd like a wave, taking in all he saw as a potential threat. Once he saw a slight fellow staring back at him, but a scowl caused the youth to avert his gaze and blend into the crowd.

Sir Victor merely watched over the immediate area, knowing that his impressive size and glimmering armor would deter any wrong-doer. People stared at him on occasion, perhaps because they had never seen such a heavily armored person before—only Anari soldiers wore any semblance of armor, and then it was typically covered in cloth.

The Kai and Vakeros soon emerged from the small building and told the other two what had occurred.

Soon after, their two companions exited the store and rejoined them, while explaining what transpired inside.

Sir Victor chuckled at Makala’s reaction around horses. “Horses are fabulous beasts. Some of them are useful for transportation, others help the peasants in the fields, while others are great warriors and companions,” he told the Telchoi as he patted Bright Lance’s muzzle.

“Then what do you all think?”

Cade holds on to his horse’s muzzle lovingly. No matter how blood thirsty or heartless a Vakeros may appear to be, the bond between him and his horse is one that is unrviled in much of Magamund.

“I say let’s go,” says Sol Hawk. “I would say we will be led to our enemy either way.” He examined the new lantern now in his possession, procured from the shop. “Besides, I sensed no deception from this man. If there is a secret way, I believe the safety afforded us will be worth it – as will the eventual element of surprise that this path will afford us.”

Arcadian turned to Sir Victor, “and you? Should we take the word of this man?”

The Vakeros didn’t even bother asking the Telchoi. He knew that if Makala wanted his opinion voiced he would voice it all on his own. Persuasion fell upon deaf ears with that man.

Sir Victor, seeing no use in trying to find deception where there may be none, agreed with Sol Hawk as he turned to answer Arcadian’s question “I don’t see why not. It’s our best lead so far, so we might as well take it. Our mission is dangerous enough as it is, I doubt this Egoliah could possibly prove even more dangerous. If it is a trap, then Ishir have mercy on us. But we swore to bring back the princess or die trying, and I fully intend to honor this vow. Now let’s get going.”

With those words, the companions remounted and headed towards the city gates.

Makala came out of his watchful stance when the others emerged from the building. The Telchoi was surprised to hear the news however, which in itself was a surprise, since few things caught him off guard. “Hold it a moment. Who is this Egoliah? How does he know the location of the kidnappers, and why would he tell you, instead of going to his liege lord?” he rasped.

Was he the only one who saw something a tad bit odd about the whole situation? After all, they were the foreigners here; and only a select few were supposed to know the princess had been kidnapped at all, much less they had been chosen to find her and bring her back. The Telchoi gave one least glance about the market square as he led his mount away with the others, waiting for the others to respond.

“Should I explain Egoliah to you in all proper fullness, but not here. It will be outside the city walls and the hearing range of the Anari.”

Cade is firm in his manner of speaking.

Their riding pace north through the city was slow and allowed plenty of time for discussion. However, Arcadian did not want the wrong word to fall upon the wrong ear.

“Let’s just say that Kubudei is not the only person who would benefit from the princess’s return to Tahou.”

Arcadian’s secrecy only made Makala more suspicious as they rode through the city. It seemed to those who did not know the full story yet that they were taking diversions from what they set out to do, but in all actuality they were moving closer to the truth. The sun rose higher, and the sounds of Tahou began to fill the air. People were everywhere. Merchants issued calls to prospective customers, fishing the passers-by with their words and hoping to snare a good sell. Guards rode around on their mounts, issuing orders here and there to help the traffic flow more smoothly. Children laughed, babies cried, and life took its normal path amongst the different lives.

It occurred to the four that the populace would be more sullen and hushed if they only knew the truth. Their beloved Ameesha was not recovering in the castle. Kai only knew where she was.... They believed a lie, and they were glad for believing it—best leave them alone in blissful happiness.

At last, they reached the stable owned by Vanu. Arcadian once again dismounted and walked in, giving terse explanations for anything, if at all. The main part of the stable was open, and shoe-smiths hammered away at rods of metal, shaping them into functional shoes. The Vakeros interrupted one and asked if he knew where Vanu was.
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

"Vanu stands before you, little one," the muscular man said, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, still holding the hammer. He frowned at the cooled metal and tossed it back into a bed of hot coals with tongs, which he laid across the anvil. "Go on, you've got three minutes before it's hot enough to work the metal again."

Arcadian told him of Kadish, and his eyes narrowed. "You know ol' Kad? Go on then," he said, setting down the hammer. "You've got my attention now."

The Vakeros spoke in hushed tones, confident the other men beating anvils around him would drown out the words. At the mention of Egoliah, Vanu tensed. "If the old watcher wants you, you'd best be going.

He led them to a stall at the very back of one of his private stables. Oddly enough, the back wall had a large lock on it. Vanu pulled out a key and opened the lock, then pulled the door open with a mighty heave. The thick door swung open to reveal a large dank tunnel.

"Follow that tunnel—there's no light, mind you." He leaned his back against the door to hold it open. "Once you go in, there is only one way out, for I'm going to lock you in. Follow this trail for about five miles, but move slowly. In places you may have to dismount due to a low ceiling, or you may have to go slowly because of loose rocks underfoot. At the end is another locked door. That one is camouflaged from the outside, and the key to open it should be in the door. Once it shuts, you'll be locked out and close to the outer ring of hills that surrounds the city."

"For Anari's sake, I wish you luck."

Sirs Victor always first put faith in the inherent goodness of humanity, hence why he didn't question too much what was going on. However, creeping about in rough-hewn tunnels wasn't exactly his idea of a pure and noble activity.

"Let's get going, we've wasted enough time as it is. However, Arcadian, you'll have to explain to me why crawling around in these dank tunnels like a bunch of insects will help speed us along our quest, instead of riding swiftly outside in open spaces with the wind in our hair and the sun on our cheeks."

Sir Hawk whispers to his horse, explaining in his way that they are soon to enter the tunnel. As Sir Victor asks his questions of Arcadian, Sir Hawk is silent, lending his lantern in preparation for their journey.

Makala glanced at the blacksmith with an unreadable expression on his face, before glancing into the tunnel from his vantage point. An expression of irritation passed over his face, and he nodded at the knights words. "I agree, this does not make much sense. I dislike wandering these tunnels like a cockroach, and I dislike being led around even more."

He shrugged, and prepared himself to enter the darkness, for it appeared the choice had already been made. The Telchoii hoped however, this would somehow prove to be a fruitful endeavor.

Arcadian abandonedly thanked the blacksmith and led his horse inside the tunnel, holding onto his reigns with his right hand. As he stepped into the darkness his left hand reached into his backpack and he withdrew a foot-long rod. After an expert twirl he broke the rod across his right forearm. Immediately the surrounding enclosure was surrounded in light.

Cade knew that the Sunrod would expel light for only six hours, after that it would grow dim and become worthless. With this in mind he urged the four adventurers into the darkness, some more reluctantly than others. After Vanu slid the door shut and bolted it from the outside, Arcadian provided them all with some light. The air in the tunnel was dry and stale, if air could be described that way. Their breathing kicked up dust, which merely hovered and slowly settled back down. There was very little in the way of an air current in this place, which made it seem more like a tomb than a tunnel. Not even spiders had populated the place, noted the Vakeros.
Rules, Rulings

Arcadian, now might be a good time to let everyone know what exactly was in the letter you got.

Sense Motive Check - 1/20 = 7 Roll = 1, Total = 8

What a crappy roll. Oh well, Hey can’t I reroll according to the RPG Core book? But I know I suffer some sort of penalty. Hmm, I’ll look it up when I get home tonight and adjust my roll accordingly if possible. I’ll post again tonight if the story has progressed further enough. Sorry for such a short post. I can’t think right now. -shrug-

~Bryan~

Questions:
Are there any others in hiding? (Perception check: 29)
Please tell about the Obelisk.
Please tell about the Rider. (Sense Motive check: 34)

Sol Hawk has the ability to communicate with Horses, of course.

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

After an hour of traveling slowly on the uneven terrain, everyone was forced to dismount and guide their horses through a narrow section of tunnel. Sir Victor had the hardest time of all, for his armor and the size of his horse slowed the group down considerably. Whoever had excavated these pathways long ago had not reckoned they would one day be traveled by a muscular Fluanean knight. Eventually, they were able to resume progress and continue on the way with the others close around him for the light he had.

After a few more hours of slow travel through dusty tunnels, they reached a dead end. At first they either diplayed or panicked, but a close investigation from the Kai revealed a small rusted key barely protruding from a small crevice in the wall. He turned it and heard a faint click somewhere inside the wall. Nothing happened after that, until Sir Victor and Makala pushed on the section of wall where the key was. With a sound akin to a mummy taking its first breath in a thousand years, the door opened, its earthen seal broken as a whirl of fresh air exchanged itself for a blast of stale air. It was just past noon, or so the knight reckoned as he peeked outside.

The door on the inside was carved to look like the rock wall. On the outside, however, it was built into the side of a hill, which was the reason for the hardness in opening it. For almost a quarter hour they said as little as possible. Then, something happened.

The clouds broke enough to allow the moon to shine down upon the plain, and all four were started to see a rider approaching them slowly. His horse was walking quieter than any they had ever seen, and his face and form was hidden by a full hooded cloak.

"Hello there," he said in a clear smooth voice, with a hint of indigenous accent.

"Name yourself and your purpose rider!" shouted Cade. The darkness of the night further served to camouflage the cloaked rider. The Vakeros ldrawered and readied their weapons. No matter the case, Cade kept vigilant and ready for any reaction from the rider.

"I am a member of a secret society long devoted to the protection of Anari from both external and internal threats. Our full history I shall leave for my master to reveal to you but in the meantime I refer you to the President's daughter."

Sol Hawk was at Arcadian's left, one hand open, one holding Blade's bridle. He regarded the stranger with interest. He must be brave - a lone rider at night. He was clearly there to meet them. Sol Hawk smelled the air again and listened. Perhaps there were more that had come with this man, perhaps not far away even now.

As the group arrived at the obelisk, Sol Hawk took a close look at it, searching for any kind of writing or symbols upon its stone face. He was about to ask the Vakeros for more details about the letter he received earlier, but before he could do so, the stranger had arrived. Sol Hawk sensed his presence, even though the man's horse was as silent as a shadow, for the Kai Lord realized its unmistakable musk upon the night breeze far in advance of its appearance.

"I am a member of a secret society long devoted to the protection of Anari from both external and internal threats. Our full history I shall leave for my master to reveal to you but in the meantime I refer you to the President's daughter." Murdach turned to the Vakeros, "We must leave now for the festival grounds where you are to meet my master...Egoliah. I must warn you though that the perimeter is guarded, hence I came alone as it is much easier for one person to sneak past them. In saying that, I do know where the guards are stationed and know their routine so I shall see us safely into the grounds and take you to Egoliah's building - if I fail in my part to do this then my life is forfeit, so inevitably I shall not fail you."

"I greet you Murdach. I am Sol Hawk of the Kai," said Sol Hawk as he continued his study of the man. Yes, he had seen Murdach before - in the streets of Tahou. "Pray tell, who is guarding the perimeter of the festival, and what quarrel have they with us? Is the festival area not open to all friends of Anari? And if it is not, why is it under guard?"

"It eases my mind to see that it is you, Murdach," said Arcadian, obviously relieved. He lowered his hand from his sword and lifted it in a sign of friendship.
## Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Cade looked around as Sir Victor disappeared into the secret way. Sir Victor was clearly an expert rider, for the horse rode gracefully well, and made hardly a sound at all.

Bright Lance was able to run that long distance with speed and grace — she was not seen by the guards — what a wonderful display! Cade noticed the lantern which Sir Victor had brought with him, as the horse approached. She was so graceful and magical, Sir Victor had brought her to protect them.

"I'll go last, once everyone else is safely through. I'll watch your backs."

Sir Victor nudge Bright Lance onwards, riding his steed as quietly as he could while urging it as fast as he dared. In a few moments, Sir Victor reached the door of the compound, satisfied that no guards had seen him, dismounted and entered, hand on the hilt of his broadsword.

"Allow me to go first, companions. If this is a trap, you'll know soon enough, and I'll buy time for all of you to escape safely."

With those words, Sir Victor nudged Bright Lance onwards, riding his steed as quietly as he could while urging it as fast as he dared. In a few moments, Sir Victor reached the door of the compound, satisfied that no guards had seen him, dismounted and entered, hand on the hilt of his broadsword.

"I'll go last, once everyone else is safely through. I'll watch your backs."

The hooded lantern vanished as more guards passed by — the Kai and his companions waited in hiding for the next flash of the hooded lantern.

You see, Cade noticed Sol Hawk to his horse and to the other horses, Bright Lance was able to run that long distance with speed and grace — she was not seen by the guards — what a wonderful display! Cade noticed the lantern which Sir Victor had brought with him, as the horse approached. She was so graceful and magical, Sir Victor had brought her to protect them.

"Let's go now. This place chills me."

Arcadian recognized the voice instantly, however. He knew that it was Murdach. They had kept their part of the deal, he had kept his part. Now it was time to leave for the fairgrounds to meet with Egoliah. Before they left, however, Sol Hawk had a couple of questions for this stranger.

Murdach listened and looked around nervously. "A group of Anari guardsmen are circling the perimeter. Since the festival was shut down early due to... ah, circumstances...these guards are here to prevent looters and others from entering."

"A few years ago, a band of thieves set up operations in the fairgrounds while they were not being used. After being discovered, the government posted patrols to keep unwanted intruders out."

He nodded in understanding of the unaspected questions: "Yes, Egoliah managed to get in. There are tunnels underneath several places in Anari that were once used by my master's former society. Now, they lie in ruin, seldom used except in matters of dire consequence."

Sir Victor did as well, knowing full well that this was their best course of action. It would provide them clues on their mission, and rescuing the princess was something that must be accomplished as soon as possible by any legal means possible—even if that meant utilizing methods and contacts that operated seemingly above the law.

The Kai and Vakeros followed behind Murdach, who led them through the Anari countryside unerringly northward. With nothing to guide them, not even landmarks, they marveled at how well he knew the land. They were forced to dodge one patrol, but the riders in that unit seemed preoccupied with something, for they were riding hard and fast toward Tahou.

Arcadian was quick to notice the lantern flash. Patrols were everywhere and Arcadian knew that they would have to be quick in order to remain undiscovered. He nudged the Kai Lord carefully before turning to face all three of them.

How many feet is the open gate away from our group?

Approx 150–200 feet.

How far was Sir Victor's ride check?

Ride check was 18.

Please grant a bonus to Makala's and Arcadian's roll if appropriate for Sol's conversation with the horses.
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Sol Hawk had given words to all the mounts, and he dashed across the open space in a very short span of time. He joined the knight inside and easily found the stable where he could place his horse until they had finished their meeting. Victor was already fussing over his horse, not wanting to part with it in this desolate place.

Again the guards passed, and again the lantern flashed. Urged by the Vakeros, and ready to get this all over with, Makala galloped across then, easily making it to the safety of the gate with plenty of time to spare.

Arcadian waited for the guards to pass. He waited some more. Where were they? He heard something faintly across the distance like someone shouting, but the light was flashing frantically for him to go. With a shrug, guessing that the guards had been delayed by wherever the shouting was from, the Vakeros raced across the flat expanse and entered the gate.

Murdach then dismounted the lantern and braced the gate with a heavy crossbar. He motioned to where the others had stabled their horses and took a few steps into the dark and eerie maze of buildings.

Days ago, this place was bustling with activity, but now nothing moved in the streets. The few trees that stood amidst the buildings had begun dropping their leaves, and they rustled across the ground in the slight breeze that played across the area. Distant flashes on the horizon warned of heavy storms in that area, possibly coming this way.

Murdach waited until all four were ready, then led them through the streets, past empty buildings and barren booths. In some places the canopies were left unfurled, and these fluttered in the night, adding their sounds to the sounds of the leaves, the insects, and in the distance a lone wolf calling out in the night as the moon once more broke through the clouds.

Had it not been absolutely necessary Cade would have been loath to leave his horse behind. Arcadian had a dire premonition about this night and returning to the fairgrounds sent chills down his spine. His wound, though near healed, began to throb.

As they walked behind the man known as Murdach, Cade lowered his hand and was relieved to find that he was not bleeding. Even as such it felt as if his blood was on fire and the foundation of the flames was his wound.

The very air surrounding them stank of dried blood and sweat. A dark ominous moon hung in the autumnal sky, casting its dismal portent upon those who resided beneath her. Though the moon is the ensign of the goddess Ishir it did not shine with neither fairness nor beauty upon this feral night.

As they passed an abandoned tent Cade knelt down swiftly and crossed himself while bathed in the light of the moon which unsettled his heart.

May dawn come swiftly…

Once he had crossed the bridge, Makala paused for a few moments to take in his new surroundings, before nodding to the others and Murdach. The Telchoii than began following their new guide as he led them through winding streets and gloomy alleys. “So...Murdach. Does the president know about this ‘secret society’...or is it secret even from the leadership of Anari?” he asked casually, nudging his mount closer to the secretive man.

All this sneaking about at dark wasn’t to Sir Victor’s liking at all, and he wondered if this was truly necessary in order to find the tracks of the princess’ abductors. He had to be especially careful not to bang his armour or scrape his scabbard across the ground for fear of alerting the guard.

“Where are you taking us like this anyways?”, he quietly asked Murdach as they made their way across the fair grounds.

Murdach never paused in his walking as he answered both questions. “Kubudeli knows of what this society has become under his own control, for it is now Anari’s central intelligence gathering agency. He does not know that some who did not want to be part of the government survived the ruler’s decree long ago. Epsilah is one of the last of them, and he is teaching his skills to others, namely me.”

“As to where we are going,” he said to the knight, “I think you will find it familiar, to say the least—we are headed for a building very close to the compound from which Ameesha was kidnapped.”

The clouds fully engulfed the moon shortly after Arcadian performed his ritual. Darkness reined across the land, and the absence of the throngs in a place that should have been bustling with activity seemed strangely spooky. The four could remember scenes in their minds of kids chasing one another through the crowded streets, people hawking their wares, food vendors offering samples in the hopes the small loss would generate a huge profit, and people milling about lazily with a look of awe on their faces at so much merchandise.

They were getting near now, and Murdach’s pace seemed to increase. Whether this was intentional or not, no one could tell. He seemed excited to get this over with, eager to slip back into the shadows once more and watch others without being seen himself.

“Not far now,” he said over his shoulder.

Sol Hawk moved quietly to the place where Makala was, appearing beside the Telchoi in a most casual way. “There is something wrong here. I can sense it. I do not know if it is Murdach who is not being completely forthcoming with us, or if we are soon to be in danger. Something is not right, however, this I can sense.”

Sol Hawk considered the fact that although Murdach had just spoken of Kubudeli now to Makala, neither the ruler nor Murdach spoke of the other before. This was unsettling, since it seemed that President Kubudeli should be the first to know about all plans regarding his daughter and her return. Sol Hawk was beginning to get the bad feeling again that their little group was a set of pawns - that once they had served Epsilah’s purpose, the princess would not be allowed to return with them to Tahuou. Even so, if this group did know the location of Ameesha, Sol Hawk knew that they would have to play along for now. He did not see how they could possibly pick up the days-cold trail alone.

Sol Hawk looked to and considered Arcadian. The glint in his eye showed his madness. His eyes were of singular purpose - Sol Hawk knew that they wanted murder, revenge. The Kai saw it in the way he moved, in the way he had stopped speaking to the others. Sol was disgusted by this, and especially of how little Arcadian had shared concerning the scroll from Tahou. Was Cade even aware that his contact, Murdach, was not right, however, this I can sense.”

“Cade,” said the Kai Lord then, placing a hand on the Vakeros’ shoulder, “Don’t worry, we’re going to bring her back.” Somehow he did not have the heart to relay his suspicions about Murdach to Arcadian - even if the man and his leige were tricksters both, Sol Hawk felt that this knowledge, if the Vakeros did not already suspect this, would shatter the man’s last hope of making good on the disaster that they together could not prevent.

“Cade,” said the Kai Lord, placing a hand on the Vakeros’ shoulder, “Don’t worry, we’re going to bring her back.”
Rules, Rulings

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Arcadjan gave Sol Hawk a quick nod of his head and then slowed his pace, falling in step with the Kai Lord.

"Don't be so quick to assume, Sol Hawk," said Arcadjan. "I fear that there is more going on than Kubudei or Murdach has thus far made us knowledgeable. Though I would not lose hope. I sense that Murdach and this Egoliah will have more answers for us than the president was able to provide."

The worried look on Sol Hawk's face wavered but Cade knew that he was not relieved.

"Such a worried fellow... thought Cade to himself, always fearful of a trap or some such. Even if this is a trap set by Egoliah there are dozens of Anari guardsmen within earshot."

Cade patted Kai Lord on the back, "ease your mind, Kai Lord. We are strangers in a strange land trying to rescue someone from a strange enemy. Without allies our quest is hopeless."

Cade turned from Kai Lord and kept walking, only a few short steps behind Murdach.

Soon... thought Cade, with gritted teeth, the debt of blood shall be collected in full....soon...

* * *

Sir Victor remained quiet at Murdach’s answer, concentrating on following him in the dark without tripping on unseen obstacles or rattling his equipment against them. Fine, we’ll know soon enough, but I haven’t seen much yet to put my full trust into you yet, he thought as the group continued on their way.

He looked at his companions to try and see what they made of the situation, seeing the intensity etched on Arcadjan's face, and Sol Hawk whispering something in Makala's ear. He couldn’t make what was said, however, and tried to gauge the Telchoi's reaction.

* * *

Arcadjan had read the concern on Sol Hawk's face, even though the Kai Lord had said nothing. For a moment, though, Cade was distracted from whatever burning rage was inside him. It was this more than Arcadjan's words that Sol Hawk took comfort in.

"We are strangers in a strange land trying to rescue someone from a strange enemy. Without allies our quest is hopeless." The stern look returned then to Arcadjan's face - he turned away and jogged forward to a position just behind Murdach.

More to himself, Sol Hawk responded, "With the great god Kai as our ally, even should the very sun itself grow dim, his light of courage will never fail to guide us.”

* * *

As Arcadjan moved off ahead, Sol Hawk came back alongside Sir Victor and Makala.

"I do not know yet what to make of the one called Murdach," said Sol Hawk, "but there have obviously been a few changes to the festival area since we were here just a few days ago. There! the Kai Lord lifts his head discreetly to the left, "and there!" Where the many alleys and smaller roads of the festival area were previously open to traffic, now they were sealed up. This was no haphazard arrangement, for the fences that had been put in were eight feet in height, placed deliberately. It was likely that the gate through which they had entered was, in the end, the only way in... or out.

"Can you hear that?" said Sol Hawk quietly to the two, "hoofbeats." Outside the perimeter, but coming closer, were the sounds of a horse galloping.

* * *

As he and the companions approached Egoliah’s building Murdach paused when he thought he heard hoofbeats. Sure enough when he concentrated Murdach heard the distinct sound of a horse galloping closer to their position. Slowly Murdach continued edging closer to Egoliah's building. Glancing back at the companions he said quietly to Cade, "We're here...this is the bull..."

Suddenly a whistle sounded loudly over the grounds and Murdach froze in his tracks. He briefly closed his eyes as he feared that the whole meeting would be a failure if the guards had just spotted them. It seemed an age had passed since he had heard the whistle, yet the fairgrounds remained devoid of approaching guards. Turning to the companions with a confused and worried look on his face Murdach stated as quietly as possible, "'Everyone, please remain as still as possible. Before going inside to meet Egoliah let me go and check what that whistle was and whether our presence is known.” With that Murdach quickly dashed forward past the two buildings to the left and right of the companions.

Just as Murdach cleared the building to his right the companions heard a loud cacophony of shouts and curses. Suddenly in front of them a large net, with iron rods woven through it, was raised up from its hiding place in the ground. Instinctively the companions looked in abject horror over their shoulders back towards the way they had just come and noticed a similar net being raised as well. Within the space of only a few seconds the companions found themselves stuck between two nets strung high between the neighbouring buildings and both stretching to the road.

Glancing over his shoulder Murdach ran straight towards one of buildings further inside the compound. Approaching its doorway he found his crossbow exactly where he had left it and notching an arrow took aim at the Vakeros. Before letting loose the deadly shaft he yelled his command, "Fire....all of you fire now - Kill them!!!"

ROUND 1

Arcadjan's face was abject horror as Murdach raised a crossbow and aimed it at his heart. He turned to the Kai Lord, "I apologize friend. It seems I have led us into a trap..."

The look of despair left his face as quickly as it had appeared. Cade grinned and drew his sword and shouted aloud.

"Let's give them the fight of their miserable lives!"

As the last word left Cade's mouth the crossbow bolt struck him in his left shoulder, twisting him around.

"Take cover!" he shouted.

With a grunt he ignored the wound and turned right towards the building there. He ran full out, 15 feet and leaped into the air, tumbling through the window. As soon as he hit the wooden planks of the building he somersaulted and then rose, sword in hand.

The second he was to his feet the companions heard a loud cacophony of shouts and curses. Suddenly in front of them a large net, with iron rods woven through it, was raised up from its hiding place in the ground. Instinctively the companions looked in abject horror over their shoulders back towards the way they had just come and noticed a similar net being raised as well. Within the space of only a few seconds the companions found themselves stuck between two nets strung high between the neighbouring buildings and both stretching to the road.

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* * *

As Murdach bolted forward, everyone knew something was about to happen, though they hoped it was benign and that this mysterious stranger was acting in their best interest.
**Rules, Ratings**

(OOC: Acrobatics or Athletics check at DC20 to leap over net as it's being raised)

Cade: I took into account your R1 actions in this post, so there's no need to post again until everyone else gives me their moves/intents.

Everyone else: Let the carnage begin.

I promise this encounter is not as bleak as it seems, although it can be quite painful depending on the choices made and rolls generated.

Initiative: 18 (free) Psychic Attack on the V12 archer (move) To U11 (standard) blasts a hole in the trap

The shot is made near to the ground because I want to be able to pass through the net next round (or perhaps Makala or Sir Victor can do so sooner if their Initiative is later than mine). I would be at point-blank range when I do this, plus this is not a moving target, so I figure it is an automatic hit.

Also: deducted 3 EP Deducted 2 WP for Psychic Attack

---

*I am using my Rallying Shout (standard action)*, which gives my allies a +1 bonus to attack and damage rolls in melee combat, until I'm struck unconscious or I fail to hit in combat for 3 consecutive rounds. I'm also moving 30' to square S6, ready to fight the men coming out of that building.

Sol Hawk: Reduce your base move by 10' for this round to signify the time spent squeezing out of the net.

OOC: Here's the initiative lineup.


For the ease of combat, I'm going to use "generic" enemies. All the same stats based on attack type.

Sir Victor, you face 3 at once:
Black-clad warrior (R7): AC: 13 EP: 20

Arcadian, one has broken off from Makala and come for you. He's trying to climb in the window.


Sol Hawk, there's evil all around you:
Black-clad archer (U12): AC: 12 EP: 20
Black-clad archer (V12): AC: 12 EP: 12/20 -1 to attacks

Makala: 16 In-net warriors: 14 Out-of-net warriors: 10

Hawk--scoring a hit as the arrow pierced his thigh. Sol Hawk: -6 EP

---

The archers in the towers of the compound tried to fire through the netting, but it interfered with both their attacks. The sound of Murdach's curses rang out as he released his crossbow.

Meanwhile, the warriors outside the netting were showing up in droves from all directions. Sol Hawk reconsidered whether he wanted to escape the netting now or not...
**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

**ROUND 2**

With his opponents directly in front of him, Sir Victor did not hesitate and stepped up to them, swinging his mighty broadsword over his head, and slashing at both of the ruffians in an impressive display of swordsmanship, as he bellowed "For Sommerlund!"

A third was coming up right behind them, and the knight wanted to dispatch them quickly so he wouldn't get surrounded, as that could spell the end for him.

---

No sooner did Cade brush the broken glass from his cloak a scimitar wielding man tried climbing through the window the Vakeros had just crashed through.

In a flash the young Vakeros was at the window. Cade already had his sword raised and it was the work of a moment to turn and strike out at the man.

---

Sol Hawk winked as the arrow hit - it has barely grazed him. The Kai pulled it free.

The battle was reaching a fever pitch all around. The comrades had scattered. They need time thought Sol Hawk. From the safety of the tower, Murdach was hurriedly loading his crossbow again. The archers atop the roof struggled to hit Sol Hawk again - aiming straight down as the Kai Lord melted through the net. An arrow flew past as the Kai dodged, but the archer was soon to find that the taut bowstring was not the bird's only master. From its place on the ground, the shaft began to vibrate - then broke free from gravity, this time with a new trajectory. It burst into a psychic flame as the archer's mouth soundlessly opened - then skewered him on the roof as he whispered his final words... "Kai is God."

Sol Hawk advanced upon the field - the scimitar-wielding warriors were coming. He swung out the gun and aimed it at the closest warrior. "Get back!" The gun sputtered as he burned it. "Anyone who doesn't back off right now dies."

The men looked at each other nervously, every one of them having just seen what destruction that weapon could do. As the first warrior hesitated, a second thought about taking the advantage until Sol Hawk swung the gun around toward its new target. "No one worlds for a fool!" said Sol Hawk, motioning violently with the barrel, "I SAID NOW!" yelled the Kai, his eyes burning, "Back or I kill you."

---

A dark smile crept across Murdach’s face as he saw the companions become trapped within the confines of the nets. When he saw his bolt strike the Vakeros square in the shoulder Murdach’s eyes seemed to glow with pleasure and pride at his marksmanship.

As he reloaded the crossbow he took a moment to survey the scene unfolding below him. "Hurry men - press your attack on them. I don't want them to escape!" he yelled excitedly to his men. Once the bolt was loaded he raised it and took aim at the Kai Lord. However his vision was blocked by his own men running towards the Kai with their scimitars raised high. Bringing the crossbow to his right Murdach sighted his next target - the Ruanese Knight. He aimed for a possible chink in his armor...and fired.

Before the bolt had even struck its target Murdach yelled yet another command to his men; the anger and hatred building at every passing moment. "Blood and ashes...Kill them all!" he yelled even louder.

---

The odds were mounting, though only the two adventurers who were still outside knew the full peril that all four of them were in. The festival grounds had proven to be an excellent place for this trap and their planned demise. They all met the adversity in their own particular styles, be it confrontation, guile, craftiness, or reversal.

Murdach laughed in triumph as his bolt sunk into the knight’s hip, just below his belt. His men were rushing the net, but they were distracted by the Kai. "In the building!" he shouted. "Banau a-katan!"

More arrows streamed across the night sky. The tower archers shot at Sol Hawk, taking their chances with the net. The first arrow was deflected into the ground by the net, but the second one tore into his shoulder. Sol Hawk: -2 EP

The other archers on the rooftops concentrated their fire on the knight. The three on the southmost rooftop together tried to fire through the free that gave Sir Victor cover, but their arrows entangled in and deflected off the branches. The other two archers who had been unaffected by the Kai’s painful attack on their bow arms set loose, with mixed results. One of them wisely aimed low, knowing he stood a chance to miss. The arrow pierced Sir Victor’s left calf. Sir Victor: -2 EP However, the other one aimed a bit too high, and the arrow deflected off the knight’s shoulder plate and slammed into one of the black-clad men! He stumbled backwards screaming, the unintentional missile protruding from his arm.

Sir Victor felt the sting in his hip from Murdach’s weapon as he moved to engage the three assailants who rushed him. He ignored it and continued, lashing out with his massive blade before the thriee could get close enough to attack with their smaller scimitars. Something bumped into his shoulder plate, and he was surprised to see an arrow slam into one of his foes. Not wasting the opportunity, he struck the man hard, then swung counter-motion into the one beside him. When the Ruanese finished his maneuver, two of the three had deep red slashes across their torsos.

Their attacks were weak due to their wounds, but the man on Sir Victor’s left darted in and slashed low with his scimitar. The knight angled his shield and barely deflected the attack before it caught him in the knee.

The Vakeros turned just in time to see one of the warriors busting out the jagged shards that still remained in the window frame. His blazing bluesteel weapon moved in a fiery slash and thrust that left the man wounded across the neck and chest. Grasping his wounds, he staggered backward a step and fell to the ground as blood spurted from the near his throat.

Not waiting to see if anyone else dared follow him, Arcadian sprang into action and rushed across the room to the stairs. There were still three men on the roof that were harming his friends, not to mention a traitorous acquaintance across the road who wielded his crossbow with deadly accuracy.

The Kai jerked the arrow in his hip free and used the force of his mind to send it upwards toward the man whom he had attacked earlier, along with another blast of mental control. The combination of tangible and intangible damage took its toll on the man, for the Kai’s focused concentration honed the arrow in to the soft flesh under the man’s lower jaw. He fell backwards, unable to scream due to the arrow that held his jaw in place.

Stepping through the net, Sol Hawk waved the Hand-Cannon at the advancing warriors and spoke in a language they should recognize. As he moved along, he was prepared to use his sword and the empty weapon to protect himself at the expense of being able to fight back.

---
Rules, Rulings

Cade immediately suspected the crash of glass from downstairs to be the entrance of some of the black-clad warriors. With his sword in one hand, Cade waited to the side of the staircase with his back to the wall. After thinking for a moment Cade bodily threw himself against the wall of the building and gave a loud moan.

* * *

Sir Victor tried to finish off his two wounded opponents before all three could surround him and strike him from behind, like the cowards they were. They didn't have the courage and honour to confront a man by themselves and needed to gang up to stand a hope of winning.

He grimaced when he felt the bolt penetrate his thigh, and hoped it didn't strike too deeply as to damage the bone. Bah, he'd had worse before. He deflected the rest of the attacks coming his way, although he did feel a slight sting on his calf, and understood that the archers were taking advantage while he was busy dispatching his enemies. Another arrow hit his shoulder guard, and deflected surprisingly onto one of the ambushers! That's to teach you to shoot into close combat, kill your own men why don't you! These people have no respect for their own lives.

* * *

You foolish! shouted Murdach at their hesitation, "It's a hand musket! One shot only! Take him!"

The green cloak billows ominously around the Kai Lord - in one hand he holds the musket, in the other, the rapier called Sun Flare. Sol Hawk laughs. "Do you follow the words of the little Feyata, safely indoors, playing games with you while you die?**" He takes a step forward, dropping the musket in the dust, then holding high his rapier. The moonlight runs all along its length - it is as if a cool but dangerous flame is running along the blade. "This, my friends, is loaded. I told you that if you come any closer, you will die. Mark these words, for a Kai Lord never lies." (Bluff 25)

Sol crouches with rapier in hand. Murdach seems to be screaming something else - even as he does so, one of the arrows in Sol Hawk's quiver comes spinning out, then hurts toward the one in the tower. Even as Murdach is dodging the deadly projectile, he has a vision - he is burning in hell - there is fire all around and he is being dragged to the ground by his men, who have dies under his command. Murdach looked up through stinging eyes and saw a cloaked figure walking towards him through the fire. "I said I am coming for you, Murdach," said the figure, "and a Kai Lord never lies." (10 for Murdach, Psychic Attack)

* * *

As Murdach cursed loudly at his men he glanced at Sol Hawk whilst he reloaded another bolt to his crossbow. Again an evil smile crossed his face when he noticed five of his scimitar-wielding soldiers advancing on the Kai Lord.

Ensuring that he remained covered as much as possible Murdach then took a moment to survey the battle unfolding quickly below. He couldn't see the Telchoi or the Vakenos however he knew which buildings they had escaped into. Focusing keenly on the knight Murdach's smile turned into an evil howl of anger as he noted his men were not really impacting any great damage.

"Throw yourselves at the knight!" Murdach yelled at his men, "Your lives shall be forfeit if you don't kill him!" Murdach fired yet another deadly bolt at the knight, this time watching in gleeful hope that its ballistic path would skewer the knight.

* * *

A battle of wits was emerging, but the one among the four with the best sword arm shunned the contest, preferring instead to rely upon directed and precise power rather than craftiness and trickery. What the four never knew was that help was just an arrowshot away....

Murdach watched for another opening to strike at the knight. There it was! The crossbow shuddered as the bolt sailed right into the knight's right chest, barely missing the head of one of Murdach's men. Not that it would have mattered anyway—they were all nothing more than fodder anyway. Epsilon had thousands more at his command. Who cared if these few fell?

Using the power of his mind to enhance his defense, Sol Hawk was able to deflect a couple of arrows that came his way. However, they were coming from so many angles that he could not concentrate on them all. A shaft pierced his upper hip, close to his side, causing him to wince as he dropped the Hand-Cannon. Sol Hawk: -1 EP

Still the archers tried to get in a good shoot at Sir Victor. Those on top of the building that Makala was on stood idly by, irritated that the action was going on, but they could not participate in it. They watched as one of the men below them circled around and burst through a window, while his fellow continued to batter at the door.

The archers on top of the building Arcadian was in had already fired their arrows when one of them realized why warriors were breaking through windows below them. He figured that someone must have entered the building, so he moved closer to the trapdoor, but still close enough to the edge to protect Murdach if needed.
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Sir Victor grunted as the arrow from Murdach tore into his muscles, but he channeled the pain into fury, and with two mighty slashes of his sword, he gained a quick advantage over his assailants. The two men he had been attacking fell victim to crushing blows that splintered bone and severed organs. Each one reeled from the attack, and one even dropped to his knees, his head lolling back and forth from the shock to his system.

Ignoring the fallen, the man who Sir Victor still had not attacked took the opportunity to attack, once more meeting with the valiant warrior’s shield instead of his leg. With a curse, he pulled back his weapon and prepared to face the man head on.

The Vakeros shook his head as his plans had to be put on hold. He tried to bluff the enemy, acting as if he had wounded himself. This prompted heavy shouting and talking in the room below him—indeed they had entered the building, but Arcadian could not see them in the dim until room. Only the faint light of the moon through the windows gave any illumination. Back the wall and weapon poised to strike like the sand snake that had almost killed him in Tahou, he hoped that he would see his enemy’s head before they saw him.... But what was that movement on the roof? Someone was walking to the trapdoor at the ladder?!?

The Kai played a dangerous game. As he tried to make the morale of the men waver by belittling their leader upon the tower behind them, he held aloft his weapon and gave a threat. However, the frantic cries of Murdach still rang in the minds of the men, making the stoic unflinching Kai seem like a much better target than he actually was. Sol Hawk waited to strike if one came close enough, but the men seemed to be inching closer. Remembering he could reach out with his mind, the Kai looked into Murdach’s eyes—a prerequisite for such combat as this—and imagined long spindly limbs tipped in needle-thin talons racing out between them. The grimace on the leader’s face showed that the Kai had been successful, and the scowl that appeared afterwards showed that perhaps the Kai would regret being successful....

Makala climbed the ladder and carefully eased open the roof trapdoor. He watched as an archer walked to watch something transpiring below. There was a shattering sound, and Makala quickly realized that he was being followed by a clever assailant. He pulled himself out onto the roof and ran toward the archers with a shout, scimitars ready, his voice already changing into the chant that would enact the Blazing Spear of his warrior people.

As the four carried out their separate plans, so did the men who obeyed Murdach react to their actions. Breaking windows to get to their prey, the men rushed headlong into buildings, eager to win their leader’s praise for their boldness and ability. Little did they know how outmatched they were one to one....

The ones surrounding Sol Hawk had figured this out, though. Instead of facing him individually, they began to act as one. After all, it would take more than one or two to bring down a Kai. And what a tale it would be to recount how they had bested a Kai.

Murdach looked past his men at the Kai Lord, holding his blade aloft. It was then he felt the painful clawing upon his very essence as the Kai lashed out psychically. Murdach sneered in derision. It was a shame that he no longer had the luxury of killing the knight first....
Rules, Runlings

Don't forget to take into account Sir Victor's rallying cry when attacking.

Arcadian: You see a sword enter the room, held high before the warrior so that he can probe for danger in the dark. He still has not seen you, and his head is just about to come into view. +2 circumstance bonus to attack and damage (I'm assuming you've extinguished Battletome until just before you strike—let me know if this is not the case).


---

Sol Hawk: They are very close now. Since you don't have Know(warfare), do a perception check at DC20 to try and understand their tactic. The rules for making a dash toward the compound still apply, but the DCs are all increased by 5 due to their proximity. Keep in mind that they are now close enough that you can make a 5' step and unleash a full attack.

Nice taunt by the way. I assure you that Murdach is seething at being called a Feyata and having you find a way to attack him from afar.

---

Sir Victor: They are near death. I'll rule that if you hit one, you can cleave into the other and kill both with one attack. Sure, you'll probably hit, given their AC, but there's always a chance you'll fumble.

Black-clad warrior (R7): AC: 13 EP: 2/20 (incapacitated, bleeding)

---

Makala: Take over when you can. Until then I will NPC you as I think you would play. For the next round I intend to have you strike full attack at two of them, using Blazing Spear to augment damage they take.

Black-clad archer (Z7): AC: 12 EP: 20

---

Round 4 commences—the map shows the starting positions of everyone.

Time: Shortly after midnight, waning gibbous moon.
Date: Raidho 27 (roughly Sep 27)
Weather: Partly cloudy, light wind from NW.

Wow, I didn't know I could inflict this much damage...

Attack Roll 1: 20
Attack Roll 2: 18

Damage Roll 1: 14
Damage Roll 2: 13

Total Damage: 27

For (14) and do 13 damage on my first attack, that should be enough to cleave through the first and stay the second one. Then I rolled an awesomely inappropriate 1 on my second attack. My take's in your hands KI! Or maybe not...it's not a critical fumble after all. I just edited my post for that.

DOC: Perception Check - 15
(free) Psychic Attack on Murdach (4 DAM for him, -2WP for me)
(free) Strafing Will on Murdach TH: 12 DAM 3 (-1/E for me, -1 AP arrow)
(move) Force of Personality on the Rapier +3 DAM (full round) Fighting Deftly and using Power of Pure Mind. AC bonus is 2. I am at -4 to hit. Note that I am only really striking if someone comes too close. If nobody comes near me, I do not use the rapier. If a hit is needed, he rolled a 20 and DAM was 7.

NOTE - Any enemy hit has its DAM reduced by 2

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

ROUND 4

Cade saw the shimmer of a blade as one of the men entered the dark room. The Vakeros stood with his back to the wall, breathing heavily, sweat dripping down his face as his adversary came closer. A glance towards the trapdoor revealed that someone was near it on top of the roof.

This is going to get bloody real quick.

Anger seethed in the Vakeros' soul and his blood boiled. With the enemy only a few feet away Cade lifted his sword to eye level and spoke softly.

"You have come looking for death...and now it is upon you. Tell Naar that more of you will be joining him soon."

With those words Cade placed his foot upon the wall as a brace and leaped at his enemy, his sword instantly blazing in blue electricity. Blood splashed unseen in the darkness and the Vakeros knew his hits were good. Arcadian's war cry was heard over the din of battle outside. Instantly every one of the black-clads inside or on top of the building knew were the Vakeros was. But Cade no longer cared, his sword had tasted blood and the lust of battle had overtaken him.

* * *

Seeing that his two opponents were drawing their last breaths, Sir Victor decided to finish them up to end their suffering before turning to meet the last of them. His blade went cleanly through both of them, unfortunately, as he turned to confront his third assailant, he slipped on the pooling blood and entrails at his feet, leading him to completely miss his strike and leaving him vulnerable to the return attack. To make things worse, another bolt lodged itself in his chest...but, in a stroke of good luck, Sir Victor managed to regain his balance by leaning on his shield, which he propped on the body of one of his slain foes.

With murder in his eyes, he now faced the last of his immediate opponents, and he smiled at him, knowing he likely only had a few short seconds to live.

* * *

As Murdach cursed loudly at his men he glanced at Sol Hawk whilst he reloaded another bolt to his crossbow. Again an evil smile crossed his face when he noticed five of his scimitar-wielding soldiers advancing on the Kai Lord.

You think you are safe, considered Sol Hawk to himself, but you are presenting me yet again with an excellent target. Murdach was an expert archer, but Sol Hawk was an expert hunter. At precisely the moment when Murdach glanced his way, Sol Hawk launched his attack.

First an arrow suddenly streaked toward the tower - Murdach dodged (I think a 12 misses), but distracted by the arrow, he stifles a scream (4 damage) as Sol follows up with the second prong of his attack. Murdach dodges back out of sight before the Kai could intensify the strength of his assault, but Sol Hawk was satisfied.

The Kai Lord was cool and calm as the many warriors came near - still they were hesitant, but neither had they backed off. They are all going to come at me at once, he realized then (perc. 15), Sol Hawk resolved not to allow anyone to get behind him. He reloaded his psychic fortress - they would not only have to penetrate it, but also the fierce steele that Light Hawk once held. **"For Sommerlund,“** yelled Sol Hawk. At once, a flickering green fire burst upon the blade - wisps illuminated his face as two cat-like eyes pierced his first opponent, with his rapier following suit. (TH: 20, D: 17)
**Rules, Rulings**

Don’t forget to take into account Sir Victor’s rallying cry when attacking.

Arcadian: All options are now open. You are no longer being pursued, but you are sure someone is on the roof by the trapdoor. Also, heavy wind is buffeting the building nearby.

---

Sol Hawk: They’re beating you up pretty bad. Any attacks you make are going to be at -4. Strafing Will can’t be used because they are all over you. Subdual damage is counted separately from real damage. Once subdual equals your remaining EP, you are knocked out. (If I’m wrong, someone please correct me. I’m going as fast as I can and have no time to reference it.)


---

Sir Victor: The effect you are feeling from the spell Swelter. You must make a Fortitude save at DC18. If you fail, you suffer a -2 to Str and Dex for 4 rounds due to fatigue. The Sandstorm complicates matters, for you now have a -1 penalty on all attacks.

Black-clad warrior (S5): AC: 13 EP: 20 (storm-beaten, -1 to attacks)

---

Makala: Take over when you can. Until then I will NPC you as I think you would play. I have a -1 penalty on all attacks.

Black-clad archer (dd4: AC: 12 EP: 20 (storm-beaten, -1 to attacks)

---

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

Murdach raised his crossbow and readied it to fire at the Kai, but then a flash of movement on a rooftop far away caught his eye. Raising his weapon, he saw the dark one exit a trapdoor on top of the building where some of his archers were. He pressed the fire lever and set down the crossbow, then turned and called out to someone in the yard of the compound.

“Arazi, Mathou: give our friends a taste of the desert.”

Having said that, he began to climb down the ladder on the back of the tower.

---

The balance of power teetered on edge. One false move or extra weight on either side could tip the scales toward good or evil.

Murdach ignored the Kai, knowing he’d hit his own men if he tried to attack. He had other plans anyway. Loosing his bolt at Makala, he tossed the crossbow to the roof of the parapet and began to climb down, calling to two slight men in loose tattered sand-colored robes that had been standing patiently inside the compound until needed.

The two men exited at their master’s command and began their respective spells.

The archers meanwhile picked their targets. Unfortunately, several of them chose Sol Hawk. Twangs of the bowstrings sounded from all directions, and the Kai was able to deflect some of the incoming missiles, but he could not turn in each direction well enough to dodge them all. One grazed the nape of his neck, painfully pulling a small bit of hair out as it passed through. Another hit his shoulder squarely, jarring the bone.

Sol Hawk: -3 EP total

Sir Victor was luckier, for neither arrow aimed at him struck his armor. The missiles sailed harmless past him and he swung his mighty sword in a huge arc, severing the heads of both critically wounded foes in one swing. However, the momentum he summoned was too great, and it threw him off balance enough that he was forced to use his shield to maintain his footing. This proved unfortunate, for the black-clad warrior readied quickly enough to skewer the knight’s abdomen, just below his breastplate. The under-paddling absorbed some of the attack, but Sir Victor still felt the sting of the blade as the man pulled it out with a practiced twist. Sir Victor: -4 EP total

Arcadian watched as his enemy entered the room, oblivious to his presence. He spoke, causing the man to look around wildly in fright, finally focusing on the blade which flared alive with sparkling electricity once more. Arcadian had a split second to lock eyes with the man before his blade cleaved into the man’s skull twice. A flourish decapitated the corpse, while a downwind thrust barely missed the person who was behind the warrior on the stairs.

Cries of terror emanated from below, and the smell of suffocating feet and glass breaking once more made the Vaeker groan as he realized his terrible attack had frightened the men more than their leader’s wrath. He stood as the headless body rolled slowly back down the stairs and considered his next move. -4FP

Sol Hawk’s night took a turn for the worse after the archers’ arrows struck him. He lashed out at Murdach with arrow and psyche, and the arrow sailed harmlessly into the night while the mental attack felt weaker than before. Before he could do anything else, the five men rushed him at once, and his blade flashed in the night, striking one across the torso. He could not fight off the entire mob however, and he soon found himself subjected to a flurry of blows with fists and the pommels of scimitars.

Sol Hawk: -14 EP, all subdual.

Chanting the battle cry of his forefathers, Makala ignored the sting that grazed his temple and jumped into the air, knocking one archer off the building with a well-placed double kick to the face and throat. The man cartwheeled to the side, his body rolling slowly back down the stairs and considered his next move. -1FP

Suddenly the two mages of Murdach completed their spells. Sir Victor instantly felt a horrible exhausting heat spreading over his body, as if he’d been trudging through Vassagonia on foot all day. It was intense, and he fought valiantly to shrug off the effects, even as the second spell hit the area.

Out of nowhere, sand began to swirl and sting his face. It affected friend and foe alike, for Sir Victor heard Makala curse in surprise, and the enemy warriors cried out in pain and shock. The leaves in the tree were torn free and began to whirl about in the air in the midst of the conjured Sandstorm.

Over all this, Murdach could be heard laughing maniacally.

---

**ROUND 5**

As his opponent struck him in the stomach, Sir Victor gasped as he tried to get his breath back. Suddenly, the air started to feel hotter by the second, and the sands lifted from the ground to whirl all around the ambuscade, so much that his view of his adversary was momentarily obscured.

The cowards must be using sorcery! I’ll show them my sword arm will prevail. I’ve been held up long enough! The balance of power teetered on edge. One false move or extra weight on either side could tip the scales toward good or evil.

Murdach overcame the sudden sweltering heat which seemed to afflict him, stood back up and hacked at his opponent, putting all his weight behind his blade, and then proceeded to thrust through his enemy’s chest, determined to put an end to his miserable life.

With his immediate threats neutralized, Sir Victor tried to scan through the swirling sand to see where his sword was in the midst of the conjured Sandstorm. The warriors were none too difficult to locate, as the body at his feet was shrouded in sand. Sol Hawk quickly moved the blade to block the attack of another.
**Rules, Rulings**

Don't forget to take into account Sir Victor's rallying cry when attacking.

Arcadian: You are now faced with two terrified and distracted archers, plus a burring building. Who said I never promised a little excitement?

---

Sol Hawk: It is now quite clear that they plan to box you in so Murdach can take you. The one guy you have wounded continues to fight as his fellows retreat.

Black-clad warrior (P13): AC: 13 EP: 20 (If by chance you attack another warrior, I'll relist his stats.)

---

Sir Victor: Good job beating the Swelter DC. It increases as my strenth does (+6 EP into the spell), and Azari only put a little bit into it. He underestimated you.

---

Makala: Take over when you can. Until then I will NPC you so I think you would play. I have no plans for the next round, aside from engaging the warrior on the rooftop with you. You are under the effects of the Sandstorm spell.


---

Round 6 commences—the map shows the starting positions of everyone.

This is going to be an interesting round. When Kamilah and Korlaeth post, I can update their scene to match the previous round of this battle. (In other words, they are 6 seconds behind what happens here.)

Aex (Makala) must be really busy IRS—he’s not posted here or in his RPOL game. I’ve given him the option to relist Makala into indefinite NPC status until such time he can play him regularly again. I’ll run him through the combat, but after that he may ‘go his own way’, only to meet up with you guys again at a later date.

Time: Shortly after midnight, waning gibbous moon
Date: Raadion 27 (roughly Sep 27)
Weather: Party cloudy, light wind from NW. Heavy wind in the storm area. Lightning flashing off clouds to the far NW.

Rules, Rulings

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

The others seemed not to notice their friend’s pain, excited now at the prospect of killing their prey as their slavemaster had commanded. A particularly nasty looking sword wielder with a scar across his cheek leered down at the Kai, then kicked for his stomact, but Sol Hawk was faster - the knee went through air, through the spot where the Kai had just been a second before.

Sol Hawk focused all of his power on holding the mental barrier between himself and his enemies. It was as if a huge bubble of force had sprung up around him - any who tried to get near found that their weapons were fuzzed this way and that, randomly, sometimes causing a strike to go astray, sometimes preventing the sword from ever landing upon its intended target (PoP).

---

Blood sprayed all up Arcadian’s arm as his assualent fell. The head rolled down the staircase and Cade grinned in satisfaction as the remaining warriors scrambled to escape the building lest he should descend the stairs.

No longer worried about protecting his back Cade approached the trapdoor and flung it open. Stepping out onto the roof he gave an experimental swing of his sword, preparing to attack the closest enemy.

---

Murdach walked purposefully past his images, holding the other weapon which he had left at the base of the tower—his jeweled scimitar. The glimmering blade reflected moonlight as he twisted the curved weapon about him.

"Well done," he said, spinning the tip of his blade to point at the building straight across from him where a faint blush glow could be seen. "Burn the building."

"But..." started Azari in protest, looking at the archers on top. Mathou looked over quickly, then turned his concentration back to the Sandstorm so it didn't get out of control.

"Burn it," said Murdach, never slowing his pace as he advanced on the Kai which his men were beating in mob fashion.

---

Evil takes many forms, and at its most corrupt state is the mentality of killing one's own to kill one's enemies. Murdach was not beyond sacrificing every life under his command to keep the four fools he found facing from the Princess. After tonight, they would have to move into Vassagonia, for they had tarried too long, waiting for the border to weaken. Since it did not, they would carve a path through it and onward to their goal in the north....

The archers could do nothing but watch. Two of their targets were in the sandstorm spell area, and anything they fired into that maelstrom would be flung off course easily—there was no easy way to compensate for the random winds.

So, though he didn’t know it, the harsh environment Sir Victor was enduring actually turned out to be beneficial, at least in regard to aerial attacks. He closed his eyes and imagined he was in the summer sun training back in Sommerlund as a boy—united by the rigors of the sweaty, grimy lessons he would learn over the years. As he focused on enduring life back then, the heat around him seemed to lessen—he had overcome the fell wizardry that tried to bring him down.

With a smile of victory on his usually serious face, the Ruanese brought his broadsword in a controlled backhand swing, raising his foot to the waist of his archer. The blood of the wounded continued to flow as the man's strength returned. Cade giggled in delight.

---

Azari's spell finished, leaving him drained. He staggered as the thin vortex of fire flashed forward and exploded against the wall. The archers could do nothing but watch. Two of their targets were in the sandstorm spell area, and anything they fired into that maelstrom would be flung off course easily—there was no easy way to compensate for the random winds.

Sir Victor pulled the sword free and stepped away from the bodies.

Sol Hawk's fractious thoughts almost took tangible form as his psychic attack pierced the essence of the warrior nearby. The Kai tried his best to use Mind Over Matter to keep himself uncathed, but there were simply too many attacks coming from too many directions. He could only block so many, and in doing so, he had to turn his back on the others. A blocked fist here meant a kidney punch there; a missed kick was replaced by an elbow to the back. He received another barrage of blunt strikes, then it stopped. Why had they ceased?

For a moment, the Kai was prepared to rejoice despite his wounds, but then he saw the slight man with the scimitar twirling in front of him. So...Murdach had not fled the scene. For a moment, Sol Hawk hesitated—given the man's skill with a crossbow, how powerful would he be with the blades? Sol Hawk: 9 EP, all surprised.

Grinding his teeth against the force of the wind that threatened to blow him over, Makala reached for his blades and pulled them free of the archer. Before the man could react to the pain of the extraction, Makala had lashed out twice, one blade biting into each side of the man's neck. The archer collapsed on the spot, his blood mixing with the sand that had accumulated in small drifts near the edge of the rooftop railing.

Turning to face the other two people on the roof with him, Makala folded his arms with bravado, bloody blades still in his hands.

"Who is next?" he shouted over the roar of the wind, ignoring the sting on his exposed arms and face.

The other archer on the rooftop threw down his bow and swung a leg over the railing behind him. With great exertion, he fought the wind and swung the other leg over, hanging for a second before dropping twenty feet to the ground below. He then ran southward as fast as he could. No reward was worth this.

The warrior on the rooftop advanced slowly, feeling he was a bit more prepared than an archer to take on this dark-skinned brute. Makala merely grinned and unfolded his arms.

Azari’s spell finished, leaving him drained. He staggered as the thin vortex of fire flashed forward and exploded against the wall between the windows, catching fire quickly. The building shuddered as the blast hit, and the sudden appearance of such a display startled those black-clad men closest to the spell’s path.

Things had not gone according to plan for Murdach, but then again, he couldn’t have hoped for two successful operations at the same location, especially when these meddling idiots had almost foiled the first one....

---

**ROUND 6**

The Kai Warrior shook off the disorientation of his severe beating, coming back to his feet. The men backed off, circling round Sol Hawk, watching as their comrades-in-arms continued to fight. The blood dribbled down the little man's face as he swung with his scimitar. Sol Hawk unbuttoned the strap on his waterskin and it fell to the ground. "No one treats Niroo this way! No one! You have soiled my armour," spat the man, cursing.

"Allow me to make ammends," Sol Hawk said. The waterskin lifted from the ground, then struck the astonished Niroo in the face (2DAM) - it burst and some of the men even laughed as the now watery blood washed down the front of the sopping-wet warrior. "Ayeew!" he yelled - in the instant following, a blue energy like electricity leapt from Sol Hawk’s open palm and engulfed the man - even his eyes and teeth glowed blue before he collapsed at last in a heap (10DAM).
**Occult Roll (DC20): 24**

**Damage Roll: 3**

This attack should knock him off the building...I'm hoping... I'll edit my post if need be.

**Intimidate Check: 20**

Penetrate is a full round action. My move action (moving up the ladder to W15 counts as my move action last round. And then this round I only have my free action (speaking) and my full round action (penetrate). Just wanted to make sure this was clear. I am not sure if I did my damage for penetrates correctly. Please check my rolls KL.

---

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

And then Sol Hawk could see why the rest of the men had backed up. Murdach was coming, walking casually and with confidence. Sol's eyes fell to the jewelled blade, then looked to Murdach's face. To the south, the building where the Vakeros had entered was ablaze. Sol Hawk thought of his comrade, Cade.

"Murdach," said Sol, "I see that you have decided to come down from your tower after all. So, it was you who was behind Ameesha's kidnapping all along, as I suspected. The Talons of Rashuur have shown themselves. You never made it back over the border with her. The princess is nearby, isn't she?" Sol watched for Murdach's reaction. (Perc 26)

---

The building shuddered as the blast hit, and the sudden appearance of such a display startled those black-clad men closest to the spell's path. Cade felt the tremble but the tremors did not cause him to lose his balance. The Vakeros ignored the archer closest to him. He invoked the sword-sequence of the spell 'penetrate' and launched it at the archer in the far corner of the building (location U12), who was looking for a clear shot at Sol Hawk.

Cade watched with satisfaction as the far archer turned and aimed his bow. Too late... the magical blast struck him in the shoulder and twisted him around, forcing him from the roof. A scream followed by a sickening thud shook the remaining archer's confidence and Cade could see it in his eyes.

Arcadian moved his sword from one hand to the other, waiting for the archer to make his move. The smell of smoke and dried timber burning filled both of the men's nostrils and they both knew that within a matter of minutes the building would be blazing and there would no longer be any chance for escape.

"Make your move, Vassagonian," said Arcadian. "Meet certain death here upon my blade or possible death by jumping to the ground. The choice is yours."
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Hurryng out of the sandstorm and towards the large group of scimitar-wielding warriors surrounding Sol Hawk and trying to beat him to a pulp, Sir Victor edged his armoured bulk through the gap in the net and, exited right next to one of the Kai Lord’s assailants, who was quite surprised to see an angry knight emerge from the encroaching wall of sand!

Stunned, the Southerner couldn’t raise a defense fast enough to parry the powerful slash of the Ruanese’ huge blade, which would soon prove fatal for him. Whatever Murdach had promised him, it was now all for naught, as he felt his life leaving him through the large rent in his chest.

“Stand fast, Sol, we’ll show them how Sommlending fight and die!”

As Murdach stepped up to enter the circle his men had created he noticed Sol Hawk’s slight hesitation and choose the moment to shout one more command to his men.

“Don’t touch him...He’s MINE to kill! Just watch my back you miserable wretches.”

Pressing forward his attack, with blade pointing down, Murdach focused on the Kai Lord and his cold eyes spoke of the fury and anger he had towards the Kai for his psychic attack earlier. At that point Murdach’s surroundings became a blur to him as he let his passion for the kill drive him forward.

Tilting his head only ever so slightly Murdach actually smiled at Sol Hawk. For a second he thought he heard the Kai talk but Murdach had already made up his mind on what was going to happen next and it did not involve a conversation with the soon to be dead Kai.

In the next instant his superior blade slashed upwards in a huge uppercut as Murdach took the final step towards Sol Hawk.

Murdach strode up to the Kai and with a calculated thrust, he skewered the Kai in the shoulder, just outside the ribcage. Smiling, he twisted and removed the blade, preparing for a full assault that would take the Kai down.

The archers—who up until now were forced to watch—all aimed and fired at almost the same time as they spotted the Lorne Vakeros on the roof off the burning building. Those who did not have a clear shot moved slightly to increase their odds of hitting. A rain of arrows sailed at the Vakeros, some bouncing off his armor, some missing, and some hitting. He grimaced as two of the shafts buried themselves in his extremities.

As Sir Victor moved to help his countryman, the sandstorm ceased and dissipated in a breath, as if it never had existed. He fully expected some other magical attack, but nothing happened. Distracted as they were, the warriors forming a ring around Sol Hawk never saw the knight coming until it was too late. The first thing through the net was Sir Victor’s sword, and he sheathed it in blood as it slid through the heart of the nearest foe. He jerked in surprise and pain, then fell lifeless to the ground as the knight struggled to get past the net. see below

The Vakeros was taken by surprise as arrows whizzed past him in all directions. A couple hit, causing him to realize he was an exposed target and he had to even the odds. Force at arms alone would not avail him here, and so he called upon his battle magic.

Arcadian: +6 EP

Three quick gestures wreathed the man’s hand in glowing energy. The fourth movement released the power in a glowing beam of light that knocked one of the archers off the building, almost landing on Sir Victor below! The man landed hard, and Arcadian turned to assess the new threatening situation he was in.

The archer he faced stood transfixed. He knew that if he did not act, the Vakeros would likely knock him off. And then again, the building was on fire now. He dropped his bow and pulled out a long serrated khanjar.

Sol Hawk watched fell one foe with his psychic outlash, but his greatest threat approached. Murdach ignored the antics occurring around him and pushed aside the drenched warrior. With a flash so quick the Kai barely noticed it, the scimitar stabbed into his shoulder. Sol Hawk: +9 EP

The pain seared, and the Kai took a moment to heal himself. A warm glow surrounded him for a second as wounds mended slight, and bleeding stopped. He spoke to Murdach as he concentrated, hoping to find out something in the man’s face, but the face was a mask of contempt. Nothing the Kai could say now would matter. see below

The Telchors looked over his shoulder as the sandstorm ended, and he saw the flames raging in the night sky up the side of the building. Everyone was out of the net now, or so he supposed. Good, he mused, they can take care of themselves after all. He moved to engage the last contaminant he had to face, lashing out with both weapons, having only one of them blocked. In turn, he felt the sting of the opponent’s blade upon his stomach.

Makala: -6 EP

The warriors gathered to watch the sport of their leader killing the Kai had their attention draw away as one of their number suddenly convulsed and fell to the ground. His killer—the knight—was halfway through the netting at the spot where the Kai had blasted the anchor loose. The ones who could move to engage the knight did so, but spacing was very tight, and most were left torn between what event they should watch.

One man ran to go warn the others, shouting at the top of his lungs for reinforcements.

The two mageos meandered about, getting in position to cast their next volley of spells.

ROUND 7

Sol Hawk had barely finished off the black-clad warrior - like a madman, Murdach had charged in to strike him with the beautiful but deadly jewelled scimitar while Sol Hawk was still occupied.

The Kai Lord was deadly-serious now. He nodded and smiled - but this was not to his sadistic opponent, It was to his friend, Sir Victor, who struck down an opponent through the net itself, and was coming through. The other warriors showed fear as Sir Victor advanced. They would try to stop him. They would fail. From the roof of the blazing building, another black-clad man goes flying over the edge, landing nearby with a sickening crunch. Ah, Cade, you’re still alive, thought Sol Hawk. His spirits rose - his friend was still here. So close. 1d-1.

Sol Hawk allowed all of the distractions around him to pass out of his mind. There was only Murdach. Their fight was the universe. His very life, indeed possibly the very fate of the quest itself, tottered on the brink of this, the toughest confrontation he had ever faced.

Murdach struck with his sword - Sol blocked five times with Sun Flare, then the blade got through, sinking deep and letting loose Sol’s blood.

---

**Rules, Rulings**

OOC: Move 30’, then attack S12. Hit roll of 26, damage roll of 18.

Simple reality: Hit = 35

Don’t forget to take into account Sir Victor’s rallying cry when attacking.

Sir Victor: Moving through the net is a tight squeeze. I reduced movement by 5’ this round, but still let you make the attack. If you wish to push on through, it’s take another 5’ step or 5’ of a move action.

Of course, rather serendipitously, an enemy just fell screaming off the building above you and landed HARD at your feet. If you want to occupy a space where a body is (the one you just killed), attacks and AC will be lowered by 2 because you have to maneuver around the body.

As for the damage killing the man, he took 90% damage to his max all at once. His body just couldn’t handle the shock, and he died on the spot from massive internal injuries.

Arcadian: Good use of penetrate. All the archers are aiming at you because, well, you’re the only valid target at the moment. That may change in a couple of rounds...

In case you need this info: the drop between storeys is only 10’.

---

Sol Hawk: I only allowed the full round action because doing it takes up the time you would need for a move action. Therefore, you cannot fight defensively or in full defense, and took the full damage of the attack. You’re going to cringe when you read the stats:

Murdach: AC: 16 EP: 76/90 Initiative: Max DR: -1/-

Do you really want to know his attack bonuses? I’ll be evil and list them: +19/+18/+13/+8 (he has an off hand attack with no penalties if he chooses, hence the +18). I guess you could consider yourself lucky that he only has one weapon...-

---

Makala: -4


---

The very dangerous Round 7 commences—the map shows the starting positions of everyone.

Time for a cliffhanger: Will Sol Hawk live or die? Is Kai watching his servant or is his attention elsewhere? Will Arcadian manage to leave the building before it burns? Can Sir Victor reach his friend in time to save him?

---

Xex (Makala) contacted me. His absence is one with good news, for his life is moving in positive directions. In 2-3 weeks, he’ll be able to rejoin us. I have been given info on my options with Makala, and that, too, is a cliffhanger till Monday.

---

Time: Shortly after midnight, waning gibbous moon.

Date: Radfois 27 (roughly Sep 27)

Weather: Partly cloudy, light wind from NW. Lightning flashing off clouds to the far NW.

Unconscious!

Subdual has reached EP.
You are not alone, a female voice said.

Sol Hawk felt his whole life passing before his eyes - his mother, his father, Tree Spirit his first mentor, Sheer Claw his hunt-trainer, Bright Star the Kai Master who had placed his faith in him. The Vassagonian prisoners to whom Sol Hawk had shown mercy. Sol was a youth, bloody from his fight with a bear - Sheer Claw had sent him out into the wood to hunt for the first time alone, and Sol Hawk had run afoul of it. He had been barely conscious when he was found - but the bear had fared worse. Sheer Claw laid him in the river - Sol Hawk remembered awakening there, the red and gore washing cleanly away as his wounds were healed, all of the rest passing away as if it were a dream.

Be at Peace, Warrior, said the female voice, Ishir, again. Hers was joined by the voice of Kai himself. Sol Hawk swore that he could see the powerful god, glowing of silver, as he squinted to see through the red haze...

"Stand fast, Sol, we'll show them how Sommlending fight and die!"

Sol Hawk found himself dodging another of Murdach's blows - it was as if it had come in slow motion. Sol Hawk ducked - weaved, dodged. Sol Hawk could hear his own heart beating as they fought... beat, beat, beat, strike, beat, beat, strike, beat, beat, counterstrike...

Murdach was yelling with anger and pain, but Sol Hawk could not hear it... all sound had drained from the world, and all colour. There was nothing left, only the action, the counteraction. Soundlessly, Murdach's sword passed right through him - Sol Hawk was smiling - the sun was coming out...

"Get up now," said Sheer Claw, "That is enough hunting for today. Time to go home."

"Just a while more," whispered Sol Hawk, feeling the water move all around him, "Just let me stay here a little while more."
As he was trying to make his way through the opening in the net, the knight noticed the sandstorm stopped abruptly. Hopefully those mages aren’t preparing some other drastic spell, he thought, before he heard footsteps coming up behind him. 

An enemy, with his nose broken across his face, was coming up from behind! Sir Victor quickly lashed out at him, striking solidly and, without looking back, he turned back to slice through the prone archer’s neck and make his way through the net.

** ***

The first arrow sliced a furrow along Arcadian’s skull and the second imbedded itself in the Vakeros’ side through a chink in the chainmail. Luckily most of the arrows’ trajectories were off by far and they struck the stones of the roof harmlessly. The Vassagonian in front of him drew a khanjar and twirled it in his hand, looking for an opening in the Vakeros’ defenses.

Arcadian appeared as if he was about to attack his enemy but suddenly stepped back and fell, feet first the 10 feet to the roof of the first story below him. As soon as his feet touched the shingling he turned and ran left along the wall of the second story. He leapt into the air and rolled as he hit the ground. Glass from the window he had previously demolished crunched beneath him.

A glance upward revealed Makala, the Telchoi on the roof, preparing to do battle with a scimitar-wielding foe. Cade turned to his left to see that an archer had crept along the side of the building and was preparing to fire and the turned back of Sir Victor. The bowmen turned his bow towards Cade but all the Vakeros needed was a five foot step to strike down his enemy (-21 damage). Cade could feel the effects of Murdach’s crossbow bolt and the two barbed shafts. The wound in his side was deep and dangerous. The scrape along his skull was not deep but was very painful and was bleeding profusely. The young man was terrifying to behold. He was sporting wounds that would normally have killed a man by now but some animal strength bid him to go on.

Arcadian was not finished yet...he was nowhere close to letting loose his last breath...at least....not yet.

** ***

Murdach savored the moment only an instant, then he struck. The scimitar twirled and then struck the Kai between neck and shoulder. It was quickly followed by a backhand slap to Sol Hawk’s cheek—a true instance of adding insult to injury—as Murdach spat the word, “Feyata!” back at the Kai. Two more slashes tore through Sol Hawk’s abdominal muscles, and the Kai wobbled, took a shaky step to steady himself, then collapsed to the ground, blood pouring from his wounds. **Sol Hawk:** -1 EP; point subtotal damage

Murdach checked the knight’s location, then stepped closer as he reversed the grip on his sword and spat on the Kai’s blood- and grime-stained cloak.

Perhaps it was the god Kai’s intervention at last, perhaps it was merely coincidence: A messenger rushed through the street as a bell sounded somewhere on the east side of the faingrounds. **Intruders! Two Vakeros outside the east wall!**

Murdach sneered in disgust, tearing his eyes from his prey to the boy who delivered the dire news. These banou were everywhere, all of a sudden, like some kind of pestilence. Ah well, another time then. He looked at the mages and nodded.

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

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Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

After quick deliberation Cade decided against searching the bodies around him. His own ranged magical abilities would be more effective than any longbow anyways. Cade ran up to the net before him and climbed through the tear that Sir Victor had just recently passed through.

A man lay in a pool of blood beside the Sommlending Knight. The Vakeros could not tell if the man was dead or dying but it was obvious that it was one of the two. Thunder rolled off in the distance and dancing whips of lightning lit up the sky.

It’s a good thing Kamilah isn’t here... thought Cade to himself, she hates storms.

The dark void before him was complete and Cade knew that he had no ability to dispell it. At the moment he was not worried of attack. The archers on the north-west and north-east towers had no opportunity of attack due to the black void. And the archers on the building to his right couldn’t see through the smoke and flames that rose up before them.

After a few moments of hesitation Cade gave Sir Victor a quick nod. The man had a confused look on his face, which the Vakeros took to be because of the void in front of him. The soldiers of the north were not accustomed to such sorcery as this, only the simple tricks of the Brotherhood Mages.

“I’m going to circle around,” Cade hissed in pain as his facial movements caused pain to the wound on his skull, “stay alert and don’t go into that emptiness alone, it will be a trap. None of us can take on Murdach by ourselves. We must dispell the sorcery which he uses as camouflage before we have any hope of capturing him.”

Before the void had materialized Cade had seen Sol Hawk go down to Murdach’s blade. Cade knew that the Kai Lord had little chance of surviving now that he was completely cut off from the others, even if he was still alive. In part the Vakeros believed that the Kai Lord deserved his fate. Though inside one of the buildings Cade had heard the green-cloaked man call Murdach out. If such insults had been directed towards him, Cade would have done even worse things than Murdach had. Still, the anger at the death of his friend was great and Cade let it act as fuel, enflaming his rage and his desire to kill.

His blue eyes gazed upon some of Murdach’s men who were scrambling towards them, “I’m sure you can handle these few, they can only attack you one at a time without entering the void. Leave Murdach’s spell-serpents to me.”

Suddenly Cade came to a halt as he saw one of the mages before him. In the darkness it was impossible to see if the man knew of the Vakeros’ presence or not. Either way Cade began to draw upon his battlemagic. The only question now was if his mental reserves would last him.

Iahir, embrace me in this moment...
**Rules, Rulings**

Arcadian is now located at T11. Movement this far: 15 feet.

Cade is now located at N10. He used the entire round in movement. 50 feet total, I think so this shouldn’t be a problem, even with the exalted free action as speaking to Victor.

If the mage has a higher initiative than I and has already moved then I will edit my post as needed. Just let me know, KL.

More action twice, to P 17, right next to the mage.

Sir Victor/Arcadian: Murdach and the mages are behind the sand walls, in the compound.

Sol Hawk: You just keep laying there.

Sorry for the terse update tonight. I've spent all day getting groceries and landscaping. I am utterly exhausted...

Time: Shortly after midnight, warning gibbous moon.

Date: Raidho 27 (roughly Sep 27)

Weather: Partly cloudy, light wind from NW. Lightning in NW skies intensifies. Thunder audible.

(My occult check was only 14)

Counterspell is a reactionary spell and does not take up my standard action for Round 9. It occurs during the mage's standard action. I'm pretty sure I fudged my roll though.

Round 9 actions will come following results of counterspell attempt.

I hit both my opponents (hit rolls of 18 and 22), for 12 and 13 points of damage each, to R16 and P16, respectively.

The counterspell fell short by just a few. If I'm adding up the DC to counter this correctly:

10 + 2 (int bonus) + 2 (tier) + 5 (half caster level (rounded down))

So, the DC is 19. The roll to counter is pure occult check—the Dex bonus only determines how many counterspells you can do in a round.

Wooh! A 25. It's seems Ishir is helping me out after that counterspell failure.

Sol Hawk has stopped bleeding and has regained 17 endurance due to the potion. If this isn't enough for him I don't know what is.

---

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

Sol’s down! Arcadian’s right, I shouldn’t go rushing in that darkness yet, they’re probably waiting just for that moment to jump me together! I can’t stay here either with my back to the wall, or I'll get cooked alive, thought the knight.

Sir Victor then belted out a challenge: “Murdach! Show yourself!”, before proceeding to circle the darkness in the opposite direction from the Vakeros.

There’s one of those mages, I’ll make sure that was the last sorcery he’ll ever try! * * *

Murdach dashed back toward the compound, his two mages in tow. Perhaps another time he could prove how easily they all could be killed....

Many of the archers fired their posts, as others began firing in long arcs to the east side of the festival grounds.

Sir Victor braved the flames to his right and rushed around the circle of darkness, seeing one of the mages headed back for the door of the compound. Before he could act further, however, those warriors fleeing the circle of darkness ran out and stopped as they came face to face with the metal-clad man from the north.

Arcadian likewise skirted around the circle, spotting the other mage preparing to retreat. He ceased concentration on the darkness, and the void lifted as quickly as it came. Pausing after he had fled from the Vakeros, he turned and prepared to cast another spell.

Sol Hawk: -1 EP, blood loss

Makala ran across the roof and shouted in fury as he jumped the span below him, landing in a roll on the rooftop where Arcadian had just come from! The khangar-wielding foe froze in terror, and Makala’s roll to cushion the shock from the jump collided with the man, throwing him off balance and into the flames. He fell backwards and into the inferno as the brittle boards gave way underneath him.

The Telchos looked at the archers fleeing the rooftop adjacent to him and had an idea on how to turn the tables. He prepared to lend his might to the smicar beneath the knight’s arm. Sir Victor: -2 EP

Only one mage looked back. The other intoned the words to the spell that caused another wall of sand to appear, right in front of the Vakeros. Stretching ten feet into the air, the sand wall blocked both Murdach and the two mages.

The last thing anyone saw of Murdach was Arcadian, who saw the man turn and flash an arrogant smile as he headed for the compound.

**ROUND 9**

The mage retreated towards the north end of the compound and the Vakeros saw him join with another mage. Cade looked ahead and could see that they were close on the heels of Murdach himself. One of the mages turned and invoked a wall of sand. Immediately Arcadian activated the ability of Counterspell.

Cade’s anger had reached a peak, the blood dripping down his skull and the pain in his wounds were nothing to him. His voice was dark and menacing as it rose over the crackling roar of the burning building behind him.

“MURDACH!”

***

As the Ruanese knight was moving on the outskirts of the darkness, the scimitar-wielding warriors who were within were trying to escape that very same area of unnatural shadows, only for some of them to stumble into the path of the very knight they were trying to escape. Both the knight and the warriors were surprised to see each other, and Sir Victor wasn’t fast enough to raise his shield, and one of his opponents managed to scratch him beneath the arm.

Meanwhile, the mages had raised another wall of sand in the way of their retreat, leaving them out of reach...for now. Those cowards will have to be dealt with at some later time, because a few more warriors had exited one of the buildings to reinforce the ambush.

Murdach, you coward, leaving your men to die to cover your retreat! We’ll meet again, I’m sure, thought the knight.

“Arcadian! See if you can help Sol, while I take care of the vermin,” Sir Victor shouted to the Vakeros, before he started laying waste to him with his mighty broadsword. Wherever his blade fell, a large line of red would appear on one of his opponents.

***

Cade nodded to Victor and turned, running towards the fallen form of Sol Hawk. The Kai Lord was in bad shape and near death. A wave of sympathy rolled over Cade’s anger and the young Vakeros quickly knelt down and applied his basic knowledge of first aid.

The Vakeros had a dire pronouncement that his skills in the healing arts were far too inept to save the dying Kai Lord. But he knew that he at least had to try.

Heal Check using First Aid to stop the bleeding.

Cade could feel the Kai Lord stir beneath him. He took one of the potions of laumspur out of his pack and brought it to Sol’s cold, white lips. The red liquid sloshed around in the Kai Lord’s mouth. Taking hold of his lower jaw and covering his nose Cade forced him to subconsciously swallow the healing remedy.

“A few days ago you gave me this potion out of kindness. And now I give it back out of sympathy.”

***

Murdach had escaped, or so it seemed. Though there were some who would fault him for not fighting to the end, in like manner Murdach would fault them for fighting to the end. The ambush was supposed to have killed them all outright, but it had not. There would be another time. That was the curse of the adventurer—never knowing when they were beaten, when they were just wasting their lives in pursuit of something...or someone.

As the archers hopped from their building, they were encouraged to see that the few warriors that were on the east side of the ambush area had been mustered into action. Careful not to injure themselves, they moved into position and waited for a shot at whatever the tower archers were firing at. It seemed there would be more than one ambush tonight.
Sir Victor: You are surrounded, much like Sol Hawk was earlier. If you wish to knock someone back, make a Strength check (Bull Rush under the 3.0/3.5 rules). Otherwise, hack away using the standard stats for the enemies around you.

Arcadian: I took a fate point for a move action and 3 standard actions. Your action was too heroic and sacrificial to penalize you or chop it up. That being said, you now have 3 of them hacking at your backside.

Sol Hawk: Next round will require a move action to stand, then you’re back in action. What a strange dream....

Makala is a bit disoriented from the fall and the rage wearing off.

The next round, Korlaeth and Kamilah arrive (and one of them is mounted even—that was unexpected).

Time: Shortly after midnight, waning gibbous moon.

Date: Raidho 27 (roughly Sep 27)

Weather: Mostly cloudy, heavier wind from NW. Lightning nearby in NW skies intensifies. Thunder crashes heavily somewhere closely. Light drops of rain fall.
**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

**Rund 10**

The words of Kai and Ishir resonated within Sol Hawk’s form. “Live,” they said in unison. One by one he saw the faces of all those who had supported him - years - family, kai teachers, kind strangers...

The sound of the gods’ voices penetrated the Kai Lord to his core in repeating waves. Each one shook his body with an inward explosion as if it were occurring in order to light the soul flame within him.

Sol Hawk was surrounded by thousands upon thousands of people - every one had had a positive influence on his life at some place and at some time. Each one was a light, each light was connected to every other by bright gossamer strands - the web of his existence - the connections that bound him to his destinies...

“Live,” said the duality of male and female. Each and every face was flashing in Sol Hawk’s mind, faster than he could see, until at last they slowed. He was presented finally by faces that felt more present than any others... Makala, a Vakeros woman and a man that he did not know, Sir Victor, a smiling sage, and at last, finally, it was Arcadian’s face - looking down at him from a strangely bright night sky...

* * *

The liquid went down with a warmth, revitalizing every cell in Sol Hawk’s body. The ache in his muscles subsided and the Kai Lord’s eyes sprang open at once. “I dreamt,” he said, almost to himself, and a tingle of thoughts flooded back to his mind. Murdach was gone - Sir Victor was coming when he fell - Arcadian must have been close behind. They had saved his life. “I am in your debt,” said Sol, but there were no more words to say for Arcadian was then struck hard by a blade from behind. They were not safe yet. Not nearly yet.

Sol Hawk stood then in order to demonstrate his recovery. With Sun Flame he blocks a blow - his warrior skill has flooded back to him in an instant, even as Makala then appears. Sol Hawk smiles at this, but his grin grows even wider as, in the depth of the darkness, a voice rolls across the sky itself...

“For Sommerlund!”

And there could be no mistaking it, for it rang out loud and true. At once Sol Hawk had returned to the fight, now back-to-back with the Vakeros against the black-clad men with scimitars. They needed to make quick work of these, for Sir Victor was bearing the brunt of the burden. At once an arrow flew from Sol Hawk’s quiver to strike the man who was trying to get behind Cade. The man was fearful immediately, seeing that the Kai Lord had yet lived.

The arrow pierced his left lung and spun him around (-1AP... as he turned, he saw the now calm expression upon Sol Hawk’s face... the black-clad envisioned a dozen prisoners of Vassagonia, kept long ago in the dungeons of the Kai Monastery. They were near to despair, all of them, when a light appeared and a figure descended from it upon stairs. The prisoners spoke in whispered tones to one another - and then Sol Hawk - the very man who had cared for them during their long months of captivity - came at last to be before them.

“I have spoken to my Kai Masters on your behalf;” he said then in the Vassagonian Tongue, “and you are now free.” The cage doors rattled and spring open, one at a time, and the prisoners ran forward in excitement and joy. “Go now, return to your homes far away, and next time you meet a Sommlending, remember the kindness done to you today - and one day perhaps all of our people, together, shall learn mercy and be free.”

The black-clad man stumbled and nearly dropped his sword - a wave of regret passed over the people, together, shall learn mercy and be free.

* * *

As the last of the red liquid spilled down Sol Hawk’s throat Cade felt a blade slice the full length of his back. He hissed in pain and stood, to face his opponent. A second slash lanced his flesh and the blood splattered in an arc. Sol Hawk, now revived, used his psychic powers to fling an arrow at the Vassagonian behind him.

Arcadian turned to see that there was one man in front of him, and one man on his left flank. A third man twirled a sword expertly in his hand off to Cade’s right. The man directly in front of Cade was clutching his shoulder, and the shaft that was imbedded in it. The Kai Lord’s attack had not been for naught and bought Cade the time he needed to attack.

The leader faltered as Sol Hawk launched his psychic attack and Cade quickly turned, striking out at the man to his left. The attack was good and ichor spattered as the blue blade sliced easily through flesh (+11). A twist and a followup backhanded swing sliced open the leader of the three across the mithra, infringing a gruesome wound.

Cade hoped that his own attacks combined with Sol Hawk’s psychic assault would deter the Vassagonians from a fight. For not, it was of no matter to the Vakeros. If they persisted in a fight to the finish it would not be his life taken in the resulting conflict.

The sound of Victor hissing in pain reached Cade’s ears and he looked off to his right to see the Sommlending knight surrounded.

“Got! Help the knight!”

---

**Commentary**

The Strangest Dream

Occurred during Sol’s unconsciousness

The dream of his former mentors faded to blackness, replaced quickly by a new one. It was not so much a dream as it was a series of images, really.

KL: I shall describe the image, and how it makes you feel.

The Kai saw the world from far above, as a star would. Vassagonia was a vast turbulent ocean of sandy waves, crashing about against the shores of her boundaries. To the north, a wave crashed over Cloassa and part of the Wildlands. To the south... another wave engulfed Anari. (You feel nervous at seeing this.)

The scene shifted and the Kai was lying on the sands now, but they were still. Above him was Murdach, dressed in black and green. A gust of wind tore across the land, and Sol Hawk closed his eyes. When he opened them, the green sash was gone, fluttering off in the wind. In its place was a red sash. (You feel puzzled, and you know that you will meet Murdach again, but something will be different.)

A screech beside the Kai caused him to turn and look. A large black predatory bird (not a scavenger) was standing with its wings spread. The bird had only one eye, on the left side of its face. It looked at the Kai and then snatched something out of the sands with its claws (huge claws). It was a gem, an emerald. The bird screeched a warning and took to the air. (You sense there is something more to this, something hidden, but you don’t know what.)

Sol Hawk transformed into a golden hawk and followed the dark bird. Through storms they flew, until the Kai-hawk saw before him a vast mire of evil. The dark bird dove toward a black column of night emanating from one building in a ruined city amidst a fetid lake, and it was gone. So was the dream. (Makamen? Danarg? Hellswamp? You feel great fear as you look upon the black column.)

Two voices in the darkness, one male, one female, blend together in perfect unison to speak to you in the darkness that follows. “Live,” they say to the Kai’s spirit as it threatens to exit his body.

I’m sure someone will come tend to you. The darkness is only temporary. It is a diversion that allows your mortal enemy to flee. I just didn’t want you to despair too much. You can be your normal self in OOCs.

Yeah, I think you’ve learned that Murdach can’t be taken one-to-one in straight combat. In fact, if he were fully prepared for melee combat, you probably couldn’t touch him.

He’s got the attack bonuses you felt, and when facing two opponents, he fights defensively every round. In addition, he has a class skill called Fling, wherein he can take a dagger and throw it as a free action at someone he’s not engaged in melee with. He typically keeps poison-coated daggers for this....

KL, who will let you know that Murdach’s player loved it when I called you Feyata in return.
Rules, Rulings

First strike hits (with my reroll) and does 17 points of damage on R17, while the second one misses. I try to use my 5' step to move into R18, but I'm not sure if you're allowing diagonal 5' movement. If not, I'll stay where I am right now.

Korlaeth and Kamilah: You'll need to roll initiative to engage in your newfound combat. Keep in mind that on horseback, you can cover a lot of distance quickly. For reference purposes, you cannot ride into any buildings or enter the two open gates to the compound (northern building) while mounted.

I must say, as the enemies flee or die, the posts are (thankfully) getting shorter and shorter.

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Seeing the danger he was in, Sir Victor put all of his training and strength into his strikes, carving one man almost in half with his first blow. However, the multitude of blades around him prevented him from landing a second blow with his dangerous blade, and he was still surrounded, even if 3 of his enemies were bleeding profusely from deep cuts.

Sir Victor then tried to maneuver out of the ring which was slowly closing around him by stepping beside the man he just wounded. Things looked grim, however, the sound of a galloping horse brought a sense of hope to the knight. Could this be some of the fair grounds' guards, come to investigate the fire and sounds of fighting, or were they also in league with the would-be assassins?

* * *

The archers fired away as two mounted riders galloped into line-of-sight. Judging from the looks of the two, the arrows would have little effect at killing them outright, but the archers were just glad to have actual clear shots at an enemy. However clear the shots were, though, the armor of the two held the projectiles at bay, and the worst the two suffered from the arrows that hit them were dents and perhaps a small bruise.

Sir Victor swung his sword in a vicious arc as best he could, tearing apart the bowels of the man just south of him. He tried to attack again, but he was too confined to make an effective swing, and the broadsword met with scimitar instead of flesh. He tried to maneuver out of the closing ring of combatants, but there were just too many of them. They jabbed and hacked as the knight tried to divide his attention in many directions at once, finding numerous opportunities to strike, cackling like jackals as they did so. Whether they struck his flesh or his armor, their frenzy intensified. Sir Victor: -5 EP total

Arcadian stood from his kneeling position in a whirl of blue steel, leaving two out of the three wounded before they realized what had happened. One of them lashed out just as viciously as the Vakeros did, using both hands to slam his sword into the chain that covered Cade's side. Arcadian: -2 EP
**Rules, Rulings**

Sir Victor: You’re getting overwhelmed, but I’m sure you can still dish out some pain.
Black-clad warrior (P17): AC 12 EP 2/20 (bleeding, near death)
Black-clad warrior (R16): AC 13 EP 7/20 (bleeding)
Black-clad warrior (Q16): AC 13 EP 20
Black-clad warrior (P17): AC 13 EP 20
Black-clad warrior (Q18): AC 13 EP 20

Arcadian: Makala is helping. Hope you don’t mind. Until his rage weariness wears off, he’s going to target already-damaged warriors.
Black-clad warrior (Q13): AC 13 EP 16/20 (Sol Hawk’s target)

Sol Hawk: None shall pass.
Black-clad warrior (P14): AC 13 EP 20
Black-clad warrior (Q14): AC 13 EP 20

Check the map closely. It’s now raining. The fire in the building is also burning out in places, while the net has caught fire. Also, I kept wondering what was so distracting about the fire, and the I realized it was above the grid overlay. Egads.

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

The Kai managed to wound the third one, extending his open hand to guide the arrow and then squinting his eyes as he sent an unseen arrow at the man’s mind. The combination of pain made him take a step to steady himself, and Sol Hawk advanced to help the knight, but he found his way blocked.

Makala watched as Sol Hawk stood and came alive, lashing out even as the Vakeros did. Makala took a step forward and swung his fists at one of the Vakeros’ foes. The man ducked the first swing, only to be smashed in the face with the second one.

The new combatant moved into position as a team, fully encircling the knight while simultaneously blocking the Kai from reaching him. Sol Hawk was able to block the attack of one, but the other dashed in and sliced open the Kai’s thigh. Sol Hawk: -3 EP

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

Sir Victor:

“I am kind of assuming that Makala is going to dispatch the warrior at P11 by turning my hands after the blow I gave him.

I am kind of assuming that Makala is going to dispatch the warrior at P11 by turning my back to him and moving towards the warrior at P14. With only 2 Endurance it shouldn’t be hard for the Telchoi to take him out. He’s practically holding his inside together with his hands after the blow I gave him.”

**ROUND 11**

Cade grunted as a blade struck his mail, breaking off a link which stuck in his side. The warrior prepared to strike again but suddenly Makala was upon him in a flash of fury and steel. Arcadian’s bloodlust was complete and he did not recognize either of the riders who rode into the courtyard.

His sword flashed in the night and the Vassagonian in front of him (O12) grasped at his throat, falling to his knees. The blade flashed again and steel ripped cleanly through flesh sending a second warrior tumbling (O13). Both men were dead or on the brink and Cade took pride in his handwork. His blade and his armor were covered in blood. His very hair was matted in the grim that had flown through the air during the skirmish.

Without a word Cade turned and limped towards Sir Victor (5 foot step to P13). He stepped over the body of a fallen black-clad but was suddenly met with a new foe. A Vassagonian with a wickedly curved scimitar stopped toward him grinning menacingly, preparing to strike down the blue-clad warrior.

Arcadian only smiled with grim satisfaction and confidence. The only death that was now on his mind was the death of Murdach’s men. And glorious deaths they would be.

***

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

A Kai Lord?! Here?! and is that...? These thoughts were but a moment in Kartaeth’s mind, for in the light of the fire he could see that those fellow warriors were outnumbered and surrounded. Another arrow plinked off his blue-steel armor, and Kartaeth knew that something had to be done now!

The Vakeros closed his eyes briefly as his horse raced forward, concentrating with supreme will on the one task at hand. He smiled once more as he felt the familiar energies coursing through him. He opened his eyes, and it was as if Avatre were moving in slow motion. He could feel each hoof come off the ground in succession, with each of the three beats on the ground seeming to echo in his focused mind. The black-clad warriors ahead seemed unaware of his rapid approach. Kartaeth’s smile once again nearly split his face. A lot of things came to mind then, but no one could yeil quite like the Telchoi, and Kartaeth shouted their warrior cry once more, guiding his horse onto the black-robbed with skill and determination, his blue-steel spear glinting in the firelight.

***

Sol Hawk began to move towards Sir Victor, but alas, Sol Hawk was not the only one who heard the command of the Vakeros. Warriors broke off from the fight with his countryman in order to block the way. In their midst was the bold knight who had tried to save him. The bold knight who was himself now in the same danger that Sol Hawk had only so brief a time ago been in himself.

With a calm he brought Sun Flare to bear. He would make it to Sir Victor. Now.

Howling, the black-clads come, swords swinging. "Did you have a nice nap, Feyata?" said the one as he swung his sword. "Feyata," he chuckled to his friend once more, perhaps relishing the memory of Murdach’s revenge. When he returned his gaze to Sol Hawk, there was a shart protruding from his heart (4 DAM). He looked up in disbelief, quavering, and then Sun Flare followed, striking his heart again (11 DAM). As the blood streamed down the edge of the blade amidst reflections of firefight, one could imagine that Sun Flare was drinking.

The man, in one desperate attempt, raised his own blade high to strike Sol Hawk. “No,” said Sol Hawk, “Stand aside.” The man’s blade was trembling - he still wished to kill the Kai Lord. “I said stand down,” said Sol Hawk, scounting at him. The man’s eyes had murder in them as he spat, “Never, I kill you, green,” and he whispered, “Feyata.” The blade shook harder. Then slowly, slowly it descended as the man lowered the scimitar’s point toward his own chest, pushing it through the leather with a creak. He girted his teeth. The blade drove itself in an inch at a time, farther and farther in until it darked against metal - Sun Flare. No blood came - his heart was dry - but the man continued to force the blade. In that instant, the scimitar shattered, leaving imbedded the broken fragment (8 DAM). Sol Hawk withdrew his sword in time to block another attack as the black-clad fell to the ground in a heap.

Sol stepped toward Sir Victor - his second opponent’s face had gone white. “Drop your weapon or you’re next,” the Kai said.
Rules, Rulings

First attack is a miss, second one hits with a roll of 19, and does 13 damage on Q18

Initiative = 9

Does jumping down from the horse count as a Standard Action? If not, Kamilah will also draw her short swords this round.

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

The many wounds the knight had received were beginning to tell on him, and the warriors around him weren’t holding anything back as they were hitting him from the left, right and from behind, where his shield couldn’t reach. Desperately, Sir Victor dropped all pretense of finesse and just started hacking around with all his strength, putting the weight of his heavy frame behind every blow.

Such a display of strength wasn’t necessarily that effective, however, because only half his blows would actually hit. He felt his broadsword bite deeply into the flank of one of his enemies, but that’s all he could manage at the present. There were too many around him! And the Ruanese was much too busy to look beyond his immediate concerns to see how his allies were faring...

* * *

As Kamilah rode forward a barbed shaft bounced off her armor near her shoulder and she dodged the path of a second arrow. The feathers of the projectile brushed against her cheek and she swore audibly. She changed the direction of her horse.

Kamilah urged her horse forward and didn’t stop until she was directly in front of one of the archers. Her horse reared up as the archer prepared to fire once again. The young, Vakerine with eyes ablaze leaped down from her steed and prepared to fight to the death (Kamilah is located at T21).

* * *

The two newcomers to the battle took a moment to assess the situation, then moved to action, all the giving the archers a difficult target to hit due to their blue armor and movement. It had been too long since the archers had struck anyone, so they began hollering amongst themselves to single out one target to concentrate all their fire upon.

Sir Victor tried again to maneuver, but the press of ruffians among his was too great. His first attack missed, but the second drew enough blood to buy him some time. By the gods, that one would think twice about jumping in to attack the knight on his sword-side again. The blades were starting to strike more and more, but he still managed to give more than he was taking. And there were still the archers.... Sir Victor: -6 EP
**Rules, Rulings**

- Of course, you know this, but just for clarification: Korlaeth and Kamilah, you don't benefit from the rally bonus of Sir Victor that the others do.
- Sirius: You are in the clear. If you wish to move your base, all ready warriors around you will get attacks. If you decide to just disengage them and not allow them that, that will take the full round, then you can move 1' back. Of course, you can always just keep on hacking at them....
- Black-clad warrior (R17): -2 WP (bleeding, near death)
- Black-clad warrior (Q16): AC 13 EP 20 (bleeding)
- Black-clad warrior (R18): AC 13 EP 7/20 (bleeding)
- Arcadian: -2 to AC if you stay where the corpse is. Good work on hacking the other two apart. You could see Kamilah charge, just in case you want to include that in your next post.
- Sol Hawk: One round, one kill...nice.
- Also, keep in mind that R14 (above) is within striking range now. +2 circumstance bonus on attacks against him. His effective AC is 10 as well since he is flat-footed in relation to you.
- Makala wants to chase Murdach. If someone tells him where he went, he's liable to sprint off. Otherwise he'll just find the closest person and smack them around.
- Kamilah, I counted it as a move action. So you did a double move. The archer moved before your action, but he's still within striking range of your new location.
- Korlaeth. Good work on using the bonus to the ride check. That helped you avoid endangering the friends. Hopping out of the saddle is a move action. At least until someone can correct me on that one or find a ruling in time. I have no time right now.
- Time: Shortly after midnight, waning gibbous moon.
- Date: Raicho 27 (roughly Sep 27)
- Weather: Mostly cloudy, heavier wind from NW. Lightning nearby in NW skies intensifies. Thunder crashes heavily somewhere closeby. Downpour gets a bit stronger.

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**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicion**

Arcadian sword ripped through the throat of one man, who collapsed clawing at his throat. The second one moved to deflect the Vakeros' blade, but a deft flick of the wrist twirled the blade around the defense and with free hand on the pommel, the Vakeros plunged it through the man's chest and ripped it free. Holding the stance for a second, Cade made sure Makala had his back, then stepped off the corpse that had just fallen next to him, thanks to the Kai.

Sol Hawk concentrated his full fury upon one person for the first time in the combat. Using all his resources, the Kai struck the man with blade, arrow, and mind—it was too much. The man shattered and was dead before his head hit the ground. Despite the Kai's words and actions, the foes remained around him. They were buying time for their leader, and in some twisted way of reasoning, that was noble to them.

Makala smashed his fist into the person in front of him, then called out to his friends as the man collapsed: “Where did the leader go?” He took a step closer to the Kai in preparation of pursuit, since he was flight of foot.

The soldiers had a tough time landing blows on anyone besides Sir Victor, primarily because they were falling over dead. Within seconds, the four surrounding the Kai, Vakeros, and Telchoi were slain. One remained, and he would surely not last long.

At this point, the two new Vakeros charged into action, one of them heading southward to deal with the archers, the other heading straight for the swarm of people around the knight.

Kamilah reached the building and leaped off in one fluid motion. She landed at the ready, weapon in hand. This would not last long at all.

Korlaeth's charge came right after the warriors had lashed out at Sir Victor. Two of them dodged aside in time, but an unlucky third was knocked prone from the horse. The other men Korlaeth hoped to scatter had already fallen. Good! He turned his horse around and prepared for his next action.

The rain started to fall harder, and the thunder rolled closer.

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**Round 12**

Arcadian allowed himself a little smile. Now that it was sword against sword and the mages weren't making things difficult for the Vakeros knew he could take out the rest of these men by himself. Quickly he reprimanded himself for being so cocky.

Fake had a way of twisting things bad as quickly as it does twisting them towards a better scenario.

Remain vigilant, he told himself. "It isn't over yet."

The black-clad in front of him twirled a scimitar from one hand to the other with ease. His eyes glared at the younger man and he gave a quick spit at Cade's feet.

"That is the biggest and last mistake you will ever make, scum."

Before the Vassagonian could react Cade stepped to the side and forward, bringing his sword in a massive swing from his right. The blade struck with perfection.

He had already decided who it would be to pay his blood debt. Murdach. Cade felt wounded more by Murdach than by any of the others. It had been Arcadian who had trusted Murdach and led them into a trap. When the others had doubted Murdach's motives it had been Cade who reassured them.

Cade gave his blade another twist and without looking at his enemy brought the sword down, beneath his arm, stabbing the wounded man.

As the Vassagonian fell over, dead from his wounds Cade looked over and saw what he thought to be a female Vakeros attacking an archer.

Wait...is that?

His thought was demolished abruptly as he turned back to the battle at hand. There was no time for thought. Only action...

And reaction...

He was angry at himself for failing the others and for letting Murdach get the jump on him so easily. Cade only hoped that when the others had doubted Murdach's motives it had been Cade who reassured them.

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And reaction...

He was angry at himself for failing the others and for letting Murdach get the jump on him so easily. Cade only hoped that his valor in the battle would regain his fellowship among the others. But in the end he knew that he was to blame for this skirmish.

I should have walked away...

---

Sol Hawk turned to Makala as he fought. "Murdach fled through the wall," said the Kai, shouting above the battle, "but he's too dangerous to fight alone." Sol Hawk grimaces, displeased that he himself did not hold the cunning Murdach long enough for his companions to arrive.

A black-clad came screaming on Sol Hawk's right. He ran in fear as a warhorse and its rider charged into the fray. The grinning man was a Vakeros. Sol Hawk could tell from his blue armour. Sol waved and laughed. Help had arrived at last!

As the black-clad burst forward, heared into the Kill Zone by the master horseman, a deadly pointed shaft leapt out of Sol Hawk's quiver, centering on its target, then shot with a speed that would have been no greater had it been shot from a hundred pound bow. It pierced its target through the calf - the man pitched forward and fell at the Kai's feet (6 DAM).

"Ishir, preserve me," said Sol Hawk. As the inferno burned behind him, he appeared as a green silhouette against the sky-high flames. Drawing the warmth from the fire itself, Sol Hawk could feel his wounds begin to close. Gashes were replaced by cuts, cuts by bruises, and bruises faded away to nothing (+7 EP).

Finally Sol Hawk walked a clear line of sight to the mob that encircled Sir Victor. Sol waited for his moment. As Sir Victor struck one of the men, the black-clad spun around twice before hitting the ground hard. Sir Victor turned his back to the man, thinking him dead, but the man was not. Slowly the black-clad recovered his sword and lifted it, prepared to throw at the brave knight's back, but the evil man was distracted, perhaps by the firelight, perhaps he had heard someone there. He turned briefly to look - it was the Kai, staring back at him.

"In Sommerlund," declared the Kai, "To attack a Knight of Ruanon is treason. Tell me the penalty." Shaking, the black-clad dropped his sword and wept, "Death," he said, and he collapsed (6 DAM).
Critical hit on Q16, for 27 points of damage. Then I hit R18 (the same I hit last round) for 10 endurance points of damage.

First two attacks missed...

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

As the foes around him were scattered, Sir Victor could now focus his attacks better, as he didn't have to watch his back anymore, and he could see his companions coming to assist him. This meant they were all still alive and well, despite the heavy opposition they were facing!

Seeing that most of his enemies were bleeding heavily from the damage he had dealt, he noticed one who hadn't tasted his blade yet. Using all the skill and strength he could muster from his energy reserves, the knight swiftly proceeded to decapitate the man in a stunning display of swordsmanship, and before the head could fall to the ground, he turned around and slid his broadsword into another man's heart.

The Kai Lord was coming up behind his other foes to help him, and even as Sir Victor pulled his sword out, he saw another of his opponents fall to the ground, with blood pooling out of his ears and nose and mixing with the falling rain.

Kamilah's heart wrenched as she tightened her grip around the handle of her blade. The haziness of her hues depicting that her tolerance was quickly fleeting. The wind stirred hurriedly around the shapely woman and for a bleak moment Kamilah felt as though the great nature, the whistling wind, was trying to speak with her - reason with her and bring out her inner lunacy.

A cascading stream of sweat rolled down Kamilah's finely shaped brow, her façade quickly becoming flushed as the battle wore on. To her left a building had become engulfed in flames, how this had happened she was not quite certain, all she knew was that the blaze was casting an orange glow across her form and at the same time leaving her rather balmy.

For a concise moment Kamilah looked farther to her left to observe the ongoing battle hoping to distinguish between and identify the statistics of enemies and allies placed before her. In that brief moment she glanced at many forms, but one particular form seemed to be familiar to her and appeared to be that of a Vakeros figure oddly similar to the man who caused this dreadful venture in the first place. The thoughts were quickly held at bay as Kamilah lunged her sweeping blades at the archer who stood only a step in front of her. With immeasurable rage the young warrior lunged at her opponent with iridescent twin blades. Though her first two clean swipes faltered as the archer dodged, the third and final strike caught him slightly off guard, piercing his flesh. The reflection in Kamilah's hues showed only abhorrence..
NPCed characters next round until command is resumed:
Arcadian, Makala, Korlaeth.

Everybody just give me your actions and intents. There's really not any unusual situations to report in the OOC part since the two fire spells were countered. One mage is probably going to get busted up really bad, but the other one may have a chance to fire off one last spell.

If anyone else must go NPC, the game will be placed on standstill. Sure, I can NPC 4 at a time, but that's more like writing a novel that every one just reads and comments on.

Time: Shortly after midnight, waning gibbous moon.
Date: Raidho 27 (roughly Sep 27)
Weather: Mostly cloudy, heavy wind from NW. Lightning nearby in NW skies intensifies. Thunder crashes heavily somewhere closeby. Downpour maintains intensity.

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

The archers concentrated their attacks on the Vakerine. Arrows flew past her and slammed into the wall, but one managed to find a weak place in her armor and pierce her calf. Kamilah: -2 EP

Sir Victor sword was faster and sharper than any executioner’s axe. In fact, he needed no block to lay his condemned’s head upon. Swinging the blade from low to high in a sweeping arc, the knight sliced through one warrior’s neck. The head spun from the momentum, and so did Sir Victor, angling his sword so that it slammed almost to the hilt in another man’s chest. With a roar of victory, the knight withdrew the blade and looked around smiling. Where only seconds ago he was surrounded by a mob of men, he was now standing around a partial ring of corpses.

Arcadian’s blade matched the knights in deadliness, if not form and power. Two quick motions caused his opponent to keel over in shock from such deep wounds and rapid blood loss. He too looked about and saw Makala preparing to run after Murdach. No, not another companion getting carved apart!

Sol Hawk answered Makala’s question and held his hands out in two different directions. An arrow flew through the air in one direction, felling a wounded man, while an invisible arrow of pain went in a separate direction, dealing different yet equal death. The Kai used his innate discipline of Healing to repair some more of the wounds that hindered him earlier.

Off charged Makala, and before Cade could call out a warning, his free hand had already started moving. In a split second he reached out and intercepted the fiery burst that issued from the weapons storage building in front of the compound. Some inner instinct told him it was another trap, and he’d be damned before he let his friends go through that again. With a flick of the wrist, the flames dissipated, leaving a startled Makala staring at a livid mage, who screamed in anger.

Out of the other side of the building, the second mage came. Korlaeth saw him and spurred into action, using a two-fold maneuver after seeing Cade’s actions. With his free hand he mimicked the motion Cade used and latched onto the fiery blast even as Sir Victor turned to see the searing torrent of pain coming his way. The knight winced, unable to move out of the way fast enough, but nothing happened. Korlaeth shredded the spell’s fabric, then guided his horse to slam into the mage, sending him to the muddy ground. Korlaeth: -4 EP from the counterspell

The one remaining soldier stared at Sir Victor, hoping the knight would go after the mage so that he could run away from this fiasco.

Kamilah meanwhile winced as the string filled her calf and lashed out with her sword. The archer held up his bow in a patrty but effective defense. After two well-placed strikes, the weapon snapped, allowing Kamilah’s third off-hand attack to hit the man in the gut. He drew a curved dagger and prepared himself.
**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

**ROUND 13**

Sol Hawk’s eyes brightened as he saw Arcadian and Sir Victor make short work of their assailants. The stranger on horseback was sweeping through the battle, causing commotion in all directions. Sol Hawk looked up. Something was wrong. “Ambush! Makala, Ambush!” he shouted, but it was too late. The two evil mages had reappeared, throwing fire.

Without another thought, Sol Hawk sprang over the corpses of the fallen even as the mage leveled a gout of burning flame at Sir Victor. Sir Victor turned his head to see it. Even as he did so, the last remaining man on the ground was still swinging his sword although it bounced harmlessly again off the heavy armour.

In mid-jump, Sol Hawk released an arrow. It flew with the purpose of Kai, imbedding itself in the black-clad’s spine (8 DAM). Sol Hawk next brought Sun Flare down hard in a downward strike, but somehow the black-clad managed to block it with his own blade. Sun Flare trembled only an inch away from the man’s neck.

“Sir Victor - we need that wizard alive!” said Sol Hawk. Sol locked blades with his adversary, trying to force the man to his knees. Through his own eyes and straight into the black-clad’s brain, Sol then released a fireball of his own - this one was composed of pure psychic energy (DAM 7). The black-clad shuddered under the shock, falling to his knees but still managing to hold off the falling rapier blade as a vanishing flame evaporated around them.

* * *

Sir Victor didn’t have time to admire his handiwork, for another threat had just presented himself. Turning around, all he could do was stand horrified as a sheet of flame was burning a trail straight towards him, leaving him no time to move aside! As quickly as the flames had appeared, however, they disappeared before they could reach him, for they had been dispelled by one of the newly arrived warriors on horseback. There will be time enough for thanks after this, if we’re still alive, thought the knight.

Seeing that the last warrior was scared witless of his deadly prowess with a blade, and thus didn’t present any further threat to him, Sir Victor turned and charged towards the mage who had just tried to burn him alive, with his sword held high above his head, fully intending to leave him no chance to try any more witchery.

However, at the last second, he heard Sol Hawk yell behind him: “Sir Victor - we need that wizard alive!”, prompting him to turn his blade aside and try to knock the wizard unconscious instead of opening him up.

* * *

Thunder crashed as Cade’s final enemy fell to the ground. The Vakeros could see one last blackclad preparing for battle but it seemed that Sol Hawk was making short work of him. Cade’s second and third attempt at counterspell left him drained and his wounds were beginning to take toll on his body.

Struggling to not falter Arcadian heaved his sword from the black-clad’s corpse and turned towards Makala. Moving as fast as his wounded body would allow Cade shoved past the Telchoii and ran to the gate where an archer was preparing to protect Murdoch’s retreat.

Cade swung downwards with his sword, striking with a vengeance.

* * *

Victory seemed to come with the rain. Sure, there were still archers, but for the past couple of minutes, they had done minimal damage. The mages’ spells had been foiled by the Vakeros, and the opposition was growing thin. After all, how could a half dozen stand when two dozen had fallen already?

Sir Victor looked at the prone and dazed figure of Mathou as he struggled to retain his footing. With clear disdain for the spellcaster’s underhanded tactics, the Ruanese knight held his sword high and rushed at the mage. His sword felt like lightning from the sky, even as the Kai shouted a warning.

Sol Hawk called out to Makala to beware, then spoke to Sir Victor before he turned to launch an arrow and send the talons of his mind to claw at the last skirmish-wielding foe. The arrow struck him at the same time as the wave of pain, and he dropped to his knees and held his sword back over his head, forewarned that the Kai was coming by the manner of attack used. The killing blow was averted as steel met steel. The warrior spun on his knees, his sword slicing low at the Kai’s legs.

Arcadian bolted past Makala after disrupting the mage’s spell, intent on taking out the archer that had just appeared. He was certain that Makala could take care of the mage, and indeed this was the case. The Telchoii broke from the momentary disorientation of having a spell thrown at him and countered, all in one heartbeat. He stepped to Arazi and punched the mage twice, hard enough to cause him to fall back into the building, bleeding profusely from the nose.

This was fortunate, considering Sir Victor had already started his downswing when Sol Hawk called out to wound instead of kill. The knight tried to divert his sword, but it was too late. The blade missed its intended target—the heart—but it still cleaved through the man’s upper torso. Blood sprayed everywhere, and the knight knew the mage would not survive when he felt his blade slide into the dirt beneath the mage from the momentum. Mathou convulsed once as the blade dissected him, then lay still.

The archers began to disperse and flee, knowing that with no more hand-to-hand opponents, the fearsome warriors would be upon them in no time. Koralath turned and chased two of the fleeing archers down the street even as Kamilah dispatched the one she faced. Sir Victor entered the compound and killed one man as soon as he jumped down from the ladder. Arcadian ended the life on the one he faced shortly thereafter and entered the compound.

“Let them go,” said Sol Hawk, looking past Makala into the building. “We have this one to question.”

Makala waited until everyone regrouped, and he even waited until the two new Vakeros joined them. Then he folded his arms and regarded Arcadian. “I did not leave my homeland to be led around into traps. It is best that we part ways now. I shall return to tell Kubudel of this, then I shall journey where my soul carries me, not into blind ambushes.”

Without waiting for another word, he strode past the smouldering building and left along the street where Koralath had chased the two archers away. He disappeared into the rain, even as another man entered. A redheaded man in bedraggled clothing walked upon the group after the Telchoii had left. The group looked up and this newcomer, wary of any strangers.

* * *

The archer gasped as Cade’s sword slipped through his ribs and pierced flesh and organ. He dropped his bow and grasped onto Cade’s cape with mad desperation. Cade leaned in and whispered into the dying man’s ear.

"Tell me what it is like...to be dying?"

The man only whimpered and tightened his death grip on Arcadian’s shoulder.
"CAN YOU TELL ME?"

The archer cried out as Cade's arm stiffened and the blade slowly churned within his ribcage. He strung out several sentences in Vassan though Cade could understand very little of what he had said.

"In the end this is what we are all reduced to. A crumpled pile of nothingness, waiting for the judgement of the gods. It is only fate that you are here before me," Cade's voice had lowered some, "all I want is an answer to my question. What is it like? Can you answer me?"

All the Vakeros got in response was a whimper as the man took deep, heavy breaths. He was trying to hold on to the edges of his life, even as they slipped away from him.

"No?" asked Arcadian.

With a quick twist of the wrist Cade forced the blade upwards, slicing through the archer's unprotected heart. The man cried out in pain and his arms flailed about wildly. Cade withdrew his sword and let the man fall to the drenched ground.

"Then tell the guardian of the gates."

Arcadian's cloak was soiled with rainwater, blood, and mud but this did not deter him. Sheathing his sword he approached the fallen mage and hefted him up by his collar. He turned to the others.

"Let's get out of this damned rain."

Makala expressed that he was leaving. When the Techoii expressed his opinion of being led into traps it was all Arcadian could do to not attack the taller man. In the end he contained his rage and spoke evenly, though his tone hinted malice.

"Kai shall make me atone for my sins, not you."

The Vakeros gave a shrug as the Telchoii turned and left the group, walking out along the road.

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Cade was so surprised at Kamilah's presence that he did not even realize that the red-headed man had arrived. His attention and focus was on his terms, at the time of his own choosing. Makala had suggested that he was headed for the Courts of Kubedei, but Sol Hawk suspected that in truth, Makala had decided to hunt Murdach alone. Kai be with you, Sol Hawk said silently.

Sol Hawk turned his attention to where the big man had beaten down Murdach's wizard, still sopping wet and unconscious in the rain. Sol Hawk moved north in time to hear Arcadian and Makala fight. Sol Hawk was silent as he observed the intercourse. Finally, Arcadian said in a loud voice, "Kai shall make me stone for my sins, not you." Makala all but ignored the Vakeros - he turned and departed in the rain. Arcadian turned, too, speaking no more words. "Makala," said Sol Hawk at first, but his voice trailed off. There would be no changing the proud warrior's mind. To do so would be to challenge his authority and this Sol Hawk knew Makala would never accept. If Makala was ever to return, it would be on his terms, at the time of his own choosing. Makala had suggested that he was headed for the Courts of Kubedei, but Sol Hawk suspected that in truth, Makala had decided to hunt Murdach alone. Kai be with you, Sol Hawk said silently.

Sol Hawk turned his attention to where the big man had beaten down Murdach's wizard, still sopping wet and unconscious in the rain. Sol Hawk was certain that Arcadian would soon kill the wizard as well, such was his rage and pain - but at that moment, the Vakeros was distracted by the woman. Sol Hawk saw something in his eyes - of course he was distracted - she was very beautiful, especially in contrast to the bloodied and beaten group, covered in mud up to their knees, cloaks wet and hanging like dead weight. Arcadian's disdainful reaction to her took Sol Hawk by surprise, but he took the opportunity to move past Cade and arrive at the wizard's side nonetheless.

The Sage of Lyris appeared then. Despite the abruptness of his appearance, Sol Hawk felt he could trust this man. He sheathed his sword before speaking. "Simyn," he said, "I am Sol Hawk. We are on a mission to rescue an innocent, a girl. We were ambushed by a man named Murdach."

"In the end this is what we are all reduced to. A crumpled pile of nothingness, waiting for the judgement of the gods. It is only fate that you are here before me," Cade's voice had lowered some, "all I want is an answer to my question. What is it like? Can you answer me?"

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There was much of this unexpected situation the characters couldn't figure out with the facts they currently had, but as far as himself concerned if you couldn't trust the words of a Kai Lord, then Nagnamund was surely doomed. "I guess there's more to your story, Kai Lord, but I'll gladly help you. I have no reason to like those that prey on the weak and innocent. I have a story of my own to tell and I guess you'll be interested to hear it, when given time." Simyn helped Sol Hawk lift the wizard. "So where do you want this poor excuse for a man? I'm not much for torture, but I have some pointy implements that might make him talk!" Simyn gave the gagged man a kindish smile. "Does he have any trinkets that might be magical on him? I have a knack for sensing such things."
Kamilah looked up as words of questioning fell upon her ears. The young women's misty hues narrowed with melancholy, sombreness filing the Vakeros's blood. A subtle gaze was directed towards the man, the sight of which caused the hair placed on the back of his neck to flare with a cold sweat.

This cannot be... She thought, Perhaps it's but the weather playing tricks with my mind. Her attention was turned for a trivial moment as she looked at the scene playing out around her. The festival grounds were now stained with enemy blood, the prolonged battle ceased and the last of the remaining enemies had fled in fear, leaving their fallen warriors behind.

The rain that was now falling heavily from the darkening clouds above seeped through her garments and dripped from her darkened tresses. Adrenaline, begun pulsing through her minute digits as her hands clenched up, she had no desire to push away the stray pieces of hair that had dampened with not only rain but perspiration from the battle prior, clinging to her rosy cheeks. Kamilah though in despair held her crisp demeanor.

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Victor just ignored him and turned to question Simyn, the funny looking fellow who had arrived shortly after the battle ended. Cade shook his head in despair and moved away from the group, no longer caring what Kamilah nor the others had to say to him. Victor just ignored him and turned to question Simyn, the funny looking fellow who had arrived shortly after the battle ended. Cade shook his head in despair and moved away from the group, no longer caring what Kamilah nor the others had to say to him.

"Simyn, if you are who you say you are, then how did you come to be here, in Anari, on these guarded fair grounds, on the very night we were led here and ambushed? It'll have to be a pretty convincing story, because right now, I'm a little short on patience, and not as quick to trust as my fellow countryman here, given our current predicament." The knight folded his huge arms and waited for the so-called scholar to explain his presence.

Cade knelt down and washed both of his hands in a puddle that had formed on the ground. After cleaning them as best he could he cupped some of the rainwater in his hands and splashed it on his face, wiping away the blood and mud that covered it. Slowly he rose to his feet, acting as if the armed shield on his back. There, the southern warrior, Makala, announced he would part ways with them, to the knight's chagrin. "Farewell, Makala, and may you enjoy success on your soulsearch," said the knight. "It was truly an honour to travel and fight by your side for the past week," and before more words could be exchanged, the dark warrior raced off through the rainy night.

The knight stooped to wipe his blade clean on the clothes of the dead archer before sheathing it and rejoining the rest of the companions, also slinging his shield on his back. There, the southern warrior, Makala, announced he would part ways with them, to the knight's chagrin. "Farewell, Makala, and may you enjoy success on your soulsearch," said the knight. "It was truly an honour to travel and fight by your side for the past week," and before more words could be exchanged, the dark warrior raced off through the rainy night.

"You know who I am, my name is Arcadian, son of Avarak, son of Ishmael. Go back home, skylark. Take your new friend with you." Her rapsy sentence fell short as she pressed her glossy crimson lips together. Kamilah's blades were still in hand thanks to the previous encounter with the unfortunate archer. She tightened her grip around the hilts and sawing them before her in a defensive manner, preparing herself for the worst.

"Speak thy name and take not one more step forth." Her rapsy sentence fell short as she pressed her glossy crimson lips together. Kamilah's blades were still in hand thanks to the previous encounter with the unfortunate archer. She tightened her grip around the hilts and sawing them before her in a defensive manner, preparing herself for the worst.

The edge she carried in her voice had returned and the expressions found her eyes were hard to read as the emotions they seemed to depict contained both fury and longing. While taking a step away from both the man who had spoken to her and the unfamiliar group of men before her, Kamilah placed two fingers between her lips and whistled loudly. The golden mare she was previously mounted upon coming to her side without delay.

The blood that had stained her twin blades now streamed down the long silver edge and then dripped into the ground nourishing the soil. It was if time and if they are just going to stand around all night bickering among themselves then I will get to it myself. Cade thought bitterly to himself. He was referring to the blonde Vakeros who had accompanied Kamilah into the compound. Cade thought he had recognized him as well but he couldn't exactly place where he knew the man from. Cade shook his head and returned to looking for clues along the rain-soaked ground.
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

The first impression Simyn got of Sir Victor of Ruanon was not a good one. He seemed like an arrogant sort, not much different from the nobles in his own homeland. "I would prefer you keep a civil tongue, sir knight or perhaps I'll go looking for it! My story is a long one and I'm not entirely sure of the details myself. It began a couple of days ago in Vassagonia, where I saw something I shouldn't have seen. Since then I have fought Vassagonian shamans, tricked dull-witted Anari border guards and stumbled upon a misplaced mercenary band. I'm not in the mood to discuss my trustworthiness. A second I thought that you might be a murderer in disguise, but only a true knight can be such an arrogant fool!" With that said Simyn turned around and faced the Kai and continued with their task.

**Sir Victor didn't like to be called a fool, but before he let his blood start to boil at the insult, he calmed himself. The knight had the distinct impression he had genuinely hurt Simyn's own sense of honour by first doubting his word. Judging from his stinging retort, it sounded like the sage had been through a lot himself before he came upon them, and the knight felt a sense of empathy for him, despite his hostile tone. It seemed he had just rubbed a potential ally the wrong way, and decided he needed to make amends, for the sake of his knightly virtue. Then the knight realized Simyn had said something of vital importance to his mission in Anar.**

"What was that? You said you came upon a mercenary band? Where did this happen? How many soldiers were there? President Kubudmil must be told of this at once," replied the knight, before adding "I'm sorry if you must feel this way towards me, my behaviour was unfit for a knight of Sommerlund, and I should have introduced myself before making any demands. My name is Sir Victor of Ruanon, knight-warrior of Sommerlund, envoy of the court of Sommerlund. Few things are afoot in Anar, and only through cooperation will we hope to make things right and make the land a safe place for all. Please accept my apologies for doubting you." With those words, the knight offered a tentative smile to the sage, and extended a hand in friendship hoping to bridge the gap between them before it got any wider.

"Here," said Sol Hawk, gesturing to the nearby building from which the mage had originally come. He and Simyn moved the man inside. Sol could see that Sir Victor was hesitant to allow a stranger into the fold. Arcadan and Kamilah stand in the rain, lightning flashing behind them — then Arcadan stormed off alone. Sir Victor challenged Simyn. Simyn's tongue retaliated.

Quietly, Sol Hawk laid down the various implements he had recovered from the mage in front of Simyn, presenting each in turn for his examination.

"Simyn," said Sol Hawk, "I want you to know that Sir Victor is a true knight of Sommerlund and possibly the wisest man I know. He is angry at being ambushed, but his question to you is not unfair. If you put his mind at ease, the others in our group will trust you, too, since the words of Sir Victor are respected by us all. I'll admit that I am curious to hear your brave tale as well."

"Sir Victor, do you think I have tied these bonds tightly enough? We do not want our man to escape after all."

"I apologize for my harsh words. The last days have been a burden upon my mind. As far as I know I rode south after I encountered the mercenaries, so their camp would be in that direction." The sage pointed in the direction he believed to be north. "A man rode past me as well. He was wiry, with long dark hair and his beard was somewhat peculiar. What seemed strange to me is that the mercenary band seemed to be a part of the Cloeasian mercenary band the Talons of Rashuur. How they have entered Anari seemingly unseen is a mystery to me." With that Simyn faced Sol Hawk and examined the wizard's trappings.

"Cade! Arcadan don't walk away from me, I deserve an explanation if nothing else. Where did you go when we left our school without so much as a goodbye? What was it that was so important?"

The Vakerine called out to him in anguish as he trudged off. Kamilah sheathed her pair of short blades and clasped the leather reins draping down from her mare's bit. Holding them tightly she hoisted one boot and swung her following leg over and on to her steed. Her scarlet lips dripped with rainwater as she awaited any sort of response from the Vakeros. Tapping the side of Kamilah's golden mare she pulled back harshly on the reins causing Glory to rear up on her hind legs.

The air was growing brisk and the rain had showed no signs of stopping or lessening in intensity, however she refused to step into any sort of building through a lot himself before he came upon them, and the knight felt a sense of empathy for him, despite his hostile tone. It seemed he had just rubbed a potential ally the wrong way, and decided he needed to make amends, for the sake of his knightly virtue. Then the knight realized Simyn had said something of vital importance to his mission in Anar.

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The expression that played across the Vakerine's face was nothing less than irritation. Moments passed and with nothing spoken from Arcadian who narrowed her eyes and looked at those standing and moving into shelter near by. These people were not of her concern at least not at the moment.

"Please Arcadian if I find no answers today then how will I have the strength to continue this journey that began only because of your disappearance?"

"What the hell is going on around here? Who are all these people?"

The expression played across the Vakerine's face was nothing less than irritation. Moments passed and with nothing spoken from Arcadian who was commencing in the opposite direction Kamilah fell silent. She closed her vibrant hues and tilted her head up towards the skies letting the rain stream down from her forehead and dark full lashes...the rain masking her own tears.

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Simyn was quick to note Sol Hawk's interest, especially as Simyn mentioned the wiry man and the Talons of Rashuur. How they have entered Anari seemingly unseen is a mystery to me."

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"Let's head back to the stables. Arcadian knows the way, he'll join up as soon as he feels ready."

Sir Victor listened intently as Simyn continued explaining his encounters of the past few days, all the while ignoring the drama that was unfolding between the Vakeros knights farther back.

* "If this man is who I believe him to be, and your description matches that of Murdach, the man responsible for drawing us into this ambush, then it would appear that the Talons of Rashuur are indeed behind the entire kidnapping plot! The pieces are falling together one by one..." Sir Victor's voice trailed off, as he tried to contemplate the terrible implications of such an association.***

*Regardless, we'll discuss this further later, once we've taken shelter and dressed our wounds," he said after a moment had passed, before adding "Allow me to help you with him," as he bent to help Sol with the mage. He examined the bonds and, satisfied that they were tight enough, hoisted the limp form over one large shoulder.

*"Let's head back to the stables, Arcadian knows the way, he'll join up as soon as he feels ready."

With that said, the knight headed back to where they had left their mounts earlier in the evening, anxious to find Bright Lance safe and sound where he had stabled her.
Rules, Rulings

Sol Hawk: Make an Escape Artist check against DC13 to see how well you've bound the guy. If you pass, good. If you fail, make a Perception check against DC20. Simyn, you can also make a perception check if you'd like at the same DC, regardless of Sol Hawk's rolls.

Sir Victor, before you latest post takes place, I'd like to find out what Sol Hawk's and Simyn's rolls are. You may then want to modify your post to take place after mine, based on what may or may not happen.

Arcadian, make a Perception check if you go inside the compound. If not, don't worry with it.

Everyone else, continue as necessary. Each fallen warrior has either a scimitar and khanjar or bow and khanjar. They have very little gold on them, not worth even searching unless you are short on funds. The dead mage has the exact same inventory as the living one.

Time: After midnight, waning gibbous moon.
Weather: Severe storm overhead. Lightning constant. 1% chance of being struck each round in the open.

DOC: passed Escape Artist Check
DOC: Sir Hawk is speaking in the Common Tongue, but will switch to Vassagonian if he receives no response from Arazi.
DOC: This may go without saying, but Sir Hawk's Mindshield is up (~18RP).
DOC: Of the 2 magic rings and 2 bags of gold found, Sol Hawk will pocket one of each for the time being (the ones found on Mathou).

Sol Hawk won't mind if Simyn takes the one on Arazi.

Sol wrote:

OOC: This may go without saying, but Sir Hawk's Mindshield is up.

Until you reach the 4th tier of Mindshield and you gain the instinctive shield ability, it costs 1 point of Willpower to activate the shield and another every round you hold it up.

...I need more sleep. And Ash needs to quit bugging me about my posts...lol

I pocket the magic ring, if Sol Hawk allows me to keep it. Of to make that perception check. By the way me and Angantyr signed your book today and drank some beer to celebrate the occasion.

Simyn,

The magic ring's all yours. I took (will take, I suppose) the other magic ring that was found on Mathou, plus a pouch of gold. I added these to my character sheet although I suppose technically I won't have them until after the interrogation. Let's also assume that Simyn got his trinket before Arazi wakes... I don't think he will be too happy if he sees us actually stealing his stuff while he is watching!

Sir Victor, I basically made it so that you can now do whatever you feel like, even if that includes holding the mage back up across your shoulder. I just needed the chance to allow him to break free the instant he came back to consciousness.

Sol Hawk, just be glad you tied those ropes tight. Your Perception check was actually a chance to allow him to break free the instant he came back to consciousness.

Hoping the bodies, grabbing a GC here and there. He'd readily accompany anyone back to check on the horses.

Arcadian and Kamilah: I'll let your narratives dictate your actions.

Time: After midnight, waning gibbous moon.
Date: Raidho 27 (roughly Sep 27)
Weather: Severe storm overhead. Strong winds from NW. Lightning constant. 3% chance of being struck each round in the open.

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

As Simyn and Sol Hawk moved the slowly-awakening Arazi out of the rain, the sage opened his mind to the power within that allowed him to see the aura of magical items. He took a step back to watch as Sol Hawk stripped the mage of personal effects: a pouch of sand, a small purse of coins (13 GC), a necklace with an evil-looking smiling sun symbol on it, and two rings. One ring was common, but the other had a faint green aura around it, and Simyn immediately knew it was somehow magical.

Arazi came around as the Kai finished putting these objects in a pile away from the mage, and the robed enemy began to fight against his bonds, showing a ferocity heretofore kept in check. Rage burned in the spellcaster's eyes as he tried to speak the words of his spells through the gag.

A short distance away, the reunion between Arcadian and Kamilah had a tense edge to it. Both Sir Victor and the other Vakeros, Koraelath, were intrigued by this. Sir Victor spoke with Simyn as he watched the two blue-armored warriors exchange words, and his attention was drawn when Simyn mentioned a mercenary band. This was not lost on Arcadian either, for he quickly surmised that if Simyn had made it through the Anari border without paperwork, these mercenaries would try also. Their best bet would be to go through the Daroga forest, possibly en masse across the border, but perhaps also a few riders at a time. Once again it seemed that where Anari failed, the adventurers would have to succeed and save the day. If only the nation knew the sacrifices they made... .

Koraelath heard himself being brought into the conversation and held up a forestalling hand, with his usual cheerful smile. "Wha now," he said laughing, "don't go placing me and Kamilah together as a couple. We merely met at an inn shortly after the borders were shut and decided to kill time by coming up here." He twirled the spear in his hand and it became a dagger, which he quickly sheathed in his belt. "I'm friendly, but not in that way with her." He tossed a leg over his horse and landed on the muddy ground, looking over the bodies of the fallen.

Kamilah mounted her horse and caused it to rear up in perfect timing with a bolt of lightning that flashed across the sky. As the horse's hooves struck the earth again, thunder rang out loud and powerful from the clouds. Arcadian could not help but stop and look at her.

...Sir Victor," said Sol Hawk, "it would not be unwise to ensure that our horses have not been stolen. Siny and I will talk to our guest if your wish is to ensure their safety - Koraelath, maybe you would go with him as well."

"I believe you will find your bonds to be nice and tight," said the Kai cooly to Arazi, "If you have any pride, calm yourself."

Sol Hawk continued. "My first question is a simple one. Why did you attack us?"

He couldn't take his eyes of Kamilah astride her horse in the rain. Her eyes seemed to bore into him...and he knew that no matter how far he ran he would never be rid of her...nor could he hide from her. It was fate that he was here and he knew that it was time to finally face his past, whether we like it or not.

Cade relented and approached the confused form of Kamilah. After helping her down from her horse he led her, wordlessly inside the compound. After a few moments of walking...when they were alone he spoke.

"I apologize...I did not expect to see you here. In this...place."

Cade waited for her to reply but no words came forth from her mouth. He sighed softly and lowered her eyes tiredly.

"I wish I had all the answers that you seek...but truth be told, I don't know all of the answers myself. The only answer I do have for you is this...I left because of you. Because I knew it was dangerous for us to stay together."

The young Vakeros shifted uncomfortably as the fellow warrior's fiery eyes burned holes into his mind. Cade knew that his answers would only further frustrate the young woman, and in part he wished that she would just leave him and their secrets be. But a small part of him wanted to finally let everything go... And to give her the explanation that he knew she deserved. Outside the cold rain hit his bare flesh, raising the hair on his arms and goose bumps to form. Inside his veins were on fire.

..."This ring is magic" Simyn said, "this one isn't. Mind if I keep this until so I can examine it a bit further?" The other objects were mundane. The sage watched closely as Sol Hawk tied the wizard up. He really didn't know how he could be of use in an interrogation, but perhaps he could discern a lie when uttered.

Sir Victor laid the mage back on the floor at the Kai's request. He looked outside at the Vakeros who still hadn't come in out of the rain—their call. He then decided on whether or not he was going to go check on the horses, or hang around for the interrogation.

Arazi strained and struggled as hard as he could, but the knots were too tight, especially with the rope being wet. He gave up and glovered at the Kai and his smug remarks. He tried to bring his hands to his mouth to remove the gag, but it was no use.

He ignored the Kai's question, even when he switched to Vassagonian. The sound of a foreigner using the Sand Mother's words was disgusting to him—he would spit if he were able. One word...all he needed was one word.
Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Arcadian shivered as the air took on an even cooler tone to it. The rain was coming down in sheets which stung the face. Lightning struck a tree nearby, splitting the wood and causing Cade and Kamilah to cringe instinctively.

"Kamilah, go inside with the others, please. It is dangerous outside. I have something I have to do and then I will meet you indoors. We can talk there."

Without waiting for her to reply Cade slipped off into the darkness, heading for the tower where Murdach had first attacked the group. As soon as he reached the tower he took off his sword and his daggers, leaving them propped up against the wall.

He looked up, watching the myriad of lightning which struck randomly above the tower’s peak.

Best not to wear too much metal while I’m up there, thought Cade to himself. The storm was reaching its zenith; its passionate stripes of light were displayed across the sky in all directions.

This is irony at its best, thought Cade who was considering that the conflict between them was much like the conflict in the skies.

As soon as he reached the top of the tower he made sure to keep his head low as to not make himself a target.

He was quick in his search, grabbing the crossbow that Murdach had left behind when he attacked Sol Hawk. Within the work of a moment Cade was climbing back down the ladder and to the ground, being careful not to lose his footing on the slippery steps.

As soon as his feet were back on solid ground he scooped up his weapons and took off into the empty darkness. Silently he wondered what he feared more...the weather’s temper or Kamilah’s.

* * *

The following is flavor text. No one knows this happens.

Makala strode through the storm, unafraid of the dangers of such weather. Lightning flashed nearby, but it did not faze the Telcho warrior. He had been insulated and his honor bore a black mark at following someone who endangered others. It was well and good that Telchoi justice did not rule in this place.

Not faze the Telchos warrior. He had been insulted and his honor bore a black mark at following someone who endangered others. It was well and good that Telchoi justice did not rule in this place.

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Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Sir Victor, feeling he had done all that he could at the moment, left the building and headed back the way they had come, going around the lot of buildings where the ambush had been sprung and the nets raised and walking on through the falling rain.

It felt good to be alone for a moment, to thing back on all that had happened and what they had learned. He still kept an eye out for trouble, however, because who knew what their enemies were capable of? Kidnapping princesses and laying ambushes while passing off as allies was one thing, but sneaking an entire mercenary company within the borders of a nation such as Anari? This bode ill indeed. He was also still wounded, and those would need to be dressed before they went any further.

The Sommlending finally reached the stables and was surprised to see a dead man, armed and dressed as the ambushing had been, lying in a pool of blood on the ground. The broken nose and the scimitar slash across his belly betrayed the killer. One of the horses was also missing, and the knight concluded that Makala had indeed come this way before leaving. "Good luck my friend. I hope our paths will cross again sometime." He was glad to see that nothing had happened to his loyal steed during his absence, and gathered Sol Hawk’s and Arcadian’s mounts before heading back out in the storm.

* * *

The Vakeros was soaking wet when he entered the building. Cade tossed the small vial to Simyn, "can you identify this substance stranger?"

As he waited for the redhead man to reply his eyes danced around. After a moment a quizzical look materialized on his face and he turned to Sol Hawk, "where's Kamiah? And Victor?"

"Sir Victor left for the stables," offered Korlaeth and Cade simply nodded.

He sat down on a wooden oak chair and began to test the taut string of the crossbow. It was of fine workmanship, and the young Vakeros couldn’t believe that Murdach would abandon such a fine weapon. Cade placed one of the quarrels in the groove and pulled back the lever. Yes, it was a fine weapon.

Suddenly he lowered the weapon until it was pointed straight at Arazi, "you’d better answer my friend’s questions quickly, my friend."

He spoke in North Speak, in the possibility that he would understand, "If you speak the language of the North, speak up now."

Cade spoke evenly and unthreateningly, though his words vibrated firmness and Arazi had no doubt in his mind that the warrior with the blue-sword would kill him in cold blood without repentance. The magician spoke a few words in Vassagonian but it seemed that Sol Hawk was the only one who had any understanding of what he had said.

"Don't remove the gag, these magicians work their conjuring with words and sounds. If he is allowed a clear word he could endanger us all."

* * *

"Help us and I will not kill you. You have my word as a Kai Lord." Sol Hawk takes a moment to explain to the others what Arazi has said, even as Arcadian enters, "be ready," he said to Arcadian and Korlaeth, then he loosens the gag to free the mage’s mouth.

"We already know that Murdach has Ameesha, that she is alive, and that she is nearby. Tell us where she is."

Arcadian, unsure as to whether the fellow Vakeros would fire, but knowing the display was having a beneficial effect.

"Give us more," he ordered. "Daroga for how long?"

"Leave here...leave Daroga. Stay...kill...leave." The mage looked at Sol Hawk for help, even as Simyn began to investigate the item Arcadian had tossed him.

The Kai then removed the gag, and Arazi looked at the Kai incredulously. Was he for real? All it would take was a word, and the place would be in flames....

He looked at Arcadian. "In Daroga. To north, near border. We to attack, kill all of you, leave. I would guess Myr’athok still leave Daroga now."

Murdach raced through the Daroga forest, relying on his memory to take him to the encampment. He slowed his mount and trotted into the camp, noticing as he did so that everyone was jittery.

"What?" he asked.

"Two Anari trackers, to the north," replied a commander. "Both dead now."

Murdach scowled and looked southward. "Anari has homed in on us at last, and the ambush failed," he said simply. "I underestimated the four, but still I left the Kai bleeding to death. Chances are that someone—or these flies or the Anari horsemen—will come our way soon. We have to accelerate things."

"Sir?" asked the commander.

Murdach told him the new plan. Smiling, the commander saluted and left to relay the message to the other three commanders. As Murdach walked through the clearing, he analyzed the fighting styles of Kubudé’s so-called champions of Anari.

The knight attacked anything that came at him, viciously; but he was easily targeted from afar. The Kai—well, he wasn’t a problem anymore. Unless he was healed. Still, he was overconfident and would present no challenge if there was a next time. The Vakeros seemed to value self-preservation, not taking anymore risks.

He pulled aside the flap of the tent that held Ameesha. She was tied to a chair that was tied to the central post of the tent. He slid his khanjar out of its sheath and tapped her bandaged hand. "If you scream like last time, you lose another finger like last time," he warned, sliding the gag out of her mouth.

She respected his threat, knowing he didn’t bluff.

"Your father’s faith in these four fools is pathetic. One has fallen already. When I left, the mages had things well in hand to slay the rest." He caressed her dirty tangled curls. "It is a shame Egotlath has his own use for you, for I would very much like to—"

Ameesha pursed her lips together in defiance and closed her eyes as he spoke. She interrupted his lecherous thoughts. "The Kai lives, and after you have your turn, I'll leave them where they are. I'll leave them where they are for the moment."

He leaned close to her face, causing her to turn away. "Get ready princess. We ride through the border soon."
## Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Cade relaxed the crossbow but only slightly. His action brought no relief to the mage's eyes.

"So it seems we must ride for Daroga. But we must rest here for the night as we have no idea how long this chase will continue. If we do not gain sleep when the chance presents itself..."

The Vakeros motioned towards the mage, "what do we do with him?"

"He could have killed us all here, without that gag. The only thing preventing himself from doing so is that he has a tremendous desire to live. But can we really just allow him to go free?"

"I would say we should leave him in the hands of the Anari...but then they will see what has transpired here. And with that will come more questions, which take up more time than we can afford."

He relaxed the crossbow even more so, "I have his fate up to you."

In honesty his mind was completely on the situation at hand. His thoughts betrayed him and more than often slipped to Kamilah. His concern for her, though not evident, was as real as the danger of the mage in front of him.

* * *

"Daroga, this we already knew," said Sol Hawk, noting the man's fear as Arcadian threatened him with the blade, "we need to catch up fast. Where in the forest are they taking Ameesha? Where will they cross the border?"

Sol Hawk listens to the man's response. "The Talons of Raphuur have Ameesha. Now tell us why you risk war for Cloesia by taking the daughter of Kubudel. Why protect Cloesia for hundreds of years only to throw her into danger now? Answer true! By whose orders?"

Sol Hawk takes some time to translate all of Arazi's answers to the others. He concludes by saying, "Arazi, I see no reason for you to lie. If you return to your old ways, Murdach will kill you as he did the rest. Indeed, there is no honour to be had by aligning yourself with a man who kills his own men for his own selfish ends."

To Arcadian and the rest, "He need not die. He may even be spared Anarian custody, for we know what punishment awaits him there. I do not wish to release him while we lay sleeping - he should remain tied with a guard if we decide to camp here."

"However, I also fear that if we are to catch Murdach and Ameesha before they reach the border that we must pursue immediately. In eight hours, he will be safely home. I say we sleep in the saddle in shifts. It is the only way to make up the distance. Murdach will be doing the same, no doubt. He will not wait for us to slumber."

Sol Hawk offers to ask any additional questions for his comrades of Arazi before deciding finally on his fate...

* * *

**Quote:**

Now tell us why you risk war for Cloesia by taking the daughter of Kubudel. Why protect Cloesia for hundreds of years only to throw her into danger now? Answer true! By whose orders?

To this, Arazi only smiles. He replies in Vassagonian so that he does not have to think about what words to use:

"Do your Green masters divulge everything to you? Do you know the true reasons why your kind are sent to and fro, or are you merely pieces on a board that they place somewhere because it best benefits them?"

"Your mission to rescue the princess is what? Just another 'go here, do this' order, on promise of reward from Kubudel the Manipulator. What does Green's master want? What does Silver's master want? And the Blues? What are motives to soldiers?"

"We do what we are told, and often we are told little, Murdach commands me. Egoliah commands Murdach. Ask one of them what their plans are."

* * *

Sol listened to Arazi's words and smiled. "You are a wise man. And what you say holds truth. However, if I and my friends did everything we were told, you would not be alive now."

Sol Hawk was silent only briefly, then replied, "It may be true that some are pawns to the grave, but there are times when even enemies can unite to avoid catastrophe. Egoliah and Murdach command an army, so we may all be dead despite what is said here. If we are to die, you and I, let us do so as men, not pawns."

"If I am to persuade my friends that you have helped us, I must know more from you than the mere fact that Ameesha is in Daroga since we knew Murdach's destination and direction since the day that we witnessed the lady's kidnapping. Tell us where she is - exactly where - and how we can reach her before Murdach makes a mistake that two countries, not one, shall surely regret."

* * *

Simyn smelled at the liquid he had been handed. "It's venom, probably from the steampider."

The sage looked around. "So you're off to Daroga? To save some sort of princess? If you wouldn't mind I'll like to tag along. I can handle my own in a fight and since I have succeeded in stumbling into some sort of friendless plot, I'll like to help sorting it out. I don't like unanswered riddles."

With that Simyn began examining the magic ring he had found closer, perhaps he could figure out its functions.

* * *

Arazi narrowed his eyes. "First you lull me to think I will go free, now you speak as if I am still doomed."

He turns to Simyn, shifting as he does so to get in a better position to see the sage. He switches to broken North Common. "You speak 'honor', yet you rob...no reason."

Then he shifts a bit and turns to Arcadian. "Banou wants life. And Otai... he shifts back to Sol Hawk "...wants things not in mind, else Banou gets life."

Arazi shrugs and returns to Vassagonian. "You couldn't save her with the information. You won't save me without it."

"Ay gavish, Otai."
**Rules, Rulings**

I got really lucky on my Perception Check: 23, ugh, I smell like gasoline. I just finished mowing my yard.

Another Bluff Check! Hope it pays off. (13)

Makes geography check to see what I know about the town Daroga, if such a town exists.

* * *

**Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions**

"You think I want to kill you?" inquired Arcadian. He gave a soft laugh more to himself than for dramatic effect. "I assure you that if I wanted you dead, my friends here would be toasting your corpse outside by now."

"So let me get this straight...you think that I want to kill you. And that if you don't give Sol Hawk, green-cloak, the information he wants, I'll kill you. And you don't have the answers to his questions?"

The Vakeros seemed to ponder this for a moment. As he was thinking he took the vial back from Simyn and placed it in his robe pocket.

Cade decided to give interrogation a try. He tried to speak as evenly and as slowly as he could. It was obvious that the mage didn't speak much North Speak so he would have to choose his words carefully.

"Murdach serves Egoliath, right? Who Egoliath serve? After Daroga, where Murdach go? Over mountains?"

* * *

"Banu thinks you know more, so do not pretend," said Sol Hawk. "I said I would not kill you if you help. Only if you help."

As Arcadian begins speaking, Sol Hawk slips into the role of translator.

* * *

This ring protects you from rough weather. It might be sand storms or blizzards, but it will keep you comfortable. If you had another ring like this, it probably has the same effects. May I keep this? I've been stranded in the desert for far too long and I don't like the prospect of being it again."

Simyn was trying to make sense of the situation. Names were dropped fast. Daroga. Murdach. Egoliath. Hadn't he passed through the Daroga forest? Was there a town named Daroga as well? The names didn't say Simyn much. Murdach seemed to be the man that had ridden past him earlier this night. The sage had believed that things would become easy just if he passed the Anari border, but he had believed wrong.

* * *

Sir Victor was glad to see that none of their mounts, especially Bright Lance, had been injured, or worse. After making sure that he had gathered all the gear, he mounted Bright Lance and led the other two horses outside, through the rain, back to where the others were, even now, probably interrogating the sand mage Arazi.

* * *

Kamilah pushed her thoughts aside as she dismounted from her golden steed aiming to come in out of the rain. She felt nonexistent as the sting of the rain and the bitterness of the air no longer chilled her bones. Numbness had swept over her small frame and fatigue had taken its toll, the venture thus far had been long and draining.

Walking into the building she found a vacant area in which to seat herself. Her hues were deadened and looked only to the floor. Trying to make herself comfortable she pulled in her legs and rested her head upon her knees. Moisture stricken hair fell over her knees, stray pieces almost brushing the flooring. She pursed her crimson lips while her head lifted slightly and her eyes danced over the crowd of converging men, some indeed intimidated her, most however did not.

She had no desire to speak out amongst the crowd nor took any interest in what it was that they were discussing. It seemed that her mind had once again drifted to thoughts of Cade and the unexpected meeting that neither of the two seemed to be prepared for.

"My search is over, what use am I now?" Kamilah thought to herself while plucking the stray hairs from her brow.

"Cade no longer cares about our past together..." She contemplated while sorrow consumed her figure. With no energy and no desire to interact with those around her she sat alone her endless thoughts keeping her company.

* * *

Sol Hawk was so enraged in conversation with the man that he didn't see what everyone else saw—Arazi could see them all well enough from where he was without having to shift around. He was trying to reach into the folds of his robes and pull something out, but he never could quite reach it.

As Kamilah walked in and sat sultry to one side, everyone began talking in unison. As Arazi addressed someone, they began to talk back to him. Ignoring them, he would turn to someone else. Finally he turned to the Kai and uttered the phrase that is the last thing many people hear before their deaths: "Ay gavish."

Loosely translated, it meant: "Go to heaven."

That phrase is followed by some strange word.

* * *

"Oh no," Cade was up from his chair in a second and invoked the words to the counterspell. As the spell was forming he lifted the crossbow to his shoulder and aimed, pointblank range at the mage.

As all of this was happening Cade saw Kamilah enter the room out of the corner of his eye, distracting his counterspell attempt. The second the spell had finished forming he knew it wouldn't have the proper effect.

He gave a curse under his breath and aimed the crossbow at Arazi's heart and fired.

* * *

No sooner had he opened his mouth, Arazi felt the most excruciating pain boiling through every crevasse in his head (5 DAM), even as Arcadian's bolt launched toward him. "Aaaagh! MHHMM!" he cried. The Kai had never strayed far and the stinking-wet gag had been immediately raised again and forced into the mage's gaping mouth.

* * *

Korlaeth was ready. When the mage shrugged, he prepared himself and placed a hand on his dagger. As Arazi spoke the word for the spell, Korlaeth closed his eyes and moved his hand a split-second behind the syllables. As soon as it was spoken, it was unraveled.

Sol Hawk reached down and grabbed with the gag, pulling it back in place. Arazi looked back over his brow at the Kai, malice and hatred seething in the glare. Then there was a dull twang, and Arazi lay still. The fires in his eyes extinguished as they rolled further back. Sol Hawk removed his hands and looked at the shaft of the bolt in the mage's heart.

"I hate mages," said Korlaeth, propelling up and catching his breath from the counterspell's draining power.
Rules, Rulings

All is clear, for the mage is dead. Arcadian and Korlaeth take 5 damage from counterspells.

Simyn...don't be put out that you didn't choose to play a BoCS. Given the amount of energy they use to cast and counter, it can be quite deadly in a fast-paced adventure. I foresee you doing some impressive things.

About this time, Sir Victor should be getting back.

Oh, and the storm is gone, by the way. Just light drizzle outside, and a bit cooler than before.

Sol Hawk recovers the Bar Hand Cannon from the rain and loads it onto his horse. Also he finds some black-clad armour with the accompanying trappings and loads this on his horse as well, weapons, gear, boots, everything he needs to pass as one of them. (KL please reveal stats for me)

Arcadian drinks 1 Laumspur: 16 health.

End of Act II

Act II, Conclusion – Suspicions

Sol Hawk sighed. He looked helplessly toward Arcadian and then Korlaeth as the mage lay dead. At this moment, Sir Victor entered to see the captive slumped on the floor. "I think we're just about finished here," said Sol Hawk grimly. "Simyn, sure, you keep the ring. I would say its original owner won't be needing it. Ay gavish, Arazi, ay gavish."

"I have a bottle of Laumspur left for whoever does not have one. I suggest we leave this place behind us and take advantage of Murdach's trail while it is still fresh."

Arcadian looked down callously upon the man he had just killed. The quarrel was imbedded deeply within the mage's heart. Cade took the khanjar from his belt and engraved a mark in the wooden stock of the crossbow.

One...

As Sol Hawk walked outside to get his horse Cade approached Kamilah and extended a hand. After helping her to her feet he gave her a quick hug. The encounter with the mage had loosened his mind and his anger began to drip away, coherent with the passing rain.

As he turned to lead her away she leaped into his arms, embracing him with the full of her body. Cade held her there for a moment before finally breaking away. He could see the tears still filling her eyes as he fronted a quick smile.

"It's good to see you again, Starling."

Cade turned to Korlaeth and Simyn.

"I do not know either of you, but if you are willing to aid us in our quest then I am prepared to accept it. If we hurry we can reach Daroga by sunrise."

With those words Arcadian fastened his sword around his waist, and with crossbow in hand made his way outside. He started to walk south, towards the stables where he had left Iri.

Outside he saw Sir Victor astride his own horse, leading his and Sol Hawk's horses into the compound. As the knight handed Iri's reins the young Vakeros grasped his hand tightly in friendship.

"I apologize, friend...for the trap I led you into...you all into. I will not let you down again."

As the storms passed, so too did the danger. After a few minutes of discussion and snooping around, the group of adventurers determined that there was no more danger lurking around. Whatever remnants of Murdach's men were left, they had no interest in risking their lives anymore. A low patchy fog started to form, blanketing the damp ground. To the southeast, lightning flashed and the storms raged still, taking their brief display onward toward Kakush. Despite minor opposition, the group decided that it would be best to sleep in the saddle in shifts, waiting no time as they pursued their dangerous prey.

Based on Simyn's account of how he came to find them, they determined that they would travel in the direction that he had taken, since his tracks would be fresher than Murdach's.

The six of them rode northward into the unknown, hoping that their pursuit would end soon.
The Enemy of My Enemy

Act III: Opening: Mirage

Sol Hawk looked around at the ground. It had rained. There was a slight fog. And it was night. He sighed and knelt beside what he thought might be Simyn's tracks heading northward from the festival grounds.

"Kai, if ever there was a time to bestow upon me the skill of Tracking...now is it. I pray thee..." Sol Hawk stopped. His pulse raced, and his breathing accelerated. He began to sweat, as if he had run a ten-mile race and just stopped.

He opened his eyes and shook his head to get his bearings. It was then that he saw them: hoofprints. Sure, they were obscured and rounded from the heavy rain, but they were there. The Kai took his time to make sure he was seeing correctly. Indeed he was! The stars were out, obscured by only a few clouds now that the cold front had passed. Sol Hawk focused on one and asked Simyn to help him find that same one again each time he had to stop and make the check.

The rest rode and dozed off as they could, thankful for the few moments of stillness when the Kai didn't seem to notice. Simyn's tracks were soft and cozy. "All my base weapons are made of enchanted wood. I ca"on't remember the last time I had slept properly. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper.

At last they reached the edge of the trees. Sol Hawk examined the brush for signs of Simyn's passage, finding smeared leaves and crushed twigs to mark the sage's passing. They had stayed on course the whole way.

Now that they were here, they faced a new dilemma: how to proceed in the darkness? It was still two hours before the sun would rise, and three hours till it would start shining over the lowest points of the mountains to the east.

** * * *

Simyn rode silently onwards. He was very tired and couldn't remember the last time he had slept properly. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper. He tried to help Sol Hawk as best as he could, but the sage's only interest in the ground was proper.

He had become to know a little bit more about his new-found companions and they had seemed to gotten over their first sense of mistrust towards the sage. Everything was already written in the stars - according to many of Simyn's colleagues. Simyn hadn't really made his mind up yet, although the stars were his main interest. Simyn just wished that if the stars ruled fate, that the stars would see fit for him to find a bed soon.

** * * *

Sol Hawk was on the trail even as his companions slept in shifts. But he was not deterred. So close - he would not allow Amsheba to slip through his fingers again, nor would he allow Murdach to get the better of him. Simyn was dead-tired, and the wisps of sleep caught on horseback were apparently less than satisfying to the sage. "Simyn," said the Kai, masking his own fatigue as he spoke, "I thank you again for joining us. There is more that I need to tell you. The girl's name is Amsheba. She is the daughter of President Kudubli of Anari. She is a very special individual. She has the gift of prophecy."

*She was kidnapped at the Darkening Days Festival which took place at the very place where we were in battle mere hours ago. While on her trail, we were ambushed by Murdach and his men. She is being taken to Coseba, we presume, by the Talons of Rashur of whom Murdach is a member. This is a dangerous occurrence. The reason for her kidnapping is not known to us, but it may be a play by the Talons to somehow blackmail the President of Anari... to what end, I cannot say.

Commentary and Observations...

KL: Everyone who has gone through 2 Acts already has leveled up: Arcadian, Makala, Sir Victor, and Sol Hawk. At the end of Act III, the others will level up.

For now, though, make all necessary adjustments: HP, WP, skills, attacks, the extra ability point, spells, disciplines, etc.

You are all just going to go at the last post of this act. I know it.

AR: I have a question.

I now have Twin blades which offers an additional attack at my full base combat skill.

So...

Do you get two additional attacks or just 1? And if it is just 1 additional attack is it at +6, or +1, or do I add them together for a +7?

If it is at my full base combat skill wouldn't it look like this...

** Attack 1: +8 (-2) +6 **

** Attack 2: +3 (-2) +1 **

** Attack 3: +6 (-2) +4 **

** Attack 4: +1 (-2) -1 **

KL: That's correct. Each weapon has its own bonus, and they do not stack. So you can only use the appropriate weapon for the appropriate situation.

KL: You get one additional attack at Max BCS. However, all attacks are at -2 in that round.

So, as you stated:

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** Attack 2: +3 (-2) +1 **

** Attack 3: +6 (-2) +4 **

Your attack bonus is basically 6/4/1 now...as long as you use both blue-stone blades. The downside is no battlemagic.

As for how to do the new armor and blade...that's a ^*^% good question. According to the book, a messenger Mage will arrive in 1d4 days. Perhaps the Dessi realized that Arcadian had grown more powerful and is facing greater peril, so they scryed your location and have dispatched someone to reach you.

Kai Lords get 5+Int Mod in skill points per level, not 4, so you get 7 skill points.

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Everyone but Sol Hawk has regained 1/3 the normal EP they normally would, rounded down*. The tracking DC in the forest would be 30 with the fog, the leaves knocked loose by the rain, and the darkness. Adding light would make it easier to follow the trail, but it would also herald your coming.

The DC drops to 28 for a daybreak, 23 when the fog burns off.

*Until everyone dries off or dries out, they are going to be cold. This makes for a rather uncomfortable ride. I'm handling all the mechanics for ambient temperature vs body temperature. At present moment, it's around 60/15.6C—not the most agreeable temperature. Whoever is wearing the rings that Simyn sees with a green aura do not seem to notice the cool air, but they still know they are soaked.

This is going to be a sort of cat and mouse game, but the mouse has a head start and the cat is on a forced march.

Time: 2 hours till sunrise.

Date: Raidho 27 (roughly Sep 27).

Weather: Patchy dense fog.

If a wolf responds, he immediately speaks to the horses also to calm them, asking help from Korlaeth to do so also.
Adventurers.

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certainly

would have

do have ranks

in Healing. He

can't restore

Unfortunately I

helped with the

Sol Hawk

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out a bit

healing could

someone with

Maybe

level.

he's getting for

his 14 extra EP

Sir Victor gets

20 EP back

from the sleep

and potion of

Laumspur, plus

his 14 extra EP

he's getting for

giving up a

level.

May

someone with

some ranks in

healing could

have helped

out a bit

here... I'm just

assuming we

wouldn't head

out with our

wounds gaping

open.

Right! Let's assume that Sol Hawk helped with the wounded. Unfortunately I can't restore hit points, but I do have ranks in Healing. He would have certainly offered to dress the wounds of any of his fellow adventurers.

Rules, Rulings

Act III, Opening – Mirage

"My Kai Masters foresee a conflict brewing here - this is why I was sent. I am beginning to suspect that the kidnapping of the princess could be the all-out catalyst for a war in the region. The likes of which the world has never seen. I have been receiving visions from Kai as well, and more and more I am convinced that the Kai Grand Master was correct - my vision also suggested that the ultimate source of the threat is Vassagonia, although the dark force behind this evil yet has to reveal itself. I have received the impression that this dark man, whatever it is, has only one eye - and that he has some sinister use for Ameesha."

As the fog intensified, the tracks became increasingly difficult to follow. Sol Hawk cleared the fallen autumn leaves carefully, watching, listening. His companions halted behind him, quietly listening as well.

"The tracks are here. We don't dare use a light," he whispered, "because the enemy is close no doubt. My Kai Masters would not be slowed - they have the ability to see in total darkness." He was quiet, pausing again to examine the trail of the Gariga. "We cannot risk being seen by Murdach... or by the Anari patrols that now seal the border."

The sun will be up soon, Sol Hawk listened for the sounds of the forest creatures... he needed one now, a predator, a wolf. With the coming dawn, he was sure some would be on the hunt, and with so many horses about, he was sure that at least one would be nearby. I'm going to call for a wolf. Do not be alarmed," he told Simyn and the others, "With the help of a wolf's sense of smell, we may be able to find Murdach faster yet. We have to try."

He listened for lupine sounds, then called into the night.

Come, brother of the wood, I am in need, he intones in the language of the wolves.

Outside he saw Sir Victor astride his own horse, leading his and Sol Hawk's horses into the compound. As the knight handed Cade his reis the young Vakeros grasped his hand tightly in friendship.

"I apologize, friend... for the trap I led you into... you all into. I will not let you down again."

"I know, Arcadan, I know," the knight replied, "you'll soon have your chance to shine again, my friend," he said as he smiled warmly.

After Sir Victor was told what had transpired with Araz, he shook his head sadly, "he must have been a fanatic to throw his life away like this. As if there had not been enough killing here tonight already."

Before they left, he pulled out the crossbow bolts that had struck him and cleaned them with Laumspur, before drinking the rest of the potion and dressing his wounds as best he could.

When they were all mounted, they started the potion and dressing his wounds as best they could in the cold of the rainy night. In his fitfully in the saddle, gaining what rest they could in the darkness." He was quiet, pausing again to watch the wolves... he was sure some would be on the hunt, and with so many horses about, he was sure that at least one would be nearby. I'm going to call for a wolf. Do not be alarmed," he told Simyn and the others, "With the help of a wolf's sense of smell, we may be able to follow the tracks in the opposite direction, back to the Cloeasian camps. They slept fitfully in the saddle, gaining what rest they could in the cold of the rainy night."

In his waking moments, the Ruanese knight tried to think of a way for them to assault an entire mercenary company, as this was what they would likely have to face when they caught up with Murdach. Not least of their troubles was Murdach himself, who seemed to know how to handle a blade and a crossbow with deadly efficiency. It didn't hurt to prepare themselves beforehand and not get caught into another ambush.

Commentary and Observations...

KL: Also, as for the Cloeasian garb:

There is no armor.

There uniform is the clothing.

It is a loose-fitting black outfit that gathers at the neck, cuffs, waist, and ankles. It has a wide green sash. There is also a black head-wrap, which includes an airway veil--to keep sand out of your nose and mouth. There is a pair of soft-soled shoes that have extra padding in the bottom of them.

Knowledge(geography) DC15 if you have that skill.

The weapons are a basic scimitar and khanjar.

Cade can post the Kajangar stats. I can't remember what I decided on them. You can find skirmish stats under Makala's character if you need them.

When you use the outfit, you have a +10 Bluff bonus against other regional people, and a +5 Bluff bonus against Cloeasians. Toward people not familiar with the region, the Bluff bonus is +15.

The weight is 6 pounds (5# outfit, 1# shoes).

KL, who has no Star Wars quote this time, but I will say that my next flavor text is going to start helping you (the players) understand the name of the campaign

AK: Kajangar is exactly the same as a regular dagger.

SH: Thanks, Cadian. I made some adjustments to my equipment. Although Sol Hawk is not yet disguised as a black-clad, he probably will be very soon. I am thinking that when we get near to the enemy camp, a close-up look around will be needed in order to discover important information - such as exactly where the princess is (technically, we are still guessing that she is with Murdach) and also how many men are with Murdach (it could be three, it could be thirty, it could be three hundred).

Thanks KL for the map as well.

When Sol Hawk does change to his disguise, his leather armour will be worn beneath his black-clad uniform. The khanjar and scimitar will be in plain sight. Would it be inappropriate for him to wear the backpack? He can leave it on his horse if so since it is mostly empty anyway. Of course the green Kai Cloak would be left behind also.

Sir Victor, you certainly win the Blue Ribbon for being the first player to breach the 100 EP mark... WOW! Plus that Laumspur really did the trick for you. Very nice.

SV: I certainly can't complain about my rolls for EP and for that healing potion. 18/20 is certainly awesome! And my maximum EP, had I rolled all 16s, would have been 112, so I'm pretty happy with 109. Sir Victor is as tough as a brick house and as strong as a horse right now!

I wonder how he knows that his title changed with his level-up. He's not a warrior-knight anymore. I'll have to check the rule book to update that under his name.

SH: Interesting question. Sol Hawk probably knows his new rank since Kai rank themselves based on the number of disciplines they have mastered. Although SV has just gained a ton of EP all at once, it is likely that this change was really quite gradual. Perhaps getting pushed to the limit during the last fight allows Victor to realize how much fight he really has in him, hence the added EP. Ah, the justification of level-up!

Are Knights assigned their new ranks by their lords? If so, Sir Victor might not realize that he has a new rank at all. This would probably mean that even though he has lots of new abilities, that it is not "official" until his lord makes it so. On the other hand, if he has some special skill now that a lower ranking knight would not have, he might suspect that he has outgrown his old status.

SV: I think all (besides all the other bonuses, I mean) I'm getting at level 8 is a bonus to my knighthly skill (from +1 to +2 bonus to hit with my broadsword and lance and to my riding skills), not a new Code of Knighthood, so that would be just a gradual increase in ability, which would fit nicely even in the middle of the adventure like this.

KL: Sol Hawk - The backpack would be a dead giveaway that you're not a true Cloeasian.

I seem to foresee a split in the party here. SH, are you going to get the party to a 'safe' location, and then try finding the encampment? I'd say it would be reasonable that if you get to within a mile, everyone could hang back and hide while you go forward.

Obi-wan Kenobi: Who's the more foolish: the fool, or the fool who follows him?

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The Emperor: "And now, I sense you wish to continue your search for young [Ameesha]..."
Act III, Opening – Mirage

"Murdach must be very close. He has only a slight lead on us. He was here where we now stand only a few minutes ago. We must be very careful for we will catch him soon. For that matter, we could find ourselves ambushed at any moment if he suspects a pursuit. Be ready. Be wary."

"Sir Victor, I am reading only a few prints, but it is possible that Murdach was going to meet others. It is my hope that Murdach and his men number only a few, but we must be prepared for the worst. To me it is clear that they know the Daroga well. We must remember that our goal is to rescue the princess. It is therefore possible that we can rescue her without a fight, or at least with very little conflict. A covert operation may be our only option if Murdach commands a large force of forest bandits."

"Dispised as one of his number, I must attempt to penetrate the camp and see if the princess is within. Without this knowledge, we may have no hope to rescue her. Beyond this, I do not know how we should proceed. It would probably be best to avoid attack unless it is necessary. If it does become necessary, however, we will need a plan."

"Here are the obstacles as I see them."

"First, I should be able to enter and discover Ameesha’s location if she is there. Getting to safety will be the difficulty. Ideally, I would get her out without being seen, but how?"

"If I am discovered, I will make a call like that of a Sommiering sparrow. Sir Victor will know this call well, for the bird is common in our homeland, yet it is not found in Anari. If this call is heard, I am in danger and will need support. Perhaps a distraction at one side of the camp to draw attention away from the escape. Perhaps an all out attack. Once the princess is safely out of the danger zone, I can make the sparrow call again at which point we would have the option to retreat. What think you all?"

"I am certain that we are headed in the correct direction," said Sol Hawk, "but this area is very muddy. From the signs, I know that Murdach and his men cut here to the northeast, but it is also possible that they cut through here north-by-northeast. If I choose the wrong path, we will probably not catch Murdach and his band before they escape over the border."

As he examined the signs further, still wishing to use a light, but still daring not to do so, he heard a return call from nearby in the forest. "It seems my call for help has been heard," he said, responding at once, "help is on the way." * * *

The rest of the party looked at the Kai dubiously when he said wolves were coming to help. Sure, a Kai was a master of many talents, but talking to wolves? Simyn began to wonder if Anari wolf-speak sounded different from Sommerlund wolf-speak…

Sol Hawk looked at the tracks again. The wolves should be able to help, but if the horses saw them, they would spook and possibly whinny. The Kai moved into the forest a few paces, hopeful the lack of a breeze would let the wolves come to him without the horses being able to see or smell them.

Sure enough, in five minutes, a couple of large murky-grey colored wolves trotted up, one eyeing the Kai suspiciously, the other with it’s tongue lolting to one side. Their colors were beautiful, and the variations of grey and black in their fur showed their wonderful adaptation to night hunting in the forest.

The ‘happy’ wolf cocked its head as the Kai began asking it questions, while the wary wolf simply came to the Kai and sat quietly. "This is my pack. Please get to know their scents." Sol Hawk speaks in Northspeak, talking. For the most part it is sniffing. "It’s alright," he tells the others, "these are my brothers. Come and meet them."

Once the introductions have been completed, Sol Hawk cuts to the chase. "There are more humans in your wood. They are bad men for they have taken a female from our pack. We want her back, but we need your help to find them." Sol Hawk crouches and shows the path that they are following. "I know that they came this way, in this direction," the Kai growls, "but I cannot pick up the scent. My pack is eager to find the female and return home. It is not far now. Will you help?"

Sol Hawk calmly awaits their answer, also eager to hear whatever they can reveal about their foe.

"Thank you for coming," said the Kai to the wolves. The others notice that this greeting involves very little tailing. For the most part it is sniffing. "It’s alright," he tells the others, "these are my brothers. Come and meet them." Then to the wolves, "This is my pack. Please get to know their scents." Sol Hawk speaks in Northspeak, although in reality, he is resonating with the meaning of each word - a technique which allows him to mentally express his meaning to the wolves.

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"Yes, we have lost the trail?" asked Koralthe in disappointment. "What now? They’re likely moving while we sit here and wait for the sun to rise."

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Rules, Rulings

**AR:** That works fine, KL… I’ll put my roll here...

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Commentary and Observations

* * *
Act III, Opening – Mirage

The following is flavor text. No one knows this happens… except Makala, of course.

Makala’s return to the castle alone heralded bad news, and the rumors reached Kubudei long before the dark warrior himself did. As he was led into the meeting hall of the president, the Telchoi noticed a man in garish wrapped and loose attire, similar in style to the black-clads but much more colorful. The man was wearing a turban with a small string of gems hanging down one side, ending in a small ocular. The strange man was seated at a small table to one side of Kubudei. On the other side, there was someone from the Anari military.

The dark warrior was reminded of Ihmra’zir and the punishment he had received shortly over 24 hours ago, but his gaze did not linger long on the officer. He looked at Kubudei, whose countenance betrayed utter worry and despair at seeing only one of his “champions” return, and empty-handed at that.

“Is she—” was all he could mutter as his brows raised in sorrow.

“She lives, and the others still seek her,” said the Telchoi in his usual gruff manner. “I have come to tell you of events that have transpired, and to strike a new deal.”

Makala told in detail of the meeting with Murdach, and of what information about Egoliah that he knew. Kubudei listened closely, as did the strangely attired man. The Telchoi spoke of the ambush, and of how he was humiliated at being so easily fooled. Then Makala went on to ask that he be allowed to hunt Ameesha alone, for he had felt his honor and pride to be tainted at being led into a trap, and he needed to make amends in his own solitary way. The president was relieved that his daughter lived, and he was even more uplifted to learn she was still in Anari somewhere, in the Daroga.

He thanked Makala and told the officer next to him to send all troops to the northern border, combing every inch of the Daroga west of the river in the process. Should they find nothing, they would proceed northward into Vassagonia, as requested. The officer saluted and left in haste. The president then told the strange person to inform Makala of what he had just learned the afternoon after the four had left.

Makala showed no outward emotions, but thought inwardly:

As requested?

The strangely-dressed man cleared his throat and placed the ocular in his right eye, then unfurled a small scroll and began reading.

“From the Zakhan of the Vassagonian Empire, Abdallah, chosen of the Sand Mother as of Raidho, MS5001:

President Kubudei

Long have our two nations been at odds with one another. From the time the line of Anar fled their homeland and settled south of our borders, we have sought to annex and conquer, both out of vengeance and greed. On behalf of all my overlords and warlords, and the Sharnazim military force, I beg your forgiveness a thousand times over for these atrocities against your people.”

The man stopped and looked at Makala, who betrayed no emotion. Looking back down, he read on:

“We have monitored increased troop movements along the Cloeasian borders for months now. Training among the Talons of Rashuur has intensified, and their fortifications have been reinforced. We know that a group of merchants left well before Raidho from Vakar, seeking permission to cross the sands to Teph and to Chahdan, en route to Anari for the Onia a-Barouta. A small patrol of Sharnazim discovered their camp one night south of Chahdan and accidentally learned that they were members of the Talons.

“A battle ensued, during which only one Sharnazim lived to warn the local overlord near the city. By the time our troops had been mobilized, it was too late. The band of Talons—we estimate their number at around a hundred to a hundred and fifty—had already raced across the Gold Trail to the border and entered with their fake credentials.”

Kubudei stopped the man and interjected, “We have record on the northern border, just north of Resa, that a Commander Orman encountered this large group shortly before sunrise on Raidho 10. Upon comparing records with the registry logs of the festival, we found that thirty or forty men claiming to be from Kakush wanted to help with the construction to help us meet deadlines. These men never showed up to claim their pay, nor did the large group of merchants sign in and pay their set-up fees for the event. We now believe that these two groups were one and the same—and that is how they knew the layout of the compound.”

The other man adjusted his ocular and continued, “Knowing that tensions between our two lands are high, we could not easily approach the border post. So, we took matters into our own hands until such time as we could send a messenger to you. Cloeasia is blockaded on the Vassagonian front. Our northern armies stand ready to stop anyone from entering or leaving, stretching a mile wide from Ferufezan to Teph to the Highroad Oasis and ending at the mountains south of Maakenmire. We have even mobilized a small force of our southern army to the Chah mountains near Chahdan, ready to strike in case these Talons flee past that position.

“Our navy is massed in the sea east of Cloeasia, stretching from the Rymerrit to Ferufezan—no doubt you have heard from nations in the north that we have mobilized on these fronts. I assure you, it is not hostile toward anyone but Cloeasia, and in that matter, perhaps we can aid one another.”
Rules, Rulings

"An old Vassagonian saying states this: 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' It means that as long as we fight against a common enemy, we can benefit from one another's help.

"Our spies in the Chah mountains have noticed that your borders are now patrolled heavily by Anari cavalry. The lights that normally light the sky from the Onia a-Barouta are gone. We can only assume the worst, for it was no secret that your beloved jewel, Ameeasha, was present in that compound. A compound that Talon infiltrators likely helped build.

"I sincerely hope that she is safe. It seems that Zultan Kularra of Cleoasia is a desperate man. He knows that the contract with the Talons expires, and he needs to either raise the funds to rehire them, or find some allies—for he has none. We think he may be attempting a last-ditch measure to blackmail you into attacking us if we attack him.

"I propose that, together, we do the opposite. Ally with us instead. Our armies are vast and powerful, but we cannot overthrow Cleoasia because of the mountains on their southern border. Your cavalry is unparalleled, and has kept us at bay many times. Together, we can overthrow the Zultan and rid ourselves of his poisonous presence. At the end of this year, the Talons' treaty ends. We would like a solution to this matter before then, for it seems they want to force your hand against us.

"We will provide your treasury with three million Crons to help with military costs, and we will deed to you the valley region south of the Chah Mountains, as well as the Four Peaks region just north of the Daroga. We will grant unhindered passage into Vassagonia as long as you fly a specially designed flag to alert our Sharnazim of your presence. All overloads and warlords have been warned on penalty of death and seizure of assets not to interfere. Mobilize your cavalry to our standing line south of Cleoasia. We will destroy Zultan Kularra, and you may then return home. At that time, we will forge a new alliance together, for we would much rather Kularra be overthrown than you, Kubudel.

"I am and remain: Zirakan Abdal-haah"

Kubudel looks up, pleased. "I have signed the treaty with full approval of the other heads of state. We shall have my daughter back, and we shall be rid of the Zultan."

Makala thought of his recent acquaintances: Sol Hawk, Sir Victor of Ruunon, and even Arcadian. They needed this information so that they didn't think Anari was attacking Vassagonia and vice versa. They may conclude that Vassagonia was the enemy, not Cleoasia—and that could prove deadly.

"President Kubudel, I shall go and inform the other three you sent of this. We will still do our best to return your daughter to you and defuse this whole situation." With that, he bowed and made haste to return to his horse, glad to see that his food and water stores in his saddlebags were overflowing. With a slight nod toward the stablehands, he sped from the capital, hoping his friends had not yet abandoned the festival grounds.

* * *

"Do not despair, Korlaeth - we are not beaten yet." He gazed to the sky. The sun would be rising soon.

Sol Hawk considered the words of the wolves carefully. Dark skies. That could mean smoke... a campfire, or many fires. For light or for cooking food.

"My friends," said Sol Hawk, "were there any dark skies before the dark men came?" Sol Hawk asked a second question. "Where did they hunt? Was it near here?"

Sol Hawk carefully considered all that they said. He knew that Murdach and his men must have been going in a northerly direction. If there were fires and if there was a camp, if Murdach and his men had been hunting, Sol Hawk was willing to lay odds that their retreat to Cloeasia would be through already familiar territory.

* * *

Meanwhile, Sir Victor watched with rapt fascination as Sol Hawk communicated with the wolves. He made sure the horses weren't spooked by keeping them upwind of the animals' smell and making sure they stayed calm.

* * *

Arcadian felt helpless as the Kai Lord thought to pick up Murdach's trail. As Sol Hawk gazed along the ground the Vakeros let loose the reins to his horse so she could wander and eat at the dandelions which grew along the forest floor. He took the curved khanjar from his belt and placed it in one of his saddlebags. Sir Victor looked at him quizzically and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Souvenir."

Cade had been quiet the entire night, his word spoken to the knight was the only sound that had been uttered from his mouth since they departed Onia a-Barouta. The Vakeros felt somewhat excluded from the rest of the group; and in he had thus far only dwelt in his isolation. Sir Victor had offered amnesty for the younger man's mistake but Cade wasn't quite sure he was ready to allow himself the same absolution. He didn't know Simyn or Korlaeth well and as such didn't talk to them often. Korlaeth, as a fellow Vakeros felt somewhat secluded from the rest of the group; and in he had thus far only dwelt in his isolation. Sir Victor had offered amnesty for the younger man's mistake but Cade wasn't quite sure he was ready to allow himself the same absolution.

Cade knew that he would have to face herself eventually and he was dreading that moment with a fiery passion. Because he knew that when he faced her he would also have to face himself.

* * *

The wolves both looked at Sol Hawk oddly as he asked about dark-skies.

Wary: Dark-sky going away.

Happy: Dark-sky going away.

Wary: But dark-sky now.

Sol Hawk interrupted their argument as he realized that dark-sky simply meant nighttime. He asked about their hunting habits, and the wolves looked at one another for a second, then back at the Kai.

Happy: You go there?

Wary: We take, not get close.


The normally happy wolf seemed to get sullen as he related how the hunters were eating everything that came close to their campsite. It must be a large group of men to require so much from the land....

* * *

"Thank you, brothers," said Sol as the wolves bounded back into the forest. They were delayed upon the trail, but it was not too late to make up lost time. As the sun began to come up, Sol Hawk paused beside his horse and began to load much of his gear onto him - his Kai Cloak, his backpack, his Anarian clothing. All was packed into the saddlebags. Almost as an afterthought, he took some bread and cheese from one of the bags and hid it in the folds of his uniform.


**Rules, Rulings**

- Simyn, you may also add my laumspur potion to your character sheet if you have not already.
- Pocketing the laumspur potion.
- OOC: Warmth of the Sun to regain 8 EP.
- OOC: For convenience, I am leaving my weapons listed on my character sheet, but Cade and Simyn should really have these items if they accepted. OOC: I'm definitely ready to go that "last mile" in order to see if the camp that the wolves saw is still here.
- To Bluff this man, you need to roll against DC18. Keep in mind the formula is d20 + your Bluff rank + the uniform bonus.
- Time: Early morning.
- Date: Radivvo 27 (roughly Sep 27).
- Weather: Patchy fog - slight glare.
- Terrain: slight slope, relatively flat clearing.

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**Act III, Opening — Mirage**

"Would that we had arrived during the dark hours," laughed Sol quietly as he dons the black head-wrap. The loose-fitting garment he pulls on over his leather armour. Finally, he trades his boots for a pair of soft shoes. Sol Hawk ties on the green sash with some satisfaction, knowing that he is still, as the Clossians might call him, Oai. It is almost startling how much he looks like a black-clad warrior.

"I know it will be great danger for me to go alone," said Sol Hawk, "but I know their tongue - it must be me. May Kai guide me to the one we seek quickly and without evident. I will return to you without delay once I have Ameesha. You know it is me for I will walk toward you with a hand upon my heart. If I need help, I will call for it as would a bird, as I described before. Try to stay hidden if you can. If our presence is revealed, we will have to fight - and I do not know if we have a hope to win against the odds.

"Cade," said Sol, as if to a brother he might be seeing for the last time, "This is the rapier-blade called Sun Flare. Long ago it was wielded by a great Kai lord named Light Hawk, who was my namesake. I cannot take it with me, for I am gone into the darkness. Keep it safe until we meet again." He hands it to Cade, scabbard and all.

"Simyn, we have only just met, but in my vision, Kai has shown me your face. I believe we were meant to meet, if only for a short time. Take this my bow, Sun Ray, and this, my quiver. Use it as you will until I return."

As Sol Hawk left, the sage didn’t but feel a little bit proud of him being given such an honour. On the other hand he wished that he actually knew how to use a bow. After all just like Sol Hawk, Simyn preferred the rapier.

* * *

"I will take care of your bow until your return, Sol Hawk. The stars know that your goal is just, and I’m convinced that you will return to reclaim it." The sage also pocketed the laumspur potion. "I thank you for this. I hope I never need to drink it."

As Sol Hawk left, the sage didn’t but feel a little bit proud of him being given such an honour. On the other hand he wished that he actually knew how to use a bow. After all just like Sol Hawk, Simyn preferred the rapier.

* * *

Cade shook Sol Hawk’s hand in friendship. When the Kai Lord withdrew his hand Cade placed the khanjar in it.

"This is a weapon that will not look amiss while you are in the camp. Perhaps I should follow you for awhile. If anything goes wrong it would be good for a crossover to be covering your back."

"If I could speak Vassagonian I would go myself, with my darker skin the disguise would be more fitting."

Cade gave a slight laugh and then lowered his voice so only Sol Hawk could hear him, "If something goes wrong get out of there as soon as you can. I have a bad feeling about this. Any sniff of a trap... you almost lost your life once. Next time I might not be able to bring you back."

The Vakeros was almost choked up with tears. Maybe it was the hurt he was feeling from failure to protect his friends. Or maybe the entrance of Kamilah into the group had uprooted some pent up emotion. Whatever the case, it was hard for him to not break down in front of the Kai Lord.

Suddenly an idea struck Cade. At first he cast it aside almost immediately. He had concocted risky plans before but this was borderline suicide. Still...

"Sol! What if...what if Murdach allowed you to walk right into the camp... What if you brought him something that he wanted..."

* * *

"Cade," said Sol, genuinely touched by the selfless offer of the Vakeros Knight, "I think I know what you are going to say, and I can assure you that there is no need for you to sacrifice yourself to Murdach. It is early in the day yet - and I doubt that he even realizes we are tailing him. Still, I will feel much safer to know that I am being covered by the best that the Vakeros Elite have to offer."

Sol Hawk began to move in the direction of the camp, followed by Koralath, and Cade. "I will go ahead to the limit of your range," he said to Arcadian, "We must not move together. Try to stay hidden. We will be in and out before you know it," said the Kai with a grin.

At this, they departed, headed into the den of lions.

* * *

The fog which proved to be a nuisance and hindrance hours ago now proved to be a life-saving blessing...at least for Arcadian.

Sol Hawk and Koralath (now without his protective armor) walked along with Cade following far enough behind to barely see the Kai through the fog. The Kai had been walking for perhaps ten minutes when a voice called out, breaking the silence of the morning. Arcadian instantly crouched down and shuffled behind the nearest tree. Sol Hawk’s form vanished into the fog, followed shortly by Koralath’s.

---

The Kai ambled along as best he could in the odd attire, checking often to make sure his plain schmitar and khanjar were in place. He hugged at the head wrap again, making sure it covered his eyebrows. Without the Kai discipline of Camouflage, he was taking a great risk here, given his natural Sommerring complexion.

Koralath freed a bit better due to his tanned skin, but he felt utterly naked without his armor. To have worn it would make him too bulky, not to mention the noise it would have made. His weapon had been transformed into the proper military issue, and it rested by his side—he realized that if he drew it, however, the bluesteel blade would give away who he was.

Sol Hawk knew Arcadian was behind him, and he dared not look back. Trying to imitate nonchalance as best he could, he was still startled when someone called out to him from somewhere in the mist ahead.

"I said stop!" came the voice again. A man wearing identical attire to the Kai appeared out of the mist. He looked at the Kai and raised his hands in exasperation before turning back around and walking off. "It’s a good thing we’re leaving—you hunters can’t catch a thing anymore."

Sol Hawk smiled and winked at Koralath. Assumptions. That was what they needed. They would walk around the camp and look for Ameesha, trying to avoid close contact with anyone unless absolutely necessary. The Kai and Vakeros kept walking, moving past a couple of archers who paid them no mind.

A tent loomed out of the fog. Then another tent being disassembled by a black-clad man. A couple of men walked by, their heads uncovered. Sol Hawk nodded. Yes, typical Vassan racial traits. Of course, it was not likely Murdach employed any mercenaries of foreign decent. The Kai shuffled along, trying to look as if he had somewhere important to go.

He was in the middle of a large natural clearing, and though he could not see the entire campsite for the fog, he realized from all the horsemen and lacking of tents that the group was preparing to move. Was he too late?

Frantically, he walked around, looking to and fro for any sign of Ameesha. He scanned the ground in the faint hope of seeing something his Tracking sense would recognize, but it was too heavily disturbed. A half dozen horses trotted by, the men talking about the “upcoming battle” and how they “wished they had more mages”.

Koralath detached himself from the Kai’s side, going to look help a couple of men help break down a tent—maybe he would hear something useful?
Rules, Rulings

Act III, Opening – Mirage

Sol Hawk half turned and looked over his shoulder, warned by his Hunting and Sixth Sense that someone was advancing upon him. The Kai could tell by the decoration on the usually-black attire that the man was some sort of commander. Wait...where was Koraeth?

"You! Where is your horse? If you aren’t dismantling tents, I expect you to be prepping your horse. We ride in ten minutes, slackard!" The man kept advancing on Sol Hawk, who had to think of something quickly.

* * *

Cade kept his eye on Sol Hawk as he entered the encampment. Suddenly he realized exactly how difficult it was going to be to discern the Kai Lord from the other black-clads. He knew that he would soon lose sight of Sol if he didn’t act quickly.

He looked around until he found a tree that would suit his purposes. It had a good view of the camp with the path leading back to the group just below it. He tied the crossbow carefully to his belt and leapt upwards, wrapping his arms around the lowest branch. His shoulder burned where Murdach’s crossbow bolt had penetrated earlier that night.

With a grunt he releases his left arm and swung himself until he could lung out and grasp the second branch. His arm burned again and he almost fell. He was only eight feet in the air and already he was sweating. He snapped of a twig to a branch and clenched it between his teeth. Each time he climbed higher he bit down on the branch to absorb some of the pain and to keep himself from screaming.

* * *

As Sol and Cade race for the camp, Sol is heartened - a rush of adrenaline rushes through his veins and he is reminded of the first time that he and Cade raised swords together against this common foe. As Cade gives the signal, the Kai Lord makes his way forward into the clearing as Cade covers him.

Sol Hawk is relieved to see that the camp is still in place. With no trouble at all he is able to move from the forest and into the camp. Trying to mimic the manner of the black-clads he sees, he strides toward the center of the camp where he feels sure he should find Ameesha. The ground offers him no clues - Ameesha may have been brought in on horseback, or the tracks may merely have been covered. He listened, too, for any hint of a female voice, but of course Ameesha would have probably been punished for making any kind of racket.

"If you aren’t dismantling tents, I expect you to be prepping your horse. We ride in ten minutes, slackard!"

Sol Hawk could see that this was the man in charge here. He slightly lowered his head in subservience to this man and also in the hopes that it would help to hide his face. "A thousand pardons, sir," Sol Hawk said, using his most convincing accent, "But my horse was commandeered after the last battle. It is being used to carry the girl and some gear now - I am supposed to be preparing and loading the animal now, but nature called... and now I am on my way back to her tent, Sir."

* * *

From up in the tree Cade kept a bead on the black-clad questioning Sol Hawk. The Vakeros was relieved when the commander seemed to buy whatever story the Kai Lord had concocted. He was too far away to make out Sol Hawk’s reply but the brash commander’s voice had reached his ears.

Arcadian judged himself to be a little less than a hundred feet from the edge of the camp, which allowed him range that extended forty feet into the camp itself. His blue cloak didn’t offer as much camouflage as a Kai Cloak though he had to make due with what he had. As he gazed through the dissipating fog, Arcadian kept one eye on the Kai Lord and the other eye on the lookout for Murdach.

Even if he did see Murdach, Cade wouldn’t take a shot at him unless it was to save Sol Hawk. Not because he was afraid of endangering Sol but because he knew it was to have the opportunity to kill the man he wanted him to see his killer. Cade wanted to look into his eyes. Cade’s own blue eyes were on fire at the thought.

"You idiot," mumbled the commander. "There are five horses with girls on them." He stepped right up to the Kai, but Sol Hawk kept his head low and his hands spread in supplication to his ‘superior’.

After a tense moment, the man grabbed Sol Hawk on the shoulder and pushed him. "Go get one of the spare horses then. There’s only a couple left."

Sol Hawk turned to leave. "And take that sand-mask off. There’s no sand around here," the man ordered as he walked off. Sol Hawk watched him leave, but did not comply. He turned around and smiled to himself.

* * *

The disguised Vakeros listened to the idle conversation between the two men, nodding and interjecting a word or two here and there so he seemed authentic. They spoke of nothing but how hungry they were, and how they longed to feel the sand beneath their feet again.

They finished and thanked Koraeth, then began packing gear on their horses nearby. The Vakeros turned and saw Sol Hawk being accosted by a commander. Oh great...that was all they needed. He moved closer just in case.

* * *

Arcadian struggled to climb the tree, but he managed to make slow progress. He reached his perch and realized—to his dismay—that though the fog was a bit thinner up here, it was still thick where he was trying to look. He could notice, however, large shapes moving through the fog—horses. They were forming up on the west side of camp, and Arcadian was shocked at how many there were.

The ambush they encountered was just a fraction of Murdach’s men! Judging from the number of horses moving around with mounted riders, there were still dozens upon dozens of men here. The fog swirled a bit, and the Vakeros was able to see something that made his mind play tricks on him.

Was Ameesha on three horses? There was some frail person in a dirty white hooded outfit, covered about the shoulders with a dark cloak, on at least three of the horses below.

A slight breeze blew through the treetops, helping clear the fog. Cade looked where he had seen the “Ameeshas”. He couldn’t believe it—now there were five! Each one followed by a large group of horses.

"Anai! a-ko uputah?!" shouted a voice below. "Anai!"

Arcadian froze...were they talking to him? At least they didn’t say...

"Banu! Banu tee-keas mah!"

"Mortak!"

An arrow embedded in the tree on the opposite side of his chest.

* * *

Sol Hawk was looking frantically around and trying to understand what the commander had said about "girls" when he heard someone shouting:

"Up there! What animal is that?! A bit of silence. "Up there!"

Sol Hawk turned to look around. He saw nothing in the trees. Was it?
Korlaeth sighed. “Cade,” he said softly. His hand went to his scimitar, and he took a few tentative steps to go help his fellow.

Sol Hawk winced. Yep, it was Arcadian. Another voice shouted out over the rest. “Forget him! Leave the camp! Ride now!”

A loud low horn sounded through the forest, and the sound of horses being roused and spurred filled the air. Oddly enough, a couple of horsemen circled past Sol Hawk and Korlaeth, slinging dozens of Gold Crowns out of their saddle bags. In the few seconds the Kai saw them, they had easily thrown out hundreds of coins all over the forest floor.

Korlaeth looked around and gave a slight shrug to the Kai. “Ameesha,” he said, hoping the Kai wasn’t distracted by the chaos.

When the rest of the party heard the noises, Sir Victor was quick to take command. “*They must have been spotted!* The time for stealth is past now, and we must hurry if we want to help them. Follow me!” said the knight, as he remounted Bright Lance. He took Sol Hawk’s horse’ reins and gave him to Kamilah, before heading towards the sounds of the conflict.

The arrow barely missed Cade’s chest. The only thing that saved him was when he heard the word ‘Banou’ which is what Irazi had referred to him as. As soon as he heard that he had flattened himself against the trunk of the tree.

Cade looked over his shoulder for a glimpse of Sol Hawk. Don’t blow your cover, Sol. Their attention is on me. Go after the princess...we will follow.

Sol Hawk realized that the gold-throwing was just a ploy to slow them down with greed, and he dashed over to someone who had referred to him as. As soon as he heard that he had flattened himself against the trunk of the tree.

“*Girls,*” the commander had said. Did he mean that there were female black-clads? Had he misunderstood somehow? Sol Hawk did not question. He would have to find out what was he was looking for some other way.

Arcadian...discovered! There was nothing to do but take advantage of the situation. As coins are thrown everywhere, Sol Hawk moves through the commotion and confronts a lone black-clad, pulling then the Anarian Ruby Necklace from his pocket.

“Look what I found - Ameesha’s necklace,” he said with all the urgency he can muster, “Come with me! We have to make sure that she is safe - the anari heroes are coming. Hurry!”

Sol Hawk waits with baited breath - eager to follow this man straight to the place where Ameesha is hidden.

“Ah hell...”

Cade threw all caution to the wind and dropped out of the tree. His landing was horrible and he accidentally put most of his weight on only one foot. He clenched his teeth as his bones shook and he fell forward. He twisted around so his shoulder absorbed the fall and he wouldn’t get a face full of dirt.

Painfully he climbed to his feet and took in the sight before him. The black-clads were mounting and riding off while dropping gold crowns everywhere. Cade stayed where he was, looking on in disappointment.

At least Sol has infiltrated the ranks. Cade thought to himself, hmm...let’s see if I can’t secure his safety a little...

Arcadian drew in breath and yelled at the top of lungs, “*Sol Hawk! Victor! I have found their camp! Over this way friends!*”

He let himself a slight smile, let them think that I am the foremost. Let them believe that I was just watching, they will never suspect that one of us is dressed as one of their own.

Arcadian took a deep breath and let go. He misjudged the ground by just a bit and landed hard on one leg, the weight of his armor making the fall a bit more painful than it would have normally been. He ignored the pain and began a ruse to draw attention to himself, stepping closer to the clearing, but watchful for archers as well.

Meanwhile, Sir Victor heard the commotion first and took action, riding hard through the foggy forest in the direction that the three had taken. Kamilah drew steel and grabbed the reins offered her, while Simyn merely shook his head and followed.

Fear and uncertainty plagued them in the short—but what seemed like eternal—ride to the clearing. Sir Victor was the first to see anyone, and it was Arcadian limping slightly forward in the fog, waving his arms.

Korlaeth smiled as Arcadian began shouting. He was clever, for sure. The Vakeros kept his hand on his weapon, looking around for any way he could gain an advantage, however slight.

Sol Hawk realized that the gold-throwing was just a ploy to slow them down with greed, and he dashed over to someone who had ceased breaking down a tent and was trying to mount up. The Kai spun the man around and held the necklace out, shouting about Ameesha’s safety. The black-clad looked in confusion from the necklace to the Kai. Sol Hawk realized as the man’s eyes widened that his eyes were the wrong color—no one of Vassan decent could have such crystalline blue eyes.

“Spy!” cried the man, taking a swing at the Kai (who dodged to one side) and scrambling to mount the horse. The horns were sounding again, this time further away—he wasn’t about to get left behind.

Sol Hawk had to laugh despite the situation: it was the banou color of his eyes that betrayed him instead of his cloak for a change.
Act III. Opening – Mirage

As he spotted Arcadian, Sir Victor rode up to him and reined in his steed and stopped Sol’s as well. “What happened? Where is everyone?” he asked anxiously, scanning the forest for the enemy, for he was itching for a more direct confrontation against the princess’ abductors.

* * *

Oh no you don’t think Sol Hawk as the man mounted his horse. Calling out to the mount with his mind, Sol Hawk commanded it.

Rollover!

In no time the horse was dropping to its knees, unable to resist the Kai’s command and crushing its rider to a bloody pulp as it rolled again and again. In no time at all, Sol Hawk is in the saddle and moving through the camp in search of Ameesha.

* * *

Simyn was tired and really didn’t want to do anything else than sleep, but he had no choice. Sir Victor had taken the lead and there was nothing else to do but follow. The sage sincerely hoped that Sol Hawk had survived. He had instinctively struck out a hand of friendship. The sage really appreciated that.

As they rode on the sage thought of the kidnapping. Someone had planned this carefully. But why? A ransom? Perhaps, but what ransom could the Talons of Rishaur be interested in? What if...

A sudden flash of insight came to Simyn. What if the supposed mercenary band wasn’t from Cloeasia at all? What if they were Vassagonians in disguise? Who would benefit most if a war broke out between Cloeasia and Anari? Vassagonia! The Vassagonian soldiers Simyn had seen, perhaps they were waiting for an invasion of Cloeasia or Anari, or perhaps both countries!

But if that was the case, why keep the president’s daughter alive? Perhaps she was dead already? The only thing needed was to point out the assassins as Cloesians. Perhaps she is kept alive for us to witness her demise? An account of a brutal murder of a beloved person could surely make the Anari people demand war.

A bold theory, but it remained to be proven. And if it was proven to be true, what would that mean for the president’s daughter?

* * *

Kamilah followed closely behind the tall man who had introduced himself as Victor. A cold shiver winded its way down her spine at the thought of Cade being captured by the enemy. She shook her head and once again her thoughts iced over.

Emotion only hurts...

Her horse sprang into the clearing right behind Victor. She could see the object of her frustration standing a dozen yards into the clearing. She could see most of the dark-clads riding westward. Three remained towards the middle of the field where burned out campfires and abandoned tents marked the camp of the enemy.

“What is going on?”

* * *

Arcadian filled Sir Victor and companion what had happened, while Korlaeth noticed arrows coming out of the fog toward them all. The missiles were poorly aimed, bouncing off tree limbs and ricocheting off the trees themselves, but one of two could have posed a threat had they been standing where they fell.

Sol Hawk was oblivious to all this, however, and as the black-clad tried to mount up, the Kai commanded the horse to roll. The beast snorted and dropped, then flipped over—crushing the Talon in the process. The horse looked back at the Kai as the man groaned and tried to move.

“Again,” said the Kai, and the horse obeyed. The man cried out as the animal’s weight once more snapped bones. He lay still, clawing the leaves, bruises starting to form on his cheek. Blood trickled out his nose, and the Kai was satisfied. “Up,” he told the horse.

He looked around quickly and saw that everyone was here, and that’s when he called out for everyone to give chase.

* * *

As Sol Hawk saw his companions coming out of the woods, he winked at them, his blue eyes flashing through the mask, his hand on his heart. He was moving at a full gallop at once, trying to catch up with the rear of the escaping Talons.

The horse burst forward, running for all of its worth. Sol sensed that his friends were now right on his tail. He returned to the task of finding Ameesha. He would know where she was. The horse was relieved to be rid of its cruel black-clad master and took to the Kai Lord immediately. Like a bolt of lightning, the horse blasted through the fog, avoiding every dip in the ground, every obstacle perfectly.

As the Kai neared the retreating Talons, he narrowed his eyes, searching for the princess. He would not fail her now. Not a second time.

* * *

Arcadian tied the exquisite crossbow to his belt and mounted Iri with unnatural speed. He drew his sword and pushed his heels into the horse’s side.

“Let’s go!”

He was off in a flash of fur and dust. Up ahead he could see Sol merging himself with the other enemy riders. It seemed that his cover was not yet blown. As he rode he constantly talked to his horse.

“Come on girl, ride like the hounds of Naar are behind you!”

* * *

They were all reunited, and the black-clads were leaving quickly. Sol Hawk winked at them, before spurriing his horse onwards at full gallop after the Cloesians. Sir Victor didn’t hesitate for another second, and launched Bright Lance after Sol, intent on rejoining the Kai before he was faced with the bulk of the mercenary company by himself. This time you won’t face them by yourself, thought the knight as the trees whipped past his face or brushed against his armour. His riding skills were definitely up to the challenge, as he skillfully led his mount through the woods.

* * *

Simyn crouched down over Starfall’s neck and whispered in the ears of the mare: ‘Run, Starfall, run like the wind.’ The sage couldn’t keep track of what was happening, but the chase was exhilarating. Simyn just hoped that Victor knew what he was doing and what was happening, the sage just followed where the others lead.
Act III, Opening – Mirage

Korlaeth grabbed the Vassan horse that remained and raced off to join the Kai, leaving the other four to fend for themselves, which they did quickly and efficiently.

They rode well, covering much ground in little time. However, the Talons simply had too great a head start. They rode west, using the swirling fog, torn earth, and swaying branches as cues on where to go.

The two riderless horses seemed to keep up well, not being as much of a hindrance as might be expected. Sir Victor led the pursuit, followed closely by the two Vakeros and Simyn. They were all startled to see black-clads on the ground, fighting to control their horses.

Was this supposed to be some other ambush gone bad? The four thundered past the preoccupied black-clads, grateful for whatever had happened.

They raced onward, and every now and then Sir Victor would catch glimpses of what he thought may be horses ahead of him, but he could not be sure. There was no time for guesswork—he focused on the trail and the tree branches that threatened to unhorse him and his friends, trying to call out when one was coming so they could all lay low in the saddle.

The pursuit seemed to last for ages.

This seemed to be madness to the sage. There was no thinking to their action. Sir Victor had just ridden on and expected them to follow, which they had done. What choice had the knight given them? Was Sol Hawk alive? What would they do if they caught up with the Talons? Fight them? This plan would only work if Sol Hawk, indeed was alive and managed to locate the girl. Simyn had heard some incredible stories about the abilities of the Kai Lords, but as a man of knowledge, Simyn preferred his own eyes as witnesses. You shouldn’t really believe tales told in taverns and the Talons were many. How should Sol Hawk succeed? Simyn sincerely hoped that the Kai Lord would succeed with his dangerous task.

Sir Victor kept riding, glancing back occasionally to make sure that the others were still keeping up with his pace. The black-clads are really driving their mounts hard! I wonder why they’re so afraid of our motley band, we’re no threat to an entire company!

As they rode, the knight made sure to check his mount for any signs of fatigue. The pure-bred Sommlending warhorse was a magnificent animal, yet even such a tough breed had its limits. At soon as the horse would start tiring, Sir Victor would stop the mad pursuit, as it wouldn’t be worth his loyal steed’s life.

Kamilah did the only thing she knew how to do at this point, follow the pack. She kept up with her fellow riders to the best of her ability.

And for what? Some spoiled princess who went and let herself get captured! Kamilah thought to herself as her eyes narrowed and grip tightened for the ride was anything but smooth.

Her tresses as always worked their way in front of her eyes but were quickly pulled back again by the howling winds. She watched as the others rode with compassion and sighed while remembering she was one female out of several testosterone driven males. She chuckled to herself quietly at the thought.

Arcadian’s knuckles turned white as he tightened his grip on the reigns and dodged a fallen branch in the road. Iri kicked up dust and wet dirt as she twisted whichever way the young Vakeros desired. Kamilah’s golden mare rode up astride Cade and he offered her a small smile, knowing full well that she would never return it.

Her coldness is so complete...so firm, so resolved, so unyielding to change, thought Cade to himself as he struggled to keep up with Victor’s muscled stallion. Cade’s head lowered slightly and his muscles relaxed as much as he could allow in the present situation.

She wasn’t always this way... Iri slowed her pace to a rapid gallop as she sensed her rider’s sense of urgency become distracted. Her muscles ached and her heart was pounding through her chest, any reproach Cade gave her she readily accepted.

Iri kept her mind on the road ahead of her and the flanks of Victor’s horse. Arcadian’s mind, on the other hand had drifted to a faraway place. And a faraway time...

Araluen was a quite, coastal town which rested at the tip of the Hikasi peninsula. It was dwarfish in comparison to the city of Hikas which resided only fifty miles to the west. It served as a fishing commerce and shipwright port. It thrived by trading with the nearby, large cities. Araluen meant ‘the place of water lilies’ in the olden tongue, the language of the dragons. It got its name from the lilies that appeared in the harbor every year in mid-spring. It also happened to be the hometown of Arcadian...and of Kamilah.

It was the final grips of winter and Cade had just recently turned thirteen years old. Kamilah, being a year younger, had just begun training under her mother in use of steel. Cade rode up the road on a chestnut mount with a mane of tenuous ebony. He knew exactly where he was going and paid no head to the various villages which littered the path. He rode up a patch of clean clothes and carried it to the room that they both shared.

Kamilah sat on the edge of the docks with her small feet dangling in the water. She smiled as small silver fish would swim up and nibble at her wrinkling toes. From inside the small hut at the edge of the docks, Kamilah’s mother smiled softly to herself at the sound of her daughter’s laughter. The smile stayed constant on her face as she sighed while remembering she was one female out of several testosterone driven males.

"Starling!"

Arcadian quickly joined his friend at the edge of the wooden dock, letting his own feet tread in the cold, spring water. The young man could barely contain his excitement.

"Oh, Kami! I can’t believe that they accepted me. You wouldn’t believe the trials that I had to go through in order to get in! Think about it, Kami, Daernath! Almost all of the legion commanders come from the Lord-Generals College. I could become a commandant; maybe lead my own battalion one day!"

Kamilah’s smile very reluctantly began to fade away. She was always a jovial little girl with a beaming face and flowers in her hair. It pained her to have any moment of sadness.

"Congratulations, Cade." Her warm reply was not felt in her words and Arcadian was able to sense this. They had grown up together; they were practically brother and sister.

"What’s wrong?"

Kamilah hesitated but Cade urged her on, unwilling to let it go.

"My mother...the only way she will let me learn the ways is if I join Valos..."

"Oh," Arcadian’s joy dissipated as quickly as Kamilah’s had. Despite this he attempted to front a supply of comfort to the young girl. “I’m sure we will see each other, Kami. It’s not as if you spend all four seasons training. My parents were from different colleges and they got to see each other all the time.”

The young Vakeros tried to sound reassuring but the truth of the matter was, he hadn’t fully reassured himself. He had grown up with this girl; he knew nothing else when it came to friendship and living out his day. Silence was near complete, as the two children remained unspeaking for several moments. The only sounds that were heard were Furor, the blacksmith hammering at his anvil in the distance and the music of the waves dancing upon the rocky shores of Araluen. They both gazed out across the water and neither of them could help but smile despite knowing that they would soon be separated. You see, nobody could ever frown while gazing up on the pure white petals of Araluen’s water lilies. The magic and the sheer spiritualness of this place was utterly complete.
### Rules, Rulings

You are now a hundred yards or so out from the outpost. All buildings and towers are on fire. The Talons are gathered about, apparently waiting for the gates to be opened. You may engage as you see fit, but keep in mind two things: 1. Sol Hawk and Korlaeth are among the enemy. 2. You must make a ride check before you attack to see if you are able to coax your horse to do what you want it to.

There are approximately a hundred where Sol Hawk and Korlaeth are. There are around fifteen to twenty behind you. The entire Talon army numbers around 10000, and they are so intermixed with Cossia's society that a pullout would totally cripple the nation in all aspects.

Also, keep in mind that the outpost is around two to three miles north of town.

Next round combat begins unless someone comes up with a plan to avoid it.

The oncoming riders may either try to hack at you, jump and pull you off the saddle, or knock you out of the saddle—you have no clue which. There are sixteen total, and 3-4 will ride by each of you next round.

Everyone will need to make 2 Ride checks if you stay for combat, DC15 on each. Only one ride check is necessary if you decide to ride off from the main group a bit. It singles you out from the 'herd', but it also forces them to make a ride check to follow since they are going so fast.

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**Act III, Opening – Mirage**

Kamilah’s voice was barely a whisper as she spoke to Cade for the last time before he would depart for Daenath. Her heart had been broken, knowing full well that in order for them to fulfill their destiny and to follow their dreams they would be apart. At only twelve she was wise but not old enough to understand that this was their karma...and that such things could not be helped. After she spoke she gathered herself up, put on her sandals, and went inside to help her mother; leaving him to stare out across the bay alone. The next day Cade had departed, west, and it would be years before they saw each other again. The young Vakeros had a ardent memory and even as he spent full days in training, exerting his body, his limits, and his mind with zealous and tireless endeavor he always kept her last words with him always...

*The water lilies, they are early this year.*

I wonder what ever happened to.....

Arcadian was torn y uningly from his daydreams as Kamilah’s mare thundered past him in a flash of gold and mud. His thoughts of days long past once again were forced to be left alone.

*Hai!*

With a snap of the reigns Cade left his memories behind, as he more often than not tended to do. He returned to the task at hand and strained his ear to catch up with Victor. The knight’s horse was no gelding, being one of the finest stallion breeds of Sommerlund. Cade gritted his teeth.

This is going to be a hard ride.

---

This group noticed a line of horses forming on their rear. The riders used crosbows, taking cheap shots at the backs of the adventurers. They scattered as best they could around the trees to avoid the bolts and lose the riders, but they were too adept at horsemanship to be shaken so easily.

Another ambush site proved useless, not because the Kai had spooked the horses, but because the Talons’ intended targets rode by too quickly. Cursing, the archers turned their mounts and joined the pursuit.

The group broke free of the forest and into the harsh glare of sunlight in the fog. They split up a bit in order to avoid being a clustered target, and the two unmanned horses seemed to understand the tactic and continued onward. Either the mounts knew what they were supposed to do, or they were caught up in the moment, racing across the open plains as they could have only dreamed about.

Either way, the group was relieved to see the fog lifting in the distance. They pressed on, not knowing exactly where they were headed, only that they were following the torn earth left by a hundred horses’ shod hooves. The sight they came upon was frightening.

The northern Resa outpost streamed dark trails of billowing smoke into the sky. Massed around the burning buildings were dozens of riders, milling about seemingly as the place burned to the ground. From their vantage point, the four companions could see that the gates were slowly opening.

A quick look southward toward Resa showed no help forthcoming. Had the fog prevented the nearby town from seeing the fire and smoke?

---

Arcadian’s horse slid to a halt and change course, slipping around the trunk of a tree as a crosbow bolt meant for the Vakeros furrined past where he once rode. The heat of the ride flushed Arcadian’s face; only the wind whipping past seemed to be any consolation. Cade glanced back and his mood darkened as he roughly counted the men behind the group.

This is going to get really ugly, really quick. Maybe we should break off and leave Sol and Koralath to play affectively...

After glancing off to his left Cade spurred his horse and 3ri dodge trees and strained forward until she was neck and neck with Kamilah’s mare. Kamilah gave him a glance and then turned away, her face hot with anger at the thought of him wishing to speak now.

*Kamilah!*

Her face snapped up and then softened when she saw the look of pain in his face and the watering of his eyes.

*I’m sorry,* several long moments passed, *for getting you into this. It wasn’t your battle, wasn’t your fight.*

*Hai!*

Arcadian spurred his horse which bolted ahead, placing the Vakeros to within shouting range of Sir Victor.

Sir Victor was busy surveying the situation, as was Simyn. Cade, I don’t like the idea of leaving the two of them undercover. Sol Hawk’s sparkling blue eyes will eventually betray him. And I don’t even know if Koralath can speak a word of Vassan, he never showed any sign of it. A feathered arrow whistled past his ear, bring Arcadian back to reality. Looking forward, Cade could see that they had only a few moments before they ran straight into the backs of the men they were following.

---

**Simyn raised his spyglass and scanned the town of Resa. The sight was not inspiring. So far this action of the supposed Talons of Rashuur was in line with Simyn’s theory, but it all depended on what they would do next. If they really were Vassagomian in disquise, the proper action would be to flee into Vassagoria as soon as possible, covering their tracks in the process. Everyone would be sure that Clossis had attacked Resa and that war would follow. Perhaps he should voice his theory to the others, but it was still only a theory, a theory that he thus far couldn’t prove. Perhaps Sol Hawk would come up with something that would prove or disprove it. For the Resans it would not matter, their beloved home had been attacked and by whom might be of lesser importance to those that had lost everything.**

---

Sir Victor was busy surveying the situation, as was Simyn. They had slowed their pace somewhat to decide on the next best course of action, allowing the riders behind them time to get very close. Within seconds, the black-clad warriors would be upon them, raining their scimitars at the four as they rode past to join their kinmen...or would they turn and attack again?

Whatever the case, they were soon to attack. Arcadian didn’t flinch in the face of danger or even death...his only thoughts were of Kamilah and her safety. Sure, she was Vakeros, as he was, but that changed nothing.

The Vakerine seemed a bit overwhelmed by the whole situation. After all, they were going up against tremendous odds—or at least contemplating it. Already two of their number—including that overly confident Korlaeth character—had begun employing their disguises to the fullest and had galloped off with the rabble! She sighed inwardly as she recalled one of the basic teachings of the Vakeros: the difference between foolishness and bravery depended on whether or not you lived to tell about it.
**Rules, Rulings**

No one will have Dex bonuses to AC if they fail the ride check. You'll get to make one attack during your round of combat—the damage you deal determines what you end up doing to the other rider. Keep in mind that since they are moving fast, a hit will do more damage than normal by way of inertia.

Enough prattle from me. I'm off Thursday, so I may try to put a grid up tomorrow night.

No time to C&P almanac info again: sunrise has occurred, mild glare in the fog, fog burning off in places rapidly. Terrain is very slightly hilly, with knee-high grass covering roughly 50% of the land. Rocks and shrubs are scattered sparsely about.

**Riders** (16) AC 12 EP 20 Initiative (not needed)

Not sure if I'm allowed to make an attack since I failed one of my ride checks, I do one anyway. My AC goes down to 16 though.

Ride Checks: 18 and 20.

I judged my first Ride Check. I got a 10 and 21 so I guess my AC is 17 instead of 18.

**Arcadian:** You have some of Sol Hawk's luck. Simyn: Since Stellar Fire is an auto-hit, I ignored your second ride check.

Kamilah, Sir Victor: Fortitude saves at DC18 (powdered/gallowbrush mixture) for initial effects (sleep) and secondary effects (-2d4 EP unless you roll a 1...don't roll a 1). The riders are heading north toward the burning outpost. From this distance, you can see that the gates are open, and the other riders are starting to go through.

You think you catch a glimpse of someone that may be Korlaeth and Sol Hawk, but they are soon engulfed by the mass of similar-looking riders. Take whatever actions you like, just keep in mind you may have a dozing companion on your hands for 1-2 hours.

**Act III, Opening – Mirage**

Simyn reached into a nearby saddlebag and pulled forth his precious multi-ocular device that allowed him to see far away. The fog was slight enough that he was able to see Rasa in the distance to their left a bit. The town’s spires had just begun to be lit by the sun, and the sleepy town had no idea what transpired just a few miles to the north of it. He turned the spyglass northward a bit, dead ahead.

There, quite evident from their vantage point, was the outpost that he—Simyn of Quarten—had been turned away from by just days earlier. The very men who seemed so bored and nonchalant at their guard duty had just perished. The sage recalled the Commander Orman’s words and his kindness, albeit a callous sort of kindness.

Pushing those thoughts of men-once-alive from his mind, the sage focused on the here and now. Behind them was danger. Ahead of them was grave danger. And if he was right, they were following a gigantic ruse...a fabrication of some mastermind—possibly this Murthad fellow—to lead them off the true trail. But was he right? Or was he wrong. He heard Arcadian calling out to Victor for instruction, and lowered the spyglass.

Yes, he was curious to hear the knight’s assessment. But, just in case...his hands rested on his blade and he turned slightly in the saddle to see the oncoming group of black-clads bearing down upon them through the fog.

Simyn had a hard time managing to stay in the saddle of his frightened horse. He felt that his rapier which was a three-pronged thrusting weapon would be useless in battle, so he tried another approach, one that he had successfully used before. His call for help reached the stars and one of them answered his plea. Fire rained from the heavens and hit one of the riders. Hopefully that would scare of the others as well.

As Sir Victor contemplated their next actions, he realized that his companions were relying on his greater battlefield experience, and waited for him to guide them on their next course of action. However, that moment was decided for them by their would-be ambushers, who had remounted and given chase to them. Now almost a score of black-clads were galloping at full-tilt towards them, intent on finishing their job. Sol and Korlaeth will have to survive without us for some time yet.

"The time for decisions is past. Companions, get ready to sell your lives dearly!" shouted the knight, as he pulled out his lance and braced it for impact, even as he was maneuvering his warhorse around for the charge. Even if he couldn't get his horse up to speed, the Closians were riding fast enough that their impetus would do his lance's work for him.

The Talons drew closer and closer to the group as the rode at unbelievable speeds. Cade gave a glance back and confirmed his fears. There were at least twenty of them and they were almost all armed with sharp, curving scimitars. The young Vakeros struggled to retain control of Iri as he drew his sword with a metallic clang.

Everyone managed to get their horse into position to counter the oncoming riders' attacks...except Arcadian. He pulled his reins to the left, only to find Sol Hawk's horse meandering there. By the time he pulled to the right, the first of the riders was thundering by. He felt something bounce off his shoulder, something slammed hard into his right side, and then something stung the right side of his neck—a scimitar had grazed it. Had he turned to the right instead of the left, there was no telling how much deeper the wound would have gone. Arcadian: -4 EP, -3 EP

Simyn turned to face the riders, but instead of looking at them, he looked upwards instead. Saying the word required to pull fire from the heavens, the sage invoked his Celestialism ability and hurled a beam of flames into one of the riders, knocking him out of his saddle and onto the ground. The line of horses behind this unfortunate person could not move in time, and he ended up trampled to death as four riders diverted their charge to try and avoid the incident. The sage left himself open, however, and a thrown khanjar tore through his right shoulder before spiraling off into the fog, flaring blood. Simyn: -4 EP

Kamilah braced herself for the onslaught, deflecting and dodging the first five blades that came her way. The sage did something then that shattered the line coming her way, something involving fire from the sky. She tried to get into position to attack, but there was just no way to do so. One of the men on the charging horses that diverted due to Simyn reined his mount to a halt and fired a small handheld crossbow at her. It grazed her hand, giving her a small stinging slap that began to sting just a bit too much. The skin around the cut turned red instantly, and Kamilah cursed as she realized the coward had used poison. Kamilah: -1 EP

The knight was a master upon horseback, a paragon of mounted combat. He turned and shouted, raising the lance from its holster on the saddle to a readied position. The first rider narrowly avoided it, as did the second. The third was the one who had slashed Arcadian's neck, and he was too preoccupied with seeing if he had killed the Vakeros to watch in front of him. The lance pierced his chest and bowled, knocking him from horseback and into the horse behind him. The beast reared up in fright, tossing the rider to the ground beside Arcadian. The remainder of that line diverted as it had for Simyn's side of the group, and a couple of riders fired their hand-crossbows at the knight. The armor plating knocked one away, as well as a khanjar that came flying out of nowhere. The second one, however, lodged just above his vambrace on his lance arm. He tore the barb out, realizing as he did so that his arm stung. Sir Victor: -1 EP

The advantage the riders sought to gain had been either foiled or hindered or countered. A horn sounded to the north, and they all whipped and spurred their horses away from the four companions. It was not clear where they were going, but it was clear that they were heading to regroup their pack.

Blood ran down Arcadian's arm from the wound on his neck. The young Vakeros hadn't even realized he had been wounded until he saw the blood. His hand grasped his neck and the wet stickiness confirmed his fear. For a moment his eyesdarkened as the blood rushed from his brain and he swooned in the saddle. He turned to try and face his opponent but a slam to his side caused him to lurch to the side and then forward.

The next thing Arcadian knew the black-clads were racing off to join the others and leaving him and his friends behind. Thoughts of battle were gone from his mind, his priority now was to simply stay in the saddle. He clutched the reins as if he was clenching his own life itself and silently whispered for hit to ease up.

His upper body leaned forward until his head rested on 3rd's neck. Exhaustion swept over Arcadian's body like a wave and he fought to keep his eyes open.

I'm not dead, he thought, pull yourself together...

* * *
Rules, Rulings

I'm assuming the fall didn't kill him.

Act III, Opening – Mirage

Sir Victor turned his mount around and quickly assessed the situation, noting that their enemies were leaving instead of pressing their attack. All three of his companions had sustained injuries, although his and Kamilah's were very light, although his had started stinging momentarily, warning that the bolts had been coated with a possibly poisoned substance. However, the sting faded quickly enough as the natural toughness of the knight neutralized any possible poisoning that could have occurred. Had the wound been deeper however, or more poison had entered his system, who knew what would have happened to him? Victor watched the Vakerine closely in case she wasn't as lucky as he was, ready to take any action that seemed appropriate.

Of other concern was the wound Arcadian had sustained right above the neckline of his chainmail shirt. Sir Victor nudged Bright Lance over to Iri's side. The Vakeros was swooning in his saddle, but the Rumenean sighed in relief when he realized that the wound appeared to be worse than it actually was, or that it could have been. The Vakeros was lucky to still have his head attached to the rest of his body. "You'll live," said the knight as he patted Arcadian's shoulder.

Turning to the guard post, he noticed that the black-clads were filing out through the gate and into the desert.

"A frontal assault against such an overwhelming force would be suicide. As much as I hate to be leaving Sol Hawk and Korlaeth on their own amidst the enemy, perhaps we should wait for reinforcements to arrive from the city. What do you think?"

That's when he remembered that the Cloesian his lance had pierced and unhorsed had also dragged another black-clad off his horse. He looked down to see where their bodies had landed. The first was clearly dead, with a huge gap right where his ribcage should have met to protect his heart, but the second man had been stunned by his fall and was slowly getting his bearings and trying to get to his feet.

"Not so fast," said the knight in a menacing tone, as he lowered his lance down to the man's neck.

* * *

Simyn slowed the pace, not sure of what to do next. "A frontal assault would indeed be suicide, sir knight" he said. "Are you sure reinforcements will arrive? What will happen with the citizens of Resa? Can we sneak into the city?"

* * *

To Kamilah the seething poison was scorching fire crawling through the veins in her fingers. She slowed her golden mare and gazed at her arm as the forceful pain methodically flowed up her arm. Closing her eyes she willed her body to fight away the venomous substance with dynastic fervor. Perhaps it was the vakeros blood which flowed through these same veins that were able to resist and counter the venom. Whatever it was she soon felt the effects subsiding.

The resulting ascension from a bitter fate exhausted her more than it should have. Perhaps it was the unmentioned sorrow that had been plaguing her since the previous night that initiated her weakness. Conceivably it could have only been in actually a momentary lapse in her guard. Whatever the cause her mind was driven to a state beyond exhaustion and for a few moments, as the poison was dispelled by her own will to live, she slipped into a mind state of euphoria. In her moment of eureka her mind drifted, and she began to reminisce a time that she would rather of left behind her.

To Kamilah the vision of feigned ignorance was indeed opulence...

It was three days before Kamilah's birthday which coincidentally fell upon the week of Winter Solstice. Two years had passed since Arcadian had left for Daernath and she had returned home to Araluen for events of the solstice as many Vakeros do. At the present moment she was walking out along the icy shoreline by her home. Her cerulean robes swished around her in the chilly wind as her feet tread softly.

"Kamii?"

The voice was soft and almost unheard yet it had a sign of strength in it, strength that she remembered. Recognized. Without turning around she gazed out along the temporary ice shelf, into the dark wintry storm that was approaching. Finally she turned, and faced the person she had feared seeing for two years.

"It's good to see you Arcadian."

He looks so...different, thought Kamilah. He stood wearing a cloak that would have been identical to her own if it was not worn with a belt of threaded cobalt at his waist. His hair had darkened some; it was not the fierce blonde she once knew it to be. It had been plaguing her since the previous night that initiated her weakness. Conceivably it could have only been in actuality a momentary lapse in her guard. Whatever the cause her mind was driven to a state beyond exhaustion and for a few moments, as the poison was dispelled by her own will to live, she slipped into a mind state of euphoria. In her moment of eureka her mind drifted, and she began to reminisce a time that she would rather of left behind her.

As Arcadian calmed she stepped forward and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Cade?"

When he didn't answer tears sprung unbidden from her eyes and she threw her arms around his torso, clutching him from behind. Her head rested on his back as tears slowly ran down her cheeks.

"I am sorry for your loss. Your brother wouldn't tell me how they died or else I would tell you. I wasn't made knowledgeable about it until yesterday myself."

"It's alright, Kamilah...I know it wasn't your fault. I am sure that they died the way they both wanted...in battle...as Vakers."

A silent tear slowly made its way down Kamilah's face, "I am sure that they did."

"You'll live" said the knight as he patted Arcadian's shoulder.

Cade could feel her tears wetting his back, "It seems neither of us acts as Vakers this day. Pure negative emotions...whether anger or sorrow will only further situate boundaries."

Arcadian's shoulders lowered and his muscles relaxed. The small comfort he gained from Kamilah's embrace was the only comfort that he could possibly have in his grief. His sword fell to the floor with a clatter. She tightened her grip around him, refusing to let him go if he tried to pull away.

* * *
Simyn, the "problem" is in PM. Anyone reading Scene III will discover the problem firsthand. There is still room for you to pass through the gates without tremendous danger.

Two things to keep in mind when/if waiting for reinforcements to arrive from Resa or from regular patrols:

1. You have no tracker. One windy day in the desert, and you're going on guesses.
2. Only 2 of you have paperwork that'll allow you to cross the border. Simyn and Kamilah would be held back.

As always, not trying to persuade you on what to do, but just making you aware that some decisions carry graver consequences than others.

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**Act III, Opening – Mirage**

"Cade? Stay with me. My mother is in Anasundi until Fehmarn, caring for my grandmamma. I know it is a long time to be gone from college but... Stay with me until the lilies return. Please?"

Arcadian nodded his head and forced a smile. Until the lilies return...

Kamilah’s thoughts stretched out for a brief moment before her eyes awakened, taking in the dazzling sunlight from the morning’s sun. The beams of light dazzled the tears that were frozen between her open eyelids. And yet she refused to let them fall...

"Cade?"

* * *

The two who had suffered nicks from the riders’ darts fought the effects well. Their bodies had become so used to such assaults that they were able to withstand the passing gallowbrush grogginess that had felled so many Anari riders. They fought off the limb-searing pain that normally accompanied the graveweed side of the mixture that coated the small barbed arrows.

Within moments, they were fit enough to travel once more. The riders had formed a column and passed through the burning outpost rapidly. Even as the four watched, yet another tower fell. Only one remained, and its fires seemed to have gutted it, but left itstanding. The buildings scattered around the Anari side of the border were still blazing, and no one moved. Numerous bodies lay about, and horses now riderless meandered along, some staying near their riders, and others grazing lazily.

The four trotted carefully to the outpost, surveying the damage. Up close the sight was truly gruesome. Wanton destruction. Death with no reason other than being in the way. Most of the prone bodies had been stabbed in the ribs or neck with a spear. Apparently the riders were ready for this: some incapacitated the riders, others dispatched them.

No wonder Vassagonia had never conquered Cleoasia....

The four gathered together to discuss their next move, aware as they did so that the Talons were disappearing across the desert—and that they had no tracker. Simyn pulled out his spyglass to keep his eye on the fleeing enemy, and he soon spotted a problem....

* * *
### Rules, Rulings

**Sh:** I'll take into account your Perception check when the time arrives. Right now, you're still catching up.

**Korlaeth:** You are more than welcome to break from the main group, which I feel now you would since you have the disguise on. There is another Vassan horse around the campsite.

**OOC:** I am going to make a Bluff check to be used on the horses as Sol Hawk says, “Wolf.” I am not sure if they will be close enough to hear or not, but it is the best card I have right now, so I try it as the riders are taking out their bows.

### Act III, Scene III – Left Behind

Sol Hawk looked around after the horse stood up and realized something: the Talons were well-disciplined. At the first sound of the horns, they took off. And here, not a half minute later, the Kai was alone. Well, time to change that.

He leaped astride the Vassan horse and urged it to run forward, and it took off to the west in a blur of motion, startling the others. The Kaithralor’s arrival at the back end of the train of horses was ignored. They accepted him, for they had no time nor inclination to doubt him.

Shouting to them in Vassan, he pressed onward, barely able to see the main group of horses ahead. As he watched, some of the horses peeled off to either side and the riders unsling bows from their backs and turned to face east, hidden behind the trees.

The Kai tightened his lips and prayed for his friends, that they would be able to break past the ambush and follow safely.

**DOC:** As Sol saw the men unsling their bows, he knew that they were going for his friends. Squinting back through the fog, he could no longer see them. Maybe he could help them one more time.

He called out to the horses with his mind. Behind us are wolves, he intoned, There are wolves back there. We’re only safe if we run from them.

He calms his own horse by whispering in its ear. “It is good that we are not back there,” he said, “let’s move in with the others and find that human girl.”

As the fog streams past on all sides, vanishing as the cavalry rides through it, Sol Hawk can see the bright light of the morning sun penetrate the gloom. It is an awesome sight - a hundred armed warriors or more were almost flying over the ground with perfect discipline. These were no common rogues. His heart hesitated for a moment. These were the elites. If Cloesia had its own Kai Knights, then surely the Talons would be they.

**DOC:** The Kai had no way of knowing if his trick worked or not, but he was sure it would at least help his friends, if not keep them totally safe.

His horse sprinted forward, dodging past a couple of other slower beasts, and the Kai noticed the ground leveling off a bit. They must be moving away from the mountains somehow. The Kai thought ahead as he passed another rider as to where they could be going to quickly.

Outside the forest lay the border of Anari...well, after a few miles of grassland anyway. Resa was at the very tip of the northern border, and the main guard post would likely be just north of town. How could these riders expect to storm through a heavily guarded outpost? Had they given this no forethought.

The Kai moved further up the throng of horses, dodging low branches here and there as his mare kept going. He thought of his own Anari steed with all his gear on it, hoping it would be able to keep up and not slow his friends down.

As the Kai moved forward, he saw one of the white-hooded women ahead and to his right. He moved to get a better look since the hood had flapped loose in the wind. In his shock, he barely dodged another low branch. It was not Ameesha—it was a thin Talon, small enough in build to be a fitting decoy.

“No faster,” came the horse’s voice to his mind. “Not can go faster.”

Sol Hawk backed down on driving the beast so, and considered this new information as he hurried along with the Talons of Rashur toward whatever end or goal they pursued.

The Kai watched as yet another group of riders ahead of him veered off toward the north, riding into the fog as they went.

**DOC:** Sol Hawk ceased to drive his horse so hard - no more could be done. Good girl, he told her. Just keep your place among the rest for now. Sol Hawk could feel his fatigue leaving him now that the sun was up. He concentrated on the ride, taking in every detail he could and trying to consider all that he had seen.

Sol Hawk tried to break down the situation in a rational manner. The first question - was Ameesha here at all? It was possible that a second group of riders indeed had her and were making for safety in some other direction whilst this group acted as a decoy. For the moment, Sol Hawk was willing to ignore this possibility. If Ameesha was here at all, she could well be over the border in any event before he could catch up. He would therefore take it as a given that she was here.

Since it was clear that the Talons of Rashur were employing deception to hide Ameesha, he could not trust his eyes to tell him where she was. One thing was certain, however. She was on horseback. Every person around him was riding a horse. She was definitely in plain sight. He could be looking at her now. She might be one of the remaining four white-robos he noticed amidst the herd. But she could also be dressed as a mountains-bad.

Without being able to see her face, he might have to check every one.

What would distinguish her from the talons? He knew of only one thing - it was the fact that she had the gift of prophecy, but although Sol Hawk could commune telepathically with the primal, simple minds of animals, he could not do the same with human beings.

He needed a way to tell her that he was here without anyone else knowing. Then an idea came to mind.

Perhaps he would investigate the white-robos first. It would be worth something if he could determine for certain that she was or was not among them. Keeping careful track of the one he had already determined was not the lady Ameesha, he began to move toward the next closest “princess.”

**OSub:** Onward they rode, and as they did, more horsesmen broke from the main column and streaked into the forest. As always, though, the white-hooded prisoners remained roughly at the front of the line.

They turned sharply northwest and Sol Hawk pulled the mare's reins to match the move. In a matter of minutes, they had broken free of the forest and started down the elevated area that the forest was set upon. The Kai noted that the fog was thinner here, and he looked behind him for his friends.

Nothing but the strugglers and slower horses he had passed, not to mention the marly Ameesha decoy. He turned and kept watch on where they were headed, trying to picture Anari in his mind. He looked over his right shoulder—yes, mountains.

That meant they were headed for Resa—which made no sense, for it was sure to be heavily garrisoned—or the border. The Kai watched as the line of horses changed position. The Ameesha slowed a bit, moving to the front center of the column, and the flanks expanded.

A few men shouldered at one another and pointed at silhouettes in the fog ahead.

The border was in sight.
Act III, Scene III – Left Behind

As Sol Hawk saw more black-clads breaking with the main group, he maneuvered his own steed into range around branch and root and again sent a mental message to the horses, hoping to disrupt this second ambush in any way he could.

Wolves in the woods! Danger! It isn’t safe to leave the herd!

Again, he calmed his own horse by reassuring her quietly that they were safe with the group. Sol Hawk noted that the group was turning Northwest and this concerned him greatly for he was not sure if his companions were any longer close enough to see. Sol’s heart sank further as he realized that their tracker - him! - would no longer be able to help them to the trail. With hopes that it could matter, he took from his pocket two items. One was the magic ring that they had found on the wizard Sir Victor bested. The other was the Anarian Ruby necklace. As he saw the unit of mercenaries wheel to the northeast, he let slip these items in the hopes that they would provide a hint to his friends. They fall shortly after he makes the turn.

Then they were out of the forest and the trees were sparser - the horses sped on the vast grasses. From the position of the sun and the Chaun mountains, Sol Hawk pinpointed their position in his mind. As the Darogah vanished far behind, he could see the faraway outpost known as Rasa. The horses ahead began to change formation. The Ameeshas slowed a bit and Sol Hawk took this opportunity to gain ground on them. He counted heads as he rode... 80... 90... there were a hundred or so. Mundich could not be seen. Korlaeth, if he was still here, was as well-hidden as he and he then wished that they had devised a signal before infiltrating.

Some twenty riders had peeled off the main unit already, but with one hundred mounted horses, Sol Hawk wondered if the Anarians could stop them. They would try. Sol Hawk silently hoped that they would decimate the Talons, for as one man he knew there was nothing he could do to halt their charge into battle.

Sol Hawk examined their destination as closely as possible. The Talons would not likely attack if they could simply break through the border outside of Rasa where the lines were weak. Beyond the outpost to the west was Slovia... to the north, the endless, miles of sand that separated Anari from Cloesia. The Anari border would be ready. Perhaps they saw the herd coming even now. They would be firing upon them soon at long range.

He coaxed his horse forward, using all of his riding skill and empathy with this mare to close the gap on the white-robes. One of them must be Ameesha. He needed to reach her. And soon.

* * *

The Kai tried to get close to another “Ameesha”, but they were still too far away. In addition, the horses knew their own pace—if they were to gallop for a long distance, they shouldn’t use all their energy at once.

Sol Hawk watched as the whole column of horses spread out into something resembling a T, with the crossbar at the forefront of the horses. They were riding hard to the outpost north of Rasa. At this early hour, the people would likely be eating breakfast and be caught unaware.

In a quarter hour, they stormed into the outpost’s small cluster of buildings that were on the southern side of the border. Men streamed out from one building, but the men and the building were quickly consumed in flames as the mages let loose with their fiery magic. Every other building was targeted, and the four large towers that flanked the massive iron-reinforced wooden gates were blasted.

The tops of the towers exploded in a shower of cinders, their occupants either falling injured to the ground or already dead, being consumed quickly by the supernaturally hot flames. Of the two dozen or so that normally manned the outpost, several had fallen prey to the attack. The fog had really come to the aid of the aggressive party this morn.

Sol Hawk could only watch in helpless sorrow as Anari soldiers died. Horsemen rode up from nearby patrols along the border, only to be quickly cut down with arrows from deadly accurate crossbows. Even those who were only grazed fell from their horses, and the Kai supposed that either gallowbrush or graveweed was to thank for that.

Where skill was lacking, poison made up the difference....

Men entered the burning towers and threw the release mechanisms. Others slid back the huge crossbar behind the gates. In a matter of minutes, the outpost had been overrun and compromised. As the gates slid open, the Kai was able to see another of the white-hooded persons was nothing more than a thin man dressed in white clothing to make it appear as if he were Ameesha.

In a matter of minutes, the gate would be open, and the Talons would no longer be on Anari soil....

* * *

As they rode through the outpost, Sol Hawk concealed his sadness at the outright slaughter. He realized at once the total danger that he would face if he was revealed. Through the battle he knew he has only one goal - to position himself near to the princess. He used the chaos to full advantage as he continued to examine each of the remaining three white-robes. He searched their faces, he tried to see if any were fighting (those would not likely be Ameesha), and he looked for any hint of a womanly figure beneath the robes. Using his best guess first, he made his way.

As the horses finally stopped moving, Sol Hawk’s task became easier yet. The Kai nonchalantly moved to a position within 30’ of the remaining white-robes. Stay calm, majesty, he said quietly to her telepathically, focusing on Ameesha, I was sent by your father and I am contacting you with my mind. Please smooth your hood if you can hear me. He watched with care for the signal, then finished, I won’t leave without you, but be patient. I cannot act on your behalf until it is safe. But you are no longer alone.

Sol was shocked as he saw the black-clads swarm to the gate and work on the mechanism. At first it is not so simple to remove. Then one of the captains comes forward with his own ingenious solution – he breaks the lock in two with several swipes of his scimitar. As the fires burned higher, Sol Hawk feared that his friends were taken by graveweed arrows in the Darogah. He thought back with sorrow to the men of Command-Captain al-Marah who likely fell to a similar pl sy. He looked to the ground—Anarians—dead—everywhere. His soul screamed for him to dismount and save these men. Yet to do so would immediately reveal him and endanger not only the mission, but the tentative peace of two countries. Any romantic notion that Sol Hawk may have had that the Talons were like the Kai burned fast away, consumed in the fire and rising to the sky with the stench of the burning innocent.

As the men worked, Sol Hawk knew what he had to do to stall the group and let his friends, if they still lived, catch up. Outwardly, he showed no clue of his action, but in his mind held within the likeness of the gate. The gate was heavy – perhaps two hundred pounds, and as the talons threw off the crossbar, Sol Hawk exerted his will upon the doors. He envisioned the two huge hands of Kai holding them shut.

Korlaeth watched in helpless consternation as the attack on the outpost was flawlessly carried out. He stayed back from the brief fight and kept his head down, worried any time he was forced to speak that his non-Cloeasian accent would give him away.

* * *

Despite the Kai’s ability to see him, Korlaeth was there, silently observing all the evil that befell the Anari military as well. His hand itched to draw blue steel and attempt to set right what he saw, but he knew such would be futile. He looked over the meandering horses and riders, knowing that somehow Sol Hawk was among them—yet another reason not to lash out blindly.

The outskirts where he was located was primarily filled with archers, targeting any Anari horseman that came close. He looked at the trail they had left in the earth, knowing that his friends and fellow Vakeros would have little trouble following him.
**Rules, Rulings**

Act III, Scene III – Left Behind

The Kai set his mind upon the large gates, hoping to keep them from moving, but their weight was too great for such a task—one that the greatest of Grandmasters would only stand a slight chance of accomplishing, he mused. He gave up quickly as he realized how useless it was to expend that energy, and he set about trying to maneuver toward another one of the white-hooded riders.

Mere feet from one, he saw her look around frantically, as if trying to find someone or something. The rider behind her in the saddle kept close hold of her. She looked eyes with the Kai long enough for him to imitate contact telepathically. Quickly he averted his azure eyes, knowing they gave him away as an outsider.

He delivered a message meant to calm and reassure her...

...but the reaction was not quite what he expected.

In Vassan she cried out and pointed at the Kai, “Spy! Intruder! Kill the blue eyed spy!”

Several black-clad riders looked up at her shrieking, following her finger to Sol Hawk, who kept his head down. A nearby rider backhanded him on the shoulder. “Hey, you! Look at me,” he said, drawing his weapon.

**OOC:** Sol Hawk kept his head low for a moment longer. “She’s crazy,” he said with a perfect accent, “The heat is getting to her.” The black-clads hesitated, but probably not for long. The princess’ chest heaved up and down as she looked on.

Another black-clad came close. For a moment, Sol Hawk saw that the face concealed within was that of Korlaeth! Ah, so the Vakeros was here. Sol Hawk was inwardly grateful at this timing. Korlaeth approached and examined Sol Hawk’s face before any others could. “He’s right, milord,” he said, and Sol could see that Korlaeth was muttering words under his breath as well. Korlaeth did not linger, as not to arouse suspicion. Sol Hawk acted as if nothing remarkable was happening, but inwardly his heart was beating a mile a minute as he waited to see if their ploy had paid off.

**OOC:** As Sol Hawk kept his head down and shouted about the crazy woman, the soldier came forward and laid the edge of his blade under the Kai’s chin, lifting it at Korlaeth came near.

The Vakeros reached into his Dessi training and wove a simple illusion around the Kai, darkening his skin, changing the stray bits of hair to black, and most importantly, light blue eyes of the daylight to dark eyes of nighttime skies. The Kai had no idea this had taken effect, and kept his eyes closed as the blade tilted his head upwards. The point pressed into his skin, and he opened his eyes.

The soldier scowled and sheathed his blade. This was no intruder. He turned to the woman on horseback. “Stupid Feyata! You can’t tell friend from foe anymore. Keep your blade away from me when we reach—”

A horn sounded and cut his sentence short. The gates had been pulled open enough to pass through. One of the tall towers flanking the gates collapsed in a shower of cinders and flames, causing the riders to spur their mounts onward before the way was blocked by fiery debris from the other towers.

“Ride!” shouted the soldier that had questioned Sol Hawk. “Ride into the arms of the Sand Mother!”

**Act Three Scene III – Left Behind**

Sol drove his horse onward, staying within 30 feet of Korlaeth as the grassland began to break up into drylands. The vast desert was just on the horizon and Resa was left far behind.

I sent telepathy to the princess, he intoned to Korlaeth. I was certain that it was she, but she screamed. Apparently she has a blade which the talons would not give to a prisoner. Either that’s not her or there is something seriously wrong here.

Sol Hawk filled Korlaeth in on everything that he had seen so far, also pointing out the locations of the mages. (He will catch a glimpse of the Vassagonia as he sojourns.)

Korlaeth swiftly followed through with the army, waiting for a time less rushed to begin assisting Sol in the search for Ameesha. His answers as Sol Hawk filled him in telepathically were brief, his attention almost entirely on the army around him. Even his mental responses were a mixture of North Speak and Vassan, focusing on thinking in North Speak only if Sol seemed unable to understand. He remained near Sol Hawk, but far enough to not be obviously linked with him, seeking anonymity among the Talons.

**Within the span of a minute, the herd of horses moved through the gate, soon joined by a band of approximately twenty stragglers—those who had earlier broken from the rest in order to hinder or kill the others. Another tower collapsed, and one of the gates swayed heavily as its main support crumbled, at last falling flat on the Vassagonian side of the border with a loud thud.**

The Talons rode hard into the desert, the five Ameeshas at the forefront. Sol Hawk and Korlaeth tried to maneuver closer, never straying from one another’s sight. The Kai frowned in frustration—in the chaos of moments earlier, he had forgotten which ones he had checked since the order had changed.

The grassland faded and gave way to sandy terrain. The Talons let out a cheer for some reason when their horses touched the sand. Sol Hawk and Korlaeth mimicked this gesture, not knowing the significance. One would think that the Talons would be hesitant, quiet, and unobtrusive in their enemy’s lands.

The Talon’s plan of having five disguised Ameeshas was a great plan, for even the keen hunting skills of the Kai were unable to even remember which one was which. Sol Hawk rubbed his eyes—perhaps he was just getting too tired.

Korlaeth, I’ve lost track of the white robes, he thought. Were you able to keep them straight in all this chaos? (Sol Hawk relayed their positions to Korlaeth in a prior post).

I expect the Talons will set up camp soon since it would be unwise to travel by day in the desert heat, especially with horses.

It was fortunate that they had entered desert. This gave Sol Hawk plenty of reasons to continue wearing his head wrap and thus maintain his disguise. Hmmm, perhaps Vassagonia was involved after all as Sol Hawk had suspected from the very start...
**Act III, Scene III – Left Behind**

Korlaeth rode quietly among the Talons, his mind puzzling over the unusual reaction to their arrival in Vassagonia. He strained to remember which of those white robes Sol Hawk had pointed out to him, but they were all so similar. He wrapped his veil against the sand and permitted himself a smile. It would truly be a grand escape...

Sol Hawk and Korlaeth galloped along into the sands, leaving Anari behind. Neither of them looked back, for no one else did—nothing they did should draw attention to themselves. Other riders fastened their sand-veils across their faces.

While Sol Hawk maintained mental connection, Korlaeth replied to him that the two on the edges were already checked and decoys. The Kai was about to ask more questions when Korlaeth’s mental “Uh no!” came across almost audibly.

One of the riders at the front sounded five short horn blasts, holding the last note before repeating the pattern. The riders diverged into five separate lines, peeling off in four directions from the Gold Trail.

One group angled westward toward the Vassagonian border while another went eastward toward the mountains. Another group headed northwest into open desert while yet another went northeast toward the mountains. The last group continued due north, following the trail to Chahdan.

The Kai and Vakeros looked at each other. They knew the east and west groups contained decoys. They also knew that this was all planned, for everyone knew what to do when the horn sounded.

They had to choose which of the three remaining groups of riders to join....

* * *

Korlaeth looked on in consternation as the army began to split. Still at the gallop, he knew the decision must be made quickly, or it would be made for him. Muttering a petition to the Elders, he threw caution to the wind and directed his single Elder Act at the white-robed figure heading for Chahdan, asking a single question. Who are you?

* * *

Sol Hawk had to think fast as the horses began to split. He had been watching the white-clads closely during the whole journey and had some knowledge of their movements. As royalty, he suspected that the princess would normally have been transported by servants and subjects—she would not have been trained in the art of riding. This meant that the others would have to lead her and guide her horse when they turned. It made sense that the two Ameeshas on the flanks were Talons in disguise—the real Ameesha would not be so close to the edge.

One of the remaining three Ameeshas fit this pattern. Which one?

* * *

The Vakeros reached into the mind of the white-veiled rider and pulled out the answer to his question: “Sharnazim fourth class Paru Kee-thana.” Korlaeth’s jaw dropped beneath his sand veil as he grasped what he had learned.

* * *

Sol Hawk watched as the various groups split. None of the three Ameeshas in the middle groups was being led. Each one was skilled enough to guide their mount effortlessly with the formation. The only one that didn’t have to show any signs of horsemanship at the moment was the one in the center—the one heading toward Chahdan.

* * *

All the whites ride very well, said Sol Hawk in Korlaeth’s mind, I am beginning to doubt that any of the white robes are Ameesha.

Sol Hawk continued riding straight ahead.

* * *

Korlaeth ignores the Kai’s mental message - there is no time for a response. Fourth class – Paru Kee-thana. This was not good.

As the horses began to split and Korlaeth considered—he knew that there would be but one more chance to discover the princess.

The Sharnazim had means of his own. This was a dangerous game. But he needed an answer now and the black-clads likely knew nothing. A Fourth class would surely know what was going on, so he focused and directed his mental probe at the same target a second time.

In what direction is Ameesha now headed?

Korlaeth holds his breath, blending with the crowd, but awaiting his answer as the black-clads began to separate to either side.

“Teph.”

Finally, they were one step ahead of the enemy. Knowing that the princess—whichever she was—would be headed to Teph gave them the advantage. They could follow along till the riders stopped, then slip away and join their friends. At least that was one option.

The lines had almost fully separated—they had to choose.

* * *

The Kai Lord was beginning to doubt that any of the white-robes were Ameesha, but Korlaeth was not so sure.

Ah, he thought, So the Princess is headed for Teph. The one he had just probed showed no signs of notice—for this he was truly grateful. There were only two groups who would likely be headed for Teph—the northward-moving group and the North-Eastern moving group. The northward route would pass through Chatshan. The North-Eastern route would skirt the mountains and avoid the eyes of the city.
Korlaeth diverged and joined the North-Eastern group. Once the separation was complete, he reached into his pack and lets drop a Sunrod onto the trail. The others would need to know their direction, and hopefully this would provide a clue.

Korlaeth began to move closer to the final white-robe, but did not act yet. Instead he waited for a time for the other four groups to split and go their separate ways. In the meantime, he took in everything he could about this group and their surroundings.

As Sol Hawk saw the Vakeros change direction, he guided his horse to follow. As they ride, he takes note of the number of black-clads in their now diminished group and the position of the white-robe. He also kept his eyes open for anything out of the ordinary as the other groups began to vanish into the distance.

The group that they decided upon contained roughly two dozen black-clads. They rode to the northeast until they reached the small hills that were at the foot of the great Chah range. The Kai chanced a glance backwards to see if he could see anyone in pursuit.

There was a faint fog, smoke from the outpost, but nothing else. No dark dots on the horizon—just plumes of smoke that would almost certainly signal to the inhabitants of Resa that something had happened.

Korlaeth concentrated instead on where they were and where they may be going. Given that these were probably indigenous warriors instead of Cloesians, they would know these mountains well. Certainly they would know of secret trails and tunnels.

They reached the shadow of the mountains, and then they were called to a halt. A man upon a magnificent horse trotted back to stand on top of a hill. He hefted a spyglass and looked toward Resa. Satisfied, he came down from the hill and looked over his men.

“Why-atch the plan has worked.” This brought cheers from the gathered. “We shall now head for the cave in the mountains to the north of the Four Peaks. After camping for the day, we regroup in Chahdan, then ride onward back to base.”

“Is what? You three, dismount and cover our tracks. The cave is three miles away.”

Korlaeth took notice as the group dwindled by two more. Eighteen left. The mountain cave was ahead. It sounded as if the princess was not with them, but this might be yet to be discovered. She could still be amongst the black clads here.

Those dogs won’t catch us,” he said in Vassan, “I am ready to serve by preparing whatever arrows are needed when we reach the cave.” He looks to the leader for his reply.

Korlaeth is ignored until they reach the cavern. The horses are led deep inside to an underground spring, and it is at this time that the leader heads to Korlaeth.

Volunteering to dip the arrows? That’s first. I hope you’re not angered anyone—or they may accidentally bump into you and nick your finger. Happens all the time,” he says smiling as he removes his veil. Sharp Vassagonian features follow handsome lines until the man miles, revealing dirty unkempt teeth. He turns and motions to “Ameesha”.

“What if they follow?” asked one person right next to Sol Hawk, causing the Kai to make sure he kept his head down and his veil in place.

The leader scoffed. “We hide our trail. And we switch to graveweed-coated arrows, just in case.” He looked around the riders under his command.

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“Myr-atch’s plan has worked.” This brought cheers from the gathered. “We shall now head for the cave in the mountains to the north of the Four Peaks. After camping for the day, we regroup in Chahdan, then ride onward back to base.”

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The woman rips the white cowl off her head. “Do you think Myr-atch got away?” she asks tossing the shred of cloth to the ground. She reached into her saddlebags nearby and pulled out her normal headwrap, hiding her beautiful features in the dark clothing.

“Yep,” replies the leader. “He is the chosen of Egoliah—he cannot fail.”

As Korlaeth dailies to try and stay close to the conversation, another warrior grabs him by the arm. “Here,” he says, shoving a bundle of arrows into the Vakeros’ arms. Setting a small vial on top, he claps Korlaeth on the shoulder and leaves.

Korlaeth takes a seat in a secluded area once he has received the arrows. He lays the arrows out in front of him, but the vial he carefully stows in his pocket for the time being. Shortly thereafter, he has his meal out in front of him as well. He eats slowly, but shuffles the arrows back and forth from one pile to the other from time to time to give the appearance of being busy. He spends the time also listening in case he still has a chance to hear the conversation concerning Murdach.
### Rules, Rulings

For now your actions (or lack of action from the Talon’s POV) has not aroused suspicion. Also note, the task set for you is not one that can normally be completed in a matter of mere minutes - you actually have quite a few arrows laid out in front of you.

In every case, my first and foremost concern is to blend in. I’ll try to make the rounds and stay semi-close to the leader of the group, but not to the extent of blowing my cover. Also, to keep my cover, I’ll actually coat a couple of the arrows, but very few, and I’d like to keep those for myself before I give the others back, if possible, keeping the above sentence in mind.

You failed a Perception check again to hear anything of any value, however your little act of hiding a few of the arrows has paid off for now.

However, you need to roll a Bluff check vs the warrior who is handing you the extra arrows. Note you’ll also need a Disguise check if you’re going to talk to him.

Also, roll your Perception checks each post as you attempt to hear anything useful. Lastly, I will assume you are NOT coating the arrows, unless you state specifically that you want to.

### Act III, Scene III – Left Behind

Once Korlaeth seated himself he immediately got to work on the arrows…at least he gave the impression he was working on the arrows. Although he had chosen a secluded area the fact remained that many warriors walked past him as they brought in the supplies to deposit at the back of the cave. The man who had abruptly handed the Vakeros the bundle of arrows had apparently disappeared on his own errands so Korlaeth afforded the chance to try and listen to any conversation regarding the Princess or what the Talons planned to do next.

He noticed the leader and “Ameesha” were still engrossed in discussion…what it was concerning Korlaeth was most intrigued. Unfortunately due to the passing crowd of warriors he could only pick up the odd word of “Anari,” “Teph” and more often than not, “Myr-atoch.”

In addition, every now and again he had to make sure it looked like he was actually dipping the arrows in the poison as there was no way for him to avert the glances a few of the passing warriors gave him.

* * *

Korlaeth continues his preparations, head down to help keep respectfully apart from those around him. In his element, Korlaeth is well-suited to keep inconspicuous, for his training in the Keron Battle Magic College has ensured that even his thoughts are in Vassan.

Surrounded by enemies, all he can do is hope that someone will let something slip about where the princess his new friends are seeking has gone.

* * *

Working away at a relatively slow pace the Vakeros was successfully looking as if he was actually dipping the arrows into the poison in addition to hiding some of the arrows for his own use.

Unfortunately over the course of the next half hour he failed to hear any valuable news. In fact much of the passing conversations he did hear centred on how long it was taking to prepare the midday meal.

Korlaeth then noticed the leader returning from the back of the cave, where he had disappeared with “Ameesha.” The leader apparently looked as if he was talking to one his warriors but for fear of being spotted the Vakeros didn’t dare look directly at him. Bowing his head again he continued “working” on the arrows. Suddenly his right shoulder was bumped from behind and he turned to see a warrior looking over him.

“Hope you didn’t prick yourself there,” the man mocked with a deep Vassagonian accent. “Here’s some more arrows for you to work on you luckless fool,” he added before turning to carry on with whatever duties he had.

* * *

Korlaeth ducked his head respectfully to the other soldier, rude as he was, and took the arrows to continue his work in silence. He continued to listen for useful information, content now to wait until the opportunity for action presented itself.

### Commentary

**Introducing:**

**Guest GM:**

**Dragon Reborn**

**Point of Interest:** Dragon Reborn also contributed to the roleplaying and strategic plans of Murdach and Aymodani – The Enemy of My Enemy’s greatest villains to date!
**Rules, Rulings**

In case you need this info:

Black-clad: AC 13 EP 20/20
Black-clad: AC 13 EP 20/20

There are two of them of course. Each one is currently looking down at the job they have to do, and they are quite effective at hiding the tracks. Over the hills, you can see the faint black smoke from the outpost. Toward the northeast, you can see the riders disappearing into the horizon.

OOC: The Required Bluff Check: 20

OOC: Focus used to restore 17 Willpower Points. This brings me from 21 to my max.

Against Black-Clad 1:
(standard) 2 attacks w/ Scimitar
(includes: Swiftest Strike Damage): 17

Against Black-Clad 2:
(not an action) Psychic Lash: 3
(free) Psychic Attack: 11
(free) Strafing Will (khanjar): 3

OOC: Sol Hawk loses 2 EP and 2 WP for his attack (Strafing Will, Swifted Strike, Psychic Attack)

OOC: Perception: 13

**Act III, Scene IV – Singled Out**

Sol Hawk swallowed hard and did as he was told. Someone took the reins of his horse and he accepted a large palm leaf that had been carried in a sack on one of the front horses. The leader and his riders—including Koralathed—their galloping ahead.

"Drudge detail," groused one of the black-clads, swishing the palm leaf across the tracks in the sand to make it look undisturbed. His companion joined in. Sol Hawk watched as the riders disappeared, then he looked back toward the outpost, hidden by the hills they had crossed.

"Well, looking around won't get this done faster," said one.

Sol Hawk turned to regard him, wondering what to do next.

"Myr-atoch is a genius, of that I am now convinced," said Sol Hawk as he fanned the tracks, "But they don't tell us everything. This thankless job will go faster with something to talk about. Why don't you both tell me what you've heard about the plan and I'll tell you everything I've heard. Let's not make the story dull—start it at the beginning like you're supposed to."

He goes to work with the fanning, trying his best to do a passable job as they talk.

One of the men stops fanning his palm at Sol Hawk's remarks. "You had doubts he was not such?"

The other made a warding sign of protection and distanced himself a bit from the Kai. Sol Hawk wisely did not look at the man talking to him.

"It is not our place to ask questions of Eglian and Myr-atoch. Why do you do so now?"

"He seeks death," said the other.

"Yes, yes, you must in order to question our orders. You will never be accepted by the Ragged if you are curious. Obedience. Vigilance. That is the key."

The man returned to fanning. "Myr-atoch has the girl. And we will soon be home in Teph, where the Overlord can hide us. I will not betray you by speaking of your wavering spirit, brother."

*I would never doubt Myr-atoch's skill," said Sol Hawk, "I wonder how long it will be before he reaches Chahdan." Sol Hawk waits for the response. As he does so, he continues sweeping, using the large action of the leaf to hide the smaller action as he draws his blade. As the black-clad walks backwards, sweeping the sand, Sol Hawk merely pauses, allowing the man to approach. The scimitar punches through from Sol Hawk's giant sweep-leaf and skewers the unsuspecting black-clad through the ninth vertebrae (17 DAM). Sol tries to wrest the blade free, almost dropping it as it is locked in the man's spine, but holding it free at the last instant instead as the shocked man tries to face him.

The second man has not even turned around yet when the khanjar Arcadian gave to Sol wiggles free of its hook and flies into the man's upper chest (3 DAM). The black-clad begins to advance, and then he is surrounded by burning psychic fire on every side (11 DAM and 3 DAM).

Only now do they see his flashing blue eyes—and somehow they know—they have crossed a Kai Lord.

One of the warriors stops at the mention of Chahdan, while the Kai subtly moves into position behind the other one. "Myr-atoch is not bound for Chahdan...he joins the Overlord's army and marches to Teph across the open desert." The man walks slowly toward Sol Hawk, narrowing his eyes. "All of us know this plan well—it is all we trained for for months. How is it that you don't know it?"

His hand slowly crept toward his blade. Meanwhile, Sol Hawk's hand was already on his blade. He pulled it free and struck downward, severing the spine of the man in front of him. The other attacker pulled his scimitar free and in a flash had lashed out at the Kai, who used the palm leaf to confuse the man.

The full power of the Kai's mind torments the man, causing him to fall to his face in agony, clutching at the dagger in his upper chest. The Kai took a deep breath and looked around, wary that the twin screams of pain would alert someone.

The man at Sol Hawk's feet merely gurgles on his own vomit, reflexively clutching and unclutching his weapon as he lies on the ground. Without a word, Sol Hawk finishes him with his scimitar (DAM 5).

The second warrior fumbles, moving to the prone position and ready to cry out. He is not nearly fast enough for the hawk has struck. The man feels a heaviness, a pressure, and he cannot breathe. The black-clad drops to his knees, clutching at his throat and dropping his weapon. He looks to Sol with shock and then hatred, then finally sadness, mirroring what he sees in the Kai's eyes. The black-clad at last collapses and sink pools in his open mouth (DAM 6).

Sol Hawk hears the words of the first man in his head and he knows now that they were true.

We will be home soon, he had said, we will be home...

As Sol Hawk trudged through the desert, his face became wet beneath the black headwrap. He bumped the soiling cloth away from his face as he made for the top of the hill. It was not hard to backtrack since his memory served well enough and the black-clads on "drudge duty" had only the time to sweep the immediate area. Already their work was in vain, for Sol was now leaving new tracks in the direction of Resa.

For a moment, Sol Hawk stopped and sat upon the sand. He listened for sounds of the desert—most of all he heard his own heartbeat. He would be able to track Ameesha still, possibly, but the Kai was unfamiliar with the sandy wasteland. This would not be the first time he would pray for Makala's return.

With eyes closed, he asked Ishir for guidance. Murdach was gone. The girl was with him. Sol Hawk knew that they had failed and that the group he and Koralathed had chosen was the wrong one.

Tired. So very tired.

Having gone without sleep and now suffering the bombardment of the heat in this strange and unforgiving land, Sol's vision began to blur.
**Act III, Scene IV – Singled Out**

No, he resolved, The desert will not do Murdach’s work for him. Not! My life and my quest do not end here. He stood up, thinking of Korlaeth, who was still trapped, and his friends who had been left behind, assaulted with the gre wheat poison.

Arcadan, Simyn, Kamilith – they could all be dead now, but he had to know for sure.

As if in answer to his quiet promise, Sol Hawk felt his will returning. His mind became sharp once again, and fatigue as he was, he meted out his remaining strength – and it fed him as a fire is fueled. It was a slow, steady burn. He rose and moved.

Almost to the next dune, he continued. He hoped that his friends would see him. He needed them to return and rescue Korlaeth. But if he could not see them from here, he would never make it to Resa on foot before dehydration took him. In that case they would find the cave alone. There were only eighteen left. Sol Hawk and Korlaeth would escape or die in the attempt.

He placed a fist on his heart as he rose over the crest of the dune, searching.

As the Kai rose to the top of the dune he focused on the desert stretching out ahead of him. Unfortunately his search revealed little other than the fact that there were another number of dunes ahead of him. As the sun continued to beat down upon him Sol Hawk began to realise much was riding on what decision he made next.

Was Korlaeth’s cover still anonymous to the Talons or should the Kai try to return to the cave and assist him? Just how far were his companions from Resa - surely they would ascertain which way he and Korlaeth had ridden?

Sol Hawk lingered at the top of the dune for a time, searching for his friends. Alas, they were nowhere to be seen. He paused long enough to eat the food that he had with him, but still they did not appear. He would have to return to Korlaeth and the cave.

After his meal Sol waited to see if his companions would ride over one of the many sand-covered hills stretching before him. After a few minutes there was no sign of them. Coming to the realization that just waiting out in the sun was proving to be fruitless the Kai lord decided to find his way back to the cave for Korlaeth’s sake.

He followed his own tracks back to the spot where he had killed the two warriors and for a brief moment he smiled knowing that the enemy’s tracks remained on show for his friends. Wiping the sweat from his brow he saw a large outcrop of rocks that he had passed earlier therefore no search was needed to confirm the direction in which he needed to head.

However, as he took another look at the rocks there looked to be numerous tracks laid out ahead of him leading off in multiple directions from the bodies. He was sure only the three of them had ventured out from the cave. Maybe more Talons had been instructed to brush the tracks since he had left. Wiping his brow yet again he now cursed the misfortune of wearing a black-clad disguise in this increasing heat and dropping his arm he looked back at the rocks…now those multiple tracks he had seen were gone.

Sol Hawk studies the terrain, wiping the sweat from his brow. He searches the bodies of the black-clads once more before departing - perhaps if he is lucky they have some water. Yes - he has discovered the way, it is all too easy. He begins to move in the direction of the trail, but his vision becomes blurred and his black outfit more and more and seems to soak up all of the additional heat of the sun.

The Kai Lord cannot help but grin at the irony - the sun, the symbol of all Kai, in fact has become his great obstacle. Still he does not falter - he moves onward, pushing on, pushing on. Korlaeth was counting on him.

Unfortunately a further search of the bodies before leaving them where they lay still revealed nothing of value. Although he was now suffering heatstroke the Kai Lord was relentless in his attempt to return to the cave. Following the trail was an easy task for Sol Hawk regardless of his fatigued state and he soon approached an outcrop of rocks from where he was able to make out the cave.

Luckily no further warriors had ventured out to assist Sol and their two ‘dead’ comrades with the path sweeping; or at least he had not encountered any. The outcrops of the rock afforded Sol some cover from which to view the cave and again Kai’s luck was upon him in that he was a safe enough distance away to not be spotted.

Sol Hawk watched from the rocky outcropping, holding his sword ready. As the heatstroke struck, he sighed, pressing his back against the sandstone which he discovered was in fact hot with the day’s heat.

Of course experienced nomads of the desert knew enough to stay under cover during the day. Sol Hawk had done away with two of their number, but there was no way to know if the rest of the band had rejoined with some of their brothers in the cave, or even if Korlaeth was still alive.

It would be death for Sol Hawk to remain out here. The ruse would have to continue.

Sol Hawk walked across the sand to the cave.

Korlaeth ignored the person who bumped into him. However, that person was not content to leave Korlaeth alone.

“You know, you don’t talk much.”

The Vakeros kept quietly wise.

“I don’t seem to remember ever seeing you before,” he said with narrowed eyes. He leaned down close to Korlaeth. “What’s that you were eating?”

Korlaeth looked up, ready in case he had been discovered.

A whistle sounded in the cave, and the man looked away from Korlaeth.

Sol Hawk approached sluggishly, not used to these warm temperatures or wearing such hot clothing. How did the native people survive wearing these things? Wouldn’t it be a better color to use? He huffed along, following the tracks to the cave, which appeared as just a small opening underneath a rock protrusion from this distance.
Act III, Scene IV – Singled Out

A whistle sounded from within. The Kai could not make out any movement, but he was sure they had seen him. They had the advantage of sight in this situation. He sighed and kept going, heavy foot after heavier foot.

The Vakeros stood and looked around. People were pointing out of the cave. He moved closer to see what was going on. A figure in black was walking weakly toward the cave, head down.

Korlaeth swallowed and frowned. He hoped it was Sol Hawk--because that would mean the Kai was safe, but he also hoped it was not Sol Hawk: for his arrival in this way meant he would not be safe for long.

The leader came to stand near the lookout who signaled everyone. "What happened? Why is there only one returning? Who is that?"

Korlaeth noticed archers on either side of the mouth of the cave, notching their arrows in preparation to fire if this was an intruder or a trap.

"Wait till my signal," said the leader. "Let's see who this is first."

They waited until the lone figure was a stone's throw away. Korlaeth's mind was in disarray, trying to figure out a plan.

Where were the others?

Sol Hawk was almost there. He could see movement inside now, but his fatigue from lack of sleep combined with the heat's toll upon him had done a number on him. He staggered and almost fell. His mouth was dry, and he longed to get in the cool shade of the cave. It was then he heard a voice call out:

"Come no further: State your name! And explain why you are alone!"

*S * *

Sol Hawk stood straight and tall but walked in no further, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dark. "It is me, my leader," said Sol Hawk, "We saw a shadow on the sand. We stopped sweeping the tracks and we listened. Then we heard voices. They did not speak the mother tongue, but before we could be certain, the voices were gone. The others sent me to report this to you immediately. Perhaps, he stopped for effect, "Perhaps they were the ones who came upon us at the camp."

Ready for anything, Sol Hawk awaits the answer.

*S * *

Korlaeth waited for the figure to speak, staying back from the cave mouth. He was only a little concerned if this happened to be Sol, sure that he would not be foolish enough to return alone to the cave without some way of explaining why he was alone.

*S * *

The leader looks down at Paru. "Have we been followed? Kubudei wouldn't send his troops so soon."

Paru Kee-thana looked at her leader with disguised contempt. She should be heading this group, not relegated to play the part of some pampered psychomancer.

She spoke, more as a formality than to really ask, "With your permission...."

*S * *

Sol Hawk focused on the cave, standing and swaying in the heat. All was silent for a moment, then a female voice called out:

"You saw a shadow, yet not what cast the shadow? Were close enough to hear voices, yet saw nothing but a shadow?"

The voice paused long enough for Sol Hawk to suppose the questions were not rhetorical. He was grasping for an answer, but his mind was sluggish from fatigue. Before he could speak, a figure walked out of the cave. The clothing was loose, but not loose enough to hide distinct feminine curvature. The person strode ten paces out of the cave, then propped her hands on two pommels at her waist.

"Where is this...shadow...now? Did you lead them back to us?" She looked down, then cocked her head back up to glare at the stranger with one eye. "And you never did tell us your name."

*S * *

"Maouk," said Sol Hawk, and he bowed his head in respect, "The sound may carry far in the desert air. The shadow may be long as the sun rises. But it is not mine to question, only to obey and report."

Sensing that Paru was trying to read him, Sol Hawk continued. "I swept the tracks for much of the way," he said. "I will show you the place where the shadow was seen, as you have commanded."

*S * *

Korlaeth moved closer to the cave mouth in curiosity, careful not to move too much closer than those around him. He suspected 'Maouk's' true identity, but would do nothing without assurance. The mission was always foremost, and right now, it seemed prudent to stay with this group until Ameesha was near.

*S * *

Paru listened to the figure's answer. She gestured with her left hand, and had Sol Hawk seen it, he would have recognized it to be an offensive gesture. A scowl of contempt formed on her face.

"You must have split with the wrong group, you fool. Only Rana's men would be so inept at survival in the open desert. You will only slow us down."

She turned and motioned for archers to exit the cave in case the figure tried something.

"Take him to the back cave and remove his garb. Treat him for sunstroke and use the laumspur sparingly."

Two men exited the cave and grabbed Sol Hawk by the arms and hefted them across their shoulders. He tried his best to resist, but there was little he could do in his current condition to stop that. The stark contrast from the bright sandy desert to the dark cool cave was too great—his eyes could not adjust, and he sighed heavily.
Act III, Scene IV — Singled Out

Korlaeth watched as Sol Hawk was carried in. He knew that this person was the Kai, even before anyone else did. His mind drew a blank on what to do, however. There were at least twenty armed people here, including two high-ranking Sharnazim. A third of the men had bowes. Who knew if they already had poison-coated arrows nocked?

As the two men carried Sol Hawk by, Korlaeth’s heart pounded and nearly leapt from his chest. He did not know what to do, however. There were at least twenty armed people here, including two high-ranking Sharnazim.

Sol Hawk was in no hurry to challenge him or to return to the outer cave. The work would not take all night. Sol Hawk could wait. He did not bother to undress, and his gear he kept in the bunk beside him. He had no need to explain himself — outwardly it takes note of the spring water. The elix would not likely challenge him for the water, but with the scribe still at work, Sol Hawk studied the caves as they passed through. The two had taken him deeper in. Allegedly this is where their supplies are kept. As they entered, Sol Hawk began to walk upon his own feet. “My strength returns. I am fine now.” Although his steps may have seemed unsteady, his determination to walk on his own was not.

Sol Hawk relaxed upon the bunk. His strength would slowly return — this he knew from his long training in the arts of Healing. He would suffer the heatstroke rather than be discovered. Sol Hawk studied the caves as they passed through. The two had taken him deeper in. Allegedly this is where their supplies are kept. As they entered, Sol Hawk began to walk upon his own feet. “My strength returns. I am fine now.” Although his steps may have seemed unsteady, his determination to walk on his own was not.

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Rules, Rulings

OOC: Bluff: 22

The Bluff failed because she doesn't care about the motive behind it. Apathy gave her a good bonus.

Paru Kee-thana (Shz9): AC 16 EP 68

gave her a good bonus.

care about the motive behind it. Apathy

The second in command of this small detachment, Paru Kee-thana was respected by the men in her command--and feared.

She was a rarity among the Sharnazim, for women were not usually trained in the military arts. Her reputation among the

Sharnazim was far-reaching, for she had a heart devoid of any sympathy.

Ashtarah is their equivalent of hell or hades. It is an eternal slope of sharp edged boulders, devoid of clouds or rain.

The elix growled, but Sol Hawk sensed that it was no longer a threat to him - it was a prisoner here, even as he was.

Mindsheild at Tier IV means that your psychic reflexes are fast enough to throw up a shield before any attack strikes. You don't have to think about it or expend WP to raise it--it's just there when it has to be.

Mindshield, or would my Instinctive Shield (Tier IV) raise in time to counter a possible mindprobe/attack? If in doubt about my protection, I would spend the point.

Sharnazim was far-reaching, for she had a heart devoid of any sympathy.

Ashtarah is their equivalent of hell or hades. It is an eternal slope of sharp edged boulders, devoid of clouds or rain.

She twirled her blade and swung it with fluid grace and ease at the side of the Kai's neck--the area that contained major

blood vessels beneath an inch of soft muscle. Not surprised by such an act, the Kai was not caught off-guard. His innate
disciplines allowed him to know what was coming, and he moved a step back and hunched his shoulders to his ear on that
side. The blade bit deep into his upper arm, and he winced again as he felt her wrench the blade free. Sol Hawk: 8 EP

* * *

**Very well. To Ashtarah with you,** she sneered, smiling viciously as she drew a khanjar in her free hand.

**OOC:** (Simple Focus): Concentration Check against elix's charm: 26

**OOC:** I rolled a hit and damage in the dice thread, but I am retracting it since I realize after a look in the rules that

this use of Mind Over Matter is a standard action, not a free action.

**OOC:** I am assuming also that Paru's attack happened in Round 1, just before Sol Hawk's. Of course, she greatly beat my Initiative Roll.

Act III, Scene IV — Singled Out

Paru. They surely meant the woman he had talked to upon entering the cave. Sol knew that she was likely a junior lieutenant

or another important personage. She was onto him. He had not believed his story.

Calm and quick, Sol Hawk moved to the pool of water. It was clean and clear - safe to drink, and he lost no time taking his fill

of it. The elix growled, but Sol Hawk sensed that it was no longer a threat to him - it was a prisoner here, even as he was. Sol Hawk replaced his disguise immediately upon finishing, returning to the bed.

When Paru arrived seconds later, Sol Hawk was beside the bunk, supporting himself upon the beam. His strength was slowly

returning - he did not need to show her this. His scimitar was nearby, laid across the bunk within arm's reach. He was garbed

as before with the mask and in the outfit of the black-clads. He could fight her. He could win. But not now, not yet. The Kai

Masters had taught him many things. Patience was among these.

If she was able to read his mind, she had not shown this skill previously. But Sol Hawk would take no chances. His mindshield

was ready.

Head bowed in reverence, he simply awaited her words.

**OOC:** I am assuming also that Paru's

this use of Mind Over Matter is a

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The Bluff failed because she doesn't care about the motive behind it. Apathy gave her a good bonus.

Paru Kee-thana (Shz9): AC 16 EP 68

head is down a bit, but he has not knelt to receive the finishing blow. Instead, he muses as a man who is thoughtfully:

"You saw it from the first," said Sol Hawk, "Just as Rana said - "Paru will know you." It is no secret among us that

Rana has expressed a certain... dislike for some of your methods. However," and he lowers his voice slightly, "He would

rather see you in charge here. He prefers to have an adversary that he can respect. That can happen... soon. I was told to

feign ignorance until I could speak to you alone.

Sol Hawk moves with a certain ease, but he is ever careful to stay far from Paru's weapon.

Paru narrowed her eyes as the man spoke. "Rana has chosen a poor time to negotiate. As have you."

She twirled her blade and swung it with fluid grace and ease at the side of the Kai's neck--the area that contained major

blood vessels beneath an inch of soft muscle. Not surprised by such an act, the Kai was not caught off-guard. His innate
disciplines allowed him to know what was coming, and he moved a step back and hunched his shoulders to his ear on that
side. The blade bit deep into his upper arm, and he winced again as he felt her wrench the blade free. Sol Hawk: 8 EP

* * *

ROUND 1

Paru was fast and Sol Hawk was still suffering from heatstroke. He felt that his body was sluggish by comparison. He reached

for and grabbed his scimitar which was quite near. Paru had taken the opportunity to strike him. The elix was wild, enraged

that its only friend ever was being attacked by the small female. Its feline eyes danced back and forth between them in the

false light of the cave, listening to the sound of scowled-upon-sword. It hissed as Paru came at once too near - she spat at it,

and continued fighting which sent the half-starved beast into even more of a rage.

As he fought, Sol Hawk reached his mind out to where the elix was now growing and straining at its chain. It was a simple

chain with a simple lock. As he parried another sword blow, the Kai made himself familiar with the intricate inner workings. In

a moment of knowing, his mind lanced the lock like needles, ultimately resulting in an audible and forbidding click.

* * *

* * *
Act III, Scene IV – Singled Out

Korlaeth makes his way slowly in the direction Sol had been taken. Having seen the end of the last fight Sol was in, he knew the Kai would not submit easily to whatever foulness the female Sharnazim had in mind and perhaps he could at least provide a distraction. He paused, glancing around the interior of the cave as a thought suddenly came to him.

* * *

Korlaeth edged up the ramp and was close to the horses when he heard a snarl and a cry of pain—a female shriek. The words that followed made him wince, and he prepared to enact his plan.

* * *

The Kai’s mind withdrew from the pain he experienced and sought out the location of the lock in the room. Odds are that it was not complex, since it was used for such a base purpose. Sure enough, Sol Hawk sensed that a simple press and twist in the right place would...

The lock popped open! Using his mind again, the Kai moved the lock out of the chain, and both it and the chain dropped to the right place would....

* * *

Unfortunately, he thought, so are the rest of this band. He was counting on the troops’ desire to be able to leave quickly and he pulsed at what he hoped were slipknots as he moved swiftly down the lines of horses.

ROUND 2

“You are right to test my worth,” said Sol Hawk to Paru, “I do not intend to disappoint.” He steps back in order to position himself as the Sharnazim Blue approach— they now stand as a barrier between him and the woman warrior.

They are fully focused upon following Paru’s command. Both have their hands outstretched— the Kai is pleased, for they have no weapons with which to defend themselves. Judgement is upon you, whispers the masked Lord to the Sharnazim who wears the evil green. Paru was amazed to see the man she knew as Maouk flip his scimitar forward to strike one of the Sharnazim squarely in the shoulder. The man buckles slightly in the commotion, none are likely to see that the khanjar had flown free of the hook on Sol’s disguise in order to strike the dozing man who was all too eager to get close...to everyone around, it simply seemed that the man called Maouk was moving quickly— even too quickly to be seen.

You’re dying, come the sound of a voice within the Sharnazim’s head, You have served well, but it is your time. So die. The imagery he saw was at once peaceful and yet shocking— images drawn directly from the stories Sol had heard of Ashtara, the afterlife.

The scimitar returned to strike again. There was no way for the man to avoid it for it was speeding toward his soul like the imagery he saw was at once peaceful and yet shocking— images drawn directly from the stories Sol had heard of Ashtara, the afterlife.

At the sound of Paru’s shout, the cave was set into motion. Korlaeth ducked into the cavern with the horses and began untying them rapidly from the main line they were tethered to. A young Sharnazim appeared from nowhere.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he asked. Korlaeth turned and punched the young man, then grabbed him from behind and wrapped his arm around the Sharn’s neck as the commotion outside loudened. In less than a minute, the bloody-nosed man was unconscious. The Vakeros returned to his plan, and once all the horses were free, he began trying to get them to rush out of the cave.

* * *

Meanwhile, the Kai had his hands full in the close quarters of the small supply cavern. The elix had died as Paru turned her attacks to it, and the guards had closed in on him.

With blinding attacks the Kai assaulted the closest one, doubling him over in pain. The second one grabbed the Kai with both hands and attempted to overpower him. A fist smashed into the Kai’s face, and the guard’s eyes widened in astonishment.

Sol Hawk: -3 EP subdual

*His eyes!* cried the man. “Northlander!”

ROUND 3

Discovered! As the second Sharnazim glimpsed Sol’s blue eyes, the Kai Lord held in his mind the psychic link that would be used to burn his mind shortly. But first, he would finish what he had started with the first one.

As the bigger bodyguard grappled him about the waist, Sol Hawk failed to break free, but could not (STR Chk: 2). Even so, as he flailed, he was able to land not one, but two more strikes upon his bleeding target (DAM 1 and 1). The strikes were mere scratches, but Sol Hawk did not relent. He turned the force of his mind powers upon the man as well. (DAM 1, 1). He had one khanjar left - the one Arcadian gave him, but just as he was about to launch it withStrafing Will, the Big Sharnazim had squeezed him about the middle, winding him (failed Concentration Check).

Sol Hawk thrashed this way and that, catching the large Sharnazim against the wall, then against the desk, but still the Sharnazim held. Finally, the Kai Lord called upon the Power of Pure Mind in order to repel the man’s grip. Like waves, field within field of force washed off the Kai, causing a disorientation and dizziness. Slowly, the big man knew his grip was beginning to slip...

* * *
Act III, Scene IV – Singled Out

Korlaeth positioned himself in the back of the cavern and braced himself. He could only hope that he was far enough from most of the horses...

He focused on one of the horses farthest from the entrance, drawing on the Elder Art of Enchantment with a little trepidation. He’d never used it on an animal before, but it seemed that it would work the same...he focused on projecting into the mind of that horse a vision of fire burning hotly at the back of the cave.

So much for the undercover approach.

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Paru dropped her weapons and looked with disgust at the elix. How had it gotten free? Combined with her guard’s cry of Northlander, the strange occurrence left a disturbing feeling in her mind. It couldn’t be....

But she’d take no chances right now. She reached behind her back and pulled out her small handheld crossbow and cocked it, drew a bolt off a sheath, down on her leg, and aimed at what she felt was a Kai Lord.

The Kai grunted as the uninvited Sharnazim bowed into his misdirection, causing his attacks against the bleeding opponent to falter. Still, his mind was capable where his sword arm was not. A final blast of energy tore through the man’s distressed body harmony. It was enough to subdue him forever. As the guard holding the Kai began to lock his grip and squeeze, Sol Hawk had the distinct feeling he was being attacked by a constrictor snake!

It was then he glanced at Paru and saw her intent. She was cataloging herself to attack.

----------

Korlaeth conjured up an image of fire, blazing fire in the back of the cavern. The horse whose mind he targeted would become wild-eyed and cried out in panic, turning to bolt. Something in it’s whinny set the other equines on edge, for it took but a little urging from the Vakeros to send most of them into the tunnel. He could not tell what direction they were headed, but from the cries of alarm, he knew they were having an intended effect.

ROUND 4

Sol Hawk tried to shake the large warrior, but the man’s grip was too tight. Reaching into his pocket, he removed the Alether potion he’d just imbibed. The large man laughed, tightening his grip all the while. Sol Hawk retaliated with a tremendous blast of psychic energy straight to the man’s nervous system (DAM 2, 3). Even as he began to despair, he could hear the potion he’d just imbibed. The large man laughed, tightening his grip all the while. Sol Hawk retaliated with a tremendous blast of psychic energy straight to the man’s nervous system (DAM 2, 3). Even as he began to despair, he could hear the potion he’d just imbibed.

Sol Hawk saw Paru taking aim with the crossbow. In an attempt to spoil her shot, he sent his last khanjar streaking toward her and it struck her in the shoulder (DAM 3). Even as she cursed, the Kai Lord began to flail about again, emboldened by the poison he’d just imbibed. The large man laughed, tightening his grip all the while. Sol Hawk retaliated with a tremendous blast of psychic energy straight to the man’s nervous system (DAM 2, 3). Even as he began to despair, he could hear the potion he’d just imbibed. The large man laughed, tightening his grip all the while.

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It was then he glanced at Paru and saw her intent. She was cataloging herself to attack.

----------

Paru saw the large warrior, looking panicked. He “grabbed” at lead ropes and halters, “trying” to calm the horses. A few seconds after coming into view, allowing most to look and see only another soldier trying to help restore order and look away, he turned and moved swiftly down the tunnel toward Sol.

----------

Korlaeth’s bluff worked flawlessly. Those who rushed past the panicked horses looked at him and holstered at them that they would help. He held on and faked it for another few seconds, then detached from the commotion and moved hastily down the tunnel. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw two Sharnazim rushing past the horses—the tunnel was clearing. Shrieks whispers filled the air, possibly a method used in training the horses to command their attention or something.

The two Sharnazim rushed past Korlaeth, urging him onward to make sure that Paru was okay. He smiled to himself. She had known. Somehow she had realized that he was a Kai Lord.

The Kai grunted at the uninvited Sharnazim, bowing into his misdirection, causing his attacks against the bleeding opponent to falter. Still, his mind was capable where his sword arm was not. A final blast of energy tore through the man’s distressed body harmony. It was enough to subdue him forever. As the guard holding the Kai began to lock his grip and squeeze, Sol Hawk had the distinct feeling he was being attacked by a constrictor snake!

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Korlaeth raced out behind the horses, looking panicked. He grabbed at lead ropes and halters, “trying” to calm the horses. A few seconds after coming into view, allowing most to look and see only another soldier trying to help restore order and look away, he turned and moved swiftly down the tunnel toward Sol.

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The two Sharnazim rushed past Korlaeth, urging him onward to make sure that Paru was okay. He smiled to himself. She wouldn’t be okay for long if he had anything to say about it. A whine from behind him startled him. He turned to see a dark brown mare moving down the tunnel toward him.

What in blazes was a horse doing coming this way? He quickened his pace to outrun the thing, not for fear of being trampled, but for fear it would block the passageway.

He rounded a corner and kept descending, following the tunnel blindly yet hopefully.

----------

The Kai watched with anticipation as the khanjar sliced into Paru’s upper arm. She muttered something in Vassagonian and looked down at her hand-held crossbow. “Hold him,” she commanded the person grappling the Kai.

Unable to move to dodge the attack, Sol Hawk was nothing more than a point-blank target. He saw her finger tense, and the bolt strike Sol Hawk. At once he called upon his Kai Powers to neutralize the poison that was swimming in his system. The Talons used Graveweed - he knew that his system should be able to easily neutralize this plant-based poison. But something was wrong. Paru looked into his eyes and smiled. She had known. Somehow she had realized that he was a Kai Lord.

He pushed all his healing power through his body, but the poison was very strong. Chemical in nature, no doubt. As the light of Kai flooded through his body, the poison began to break up - the initial wave of weakness vanished, but not before it had done its work - it had paralyzed him. Even so, Sol Hawk found that the effort had healed some of the bruises and batterings that he had just taken. (Restores 8 EP and negates all subdual damage with Warmth of the Sun).

ROUND 5

The bolt struck Sol Hawk. At once he called upon his Kai Powers to neutralize the poison that was swimming in his system. The Talons used Graveweed - he knew that his system should be able to easily neutralize this plant-based poison. But something was wrong. Paru looked into his eyes and smiled. She had known. Somehow she had realized that he was a Kai Lord.

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**Act III, Scene IV – Singled Out**

Sol Hawk went limp in the arms of the Sharnazim who gleefully squeezed harder and laughed. Sol Hawk tried to strike at Paru with his scimitar, but it fell to the floor from his limp fingers. It would not stay there for long. The blade wigged upon the floor, then like a spinning disk of death, the rounded blade flew end-over-end. Paru deftly dodged the flying blade – it clanked to the floor at the other end of the chamber.

Suddenly, another black-clad appeared. At first he lingered in front of Paru - she was looking at the air above his head, moving this way and that. At first, Sol was very curious about this strange happening,... until he noticed the blue kai. Korlaeth! Ah ha, so the Vakeros had lived!

At that moment, a large mare arrived behind Paru, wild-eyed and scared. She is our enemy (bluff 11), said Sol Hawk mentally, "TRAMPLE her! (VGP - JT)" Still frightened and unable to resist the Kai's command, the horse rears up - simultaneously, Paru feels the psychic shock of the Kai's powers inside her head simultaneously with the confusion of seeing yet another horse, which for a moment, disorients her (*DM 3*, 7). As she shakes it off, she looks up to see both hooves speeding down toward her.

**Korlaeth** smiled briefly in triumph as he bluffed his way past the Vaskan soldiers, rushing to "aid" Paru. His thoughts briefly wondered at the presence of the mare, but only long enough to ensure he was ahead of her. He raced swiftly down the tunnel, drawing his blue-steel khanjar as soon as he was out of sight of the others.

As Paru came into view, he called on the training given him by the Desai mages, covering his own appearance with that of a changing, panicked horse...it lasts in her mind. Korlaeth smiled to himself as he drew his blue-steel khanjar. His first intent had been to run her through as she dove away from his illusion, but as he thought of the mare heading down the tunnel behind him, he revised his plan. Let the illusion vanish before her eyes, revealing what it is. He aimed for the Sharnazim, and freedom for Sol.

The Kai's senses were assailed with all that was happening. His paralysis did not remove pain, for he could still feel the bolt lodged in his chest and the crushing strength of the Sharnazim that held him. He heard more people enter the room, followed by Paru's hate-filled command:

"Kill the Kai!"

Sol Hawk felt himself fall onto the b puck, and out of the corner of his field of vision, the Sharnazim that had been holding him drew his scimitar and reversed the grip, positioning it near the Kai's heart. A cruel smile played across his features.

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Korlaeth had the satisfaction of seeing Paru recoil in terror as she thought a horse had entered and reared up. Then fear turned to momentary confusion as a man stood where the horse had been. Man or horse—no matter. She'd kill either!

The crossbow fired, and the bolt slammed into Korlaeth's abdomen. A warmth filled his body, quickly turning into a painful bolting of the bloodstream it seemed. He steeled himself, wondering if this was what happened to the Kai.

Suddenly behind him, the already crowded room because moreso as a real horse—the mare that had been behind him—burst into the room, looking around in a frenzy. It turned to look at Paru and whinnied, raising up to hit her with a hoof. She fell back, pulling her last bolt from her thigh-shaheet.

Korlaeth was pushed aside by the massive beast as the poison coursed through his system.

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**ROUND 6**

Sol Hawk tried to move, but he laid instead like a doll on the bed. Korlaeth was here. He was poised to strike - but Sol Hawk knew that even now Paru would be firing upon him. From the bed he still had enough of a view of the room to find his scimitar upon the floor. With a strength of will, Sol sent it once more into the air, flying true and cutting into Paru's arm as it sliced its way up (*DM 1*).

The horse continued to trample her toward the corner, putting all of its efforts into crushing the bad, bad woman with its massive weight. Even as she fell to the ground beneath the horse's hooves, Sol Hawk still held the psychic link to her in his mind. She felt as if sharp spines were being driven into her all over her body, nailing her to the ground. At first, she thought these illusions, but when the agony subsided, she saw that the wounds still bled... (*DM 9, 3*)

Korlaeth, intoned Sol Hawk mentally to the man with the blue khanjar. She has poison. Like at the border. Poison arrows can kill with one hit. Sol Hawk looked up at the Sharnazim who was licking his lips and positioning his scimitar for a downward strike. With all the drugs still in him, Sol Hawk had but one defense: he called upon Ishir to heal him in hopes that it would close the terrible wounds he was about to receive. Again, the light of Kii washed through him. Even in this dark place, the masked lord could still feel the Warmth of the Sun (*recovered 8 EP*).

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Korlaeth's smile quickly fell as the poison coursed through his blood. He dropped to floor unconsciously, trying to use his failing muscle control to roll away from the failing horse. He tried to focus his mind on Paru again, visualizing another horse coming swiftly toward her.

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"Paru!" came a cry from the hallway. "I'm coming Paru!"

The female Sharn seemed not to hear the voice from the tunnel, nor the loud slapping footsteps of someone running that direction. After all, there was a horse in front of her, with its nostrils flared and teeth showing. She managed to load the crossbow and shot, grasping the horse on the inside of its back leg as it raised up and slammed its hooves into her head. She shielded herself as best she could. Something whizzed by her again and sliced through her skin—the Kai's scimitar had ricocheted off the wall behind her, allowing his mind to grab it again and thrust it toward her. "I told you to kill the Kai!" she shouted frantically, blood flowing from a large tear in her forehead from the hooves.

The soldier did as instructed. He raised the scimitar and let it fall as Korlaeth collapsed against the wall and slid to the floor. He felt the horse's back hooves bump into him, but it was just trying to move around, not step high enough to trample him.
Perception: 25

Korlaeth: You are bound tight, gagged, and blindfolded so you can't target anyone with a spell. The Escape Artist DC is 30. You have no idea where you are, but you are in a chair. Suddenly, someone speaks to you and asks who sent you. Before you can answer, a heavy fist slams into your jaw, followed by another, and another -8 subdual

Sol Hawk: Ditto. You are tied tightly to a chair, gagged, blindfolded, and you feel horribly weak. You feel like you have been beaten senseless while drunk with Bor Brew. You are groggy and disoriented. DC30 on the Escape Artist. People are talking all around you. Without warning a foot slams into your stomach -2 subdual -1 lethal

You both are being asked all manner of questions:

- Who sent you?
- What do you know?
- Why are you here?
- How did you get here?
- Did Kuthodel hire you?
- Who are you looking for?
- How soon do you want to die?
- How painfully do you want to die?

OOC: I am assuming that the paralysis has worn off.

I'll do a perception check, too. At least I'd like to know how many people are here and if Paru is here. Whatever else I could discern might also be of use.

Perception: 25

I see a sheath in my boot for my blue-veined dagger...I don't expect it's there, but you never know...oh, I'll check for those arrows I hid away, too, while I'm at it.

You can't tell if you dagger is there or not, and when you come to, you find that your legs have been bent back on either side of the chair and tied to the back legs of the chair. The sounds you hear when you awaken are those of the Kai being questioned heavily by a gruff-sounding man. He curses the Kai and does something-all you can hear is movement and then a dull thud, followed by the sound of a chair turning over and skidding a bit.

The others in the room all whoop in joy or astonishment.

"Send a rider to get more Laumspur from Aya in Chahdan."

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Act III, Scene IV – Singled Out

Sol Hawk could not focus on the blade, could not focus on the man. His eyes stared straight up at the ceiling. The blade shot down, and the Kai felt an intense spasm in his chest where his heart was. Blood sprayed into the air, a crimson mist that no amount of Kai healing could control. His body succumbed to the blow, and Sol Hawk the Kai saw the world go from fuzzy focus to blurry swirls to black.

Korlaeth could not see this, but he knew something was wrong. He recreated the enchantment of a horse and Paru screamed and covered under it. The two men who were supposed to come stay the Vakeros hesitated a second and--seeing their leader in trouble--turned their blades upon the staggering horse, wondering why she was so terrified. It fell twitching to the floor as they moved to make way for it.

A tall man (who Korlaeth would recognize as Paru's commander if he could see straight) entered and took in the bizarre scene: A Sharn had just skewered another Sharn to the bed, two more were hacking at a helpless horse on the ground, Paru was curséd up and bloodied, and a man lay still next to her, looking groggily toward the wall. The Sharnazim commander called upon his years of training to ignore the strange sights and focus on the injured...especially his lover. He rushed to Paru and pulled a potion from his belt, then turned to the man beside her. A quick look up and down the body revealed the one thing that Korlaeth would not want seen: a strange azure-tinted shanjar.

"Tears of the Mother!!" he said in awe. "Blueteel!!" He snatched it up and looked at the man. The two Sharnazim next to him kept beating the horse, even though it was clearly incapacitated. "Enough," he shouted at them. They stopped and he pointed to Korlaeth.

"Bind, blind, and gag him," he said, standing as Paru drank the laumspur. He turned to the dead Sharn on the bed.

"What happened to him?"

"Kai," Paru said feebly.

"Kai? Not a Kai!" He snatched the potion from Paru's grasp, drawing a whining protest.

"Hey!"

"Move you fool," the leader said, knocking the executioner back. "Grab some more laumspur! Hurry!" He felt the Kai's neck. Weak. Very weak. Blood was everywhere, a sign that the man had missed the Kai's heart. Having treated battlefield wounds many times, the commander pried open the Kai's wound and poured laumspur all in it.

When the next bottle was handed to him, he pulled the cork out with his teeth and put half in the wound, half in the Kai's mouth. "Come on!" he shouted, massaging the chest wound.

"What are you doing?!" asked Paru.

"If the Kai know what we're up to, I want to know it, too! Don't you find it odd that a Kai and Vakeros are together spying on us? We need their info!"

-------------

Sol Hawk's vision swam. Someone was rubbing his chest, which was tingling. He tried to blink but couldn't. Something was in his mouth. He choked on it and a realization hit him:

He wasn't dead! (Sol Hawk: -2 FP)

He swooned again, happy that he was alive but wondering if he was about to die again... It was becoming a habit. A really bad habit.

* * *

Korlaeth flinched at the blows raining down on him. They seemed to have little effect on the well-trained Vakeros. Korlaeth was seething inside, so intent on his anger at the world, the Talons, Sol...but mostly himself, that he had little room for the questions and blows outside the darkness he currently found himself in.

Teo the Daezarin with all of them! he thought, flinching subconsciously as the fist struck again. The stupid Daernath lets them know we're there, and then the stupid Kai gets himself caught and I have to come save his sorry...

His train of thought broke off as the fist struck again, harder this time. Korlaeth dragged himself from his self-pitying anger and turned finally to his Keron training. When caught, always do the last thing your captor would expect...

He pushed off the floor with his feet, sending his chair toppling backward, and kicked as hard as he could.

* * *

The Vakeros surprised his captors with the tactic, but the knowledge it brought only increased his suffering. He tried to reach for his dagger, but couldn't reach it thanks to the bonds he was in. He didn't even know if it was still there. The arrows he dipped were in an inside pocket of his tunic-wrap.

He would have to hope that no one drove one of the tips into his flesh while pummeling him.

Lying on his back on the floor, his anger blistering hot, the last thing he heard was:

"Stupid Blue."

Then a foot struck his temple, shutting down his thoughts.
<p>The sun will rise in the W, NW, and N, you can barely make out the dark spots on the horizon that signify the other sides of riders. The sun will soon peak over the sides of the mountains. </p>
Act III, Midstory — Mirage

Sir Victor's face lit up when the sage suggested what that sun rod could mean for them and their separated companions. He dismounted to pick up the sun rod and examined it before handing it to Arcadian. "This means at least one of them went with the group headed North-East. Our choice is clear, let's follow this trail!" proposed the knight enthusiastically, as he remounted and started riding in the direction of the foothills.

Hope once again welled within him as he was now sure of their next course of action. Sol and Koraeth were probably following the group holding the princess captive! The Sommlending knight felt confident that between the 6 of them, they could overpower the score of black-clads who headed to the north-east.

Suddenly Arcadian wondered why he even cared. He shrugged and gave her another obvious glance.

"Why are you here?"

Arcadian sighed, "I should probably be thankful that at least speaking to me." He sounded smug though he tried to refrain from doing so, "you are here because of me? Then I can only resolve you have been searching for me. Why? Where in the depths of your dark heart did you find reason, basis to follow me?"

Arcadian, though he wanted to talk to her and resolve their past was finding himself becoming frustrated with her mere presence. Her calm and decent demeanor infuriated him to the point of reseme. He kept up pace with her horse as they kept riding across the sands.

"And you know why I left, Kami. Don't play with me."

The young Vakeros made sure that he did not make eye contact with the warrioress. For he knew if he did so she would hold power over him. She always had. She had it within her capability to manipulate and affect his emotions and his actions. She was a being of mass confusion who no man would ever truly begin to understand. As a phenomenal essence of individuality whose very existence relied on the emotional walls she herself had set up her heart was and would forever be... clandestine. And it was for that he resented her.

Arcadian smiled brightly and looked to Arcadian almost incomplently.

"I'm here... because of you, you didn't honestly think you could leave me behind, did you?"

* * *

"Why did you leave me behind... what was it that I did to make you leave so unannounced?" Kami's voice softened as her soft red lips pursed.

* * *

"I'm here...well because of you, you didn't honestly think you could leave me behind, did you?"

Arcadian sighed, "I should probably be thankful that at least speaking to me."

The knight turned to listen to the sage as he rode up beside him. "She's very important. Besides being the President's daughter, her abduction may be all that stands between peace within these nations and outright war. The political situation between Anari, Vassagoria, Closia and their immediate neighbours is very tense and everything is hanging on a raper's edge. There is more going on than we know, wheels within wheels, we stumbled on quite an elaborate plot. If we can concentrate on saving the princess, that may be all that's necessary to stop another pointless war. Men are killing men, when our real enemy lies to the west of Sommerlund, in the Darklands. Vashna's defeat by King Ulnar was but a reprieve, and I'm afraid that when the Darklords are ready to strike back, humanity and all the free realms and races will be woefully unprepared for the onslaught. Who knows when that will happen, as it's been sixty years since they've launched a real offensive of any kind. It could happen in our lifetimes or not, but we must be prepared for any eventuality, something too few rulers are willing to believe." The Sommlending then fell silent, pondering on the threats to his realm and his life, whether immediate or far away.

* * *

"So you fear that the foul scheme we are trying to uncover was perhaps planned in Holgedad and not in Barrakeesh?" Simyn shuddered at the thought. For him the Darklands had always been distant, but for the Sommlending it was a cold reality. Peace was a rarity in Lyris. If the Darklords and their minions plotted in Vassagoria, why couldn't they have schemes that concerned Lyris and perhaps the whole of the Stormrains? Simyn felt a wave of home-sickness. Would he ever see the beauty of Varetta or the mighty river Strom again or his home Quarten?

* * *

Long dark tresses swayed about Kami's face as she pulled her cloudy eyes away from Arcadian. Suddenly the aura about the young woman pulsed with resentment and madness, which quickly consumed her essence. Kamiel wrenched angrily on the reins of her mount forcing the beast up on its hind legs with a piercing groan. The Vakerine would tug just one more time on the leather straps instigating the mare to kick out with her front legs and hooves in hopes to alarm Cade of her rising frustration.

"How dare you CADE!"

Kamilah screamed through her gaping moist lips the echo of her cry falling in unison with the return of booming hooves to ground below. She only let her mount pause for an instant before kicking the steed to a jaunt while maneuvering in front of Arcadans steed thus preventing him from advancing with the other riders.

"I would be here if I knew why you left! Would my heart be so cold and treacherous if you had taken the time to ask ME whether or not I wanted to be left behind and alone! Or perhaps none of those things mattered to you! Was I not your friend, your lover? Do you yourself believe that I didn't so much as deserve to know at least where you were going and why, or even when you would return... if at all?"

The mere echo of her voice was almost enough to overpower the strained and harsh cry of Kamilah. With a swift movement her hand fell to her hilt drawing one of her short swords and directing it at the wound placed on his neck.

"Do, mm I answer me if I swear to the Gods that I'll finish what another started! All this time you've left me wandering and when I do seek you out the words that you speak are full of what? Not love but doubt and bitterness! And don't for a moment think that I would toy or play Arcadian, I'm not a child anymore. You have great nerve asking and saying such things..."

Her misty hues locked on Arcadans as she awaited his response. Slowly the hollow sound and ambience of rage was replaced with melancholy, a single tear drifting down her cheek... still the grip on her blade tightened.
Act III, Midstory – Mirage

Arcadian glanced unmoving at the blade, which was pressed against his wound. If he had any fear that she would take his head, the Vakeros did not show it. He stared at Kamilah with cold, lifeless pupils and any sort of warm emotion he felt towards her in this moment was immediately snuffed out of existence.

"Yet you are a child, Kami. If you were not you would see that it is your love that has blinded you, not I. In your anger there is no wisdom, no insight to the consequences of your actions." His words were slow and clear. And though they had the ugly taint of anger upon them he did not speak in rage as she had. Arcadian had lost sight of his wits more than enough in the past few days.

"If you must know why I left then I shall tell you, though you will not like the answer. You may very well wish you had never pursued me."

As Arcadian spoke his hand drifted to the hilt of his sword. He had no desire to kill her, yet his warrior instincts demanded that he prepare to defend himself. His eyes were still frigid and remorseless as the Kaltersse during the frost.

"Ever since my parents died there has been a serpent growing within my chest. And as each day passes, as each enemy falls to my blade, as each agonizing drop of blood is split that serpent dominates me. My rage grows and soon approaches the time where I will no longer be the person that you love. My destiny lies not with the honor codes of the Vakeros but with myself. Alone, I will have to confront my inner demons as well as my past."

"Already my transformation has affected you, or else you would not be so quick to anger at my site and my words of truth. Eventually you will come to realize what I have already: in our youth we were a pair. You and I meant everything to each other, and that at least was that his intention."

"But those days are gone, Kami. The sun of our infancy has set and who we were in that infancy has slipped into shadow. Our fate was not to remain together, or so it seemed. After leaving I doubted my reasoning, and myself and that is why I sought Ameesha and her powers of foresight. I wanted to know what would happen should I return Aralu'en."

Arcadian looked straight into her lividly eyes of fire with a cool radiance that must have infuriated her. His face was so void of emotion that he knew she would see no hope within him, or at least that was his intention.

"But now that you are here and your blade is ready I see that I had no rationale to find doubt within myself. I was right all along. If a contest of steel is what you coveted then strike, for that at least I shall not deny you."

The four companions continued their journey northeast with the Ruanese Knight and the Sage engaged in a deep discussion regarding the possibilities of Vassagonia part in the current state of affairs. Meanwhile, the two Vakeros were seemingly engrossed in a very personal discussion.

As the sun rose over the sides of the mountains the group only hoped that they were gaining on the Talons. Suddenly Kamilah's voice cried out causing Sir Victor and Simyn to quickly reign their mounts to a halt. Looking back at the Vakeros a rather unexpected scene met their gaze whereby Kamilah's blade was pressed against Cade's neck.

"By all that is holy and pure in Magnamund, what are you two doing?" Simyn shouted to Arcadian and Kamilah. "Don't we have enough trouble as it is? We are searching for a girl that most likely is very afraid and lonely right now. If you two want to fight I won't stop you, but I'm very tempted to learn you two something about swordmanship! I don't know what has transpired between you two before and frankly I don't care either. I thought you two were warriors, not squabbling children!" With that Simyn turned around his horse and followed sir Victor, neither interested or inclined to listen to protests.

When he heard the shout, Sir Victor turned his mount around to stare at the two Vakeros, who seemed to be about to tear each other to pieces over the consequences of their union. The Vakeros were seemingly engrossed in a very personal discussion.

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"Ever since my parents died there has been a serpent growing within my chest. And as each day passes, as each enemy falls to my blade, as each agonizing drop of blood is split that serpent dominates me. My rage grows and soon approaches the time where I will no longer be the person that you love. My destiny lies not with the honor codes of the Vakeros but with myself. Alone, I will have to confront my inner demons as well as my past."

"Already my transformation has affected you, or else you would not be so quick to anger at my site and my words of truth. Eventually you will come to realize what I have already: in our youth we were a pair. You and I meant everything to each other, and that at least was that his intention."

"But now that you are here and your blade is ready I see that I had no rationale to find doubt within myself. I was right all along. If a contest of steel is what you coveted then strike, for that at least I shall not deny you."

The four companions continued their journey northeast with the Ruanese Knight and the Sage engaged in a deep discussion regarding the possibilities of Vassagonia part in the current state of affairs. Meanwhile, the two Vakeros were seemingly engrossed in a very personal discussion.

As the sun rose over the sides of the mountains the group only hoped that they were gaining on the Talons. Suddenly Kamilah's voice cried out causing Sir Victor and Simyn to quickly reign their mounts to a halt. Looking back at the Vakeros a rather unexpected scene met their gaze whereby Kamilah's blade was pressed against Cade's neck.

"By all that is holy and pure in Magnamund, what are you two doing?" Simyn shouted to Arcadian and Kamilah. "Don't we have enough trouble as it is? We are searching for a girl that most likely is very afraid and lonely right now. If you two want to fight I won't stop you, but I'm very tempted to learn you two something about swordmanship! I don't know what has transpired between you two before and frankly I don't care either. I thought you two were warriors, not squabbling children!" With that Simyn turned around his horse and followed sir Victor, neither interested or inclined to listen to protests.

When he heard the shout, Sir Victor turned his mount around to stare at the two Vakeros, who seemed to be about to tear each other to pieces over who knew what, something personal going back to their past lives as defenders of Dessi perhaps? Hopefully not all of Dessi's knights were like those two, or else the country would have been invaded for lack of defenders because of their squabbling and infighting. To the Ruaneese, Kamilah and Arcadian needed some leadership right now, to point them in the right direction and focus their energies on their enemies and the mission instead of each other.

"Simyn's right! You'll have plenty of time to settle this later, but right now, this is neither the time nor the place. The fabled Vakeros knights of Dessi are legendary for their discipline, but you two are acting like a couple of guilks fighting over the spoils of their latest attack! You should be ashamed of yourselves! Right now, two of our companions, including one of your countrymen may be sacrificing their lives for the good of the mission, but that would be all wasted if you can't cooperate for more than a few minutes at a time. Mark my words, there will be plenty more bloodshed before this is over without having to spill our own." The knight paused to let them absorb what was just said, before concluding his tirade "We need to find shelter from the sun and soon, unless we want to bake under this sun. Hopefully we'll find an overhang and some shade in those foothills where our query disappeared."

Having done what he could, Sir Victor took a swalllow from his waterskin before he turned his mount towards the foothills and started riding off, not waiting for an answer or an apology from the Vakeros.

Though Arcadian heard full well the words of both Simyn and Victor he gave no such heed to either of them. His eyes remained unmoving; gazing deep into the misty blue eyes of the woman he once called his love.

The snow ultimately began to melt away as the commencement of spring began to spread through Aralu'en. Both Kamilah and Cade had taken leave of college for the past two months and Kamilah's mother was still in Anaundni. The pair was delited at being reunited once again and they spent their time in the simple hovel that the bayside hovel provided them. For them the world seemed so far away and everything might have remained as it was. For a brief elapse in time the feelings that he had once felt with such vitality overwhelmed his senses and he swooned in his saddle and against Kamilah's blade. A shallow slit appeared on his neck where the blade had rested.
Act III, Midstory -- Mirage

No. Not now...

Arcadian fought to keep his feelings at bay. He knew that there was a time and a reason for everything. And he also knew that now was not the time to attempt to explain himself to the girl. All that would arise would be more questions, questions that the party had no time for.

“So what is it going to be Kamilah? Are we going to set up camp or are you going to slit my throat and be done with it? I for one have no desire to continue this worthless banter. We shall talk when your blood has cooled and your eyes have softened.”

Simyn and Sir Victor quickly realised the two Vakeros were not heeding their warnings nor paying them any attention. Looking in the direction of the mountains and at the rising sun Sir Victor knew they had little time to waste and spurred his horse on. Simyn was quick to follow and rode alongside the Knight.

Over the next half hour the going was becoming tougher due to the increasing intensity of the sun’s heat and because they began climbing over the sand dunes they had seen earlier. As it turned out these ‘dunes’ were actually mere hills of varying height that had been covered by sand as the dry winds whipped over the mountain range. Luckily the enemy’s path could still be followed to the start of these foothills and it was clear to see they had travelled this way.

The question now needed to be asked was where in the blazes were the enemy actually heading? To the companions it seemed these sand-covered hills stretched for another half hours ride. For all they knew the enemy could easily have stopped on the other side of one of the bigger hills closer to the mountains.

"Come on Simyn, they'll catch up when they're serious about this mission, unless the sun catches them first." said the knight drily as he spurred his mount along their quarry’s trail.

After half an hour, they reached the foothills, and weren't sure which direction the enemies - and their friends - had gone in. Sir Victor didn't want to despair yet, and started to scan the ground around them, as he had seen the Border Rangers do on many occasions when they had hunted parties of giaks on the outskirts of the Durncrags or groups of szall marauders around the edges of the wastelands.

Whether it was luck or his experience showing through, the Ruaneus spotted something shining through the sand. As he dismounted to observe what it was, he found it was a nail, which was probably dislodged from a horse's hoof.

"Kai is smiling on us today, Simyn. They headed this way," said the knight confidently as he remounted and headed in that direction.

"You have an excellent eye for details, sir knight. Very perceptive of you. Do you have any idea of how far ahead they are? Are we gaining on them?"  

"Alas, my tracking skills aren't the equal of the Sommerlund border guards, much less those of an experienced Kai Lord. Our quarry didn't have that much of a head start on us, however they're likely to be a lot more at home in the desert than we are," said the knight as he wiped the sweat from his brow with a gauntlet. "My best guess is that they're no more than one or two hours ahead of us."

The four companions rode on into the morning, debating the wisdom of their decision to come into Vassagonia—even the fringes—without proper protection. It was a stark contrast from the upper regions of Anari, which were cooling down at this time of year. Was Vassagonia even hotter than this in mid-summer?

In over an hour of riding, they topped a hill and Simyn's keen eyes saw the dark shapes lying in the sand before the rest of them. He drew their attention slightly more toward the east a bit, and the group shifted their course to investigate whatever it was that was in the sand.

Arcadian leaped off his horse upon seeing the black-clad figures motionless in the sand. "Sol Hawk!" he shouted as he trudged through the sands. Near the dead were three large palm leaves; one of them still clutched his. It was apparent to Sir Victor that they were trying to cover their tracks.

"Two dead, three palm leaves," stated Kamilah, looking at the tracks that headed toward the low mountains to the northeast.

Her fellow Vakeros turned one of the bodies over and withdrew in disgust as insects skittered away, some deeper into the black-clad’s clothing, others burrowing back into the ground. The insect scavengers of Vassagonia were quick to find meals. He suddenly began to wonder if they needed to sleep on rocks instead of sand.

The man's skin was too dark to be the Kai. He was also barely injured. The other man had sustained a massive spine wound, and luckily he was also not the Kai. Simyn motioned to the first, saying something about Sol Hawk’s psychic abilities being responsible for the lack of external damage.

The four stood a moment in the hot sun. Their scant sleep, combined with the energy draining power of the desert wasteland they traversed, was fatiguing. Sir Victor felt it the most, like a kettle over a fire—his armor reflected sunlight, but it was metal—and it also heated up and didn’t cool down easily.

He then realized that in the sunlight, his armor would doubtless reflect the sun as he rode, like a beacon on the sands.

"Should we try to find shelter?" Simyn asked his companions. "It's getting hot and I'd like some shade and some water. I can't remember when I slept last either." Simyn looked at the knight. "By the way, the armour you are wearing is it uncomfortable in this heat?"

"The stoic knight wasn't the complaining type, yet he couldn't hide his discomfort from his companions.

"Yes, I feel like I'm boiling alive under this plate mail. This is certainly not like the cool verdant plains of Sommerlund! We should definitely seek shelter to avoid the worst of the day's heat. But I feel we're so close to our quarry, I'm also loath to abandon the chase yet! That diverging set of footprints could be one of our companions, maybe we should follow it some more, before seeking shelter."

Simyn pondered the problem. It was hot and they needed shelter, but who knew perhaps they would lose the track if they rested now? The sands of the desert were ever shifting and they had as far as now been lucky, “Let's continue then. I wouldn't want to lose the track either.”

Arcadian rode up to join the knight and the sage. The red-haired man gave him a questioning look when the female Vakeros was not at his side.
“She is returning to Dessi. She came not for the recovery of Ameesha but for me. Let us follow the track with haste.”

He took a long draught from his waterskin, “if we do not find shelter soon we shall waste all of our water in this execrable sea of sand.”

Arcadian removed his helm and placed it upon his lap as he rode between his two fellow travelers. Afflicted, he glanced up at the rising sun and silently prayed for a wisp of cloud to come to their aid by blocking its gaze.

“Come brothers, this paltry barren oppresses me.”

The three riders and the two horses they had in tow moved onward, past the dead bodies. Arcadian looked over his shoulder once at Kamilah, but no more. Things had changed; others had not. But time moved on....

They alternated between trots and walking the horses, which were becoming restless. It appeared that more than the humans were affected by the unusual heat upon the sands. The mountains in the distance loomed larger, but still they seemed to be far off.

Simyn took pause while they were moving slowly once and used his spyglass. A speck on the horizon was near the mountains—a lone black figure moving along slowly toward an almost unperceptible (at least from this distance) opening in the rock face.

More questions. If only he could have some of the older questions answered before piling new ones on....

“I will go ahead and assure you this seat is no longer occupied,” Arcadian said.

“Perhaps you can give a better estimate, Simyn?”

Arcadian’s talkativeness was out of grief, oddly enough. To get his mind off of Kamilah he became as actively involved in the present situation as he could. After all, if this mind was focused on the scenario before them he could suppress his urges to turn around and track Kamilah.

She would head south, he knew, and snake around the border of Vassagonia until she reached the outskirts of the Bavari hills, in northern Dessi. Suddenly he began to regret his words and a solid stone of remorse immersed itself in his gut as an overwhelming feeling of guilt washed over him.

Damn my pride...

“Perhaps we should wait for nightfall to continue the chase. While our quarry could remain well hidden within the hills that we approach, we remain quite visible and out of place upon the open sands.”

Sir Victor listened to Arcadian’s suggestion. “Wisely spoken, Arcadian. While I am loathe to leave our companions to fend for themselves for a while longer, I agree, this heat will only sap our strength, which we will certainly need if we are to engage this company of black clad. We should seek shelter from the heat of this sun, and regain our strength for the struggle ahead.

The knight then turned to Simyn to hear what he had to say.

“Hmm, shelter would be good.” Simyn lowered his spyglass. “I have detected a cave further away and a lonely black-clad figure who is entering it. Perhaps it could be one of our missing companions.”

The sage smiled at Arcadian’s question. “I can’t give you a proper answer to your question. I have had little prior experience to desert travel before my present trip to Vassagonia. It was supposed to be a trip when I visited a dear friend and colleague, but it resulted in something far more sinister.” Simyn raised the spyglass again. As he spied the horizon, he continued: “As I see it we have two options. Either find a suitable camp here or head for that cave. We don’t know what’s in that cave and we can’t be sure if it is a trap or if it is one of our missing friends. If we camp out here we will be in open country and be easily spotted. I’m very curious of that cave but I would like to check things out first. I vote for making a camp around here.”

The sage hefted the spyglass again, rotating various pieces of it to make it reach as far as it could, bringing blurry dots into crisp focus. He gave a minute-by-minute description of what he saw:

The lone figure advancing on the cave stumbled, then stood still. Another figure—a female?—entered the cave and stood a few paces from the first.

The lone figure bowed his head and spread his arms, to which the female made some derogatory gesture with her hand and turned away.

Two men with bows trained on the lone figure emerged, while another two men came and took the lone figure into the cave.

Given this recent information, it was clear that the trio would be seen from afar. No doubt the arrows that would meet them before they could reach the cave would be numerous....and potentially coated with poison.

Regrettfully, the three moved to an outcropping of rocks a half mile to the east. A barrier of boulders would be between them and the cave opening at that location. They each decided to take a watch during the day, while the other two slept and ate.

After they each had rested, and the sun crept across the sky and sank into the west, they all quenched their thirst again and ate a light meal while discussing their plan.

“And what of the enemy?” Arcadian asked Simyn.

“Not a care,” Simyn replied. “We could have them on the run by now. The men of the Talons are not so fit as our riders, we are not to be taken by surprise.”

“Then we shall make haste on to the mountains and leave the Talons to their own devices. I worry not for our safety, nor for theVIC.

Finally Sir Victor gave the signal to move on. The three riders and the two horses they had in tow moved onward, past the dead bodies. Arcadian looked over his shoulder once at Kamilah, but no more. Things had changed; others had not. But time moved on....

It takes a half waterskin and 1 meal for the day’s activities. Make up a plan on what or how you wish to approach/enter the cave. You can even plot this in your notes to save for later use. I will go ahead and assure you this seat is no longer occupied.”

* * *

“Even if we can make it to the mountains, it will not be before noon and we will have fatigued ourselves to exhaustion,” stated Arcadian.

The heat from the sun was making his skin sweat and swelter beneath his chainmail tunic and he contemplated taking it off. He tried to conserve Iri’s energy as much as he could by walking instead of riding.

“If we catch up with the Talons among the hills it will be the hottest part of the day and we are in a land that is unfamiliar to us. I say we either seek shelter or slow our pace. No matter what do I sincerely doubt we will reach those mountains before noon. Perhaps you can give a better estimate, Simyn?”

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* * *
Act III, Midstory – Mirage

Arcadian volunteered to take first watch and let his companions get some well-deserved rest. His friends gave him a weird look. After they were all bedded in the cave, Arcadian put some distance between him and the point of exhaustion and his uncredited act of kindness. He just nodded, giving them reassurance and then settled down at the mouth of the outcropping. From here he could see any activity pertaining to the direction of the cave.

"Get some rest," said Arcadian, "I'll wake one of you in a few hours."

To be quite honest the young Vakeros and far too much on his mind to consider sleep anyways.

He settled down and took off his armor. His knees felt weak from the tumble out of the tree earlier that morning and it felt good to stretch them out and take the load off of them. He placed his hands on his sword at the ready. After a moments thinking he reached inside his horse's pack and grasped a second blade which until now had been left alone.

This weapon was sixteen inches shorter than his sword and was forged with the familiar blue-steel. The blade was thin and pointed at the end, designed to pierce through the hands in a foe's armor. He tested the blade with his thumb and then stood.

"I'm not going to get any rest for several hours anyways.

He drew his sword from its sheath with his sword hand and then tested the balance of the shorter sword in his hand-off. A quick glance at Victor and Simyn ensured that they were asleep, at least all seemed so. He began to move his sword in slow, rhythmic strokes around his body while simultaneously lunging out with the shortsword in different strategic directions. He developed a system where he slashed out at a specified area with his sword and then used his momentum to bring the shortward around in a follow-through slash and a quick lunge. He experimented with this technique for over an hour until he had it perfected to his satisfaction. He used his sword to lash out at neck level and with his off-hand used his shortsword to follow, only based lower; to slash across a man's midsection. After some practice he found he was able to use this effectively to strike out three times within a few seconds, utilizing the technique to its full capacity.

While on watch, Arcadian noticed a man in familiar robes skirting along the edge of the rocks nearby. He was a magician of Dessi, and a pack was slung over his shoulder. He arrived quickly and quietly, no doubt aided by some newly researched spells of Dessi.

"Greetings Warrior Arcadian," he said formally, his hand on his heart. "I am Timmon. Here is your new armor." He set the pack down and opened up another. "Please place your current armor in here so it can be reforged anew."

Arcadian placed the armor he had set aside within the sack and nodded his gratitude. The magician left quietly, wiping the sweat from his brow, and heading back out on the treacherous mission he was sent upon.

May you reach our homeland safely, magician.

With the magician gone, Arcadian tested his new armor and found that the scalemail was engraved with hard blue-steel and that the scales themselves had been hardened in the fires of Herdos. It was indeed a fine work of mastership. Not wanting to sleep in his armor he placed it within the sack to protect it from the course sand of the desert and woke one of his companions. Gratefully he settled down to rest but his sleep was a restless one at best, inlaid of the nightmares of his past, and worse: his possible future.

* * *

Simyn awoke from his slumber by a firm but not unkind nudge from Arcadian. It was time for his watch. The sage had chosen to sleep in his leather armour, which had made the rest rather uncomfortable, but with the enemy so near Simyn chose to be cautious rather than comfortable. He took a swig from his waterskin and went to check out how Starfall was doing. The mare didn't seem to like the heat. "Dear old Starfall, I hope I can take you down at the mouth of the outcropping. From here he could see any activity pertaining to the direction of the cave.

"We should wait another hour before making our approach. If we keep our way to the edge of the hillslocks and mountains that encircle the area, we should be able to go north and curve around west. The sand dunes will do well to cover us if we go on foot. If we go by horse we may be seen once we get close."

Arcadian knew that either way was risky. The way shown, he sheathed his shortsword and placed it beside his sword.

"If we leave our horses here our approach will be much better hidden. However, if we go on foot any escape we may have to make will be hampered. All of the black-clads have steeds and if we have to run our armor will hamper us, causing our feet to sink into sand. Even on horseback, their mounts are more accustomed to the consistency of the ground."

"Either way we risk much. I say we would be better off on foot. If Ishir frowns upon us this night we could possibly steal the mounts of the Talons. If we approach on foot...I don't think there will be any retray. The entrance to that cave will be a bottle-neck if we enter it. And the close quarters of the cave should protect us against poisoned arrows." 

* * *

The knight didn't argue when Arcadian offered to take the first watch. After taking care of his steed and making sure it was fed and watered, Sir Victor removed his armor, incapable of sleeping in its burning heat. He was sweating profusely under its steel carapace, and was quite relieved when he reached inside his horse's pack and grasped a second blade which until now had been left alone.

I was lucky to avoid it when they passed us on our way to the border, but I can’t say my luck will hold for the next time - because there will certainly be a next time.

After a while, Arcadian came to sit beside him and discussed strategy.

"As much as I'd love to ride the scum down, I believe you're right about our approach being less conspicuous if we left our steeds behind...temporarily, of course. I'd never abandon my loyal Bright Lance if my life depended on it. We should certainly strive to surprise them, and as we have infiltrators within their ranks, our task should be all the easier. What I'm concerned about, however, is the poison with which they coat their arrows.

* * *
As they talked, the two knights shared a frugal meal from their packs, because they might not get another chance to eat before a while. The Rueneese also kept an eye on the cave entrance, which was getting more difficult in the fading light of the day.

* * *

As soon as the fiery orb's rays were obscured by the horizon, the three tied their mounts securely and left any unnecessary gear that would slow their travel—they still had roughly a two to three mile trek across the sands.

Hanging close to the rock wall, they soon developed a strategy for safe and effective travel. Simyn would peer through his spyglass for a minute or two, then Arcadian would move forward while Simyn watched. When the Vakeros judged the area was clear, the other two would follow. Bit by bit they covered the terrain, staying below the ridge of dunes that would mask their presence.

The entire plan was a good one, and after an hour and a half of moving like this, they were over two thirds of the way to their goal. The desert had thankfully cooled down, the sand quickly losing the heat that it absorbed from the sun. They only had a half mile left to go when Simyn shook his head.

"Guard," he whispered, handing the glass to his friends so they could see.

Outside the cave, some five hundred feet from it, stood an archer—his form almost obscured by a small cleft in the rocks where he hid.

Sir Victor observed the guard through the spyglass as Simyn handed it to him. This was a handy instrument, to be sure, thought the knight, as he assessed the situation, before handing the spyglass to Arcadian. The heat of the day was fading fast, and for that he was certainly thankful.

"I can’t take care of the guard from this distance. We’ll have to move closer to the entrance of the cave, unless you two can remove him from afar," he whispered to his companions, even as he was aware that they couldn’t remain undetected for too long, given the fact that he was wearing his suit of plate mail, which wasn’t known for its stealthy properties.

"So what do you propose? Do you two have an idea for knocking the guard out without raising the alarm?"

Arcadian considered the situation thoughtfully.

"I could try and dispatch him with my crossbow. How far away do you think he is from here? Those rocks enshroud him from my aim and I doubt my accuracy."

The young Vakeros let the thought hang in the air.

"I do have this," he reached into his pack and withdrew the stopper bottle of venom which he had taken off of the dead mage the night before. "But we have no way of knowing its potency. And he needs only a moment in order to sound the alarm."

"If only there was some way to make him investigate this area without feeling the need call for backup. Up close I could take care of him before he can even think the word ‘banus.’"

Arcadian grinned at the thought despite the dire situation that they were in.

"The night is dim and there is no full moon to give away our position. I could strip of my armor and clothing and crawl to his position. But if discovered I shall be without my armor and in a precarious situation indeed. Even if successful we would lose much time in my approach and return. At least my darker skin would better obscure me; your paler countenances would be a beacon in starlight."

"Can you identify those plants, Simyn?" Cade pointed to the various plant-life which had appeared as they approached the mountains. It was a doubtful but perhaps they could be of some use.

Arcadian withdrew a quarrel from his quiver with a quick, fluid spin of the hand. He dipped it in the vial which he had taken off of the dead mage.

"I still think it’s risky, but I don’t see that we have any other action to take here. At least with this venom if we don’t kill him outright and he does yell for help, he won’t be conscious long enough to give away our exact position."  

The young Vakeros knew that he was speaking with a confidence that he did not feel but he knew that there was little else to do in this situation. Both bolts would have to hit with extreme accuracy in order to dispatch the guard quickly.

He looked over at Simyn, "ready when you are."

As the Vakeros and the sage were readying their weapons, the knight gripped his broadsword and shield tightly in his hands in anticipation of the fight ahead. If the bolts didn’t kill the sentry, he readied himself to charge headlong through the mouth of the cave and into whatever fate awaited within.

Moving as carefully as they could, the two snipers slowly crawled across the desert sands. The dunes had already cooled off a bit, making the ordeal much more tolerable than it would have been during the day.

Oddly enough, Simyn noted, no insects were bothering them as they had the dead bodies. He surmised that one of the ways the insects homed in on fallen creatures was by blocking the sunlight and heat of the sun. So, wherever the temperature of the sand dropped, the creatures knew a meal was above them. Fascinating thing, ecology.

The two crept more slowly as they got closer, knowing that the guard would be on the lookout for anything abnormal. More than once, sand got in the dusk’s mouths and noses, and their skin was dry and starting to chafe from the abrading granules.

Just a little further to go, and they would be in range.
Rules

You're still a bit away, SV. Since you had to hang back due to the noise and reflective nature of your armor, you couldn't get nearly as close as you would have liked.

Arcadian, I take it you still have your armor on. With the MPH rule in effect, you never really said you were taking it off, only that you could.

Unfortunately, the other thread with K&SH hasn't progressed to the point I wanted by now, so I'm going to have to hold this thread until I get your scene resolved.

What they can or can't do directly affects what you guys will now face, and rather than guess or predetermine, I'll let their actions decide.

Sir Victor hated waiting so far away from where the action was. They would need him, he reasoned. Slowly--much more slowly than he liked--the knight crept across the sands, careful to remain as hidden as he felt he could be.

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Sir Victor checked the range and location with his spyglass, passing it to Arcadian. The Vakeros had a flash of insight that if that contraption could be shrunked and mounted on a crossbow, it might be an invaluable tool....

He handed it back and watched the guard for patterns of movement, of which there were basically none. At times, he seemed to vanish altogether into the shadows.

Simyn was about to move a bit closer when Arcadian sneezed. The Vakeros muffled it as best he could, but it still alerted the guard. The sage hurriedly moved forward on his belly and fired just as a loud whistle pierced the night stillness.

The sound was cut short by a cry of pain. Grumbling at his luck, the Vakeros raised a bit and fired his weapon. Another cry of pain. At least this one would be easier to kill now....

The whistle-cry returned, albeit a bit more erratic in its sounding. They had possibly wounded the man in his ribs, judging from the short bursts of noise instead of a long one.

Arcadian looked at the mouth of the cave and saw four figures emerge, some holding bows, some with scimitars.

"Great."

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Sir Victor was proud of himself for having gotten this far. He had stopped to gauge his direction and distance when he heard the whistle. Knowing it meant trouble, he began to run—a fact that only someone as strong as he could accomplish. It would still be a couple of minutes before he reached his friends—granted, he had to find them, though.

Far in the distance, he could see disruptions in the light emanating from the cave mouth. Yes, the Talons had been alerted.

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It seemed that their plan hadn't quite worked out the way they had planned it. Now the entire nest of enemies was aware that something— or someone—was outside, and they'd be all the wiser for it.

Sir Victor knew that the game was up, and he finally could stop crawling around like a rat. Knowing he would soon be needed near the cave mouth, he started running towards the opening as fast as he could, hoping he'd get there on time to make a difference.

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Arcadian cursed, knowing that his sneeze had fouled their plan drastically. Armed with his furry he quickly began to reload his crossbow after he heard the guard cry out a second time. He took care in dipping the bolt in the flask of venom. As soon as the steel head was coated in the substance he stopped the bottle and set the second quarrel in the groove of the weapon.

"Keep down!" he hissed at Simyn. "Chances are they don't know where we are hiding."

With those words Arcadian peered over the shallow crest of sand and searched through the fading light for a new target. The young Vakeros knew that it was only a matter of time before the venom began to spread through the guard's veins so he focused his attention on the figures near the cave.

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Simyn did as the vakeros said and began re-loading his crossbow. He hoped the vakeros was right in his assumption. Feeling that Arcadian possessed a greater expertise when it came to combat, the sage chose to wait till Arcadian's next move.

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The Knight rushed across the desert, frantically trying to reach the cave before it was too late. He had no idea what had happened—only that his friends would need him.

Throwing caution to the wind, the knight huffed and sweated like he was standing in the noonday Vassagonian sun as his exertion began to show.

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Arcadian smiled as the whistle blew feebly and silenced. He then turned his attention to the cave opening and the silhouettes moving near it. They were hesitant to venture into the desert, knowing full well that they could not see as well as they could be seen. A couple, however, exited and began to slink along the sheer rock walls, moving in and out of shadows.

Simyn waited, holding the cumbersome weapon in his hand. There was so little grace or finesse. Point. Click. Pray. Though cowardly to engage from ambush in this manner, he had to admit—it was an effective tactic.

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Sol Hawk had listened for hours, off and on during his lapses of consciousness, and Koraeth was questioned and beaten. Eventually the questioning had stopped, and only the beatings remained. Sometimes he would cry out in pain, and Sol Hawk could make out what they were doing: they were using his own bluesteel against him, making painful but not lethal cuts on him.

The Kai knew well what Koraeth was enduring, for they had tired of him an hour or two ago when he passed out from the shock of pain. They had made a sport of tossing rocks at him, and the winner was the first to hit him in the face or head. They had spat on him, slapped him, beaten him, kicked him, cut him, and countless other things as part of their sadistic sport.

There was a method to this however. They would leave one conscious, then torture the other till he passed out. After laughing and mocking a bit, they would use just enough laumspar ointment and potion to bring the unconscious one back to consciousness. Then they would repeat the above on the other one.

By the time Simyn reached the mouth of the cave, they had stopped, and only the beatings remained. Sometimes he would cry out in pain, and Sol Hawk could make out what they were doing: they were using his own bluesteel against him, making painful but not lethal cuts on him.

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Rules

Act III, Midstory – Mirage

Although he was naturally agile, Simyn had never got hang of the noble art of stealth. He tried as best as he could and came finally in range for his crossbow. There he raised it and aimed. It was hard aiming in the darkness. The black-clad man seemed at times to be part of the darkness. Finally the sage got a clear shot and let the string go. An out-cry from the guard confirmed that the bolt had hit its intended target.

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Sir Victor watched as his two allies tried to move forward quietly to ambush the sentry from the dark, and silently wished them good luck. He felt somewhat powerless to do anything to help them, but his expertise was in melee, and that's where he shone. He itched to charge headlong into the cave and confront their enemies head on and see how Sol Hawk and Koraeth were doing, if they were still undercover or if their cover had been blown. They'd know soon enough at any rate...

He got ready to charge, should the alarm be raised.

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Sir Victor hated waiting so far away from where the action was. They would need him, he reasoned. Slowly—much more slowly than he liked—the knight crept across the sands, careful to remain as hidden as he felt he could be.

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Simyn started running towards the opening as fast as he could, hoping he'd get there on time to make a difference.

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Sir Victor knew that the game was up, and he finally could stop crawling around like a rat. Knowing he would soon be needed near the cave mouth, he started running towards the opening as fast as he could, hoping he'd get there on time to make a difference.

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Arcadian looked at the mouth of the cave and saw four figures emerge, some holding bows, some with scimitars.

"Great."

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Sir Victor was proud of himself for having gotten this far. He had stopped to gauge his direction and distance when he heard the whistle. Knowing it meant trouble, he began to run—a fact that only someone as strong as he could accomplish. It would still be a couple of minutes before he reached his friends—granted, he had to find them, though.

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Rules, Rulings

Sir Victor: You are still a good ways off. Continue running? If it breaks down to rounds, you're about 10 rounds away as of this post.

Arcadian, Simyn: I'll have a grid up after I eat some shrimp. To answer your question, there is enough poison to coat about 4 more arrows. Keep in mind that you really don't know what it does. (I may have said way earlier, but right now I can't remember)

Korlaeth: You have sustained quite a pounding. Your current EP score is listed below. You are not actively bleeding from numerous cuts, but you do have them across your legs, shoulders, and a couple on your cheek.

Sol Hawk: Given your condition prior to entering the cave, and what happened, you are in really unstable condition. Any exertion on your part has a 50/50 chance of some detrimental effect.

Yes, the paralysis has worn off. It only lasts around thirty minutes. You could make out—at any given time—around 5 to 7 men in the room. Paru never entered, or if she did no one spoke to her or of her. I got a laugh at your fluctuating avatar when I logged on today.

Korlaeth: current EP is 38 with 30 subdual damage

Sol Hawk: current EP is 10 with 9 subdual damage...they just brought you back around so you could hear them torturing Korlaeth yet again.

I suggest looking at the Jedi Purge music as you read the torture scenes above. (Anakin's Dark Deeds is the name of the track I think) It has been playing in my head the whole time.

Time: Nighttime (primetime).

Weather: Dark, moon rising slightly over the mountains.

Ambient Temp no longer has negative effects.

Sol Hawk: is this most likely be my last post of the month. Sol Hawk, you can take care of Sir Victor while I'm away, since you're the only one who volunteered and your character is almost unconscious anyways, so you'll have more to do. Good luck and take care guys!

Death Roll: 21
Damage Roll: 5

There are no modifiers to the damage from a crossbow right?

DOC: I read up on what happens when you try to do standard actions while incapacitated (at 0 EP). In that instance, if I read it correctly, I don't suffer until the action is completed. Further, if I use the standard action to heal myself, I can avoid the penalty entirely.

This situation is slightly different, though, in 2 ways. First, I see that WOTS is a fullround action, not a standard action. Second, I actually have 1 EP rather than 0, so this might change things. I am guessing therefore that it might be OK for me to do WOTS and then avoid future penalties. Let me know if this sounds right. I can make an edit or two if not.

Damage roll and attack roll are in the dice thread. Almost scored a critical.

Okay, I think it's safe to say we're officially in combat. So, everyone (including Sol Hawk and Korlaeth) give me an initiative check.

Arcadian, I need to know which enemy you attacked.

Sol Hawk: given your condition prior to entering the cave, and what happened, you need all his strength for the struggle ahead, in spite of the fact he'll have run half a mile at breakneck speed to get there.

Arcadian swung over the dune crest and landed on his feet. His cloak swirled in the cool, night wind as he aimed with his crossbow out across the sand. The Vakenors made sure that one of the figures was positioned directly between the pins on the heavy weapon and pulled the pin, sending the quarrel rotating across the sands.

He didn't wait for Simyn to take his shot or even see if his quarrel had met its mark before taking off across the sand. He had plenty curs ed his new scalemail, knowing that it was restricting his speed.

At least the air is cool... thought Arcadian to himself as he mentally and physically prepared himself for an onslaught from the talons.

Sol Hawk was absolutely still, lying sideways on the floor. The sound of a whoosh had pierced the air. It had to be danger. He waited a moment until the black-cloaks had left the chamber. Then he said in a whisper, "Korlaeth. How fare you?"

He listened carefully. He needed to know if they were alone.

The distraction would not last forever. He hoped that they were still in the room with the spring. If they could only get free, there would be laumspur here a'plenty.

Sol Hawk felt himself begin to black out again. There was severe swelling about his left eye where someone had beaten him with something heavy as blunt. It throbbed all the more for the blindfold was tied too tightly against it. His common sense told him he'd been run through the heart with a blade and his basic Kai Healing skills confirmed it. He thanked Ishir for his survival, for certainly he knew that such a wound should have left him dead. He closed his eyes and gave a silent prayer. If he was to escape it would have to be now. And if he was to be of any use to Korlaeth, he would have to recover quickly from his wounds.

He drew a deep breath. As he exhaled, little by little, the pain, the fatigue, the desperation seemed to leave with his own hot breath. He still felt weak, but he was no longer incapacitated. (Warmth of the Sun, +8 EP, -8 Subdual).

Simyn aimed and fired at one of the black shapes. He didn't check if his shot struck true, but got another bolt from his case and started re-loading the crossbow.

"There! Across the sand!" shouted an archer. Arcadian didn't know if they were talking about him or Simyn. No matter. They would have a difficult time hitting a moving target at night with slight moonlight.

What he did not realize, however, was that the archers were referring to the slight form of Sir Victor, whose armor glinted as he rushed toward the cave.

Distracted as they were, Arcadian would stand a good chance at surprising them. Apparently, Simyn had surprised one of the targets he had shot at, for at that moment the man cried out in pain.

Inside the cave, the Kai tried to see if Korlaeth was still alive before healing himself. The exertion was intense, yet the Kai was able to recover a bit, and the pain eased...but there was so much damage Sol Hawk could scarcely tell how effective his actions had been.

People in the cave had apparently mobilized and left them alone. That presented an opportunity...to do what? He had to think! If only he could see....

**ROUND 1**

With his great shield in hand, Sir Victor continued to run at full speed toward the cave mouth. Even as he ran, he took what advantage he could of the dips and ridges that had naturally formed in the sand—thankfully, the very moonlight that had betrayed his position also now lit his way in the dark as he made the best possible use of every terrain feature.

"Cade, Simyn, it's up to you... for now."

* * *
Opening to Round 1 – Simyn and Arcadian approach the cave. Note that Sir Victor has not yet come into view due to his slower speed in plate armour. What awaits our heroes next? Perhaps the greatest fight of their lives!
**Act III, Midstory – Mirage**

Korlaeth had not answered. Was he conscious? Sol Hawk had not heard anyone else in the chamber, either, so it was time to act. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. If he could open a lock, he could loosen a knot. Meticulously, he began to form an image of the knot in his mind, searching for the correct spot to focus on. Beads of sweat poured down Sol Hawk’s face – it was too late to avoid. Already on the floor, Sol Hawk resorted to rubbing the side of his face against the ground in an attempt to flick the piece of cloth free from his face.

**Rules, Rulings**

**Initiative:** 19

(standard): Simple Focus against blindfold: 25

(move) trying to rub the blindfold off of his eyes

(free) speaks to Korlaeth

I’m inclined to disagree on that one. Not to be overly picky, but the discipline description says ‘mechanism’. I feel its purpose is to be used as mentioned...to move tiny things, not to untie knots...else it would grant some sort of synergistic bonus to Escape Artist.

I shot the archer to the right.

**Initiative:** 20

Since I presume that my other bolt was poisoned I aim at the other archer. I hope that Arcadian isn’t possessive about the poison. Since I think we had enough poison for four bolts, I guess I have shot my two bolts.

I fired at the closest black-clad. I don’t know if I hit or not, I didn’t see you post anything on it, KL. My Initiative is 8.

When placing movement, KL keep in mind that I only move 20 feet a round with my new armor.

Simyn, don’t worry about the poison. I’ll just assume that after firing both my poisoned shots I tossed you the vial before taking off across the sand. This sound fair? I’m deducting the vial from my character sheet now.

This was my bragging act, now let’s get ready to rumble!

Arcadian, I’m going to move you 20’ toward the cave. I don’t know the exact square you want to be in, but just let me know from this point on—I’m guessing you take double moves until you get to the cave?

Sol Hawk, whatever you want to do with Mind over Matter, just go ahead and roll for the check. I’ll let you know what happens.

Everyone else, just keep the morale high and get ready to clash. This one isn’t going to be the pushover the last one was.

**Newly updated grid in my signature by 10am CDT.**

Sol Hawk squirmed and used the abrasive stone floor to grab his blindfold. He nodded and shook his head, moving it this way and that until he felt the blindfold budging. He augmented his struggles with his long-time discipline of Mind over Matter, keeping it in constant use for the exact moment...when...the blindfold...would...would...almost....

The blindfold flew across the room as the Kai’s eyes were opened. For most people, being able to see the room would only allow them to view with gloom the predicament they were in. But to a well-trained Kai with mastery of Mind over Matter, the room was full of weapons, tools, and opportunities.

One thing caught the Sol Hawk’s eyes immediately: a dagger with a slight blue tinge to the blade. If he could only figure out a way to use it effectively and quickly. He heard the Sharnazim in the cave moving about, shuffling something about tying strips of oil-soaked cloth to the backs of arrows, near the fletching, and shooting them in the sand so they could see any ambushers approaching.

The Kai had to admit—that was a right good idea. And that meant it was a dangerous idea to his friends. He had to act. Surprise was on their side.

Korlaeth heard Sol Hawk talking to him. Shame he couldn’t talk back. Then the Kai told him that his blindfold was off, and he could see. Having known of the Kai’s skills for a long time, the Vakeros knew that if Sol Hawk could see, he could manipulate the world around him once more. He could move things, attack, and talk to people and animals telepathically.

With a faint leap of hope in his chest, Korlaeth ignored the pain from numerous injuries. The Kai may have gotten them into this, and now it seemed, the Kai would be the one to get them out.

**Fitting, that.**

---------------

**Outside the cave:**

Sir Victor was not remotely winded. He trained for this kind of thing day in and day out back home in the cool climes of Sommernund. He could see the lights in the cave wavering a bit.

He smiled at their knowledge of tactics—the possessor of fire at night is at the disadvantage when it comes to warfare, for he cannot see clearly beyond his illuminated radius. Facing himself, the armored warrior drew steel now, so it would be ready later.

He surveyed the region and realized that he was on the best path for confrontation—direct. If he veered off to one side or another, it would only slow his arrival in the end. He was armored, it was night, and he was moving. They should not harm him at all.

Simyn had to admit that poison was a great equalizer. Once more he gained a deeper understanding of the mind of the assassin. However, he could only wonder if one day he would be on the sighted end of a crossbow for his involvement in all this. Had Ameesha been a farm girl, the stakes would not be so high.

As he went over his current predicament in his mind, he wondered strangely where the chairs had come from, and had a sudden image of the Talons rushing through Anari, chairs legs rising ponderously into the sky in the midst of them, he smiled again before turning his thoughts to escape, for the beatings had stopped, and all he could hear were faint sounds of movement from where he thought he remembered Sol being. He muttered around his gag, and, unable to come up with any instant escape ideas, began gnawing at it.

It was with grim satisfaction, the sage heard how his bolt had hit its target: the archer to the right. He didn’t let this momentary sense of fulfillment stop him to re-cock the crossbow and put another grave-weed covered bolt in the crossbow. He swiftly aimed and shot at the archer to the left hoping that that poisoned bolt would strike true.

Arcadian decided against pausing to fire again and instead fastened the crossbow to his belt (is this how crossbows are carried when not in the hand? I assume with longbows it is over the shoulder but...) and drew his sword with a metallic clang.

The young Vakeros’ muscles burned and he ran across the sand, fighting to keep his feet from sinking due to his heavy armor.

Should of stayed with chairmail... thought Arcadian to himself as he sprinted.

Simyn smiled when he saw that Arcadian unsheathed his sword. "So you want to get into close combat, vakeros? You seem to be reading my mind" the sage said as he put down his crossbow and drew his rapier and poignard with two swift motions. "Let’s see how these desert warriors handle themselves against our swords. Thus far I haven’t been impressed."

Inside the cave:

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But the princess of a nation sworn against Vassagonia? He loosed the second bolt and saw the small jar of poison hit the sand next to him.

Looking over, he saw Arcadian running down the dune. Yes! Enough sinking about, and onward to the clash of steel on steel! He stood and breathed in the clean air, preparing for combat.
Rules, Rulings

(1) Perception Check. Please describe room fully. Am I in a position to see Korlaeth? Is this the room with the spring? Where are our weapons, equipment? Etc. (Check is: 14)
(standard) Path of Pure Mind to cut the binds. Rolled a 25, DC would be 20)
(move) I only need to make an Escape Artist Check if the binds are still too tight for me to escape from, but surely the DC is lowered from 30 if I cut ANY ropes. This roll is only to be used if PoPM didn’t do the whole job... and I hope it did because I rolled a 6.

OOC: I think I can actually run for 3x movement (better than a double move). I seem to have seen something to this effect under the armour listings. If this is so, I am doing a triple move this round since Victor is surely running now.

Act III, Midstory – Mirage

ROUND 2

Sol Hawk was elated as the blindfold at last flew free, and even more so as he heard Korlaeth make a sound. “Hang on, Korlaeth,” he tried to say through his gag. Korlaeth’s blue dagger began to lift off of the cavern floor and move airborne toward the Kai as if the hands of the goddess had carried it themselves. The blade moved along in front of Sol Hawk, touching itself to his cords at first gently, then pressing in closer and moving back and forth with a sawing action. The cords began to fray one by one and split. Sol Hawk peered nervously out to the hallway as he cut, but he did not cease his efforts.

*S * *

Sir Victor knew what the Talons were planning. Had they seen Cade and Simyn? Perhaps not, not yet. They were probably too far to fire upon him and this would give them a false sense of security until...

“AAAAAHHH!” The sound of a man’s pain came to his ears across the desert.

Sir Victor, with his weapon and shield at the ready, continued to move toward the cavemouth and the sounds of his enemies.

*S * *
I guess I begin run in the round after Arcadian began his sprint. I guess I'll move 120 feet then. I will be making double move actions until I am close enough for melee combat. If the current situation changes, Arcadian's actions may change. You might find my posting to lessen in consistancy the next couple weeks as I am in the process of moving. I spent all day today, for example, painting the walls of my house.

Sol Hawk: Look in PM for info on the waking dream. As for the room, it's a medium sized modified cavern (most natural, some manmade extensions) with iron loops in the walls for ropes. Various small supplies are at the back of the room—horse-related equipment—there is a small pool of water at the far end of the room. You and Korlaeth are on the "path" that leads along the room, in a leveled out area large enough for a dining table or two. From the traces of odor, this is where horses are stabled…when horses are not frightened away, that is.

I'm going to take the liberty of a double round update here, since I see no point in making you act out running across the desert. This extra round of running will be the round that Sol Hawk frees Korlaeth from his bindings, so nothing will be offset any.

As Arcadian moved, the sage began to follow. The blood was pumping in his veins and Simyn sensed the thrill of the imminent combat. Hopefully this would end this tiresome pursuit and the sage could return west to Lyris.

With blood pounding in his ears, Arcadian attempted to quicken his pace but found that he had to take care not to trip in the heavy sand. His sword was drawn but he hadn't activated his battleblade ability and decided not to until he was close enough to engage in combat.

I only hope that we're not too late to save Ameesha. Is she even here?

Sol Hawk reached out with his mind the instant the blindfold was off, losing his grip on the piece of cloth and seizing the Vakeros weapon nearby. It floated to him and slid across the ropes, which were tied so tightly that they split once the pressure from the blade pressed hard into them. The entire binding loosened, and in seconds the Kai was free. He rolled over into a crouch and looked around, taking in as much of the room as he could in the brief second he was scanning.

Korlaeth was beside him, awake, and mumbling something. He held the dagger in front of him to free his friend—and a slight lightheadedness overcame him. It passed as quickly as it had come, leaving him staring at the blade in his hand with disbelief, almost fear.

Sir Victor saw motion up ahead. Something moving across the desert toward the cave. Smiling, he realized that his companions had abandoned their missile weapons and charged forward. Good, stealth was for Kai and assassins, not warriors.

Arcadian shook his head as he ran, finding the armor to be more trouble than it was worth in such a situation. He knew that Simyn would cover him as he ran, and so he drew his sword in preparation for the upcoming combat. Suddenly he heard something behind him. Turning his head slightly, a blur came in view beside him and on past him—Simyn!

Laughing to himself, Arcadian watched as the lean scholar took the lead and closed in on the cave entrance, not wishing to rush in foolishly by himself.

The sage ran quickly, overtaking Arcadian in his cumbersome armor, and dashing on through the night across the sands like a frightened elix. The second archer succumbed to the poison and fell over after taking a couple of steps, leaving the cave entrance seemingly unguarded.

A common fool might rush on in, but Simyn was not a fool, nor was he common. He knew that in small numbers he could face foes alone, but larger groups required extra blades swinging in his favor. On top of that, those inside the cave could be set in ambush for anyone entering.
**Rules, Rulings**

***Turn Round:*** Running, 3x speed. I can keep running for as many rounds as I have Constitution points with no problem, as Sir Vic is not winded by a long shot.

**OOC:** KL, you were keeping a count. It would be T-4 by now. I wanted to know, though, is it actually a little better since I am moving 3x move instead of 2x? Or was that already taken into account? Just curious.

**Notes:** Want to know what I am missing from my person. Want to know where exits are, how many. Want to know what equipment is in the room, especially weapons.

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**Act III, Midstory – Mirage**

**ROUND 4**

A smile came across Sir Victor’s bearded lips as he saw that Simyn and Arcadian had now taken out the black-clads near the cave mouth. “That will put paid to their plans,” he said.

A run in full armour would have tried a lesser man, but Sir Victor was as strong as a bull and plumed onward, wary should anything unexpected occur.

**Simyn:** Sol Hawk needed a weapon. After returning the dagger to Korlaeth, he searched the room for whatever it might provide and takes a weapon that he deems worthy. (A scimitar would be nice. If there are no melee weapons, a quiver of arrows will do).

“*Korlaeth*,” he whispers, “I am weak. I see that you are as well. What weapons do you have? We would need to kill as many as we can as quickly as we can, and hopefully without being seen. I have the ability to launch any small object with my mind. Of course, if they still have poison, we will be dead immediately if we are caught doing so, but also we can’t stay here.”

Sol finishes his survey of the room - in particular, he needs to know where the exits are (if more than one) and how far off the black-clads are.

**With his fencing swords in hand, the sage reached the cave. The two archers had fallen over and the other two black-clad warriors seemed to be fleeing. Not wanting to enter the dark cave by himself, Simyn did a quick check of the two archers’ bodies, hoping to find something useful or a clue to the whereabouts of Sol hawk and Korlaeth.**

**Arcadian:** No puns about being between a rock and a hard place.

**Until I get a grid up:**

**SH/K:** You only hear voices only. No one has come by. Once you get into the hallway, it will be easy to determine that left is toward the main cave and right is towards the supply room.

**SV:** Are you wearing a helmet? This is important for one of the class features on the leader of the group of black-clads.

**S/A:** You are just beside the two dead bodies, kind of in a straight line with them. The two “Sc” miniatures will be upon you in round 7. Not to mention whatever comes out of the cave in round 7.
OOC: Still running at 3x speed.

OOC: Yes, Sir Victor is wearing all of his armour including his helmet.

OOC: Sol Hawk is moving to the supply room unless Korlaeth objects. I am rolling a stealth check for this. Stealth: 20

OOC: -1 WP for Telepathy. I am going to maintain this constantly so I don't lose track of Korlaeth during the fight!

OOC: Added 9 Graveweed Arrows to my Inventory. (That leaves one for Korlaeth).

**Rules, Rulings**

Sir Victor had been running now for half a minute. His will would not be denied, for he was closing fast upon the black-clads. Arrows struck him from all angles, but Victor hardly took note, for the tiny spears merely clinked and clanked off the heavy metal or off of his gigantic shield.

* * *

Sol Hawk looked at the arrows and recognized at once that they were covered with poison. He looks at Korlaeth in amazement, then a wide smile crosses the Kai’s face. Sol Hawk pulls his black mask back over his face once more. It is a tattered disguise, but in the heat of battle, it may be enough. He looks into the Vakeros’ eyes.

I am going to keep telepathic contact with you, said Sol Hawk as he moves carefully into the hall, So if you need to tell me anything, just think it. Stay close. The supply room is this way. We need to hit anyone inside fast and hard, then arm ourselves. Korlaeth, asked Sol Hawk, fearing the answer, Did we choose right? Is Ameesha hidden here in the caves?

* * *
Act III, Midstory – Mirage

Korlaeth makes a sudden decision and stops the Kai as he takes the arrows. He plucks one back for himself as Sol tucks the rest away.

If not, she’ll be in Teph. Korlaeth thought back, Lead the way, I’m right behind you...

Korlaeth pulled his tattered black robes and veil around him again, wincing in pain as he followed the Kai out.

Simyn gritted his teeth. The arrow had hit his shoulder. The wound wasn’t lethal, but it was painful. It didn’t seem poisoned either. “I’m fine” the sage told Arcadian who had try to warn him. “But someone won’t be for long and that won’t be me!” he added. Drawing his rapier and poignard, he readied himself in a fighting stance and shouted into the darkness using the Vassan language: “Come on and fight as men, you piles of kwaraz dung!” The sage wished that he had known any worse Vassan curses. “Come on Arcadian, let’s give these b*$tard* a fight!”

“A fight? Let’s give them death.”

With those words Arcadian took off, his feet pounding into the sand. His anger spurred him on and momentarily he forgot his cumbersome armor. In all actuality it wasn’t that difficult to move in. He had seen other Vakeros wearing full plate and appear to move in combat without much difficulty.

And right now only one thing was on Arcadian’s mind; the one thing that could avert his thoughts from Kamilah. Murdach. The Vakeros, though taught against such things as revenge and hate, wanted nothing more than to feel that man’s blood dripping from his sword and fingers. Arcadian wanted to feel Murdach’s heart stop.

With each new wound, and with each new callous, the young man found himself drifting from the boy named Cade and becoming the warrior named Arcadian.
Rules, Rulings

Okay, new grid is up. Check my signature for the link. It is current as of the end of R6. I am going to summarize and possibly retypewhat everyone is doing to get us up to speed myself. And I may have given SV a super boost of speed to reach the bottom of the grid, but everyone will get some beneficial leeway at some point...

Please use the grid references for movement and attacks.

SH, K: Perception check to make out what is said. Let me know if you wish to rush in and kill or rush in and incapacitate in your post.

Sol Hawk, I need an initiative from SV. Remember everyone that moving over a dead body (such as those in the entrance) takes away from your base movement for the round. If you want to jump over the bodies, I’ll allow an Acrobatics check at DC15 to avoid loss of base movement.

Simyn, if you stay put, you can go ahead and make attacks at whatever comes out of the cave in the next round. You’ll get your full attack if you wish, directed at one opponent that runs past you.

So far:

Scomitar 1 (cc21): AC14 EP5 Init 5
Scomitar 2 (cc22): AC14 EP5 Init 5

And only SV can see the ones in the cave. I won’t list their positions. Next round I’ll start doing trajectories as well.

The key to the map is in the Relevant Maps sticky.

Well, if you read the dice thread, I believe that I have dealt 25 points of damage in this round. Will my initiative be lowered because of this? It looks like I have done a delay action.

Initiative: 10 (Double Move) to dd11. (Theo) Speaks to Simyn

Perception: 14

OOC: Without a very good reason not to, Sol Hawk rushes in and kills the first enemy he sees. The only good reasons I can think of: Someone is talking about Ameesha, it IS Ameesha, or something like that. In that case he would not rush in, but continue to listen.

Sol Hawk leapt into the room - he is swift and silent like a nightmare from the dark. He stabs at the poisoned arrow at the enemy, using the skill of the expert warrior. In the nest of the enemy, there is no more time for trivia. There is only life or death.

OOC: Sol Hawk needs to take this guy down before he can scream. I am going to show my results in order. Basically, Sol Hawk is applying the attacks one at a time until his target is dead. If he has leftover attacks, please apply his attacks to the next enemy (if there is one).

Attack 1 (melee arrow) hits AC 23, damage is 16 plus poison
Attack 2 (Psychic Lance) autohits any psychic, damage is 12
Attack 3 (Psychic Attack) autohits nonpsychic, damage is 12
Attack 4 (Strafing Will) hits AC 13, DAM is 4 plus poison

Note: Sol Hawk loses 2 EP (Strafing Will, Swiftest Strike) and Sol Hawk loses 2 WP (Psychic Attack)

Free Action: Battleblade to sword
Standard Action: Drawing shortsword
Free Action: Battleblade to shortsword

I am assuming that I was located at (d32) before the start of this turn. As I used up my standard action drawing my shortsword I cannot attack this round. Hope my higher AC

Korlaeth was ready at the instant for whatever happened...which was nothing. The Kai had been swift and silent. The sheets of the bed were thrown back. But why?

The room was otherwise empty, but ransacked. Drawers were torn open in the small desk. The sheets of the bed were thrown back. But why?

The arrow Sol Hawk held slid under the curve of the man’s jaw. The one sent by his mind lodged in the man’s neck. There was no time. The Kai became a blur of motion, a shadow of doom for the one who never saw the arrow until he was already dead. If he had been left to live, it might have been a merciful end. But not for Korlaeth. He made his way out of the room, leaving the body behind him.

Simyn followed behind Sol, hanging back slightly and feeling naked without his blue-steel gear. The sage prepared for the oncomming fight. Knowing that protecting Arcadian’s back was important he concentrated on the imminent threat from the cave. Not knowing the number of opponents, Simyn chose to stay anyway. When the first of the black-clad warriors were out of the cave, Simyn was on him in his lethal rapier cutting through the air faster than the eye could see. In his right hand he had the poignard and the sage used the technique that so few of the sages mastered to his advantage. It was a fighting style that surprised at first, a style that could be deadly.

Sir Victor could see the black-clads lurking and waiting to fight. The knight drew upon his years of military training and realized immediately how to use their numbers against them. He sprinted to the cavemouth - if they insisted on fighting, they would not be allowed out any more than two at a time. Sir Victor closed to block the entryway, close to Simyn. Now the black-clads would have to clammer over their own dead to carry on the fight.

III. Midstory – Mirage

ROUND 8

The sage prepared for the oncomming fight. Knowing that protecting Arcadian’s back was important he concentrated on the imminent threat from the cave. Not knowing the number of opponents, Simyn chose to stay anyway. When the first of the black-clad warriors were out of the cave, Simyn was on him in his lethal rapier cutting through the air faster than the eye could see. In his right hand he had the poignard and the sage used the technique that so few of the sages mastered to his advantage. It was a fighting style that surprised at first, a style that could be deadly.

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“Simyn,” said Sir Victor gruffly, “Seven more inside. Stand with me to block the exit.” His sword is at the ready now and he polishes himself for the onrush of enemies as they vomit from the mouth of the cave.

Sol Hawk leaps into the room - he is swift and silent like a nightmare from the dark. He stabs at the poisoned arrow at the enemy, using the skill of the expert warrior. In the nest of the enemy, there is no more time for trivia. There is only life or death.

As Arcadian ran he began to channel his Battle Magic and sent a blast of energy out along the blade of his sword. Suddenly his short sword was in his other hand, also writhed in the blue fire of his Battlblade skill. His powerful blades of Dessi crackled and spit lightning in the dark night and the moonlight reflected off of his scalemail, giving him a fierce appearance.

Fully armed and prepared to fight to the death he faced the two talons without fear and without pity. Pity was reserved for the gods, not for men.

Korlaeth followed behind Sol, hanging back slightly and feeling naked without his blue-steel gear. The poisoned arrow he kept had been tucked away again...he had someone specific in mind for that...

Inside the cave:

Sol Hawk tried to hear what was being said. All he could make out was “somewhere,” followed by a sigh. There was no time. The Kai became a blur of motion, a shadow of doom for the one who never saw him coming.

The arrow Sol Hawk held slid under the curve of the man’s jaw. The one sent by his mind lodged between ribs. Timed perfectly, the psychic onslaught hit shortly thereafter so as not to make the man move until the arrows had hit. All that emerged from the man was a surprised grunt, and then he collapsed.

The room was otherwise empty, but ransacked. Drawers were torn open in the small desk. The sheets of the bed were thrown back. But why?

Korlaeth was ready at the instant for whatever happened...which was nothing. The Kai had been swift and effective.

* * *

Hold your own til we return! He wished to his friends, wherever they were.

From inside, Sir Victor could see a mass of soldiers preparing to rush out.

Simyn merely waited, knowing that to go in front of the door was to get shot again. He watched Arcadian and debated staying where he was or rushing to help the Vakeros. It was good to know that if he did decide to help Cade, at least he had good protection at his back.

Arcadian blocked out everything else. There were two more targets of retribution in front of him. Two more opportunities to visit upon these b_stard* the misery that had placed upon him and others. He met their rush with one of his own, using his weapon to easily reflect their initial strikes.

* * *

Victor closed to block the entryway, close to Simyn. Now the black-clads would have to clammer over their own dead to carry on the fight.

* * *

Once out of the sight of the others, the duo sprinted down to the room, slowing just before entering. Someone was mumbling inside.

* * *

* * *
Okay, since we’re in a round-by-round situation, we’ll handle searching this way:

Every round you want to search, each of you needs roll a perception check.

Besides that, I want another perception check at DC15 for the man Sol Hawk just killed.

The map in the signature bar should work. If it ever doesn’t or hasn’t been updated, it’s probably because you’re checking too soon after I post (I post, then update the file, then upload...that last part takes 5 minutes).

Simyn, your initiative (though delayed) is back to where it was, and I’ll allow you a +1 to the attacks in this next round due to the ferocity of these attacks. The fate point allowed you to slay the first man out, trip up the second and third, and still manage to be ready to react.

These guys are the fodder. The challenge awaits.

Outside the cave:
Sir Victor rushed forward and spoke to Simyn about bottlenecking the advancing troops. Taking a deep breath afterwards, he bellowed out his rallying cry to bolster their will.

Simyn waited until the first soldier came out, then attacked. The rapier whistled through the air in a deadly arc, catching the man in the throat. Momentum carried the skewered man in an arc in front of Simyn, who did not let go, but rather thrust the poignard with power into the man’s back. Pulling both weapons free, he spun in the sand and tore two wicked gashes across the man’s chest. -1 FP

Though on Magnamund the two warriors slain—one by a Kai, one by a sage—did not know of their simultaneous heinous deaths, the first sight that greeted them in Ashtara the instant before they felt the hellish heat was one another’s faces.

The black-clad soldiers poured out of the tunnel, hindered by the bodies at the mouth of the cave, the bellowing silver statue that was Sir Victor, and the whistling blades that Simyn commanded with supreme skill. The first two out of the cave staggered and stumbled across the sand, their attention drawn by the person who was in front of them—already dead!

Arcadian provided his own blocking power to the two who would assault Simyn from behind. He dodged on blade and drew his second weapon. Both weapons flashed to life with his battlemagic. The other foe was hindered by the sudden light, but his attack still caught the Vakeros on the hand. Arcadian: -1 measly EP
The pendulum swung one way, and then it swung the other way...
Sir Victor was indeed flanked now. Unable to do defend all sides, he had to rely on his armor. A raised shield caught one attack; a hastily raised sword caught another, but the third managed to find a chink in his lower back. Even as the attacker pulled his weapon free and stepped aside, arrows whistled through the mouth of the cave. One shattered upon the knight’s breastplate, leaving a small dent, while the other was a bit farther located between his breastplate and pauldron. Sir Victor: +9 EP, +3 EP

Arcaadian tried to move out of the trap he was in, but he had already overextended himself with attacks. Rather than try to block only one, he’d block both. He reversed his grip on the short sword with a twirl, raised it skyward, catching the scimitar coming at his head but not having it positioned right to fully avoid the injury. The second blade slammed into his thigh, but his armor held. Arcadian: -2 EP

To make matters worse, Sir Victor suddenly felt like he was hit with a huge brick full in the chest. A torrent of concentrated sand, like a large battering ram, crashed into him. He fought to maintain his footing against the foul magery. Sir Victor: +3 EP

ROUND 10

The fatigue of the past hours washed away as Sol Hawk heard the distant sound of Sir Victor’s rallying cry. They were here! Now they had a chance. They could escape and rejoin their comrades.

Sir Victor is outside, he thought to Koralatha. Noticing now that Koralatha had uncovered his equipment, and also not having heard any imminent threats from the hallway, the Kai makes his way to the stash and recovers his weapons and equipment.

* * *

Grunting from the pain in his leg he swung out with his sword at the enemy to his left, exhalings as the blade sliced flesh. A followup swing hit home again and blood splattered. Once again Arcadian tried to bring his shortsword around but he missed with its short reach.

* * *

Koralatha picked his sword up triumphantly, wishing briefly that his armor had been with him as well...

He scanned the room again, hoping to find something else of use, as Sol’s voice was in his mind again. He grunted in response, glad of the distraction, but still frustrated at the lost opportunity of spying on the enemy. He pressed his chapped lips together in a firm line as he finished his quick sweep and winced at his wounds again.

Convinced that he would find nothing else of value without being quite thorough, he moved to the cave entrance, ready to move outside.

* * *

The pain in his knee was terrible, but the sage wouldn’t fall. Determined to fight against the overwhelming opposition, Simyn continued with his fighting style, determined to sell his life as dearly as he could. Not ready to throw himself recklessly at his opponents the sage entered the more defensive stance that he had used so skilfully against the sharnazim he met outside of Chahdan, for what felt like an eternity ago.

* * *

Grunting as the sand blasted into his breastplate, Sir Victor nevertheless stood firm against the mystical onslaught. Only cowards resorted to sorcery to attack a knight of Sommerlund...

Simyn had been badly wounded on the leg, and the knight could see that it could hamper his fighting abilities considerably. Seeing that he was a direct target for the wizard and archers, he stepped behind an enemy, close to the sage, and slashed right and left, trying to fell the two opponents that were assailing Simyn.

* * *

Inside the cave

Preoccupied. That was the best word to describe Koralatha at the moment. Having found his cherished bluesteel weapon, which he had feared would already be on the black market in Chahdan, and having been informed mentally by Sol Hawk of current events, he was just overwhelmed. His senses refused to work like he wanted them to. Looking at the room, he just saw a room—nothing more.

He could still hear, however, the sounds of battle not far away. The warrior part in him was drawn to such, and he found himself joining the Kai at the tunnel, ready to move to the where the action was.

Sol Hawk made a mental note to check the room again later, once this was all finished. Yes, he had to admit, he was that confident that they would win. Hadn’t they always won before? An ache near his ribs

Still, though, they had regained what meager trappings they had with them before they had been discovered. That was a small comfort. Their friends lived. And soon he would see all four of them again.

Outside the cave

It was the stuff of Sommeling legend and Kivosh nightmares. The mage expended a great deal of his life force to destroy the knight, as his leader had commanded. Using the only real attack spell at his disposal, he summoned the very sand of Vassagoria to appear in his hands and fly toward those that would threaten the whims of the Sand Mother. It left his outstretched arms with a roar, colliding with the breastplate of the knight and obscuring the mouth of the cave in a cloud of sand.

Grinning evilly, the Kivosh pictured the knight being hacked apart, prone and unable to rise again. A second later when the sand settled, the knight was standing! The leader looked at the mage in disgust, but the mage only felt betrayal—what god could be more powerful than the Sand Mother?

The black-clad outside yanked his scimitar free of the sage’s knee, glad to have traded the pale outsider for blood for blood. Simyn had already turned his attention, however, to another man nearby. Seeing him approached by Sir Victor, the figure was already dead when he got the sand with his standard triple-attack. Three strikes opened wounds on the man’s back and sides. And he turned to face Simyn as Sir Victor began to move.

ACT III: MIDSTORY – MIRAGE

Simyn found himself almost flanked. The two foes he faced struck out, one high, one low. The division of his attention and defenses worked, for the poligard missed blocking one blade, and it tore into his knee. Simyn: +9 EP, +3 EP

Sir Victor: +9 EP, +3 EP

To move as a whole. You may very well think her dead once you heard it. Also, I know I mentioned you seeing “four” instead of 25. Good for them, but not good enough!

...since those black clads have 30 EP...worse I missed a critical!

If Simyn’s second attack is actually a hit, I think that takes care of those two for good.

Simyn, don’t forget my Rallying Cry. Unless you’ve seen or hear me, within 100 feet.

Sorry for my lack of stats on the enemy last time.

Sorry for my lack of stats on the enemy last time.

Sorry for my lack of stats on the enemy last time.

Damage 2: 25

Damage 3: 30

Bleeding

Damage 3: 25

Bleeding

Damage 2: 20

Bleeding

Damage 1: 15

Bleeding

Damage 0: 10

Bleeding

Damage 2: 25

Bleeding

Damage 3: 30

Bleeding

Damage 2: 20

Bleeding

Damage 1: 15

Bleeding

Damage 0: 10

Bleeding
End of Round 10

Rules, Rulings

DOC: Ok, the perception roll: 21. We came here to get Laumspur. I would hate to die from arrowfire and then later discover that some was here! Can I also use my Perception Roll to hear if Paru is coming for us? I’m starting to sound like Valestar.

And -1 WP for telepathy

OK, I won’t apply any Rally Bonus

* * *

Act III, Midstory – Mirage

Arcadian whirled like a vortex of blue flame. Slash, parry, stab! The rapidly moving blades would have been mesmerizing to just stand back and watch. Where they struck the foe, tiny red motes of light surrounded the blade as the blood sprayed into the air, instantly vanishing before the eye could fix on them. The majority of the Vakeros’s attacks struck, leaving his foe badly wounded.

The other assailant leaped in, taking advantage of the situation, but the Vakeros knew how to move from side to side as he fought. The blade intended to stab the back of his neck instead skidded across a shoulder plate.

The archers trained their arrows on the same spot in the sand cloud and fired. One whistled past the knight, but the other hit him in the same spot near his left shoulder. The knight moved and lashed out at the man whom Simyn had just attacked, and the one responsible for crippling the sage. The former soon suffered from a compound puncture to his torso, while the latter lost his arm as the knight’s blade pulsed free and slashed through his ribcage. He joined his comrades in death.

Sir Victor: -4 EP

All this proved too much for one man. Having seen the knight slice one man in half, then withstand a powerful blast of magic before almost killing two more, all he could do was flee into the night, screaming to his matron god to save him from the silver terror.

Simyn laughed at this. Victor wasn’t so terrible.

Inside the cave, a female voice shouted over the chaos.

ROUND 11

As the Kai and Korlaeth stood at the cave mouth, Sol Hawk paused. Good Korlaeth, he considered, I was certain that we might find some Laumspur in this room. By Ishir’s Grace, perhaps we might give it one last look.

With eyes of a hawk, and drawing upon his knowledge of the healing arts, Sol Hawk scoured the room once more for any chance that he might find a vial or two of the precious fluid still intact...

As the woman’s voice yells in rage somewhere in the tunnels, Sol Hawk’s blood ran cold. Paru? he thought, Has she discovered our escape?

* * *

Without any sparse hint of mercy in his eyes Arcadian delivered the coup de grace to more wounded of the two talons. With a wrench he yanked the sword free of the corpse and swung behind him, attempting to catch the other warrior at neck level. The blade passed over the head of the black-clad, but Arcadian was prepared for this.

With a turn he pushed his left hand forward, imbedding the shortsword in the man’s side. The talon looked at the cold warrior in shock, and then down at his own bledded torso. The shortsword had pierced his gut cleanly, avoiding an organs yet inflicting a gruesome wound nevertheless. The cobalt lances of electricity danced along the blade, and stung his wound with a furious bite.

Once again the black-clad looked up into the eyes of the warrior, just in time to see the doe, brown eyes turn hard, almost black. And then as he watched Arcadian’s eyes did indeed turn black, black as a moonless midnight. And then the Vakeros’ eyes changed, the pupils dissapeared until there was nothing left but two midnight vortexes, empty.

Souless.
**Act III, Midstory – Mirage**

Happy that he had sir Victor as a fighting companion, the sage pressed his attack. Still vary of his two opponents, the sage continued to fight defensively, “Shouldn’t you give up as your friend just did?” he taunted his opponent in Vassan. His opponent didn’t answer, Simyn made a point by hitting him twice with his rapier.

* * *

**Good Korlaeth, Sol thought to him, I was certain that we might find some laumspur in this room... The woman’s yell interrupted the thought, and Korlaeth’s full attention was suddenly outside the room.**

**Look quickly, Sol, he drew the poisoned arrow he had kept gingerly into his hand again and considered it, looking down the tunnel, then back at the arrow. Reaching a decision, he started to creep down the tunnel, I’ve got a score to settle.**

* * *

**Sir Victor, satisfied that Simyn was out of immediate danger, stepped back where he was standing a moment earlier, at the exact same spot that he had been magically targeted with a wall of sand.**

Ignoring the walking wounded, he concentrated on the man closer to the cave entrance, who was trying to surround the sage, and made him the target of his wrath, as he used his heavy, yet well balanced blade not once, but twice on the poor fellow.

* * *

**Inside**

Korlaeth crept quietly around the curve in the tunnel and up the sloped stairs. He paused for a second and noticed two archers, kneeling and firing their bows out of the cave exit. He was certain other archers were nearby, for the cave itself had a wonderful defensive structure.

His companion Kai, however, gave in to curiosity and looked the room over. He looked for bottles, vials, jars...anything that might have laumspur in it. The room was in such disarray that merely glancing at it revealed nothing. There could be some hidden under those papers, or under the table, or in that box under the bed. There was...wait.

A box under the bed?

**Outside**

The Sage tantalized his foe for a split second before his blade pierced the bleeding man’s heart. He pulled his weapon out and thrust it backward, catching the black-clad standing in the mouth of the cave in the abdomen.

The archers, waiting for a clear shot, had their chance as the armor-encased knight stepped back into their line of sight and swung his sword like a razored pendulum. It tore through the man whom Simyn had just felled, ripping one way and then the next. The injuries were too much, and he collapsed to the ground.

A flurry of arrows ripped through the air, targeting everyone near the cave mouth. Fortunately, most of the projectiles missed. Sir Victor: -3 IP / Simyn: -3 IP

The lone Vakeros was nothing short of the hand of death in this instant. Before either man flanking him could act. Using a technique of Vakama’re, he moved his blades in wide sweeping arcs, tearing through the defenses of both his assailant’s in mere second. They fell backwards in each direction, the impact of their lives being, in whole, nothing.

The one remaining man sized up the odds. Many against three had failed. One against three would end in one possible outcome.

He fled.

**ROUND 12**

Sol Hawk was amazed to see the box. Had this been here? Perhaps it had something to do with the man he had just felled. Perhaps there were potions here. Sol Hawk moved the box out a few inches then backed away. With all the poison the Talons used, he was suspicious of a trap. Still, if there was laumspur inside, he was going to need it. He concentrated his powers upon the box.

**Be careful, Korlaeth, intoned Sol Hawk as the Vakeros sped off, Don’t let them see you.**

* * *

**Realizing that entering the cave without a plan would be close to suicide, Simyn sheathed his weapons and pressed himself against the cavern wall.**

“Place yourself in cover, sir Victor. I suggest we wait for Arcadian before we take out these curs. Taking out an opponent is not noble, but I can play their game as well.”

* * *

Korlaeth continued carefully down the tunnel, listening for Paru’s voice again. He grunted at Sol Hawk’s thought, only just stifling a sarcastic reply.

* * *

“Cowards!”, spat the knight at the fleeing warrior. “It doesn’t surprise me, coming from these Southerners...!”. Seeing that Arcadian was still away from them and would take the next few seconds joining with them, he nodded at the Sage and pressed himself on the other side of the cave entrance. However, he wondered what the Simyn was doing sheathing his weapons with a cavern full of enemies waiting for them. Maybe he had other tricks up his sleeve.
Rules, Rulings

It will change into the weapon, but not the ammunition. So, yeah, you’d have to supply the arrows. Shouldn’t be a problem... for you.

I know my archers are going to freak with attacks coming from behind.

Moving to cc10, keeping my weapons ready and my shield up against the archers.

Cade, I’m going to go ahead and update the post, but if you feel I didn’t interpret what you’d do accurately, let me know and I’ll change it.

Inside:
The Kai rushed to the box, momentarily distracted by what the contents could be. As he pulled it out, he noticed that it was chained to something under the bed. Odd. Still, he had enough room to pull it out. Using the powers of his mind, he reached into the lock and tried to open it, but the complex device would not budge. There were too many tumblers to concentrate on. Frustrated, Sol Hawk looked at the box and considered hacking it or prying it apart, but its solid iron oak panels pretty much restricted that.

What to do?

This was the same question which faced Korlaeth, as well. He had managed to sneak up behind the archers so far, and he knew that he could turn his bluesteel sword into a bow. He had a poisoned arrow. He debated when he should use them—do it now and have the advantage of darkness to retreat into? Do it next to the cave and retreat in there after firing? Or move into the fray?

Outside:
Simyn moved away from the mouth of the cave and pressed his back against the stone wall. Sir Victor did the same. Arcadian ended his battleflame on the weapons and came over to join them, taking a cue from their positions to stay out of the range of the archers.

A couple of arrows clattered off the stones of the cave mouth, and a gruff male voice shouted, “Ny! Isha!”

“What do we do now?” he asked, knowing that whoever was first to enter the cave would take the brunt of the archer’s attacks. His mind searched for any magical spells that could help.

Commentary and Observations

Sand Mage
(Kivosh)
(as shown in Rising Sun 12)

The Sand Mage is a spellcaster found in Vassagonia which is actually part priest and part mage. They worship the Sand Mother, which is believed to be the spirit that guides the winds across the desert and helps expand the empire. Each level, a Sand Mage picks a new step along their path, all of which culminate in either Mastery (a new spell and increased counterspell DCs) or Archmastery (another new spell and even more powerful counterspell DCs).

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End of Round 12
Rules, Rulings

Note - If Sol Hawk is close enough (and if it is free), he will pass 2 more arrows to Korlaeth this round

Moving to D13 stealthily (21 on stealth check). Looking and listening for Paru, specifically in the cave to my left (right side of the screen), Perception check 13. Standard action: Song of Steel's True Form to make a cobalt long bow. What kind of action to grab arrows from Sol if he gets next to me?

After reading over my ability of Cobalt Freedom I have found that I regain 5 feet of lost speed due to armor. So my speed is 25, not 20.

After reading over my ability of Cobalt Freedom I have found that I regain 5 feet of lost speed due to armor. So my speed is 25, not 20.

I have given Arcadian and other allies within 10 feet +2 in Dex for 7 rounds.

Arcadian wrote:

After reading over my ability of Cobalt Freedom I have found that I regain 5 feet of lost speed due to armor. So my speed is 25, not 20.

Great!

I'm trying to stay within 10' of the Vakeros, at least for this round. So I'll wait until he posts before I can tell you exactly where I'll be standing.

Move to Y15. This is assuming that I was within 5 feet of Grown when I took off into the cave.

I'll move to Y 13 for this round.

Super.

Korlaeth, not much to report new. From your vantage point, you see no one in the cave. The two of you were being tortured, and you still can't see anyone beyond the archers on the cave floor. You know Paru has to be down there, though—unless she is hiding somewhere near you. To take an arrow from Sol Hawk would be a free action if he is adjacent from you, a move action if he is not.

Sol Hawk, you have just entered the grid. Korlaeth is straight in front of you, and you can see two archers in front of him. From your vantage point, it's pretty much the same.

DragonReborn will be running a character in the next few phases of combat: the leader of this group, Aymodani.

Act III, Midstory – Mirage

ROUND 13

Always ready for a noble sacrifice, Sir Victor didn't hesitate and addressed his companions:

"Allow me to head in first, you can both follow right on my heels. Unless either of you have a better plan...." The Sommlending waited for their answer, eager for the coming clash.

* * *

Sol Hawk stared at the box. The well-crafted mechanism was more than a match for him in his fatigued state. He placated himself by supposing that the box could not contain Laumspru if it was locked so tightly. Korlaeth needed him now. The mysteries of the box would have to wait.

I'm coming up behind you now, warned Sol Hawk. With scimitar in one hand and arrows in the other, he arrived in the cavern, moving like a shadow in the darkness of a moonless night.

* * *

Korlaeth pressed forward, hugging the rock wall to his right and placing his feet with utmost care. He glanced into the cave to his left as he came abreast of it and strained his ears for Paru's voice. He concentrated on his khanjar, and it melted swiftly into a cobalt long bow, ready to give the white-robed woman a taste of her own medicine, if he could find her.

Sol's thoughts intruded on his focus, and he glanced at the archers ahead as the Kair lord came up behind him. I could use a few of those arrows, now, he thought back.

* * *

"Get out of my way, you two. I have an idea." Said Arcadian as he gathered his magical reserves. He was preparing to use a spell in sorcery that was once taught to him.

With that Arcadian erected a glowing energy shield around his body (+4 Willpower, Force Shield) and then took off, running straight into the entrance of the cave. As he burst inside and took stock of the situation his eyes flamed into anger. So many to kill...

As soon as he was inside he headed straight for the mage, prepared to counterspell if necessary.

* * *

"Any ideas Arcadian? 'Cause I don't like the prospect of running into a cave full of archers. I have my crossbow and am willing to use it, but before that I want to give you this. See it as a blessing."

The sage began tracing a set of complex motions in the air. There seemed to be a pattern to his fingers but what that was eluded the vakeros. Suddenly he stopped. The sage was smiling. "I share with you my personal blessing, the blessing of box, the star of Ali."

* * *

Seeing that the Vakeros had something in mind, Sir Victor let him go through the cave opening first, hefting his broadsword as he followed on Arcadian's heels.

"Cade, I see the mage, he's on the right!" exclaims the knight as he follows the Vakeros inside.

* * *

"He's all mine!" growled Arcadian, with sword drawn.

* * *

Aymodani was anxious to launch himself into the attack. The mayhem and noise of steel biting on steel and the cries of pain from steel biting on flesh served to fuel his bloodlust for killing.

From his hiding position near the cave's entrance he glanced at Paru, and she nodded, knowing that the knight would now be the second to enter. His twin scimitars spun, one reflecting light, one wreathed in shadow from the spell NightStrike. It was unfortunate the Kivosh could not cast it on Paru's blade as well. Still, a smile creased his face for he knew that every time he wielded the blades he spilled enemy blood.

For a fraction of time Aymodani couldn't hear any battle sounds from outside the cave. However, looking up at the archers he noticed they had an arrow notched to their bows in anticipation. Dropping to a sort of half crouch Aymodani closed his eyes and emptied his mind of all conscious thought; solely focusing upon the impending attack and thinking through his battle forms.

Some part of his battle hardened mind told him to look up...was Paru just looking to charge, was all he had time to think before the first of the enemy entered the cave. The Vakeros was the first to enter but Aymodani stayed his charge, waiting for the opportune moment. Suddenly a bright glare hit his eyes and at that moment Aymodani's body leapt into action. The clatter of armor heralded the knight, and the few torches reflected brightly off the armor, acting as a beacon for Aymodani's scimitar to strike.

Raising his enchanted scimitar, he charged the knight and brought it around in a reversed stab, piercing the knight's gut. He watched as the spell took hold, remembering his training wherein all the military was forced to endure the spell's effects. Aymodani had forgotten he still had the blade in the knight's side when Paru struck.

He backed off and twirled them again, waiting a second until he could unleash his fury on this infidel in theSand Mother's domain.

* * *

Simyn held back as the others ran in. He was brave, but his lack of metallic armor would not allow him to be as brave as the other were. Therefore, he extended to Arcadian the protective power of his chosen star. Looking skyward, the sage pointed at it. As if in response, it changed color to blue for a twinkle, and the sage pointed at Arcadian. Unseen to the Vakeros, a shimmer of very faint azure light washed over him.

Arcadian had not expected the sage's blessing, but he accepted it with silent gratitude as he completed his own spell. A pale blue oval appeared off his left shoulder as he dashed off, jumping over one body and turning 'round to enter the cave. "He's all mine!" he declared as he entered the cave, scanning instantly to find the mage. One of the archers alerted the rest, shouting, "Banou kiva! Nev A-kana!"
Rules, Rulings

Simyn, feel free to come on in anytime.

Arcadian: The DC to counter "Darken" is 29. (10 + Kivosh level (9) + archmastery (10)) He barely made the roll himself.

If you can't counter it, there will be a 15' diameter hemisphere of shadow around the mage, giving him 15% concealment (meaning if you hit him, roll damage and a d100 at the same time... if the percentile comes up 15 or less, you actually missed)

Sir Victor, you are now the victim of the Kivosh spell "NightStrike". You are now considered 'blinded', as per the basic status rules in the LWRPG:

Movement halved.
No Dex bonus to AC.
-4 on Str/Dex based skills (this includes attacks...you're swinging wild) 50% miss chance (if you do hit, it's 50/50 on whether you cause damage)
All enemies get +2 on attacks.

Paru (Shz9): AC 16 EP 62/68 Init in signature

Act III, Midstory – Mirage

He was greeted by a chorus of twangs as the archers let loose their shafts. The magical barrier angled reflexively, catching the ones that would have hit him, blocking the arrows with pulses of color. His rage had given him great power... and he knew that it would help him strike down the mage. So focused was he on the spellcaster that he ignored the other black-clads he had seen on his periphery as he entered the cave.

Sir Victor waited for the Vakeros to enter, then followed. The archers tried to take down the blue-steel-bearing opponent, but his magical shield held off the arrows. The knight noticed motion to his left as he entered. He stayed close to the Vakeros, and then he noticed someone detaching from the shadows of the cave to his right as well. Another ambush!

Sir Victor halted near Arcadian and turned his head just in time to see a figure as large as himself rush up behind him. A blade slid into his lower abdomen under his breastplate, and above the searing pain of the wound, he felt as if a snake were crawling through his body, up his neck. Rapidly the feeling spread until it reached his eyes, and they felt as if they had been made of ice. The already dim colors of the cavern faded to black as the spell transferred from the weapon to the victim. Darkness descended upon the knight, leaving him blinded and unprepared for the next attack that hit from the opposite side, near where Arcadian was. The second member of the ambush silently slid her blade into the arm opening in the underside of his breastplate, cleanly slicing the musculature between his ribs. It seemed the archers were the least of their worries... Sir Victor: -14 EP, -11 EP: you are now bleeding from sub-critical damage and will lose 1 EP per round until healed

Seeing the angry man coming his way, the Kivosh invoked a fast spell upon his khanjar, hoping his archmastery of the path would allow him to exceed the Vakeros' ability to counter it.

End of Round 13:
**Rules, Rulings**

I'm attacking the leader. Attack 1: 15 (miss) Attack 2: 27 (critical hit), for a total of 15 damage. If I miss 50% chance, Rallying Cry ends this turn.

(Standard) retrieves five arrows

(free) while moving, drops arrows with Kivraeth (~5 poison arrows for me)

(move) To E14

(free) Telepathy (-1 WP for me)

(free) Strafing Will on O11 (-1 EP for me, -1 poison arrow for me)

(free) Psychic Attack on whichever enemy is closest and is still standing after Kivraeth's and Sol Hawk's attacks (-2WP for me)

Movement to V17, placing the mage between me and most of the archers.

Attack: 24

Damage: 11

100 sided die results: 6

d mm you kll...

This was what I intended all along. Since I didn't have my crossbow ready, I'm doing a double move action. I'm drawing my crossbow and loading it. I'm also taking a 5 foot step to square C12. Do I have a line of sight to the archer in T7 or is the cave wall in the way? I want to give him something to think about in the next round.

Delay action to wait for Sol. Five foot step to E13. Free action to fire arrows. Full attack action to shoot twice, both at the archer in O12, since the first one missed. The second one hit.

Kivraeth: The AC on the archers was 10 because they were flat-footed. I allowed both arrows to hit each one.

Sir Victor: They are coming for you. Time to be clever.

Sir Victor: I promise I'm not doing this on purpose. On a bright note, if you fail the saving throw (I haven't checked to see if you can even meet the roll...just setting the DC at the damage taken), they may consider you dead and head to different targets.

Arcadian: The mage is gone, and the archer who would have targeted you is moving toward the Kai. You are wide open to try anything.

Arcadian: Perhaps if I had seen the archer that would have targeted you, I would have turned and helped his fellow warrior. But the blue-armored bringer of death had locked eyes with the frightened mage and he was not about to let his quarry escape. Even as he approached he saw the man working a spell with his khanjar.

Arcadian smiled. "Bring what devilry of the sands you may. My sword will not be cheated out of tasting blood."

Without bothering to attempt a counterspell Arcadian leaped upon the man with his sword in his hand. Just before he struck a 15 foot hemisphere of shadow around the man, concealing him considerably. Refusing to be denied Arcadian swung his sword as blue-fire consumed the sharp blade.

The young Vakers was frowning when the blade did not catch anything. No cry of pain, no blood was split. Only dark empleness.

Sir Victor: If you think about it, I think you were quite effective.

The combination of attacks from the Kai and the Vakers took their toll quickly. Both archers were ambushed by a volley of poisoned arrows. The graveweed took almost immediate effect as the men's systems could not fight its effects. Watching them convulse and flail at the arrows for a second before collapsing, Kivraeth felt his own mortality and how close he was to death with these arrows near. One false move....

And the Kai was running about with a handful of them! Aymodani shouted, "Let us finish him!" and he shifted his position in unison with Paru. Then then unleashed their fury upon the knight, emitting a chorus of clangs and crunches as the blades bounced off armor and sunk through underpadding. Sir Victor: -27 EP total, bleeding...-2 per round until healed Fortitude Save at DC27 to remain conscious.

The archers faltered, looking around to see why two of them had fallen at the top of the slope. One pointed at the Kai and stood. The other followed suit, holding his bow at the ready and taking a couple of steps closer. The lone archer was confused and spent his time debating what to do. Eventually he stepped forward and one of them, the man that he himself had tortured, mocked, and beaten. Twice fooled now, he knew his fearful understanding then crossed over his face. He knew this was the man who had appeared in their camp as one of them, the man that he himself had tortured, mocked, and beaten. Twice fooled now, he knew his doom was upon him. Sir Victor held the man for just an instant, but it was enough. Sol Hawk had driven another poisoned arrow through his body (1 DAM plus poison). The violation of his own torture burst to the forefront of his mind, and he delivered directly into the Black-Dread's leader's brain. (DAM 5). Before Aymodani could counter him, Sol Hawk had driven another poisoned arrow in through his armour (1 DAM plus poison). Aymodani gasped, realizing that the secret of Resa's destruction now coursed through his veins, seeking his black twisted heart in mazeways of blood.

**Act III, Midstory – Mirage**

**ROUND 14**

Out of the corner of his eye, Sir Victor spotted movement to his right and to his left. Trapped? He lifted his shield too late to parry the first blow, which sliced deeply into his skin. As he felt the evil sorcery consume him, Sir Victor yelled his hatred at the fee, and lunged back, even as his vision dimmed and left him in darkness.

As Kivraeth makes his request for the arrows, Sol Hawk emerges from the dark. Apparently, the archers in the cave ahead are too preoccupied to even imagine that their two enemies are behind in the caves, waiting. Let's get closer, thinks Sol to his fellow emancipate. Once the noble Kai has divulged the arrows, he radios himself again for the attack and moves into position. In his right hand is his scimitar, arrows in the left. He lifts his fist of arrows and moves one of his fingers, prepared to release the first one....

The poisoned projectile flies free of his hand and embeds itself in the archer's neck (4 DAM + poison). The attack was so unexpected, so very swift.

Sol Hawk then hits the nearest enemy (who still stands) with the power of his mind, a deadly force that cannot be resisted.... (4 DAM)

Sir Victor: I promise I'm not doing this on purpose. On a bright note, if you fail the saving throw (I haven't checked to see if you can even meet the roll...just setting the DC at the damage taken), they may consider you dead and head to different targets.

**ROUND 15**

Even as Kivraeth searched for Paru, Sol Hawk had dropped the scimitar and was already running. The Archer's tried to grab at him, but they were no match for the Kai's speed. Sir Victor was in terrible pain as two deadly swords slashed into him, one of them shining with an evil dark light. There was no more time. As the massive man began to falter, Sol Hawk was running at full speed into the cavern. Cade turned his head for a moment when Sol Hawk raised his black-clad hand and launched a poisoned projectile through the air, coming from the darkness like a shining ray of hope. Even as the larger man was unleashing his most furious attack possible upon the Sommlending Knight, the steel-tipped shaft struck the evil man's armour with enough force to punch through. (DAM 4 plus poison)

Aymodani turned his head and saw the Kai Lord's eyes of blue glint for a moment on a beam of moonlight. The painful understanding then crossed over his face. He knew this was the man who had appeared in their camp as one of them, the man that he himself had tortured, mocked, and beaten. Twice fooled now, he knew his doom was upon him. Sir Victor held the man for just an instant, but it was enough. Sol Hawk let all the rage, the violation of his own torture burst to the forefront of his mind, and he delivered directly into the Black-Dread's leader's brain. (DAM 5). Before Aymodani could counter him, Sol Hawk had driven another poisoned arrow in through his armour (1 DAM plus poison). Aymodani gasped, realizing that the secret of Resa's destruction now coursed through his veins, seeking his black twisted heart in mazeways of blood.
rules, Rulings

Full Action?: Blazing Aura (DC 22) Result: 29 Free Action: Battleblade Intimidate check failed. While Blazing Aura is in effect (7 rounds) any successful melee attack made against me forces the opponent to make a Reflex save or take my base magical damage as fire damage.

Since I can't find an AC for the mage, I don't know if I hit. At least I know the concealment spell didn't work on my crossbow, I'm shooting (standard action), and dropping the crossbow (free action) and drawing my rapier (move action). This sage is going to my kebab out of a certain mage!

Well, I'm making a few assumptions, I guess...mostly that the archer I hit fails his Fort save. Hopefully, I won't have to come back and eat my words. 5-foot step to Fl4. Shot at the farther archer (missed by one, dang it!), then 2nd shot at the nearer archer which hits for 6 points of damage. [insert prayer here that this guy has the areas I prepared.]

KaiLord wrote:

Sir Victor: I promise I'm not doing this on purpose. On a bright note, if you fail the saving throw (I haven't checked to see if you can even meet the roll...just setting the DC at the damage taken), they may consider you dead and head to different targets.

No hard feelings, it's just a game. I can and I have passed the DC check, however, which could be bad for me...I rallied 29.

Attack 1 is a hit (18), for 5 E/D. Concealment % was 98 this time around. Attack 2 is a miss (9).

Arcadian, Simyn: My Ralllying Cry is no longer active.

Act III, Midstory – Mirage

The mage was gone but Arcadian's eyes had fallen upon a new enemy. The large man was surely the leader of this group and a fire which could only be quenched by Aymodani's blood spread through his veins. Arcadian could see Victor falter and he could not see Simyn anywhere.

Arcadian's black eyes burned holes into Aymodani and the young Vakeros made it as blatant as possible.

"How about a true fight, Vassan?!" Challengeed the young Vakeros. "One without shadows and poisons. Is that or untrue to your nature?"

With that Cade twisted both of his lethal blades in front of his body. He did as so both of the blades became enwrapped in radiant blue-white lightning, giving off a terrifying display of light which lit up Arcadian's dark face. And as Aymodani watched swirls of lightning began to run over Arcadian's entire body. A blue-white inferno suddenly encased Arcadian's body with a thunderous roar.

Supernatural wind caused his hair to whirl around him and his invisible as if the young Vakeros was completely encompassed within a firestorm of cobalt illumination.

"Do you really think you can content with the might of a cobalt warrior?"

Arcadian's blue-fire blades swirled around his body in deadly circulars of near-blinding, white luminosity. Strands of blue lightning sprung out and moved over his arms, legs, and torso as he prepared for battle.

"I'll make sure the insects of the sand enjoy eating your flesh."

Seizing a new opportunity when it presented itself, Simyn aimed quickly at the mage and shot into the black cloud. The sagae wasn't sure if he had hit his intended mark, but didn't stop to think about it. He quickly dropped the now empty crossbow and drew his rapier. His friends needed help and he wouldn't sit idly when they were cut down.

Korbaeth snatched up the arrows near him by the flitching and stopped into the center of the passage, emerging from behind the rock wall even as he again dropped the arrows and knelt. The archers saw death from their own poison staining them in the face as Korbaeth let loose with first one, then another of the four arrows he had left. Korbaeth cursed as one arrow sailed past one archer's cheek, missing by inches. His miss focused his aim, however, and the other arrow struck true.

The Vassan leader bellowed and Korbaeth hoped fervently that Paru was nearby to send the insects of the sand Mother to pounce upon him like a burning spider, Vassagonia will just have to wait for some other stronger nation or entity to ally with them in a huge compact.

Adventures: Sharnazim are the essentiality the military of Vassagonia, therefore they will usually be encountered on patrol or on assignment. Occasionally there will be more free-roving Sharnazim encountered, usually in dangerous regions or away from commanding officers. Older Sharnazim that manage to move through the ranks are revealed by the Zakhan, ironically enough, with title and land. If the Zakhan of the nation dies, those officers will then fight amongst themselves for the right to claim the throne.

Characteristics: These black-clad warriors with red sashes are sadistic and uncharited. The Vassagonian populace is more like a flock of sheep to be herded than they are equal people. Non-Vassagon are many animals to them. Though not really fond of wanton destruction or anarchistic principles, they are still capable of such.

Religion: One facet of deity in this society is the current Zakhan, who is revered like a god. Unlike this mortal man, though, the Sand Mother (the name given to the spirit that moves the sands and expands the desert) is revered, especially by the Sand Mages (whose name is a bit of a misnomer, since they are as much priests as they are wizards).

Background: The history of the Sharnazim class has been lost, much like the ancient holy sites that have been consumed by the Sand Mother's whims.

Other Clashes: Sharnazim mix well with Sharnazim, and not much else. They respect order and strict discipline, and among all the other militias in Mugaron, they most resemble the Drakkrmar assassins of the Draklands, whom they admire as true warriors.

Come Rule Information

The Sharnazim has the following game statistics.

Abilities: Like any other warrior class, the Sharnazim's physical attributes are most desired. Depending on the expertise of the warrior (strength, agility, or vigor), one of these may take precedence over the others. This is not to say that Sharnazim are dumb or repulsive—they merely know that intelligence and charm are matters suited for other groups of people.

Endurance Die: d10.
Base Speed: 30 ft.
Starting Wealth: 200 Gold Crowns

Class Skills

Alertness, Bluff, Climb, Escape Artist, Heal, Intimidate, Knowledge (geography, warfare), Perception, Ride, Sense Motive, Sleight of Hand, Stealth, Survival

Skill Points at 1st Level: (3 + Int modifier) x 4
Skill Points at Each Additional Level: 3 + Int modifier x 4

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the Sharnazim:

Armor and Weapon Proficiency: Sharnazim are proficient with the following weapons: scimitar, khanjar, short sword, dagger, staff, spear, crossbow, short bow. All Sharnazim are equipped with a scimitar and khanjar, without exception. If one is lost or broken, the Sharnazim can report to any city garrison and have it replaced, albeit at some cost. The Zakhan of the nation greeds for expansion has become complacent, for skirmishes are few and light, typically being with Other.

Victor falter and he could not see Simyn anymore. Thearcadian, Simyn: My Ralllying Cry is no longer active.

Commentary and Observations

Check the Sharnazim class:

Quote:

Twins Scimitar style, defense: Utilizing two scimitars turned in reverse grip (the back of the blade runs along the underside of the forearm), the Sharnazim gains a bonus when fighting defensively or in full defense. If fighting defensively, his AC is in creased by +6. In full defense, it is increased by +8.

But, he's not using TSSD. He's engaged in full attack right now. And considering that he is not aware of Simyn or you two, he has no need to enter defensive mode.

Why can't you add the +2 charge bonus? Charge is basically a straight-line, double-move, attack option. I'm sure that even though you don't have true line-of-site, you have a high enough base move coupled with a full 40' of straight-line movement toward them once you do see him.

Valiant. Dangerous. Selfless.

We shall see what happens....
**Act III, Midstory – Mirage**

The time for heroes had come. The time for sacrifice had come. What would be the outcome?

Korlaeth moved again and fell one archer easily, leaving another ready to return fire, however. He cursed as the man took careful aim, even as his nearby fellow succumbed quickly to the graveowd. The return arrow ricocheted off the Vakeros’ unprotected shin. **Korlaeth:** -2 EP

Simyn seized the moment of opportunity and redirected his attentions to the sorcery-enshrouded wizard that had just run into view. Even through the shade, Simyn could see the look of abject shock on the mage’s face. The Kivish fumbled for a spell, but before he could cast one to mind a searing pain tore through his intestines. Looking down, he saw blood spilling from a wound containing a deeply-embedded quill. Then he felt the burning sensation as the poison moved to his heart. As quickly as it had come, it left, and he fell dead, his enchanted Kajjar still at his side.

Sol Hawk knew Sir Victor was in dire danger. The combat heightened his senses, even those innate Kai ones. He knew that the knight-defender of his homeland was falling. With the sound of a sword slicing through the air, he rushed down the tunnel, picking up speed as he bounded down the slope, and ran full force into the large man who looked like Sir Victor’s black-clad twin. Had his ploy worked? Or had he accidentally poisoned himself from such a maneuver?

Already the arrow he sent with his mind was proudbuilding—to be poison even without the change. He pulled his hand out of the wound in the man’s side and saw a trickle of blood, but felt no burning. Apparently, the man whom he struck did, for he lowered his weapons and screamed in pain as he realized what had happened. For a second, the Kai felt triumphant.

But in the next second Paru moved into sight from the opposite side of the knight. She needed only an instant to figure out what was happening. Looking out at the knight with her fine weapon twice and ended with her arm outstretched at the Kai—the kajjar flung gracefully through the air, but it missed.

The momentary distraction was all Aymodani needed, however. This insolent b _**stard**_ somehow freed himself and poisoned him. Hmph! Aymodani, new initiate of the Ragged, set to enter their order under the tutelage of Egleip Once they returned to Teph. How dare he do this?

No fool to combat, Aymodani knew where this would end for him. Squinting from the psychic pain in his mind as he overcame the effects of the poison, Aymodani twisted both blades and struck out twice at the knight, and twisted at the Kai.

Sir Victor’s blood spattered through the air from the first attack. Then Aymodani brought the second blade across the same area. Spinning, he took a tiny step and extended his arm at the Kai’s chest—the blade pierced fully to the hilt. Using his massive strength, the man twisted the blade and pulled it free before bringing the other across the Kai’s stomach. Had he not been a Kai Lord, Sol Hawk would now be dead.

The only thing that saved him from instant death was his mastery of Sixth Sense. He knew the blades were coming, and made sure they would strike. He moved so they would only heavily injure him, not slay him outright.

With a gap, Sol Hawk fell to the ground. Sol Hawk [Glauncing Blow utilized (original damage 28): +crit -12 EP, -6 EP]

He would never witness how his selfless act turned the tide an instant later.

Sir Victor cried out for assistance. To be reduced to such an ambling target by mere sorcery was irritating. Then to be hacked apart so efficiently was humbling. Now he needed his friend’s help more than ever, for all he heard in his world of pain was a man’s scream to his left, a woman’s scream to his right, and someone gurgling before hitting the ground. What was happening? **Sir Victor:** -10 EP, -15 EP

The knight held his sword out at waist level and employed the only technique he knew would work at the moment. Spinning in a half-circle, the knight felt something jar his forearm, the Sharnazim gains a bonus when fighting defensively or in full defense. If fighting defensively, his AC is increased by once. If the weapon does not normally have a range factor associated with it, the range increment is a flat 10’. These attacks are still subject to the -5 penalty, and they occur after all other attacks are made.

Explosive thrusting attacks are the trademark of this style. The Sharnazim lays out with his entire body on the first attack of each full attack, giving it a bonus to hit due to the speed with which the attack comes. Note that only the highest attack bonus from the main-hand weapon gains this benefit.

Tier I: -1 on attack and damage, first attack only

Tier II: -2 on attack and damage, first attack only

Tier III: -3 on attack and damage, first attack only

**Sand Survival:** The Sharnazim gains a bonus to Survival checks in open desert equal to his character level divided by 2, rounded down.

**Improved Initiative:** Due to a strict military school of training, the Sharnazim is more prepared for combat than most, and he gains a +4 to initiative.

**Sand Knead:** When making Perception or Stealth checks in the desert, the Sharnazim gains a bonus equal to his character level divided by 2, rounded down.

**Improved Ambidexterity:** No penalties are applied with a Sharnazim fights with a medium weapon in his main hand and a small weapon in his off-hand. The most common form of this is the Twin Scimitar style, below.

**Sand Firer:** As a full round action, the Sharnazim can throw the small weapon in his off-hand at any opponent outside melee reach when he himself is engaged in melee combat. This attack always occurs just after the Sharnazim’s last regular attack, and it uses the base combat skill bonus with a +5 penalty.

**Sand Strike:** Base move is increased to 40’.

**Improved Quick Draw:** Two weapons can now be drawn as a single free action.

**Sand Slender:** When making Perception or Stealth checks in the desert, the Sharnazim gains a bonus equal to his character level divided by 2, rounded down.

**Improved Ambidexterity:** No penalties are applied with a Sharnazim fights with two equal medium weapons. The most common form of this is the Twin Scimitar style, below.

**Twinst Scimitar style, defense:** Utilizing two scimitars turned in reverse grip (the back of the blade runs along the underside of the forearm), the Sharnazim gains a bonus when fighting defensively or in full defense. If fighting defensively, his AC is increased by +6, in full defense, it is increased by +8.

**Lord Status:** The Zakhan recognizes the lowest of titles by letter through a messenger. As a result of the status, the Lord gains 2 bonuses.

**Improved Disarm:** When both attempting to disarm and resisting disarm, the Sharnazim gains a bonus due to his knowledge of the curvilinear blade. When using a scimitar and kajjar, the bonus is +2. When using two scimitars, the bonus is +4.

**Improved Ambidexterity:** The Sharnazim can attack with both blades simultaneously. If the attack scores a hit, roll damage for both weapons. The critical range is also lowered by one when using this form of attack, so that criticals are no longer possible.

**Twins style, offense:** The Sharnazim can attack with both blades simultaneously. If the attack scores a hit, roll damage for both weapons. The critical range is also lowered by one when using this form of attack, so that criticals are no longer possible.
Rules, Rulings

For those who read this before Sol Hawk decided to use Glancing Blow, he had originally died. Only by remembering this is he still (barely) alive.

The combination of attacks from Sol Hawk and Sir Victor have slain Aymodani.

Commentary and Observations

Sharnazim Class (first shown in Rising Sun 12), Continued

Scimitar Mastery, defense: As a special move action that does not allow a 5’ step, the Sharnazim can hold his ground and deflect many attacks targeting him. His AC increases by +10, and he can make one unmodified attack per round (just add base combat skill bonus—no attack or damage modifiers). Due to the exertion required to do this, he loses -4 EP every round he utilized this technique.

Warlord Status: In an on-site ceremony headed by an officiate of the empire, the Zakhan assigns two Sharnazim bodyguards of 10th level with at least 75% max EP. These bodyguards can be either mages or warriors, depending on the preference of the Warlord. In addition, he is granted a magical weapon and suit of armor (both are +2 superior, +1 magical). The Warlord also gets a special medallion with his family emblem engraved on it.

Scimitar Mastery, offense: Years of combat and training have paid off for the Sharnazim. Both the Str and Dex mod are added to the attack roll, and damage rolls of 1 or 2 are instead treated as 3.

Overlord Status: This rare event takes place before the Zakhan in Barrakeesh. The Overlord is assigned two bodyguards of at least 14th level, either mage or warrior. He is presented with a special sash denoting his rank, and a weapon and suit of armor of rare magical quality (+3 sublime, +2 magical). Finally, he is granted rulership of a region and rights to build a keep of his design. A contingent of 100 Sharnazim (all 2nd-4th level) will be assigned to this keep when it is finished.
Enraged as the arrows delivered their deadly payload, Aymodani brought his blades to bear, determined to take Sir Victor and also the brave Kai Lord with him. Sol Hawk slipped left, then right to avoid the blades. His Kai Grace was an asset to be certain, but Aymodani had a deadly accuracy, and although Sol Hawk had avoided a mortal wounding, the shock of having lost too much blood had caught up with him.

Sol Hawk laughed as the blood poured out. Aymodani had connected. But the arrows of poison had connected, too. Aymodani was choking on his own thick blood which was spewing from his mouth, a red, bubbling froth mixed with bitter black poison. With his blade still in Sol Hawk’s stomach, he brought the second blade in and across. Sol winced backward - a thin, long gash appeared. Sir Victor was slowing, and Paru’s eyes met those of Sol Hawk. It was him. She knew. She screamed the most desperate and murderous scream, knowing that what Sol Hawk had begun with her he had finished with her brutal lover. Paru thought back to how she had pleaded with her mate to kill the Kai quickly. She had tried to persuade him several times of how deadly dangerous a Kai Lord is, and how he can never, ever be underestimated. She thought back to how she had lain gouged and trampled andpickshocked on the floor, barely alive as half a dozen black-clads had come to her aid, for less had no chance to subdue him. Even when the Kai had been completely paralysed with a rare poison (for no common poison could even touch him) the Kai’s will was so strong that he was able to continue the fight with a deadly mindforce. Even a blade straight through the heart had not killed him. Who was this man who could rise again and again from the dead? Her mate had been a fool, it had been so very clear. Aymodani had dared to believe that he could somehow stand against the might of such a warrior, and yet now Aymodani, scourge of the desert, aspirant to the Raged, heir to the favour of Egoliath, was no more. Just a dead corpse standing, standing, waiting to fall to the hard stone floor like a sack of rotted meat, which he finally did with a sickening, hollow clunk.

Stand fast, Sir Victor, whispered Sol Hawk as the last of his consciousness faded off, We’ll show them how Sommerlundings fight and die. There was a smile then upon the Kai’s face although no one could see it - it was concealed by his black-clad mask. His friends - Sol Hawk knew now that they would live - would discover him later. Korlaeth would show them. Would they ever find the princess? Somehow, in some way, he knew that they would.

Flying, flying on golden wings. The hawk perched upon the outstretched arm of its master and it was glad. For it was home.

Korlaeth winced as the arrow glanced off his shin, but then he heard Paru scream. All pain was forgotten. He snatched up the two remaining arrows from the ground and sped forward, placing one on the bowstring, even as he skidded to a stop, now very much in the open. He was forgotten. He snatched up the two remaining arrows from the ground and sped forward, placing one on the bowstring, even as he skidded to a stop, now very much in the open. He dropped one arrow and drew the nocked one to his cheek, taking aim at Paru even as Sol and the leader fell to the ground.

“Remember me?” he muttered, and let fly.

Simyn was surprised that his chosen bolt had had such an effect on the mage. It seemed that he had another poisoned bolt that he had forgot about. Simyn didn’t ponder this lucky coincidence any further, but acted. Sir Victor was in danger. Simyn entered the case intent on slaying any opponent. The archers seemed preoccupied with someone attacking from inside the cave, this could only be their missing friends.

“Sir Victor, I’m on your right side” the sage shouted as he attacked the black-clad warrior on the knight’s right side. There was no time for finesse, but Simyn was satisfied that his first thrust met flesh.

Just as Simyn came beside the knight and informed him of his presence, Sir Victor heard a woman shriek a word to his right, and immediately spun around, blade swinging towards the sound. He was rewarded with the feeling of his blade biting deeply into flesh, and he pressed the attack, hitting his opponent further. This had to end soon, because his forces were ebbing, and he spat a waft of blood which had come up his throat. Hopefully nothing vital had been ruptured yet. If only he could stay up until the threat was neutralized, he could then reach for his Laumspur...

Arcadian stopped dead in his tracks. All seemed enwrapped in complete silence as Aymodani buried his scimitar to the hilt in Sol Hawk’s torso. Almost instantly the battle had lifted from his eyes as he saw the brave Kai slip to the bloodied ground. Sol Hawk was the only adventurer that Arcadian had managed to take a liking to in the group. Despite the Vakeros’ temper the young Kai had taken it upon himself to befriend him.

I held your dying body in my arms once before...

Even as Aymodani was felled by a lucky blow from the blinded Victor Arcadian was moving. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Simyn fire at Paru and miss. The quarel bounced off stone. Simyn’s rapier bit the flesh of one of the scimitar wielding talons, but Arcadian was through with finesse.

Cade’s blade bit deep.

ROUND 15

1: 31 (crit), for a total of 19 damage.
2: 16 (hit), for a total of 6 points of damage.

Actually you were struck twice by Aymodani, the first a crit which caused 18 damage and the second a regular blow causing 10 damage. If this is the end for Sol Hawk, then your noble sacrifice will be remembered by this knight of Sommerlund. I’ll wait until Simyn posts before doing so.

Well Mr. Kai...you picked a fine time to remember this.

His primary attacks are on Sir Victor, so he took the Serpent Form initiative.

The above are, of course, if Paru doesn’t bring me to -1 EP first (higher Attack 2: 16 (hit), for a total of 6 points of damage.

Actually you were struck twice by Aymodani, the first a crit which caused 18 damage and the second a regular blow causing 10 damage. If this is the end for Sol Hawk, then your noble sacrifice will be remembered by this knight of Sommerlund. I’ll wait until Simyn posts before doing so.

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His primary attacks are on Sir Victor, so he took the Serpent Form initiative.

The above are, of course, if Paru doesn’t bring me to -1 EP first.
Sorry, SV, I've got no healing Rules, Rulings

Combat is officially over. And Cade, through no intervention on my part, you actually were the one to slay Paru. Korlaeth took her to 9 EP, Simyn to 5 EP, and you killed her. Sir Victor's critical was too good to pass up, so he just gave the dead horse a good whack. She is mangled terribly.

Though you are now out of combat, things will continue to happen on a round by round basis, since SV is close to bleeding to death, and Sol Hawk is already bleeding to death.

There is no grid for this round since there are no survivors to fight.

Rules, Rulings

Heal Check: 24 Laumspur: 13

If this doesn't bring him back, nothing will save Ishir herself.

Sorry, SV, I've got no healing skill at all...

Simyn has no heal skill either so I guess that it is totally up to me. Since I spent 2 rounds healing Sol, Victor is at -1 EP. So now I'll need a healing Sol, Victor is at -1 EP. me. Since I spent 2 rounds I guess that it is totally up to

Heal Check: 24

Korlaeth's missed Paru's shoulder. He had the satisfaction of seeing her scream in pain as the poison course through her. She staggered a step, and then the sage—who had nearly vaulted over the pile of bodies to make his entrance into the cavern—rushed around and pierced her gut.

She turned slightly and looked at him, feeling the graveeweed take her life force away. "You've still failed," she said in North Common, to be sure all understood. She lashed out at the knight one final time, drawing a fresh line of blood on his neck, then she hacked at Simyn's sword arm, opening a deep gash in it. She never saw Arcadian move into position. Sir Victor: -5 EP, Simyn: -5 EP.

The two archers were shaken by the loss of their leader. They also knew that whatever arrows the man in the tunnel was using, they were poisoned. Seeing their strongest fall, and their next in command hit by a poisoned arrow, they knew the outcome. They scrambled to flee out the cave entrance, not caring whether anyone else lived or died but themselves.

Arcadian made sure to stay behind Paru the entire time until he was interposed between her and the Kai. She knew of his presence when his bladed blade ran wet with her blood, plunged into her back near the left side of her spine. She fell to the ground, and Sir Victor swung again in similar fashion, this time tearing through her body until the sword hit the stone floor—perhaps she was dead?

He staggered a step and looked around reflexively, despite his cursed eyes. Who would attack him next? Where were his friends?

Suddenly, all was quiet, the sounds of combat vanishing as with his last blow. The knight knew his body was failing, his life draining away, but at least he knew that he had fought his best he could. He dropped his broadsword and shield and lowered himself to his knees, his head sagging on his chest.

"Simyn, Cade, I can't see. Are we out of danger yet? There are two vials of Laumspur in my belt pouch. Use them wisely. Don't waste them on me, for I'm too far gone to save. It was a pleasure fighting at your side."

The knight closed his eyes, his breathing becoming shallower every second.

Arcadian knelt beside Sol Hawk as he spoke to Victor, "you're not dead yet, so just breath. Can you help him, Simyn?"

The young Vakeros began to attempt an almost impossible feet in order to restore Sol Hawk. As he worked he deactivated his Blazing Aura ability and began to work on healing the young Kai Lord. Even has he worked on the Kai's body his mind was elsewhere. He was still reveling in the feeling of Paru's limp body, with his sword in her spine. Feeling the life drain out of her brought him...euphoria.

Once again, by some grace of Ishir herself Arcadian managed to stop the young Kai Lord from bleeding. After a few minutes of work the wounds were staunched and Arcadian's arms were covered to the elbows in a mixture of Paru's and Sol Hawk's blood. Mostly Sol Hawk...

As soon as his wounds had closed Arcadian the entire contents of a Laumspur potion down the young man's throat. Sol Hawk could feel the warmth of the potion as well as the warmth of Cade's hands on his chest.

"That's not your time yet, Sol. It's not your time."

Paru fell. The archers ran.

Korlaeth slumped to the floor where he stood, trying gamely to not show his wounds, for he knew others were hurt far worse. He hoped Sol, at least, was okay...and the others, too, of course, but he knew them very little.

He knew where they were taking Ameesha, of course, but for now, it was time to breathe.

Without waited to see if Sol Hawk had been revived Arcadian moved to the form of Sir Victor, which had just collapsed. Moving the heavy broadsword aside Arcadian began to work on his wounds, attempting to close them up as best as he could. But the young Vakeros was exhausted from using so much energy in such a short amount of time on his battle magic.

He could feel Victor's life ebbing away in his hands. Arcadian looked around desperately as Victor's breathing shallowed, "I'm losing him."

Arcadian's acts were of desperation now, and he simp'y couldn't get the horrific wounds to close despite his greatest efforts. The Vakeros was spent even though he hadn't been wounded severely.

"Is he poisoned?" asked the Vakeros.

"Cade........." Sol Hawk lapped at the potion and his blue eyes flitted back and forth excitedly, searching for his friends, their enemies. Arcadian was frenzied, but Sol Hawk realized somehow that the fight had ended...he was alive! He tried to move and then felt the unbelievable pain in his abdomen where a scimitar had gouged right through him, somehow failing to puncture anything vital. His chest, too, was shooting with pain where a thug's scimitar had punched through, nicking his heart and nearly killing him. Sol Hawk had been left in a sorry, sorry state.

Arcadian had barely laid his head into the dirt - the Vakeros was already attempting to stop Sir Victor's bleeding. Sol and Victor had fallen together. The big man was only just an arm's reach away. Cade's face showed frustration and anger and... fear? Cade's arms were covered in blood up to his elbows. The knight was slapping away. Sol Hawk let his arm drop to touch Sol Hawk's cheek. A warmth flowed from Sol Hawk and into Victor, then suddenly the Knight was resting easy.

"So tired," was all Sol Hawk could say, and he let his head slump back into the dirt.
**Rules, Rulings**

So it begins. Instead of presenting you with choices for the taverns or inns to enter, just make up a name of the one you decide to rest in. I'll take it from there.

**Hero for Act III, Scene V:** 

![A Magician of Dessi](image)

**Valestar**

**A Magician of Dessi**

Strength : 6 (+2)
Dexterity : 16 (+3)
Constitution : 16 (+3)
Intelligence : 14 (+2)
Wisdom : 18 (+4)
Charisma : 13 (+1)

**Background History:**

Valestar is a young (by Dessi standards) but talented mage who comes from a family of powerful mages which has fallen on times that, while not hard, are not filled with the fame that it once knew. Both him and his younger sister, Valestria, are considered to be amongst the most talented the family has ever had, and both are expected to return the family to glory.

Wow this is fun, and it hasn't even started yet! Okay, I'm at home now.

I checked to make sure you didn't have Vassan as a language. Though everyone can speak at least some North Common throughout Magnamund, they may or may not use it.

**Perception check on two guys sitting at a table nearby. DC15**

![rolled a 17 on Perception](image)

Perception 20 to see what is being said. Or you can talk to the bartender for info. Use whatever roll you think would help if you like: Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate, a basic Charisma check, etc. He seems to not be as disdainful toward you as others have been in town.

White skin diplomacy was a take ten skill. Wouldn't make sense. It's just as well, cause I rolled a 14+4=18

**Bits of the conversation that you can make out (from one man only):**

"...clearing out..."
"...arena?"
"Blasted borders're shut."
"What? Open?"
"NAH! He's comin' here?!

After this last outburst, the other one slapped the loud man upside the head and told him to be quiet. From that point the conversation was whispers.

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**Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine**

Chahdan. Why in the world was he in Chahdan?

Valestar strode into the town, ignoring the scathing glances of the folk at his attire. He was clearly from Dessi, a nation not known to have the friendliest of relations with Vassagonia. It was common knowledge that if it were not for people like Valestar—and his bluesteel-covered bodyguard kinfolk, the Vakeros—Vassagonia would have long since focused her wrath upon the small coastal nation.

The sun was rising, and despite the fact it was Raisho 27, it was still quite hot. The Dessi-mage pressed deeper into the bowels of the city, looking for a suitable place to get in out of the heat. Taverns were all around. Merchants and vendors sat under awnings and fanned themselves along side streets.

But Valestar kept walking. He would know where he was going when he got there. Wherever “there” was. So far, nothing seemed right. He was aware that a trio of young men were following him at about twenty paces, but he didn’t care.

Valestar fought the urge to summon a guardian spirit to keep him company... to keep him safe. To keep those eyes off his back. But no, he had to control himself. This was all part of the journey, the test, the elder mages had set for him. If he couldn’t prove himself now, if he couldn’t fight back the feeling that a knife was prepared to slit his throat, then he would never gain entry into the higher order, and his hopes, and those of his family, would be dashed.

A bead of sweat formed on his brow. He could only stand this poorly concealed hostility for so long. He led his donkey to the first Inn with a stable, trying his best to ignore the name of the inn:

The Gullible Traveler

The windows of the inn were covered in dark draperies, smothering out the light of the day. Valestar looked around and saw only a handful of other people—perhaps most residents of the city saw fit to stay in their own homes during the daylight hours.

He looked for a place to sit, and the choices were many: booths along the side, open tables in the middle, or the all-too-frequent barstool at the back of the room.

As he debated where to sit, he noticed the three youths pass by outside, lingering a bit too long before moving along. His hesitation in seating drew the attention of the bartender, who called out to him:

"Ayo, task-a pretu mayana?" After a moment: "Tacha Vaz? Tacha Vaz ny nok?"

Searching for the right words, the man switched to North Common, heavily accented. "Spek no Vazz'n, ny? Spek Nord Common? Whad you want?"

"Vood? Water?"

The bar was dirty, Valestar noted with distaste. Then his eye caught three men, outside. Watching him. No. He shook his head. No, they had moved on. He had to calm down, or he'd soon think the whole city was after him. But then, they had been staring directly at him. He sighed. It was too hard, in Vassa, to discern what was his imagination and what was real danger.

When the bartender broke into his thoughts, he ordered food and water, and sat at the barstool to await his repeat. Which he hoped would be prepared with clean hands.

As he passed by the table of strangers, he noticed they were not Vassan—they were northlanders who had become very tanned from constant exposure to the sun of this land. Interesting.

The bartender held out his hand as Valestar sat on the stool. "Un golt crown," he said in reference to the cost of the meal. Though the Dessi-mage felt this was a bit high in price, he paid it and waited.

A few moments later out came a huge plate of food and a mug of water with a small plate of various fruit wedges and spices to flavor the drink. It certainly was a surprise to get so much food.

As he ate, Valestar tried to make out the conversation behind him. In doing so, he noticed that the door had opened and another patron entered. It was one of the boys who had been trailing him. But where were the other two?

Valestar was glad to see that the food was worth the crown. It wasn't hard to appear occupied with it as he attempted to listen in on the conversation behind him. But the noise of the inn drowned out the conversation and though he caught a few muttered exclamations, he couldn't make out anything worth while.

After a moment the bartender reappeared and looked with satisfaction at how quickly Valestar had eaten. "Gud, vah?" he said. Valestar nodded and swallowed the fruit in his mouth, the juices quenching his parched throat.

"Excellent," he said. "Anyone with fruit as good as this is a fast friend of mine."

The bartender smiled and nodded. "Vant Muf?" he asked. As if Valestar could fit anything else. He shook his head.

"Maybe later. Right now, I wonder about the group in the corner."

He discreetly pointed them out to the bartender. "I am always glad to see a fellow Northlander, and I wonder if they come here often. Maybe I could stand them a drink sometime. Do you know anything about them?"
Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

The bartender pours some more water, obviously brought from some underground cellar, for water could not be cool otherwise. “Steh wayfram dem, iv you...uah,” he fumbled for the word, “veska, veska...um, wise? Steh way iv you wise.”

Valestar cast a quick glance at them, wondering why they were dangerous. He noticed the youth who had entered earlier waffling off the serving girl. She frowned at his lack of an order and left.

Valestar leaned close. “Slaughters, Wan from nord, wan fromouth. They meting here to tred slehves. City have...” again he searched for the best word. Not finding it, he merely used gestures and described. “City have city below sand. Dancher there. Slehve tred there.”

He tapped the counter and pointed at Valestar—a gesture of speaking truth and advice. “Dissie man fesh high price. You en danzher. Should leaf.”

Valestar considered his words, but his ruminations were cut short by a scream from the kitchens. Valestar looked over his shoulder instinctively.

The northlanders were surprised, stopping in mid-conversation. The youth and a crash from the kitchens. Valestar considered his words, but his ruminations were cut short by a scream from the kitchens. Valestar looked over his shoulder instinctively.

Valestar considered his words, but his ruminations were cut short by a scream from the kitchens. Valestar looked over his shoulder instinctively.

Valestar stood and turned, slamming his staff into the ground and glaring down at the youth. He tried to control himself, but his nerves were reaching their limit.

“*What would you have with me?*” he demanded.

The man’s cold blue eyes never left his. Valestar felt a familiar voice in the back of his mind.

“What are you waiting for? Destroy him!”

In response to the Dessi’s question, the youth pulled out a long dagger and pushed a chair out of the way as the commotion drew the attention of the bartender away. “I would have nothing with you, but from you!”

He slashed hard horizontally at Valestar’s throat, meeting with the wizard’s staff instead of flesh.

A scream was cut short in the back, and the bartender’s voice raised in intensity. The northlanders stopped, unsure as to whether or not to get involved or flee—

Valestar whispered in the youth’s ear. “I need initiative and a half-door.”

* * *

The Dessi, however, needed no help. Stepping back and blocking with his staff, Valestar twisted it and launched a beam of fiery light from one end, then the other. The first one struck the young man in the head, spinning him around out of the path of the second. The flames danced a moment around his head as he convulsed and crashed over a table.

The northlanders started in awe. “*E killed *him* with one shot!*”

Valestar poured the morning’s fears into his attack. The voice laughed. The man was struck full force. He didn’t have the chance.

Valestar’s next plan was to burn the inn to the ground for the indiscretion of attacking him. A second later this changed to the urge to run. But then he remembered that his belongings were on the donkey. And if he knew the beast, it would choose this moment to take a nap or be otherwise non-complacent. And he’d be d_#ed if he’d leave his saddles here to be lost. The bartender... he would protect him... calm the crowd... but he had disappeared back, where the screams were still continuing.

And the northlanders. Surely they were after him... surely they would follow him from now on... He stole a glance at the door to see if the youth’s companions had come through. They hated him too. But no-one was there. And that means we get to deal with these two... the voice explained.

Scooting, the mage began to concentrate. But suddenly he remembered that these two had nothing to do with the attack on him. Surely, they deserved his wrath for being slavers, though...

With an intense force of will, Valestar cancelled his attack and rushed into the kitchens.

* * *

The Dessi chose to ignore the northlanders, walking behind the counter and through the swinging half-door like he owned the place. In his years, he had seen his share of things that he wished he hadn’t. This was just another of them.

His attention was drawn to the floor as he entered, to the body of the serving girl—her throat was slit from under one jaw down to her collarbone, and her eyes were pointed right at the mage. Frowning in sadness that she should have to meet such a wasteful end in her youth, the Dessi looked up to see the bartender deflecting slashes with long-tooth daggers from the other two thugs he had seen moments earlier. Beyond them was a door hanging on a splintered frame—forced open from a back alley.

What did they want with him? Why couldn’t everyone just leave him alone?! His grip tightened, and did the features on his face. For this trespass, there was but one punishment. Vassagonian law may dictate what officially would happen, but Dessi law was about to supersede.
Valestar wants to see if either of the two is still alive.

Well, only rolled 7 for diplomacy, so I guess it depends on how much the bartender likes me.

If you want to keep using the staff, you'll get a -1 to hit and -1 to damage from the close cramped quarters. It's like being in an elevator with a friend and trying to fight two damsels.

Okay, Valestar wants to strike the thugs with his staff, hopefully spinning at them above the ducking bartender. He doesn't get two hits on physical, so we'll only hit one. If the bartender doesn't move or his body blocks this kind of attack, Valestar will instead get close and send a force blade over his shoulder, or around him, whichever provides the largest firing space. I've rolled dice for both, just in case.


Okay, rather than try to knock dishes down on these guys or anything, I'm just going to try to blast them with my magic again. I want to get in front of the bartender first, moving after the thugs have their turn (they have higher initiative anyways), and then if I still have any amrachtions left I'll like to use two ranged magical strikes. If I don't have enough actions to use both strikes, then I'll instead assume a defensive position this round, adding +4 to my AC, and using both ranged attacks next round.

Initiative is a one-time thing in combat, just roll at the beginning, and that's your score throughout the combat. It can never go up (I don't know of any magic or item that can raise it once it is set), but it can go down through delaying.

If your actions get confusing as to what you can do, you can do what Sol Hawk does - list out each action categorization followed by what you do. Example:

Free: 5' step (due to full magical attack) - Full Round Action: Full Magical attack
Magical 1 (ranged): Attack 23, damage 9, +3WP for me - MAGICAL 2 (ranged): Attack 9, damage 5, +2WP for me

Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

She had been a pretty girl. As to her other attributes, Valestar could only guess. But there was nothing to be done for her now. Besides, he had found the other two thugs. He would now ensure that they would hamper him, or anyone, ever again.

And it looked like he would be protecting the bartender, not the other way around. But that meant that the sticky fellow would have to get out of way. Valestar leapt forward. "Get down!" he shouted. He hoped the bartender had quick reflexes, but if how fast he had moved earlier was any indicator, then he wasn't worried.

Maybe he'd even get some free fruit out of this.

Valestar leaped over the ducking bartender and brought his staff down as best he could in the close quarters of the kitchen. It glanced off the boy's shoulder with a flash of light, and in a strange series of opportunistic attacks, weapons flew in all directions:

The ducking bartender got nicked with the boy's khanjar, and in turn Valestar hit him in the shoulder. The other thug's attack intended for the bartender pierced the mage's shoulder, and the panicking bartender swung wildly, striking that thug in the leg with the bladed cudgel. A cacoony of curses and yells emanated from all the wounded as they all ended up losing some blood. Valestar:

As the Dessi landed on his feet, the bartender began to raise up beside him. There was little room for powerful strikes now, especially with a staff-sized weapon.

Valestar staggered back, his hand to his shoulder. Just a scratch, yet if he wanted to avoid other blows he'd have to reign in his rage and fight a bit more strategically. But there wasn't much room for strategy in the kitchen. The two thugs were advancing towards the barkeeper. They were fast, faster than Valestar. They struck before Valestar could sort him. He couldn't assess if Fai had hit the bartender or not. Once again rage swelled up in him. He moved past the bartender and prepared another magical attack.

The Dessi mage stepped slightly in front and to the side of the bartender and felt the magic surging in him. He extended his arm and spoke the word of activation: A shimmering azure dart the size of a speartip appeared and shot toward one of the attackers. It lanced him in the small of the throat with a flash of light, and he dropped to his knees in surprise.

Valestar was slightly distracted by this, and his second magical harpoon flew past the remaining assailant and struck the wall of the kitchen, dissipating in a flash of tiny blue motes that winked out of existence.

This was apparently too much for the lad, for he turned to flee. The bartender howled in outrage and swung the club at the coward, who was on the back of his neck and bust of the skull. He pitched forward for the stashing, smashing blow and toppled into a pile of pots and cooking utensils, blood trailing from the gapping wounds on his head.

"Haah!" cried the bartender in glee, shaking his club before him and looking at the Dessi mage in triumph.

Valestar felt his anger subside. He quickly bent down to examine the youths, determining if they were alive or dead. He wasn't sure what he'd do with them if they happened to be alive. Turn them over to authorites, perhaps. Or question them. Make sure others weren't coming after him. The bartender was beaming. He seemed to have forgotten the loss of his serving girl.

"Vuy care bout them, huh? Dey's be larning de lesson." He looked off into the distance, not really at anything.

There is something behind this rage that possibly only Valestar knows about. It is connected with an event in his past that he has discussed with only one other, his younger sister Valestire. It is presumably some dark secret that he wishes to bury in the past. Valestar is of average height and weight. He has a lean, almost gaunt figure that is nonetheless stalwart and speaks of high birth. His hair is so white that it almost shines. He generally wears a scowl on his lips, though sometimes they twist upwards in amusement or even merriment.
Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

The Dessi-mage leaned over and felt the neck of the one he had magically harpooned. Nothing. He touched the other thug’s neck and felt a slight pulse. “This one's still alive.”

He raised back up and looked around for something to bind his attacker, but the bartender had already acted. He grabbed a paring knife from the counter nearby and dropped to his knees with a roar, plunging the blade in the thug's back. He pulled the blood-soaked weapon out and tossed it nonchalantly into a nearby water basin.

In stark contrast to how he had just done, the man smiled broadly at Valestar and began to amble through the mess of spilled dishes. At the Dessi’s question, the bartender looked around. “Not lehve? Brahe, or stupied. Sure, stay a night. I close door to inn now.”

Valestar followed the bartender back out to the common room, where the two北lander still stood, talking excitedly between themselves. At the Dessi’s entrance, one of them smiled amiably and walked over.

“Hello, Master Mage,” he said offering his hand in greeting. “I am Timmons, and this is my friend, Nathan. We are two Durenese ex-patriots who have taken up residence in the lands, and we could not help but notice your extreme skill in dispatching that ruffian.”


Nodding, Timmons continued. “We do not wish to trouble you long, only to ask that you come with us to our business a few blocks away in order to identify something.”

“A sword. A bluesteel sword with engraving on it in your language.” Nathan showed how large the sword was with his hands.

“Will you take this sword back to your land? We have kept it hidden from the natives,” he said scowling at the bartender, who returned the look, “for some time now.”

“Dahn’t truss. But...I giff you key to behk door if you go.”

Nathan wiped his stubby cheeks in disdain. “These sand-rats would have a black market of such items from travelers who die in the desert.”

Valestar considered their words, looking at the bartender. The man shook his head. “Dahn't truss. But...I giff you key to behk door if you go.”

* * *

Valestar looked over the Northlanders. He didn’t trust them. And neither did his violent friend the bartender. Their story didn’t make any sense. And what did a magical sword benefit him? He was a mage, not a fighter. Unless the thing was truly ancient and its return to Dessi would win him honor...

“Could the sword be what his Masters had intended him to find?”

It didn’t seem very likely. Knowing his Masters, they would want a newborn chick over instruments of war. And who said what they wanted was physical in the first place? No, he could sense his journey wasn’t at an end yet.

He shook his head. “I am sorry, but it is late and I’ve had a long day. If you wish me to identify a blade, perhaps we can work something out tomorrow. In the daytime. For what purpose have you kept this blade? Where did you get it?”

He awaited their response, trying to read in their faces what their true motive was. But their faces did not read like one of his maps, nor like a book, and he wondered if he would be able sense anything at all.

* * *

Timmons opened his arms as he spoke, holding them apart to symbolize nothing to hide. “Yes, of course.”

“Tomorrow then,” Nathan said.

Timmons nodded. “It’s agreed upon. We shall come find you at sunrise.” He turned to leave.

“Tell your friend,” Valestar called after him.

“Tell your friend,” Nathan repeated.

* * *

Valestar headed up to his room, which turned out to be a small chamber with a bed, chamber pot, and a bucket full of soapy water for washing.

The Gullible Traveller, indeed. Well at least they had good fruit. And he hadn’t exactly had time to choose a choice Inn. He supposed if he was to travel for much longer, he would one day have to get used to such accommodations anyways.

As he washed, Valestar went over in his head what the Northlanders had told him. He didn’t trust their story, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what was wrong with it. The whole thing seemed dubious anyways, but the more he thought about it, there were certain pieces of the story which were definitely out of place.

First of all, they had mentioned that they had kept the blade hidden from the natives, but they proceeded to discuss it in front of the bartender in North Common, which he obviously understood. Then, too, the relationship between the two men had changed mid conversation. First they were friends, and then brothers. Suspicious, that’s what it was. And then there was the sword itself. Valestar had studied occult knowledge for years as a hobby, and he knew for a fact that Bluesteel Blades were Vakeros made, and it would be rare for the Vakeros to be seen protecting a caravan.

And he wasn’t about to believe that they would pay a 1000 Gold Crowns to identify a sword.

So the two were almost certainly lying to him. But what was their motive? To attack him? That didn’t make much sense. They themselves had commented on how lethal he had been in combat. Surely they wouldn’t attempt to attack him without compatriots. Of course, that was a possibility. But something in their manner had suggested more that they wanted him for some purpose of their own. They had commented on his fighting skill. Maybe they wanted protection from something? But then why come up with the story about the blade? He remembered snatches of the conversation he had heard them having earlier and the word Arena stuck in his mind. But it didn’t enlighten him much. He didn’t know much about Durenor besides external politics, some occult history, and that it guarded the legendary Sommerzerd. For all he knew, they had lied about their Durenese decent, as well.

Finished with his bathing Valestar slipped under the covers of the bed, checking for fleas and other pests first. His curiosity was peaked, and a plan was forming in his mind. Tomorrow, he would get some answers.

* * *
Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

Valestar awoke early, around 5:00am and began to make his preparations. At 6:00 he left the inn for an hour, to return with a heavily bandaged arm, a large vial of red blood, and 3 gold crowns lighter. He hurried to the stables, whereupon he retrieved his Alchemy kit, first giving Varsuvial (his donkey) a friendly pat. He then returned to his room.

Hopefully he would have enough time before the Northlanders arrived. He set up the instruments he would need, set a bit of water to boiling and began to add in the ingredients. A truth potion used fairly simple ingredients, a bit of sugar, some crushed beetle wings, grass root, things you could get in almost any town or city. But there was one catch. He pulled the vial of blood, his blood, from his robes. In order to make a truth potion you had to have your blood shed by another person, after telling them one of your greatest secrets, a truth you would tell no one. And Valestar had a small number of those. The burn had been confused, but more than willing when offered the gold crows. And even more willing after hearing what Valestar’s secret was. His arm still stung from the blow.

Now came the tricky part. Valestar would have to say the incantation correctly and add the blood at the right time, or else the potion would be ruined. He hesitated. He hadn’t done this in a while and it was best to be prepared. He opened the backpack he’d left in a corner of the room and brought out a stopped glass containing a yellow substance. He drank it in one gulp. It tasted like tea leaves. Almost at once he found he could think more clearly. The words of the incantation flowed through him. He could do this in his sleep. He deftly emptied the vial into the boiling mixture, speaking the words “morning’s brew” as he did so. He turned down the heat a simmer and began to stir the potion and chant the secret words of the Dessi Alchemists.

Within minutes, the potion was ready, a bright red mixture he poured into a clean vial and hid within his robes. The Northlanders would be there soon, and he’d have them dancing to his tune.

He didn’t have to wait long for the Northlanders to arrive. They saw him at a table in the corner and he waved them over with a large smile.

“I can’t wait to get a look at this sword,” he said. “But I thought it would be helpful to know a little more about it first.”

The man named Timmons rolled his eyes almost imperceptibly, but his friend cum brother smiled even larger than Valestar and sat at the table.

“Of course! Anything to help you.”

“You know, you gentlemen look like you need some drinks. Let me buy you a round.”

“We won’t say no. Get us the house ale.”

“You know, you gentlemen look like you need some drinks. Let me buy you a round.”

“We won’t say no. Get us the house ale.”

But Timmons, seeming annoyed at the delay, shook his head. “I don’t want nothing.”

Valestar eyed the rim of his drink casually. “Sir! My honor would be insulted if you turned me down! I must insist on at least a toast to new acquaintances! If you would oblige me with but a drink...”

“Alright, alright, just get a pint for the table, I’ll have a taste.”

Valestar smiled and headed to the bar. He poured a glass for himself, then with a quick movement of his wrist down the heat a simmer and began to stir the potion and chanted the secret words of the Dessi Alchemists.

At the mention of the words needed to invoke the spell, Nathan started laughing. Timmons smiled and shook his head, and Valestar joined in, acting as if he was one of them.

“Hey, man this is going to be great. After we’ve gotten you to the sword, we’re going to stab you with this.”

Valestar felt his insides turn at the response he had received. And in the back of his mind, the voice was speaking to him again, whispering the ways that a man could be killed quickly... but then another voice spoke, and while it wasn’t much kinder, it was a lot more humorous.

Valestar looked the men over. The potion was wearing off. He had time for one final question:

“How guileful are you two?”

A minute later, the men shook their heads as if to clear them. Valestar looked around strangely and asked:

“So, um, where were we?”

Valestar eyed the rim of his drink casually.

“Hey, I was just telling you that I’d poisoned your drinks. Yes,” he went on, before they could respond. “It’s a powerful poison, takes about 20 hours to work. Turns your inside right side out. Your spleen will dance. Now, I have the antidote in a safe place, but I have some terms before I give it to you. You see, I’m a very paranoid person, and you two have pushed me to my limit. So first, I want the dagger. The poisoned one. It won’t do you much good now anyways, seeing as without me, you don’t stand a chance.”

Nathan was caught off-guard with this question. Timmons merely guffawed. “Me? I don’t care enough to believe in much. And Nathan...”

Nathan cast his brother a glance that shut him up in mid-thought. “I am a great skeptic. For instance, I doubt you are a skilled Dessi mage at all, and though we...”

He stopped and cleared his throat. Timmons rubbed his head and groaned, as if he had a headache. “So, um, where were we?” asked Nathan.

The Dessi delivered his bluff well. However, he was up against two people who did this sort of thing for a living.

Timmons’ jaw dropped. How’d he know about the dagger? Come to think of it, why did he already have it in his hand? He looked nervously at Nathan, who had leaned forward and propped his arms on the table. The man interlaced his fingers and rested his chin upon them.
Rules, Rulings

Initiative: 16
Free action: take the dagger
Magical attack 1: Fireball (attack: 20 Damage: 7)
Magical attack 2: Force Blade (attack: Damage: 2)
Timmons (F4): AC: 10 EP: 18/33 Init: 6

Draw a weapon is considered a move action technically,
so you can check the spell description for your options.

Welcome aboard Hawkeye.

Timmons (F4): AC: 10 Ep: 18/33 Init: 5 normal AC is 12
Nathan (F5): AC: 10 EP: 24/45 Init: 5 (normal AC is 12)

Both of these attacks are directed against Timmons

Both of these attacks are directed against Nathan, unless he
dies after the first attack, or if someone grabs my hand when
I take the dagger.

Intimidate check : 14

Here is a list of the options available to Nathan:

Yes, it was right. Timmons couldn't be allowed to escape. He was scum anyway, he'd be doing
Chahdan a favor. And then it would be time to leave. And never come back to this godforsaken desert
town.

He slipped the dagger into his robes and spoke a sorcerer's power word, sending a line of magical
energy to the fleeing brother. Then, as an afterthought, he gripped his staff and sent a magical blast
after him as well.

Hawkeye

Background: Hawkeye had requested before the Grand Master Council that
he'd be allowed to leave the Monastery and go on a
pilgrimage, a quest to
the Monastery and go on a
pilgrimage, a quest to

The Halfling Mage

He slipped the dagger into his robes and spoke a sorcerer's power word, sending a line of magical
energy to the fleeing brother. Then, as an afterthought, he gripped his staff and sent a magical blast
after him as well.

Hawkeye

A Kai Lord

Strength : 13 (+1)
Dexterity : 16 (+3)
Constitution : 13 (+1)
Intelligence : 13 (+1)
Wisdom : 15 (+2)
Charisma : 13 (+1)

Movement: 16

On not sure on how to go about here since this is my first
official active post. Since Hawkeye just arrived and not
knowing the actual situation, who's the aggressor and who's
the defender, he can't just jump into the fray and start
swinging right? By the way, do I need to speak in Vassan
here with the two men?

Intimidate check : 14

I'll edit this post out after all is said and done.

Drawing a weapon is considered a move action technically,
but since you're not officially part of this yst, I'll allow it as a
free action.

As for what you can do, it's all your decision. If you'd like to
just start hacking away, go ahead. If you prefer to sort things
out first, so be it.

If you wish to speak Vassan, just mention it so that Zipp
knows not to let Valestar understand what you said.

Hero for Act III, Scene V:

A Kai Lord

Strength : 13 (+1)
Dexterity : 16 (+3)
Constitution : 13 (+1)
Intelligence : 13 (+1)
Wisdom : 15(+2)
Charisma : 13 (+1)

Background: Hawkeye had

Hawkeye

Kai Lord Hawkeye strolled casually through the streets of Chahdan, noticing as he did so that
people were standoffish toward him. A Kai in Vassagonia was not the type of person that locals needed to be
seen with. Word of such a meeting might get back to a ruler, and that person might just send out
execution warrants for suspicion of conspiracy or treason.

It was only the fear of what Sommerlund would do that kept kill-on-sight edicts from being delivered for
all Kai....

Hawkeye decided to get some breakfast, fully aware of the overt coldness the place had for him. He
heard a pain-filled scream and looked around. There was a man ahead—the Guileful Traveler. It had to
have come from there! He rushed to the front of the building and pushed on the two swinging doors,
aware now that the owner was in hysterics over something.

"Ahhhh!" shrieked Timmons as he felled his arms and fell backwards. He lost his footing as the waves of
magic boiled over him, and he landed hard on his back in front of the exit.

Nathan had turned and began crawling toward the exit, unaware that it was going to be blocked by both
his brother...and a completely confused Kai Lord. Hawkeye looked inside and saw two badly burned men,
the frantic innkeeper, and an old narrow-eyed Dessi mage.

That explains it, thought the Kai.

"Guileful Traveller indeed!" Hawkeye rushed to the front of the building and pushed the swinging doors
down and saw two badly burned men, the frantic innkeeper, and an old narrow-eyed Dessi mage. "What in
Kai's name... what is happening here?" asked Hawkeye, his hand gripping his sword, preparing to draw
it. No one was paying him attention as they were more interested in the fight between the three men.

He looked at the Dessi mage and then at the two men. This happening in Vassagonia could only mean
one thing, the mage was the victim and was fighting off the two men. "Great, everywhere I go, there's
always a fight..." thought Hawkeye. He decided to help the mage, since the rest were more keen on
seeing him dead. He looked at the man scrambling on the floor just in front of him and stepped towards
him, intending to put him out where he can do no further damage.

"You two! Stop what you're doing less you want to meet you maker sooner than you had expected. Pick
yourselves up and leave!" warned Hawkeye.

Hawkeye approached the crawling man cautiously and began to speak in Vassan, "Get up and leave!
You won't hear that from me again!" He trained his sword at the man, threatening him. Hawkeye
has been in one too many fights, and was hoping to continue his journey through Chahdan without
incidents, but now looks like it was not be. It was a wonder that no “authorities” had arrived to investigate.

Vassagonia is not known for its friendly authorities always helping out visitors.

"But, since I'm in a good mood today, I'm just curious enough to hear what your 'terms' are."

Timmons looked at Nathan, who nodded. He laid the push-dagger on the tabletop and eyed his drink
suspiciously.

"You need to speak in Vassan, just mention it so that Zipp

Hawkeye looked from the corner of his eye to see how the old mage was doing against the other guy.
act three scene V - the (sour) grapevine

oh, by the elders. a kai lord. he recognized the green cloak, unique to that order. valestar wondered how it was that you could find one of these guys no matter where you went in vassagonia. he had mixed feelings on the kai. surely they were good people, and they fought against the dark with strength, vigor, and intelligence, but valestar personally felt that they all too rarely acknowledged the efforts of other groups of good. as if they were the only ones who cared for magnum.

but he wouldn’t begrudge this one appearance. they were both on the same side of the darklands, after all. and his sword was pointing quite profitably at timmons, his presence was blocking both the northerners from leaving. valestar would definitely take advantage of a opportunist.

the northerners had barely put up a fight. he was slightly disappointed, but at least he wasn’t up for sale at some bazaar. maybe another fireball would suffice. he sent two, for good measure.

* * *

from the bard’s point of view, all asthara was breaking loose. he had warned the dessi-mage that these two were dangerous, and now he had gone and attacked them! his inn was surely doomed now. and to make matters worse, in strode a kai lord, instantly joining the side of the mage as if he knew him.

he prayed to the sand mother for deliverance. of all the towns for a kai lord to be strolling through! so far away from the zakhari’s eyes and reach, chahdan was nigh lawless. a kai would only be a beacon for trouble to be drawn to.

--------

as the scorched men tried to flee, valestar lashed out again at nathan. two pulses of energy shot toward him, bursting once more in small magical flames that danced over his body, burning him but not clothing. the elder mage was somewhat relieved to see a kai enter, even though he had everything well in hand.

hawkeye shouted at timmons, ignoring the smoldering nathan as he crawled past and exited the inn on all fours, timmons followed suit, more from fear of being attacked again than from some newcomer yelling at him. the fellow half crawled, half ran out of the place, pushing past the kai lord with all haste.

the two of them turned north up the road outside, crying out in agony, drawing the attention of a couple of people who happened to be out this early.

* * *

hawkeye, relieved that he did not need to kill somebody, at least today, sheathed his sword. he looked at the small crowd watching them and the mage then spoke to them in vassan again, “get about to your business, nothing else is going to happen and we want no trouble unless you are asking for it.” not warning anymore attention than he already had, he went to the frightened innkeeper, calming him down. “now my good man, are you still open for business or do i go and find another inn? if so, then i would like to order a meal and a drink of your ale.” the young kai lord pulled his hood over his head to hide his gaze from the others and went to sit down at a table in a corner.

* * *

valestar strode out into the street. at the sight of him, the brothers dragged themselves to their feet and stumbled hysterically away. well, that was the way of that. they’d think twice, or perhaps thrice, before threatening a dessi mage again. and now it was time to go.

the kai lord said nothing to him, as if he didn’t exist. figures. now that the danger had passed, he had wrapped himself back in his mystery. as if anyone really cared who he was. valestar ignored the bard and made his way to his room, whereupon he gathered his equipment. on heading back downstairs, he noticed the kai lord had settled himself at the bar. foolish man. as if the bard would serve another foreigner after the day’s incidents.

valestar stopped next to the kai on his way out. “i don’t think you’ll find chahdan to be very hospitable, kai lord,” he said. “i’d advise you leave town at once.”

* * *

just as the mage was about to walk away, hawkeye spoke to him, “and what brings you to chahdan, mage? seeing that you yourself are quite a way off from your homelands. as unhospitable as it is for me, i don’t think vassagonia will look kindly upon yourself as well, especially one your age.” hawkeye looked up from underneath his hood. with his left leg, he pushes a chair as a sign of offering the mage a seat.

hawkeye wouldn’t be bothered at making a friend but the prospect of making another enemy, especially in a place like this, bothers him even more. “well, looks like my meal won’t be coming after all.”

* * *

“One my age?” said valestar. “i’ll have you know, i’m a young 76, barely out of schooling. and as you can see, i can handle myself. besides, i’m taking my own advice and getting out of here within the hour. i really suggest that instead of setting at that bar, you pack up and leave as well. what brings a kai lord to these lands is beyond me.”

he saw the look on the kai’s face. “yes, i see, you’re probably wondering what brings a dessi to these lands. well, to be honest, i’m not sure. and so i’m leaving. good riddance to them. well, at least as soon as i get some supplies. and figure out the fastest way out of this desert.”

these two are making an excellent start of it, huh? yet i can sense a good friendship forming. they all start to like this.

commentary and observations

character

name: hawkeye
player name: hawkeye
race: somniflering human
allegiance: good
age: 22
gender: male
height: 5’9
weight: 152 lb.
class: kai lord
level: 7
xp: 21,000

abilities

strength: 13/+1
dexterity: 16/+3
constitution: 13/+1
intelligence: 13/+1
wisdom: 15/+2
charisma: 13/+1

saving throws

fortitude: +4
reflex: +12
will: +8

endurance: 61 (40+6+6+7+2 from kl)
wilpower: 25
base speed: 40ft.

skills

athletics: 8 (5+3) +2 when jumping (athletics)
athletics: 6 (5+1) +2 when jumping (aerobatics)
bluff: 9 (8+1)
climb: 3 (2+1)*
concentration: 3 (2+1)
craft: (weaponsmithing): 1 (0+1)*
craft: (armorsmithing): 1 (0+1)
diplomacy: 1 (0+1)+2 from bluff
disguise: 12 (9+3) +2 from bluff when being observed/aide in character/sense motive +5 from camouflaging (false faces)
escape artist: 3 (0+3)*
hide: 3 (1+2)
perception: 11 (9+2)
ride: 3 (0+3)
sense motive: 7 (5+2)
stalwart: 12 (9+3) +11 from camouflage tier i and iii*
survival: 6 (4+2) +2 from perception to find or follow tracks

defence

ac: 17 (10+3+0+3+1)
psychic ac: 21 (13+8) damage: 2d6
armour type: studded leather 20lb.
armour check penalty: -1 (applied to skills with *)

combat

melee: 5 (5+1+3)+(base+str+ws)
ranged: 9 (5+3+1)+(base+dex+ws)
initiative: +3

psychic combat

psychic combat, casts 2wp, does 2d6 damage
psychic attack bonus: 7 +1 (character level + cha mod)

critical: x3

range: 20ft.
type: piercing
weight: 3lb.
arrows: 203lb.

kai disciplines

camouflaging tier v
hunting tier v
tracking tier v
weapon skill tier iv
mindshield tier iii
mindblast tier ii
sixth sense tier i

backpack

film and sleep
waterskin 4lb.
lavymour 4x4
3 meals 3lb. (1lb. per meal)
Act III, Scene V – The (Soup) Grapevine

"Touché, and yes indeed I do agree you have a, well, a flair for magical bolts, and nuts if you wish, one can't help to be on his toes in this god-forsaken land. As for me being here, I have my own reasons and I am sure you have yours. I was intending to pass through without drawing much to myself, but as you can see, thanks to you, I'm well out of the question", Hawkeye replied while cautiously eying the man in front of him.

"As for supplies, well I think hardly anyone will sell their wares to you once they know what you're capable of, words do travel faster than magical bolts around here, you know. Still, I'm in need of supplies myself, so maybe we can help each other out here. Since you've been here longer, you should know the shops. In turn, I'll get us both a fast route out of here. What do you say, old mage?" Hawkeye asked.

"* * *

"Longer than you? I've only been here a day and it was too long." Valestar shot Hawkeye a look. He had said that they should leave at once. Not order food.

"Well, I won't turn you down," he said. "I could use some help carrying supplies. The name is Valestar, of the Sal family of High and Learned Mages. And stop calling me old mage."

"* * *

"A day! Yet somehow you've managed to do quite well in the attracting the wrong company. And why are you looking at me like that for? Don't worry, I'm no thief. And as for your supplies, don't you have a spell to make them float and follow you or something?" Hawkeye sneered at the Dessi mage.

"I am Hawkeye, Kail Lord of the Kail Monastery. Although I'm not too excited about having you as company but it is much better than walking alone with all these people looking at you. I suggest we'd best be on our way to avoid any further incidents here." Hawkeye bowed slightly and looked around the room, studying the other people there.

"* * *

Now that the two Northlanders had run away, whimpering and yelping like a pair of scared dogs, the only sound was that of the bartender—who could be likened to a small feisty hound barking at his own shadow.

The Kail tried to distract the man from his worries and mollify him by offering for some food. The man hunched and looked blankly at the Kail as if he had been slapped. He realized the Kail spoke Vassan.

"Tache Vasi" he cried in relief. He continued in his native tongue since it was easier to communicate. "I am glad you were not involved in—that the Desii, he knows how to stir up trouble for sure. His travels will end in Chahdan, I think."

The man disappeared and brought back some food once the two had started talking. He set it down, took a Crown from Hawkeye, then warily eyed the two. Walking over to straighten up the area where the disagreement took place, he mumbled to himself. The two became friends. By the Mother, may they live long enough to leave my inn..."

A couple of people from outside came in under the pretense of eating. They paid for a mug of water, much to the owner's dismay, and sat watching the two. Hawkeye noted that six people in all had entered, and three had left already—one of them before ordering. Word was spreading.

The two were preparing to leave when a tall man dressed in plated-leather armor entered the inn. "You must be the Desii I have heard about," he said with clarity and very little accent as he spoke Vassan. "You're capable of making your peace with his inner-self. The council that he'd been allowed to leave the monastery to nurture it, was of no surprise to anyone who had known Darin, son of Cadoc, son of Dorch, as a boy that he first developed the Kail skill of Camouflage (and later Invisibility). Coupled with natural hunting and tracking skills and to mention his astonishing well-defined vision, hawk-like as they say; from which his Kail name was derived, it was also of no surprise that Hawkeye found himself unusually talented for one so young to become a bounty hunter, a "Kail Findsmen" as it were.

13 years in the Monastery had made him what it is today, a man gifted with abilities and a promising student of the Order of the Kail. It was also without a doubt that without the tutelage of his friend and mentor, Cloud Moon, he would have faced numerous times in all the rigorous and mentally torturing trainings. Also, all that good was not to last. His mentor was reported missing and shortly thereafter, news of a dark being terrorizing the villagers and exploiting them began to emerge. Kail Lords were sent to track the villain down and bring him to justice, but none succeeded and neither were they prepared when the identity of that cursed being was determined. News of who this villain was, travelled far and wide and soon, it reached none other than Hawkeye himself. Upon hearing the news, he immediately took it upon himself to accomplish what the others had tried to; he had assumed common travelling clothings and was preparing to go straight into the heart of Sommerlund, seeking out this particular enemy; a former Kail Master. He had a personal stake in this - his former mentor, Cloud Moon, now mockingly calling himself Dark Moon - was the apostate Kail who had fled the Monastery in search of the knowledge of Right-hand Magic, now stands accused of exploiting and murdering villagers, while trying out his newfound powers. And ever since he made his acquaintance with his former mentor and friend, from which the latter was captured and sent through the Shadowgate in Toran, a darker side has appeared in him; he does not easily trust anyone, not as cheerful and ever-ready to smile as before and even some say, he does not have feelings anymore..."

But that was then, and now...

Hawkeye had requested before the Grand Master Council that he'd be allowed to leave the monastery and go on a pilgrimage, a quest to make his peace with his inner-self. The council knowing that this might be a way to help him agreed and sent him off on his quest.

Eight months and seventeen days he has been away from the Monastery that he had grown to love and called home. He has met many people in many different places and now his quest has brought him to Chahdan, a city full of criminal influence where rogue Shamazim have set up many trade guilds in the city, and people often caught in the crossfire from territorial wars.

Western Vassagonia is a rough place, ruled by powerful and wealthy rulers, some of whom are feared and others feared. The region is dominated by the great city of Vassagonia, where many different cultures and languages come together, creating a melting pot of influences. The local language is Vassan, which is spoken throughout the region.

Young Hawkeye, Kail Lord of the Kail Monastery, had always been the social chameleon, able to join every little group of children in his home village and always the boy invited home to meet his friends' parents. He was in a way, everyone's friend being able to blend in well with the conversation being carried out. However, when his talent was discovered and he was brought to the monastery to nurture it, it was of no surprise to anyone who had known Darin, son of Cadoc, son of Dorch, as a boy that he first developed the Kail skill of Camouflage (and later Invisibility). Coupled with natural hunting and tracking skills and to mention his astonishing well-defined vision, hawk-like as they say; from which his Kail name was derived, it was also of no surprise that Hawkeye found himself unusually talented for one so young to become a bounty hunter, a "Kail Findsmen" as it were.
"Maybe I am, maybe I’m not," Valestar said. "In any case, my companion and I were about to be leaving, so if you’ll excuse us." Hawkeye looked at the man cautiously, studying his behaviour. "Perhaps you got the wrong people, we’re just travellers passing by and we won’t be lingering any longer."

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"Oh, you’re the one alright...and no, you’re not excused." The man held up a hand to forestall the mage’s departure. Valestar glared at him, both with suspicion and incredulity. He dared to halt a magician of Dessi?

Before the mage could voice opposition, the man spoke. "I am Vazir, one of the higher-ranking Enforcers in this district. I do not know what wrong turn the two of you made to be here, but your lives are now in great danger here.

"You are right to be suspicious of me, but I will ask the Kai to use his senses upon me. Do I wish to harm you? Listen closely--Nathan and Timmons are part of the acquisitions ring for the Arena under the city. Their next move will be to whine to their bosses about this, and then there will be a price tag on both your heads...especially yours, though.

"I will take you as far as Hagama Street. From that point on, if you wish to stay in town, head through the merchants district and into the upper class housing area. There are inns there that cost 5 Crowns a night, but offer safety via guards."

He steps aside now, extending his arm to usher you forward.

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"What about leaving town?" Valestar questioned. "How far would they follow us? Because I’d rather not stay here, in their midst, if it can helped.

Either that or..."

That voice was speaking to him again. Telling him there was only one way to ensure that these people left them alone.

"... how many are there? And do we know where they are located?" His tone left no question about the purpose behind these questions.

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"They have government license to operate in this district alone. Chahdan may appear lawless, but the Overlord’s few decrees leave no room for interpretation. They both fear and respect him, for he fought his way to the status he has now."

He shrugged. "As for their number, well, a couple hundred maybe. Working in various areas with various tasks. And if word has already gotten to me, you can not assure that couriers are spreading it to the guards at the gate station south of here. Not everyone that patrols this district is in league with the undercity rulers, but most are--Vassagonia is, after all, a nation of greed."

It is now that you can make out a long scar on one side of his face, hidden by his hair. No telling how many other scars there are hidden beneath armor and attire. He appears to be a man who has fought to be where he is as well. Perhaps, in looking at him, you think that one day he may usurp the current Overlord.

---

Vazir scowled... more so than usual.

"Too many for us to take," he said. "Well, in that case, we thank you for your suggestion, but we’ll be leaving town before noon. Even if they follow us, it will be in less numbers. And the sooner we leave, the better the start we have."

He shot a glance at Hawkeye, supposing he’d probably have something to add, but the kai lord was silent. Valestar couldn’t be sure, but he seemed to be eyeing a bowl of fruit the bartender had set out on one of the tables.

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"Hmm, what? Oh yes, I think we shouldn’t stay here any longer, and since you’re almost done with packing, I think we’d best be moving along. Any other place is ok, as long as it’s not here. From Hagama Street, how far is it to the nearest exit, safe one of course? As you’ve said, they have, most probably, received news about us and no doubt their men will be on the streets, searching for us. And I am not looking forward to the prospect of being at an exit only to be confronted by a gang of, acquirers."

"One more thing, what is it to you that we make it out of this place, alive? Sorry to be so bold but I’m sure you’d asked the same thing if you were in our shoes", Hawkeye asked further then turned to Valestar. "OK mage, if that’s your last item, we should move now and discuss while on our way. Every second here, means a second closer they’ll get to us."

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"I’m carrying whatever I need and these here are all that I need. So there’s no need for a horse", replied Hawkeye. "You go ahead and get your donkey fast, we’ll wait for you outside", he continued, packing the fruits into one of the pouches that Valestar has carried with him.

He turned towards Vazir, while Valestar walked towards the back where the stables are located. Hawkeye took a quick look around him just to be sure that no one is acting suspiciously or trying to approach them without being noticed. Probably a misplaced sense of worry since this man, Vazir or something, is here with them. Then again, who knows what those scums are capable of.

---

Vazir answered the Kai. "From Hagama street, it is south one quarter mile until you will reach the South Mercantile Gate. As for why it is my concern that you live, call it national pride. For too long, outsiders have looked upon us as being warlike, greedy, and unwelcome to strangers. While that may be the case, I prefer to leave a lasting impression on those who I come across by being the opposite.

"Do not get me wrong, I am not endangering my life to help you. I am merely intervening to keep yours safe from the danger it is in. Call it a flaw of my altruism--I care, but not to the point of folly."

He turned and looked out onto the street. "You’d best move soon if you move at all. The sun rises, and though the days are shortening, the heat does not abate as quickly in these sandy lands."

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"Well, I think we should purchase some food for the road," Valestar said, returning from the stables. "Could you lead us to the shops first and then we will gladly take leave of the city."

Hawkeye nodded his acquiescence. "You may want to purchase a donkey," Valestar added. "If we’re trekking across the desert, cheaper than a horse, and faster too, when they’ve got a mind to be. And they can stand rougher terrain. We may have to take to the mountains."

---
I'm doing some slight role playing for Hawkeye here, just to keep things moving. If this isn't okay, let me know, I'll change it.

Magical Attack: Summon Air Spirit (takes 2 rounds)

Move Action: Move 30 ft

I'm pausing in case you'd like to go down a different road. Didn't want to assume too much. The intersection looks like this:

The locals on the street scattered in every direction, eager not to get caught in whatever crossfire there was. Oddly enough, Valestar spoke a word and a wall of darkness appeared on the street in front of him.

He turned to see the two still standing. "My mother was a Kivosh," he said, as if this explained everything. "GO!"

He began backing up and affixing a small jar of some substance to a small crossbow, then he pulled out a bolt from his sleeve, dipped it in the jar, nocked it, and fired blindly into the darkness.

The shouts of the Sharnazim still in his ears, the duo and their donkey—which thankfully seemed to realize moving was prudent—rushed southward along the street. Their presence alone caused people to stop and stare, and their rushed actions caused even more attention.

At last, they found an intersection: To the left was Biyna Street, to the right was a forked intersection of Bura Path and Grisha Path.

"Grisha path, here," said Hawkeye dramatically. "Hurry up, Old Man. Unless you haven't had enough fighting for one day." And with that, the Kai moved toward the exit that Vazir had indicated.

"Do I move like an old man? Do I have hip and back problems?" Valestar grumbled. "I can summon the very cosmos to do my bidding and he calls me old. I'll have you know, that even though I was born long before your time, my mind is young and fresh, capable of holding much more than it already does. Which says a lot, by the way. I don't know what kind of education they give at the monastery, but I can tell you that the Dessi learn their students right, yes they do. Why, I spent fifty years in training, and I graduated early. And was given a quest by the High Mage himself. He didn't deem it necessary to tell me why it is I am looking for, so I may very well be old before I'm finished, but I am certainly not old now," Valestar continued his ranting, which, to his annoyance, the kai gave no sign of hearing. Grumbling further, he followed the kai down Grisha Path.

Within minutes, they had found Hagama Street. It was a long (roughly) straight road that led to a gate in a low wall approximately seven feet high—a more symbolic than actual. The guard posted there watched them pass with a knowing smile on his face—they had gotten in over their heads and ended up in the wrong part of town.

The difference between the two sectors of town was like the difference between the middle of the night and noontime. On the "dangerous" side of the wall, very few people moved about. Most of them were timid and watchful. Here, however, people were everywhere, even at this early hour. Most of them were aloof and ignorant of others, and Valestar remembered what Vazir had said about how the laws were strict—no one from the undercity would dare ply their trade here.

Still looking over his shoulder nervously, the mage pulled his donkey along. The Kai looked around in wonder. This was the Chahdan he had heard about, not that sleazy dismal section of town.

They were in the main market section of town, and every thing imaginable for sale could probably be found here...well, except for people. That could be found where they just came from apparently....

Valestar looked about him nervously. It looked like they had outrun the elite guards. He hoped the summoned air spirits had had a hand in that, and that they didn't suddenly appear in the middle of Hagama street. Hawkeye was looking about him with a fascinated grin on his face, but Valestar felt uneasy. This part of the city felt no less sleazy to him than the part they had left. Greed ruled here too. It was just that the rules were different. He began looking for the fastest way out of the city.

Hawkeye looked on amusedly as his companion attempted to flag down a passerby and determine the fastest way out of the city. The man he had grabbed at gave him a disdainful look and muttered something rude in response.

"I'll show you how it's done, Old Father," smiled the Kai Lord. Using an accent and mannerism that were perfect for Chadan, Hawkeye sidled up to a beautiful young woman who giggled at his good looks.

"My father and I are late for a meeting," he said, and "we would be ever so grateful if you could point us to the edge of town by the quickest route." He lowered his eyes and then raised them to meet the lady's large brown eyes.
Rules, Rulings

My goodness, you guys are off the charts!!! And here I thought I was brooding and can't trust people easily, I'm harboring a beautiful girl and gotten the way to her house as well…

Valestar:
Perception check at DC12.

Hawkeye:
Perception check at DC15.

Perception check = 23

Perception check : 19

Clarification:
You're heading to an alleyway? Are you sure? Double check the facts.

Sorry about that. I've changed that part, so you can keep yours.

That's no big deal. Generally I wouldn't mind, just that I chose to do something different this time.

I'm sorry again about that. There, everything should be good now. I have to keep in mind all these, still need to get use to it. Just let me know if there are any, I'll be glad to edit it and learn.

Ha ha, great response Hawkeye! Very in character.

After the boy responds, and whatever mayhem occurs, Valestar will decide that he'd better go after Hawkeye and make sure he doesn't die, and will head down the alley, cautiously, listening for sounds of trouble.

Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

Valestar grumbled as the young girl giggled and was tempted to butt in and put a stop to it. Instead he suited himself with mental images of the Kai Lord being put through the Dessi schooling regiment for a good seventy years. Then they'd see who was “Old Father.” He had to admit, though, the Kai Lord was getting quite the directions from the girl…

… on a closer listen he realized she had not told him the way out of the city but also how to get to her house.

Hawkeye smiled and bowed to the young girl who had offered her hand for him to kiss. The Kai Lord took her hand and was about to kiss it when he was pulled along hurriedly by Valestar who was getting impatient and annoyed at his companion. “Alas, I am unable to stay for long as my father here is not quite the patient and romantic man that I am. I bid you a good day!” Hawkeye shouted to her while being pushed on his way.

“Hey, old mage, now there's no need to get rough. Besides I got the information that you were unable to obtain. Ishir knows how long we would be stuck there while you ask and cause people to run away from us. Maybe you should do that for those Sharnazim behind us, make them run away from us instead of running after us. Anyway, I don't need a donkey as that would hinder us more than it should. Let us be on our way, this way.” Hawkeye said as he led Valestar and his donkey down the road they were on.

They meandered through the canopied tables and tents as best they could. There were countless people moving about, most with heavy hoods or bright colors on to combat the sunlight. Admittedly, it was getting a bit warm thanks to the cloudless skies.

It appeared, however, that many merchants were packing up their wares for some reason. More than most looked upset over this--after all, this was equivalent with losing money for them.

Valestar passed by a sun-weathered and time-worn man who was slowly packing up his small crystalline jewelry, probably trinkets of some sort. Hawkeye was instead looking across the sea of people, scanning the edges of the bazaar as they steadily moved southward.

“It took you that long to decide about the donkey? I thought you hadn't even heard me in the bar;” Valestar said looking around the merchant square. “And if you keep flirting with girls that way, you'll soon need more than a donkey to carry your belongings.” He stopped. Something had caught his eye.

“No, I did not take that long to decide. It's just the way you were looking at that donkey and then at me, so I thought you meant for me to get one as well. By the way, what's with you and the donkey? You know, if I didn't...argh nevermind, we best be out of here fast. If not, not even a thousand donkeys would matter.” Hawkeye looked around at the crowd of people walking by as they continued their way.

“Something is wrong, old mage. People are packing their wares and it's not even dusk yet as if they're trying to avoid something that is going to happen soon. I don't feel good about this…..”

Both of them were looking in different directions, and both of them spotted trouble.

Valestar saw a young man taking advantage of the situation and start swiping some of the old Vassaogian's items. When the decrepit old man turned around, so would the boy—appearing to mind his business. When the merchant turned to pack what little he could move at once into his pack, the boy would reach out and take some more.

Hawkeye saw a couple of Sharnazim in full uniform across the market area standing at an alleyway with a timid looking man. One of the Sharnazim pointed into the alleyway, and the man looked back and forth before going. Both Sharnazim did the same thing, then entered cautiously.

“Hmm, something's afoot,” Hawkeye told himself. “Come old mage, I think someone may need our help. If anything, it would definitely require a look into.” Hawkeye pointed towards the alleyway.

Valestar shook his head at the sight of the theft. Like he had thought, this side of the city was little better. Hawkeye was speaking:

“Come old mage, I think someone may need our help. If anything, it would definitely require a look into.” Hawkeye pointed towards the alleyway.

“What, are you daft?” Valestar inquired of the Kai Lord. “We're in enough trouble ourselves. Let's get our hides out of this city, rather than annoy any more city guards.”

“No, I'm not daft. Yes I would like to get out of here just as quickly as you, but that man may be in trouble. I'm a Kai Lord and I have vows that bind me to my responsibilities that put others above me. Ahh, you wouldn't understand about that. Anyway, I'm going to check it out with or without you.” Hawkeye pulled his hood over his head before making his way towards the alley, occasionally looking around to see if anyone was watching him, less it's a trap.

The Kai's word enraged Valestar. Sure, being nice was, well, nice, but he felt strongly that helping every person they'd come across would only get him into trouble. The gods knew what trouble Hawkeye had spotted in the alley. “Go off on your foolish crusade, then!” he said and turned his back on the Kai...

… to face the boy stealing from the merchant. Despite his feelings, he felt a sudden pang of guilt. He strode up to the boy and grabbed his arm.

“Steal one more thing from this man,” he growled. “And I'll charbroil you.”

Hawkeye paid no mind to the mage's ranting and moved through the crowd, blending in more here than in the other area because of the vast array of clothing around him. He reached the road that ran around the edge of the bazaar and moved cautiously to the alleyway. He pretended to be drunk and swaggered into the alley, prepared to continue the ruse when the Sharnazim looked at him.

But no one was there—the alley extended for twenty feet, then ended in a ten foot high wall. The Kai's wobbly movement stopped suddenly. Had he gotten the wrong alley? He turned and looked across the crowd to see Valestar shaking some young boy by the arm. Sighing at the eccentric old Dessi, he backed up and looked at the buildings. Yes, this was the right alley, but where had they gone?

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Valestar's action startled both the young boy and the merchant. The boy yanked free of the mage's grasp and tossed his most recent handful back on the counter. ”Nisok Feyata,” said the boy, tossing another handful on the counter before bolting into the crowds and behind a tent.
Well Valestar has no idea, but holy sh t, that’s the guy that eviscerated Sol Hawk! I would love to question the old man, but then, I’m not Valestar. We’ll keep it in mind, however.

Unless the old man has something else to offer, Valestar now heads to the ally

A Knowledge Arcana check to see if Valestar knows what this is, and an appraisal check to, well, appraise it.

Knowledge Arcana: 12
Appraisal: 6
I have to check the book to see if I can try again... I’m at work at the moment...

Perception check: 24

KL wrote:
He turned and looked across the crows to see Valestar shaking some young boy by the arm.

Crows or do you mean crowd?

Ha, yeah...crows. That’s such a horrible typo that I’m going to leave it.

I’m going to let you decide if you wait for Valestar and Varsuvial, or if you want to go ahead and fidget with the brick.

If you find a secret door, Valestar will be curious but will not leave the supplies unguarded, unless he is convinced that no-one will steal his precious items. Even then, he make take some convincing to get him to follow.

I need 2 checks. A Stealth check to see if you can slip in unnoticed, and a Perception check to see if you can make out what is being said.

I won’t tell the DC of the Stealth, but the DC of the Perception is 20, thanks to the noise coming from outside in the market and the angles of the building.

Also, later this weekend (maybe not tonight—depending on time), look for a grid. Not necessarily for combat, but just to let you know what you see better. It will be found in my signature when completed, as relevant map #2: Alley

Rules, Rulings

Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

The merchant sighed and wiped his brow, shaking his head slowly. “Thank you, Outlander. Ever since Ka’nur died last year and left his son in charge, things didn’t change much. However, Aymodani’s absence in recent weeks has caused the city to grow rapidly. Granted, he himself was just a spoiled kid who inherited the town due to his father’s death, but at least his laws kept order while he was here to enforce them.”

Sadly, the old man scooped up the pilfered trinkets the boy had returned. “Now, this. Everywhere we turn, lawlessness. . .crime . . .oppression.” He glanced around at the Sharnazim who walked along the edges of the bazaar. “They follow their own laws—I dread to think what will happen when that Anari president rides through the city. I hope he’s well-guarded.”

He put a small pouch on the table and began to rummage around in it.

“Well, I won’t argue with you, good merchant. Ever since arriving here, all I’ve seen is crime. Speaking of which, I’d better gather my companion before he gets us into more trouble. Keep a close eye on your wares.”

“Wait!” says the old man as Valestar turns to leave. “Take this, Outlander. It’ll keep you safe.” He holds out a piece of chipped topaz on a crude leather thong—he has fished this out from the bag and now puts the bag back under the table.

Valestar stopped, interested despite a sudden anxiety over Hawkeye. But the Kai Lord was capable of handling himself for a few moments. He reached out and took the amulet.

“And what might this be?” he mused, half to the merchant and half to himself.

Hawkeye was bewildered at the disappearance of those three men. “Where could they have gone to? There are no doors and gateways here. No staircase leading up or down. Not even a window to sneak into. They couldn’t have just vanished, or flew off, or go through walls! Hmm, wait, or maybe, just maybe they could?” Hawkeye began to look around for signs of some secret entrance of some sort as well as tracks of the three men that will help him to determine where they have gone to.

Valestar looked at the token on the merchant was pressing upon him to take. He didn’t know what it could possibly be for, nor how much it was worth. Just going on face value, it looked rather paltry. Still, it was a gift, and it apparently meant something to the old man, who was beaming brightly at Valestar, his eyes hidden in the wrinkles brought on by his broad grin.

Meanwhile, the Kai walked into the alleyway and looked around. No one could just vanish—there had to be a valid explanation. He studied the wall and saw no sign of scuffing where someone’s foot would push against the boards. Neither building had any distinguishing outlines of doorways on them. Scratching his head, he crouched down and looked at the ground.

There it was. The footprints jumbled around, as if people were standing or moving, then headed into the building on Hawkeye’s left. But how did he open the door? It was then that he saw a brick that was a bit off-color, down just above the very corner brick. Had he not stooped to look at the ground he would have never seen it. Did it open a door? If so, how?

Sensing no evil, nor any motive for evil, Valestar put the amulet around his neck. The man seemed so pleased that his gift had been accepted that Valestar smiled in spite of himself. He thanked the man and headed off for the alley, pulling Varsuvial, who had become obstinate again.

It was then that he saw a brick that was a bit off-color, down just above the very corner brick. Had he not stooped to look at the ground he would have never seen it. Did it open a door? If so, how?

The young Kai began to study the brick and the bricks around it. He touched the surface with his fingers and began tapping, then pulling and pushing, to find out how it works. Just as he felt it began to move, “There you are. Well, it’s a lovely alley you’ve found here. Can we go now, or have you decided this alley is a threat to the people of Chahdan?” The mage’s words were filled with derision, though a tiny bit of relief seeped through.

Hawkeye interrupted him with a lower tone. “Shh, mage, there may be ears around. By the gods, I can even hear you breathing 10 feet away. One would think wild boars are coming through. Now, just be prepared for anything while I open this. It’s a secret door I think. Oh by the way, I don’t think your donkey can fit through or be as equally silent, so just tie him somewhere near.”

“Wild boars... I’ll give you wild boars... give you what for, you carpet bagger...” Valestar grumbled under his breath. “And what do you expect me to do? Leave all of my supplies here to be pocketed by some thief? Listen, if there’s a secret door, then there’s something to be kept secret. And someone who wants it to stay that way. What interest do we have in this city’s dark secrets? Let us begone from here, Hawkeye, before it is too late. We were on our out,“ he reminded the Kai Lord.

“Can’t you just cast an invisibility spell or something on him?” Hawkeye replied while looking at the donkey. “Fine, fine, mages and their stuff and pet donkeys. Hmm, maybe we can hide and cover him with something. You can try and look around to see if we can use anything or somewhere to put him so that he won’t be so easily noticed. Hmm, on the other hand, maybe you’re just afraid. Well you can just wait here and keep an eye out while I go and have a look. If it’s just some secret Sharnazim cult recruiting new members or the likes, we’ll leave. But if indeed that man is in trouble, then I must help him.

And you’d better be here to lend me a hand should I need it, agreed old mage?”

“Honestly, I don’t know why I don’t just leave you and get out of here,” Valestar sighed. “Okay, I’ll give you ten minutes. That should be long enough for a Kai Lord, hm? If you’re not back here in ten minutes, I’m leaving. If you get into trouble, please don’t hesitate to recall that I told you so.”
Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

The outline of a door appeared finally. Hawkeye exchanged some words with the caustic mage before entering, slowly and carefully. It was very dark inside, but the Kai could make out that he was in a small room that opened into a hallway. Light was coming from somewhere down that hallway, perhaps from a window?

He took a slow step and turned his head to the side to listen. There were voices talking.

* * *

Valestar watched the Kai Lord dissappear into the sudden opening. He hoped he would come back alive. Though it would serve him right to be skewered by the blades of whoever hid behind this wall, Valestar had need of him alive. Besides having someone who could talk to him (though he was fast regretting Valestar's ability to do so), he needed a guide to get him out of this stinking desert. He certainly wasn't going to rely on his own skills again. They'd landed him here.

* * *

Hawkeye stepped inside the open doorway and entered the room, cautiously taking each step for fear of giving away his presence. He looked back and saw Valestar waiting impatiently, constantly grumbling outside the secret entrance and begin to doubt if this was such a wise decision on his part. Maybe he should go back and just get away from Chadan just like the old man had told him? No, never. He can never do that. As a Kai, he has responsibilities and duties to carry out and this is one of them. The deeper he goes, the more inviting the outside where Valestar was waiting looks. Hawkeye reassured himself and grip the hilt of his sword with his hand while another runs on the wall's surface as his walked along.

* * *

The Kai Lord moved soundlessly across the floor, for this was what he had spent his entire life training to do. Even animals in autumn forests were surprised by his ability to muffle the faintest sounds.

Moving over toward the open doorway, Hawkeye stopped and listened as he slowly looked out the door and down a long hallway with three other doors—one of which was opened. It was from this room that the voices came (speaking Vassan):

(normal tones, a bit nervous): "Yes, yes. It is true bluesteel. Not the imitation alloy floating around the undercity. Do you doubt that it's owner here is of Dessi heritage?"

(heavier, gruff sounding): "Haha! I do not doubt that she would make a fine addition to any slave harem. Look at the fire in those eyes! By the fiery sands, man! I'll arrange a hundred Thrones for her."

(nervous man): "She is not for sale...yet. We are talking about the steel."

(voice of another): "Yes, three hundred crowns for the spot on the blades."

Outside, Valestar sighed and looked about nervously. An old man and a donkey slinking in an alleyway was sure to draw attention. He patted the gentle beast on head between the ears. Varsuvial twitched his tail and looked away for a moment, then back at the mage, as if to say "Hey, this place is more boring than usual. Liven it up."

* * *

Hawkeye moved cautiously towards the door and positioned himself carefully beside it. The bits of conversation he had managed to pick up has definitely peaked his interests and confirmed to him that there is indeed trouble that needed rectifying especially when it involves someone else's life. But he wasn't that foolish as well; he wanted to listen on what else if being discussed, he wanted to find out the exact number of people in the room and their locations, were they armed to the teeth, any other exits from that room, is the lady ok and is she tied up? He also needed to determine if there's anything in the room that he can use to his advantage, to even up the score since that old coot has probably left with his donkey and left him alone.

* * *

Valestar sat next to Varsuvial in the alley, trying to calm his mind using the meditative techniques he had learned in Dessi, yet had never quite got the hang of.

* * *

"Envision yourself in a beautiful and serene place..." his inner muse told him. Meaning very different from where I actually am?

* * *

"You are calm in this place..."

Sure, sure. I am calm... where is that Kai Lord? He'd better not be dead...

* * *

"You are detached from the world..."

Except that I still feel the heat, the sand is uncomfortable, and any minute someone could chop off my head. Hey, why do I have my eyes closed in the first place?

"Look, if you're not going to take this seriously, then I'll just go find someone else. Plenty of people out there need a muse, I ain't lacking for work. Everyone wants to be enlightened these days. I'll have you know..."

Valestar opened his eyes, abruptly killing the inner conversation. He and his muse had a tumultous relationship. They'd work

* * *

The Kai flattened against the far wall of the hallway and edged to the open door at the far end. His back to the wall and hand on his weapon, he listened a bit longer before deciding his course of action.

(nervous man): "Surely this blade alone is worth three hundred."

(gruff voice): "Don't start with your smooth talk to get more money from us. I'd just as soon leave as stay if you're going to do that."

The Kai heard this man take a couple of steps, but he could tell the man was bluffing—he wanted both the blades and the captive.

(nervous man): "Okay? Okay, three hundred for both weapons. And the armor?"

(gruff voice): "No armor. What use do I have for female armor?" Then he laughed. "But I do have a use for the female herself. One thousand crowns for the Vaskerine."

There was a loud jingling thump as one of the men took a bag of coins and tossed them on the floor.

(nervous voice, tinged with excitement): "Very good choice! I thank you." His tone changed then, more domineering. "Vos, Ny'tan...gather the rest and lets be off."

* * *

Rules, Rulings

1. This post in no way represents MY feelings about you, Hawkeye. Don't worry, I'm sure Valestar would feel worse than he'd admit if you kicked the bucket. Good luck in there!

2. Could you let me know when ten minutes have gone by, Kai Lord? That's when Valestar will venture into the building himself.

3. Not trying to influence your actions, Vale...just loving this whole donkey facet. They're such expressive things.

4. Hawkeye: Let me know where you want to go on the grid. Stealth check again when you move. Just so you know, the DC is 26 this time (it was 25 before). Also, if you plan on doing something action-packed this round, let me know what it is.

5. Since this is potentially your first combat, I'll ask that you just give me intent and actions. Don't try to flesh out too much or I can't add any flair to the narrative.

6. Oh, possible combat? Cool. I'll move to LB, just by the opened door, and listen further, occasionally taking peeks into the room to study the situation and surroundings. Oh yeah, I'm going to find out more before announcing my presence and help the lady.

7. Did the door close behind Hawkeye, or is Valestar staring into the room? Also, should I be rolling anything to signify Valestar's attempts to hear if Hawkeye's in trouble?

8. Since the information on the grid didn't change, I'm not updating it.

9. Okay Kamilah, you can now start posting as a bound helpless Vaskerine looking upon a grizzly Sharnazim who "bought" something he had no rights to in the first place. The other one of looking your swords over greedily.

10. Hawkeye, you sense the "deal" is completed and likely to end as quickly as it started.

11. Valestar, you still hear nothing except Valestar's noise in there!
There is someone thinking only 3 or 4 days have passed. In fact, this game has been going on for months, but I us at about half a minute. To L8, 6-10 seconds to listen, then this last post would put V: Technically, it has been maybe 30 seconds. It just After that, we’ll go in order of initiative.

positions then, plus we’ll call that a surprise round, so take into account you looking into the room. You’ll get all say at least five enemies. My next post in the morning will

The number of people (at least those speaking or spoken to or spoken about) is in the text of the post. We’ll just say at least five enemies. My next post in the morning will take into account you looking into the room. You’ll get all positions then, plus we’ll call that a surprise round, so you’ll get a free round of action before everyone else acts. After that, we’ll go in order of initiative.

V: Technically, it has been maybe 30 seconds. It just seems longer since it’s an online RPG: 6-seconds to enter the first room, 6-10 seconds to listen, 6 seconds to move to L8, 8-10 seconds to listen, then this last post would put us at about half a minute.

In fact, this game has been going on for months, but I think only 1 or 4 days have passed.

This explained. Valestar is sitting outside still. Can’t help you here, Hawkeye. Post changed.

HE: I’m being friendly yet devious. There is someone at J10. That prevents you from seeing any further into the room, because he is facing “south”. He’ll see you immediately if you tried to look around.

The number of people (at least those speaking or spoken to or spoken about) is in the text of the post. We’ll just say at least five enemies. My next post in the morning will take into account you looking into the room. You’ll get all positions then, plus we’ll call that a surprise round, so you’ll get a free round of action before everyone else acts. After that, we’ll go in order of initiative.

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This explained. Valestar is sitting outside still. Can’t help you here, Hawkeye. Tota...
Rules, Rulings

Be sure to let me know who you hit.

Valestar, you indeed heard him call you that time.

Valestar is running through these rooms. He should reach Hawkeye in, what? Two rounds? Three rounds? When he sees Hawkeye, he will ask what is going on. If the men attack him, he will skip the questions for later.

Hawkeye wrote:

He looked around and aimed at the Sharnazim nearest to the Vakerine, who's back was towards him and let loose one towards the exposed back of the neck of the leering culprit.

Didn't anyone read this part? That is my target, the Sharnazim nearest to Kamiah, I think his location is Q13. I'm not too sure on who to do a psychic attack on, the injured Sharnazim or the thug nearest to the door. I'm just guessing that perhaps half of his EP gone in one attack all of a sudden would cause some sort of shock to that opponent.

Ok, Psychic Attack Damage of another 10 to that poor sod. I've been getting 10s three times in a row!!! If somehow my initial attack with the bow cause the Sharnazim to retreat or not be in the battle, I'll do the Psychic Attack at the thug nearest to me, should be the one directly in front of me at the door. By the way, I'm going to stay and fight at the door, this way the enemies have to engage me one by one, giving me some chance at least till Valestar arrives or Kamiah frees herself and get her weapons and join the fight.

In reality, Valestar is just messing with you. He's trying to save his powers in case he needs them later. But if you get hurt or call for his help, he'll join in.

A quick recap:

Round 0 (Surprise round): Hawkeye does 30 damage to Q13, yells for Valestar.

Round 1: Valestar rushes in and says something; Hawkeye says something back.

Keep in mind that you only have 6 seconds to speak in each round. It'd likely be brief. No harm done, no need to edit. Just something to remember for the future.

So, here we are at Round 1. Hawkeye, you still need to act for this round. Everyone else is going to be acting as well now. Everyone needs to roll initiative so I know who gets to act first. Can't give descriptions of what happens when until I know it.

For now, here are the enemy stats, followed by initiative:

- **Thug J10 (F3):** AC 11 EP 30 Init 12
- **Thug N9 (F3):** AC 11 EP 30 Init 10
- **Sharnazim N13 (Shz3):** AC 13 EP 35 Init 15
- **Sharnazim Q13 (Shz5):** AC 13 EP 40/42 Init 9, bleeding badly
- **Commoner O15 (C1):** AC 10 EP 6 Init 12

**Order:** Thug2, Sharnazim1, Commoner, Thug1, Sharnazim2

**Initiative 17**

- Move: trade places with Hawkeye
- Fireball: automatic failure.
- Move: get out of doorway again

I'm not too sure which will be my accepted Initiative score, but whatever it is, I'll move to trade place with Zipp. Draw my sword and then move back again. Didn't bring my notes with me so can't really refer the actual moves.

The day I didn't bring my file with the corebook is the day when KL resumed the game.

**Grid updated. Round 2 begins.**

- **Thug K9 (F3):** AC 11 EP 30 Init 12
- **Thug L9 (F3):** AC 11 EP 30 Init 18
- **Sharnazim K9 (Shz4):** AC 13 EP 35 Init 15
- **Sharnazim Q13 (Shz5):** AC 13 EP 40/42 Init 9, bleeding badly
- **Commoner S15 (C1):** AC 10 EP 6 Init 12

---

**Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine**

Valestar leapt up at the huge cry, dropping the novella. “Stay here, Varsuvial!” he cried, and then he ran through the doorway, staff at the ready.

In the first room he saw no-one. He kept going through another door into a long hallway.

> Hawkeye released his arrow, strengthen by his mastery of the Hunting discipline, towards the unprepared Sharnazim, hoping that his action would allow the Vakerine to free herself much easier and join the battle.

Right now, he could certainly use all the help he can get. As the arrow buried itself in its target, a scream filled the room. A scream of pain and agony. Hawkeye never slowed down his pace, as he kept the momentum of his surprise attack going. From the depths of his mind, he created a ball of psychic energy and hurled it into the unprotected mind of his opponent.

> The Kai was quick to aim and quicker to act. Entering the room, he leveled his bow at the Sharnazim's neck. The arrow sailed across the room in an instant, piercing the man in the neck. He cried out in pain and fainted about as he grabbed at the arrow and fought to keep his footing. Dropping to one knee, he realized in horror what had happened. Trying to look at who had done this only made the pain worse.

> The commoner's eyes bugged out at the wound. “Get him! Get him!” he shrieked.

Hawkeye was already sizing up another target, and then he realized that soon he would be in close combat with someone if they all advanced on him—he'd have to switch weapons shortly.

Valestar rushed off as Hawkeye cried out, leaving Varsuvial to bray in protest at being treated like a pet dog. Where was that blasted Kai?

---

**ROUND 1**

Valestar rounded a corner and saw Hawkeye at the end of it.

> "Hawkeye!" he yelled. “What mess have you gotten us in this time?" He saw Hawkeye release an arrow and heard a brief cry. “Oh, that kind of mess, is it? Well, I hope you'll remember that I told you this would happen. Anyways, you seem to be doing fine, I'll be outside, reading a most excellent book. Remind me to lend it to you sometime.

Just as he released the psychic ball from his mind, Valestar arrived, yelling, “Hawkeye! What mess have you gotten us in this time?” He saw Hawkeye release an arrow and heard a brief cry. “Oh, that kind of mess, is it? Well, I hope you'll remember that I told you this would happen. Anyways, you seem to be doing fine, I'll be outside, reading a most excellent book. Remind me to lend it to you sometime.”

> "Stop fooling around, old mage and start doing some damage. You love shooting firebolts everywhere earlier on, so why not now? Besides, there's more Vassagonians to fry now and just as I mentioned earlier, someone in that room needs our help, a female Vakeros. So just do what you do best, besides complaining of course. You can keep the lectures for later, after we get out of this alive, if we get out of this alive."

> "Let me take a shot," Valestar said, seeing a potential target near the doorway.

Valestar rushed through the building in time to see the Kai backing up from the doorway, dropping his bow and unsheathing a hand weapon. The mage wondered how he had ever seen any elderly Kai when they had such a proclivity to getting into fights.

The Dessi-mage entered the doorway and tried to cast a spell, but his momentum carried him off-balance enough to mess it up. The pulse of energy careened over the shoulder of one brush-tongued looking man and singed the wall behind him.

The man swung his fist at the mage while drawing his own weapon. The blow missed, which was probably good fortune smiling on Valestar. He was undaunted however--after all, he had magic. They didn't.

Inside, the man who arranged the arms deal took notice of the bleeding customer near where he was and edged along the wall to the door. A dark look from the Vakerine in the chair followed him, but he paid her no mind. He was not about to die here this day, no matter how much profit he stood to make.
**Rules, Rulings**

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<th>Initiative 15</th>
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- **Hit with staff**: attack roll 8, rerolled for an 18
- **Damage**: 22
- **Move**: out of doorway to L8, let Hawkeye have at em
- **Spent 2 willpower**

By the way, I realize that some of the targets may have changed by the time Valestar gets to move. In that case, I'll hit the Thug nearest him. In the future, do you want us to roll initiative and not post actions until everyone who’s had a chance to move before us has gone?

**Initiative**: K’L’s decision  
**Move Action**: Move to L8, not too sure on the distance

**Standard Action**: Attack with sword/melee - Thug at K9

**Damage**: 9 x 2 = 18 (Critical)

If this thug retreats or something else that results me not being able to attack him, I'll go for the next thug beside him.

I can have a Psychic attack here?

I realize that this time I stepped on your toes a bit, KL. Sorry about that. I wasn’t sure how we would do this. Next time, do you want me to just post actions without rolls, and then see whether those actions even make sense after other attacks?

No problem. I think in the house rules I mentioned that I will sometimes modify your actions to reflect what you intended. A prime example is moving to L8 when Hawkeye moves there in a later post. He has higher initiative, so I move you back a step instead of sideways.

**Thug 10 (F7):** AC 11 EP 30 Init 12  
Sharnazim N13 (Shz4): AC 13 EP 35 Init 15  
Sharnazim Q13 (Shz4): AC 13 EP 8/42 Init 9, bleeding badly

**Initiative 5.**  
I’ll wait until seeing what everyone does before posting my actions, if you don’t mind.

I just realized that Valestar doesn’t know what's going on. You should probably tell him, Hawkeye.

If you want to see what everyone does before posting your actions for the round, then you’ll always act last in the round. Initiative = 5. That is the only way to ensure I don’t have to post twice to condense a combat round into the narrative.

Since initiative is a once-per-combat thing, you’re stuck at 15 unless you delay it (in essence, you just stand around until everyone else acts). As is, you act at the same time as the Sharnazim that no one can see anymore due to line of sight: Hawkeye, Valestar/Sharnazim, Thug, Wounded Sharnazim. That’s the current order.

It’s your choice, but it may complicate things once the two groups merge and there are potentially 15-20 combatants in a single combat.

What happened to the other Sharnazim at N13? As for the thug at the doorway that Valestar and me are facing, right now we’re flanking him right? And we’re still in Round 2 until informed? Below is just the conversation or rather words exchanged while we’re fighting.

**Move so that I’m flanking Thug.**

**Full attack**  
**Force Blade**: 23 Damage 9  
**Fireball**: 16 Damage 3  
**Willpower spent**: 4

The target is the thug in front of me, the one who hit me. If he is killed before both (or either) attack gets off, than any extra attack becomes invalid. Waiting to see how it ends up before depleting willpower.

The thug at N13 is no longer in anyone’s line of sight. The Vakerine is stationary, as is the heavily wounded Sharnazim, so they remain on the grid for reference.

Technically, you’re not flanking the Thug as is. If Valestar were to step back to J7, you would be.

The grid is always current for the beginning of the next round. That is, this is how it looks best before everyone moves and/or attacks.

**Escape Artist Roll (Round 2):** 11  
**Escape Artist Roll**: 23 _-_  

*Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine*

Valestar ducked under the thug’s clumsy swing. He then struck out with a whirling blow that should have decimated the punk, except that it was stopped short by the door frame.

Valestar’s mouth fell open. He hadn’t fought this poorly since his early days at the academy. What was going on? It felt as if he hadn’t been in battle for a month, though it had only been yesterday...

He quickly stepped aside, to let Hawkeye have his, hopefully more successful, turn at the thugs. But inside him a rage was building. That was two misses in a row!

Suddenly he felt power surge through him. Fate would not let him lose today. As the thug, grinning, stuck his head through the doorway, Valestar struck out again, first with one end of the staff, striking him below the chin and then with the other end, striking him on the head. What’s more, he poured his anger into the blow, and sparks flew with each hit, as if the thug had been struck with the red hot hammer of a blacksmith’s burly arms, not the simple wooden staff of a mage’s small structure.

**Hawkeye**

Hawkeye drew his sword just as Valestar began his own attacks on the thugs. They were just as much surprised to see a Deafl Mage as they were to see a Kai Lord. Seeing his elderly partner swinging and miss each time spurs him into action.  
"Mage, cover my back and I’ll show you how we Kai Lords deal with these types of people!! Arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!" Hearing that, Valestar was infuriated and managed to struck a grievous blow to the thug standing in the doorway, making him faller behind, giving space to Hawkeye to strike a blow in. And what a strike it was, true and deadly, a slash right in the chest. The blessed thug fell to the floor while the duo prepared to face the other one.

**Hawkeye**

Hawkeye realizing that he’d never be able to strike out with the mage in his way, so he sidestepped Valestar and—using an ability he honed at the monastery years ago—lashed out with his blade into the thin strike area afforded between Valestar and the door frame. The sword struck the ruffian in the gut, slicing into his liver and nicking the major circulatory structures there.

As the Kai pulled his saturated blade free, Valestar had an instant of deja vu—wherein he felt as though he had been in this very same situation before and missed his attack. But the feeling passed quickly as he brought the staff down hard, channeling his innate powers into its length. It flared and flashed with a bright light as it struck the man in the head. He grunted and staggered backwards, clutching at his blackened eyes as his lifeblood poured out. His death was swift, but not painless...

The other bodyguard moved to engage Valestar, even as he stepped back to allow the Kai access to the room. He swung his heavy club and smashed it into the mage’s shoulder, almost making him drop his staff. Valestar: 6 EP

The bleeding Sharnazim slowly sank closer to the floor, having trouble maintaining consciousness. The man who arranged the deal rushed out a side door and slammed it shut behind him.

**Valestar**

Valestar staggered against the back wall, wincing in pain. The voice inside his head laugher at him, taunting him with visions of his head on a pike, and tantalizing him with images of him beating a hapless thug to death with his staff.

"Some friends you’ve got here, Hawkey," Valestar said, as the ‘friends’ came through the doorway.

**Hawkeye**

"I find it very amusing that you are able to jest when we are fighting for our lives here!! Now just try everyone you see, except me and the Vakerine in the room. We need to do this fast and I want a word with that man these thugs were dealing with..." Hawkeye replied hastily, turning his attention to the other thug.

The feelings he associated with battle were not there this time. Though the voice still spoke to him, he was somehow more at peace. His paranoia wasn’t present about these pests. All that was important was that they feel his power and bow to him and the Kai Lord. A rage still flowed through him, but this time he controlled it, using it to heighten his powers, rather than to cause him to act rashly. And the beast in him smiled, for it believed it could smell fear in its victims.

**Kamilah**

How Kamilah managed to free herself from the ropes that bound her helpless cannot be said. But somehow she managed to wriggle along the floor until she had one hand free. Using that free hand she managed to rid herself of the rest of her bindings.

Once free the first thought that entered her mind was the whereabouts of her comrade. And the beast in him smiled, for it believed it couid smell fear in its victims.
Rules, Rulings

Quote:
And we're still in Round 2 until informed?
Yes, but go ahead and post your Round 3 actions and intent. Then I can give you a
hard decision to make.

Ok, I'm attacking the other thug, the one that got a hit on Valestar. Doing 11
damage to him and psychic damage of 9 as well.

Valestar: You can modify your WP as needed to account for the fact that a
full attack was not needed.

Valestar, Hawkeye: Once you enter the room, you will be able to ascertain
instantly what has happened and what is going on. Keep in mind that you still have
an initiative advantage on this Sharnazim, but you now also have a 90%
concealment of him since he's behind Kamilah.

That means that if you have to roll a ranged attack to hit, there is a 90% chance it
misses him. And a hefty chance that it hits her.

Also, keep in mind that the thug you just killed is in the doorway, so your
movement is reduced by 5' if because you have to step over (on?) him to enter the
room.

Kamilah: He is much stronger than you--no way you can break free by brute force.
Let me know if you plan to comply or resist, for that determines what he does next
round.

Sharnazim N13 (Shz4): AC 13 EP 35 Init 15
Sharnazim Q13 (Shz5): AC 13 EP 5/42 Init 9, unconscious

Valestar will enter the room after Hawkeye, and will use perception to
try to see if he can see anything that may be of use in taking out the captor without
having to use his precious willpower. If not, and if Hawkeye doesn't have some
plan, he'll just fireball the bastard*. Perception roll: 14

Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

The assault on Valestar presented a wonderful opportunity for Hawkeye. He ripped
a gash open in man's side while simultaneously assaulting his mind with malice.
The large brute shuddered and paused for a second, long enough for Valestar to
once again finish him off with a blast of magic. The harpoon of magical energy
slammed into the man's chest in a spray of blood, causing him to drop to his knees
and then collapse backwards. Sensing that further attacks were not necessary,
Valestar held off with his magic and allowed the harpoon to blink out of existence.

The two looked at one another in satisfaction. They worked well together. Now
there was the matter of the bound Vakerine.

Kamilah was thankful that the rope binding her was thick and made of course
material, for it was easy to slip out of after repeated efforts. She had just gotten
loose and low to the floor when a hand grabbed her hair and yanked her head
back. She felt the keen edge of a blade poised on her throat and the stubbly face
of the other living Shamazzim press against her cheek.

"Get up," he said, using her hair as a handle to ensure she did what she was told.
What he didn't know what that her free hand was on the Shamazzim's blade. It was
then she realized the the weapon at her threat was her very own bluesteel blade.

ROUND 3

As the thug fell, Valestar actually smiled at the Kai Lord.
"Remind me never to let you go into dark alleys again," he said. Suddenly there
came the sounds of a commotion from the other room. Valestar looked at
Hawkeye.

"After you," he said.

* * *

Kamilah froze suddenly, a strong hand had wrapped about her long tresses. It was
one of her captors, she bit her tounge harshly becoming aware of the severity of
the situation. Retracting the hand she entended to grab the dagger she stood-
slowly. Not having much of a choice, she listened to the man carefully, as one
clean sweep of the blade could send her to her grave.

"What do you want with me?" She hissed through her clenched teeth. She
breathed in deep, the smell of blood lingered everywhere....

* * *
**Rules, Rulings**

I would like to move to M9, not too sure how far is that or would it be possible for me to move to M15? If both are not possible, then I'll just move to the farthest possible.

**Perception** roll: 20

**Diplomacy** roll: 18

Valestar is staying near to the door, let's say k9. He's looking around the room to see if there's anything useful to the situation. If Hawkeye's piece seems to be going well, Valestar will add in his own piece. I'm not sure if his attempts at intimidate would stack with Hawkeye's diplomacy. If they would stack if he uses diplomacy instead, than that's what he does. If the Sharnazim looks like he's going to harm Kamilah, then Valestar unleashes the fireball. Pheel! Rolls below:

**Perception:** 14
**Diplomacy/Diplomacy:** 16
**Fireball:** 28  Damage: 27  

**Sharnazim (Shz4):** AC 13 EP 8/35  Init 1, disoriented

Sharnazim (Shz2): AC 13 EP 0/42 Init -, near death

I can't update the grid till I get home.

Kamilah, you are free, but still right next to the Sharnazim unless you decide to move away.

**Sharnazim**

Valestar mentioned, but then wouldn't it be more feasible that a Kai Lord can talk? And I would like to know if I can roll a perception check as well as the Sharnazim. If I can't then I'll blow his brain out with a Psychic Attack for 8 damage. I'll post accordingly when my actions have been confirmed. Just to be clear, I'll use my bow only when Kamilah has moved out of the way.

When Valestar shouted "Finish him" at me, the thing that immediately came to my mind was "FATALITY".

I'm going to use your psychic attack option since using the bow would be done next round. You are still able to do the psychic attack this round. After this, you are officially out of combat and can do what you like.

Oh, you make me laugh KL. Hee hee hee.

I'm not too sure on my actions now, I think I have moved this round thus I can't take a move action again right, like draw a weapon, in this case my bow and load it. If I can, then I'll use my bow and deal a critical hit of 15 damage to the Sharnazim. If I can't then I'll blow his brain out with a Psychic Attack for 8 damage. I'll post accordingly when my actions have been confirmed. Just to be clear, I'll use my bow only when Kamilah has moved out of the way.

When Valestar shouted "Finish him" at me, the thing that immediately came to my mind was "FATALITY".

I'm going to use your psychic attack option since using the bow would be done next round. You are still able to do the psychic attack this round. After this, you are officially out of combat and can do what you like.

**FATALITY. HAWKEYE WINS.**

Valestar might not say anything, but I will. Welcome back Kamilah, looking forward to finally teaming up with you.

* * *

**Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine**

Hawkeye walked over the dead thug’s body at the door, after picking up his bow and unused arrows, slowly into the room, looking around and saw that the remaining Sharnazim was using the Valerieine as a human shield, protecting himself as well as her as a hostage, possibly as a means of getting out of the room alive. Hawkeye sheathed his sword and looked around the room, followed by Valestar who then stopped just at the doorway, searching for anything that might help him during this situation.

He spoke to the desperate man, "Listen, whoever you are, whatever you did, I don't care about it. All I care is the woman to be set free unharmed, then you can leave here. We all can. Drag this longer and that's how long we'll be here. What do you say, let her go and we all walk away, no one has to die anymore." The Kai Lord tried to persuade the Sharnazim to free the Valerieine, hopefully preventing further bloodshed.

**The Sharnazim pressed his stubby sweaty cheek against Kamilah's.** "What do I want, banou? A shield...for now." Having secured the blade at her throat, he took her right arm and put it behind her back, then reached around her waist and pulled her tight against him, wedging the arm between them. He tensed and watched as the Kai entered, pressing the blade a bit harder against her neck. "Nothing sudden," he whispered to her.

Hawkeye watched the man carefully for any signs that he was going to harm the Valerieine. All the while he was moving closer to a position that would put him at an advantage. He spoke calmly, trying to reassure the man that—despite the carnage around him—he would go free if he complied.

Valestar entered behind the Kai, at the ready for any hint of danger. He watched the man speak with Kamilah and saw the courage and defiance in her eyes, but the veil pulled slightly aside and he saw fear underneath. He listened as the Kai spoke. Fine words...if it weren't for the guy bleeding to death with the Kai's arrow nearby.

The Sharnazim adjusted his grip on the blade and pressed it tighter, taking a step toward the door. The woman's eyes squinched a bit in pain, and Valestar had had enough. A flash of energy shot across the room, striking the man in the face.

"Hawkeye! We've got a live one here." The Kai Lord kneeled down beside the Valerieine, watching the man carefully for any signs that he was going to harm the Valerieine. All the while he was moving closer to a position that would put him at an advantage. He spoke calmly, trying to reassure the man that—despite the carnage around him—he would go free if he complied.

He realized that he hadn't said a word to the woman, and that it might be considered rude not to do so, but he was so bad at these first meetings. Besides, he was sure Hawkeye had that area covered.

"He switched!" repeated the mage.

**A sudden dizziness assaulted Valestar. He winced in an almost emotional pain. He hadn't felt his way since leaving the academy, but he recognized what it was. Spell exhaustion. He had cast too many spells in a short period of time and his willpower, which fueled his magic, was running low. He'd have to try to not use any magic for a day or so.**

"Well don't just stand there!" Valestar barked at his companion while trying to maintain his composure. "Finish him!"

Kamilah readied herself to act, but before she could do anything, the man screamed out in pain and grasped his head. He staggered a couple of steps and fell on top of the other Sharnazim, the bluesteel blade clattering across the floor out of his dead grasp.

"As the Sharnazim warrior cried out his last breath, Valestar went to examine his friend. He put his hand on the man's wrist and instantly felt a pulse. "Hawkeye!" he called. "We've got a live one here."

He realized that he hadn't said a word to the woman, and that it might be considered rude not to do so, but he was so bad at these first meetings. Besides, he was sure Hawkeye had that area covered.

Suddenly, in the midst of everything, everyone heard noises from inside the building. It sounded as if someone were trying to sneak in, but was making far too much noise to be sneaking. Another set of heavier footsteps causes the floorboards to creak. It was obvious that two people were coming down the hallway.

"Hawkeye let go a sigh of relief, glad that it was over for now. He went to the door with the intention of catching up with the commoner but it was locked. He decided it was not much of a point to waste time anymore delving into matters that do not concern him. But when it involved the well-being of another, he made it his concern and his concern here has been carried out, the Valerieine saved. He had to admit, Valestar is indeed a worthy ally although a not so accomodating companion, but he knows a good friend when he sees one. But he should probably hold onto his fireballs. Hawkeye turned back towards the middle of the room when Valestar called out to him, "Hawkeye! We've got a live one here." The Kai Lord knelt down beside the Sharnazim and checked his pulse. Indeed, he is still alive, barely. He looked at the Valerieine and asked her, "Are you alright? Injured in any way? Hawkeye had lots to ask but he thought the better of it, the woman beside him needs to relax, calm down."

"Valerieine!*  moved closer to a position that would put him at an advantage. He spoke calmly, trying to reassure the man that—despite the carnage around him—he would go free if he complied.

Hawkeye had that area covered.
Rules, Rulings

Both of the Sharnazim are dead, and there is no need for perception checks. A Stealth roll of 3 really isn't all that stealthy. And Sir Victor walked in without stealth (unless I misread), so he's not trying to hide his footfalls.

Long story short, you hear them (someone) regardless.

Hehe, Val, we posted almost the same time. So I'll just add some additional comments here.

Edit to comply with others.

I'm not sure you're allowed to post for us hiding. Kamilah, maybe, because she hasn't posted in a couple days. That's okay, I'll just go on as if you didn't say that ^_^

Act III, Scene V – The (Sour) Grapevine

Hawkeye tried his best but couldn't do anything to improve the man's condition. His injuries were very serious, fatal infact. That just shows how deadly a Kai Lord can be, especially one that goes by the name of Hawkeye. I don't what came over me, LOL. The silent Kai Lord was just about to stand up when he heard a sound coming from the corridor outside, someone is approaching!

"Shhh, listen. Someone is approaching the room. Quick, be prepared. Mage, you go hide behind those crates with her. And hold back on those fireballs. Your face looks as if it's going to explode, judging by those veins."

* * *

Valestar was about to retort Hawkeye's comment on his fireballs but suddenly the sound of creaking floorboards reached his ears. He looked at Hawkeye and saw that he too had heard them.

"You might be wishing for those fireballs before long," Valestar whispered fiercely. "I can't use anymore magic today."

Technically it was a lie, but he'd like to save his strength if at all possible.

"Of course," he realized. "They don't know that. Should we try to scare them off, or escape through the back door?"

* * *

"What backdoor? In case you haven't noticed, that is the only door out of here, and the other one over there has been locked from the other side by that man who left before we crashed his business plans. Scare them off? Really mage, hurry, they'll be here any moment. What are you still standing there for? Didn't you hear what I said? No time to argue now."

* * *

"Hiding makes me a nervous," said the ever obstinate Mage. "I'm going to go at least see who they are. I may not be able to char them, but we can always lock this door while we break down the other one."

And with that, Valestar strode out into the long hallway, an act not so much inspired by bravery as by an extreme uneasiness with not knowing what was out there.

* * *

"By Kai, that mage will be the death of me!" Hawkeye muttered as he contemplated to follow him or attending to the female Vakeros. He decided that he should help her. He assisted her to gather her stuff, before asking her, "Who are you and what's your name? What did those men want with you? I'm Hawkeye, a Kai Lord of the Kai Monastery and that mage that just ran out of the room, presumably to get his own behind charred is Valestar, a mage from Dessi. He's a grumpy one but a good man nevertheless."

"Come, we best move on and follow him. I can't trust him being alone for a moment, especially with his trigger-happy nature with his fireball spell."
Laumspur, drunk potion of Barely. Have survived. We seemed to rules, you show it to me? Suddenly the sage felt his aching body. "Perhaps we should tend our wounds before proceeding. I have a nasty cut on my thigh."

Sir Victor closed his eyes and knew no more...until he felt a warm hand touch his cheek, and the power of the great god Kai flew into his veins. His eyes fluttered open, and turning his head, he saw Wait a second...I'm still blind! only darkness, but could imagine the young Kai Lord laying in the dirt..."Sol, it's good to be by your side once more. This fight brought me closer to the edge than ever before, and if I'm still breathing right now, it's thanks to you. I owe you my life, or what's left of it", he added, feeling his battered body.

"Sir Victor closed his eyes and knew no more...until he felt a warm hand touch his cheek, and the power of the great god Kai flew into his veins. His eyes fluttered open, and turning his head, he saw Wait a second...I'm still blind! only darkness, but could imagine the young Kai Lord laying in the dirt..."Simyn, you are wounded. Let me have a look." Sol Hawk could see that the Sage had been limping. He motioned Simyn to sit down beside him where upon me again, though, and I am glad.

"Yes, yes," said Sol Hawk to Simyn, realizing that he had been perhaps a bit overeager, "You are right. Puzzles and boxes can wait. And it is good to each other, and I thank you as well, and the land where I was born for delivering such a champion into our midst.

"Korlaeth and I were split up. I was sent to sweep over our trail. This gave me hope that you and the others had survived. I talked to the men and found that Ameesha is definitely with Murdach, even now.

"Korlaeth and I awakened to find ourselves bound and gagged. We were bludgeoned and beaten. They wanted to know what we knew. We didn't talk, but I cannot help but believe that there was something very important in that box if it was hidden, chained, and locked."

"A box you say? A puzzle and a mystery. Intriguing!" Simyn rose. "I would be interested to look at it. Perhaps I can make something out of it." The sage smiled. "By the way nice to be seeing you Sol hawk. It seems that I have decided to stay in your company for a while. If you feel up to it could you show it to me?" Suddenly the sage felt his aching body. "Perhaps we should tend our wounds before proceeding. I have a nasty cut on my thigh that needs looking after. We all seem to have received our fair share of cuts and bruises. Perhaps we should tend to them before we plan what we should do next."

"Sol, it's good to be by your side once more. This fight brought me closer to the edge than ever before, and if I'm still breathing right now, it's thanks to you. I owe you my life, or what's left of it", he added, feeling his battered body.

He felt for his belt pouch and pulled out one of his potions of Laumspur, quenching his thirst and closing the worst of his wounds with every swallow.

"Sol Hawk smiled as Sir Victor became within seconds his old self once more. "Nay, you owe me naught, Sir Victor. I say instead that we have saved sands. These butchers killed the guards at Resa. They never had a chance. Their arrows are Graveweed," said Sol, "and they utilize other poisons as well. One of these even the Kai cannot tolerate, as I was to discover the hard way."

"Simyn, sheathed his rapier. He was very tired, but happy that he was alive. "Sir Victor, I'm glad that you survived, I feared for your life for a second. I should have known that a knight of Sommerlund does not fall easily." What do we do now? The question immediately came into the sage's mind. Sir Victor would live, but he was still severely hurt. The sage himself was also beaten and he had wounds that needed tending, Simyn didn't know much about the healing arts, though, when he left Barrakeesh for the journey home he didn't expect this. For now he just sat down beside sir Victor, not sure of what to do, hoping that another would take the command.

* * *

Acradian stood and stepped back away from the two fallen men. His hair was matted with sweat and hung down across his face. His chest was pounding and he was breathing heavily. His arms were totally covered in thick, dark blood and his hand was burning with pain from a wound he had received. But everyone was alive.

Only Korlaeth was unaccounted for. And what will happen when Sol Hawk asks about Kamleh? What could he tell him?

Cade looked down at the collapsed body of Paru. Arcadian's blue blade had pierced her heart, she had been dead before Victor's blade even touched her. And touched her it did. The woman was nearly torn in half, her body was mangled beyond recognition.

The next word out of Acradian's mouth brought a slight smile to the face despite the situation.

"Stupid bitch."

He hugged at the money pouch at her belt and began to search the bodies of both her and Aymodani. He left their weapons alone. He would never consider wielding a blade that was not blue steel in combat. It just didn't suit him at all.

Slowly, the life came back to Sol Hawk. He was able to raise himself into a sitting position. This he did very slowly. He saw that Cade was searching the bodies. This caused him to remember something.

"Simyn," he said, and with the mask no longer on, it was clear that his good humour was returning as well. "That way, down the hall, was their Supply Room. Not the first cave, but the second. We fell a man there. There was something strange about him. I don't know what. But I found a box - under the bunk. It was chained beneath the mattress. It was locked. It was hidden. I couldn't open it."

"There was Laumspur in the supply room before, but I heard..." images returned to him of the torture that had befallen him and also Korlaeth... "I heard them say that they had used the last of it. That they would have to resupply in Chadan. I don't know what would be left in the Supply Room, but I cannot help but believe that there was something very important in that box if it was hidden, chained, and locked."

"Sol Hawk turned the graveweed arrow over in his hands before at last wrapping it in a swatch of cloth that he had torn from a dead black-clad's uniform. Then he put it away."

"Korlaeth and I had to make a snap decision. The regiment split five ways. We had tried our best to determine where Ameesha was, but we could not. We had narrowed down the possibilities and joined the group we thought would most likely contain Ameesha. And Murdach. By talking with the men, I found that Ameesha is definitely with Murdach, even now."

"Korlaeth and I were split up. I was sent to sweep over our trail. This gave me hope that you and the others had survived. I talked to the men and learned that a huge army is ammassing in the middle of the desert. Murdach included. They're seeking someone called the Overlord who is supposed to hide his faithful. From who I don't know. I don't know if they meant Egonlah, or if the Overlord is someone else. I couldn't ask anymore. They were slowing suspicious. They attacked me and I killed them."

"I knew I had to make it back to Korlaeth. The desert sun was taking its toll on me. I wished many times for Makala's strength." He looked to Simyn, who had questioning eyes. "Makala. He was a companion of ours. He was learned in the ways of the endless desert."

"I lost the ring. I dropped it to mark the trail. That was my great mistake, for I was in sad shape when I returned to the cave. I didn't dare sneak in, for it would have been death if I was caught. As a black-clad, I thought I could walk in. Somehow, they were onto me, though. Paru, the woman," Sol Hawk motioned to what was left of her. "Well, she was obviously very sharp and carried herself as the leader of this group. Ultimately, she caught me alone. She had not worked out yet that I was a Kai Lord, but she decided to kill me anyway. She realized her mistake quickly, and I did my best to silence her, but with two bodyguards to do her bidding, I was definitely in for a fight."

"I was swarming with guards and I was poisoned and paralysed. I think Korlaeth had arrived then, too, for I could hear him, but he fared no better. It might have been the end of him and me. While paralysed, I was stabbed in the heart. I don't know how we survived. Somehow, the leader had decided to spare us. We were soon to find the reason why." Korlaeth and I awakened to find ourselves bound and gagged. We were bludgeoned and beaten. They wanted to know what we knew. We didn't talk, but they didn't seem to care. After a few hours, they stopped asking questions."

"Sol Hawk looked around and realized the situation. "They just beat us anyway." His voice became quieter. "When Korlaeth or I couldn't take any more, when we had passed out from loss of blood, they would just rouse us with potions and start it all over again."

Sol Hawk wondered after all he'd lost if he had any blood left, or if his veins now coursed with pure Laumspur.
"Then they stopped. Koriath and I didn't know why, but we asked no questions. But before long we realized the reason. We knew that you were here, Victor and the rest. Koriath and I broke free. We knew we were needed. We had no idea how strong the leader was until we saw him. It was Koriath's quick thinking, actually, that has saved us all. Somehow, I don't know how, he got his hands on some Gravehead Arrows. Ironic that the black-clad instruments of death should ultimately be their own downfall."

Sol Hawk paused, and looked around the cave. Seeing the black-clad with the blue bow, he waved.

* * *

"So the enemy is Vassagonia then? But who is this overlord, the Zaiken or another enigmatic person? I have had my share of theories. Still it seems that Vassagonia is bent on war. I suspected that they planned to start a war between Anari and Cloeasia and then invade both countries when they had bleed enough. I'm not sure anymore. The question is, what do we do about it? This seems to be a bit larger than the kidnapping of a girl?"

* * *

"Vassagonia," said Sol Hawk. "It makes sense. I received a vision from the god and goddess when I was struck unconscious. I was wounded, but my former masters came to me, healed me. Then I was in the heavens above, amongst the stars, and I could see Vassagonia far below me. Its sands were like a turbulent ocean, and the waves washed out violently to crash against Cloeasia and also Anari. This left me with some disquiet. More and more it seems that Vassagonia is somehow behind everything, although how it all ties in, we may have yet to discover.

"Murdach was also in my vision. He stood before me wearing a sash of green." Sol Hawk shows Simyn his own green sash (which is part of the black-clad uniform). "Then suddenly, his sash was red. I didn't know the meaning, but it seemed that the next time we meet Murdach, he will be different. Something will have changed. Perhaps his allegiance will not stay with the Talons. Perhaps it is not now with the Talons, but his true face will soon be revealed. In my dream I heard something then, and turned away from Murdach to see it.

"In my dream I also saw a large, dark predator, a bird, maybe an eagle or a hawk. I transformed into a bird and took chase. The bird only had one eye - it was on the left side of its face. The dark bird saw me, then snatched an emerald out of the sand with its huge claws. This seemed significant part of the vision. I have my suspicions as to its meaning - perhaps you do as well.

"I continued to stay upon the dark bird's tail. We flew far, then the land below us was twisted and dark and dank, like a swamp. As we closed, there was a fetid lake. In the midst of the lake was a city, all in ruins. And protruding from the center of the city was a tall, black spire. The dark bird dove toward it until it was gone."

* * *

Sir Victor, being the pragmatic sort, hadn't thought about his own dream-vision which he had had the night before. Sol's own dream spared memories deep inside his mind, and the Ruanese spoke up:

"I also had a similar dream last night. There was a large black bird of prey, its claws dripping with blood, flying across a desert. Then, a shadow appeared in the south, approaching quickly with the sound of thunder, and the bird of prey shrieked a challenge. I had discarded this vision as just another dream, but now, combined with what you just said, I'm not so sure anymore. One thing is for sure, its meaning eludes me. Perhaps one of my learned companions could interpret some meaning out of this?"

* * *

Sol Hawk became excited as Sir Victor recounted his similar tale. "Kai is surely on our side! He is showing us the way. Arcadian, Koriath, what do you make of it?" Sol Hawk suddenly paused and he craned his head around as if searching for someone. The lady Vakeres. She was not here.

"Cade," he said, "Your friend, the Vakerine... the one you called Starling... is she... did she...?" Sol Hawk did not finish the sentence, but the whiteness of his face showed what he feared her fate to be.

* * *

Strange, I also had a dream last night. I dreamt of a girl in white, with hair the color of a raven. She wore an eagle on her shoulder. The eagle's talons are pressed her flesh and caused bloody stains to appear. It pointed with its wing to a pedestal, and the girl touched it.

When she did that an image of a large book, inlaid with a sinister pulsating gem on its cover, appeared on the pedestal. The eagle cried out and leapt toward the book. A red fist - actually a deep crimson gauntlet thrust into the air in victory.

Could the girl in my dream be Ameesha? The eagle could perhaps be Murdach. I think he needs her for something. I think he's looking for this book and he needs Ameesha to find it. The talisman turning red in your dream Sol Hawk could mean that Murdach not really is what he seems to be, but it could signify blood and thus be a warning of the carnage which will be let loose if Murdach isn't stopped. I think it's time to look at that box you found, Sol. There has to be a reason that it's chained to the wall. What bothers me is that if it's important to Murdach, he will come looking for it. Simyn halted in his tracks, a new thought entering his mind.

"Sir Victor, if the bird of prey signifies Murdach, perhaps he has enemies of his own? You said that the bird was challenged by something from the south, Desso perhaps? Or perhaps Desso is the ultimate goal for Murdach's quest. There could be another enemy of course. We have a saying in the Stormlands, the enemy of your enemy is your friend. Well, this is all theories. The book could for example be a physical thing or just signify knowledge, probably dark and forbidden lore, since the book in my dream felt scary."

* * *

"I had a dream as well..." Arcadian's words were muted, barely audible. But Arcadian's mind was on something else entirely. Murdach. Somehow the young Vakeres knew that the group would catch up with that man. When this entire catastrophe ended so would the enigma behind Murdach. That man was certainly not the center of all this. And he was so tightly woven within the situation of Ameesha that a confrontation was inevitable.

And Murdach will die...

* * *

Arcadian found the coinpurses by feel rather than by sight--these black-clad uniforms had several redundant fold and hidden places. He untied the strings and pulled open the tops. In the dim light he couldn't make out much, so he dumped them onto the floor. His jaw dropped as he looked at what fell out of the two bags. The pile he stared at contained around 60 platinum Thrones and 30 Crowns.

Theories, theories. That's all you get from me. I really need to think over which excellence feature I'm going to pick.
As the Kai moved to the box and knelt down, Simyn noticed the body of the man nearby. His hand was cuffed over something, even in death. As Sol Hawk prattled on about the lock and how he tried to open it, Simyn moved the corpse’s hand and saw a set of iron keys.

"Perhaps these will help," he said, tossing them to the Kai.

Sol Hawk looked up in time to catch the keys before they clanked off his head. Smiling, he tried a couple with no luck. The next one fit perfectly.

*click*

Sol Hawk raised the lid of the box, hoping the small container had something worthwhile in it. In it was a string of beads—some sort of necklace it seemed; a small vial of smoke that seemed to roll and storm about, especially when held; a small medallion shaped like a sun on a leather cord; and about a hundred platinum Thrones.

***

Arcadian took 30 of the platinum throws and tossed the remains of the bag to Victor. Victor’s sight was returning so he caught the leather pouch without too much difficulty.

"Go ahead and split that. The weaponry, though it is fine, I leave to whoever wants it. It is of no use to me."

***

As the room grew quiet, Sol Hawk took the opportunity to show the store room to Simyn. In the heat of battle, the Iron Keys had wandered over to Paru’s remains. A tentative smile returned to his face, "Did that Mynx carry anything useful?"

Simyn concentrated upon the objects. As most sages Simyn was blessed with the ability to see magical auras. This was a wondrous sense and the sages theorised that it was a gift from Ishir herself. As with many of the sages’ theories it remained to be proven. When he had studied the objects he opened his backpack and took out a laumspur potion. The ability of Sagacious Concentration was draining and the sage needed healing anyway.

***

Korlaeth just sat, leaning against his blue-steel bow as the dreams were discussed. He had little to contribute himself, and for now, it just took too much effort to speak across the cavern.

Finally, when Sol and Simyn passed him and the Vakeros tossed the pouch to the knight, he pushed himself to his feet and wandered over to Paru’s remains. A tentative smile returned to his face, “Did that Mynx carry anything useful?”

Arcadian looked up at that, and for the first time, Korlaeth really looked the man in the face. It couldn’t be...but, yes...drop a few years and the beard from that face, and...Korlaeth’s eyes widened and his smile was instantly gone. He stopped right up next to Cade, “You...deserter!” and punched him in the face.

***

Cade reeled back as the blow connected with his chin. Arcadian was in no mood. He didn’t even recognize this Vakeros and yet he had the nerve to strike him across the face. Korlaeth didn’t even see Arcadian swing his fist around. The blow struck the other man across the ear, hard.

“I don’t know what you are talking about!” Arcadian’s words were heard throughout the cave as he bellowed in anger.

Using a round-about he swung again but Korlaeth deftly moved out of the way of the blow.

“Hit me again. Go ahead and burn that bridge. Whelp!”

***

Simyn studied the items that the Kai handed him, using his gift from Ishir to all sages to fully understand them. He saw that two of the items were beneficial: the beads and the amulet. The vial, however, was potentially dangerous to have around.

Sol Hawk noticed as Simyn was studying the items that the inside dimensions of the box just weren’t right. It was too shallow. He turned it over, dumping out the coins, and slammed it onto the stone floor, startling Simyn—who luckily had finished his scrotum-trance.

When the Kai raised the box back up, there was a flat piece of wood and another larger iron key on top of it—the false bottom of the box had fallen out with the force of the slam.

It was then that they heard shouts coming from above.

--------

A lone rider stood beside his horse and knelt to observe the sand. It had been disturbed—something had rubbed over it back and forth, trying to obscure a trail. Interestingly, he then found the two insect-ridden bodies of the Sharnazim that the Kai had slain earlier in the day.

His horse snorted and turned its head.

“Yes, I hear it, too.”

Another horse nearby whinnied. The figure moved along, ready to ambush whoever was there, but all he eventually found after following the trail of horses was a small encampment. Minor gear was strewn about, and the animals he saw were vaguely familiar—then he saw the Sunriding warhorse, and he smiled.

“Yes, they were here.” He looked down at the footprints heading off around the edge of the mountains. “And there they went.”

Suddenly, a human shout carried across the sand. Most people would not have heard it, but a Telchoi is trained to find what normal people can’t, especially in the desert.

“Come,” he said, mounting his horse. “Let’s go see what that was.”

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Rules, Rulings

Simyn smiled. "I think we have found some treasures here, not counting the gold. The amulet protects the wearer from missiles. Very useful indeed. The beads are even more interesting. It’s enchanted with a beneficial charm that makes the wearer more skilled. I’m interested in keeping these. The amulet I can give to another." When Sol Hawk dropped out the hidden contents of the box, Simyn sighed in relief. "You scared me there. I wouldn’t have wanted to drop this bottle. It contains an air elemental, a very powerful creature. It might come in handy one day. I think it’s best usage is to throw it on whatever creature you want to attack. Hopefully it will break and the elemental will let loose. I think this amulet would be a nice gift to sir Victor. I think he could have used it for it, when he stormed the cave." The sage looked at the chain. "By the way is that attached to something?" As Simyn spoke, they both heard sounds of anger and a scuffle in the cave they just left. The sage pocketed the object for now, careful not to break the flask. "Let’s see what’s happening."

** * * *

After what seemed an eternity in the dark, Sir Victor’s sight started to return to him slowly. The Ruanean gasped in relief and offered a silent prayer to Kami, for without his sight, he would be a knight in name only, cursed to wander the streets and beg for sustenance.

He looked around and appraised the situation. All the bodies strewn about, but mostly the two around him, which had almost been his undoing. His respect for the Shanazim had grown, but only slightly, because they had resorted to witchery and trickery to lay him down. Typical, for none could stand toe to toe against a knight of the Order Triumphant and hope to come out victorious.

As his vision was returning, he glanced at Arcadian just as the young Vakeros threw him a small pouch of coins. Peering inside, he glanced at the coins and grinned. "This is a princely sum, and I’m willing to bet the ring and jewels are worth more than their weight. We’ll share them equally, should they be enough to purchase a few potions of healing and supplies in Chahdon, if that’s where we’re headed next."

Then, for no apparent reason, the two Vakeros, Korlaeth and Arcadian, started brawling with each other. First with the girl, then with another fellow cobalt warrior... These Vakeros are much more disciplined then I was led to believe! I wonder if they’re worth the trouble. Time will tell...

The knight just lay back and observed the fisticuffs for now, content to be a spectator, until one of them drew a blade or things got out of hand.

** * * *

"Simyn, indeed this was a worthy find. I shudder to think what might have happened if our friend here," he gestured to the dead black-clad on the floor, "had been allowed to release an air elemental into the midst of battle. I quite agree. The medallion should be for Sir Victor. Although magic will still have a chance to halt him at range, common missiles - perhaps even poisoned ones - will not touch him. And he will be able to reach toe-to-toe battle with his full strength. Yes, that will please him very much. Perhaps the beads are for you. As for my prize, I would have another look at those fine scimitars. Perhaps you can tell me if they are safe for use by an honest Sommelethim."

"It was thinking about the visions further," said Sol Hawk, "Regarding the bird, I feel that his one eye is significant. It could mean that the enemy we face has only one eye, though I doubt he is a bird. Simyn, you are a learned man. Do you know of any political personage that might fit that description?"

"Second, as you know, Ameesha is clairvoyant. Her powers are great, and it is said that she can also see the future. For a time, I am going to do 2 Knowledge: History checks to see if Sol has insight into the following questions:

1 - Is there a current political figure who has only one eye?  
   Result: 18

2 - Is there a gem that can enhance psychic powers?  
   Result: 18

Before Sol and Simyn get there.

** * * *

Wrestling roll: 22 (that’s 17 + my BAB, if that’s right.) Now the other two arrive. BTW, I like the whole everyone thinking “lack of discipline.” I like to think of us as one big family with those little family squabbles, but if anyone tried to do something serious right now, we’ll give em what for! and then go right back to our problem.
Rules,
Rulings

Just for all of you who are wondering, I have been leaving clues since the very beginning of the game that Arcadian has had a dark secret. You can tell even from the background bit in the Character Sheet. There is a part when Arcadian thinks briefly about his reasoning for seeking Ameesha. And as far as one can tell from Ameesha’s reactions, she has not told a soul. What that secret is will not be revealed here.

Arcadian rode up to Kamilah’s house on the water. The snowflakes were falling steadily and they burned his face as the white specks landed upon it. Arcadian’s lip and he had decided that he had pretty much had it. With a quick tug he broke free of Korlaeth’s grip and rose to his feet.

Korlaeth stood as well, angry as a hornet but found the cold, blue steel of the other Vakeros’ shortsword aimed at his throat. Instantly the fight stopped and Arcadian waited, tensed, for Korlaeth to draw his own weapon.

“If you wish to fight me then draw your steel. I am through with the squabblers of old women.”

Korlaeth’s eyes were so soft. He may have been guilty of many things that others would deem as faults in his character but he did not consider himself a traitor. Yes, he had left Dessi, but had done so in the act of desperation. Never once had the thought of abandoning his own country cross the young man’s mind.

The group had seen the Vakeros act ludacris before, but right now it appeared as if the man was on the brink of insanity. With his left hand Cade pointed a finger at Victor, who was the closest to the two quarrelling men.

“Stay out of this.” Arcadian looked toward Sol. “Back down as well. I have no quarrel with you.”

Slowly Cade turned his head until he was facing Korlaeth. His piercing brown eyes were fiery and the anger behind them was evident. Perspiration ran down Arcadian’s face as he breathed heavily. Suddenly Cade’s mind drifted back to the day that he left Dessi behind.

“You think me a traitor?”

It had been two years since Arcadian had left the house of Kamilah and returned to his duties as a Vakeros. The two lovers had seen each other as often as they could, though visits of each other were brief and lessened as time went on. Somehow Arcadian blamed himself for the drift between the two and that guilt ate his soul alive as the years passed. And yet, once again in the middle of winter Arcadian found his way back to Kamilah’s home in Araluen. And yet the greeting was not one that he had expected.

Arcadian held the blade as steady as he could while shaking with furious anger. And yet who did he have to blame but himself? How many times could he blame Kamilah, Victor, now Korlaeth, even Murdach for his own ill choices? And yet…none of this seemed to matter. All that mattered was the man in front of him and the shortword in his hand.

Arcadian shook his head. Kamilah could not know. Kamilah must have kept it to herself or else the man would have killed Cade by now. There would have been no blow to the head, only a blade to neck.

Korlaeth didn’t know, and yet he knew that he had left Dessi behind. He knew that Arcadian had forsaken his training. And that alone was enough to anger a fellow warrior of the cobalt legions.

Arcadian knew the blade as steady as he could while shaking with furious anger. And yet who did he have to blame but himself? How many times could he blame Kamilah, Victor, now Korlaeth, even Murdach for his own ill choices? And yet...none of this seemed to matter. All that mattered was the man in front of him and the shortword in his hand.

* * *

Sol Hawk was thrown aside as the two blue warriors continued to battle. He looked from one to the other. There was not a clear antagonist - each one was just as eager to take down the other. To hurt each other. Then Arcadian drew the sword.

“What are you doing, Cade?” asked Sol in a measured way, “If you hit him with that, you’ll kill him. We all know you’re not a traitor. But if you slay Korlaeth, what will the Vakeros think then?”

* * *

Simyn had hard to stand people who gave in to their impulses. Although he had to admit that he himself did that at times, this seemed ridiculous. To think with their sword arms instead of their brains? If this was how this journey would continue, Simyn wondered if someone in the party would awake with a dagger in his or her back? With such friends who needed enemies?

* * *

Murdach watched through the spyglass as the commotion in his camp erupted. Smiling to himself, his ego bolstered by his correct assumption, the man drained through the fog and watched until the camp was clear.

“There they go,” he said, handing the ocular device back to one of his captains at hand, “chasing a mirage.”

He turned his smug countenance to the princess, who kept her eyes lowered. He stared a long moment at her. Such beauty. He was bound by duty not to force himself upon her, but he was not prohibited from goading or ridiculing her. “No prophecies today?”

She raised her head then, revealing tear-streaked cheeks.

The display did not move him. “Perhaps you can foretell which of your father’s immobile-heroes will die next?”

Aside from the tears, her face revealed no emotion. “You will not succeed.”

He laughed quietly and waved off her contempt, but her gaze hardened with an intensity he didn’t like. She was searching for a vision now, reading the words of the future from a book only she could see. “You will not succeed,” she repeated, “at… killing my father.”

Murdach frowned at this. Was this prophecy or insanity? He wasn’t about to head back to Tahou and try to kill her father. His orders took him northward, across the border to rendezvous with an army that had marched from Teph. From there, he would replenish his supplies and ride out with a hundred more Shamazim back to Teph.

“Of course I won’t succeed—I’m heading away from him, not toward him.”

“You will never see Teph again,” she said faintly.

Scowling at her, regretting his mocking request for prophecy, Murdach motioned to his men to begin riding northward. In less than an hour, the Anari cavalry would be converging on Resa, leaving him and his men unhindered in their crossing of the border.

* * *

The same instant that Murdach crossed the border, Makala returned to the festival grounds from Tahou, bearing the news he had heard in Kubudel’s presence. He hoped to find his former companions there, but they had already left. Several lay dead at the scene where they had fought, and the Telkoi had little difficulty determining which direction they had taken; north into the Daroga forest.
Rules, Rulings

Act III, Conclusion – Mirage

He grimaced at the thought of entering it alone, given the fact that the Cloeasian forces had retreated there, but he had to find them. The dark-skinned warrior came upon the path of heavily torn earth in the forest, and—nothing the direction that the horses had gone—he headed westward through the Daroga, curious at what he would find when he exited. On several occasions, he found where horses had broken off from the main group, but he continued on the main trail through the day.

At length, he exited the forest and found the outpost on the northern reaches of Anari in smouldering ruin. Townsfolk from Resa were all over the area, as were hundreds of the Anari cavalry. Rumor was that the army was on immediate call, massing just south of Resa. Kubudei himself was leading the armies across Vassagonia to strike at the Talons with the help of Vassagonia.

Of course, all of this was nothing new to Makala—except the part about Kubudei leading the army. Was the man crazy?

The Telchoi tried to cross into Vassagonia, but he was detained by the gathering military. Following a lengthy altercation wherein Makala was forced to present the papers signed by the president at least a dozen times, the Telchoi was finally allowed to exit Anari and head into the grasslands of Vassagonia. He dismounted and knelt down, sighing. Yet another trail to follow, and night was falling. The Telchoi took comfort in the fact that he was skilled in desert survival, and that he would have little difficulty following a trail in the sands.

As the sun went down, the heat abated, but this mattered little to a person who had lived years and years in such a climate. It was to be expected. In time, he found the trail taken by his companions and followed it to the cave, where he found them recovering from a massive battle. It seemed that they were only too good at encountering overwhelming odds.

As Makala approached, he wondered who had led them into this one....

--------------

Egoliah paced back and forth in his war room, awaiting the arrival of his prodigy, Myr-atocht. By this time, the young man should be meeting up with the Sharnazzan army he had sent from Teph through Chahan. At that point, Myr-atocht would receive his new orders to divert to Chahan for a special mission.

The Vassagonian envoy that met with Kubudei sent word via dart-hawk after the Resa massacre that the president himself would be leading the armies. Egoliah quickly changed his plans and dispatched another dart-hawk to Chahan with a message to send a rider to the army encampment with the new plans to give Myr-atocht.

He walked around a large table and reveled in his daydreams of power and the completion of his plan.

In just ten days, the psychomancer Aramesh would be in his clutches. Sighing at being forced to wait, he walked to the small window and looked across the city and onto the open desert with his one good eye. If all went as planned, the Talons would be marching past Teph soon, headed to meet the Anari cavalry in the open desert between Teph and Chahan. What a surprise they would encounter.

Egoliah laughed. What a shock the Zakhan had experienced the day Egoliah explained his master plan and said it would cost around eight million Crowns. He was almost executed on the spot until he revealed to the Zakhan that it was only an empty loan—all funds would be recovered in a short amount of time, along with interest of a non-monetary sort.

The empire would grow in three directions. Not since the Majhan lived had the nation experienced such expansion.

Rubbing his neck, remembering the fashion that was pressed against his neck until he explained his plan fully that day, the old man turned and walked to the center of the room. The Sharnazzan master assassin stood by a large table that was covered in small carved figurines, representing the different players in this game.

A brown horse faced off against a black hawk in the center of the map. On either side were a dozen scimitar pieces. Egoliah smiled and used both hands to make them converge on the horse.

"The enemy of my enemy is not my friend—he's my tool. An implement, a means to an end," he knocked the horse over. "And once I have no more need for my tool, I will toss it aside," he said, thumping the hawk onto its face. The "dead" animals were encircled by scimitars, a symbolic image real enough to evoke a cruel calculating laugh from Egoliah. This was only the beginning, the grand--and costly--diversion.

All that mattered was that he get that blasted princess to the catacombs in Cloeasia so she could interact with the pedestal. With the Talons gone, it would take mere days to get there. He knew it was in V’ka somewhere, but she would give him the exact location. And he was not going to enter the Maakenemir unless he knew exactly where to go.

And once he knew...and once he had the book...and once the formula was rediscovered....

His hand slowly crept to a dagger in its scabbard near the map. He pulled out the jeweled weapon and caressed its blade—an odd blade, one that was deep crimson in color. "An army," he whispered. "An unstoppable army, all headed to one place."

Turning in fury and hatred, he threw it at the wall behind him. Straight toward a map it sailed, a map of southeastern Vassagonia and the Tentarias. The blade bit into the wood-reinforced walls, buried deep in the country that sparked such fires of malice within Egoliah’s black heart.

He said one word, then spat on the floor to rid his mouth of the word’s bitter taste: "Dessi."

* * *

Completely appalled with the Vakeros fighting, Simyn returned to the cave. There had to be more to this puzzle. All they had found was a substantial amount of money and some magic trinkets. The iron key that Sol Hawk had found must be important in some way, why would it otherwise be hidden. There had to be more things here. If there wasn’t what would they do next? Simyn began by checking out the chain. Was it attached to the wall or perhaps to something other?

* * *

Arcadian glared at Sol Hawk, “he started this, not I. I am acting only in self defense.”

The young knight refused to back down and he kept the blade in his hand, poised to strike. Korlaeth remained unmoving. It seemed that he knew all too well the bite of blue steel and would prefer to avoid it. All the same to Arcadian for this surely was not a fight that he had instigated.

"Cade..." Sol Hawk’s words were pleading, full of sorrow.

Arcadian sighed heavily and with a twist of the wrist sheathed his weapon, much to the relief of the others. Victor and Simyn had remained silent through the entire affair. Simyn it seemed had simply walked away from the situation, expecting it to cool down. It seemed that neither of them cared much for the fueds of other men.

"Touch me again and I will leave your corpse in the dust." Cade’s words, though not entirely felt, were definite in tone. After conflicts between him and Makala, Victor, and Kamilah the last thing he needed was another member of the fellowship viewing him as an enemy.

Cade began to shuck off of his armor while keeping a untrusting eye upon Korlaeth. As soon as the last piece was removed the Vakeros placed it within the sack that he was given in Tahou’s palace.

* * *
Act III, Conclusion – Mirage

Sol Hawk breathed a sigh of relief and said nothing else. Arcadian would need to calm himself now - Sol was satisfied that the fight had not come to worse and left it at that.

"If your water is running low," Sol Hawk said to the room. "There is a spring in this cave where the water is fresh." He explained the location.

"When we have had our fill, perhaps we could water our horses as well."

Sol Hawk stood now over the bodies of the fallen. "We should search the bodies for any additional gold. A single Laumspur potion each was not enough to carry us through this fight. I fear that we must respuelly before we can continue the chase. And the enemy is now a full day's ride ahead of us. The princess... must be so scared."

"We all need rest. We can do so here if we wish it - this place is cool and it is defendable. There is also a Supply Room. I do not know what might be there. Perhaps arrow or food. Tomorrow we will have to choose our path."

Sol Hawk took some time to claim any gold that could be found upon the black-clads. He was also quick to restock his supply of arrows. Finally, he stood over Paru and Aymodani. Their bodies lay together - aside from the blood and the mutilating wounds, they had each other now, forever, fallen for the last time into one another. Sol Hawk had been slowly hardening to the pain of his enemies. He found that it was harder and harder to trust in their compassion, for on the mission, each time that he had tried a path other than that of the sword, it had meant deadly danger. The wizard. The Black-Clads. And Paru. Always it ended in death, always it ended like this. And yet, for a moment, Sol Hawk piloted them. Evil though they were, somehow they had found a comfort in one another. Something good in an otherwise deadly and evil world.

He stooped to examine the bodies, and especially their weapons. The scimitars of Aymodani were of fine craftsmanship. Perhaps superior to his own rapiers. Pride told him that he should not wield weapons of the enemies. However, after the humiliation he had faced at the torturers' hands, he found that pride was a luxury. This was about life and death now. His friends needed every edge that they could get.

To the others, Sol Hawk's mediation of the fight between Arcadian and Koraith may have appeared to be based from the heart. Indeed, in part it was. But Sol Hawk also knew that the group needed every body that they could get if they were to succeed in a mission that was to save thousands. Both of the Vakeros, although obviously volatile, were also warriors without equal. To the others, Sol Hawk may have appeared foolish to intercede and to place himself in danger as well. But again, there had been no choice. This was survival. It would have been useless if Sol had saved his own skin only to witness the death of one or both of the group's best fighters. A Vakeros death would surely mean death for the mission and likely death for Simyn, Sol Hawk, and Sir Victor down the road.

As Sol turned the blades over in his hand, he spun the scimitars in a wide arc. He thought of Maka. Would their battle against Aymodani have been so desperate if the Telchii had remained? S veggies, Simyn. And the Vakeres. What had become of her? Cade had not answered when Sol had asked about her. Part of him wondered if she had been the reason for the fight in the first place. Koraith had hidden in with her, but Arcadian had some bond with her. What had he called her? Starling? Sol Hawk had known better than to even mention her in the heat of combat. He knew that if he had done so, he might have sent Arcadian or Koraith into even more of a rage, a rage that surely would have ended in death. The Vakeres - what had become of her? And why? He would ask Sir Victor later. Not now.

Sol Hawk intervened between the two Vakeros long enough for their ire each other to cool down somewhat, and the tension drained from their bodies, to be replaced by the weariness that followed combat.

---

**Rules, Rulings**

**OOC**: Ok, here is what Sol is after: Gold, we need all we can get I think. Search for any Cape might have missed.

**Arrows**: As many as I can carry. Still need to get my quiver back from Simyn. If the arrows are coated with Graveweed, let me know. Likewise, if I find any vials of Graveweed let me know. As a Tier V Healer, I am sure I could identify these things.

**Finally, the weapons - what does Paru have? What does Aymodani have? What can I discover about these?**

**Appraisals**: It also appears that Egoliah is some type of "master assassin". And once you read the end of this act, you'll know who is the target...well, the players will know.

**Act III - The Mirage**: --- Just think about what a mirage is...I'll edit the explanation here in a couple of weeks.

I thought this had something to do with the 5 splitting trails of black clads, as well as them being (perhaps all 5) decoys for us to follow, while Ameesha is being brought to Tephe by Murdach through another path altogether.

Or it could mean that we were meant to think they (the black clads and Murdach) were Cloesians while they're really Vassagonians.

---

**A Very Special OOC**

**KL**: We are getting close to the end of this Act. If you'll remember, I told you that the last post I made in the Act would leave you going...

Since your characters will not know what transpires in that post, I just wanted to open up this thread for you (the players) to comment on it. Some of you will take it more seriously than others.

I will also comment after the last post on the (sometimes difficult) choice I make for the Act titles:

**Act I - The Darkening Days**: It refers to both the festival held in Anari and the upcoming evil that is imminent yet unknown to all but a few.

**Act II - Suspicions**: You don't trust the Anari; they don't trust you. Clues point to Cloesian involvement, but they are very far away. Someone tried to assassinate you (specifically the Vakeros) in the capital. Who? Why?

**Act III - The Mirage**: **edit**: Something that looks real but isn't. Something people in a desert often chase after, hoping it is true. None of the five white-robed people was Ameesha. And aptly fitting for the act's name, two of the character's adopted the same technique of becoming a mirage!

**Act IV - The Traitor and the Assassin**: You'll learn about this one soon enough. Who is the traitor? Who is the assassin? Who is being betrayed? Who is being assassinated? Are traitor and assassin the same? Or is the assassin trying to kill the traitor? Is the traitor exposing the assassin? Ohhh, the mystery of it!

**KL, foreshadowing, even going as far as saying Act V is called The Red Sands of Vassagonia.**

**SH**: I would have to say that coming up with a title that sets the scene is important... yet the GM wouldn't want to give too much away, either. Looking forward to Act IV... ha ha, if I live that long!

**S**: I have to say that the name of my personal thread: "The End is near" was very fitting, I thought I would read about my imminent death every time I opened up a post.

---

**Act I - The Darkening Days: It refers to both the festival held in Anari and the upcoming evil that is imminent yet unknown to all but a few.**

**S**: Ah, Dessi. Hadn't thought about that one. Perhaps it was too obvious. Seems we will be...

**KL**: I also will comment after the last post on the (sometimes difficult) choice I make for the Act titles. And that Murdach will die in the next Act or two. And once you read the end of this act, you'll know who is the target...well, the players will know. The characters will still be clueless, but everyone has done a wonderful job so far of keeping the characters from utilizing player info.

**S**: Ah, Dessi. Hadn't thought about that one. Perhaps it was too obvious. Seems we will be heading to Cloesia then and the Maakenshire. Or will we? Whom? Who knows?

**SV**: It also appears that Egoliah is some type of "master assassin".

And that Murdach will die in the next Act of two.

---

So the Mirage would be the attack against Anari then? I was sure I had it all decided. And now it seems you have told us the whole plot! How will I be able to sleep tonight? Then I need to decide what I should choose when I level! Researcher or Wilderness? It would be nice to be able to follow tracks, but will it be the most useful...?
Act III, Conclusion – Mirage

Then the Kai Lord told everyone where to find water, the knight picked himself up and went to the back of the cave, where he found running water. He painstakingly removed his battered and rent armour, thinking he’d need to repair it soon, otherwise it wouldn’t be strong enough to protect him in the future. Then he proceeded to wash and clean his many scintillar and arrow wounds.

Once that was completed, he came back to the main cave and surveyed the situation, looking for any digging implements.

“We should bury the dead, otherwise they’ll probably draw animals. Has anyone found any shovels in the caves?”

He looked on as Sol searched all the enemies’ pockets. This wasn’t too honorable, but they would need all the resources available if they wanted to survive long enough to see the end of this. It was then that another shadow drew itself across the cave’s opening. It looked familiar to the knight, who nevertheless put his hand on the hilt of his weapon, before he recognized their visitor – Hakka had rejoined them, too late to help in the fight, unfortunately.

“I’m glad to see you, southern warrior. I think we have a lot of catching up to do, for the past couple of days have been pretty hectic, to say the least. Thank you for bringing our mounts to the cave.” The Ruanese was especially glad to find bright Lance waiting for him outside the cave.

* * *

Korlaeth stood, still unmoving, as Arcadian turned away and things continued happening around him. So searched the dead, Sir Victor asked about burying the bodies. Simyn came and left again. Still Korlaeth stood there, eyes boring into Arcadain’s back.

A part of him wanted to take the man up on his threat. Any Vakeros that could raise his blade against his fellow...

Korlaeth slumped to the floor, finally, closing his eyes. Now that his anger had cooled some, his Keron training reasserted itself. Perhaps the man was right. Perhaps he had reacted too quickly...but to desert his home, and worse, to raise his blade against a brother!

Korlaeth looked at Sol, then back at Arcadian. Time...time would tell. For a deserter, there was still hope. If, however, the man had betrayed his people, as he suggested...

Korlaeth’s eyes hardened. Justice would be done.

* * *

Simyn returned to the supply room. He ignored everything but the box. He yanked on it and pulled the chain tight, then looked under the bed. In the dim light, he could not see where it attached.

His knee ached as he pulled and pushed the mattress off the frame, and then flipped the bed over onto its side. Curiosity has its rewards!

The chain attached to a slightly larger metal plate set into the wall. A latch holds this inset compartment shut, and securing the latch is a large padlock.

* * *

Simyn returned to the cave. Arcadian and Korlaeth seemed to have settled down.

“Sol Hawk, I have found a lock and I’m sure that you possesses its key. Either you follow me or hand me that key. There was more in that room than meets the eye.”

A Very Special OOC

SV:

Simyn of Quarlen wrote:

So the Mirage would be the attack against Anari then? I was sure I had it all decided. And now it seems you have told us the whole plot? How will I be able to sleep tonight? Then I need to decide what I should choose when I level! Researcher or Wilderness? It would be nice to be able to follow tracks, but will it be the most useful...

I thought the Mirage was that we were sent to pursue a decay - the feeling “Talons”, while Murdach was just away further in the forest, laughing at us as he toyed with the princess.

SV:

Sir Victor of Ruanon wrote:

It also appears that Egoliah is some type of “master assassin”.

And that Murdach will die in the next Act or two.

Oh, Murdach will die, oh yes. But Sir Victor, I am not sure if Egoliah is the master assassin. I think it might be Murdach.

In Sol Hawk’s vision, Murdach’s sash had turned to red. True, this could mean that he will die, killed by Egoliah. But I kind of think Murdach will be the assassin who is trying to take over Egoliah’s position for some reason. In my vision, I had the impression that when we meet Murdach again he will be changed - and that was represented by the Red Sash. So the Red Sash could mean that he is now the assassin, it could mean he has been killed, but I doubt the latter since in my vision, he was very much alive and deadlier than before.

SV:

KaiLord wrote:

Aptly fitting for the act’s name, two of the character’s adopted the same technique of becoming a mirage!

Ha ha ha, the miraged become the miragers!

Cha cha

Sol

SV:

Sol wrote:

Sir Victor of Ruanon wrote:

It also appears that Egoliah is some type of “master assassin”.

Oh, Murdach will die, oh yes. But Sir Victor, I am not sure if Egoliah is the master assassin. I think it might be Murdach.

If you read this part:

KaiLord wrote:

Rubbing his neck, remembering the falchion that was pressed against his neck until he explained his plan fully that day, the old man turned and walked to the center of the room. The Sharnazim master assassin stood by a large table that was covered in small carved figurines, representing the different players in this game.

It appears that KL refers to Egoliah as a master assassin, since he’s the one playing with his miniatures on the table.

SV:

Ok, Sir Vic, just read the post. Hadn’t before - ah, hobby. That’s lots to digest!

The attack from Anari - that makes sense, figured that from Sir Vic’s vision.

That they are meant to wipe out the Talons... brutal. Evil.

The book that Ameesha needs to commune with... The Book of the Magnakai????

Ah, wow, I need to digest.

Sol

SH:

Re: Murdach still in the $x$$x$#$x##$% forest...

d_mn! HE IS A GENIUS! NO!

SH:

Sir Victor of Ruanon wrote:

We need a clue for his whereabouts, what was it you found in that hidden compartment Sol?

SV:
KL: Here are Aymodani's swords. I found them in the newsgroups and colorized them.

Rules, Rulings

KL: Sir Victor: No harm done in having Makala bring the horses. He would have done so if you had asked him anyway. An option you may want to consider is to merely pile the bodies inside somewhere instead of burying them. There is no shovel in the supply room.

Before everyone goes to sleep, Makala offers to keep full watch if you let him get some sleep first, but he is not prepared to rejoin with you yet. He lets you know everything that took place in the exchange between himself and Kubudei, plus the fact that Anari's army is massing at Resa. Their march is imminent. Perhaps in a day.

Solv Hawk: There is a total of 47 Crowns scattered amongst the people. They have no graveweed, no potions. You also notice one of the smoothest and most flexible sets of underleather (a type of armor worn underneath clothing) you've ever seen on Aymodani. The craftsmanship is beautiful, every stitch perfect, all pieces of leather unblemished—well, except for sword punctures and such. Inside Aymodani's raiment, there is a note, written in beautiful Vassagonian:

Governor Aymodani: I apologize for calling on you so soon after your father's death. I know that the burden of that, plus overseeing Chahdan, is quite severe. But the Sand Mother has revealed to me that now is the time we must strike Anari.

A group of my men is coming from Teph in the week. Join with them, using the credentials and nseu they will tell you about, and enter Anari. Once there, try to gain an advantage when the time comes to strike and steal Kubudei's precious jewel.

Hide out in the Daroga as needed. Perpetuate the ghost stories surrounding the wood if you must. When you can, return to Teph. Myr-atch is overseeing this mission, so defer to him in all things.

One final note. Paru is coming on this mission—don't let that interfere with the goal, or I will permanently interfere in your goal.

I'm glad we understand each other....

Epilogue

Concerning the blades, all 3 (2 Aymo, 1 Paru) are well made. Superior quality scimitars of different design, but equal power. Paru's and the Kivosh's khanjars are mastercraft quality.

Your initial appraisal of the scimitars is that they're worth around 1500 GC each. The gem inset into the blade on Paru's is worth another 500 GC. The daggers are around 300 GC each.

SV: Nice, three Superior scimitars. Too bad a knight of Sommerlund doesn't use such heathen weapons.

KL: Here is Paru's sword.
**Rules, Rulings**

OOC: Took gold, 2 scimitars, Armour's note, sword--one time use. 
OOC: Passed Paru's weapons to Korlath

**OOC: dropped Iron Key (gave to Simyn)**

**OOC: Sol Hawk has Craft(Armour). Can you tell me the qualities of this armour? Is it also of superior make as the text seems to indicate? Is it lighter than normal armour?**

**Act III, Conclusion – Mirage**

After collecting what gold he could uncover, Sol Hawk carefully appraised each of the weapons. "These are of superior craftsmanship," he told Korlath. "This man was obviously one of means. And take a look at this." He passed the note to Korlath - it contained all of the details regarding Aymodani's plans. At this point, Sol Hawk took Aymodani's two scimitars, then passed Paru's blade, also of undeniable craftsmanship, to Korlath. "These Kharjans, too, are beyond the average make."

The armour that Aymodani was wearing was also apparently beyond the average make. Although it was slightly damaged, it was largely untouched due to the method of Aymodani's death. Sol Hawk worked the armour free and examined it more closely, using his knowledge of armourcraft to appraise the leatherwork more completely. Very well made, very flexible.

As Makala brought the horses, Sol Hawk contented himself to observe and take charge of his own horse, Blade. Although his spirits lifted as he saw the Telchoi return, Makala had always shared the closest bond with Sir Victor - the Kai was content to allow this interaction to take place. Having not eaten all day, Sol Hawk took a meal from his saddlbaag. He stowed inside his old leather armour while likewise discarding for good his own black-clad disguise. It was too tattered and destroyed to be of any further use. He also stowed the two Kharjans. Aymodani's armour he took with him. Sol Hawk quietly tended to the various end-of-day duties such as watering and feeding his mount, reflilling his waterskins, and cleaning his weapons. Finally he ate his meal and tended to Aymodani's armour which he cleaned.

Sol Hawk thought more and more about the note he had read and the mention of the stone. He waited until Simyn returned to the main cave, then read and translated the contents of Aymodani's orders to his friends. "The gem might be the same as the one seen in our visions," he said. (Perception Check: 28 Did I see this Gem on Kudubed in Anari?) Sol Hawk also took the time to explain all of his suspicions to the group - especially those he had shared in private with Simyn earlier in the supply room. "Murdach was ultimately headed for Anari. Makala's news makes me disquiet, however, for apparently Anari is also planning for an attack."

At this point, Simyn brought up the matter of the key, and Sol Hawk was pleased to produce it. "We may soon see what secrets have been hidden," he said, giving the key to the Sage.

* * *

His natural curiosity awakened, Simyn quickly took the large iron key when it was offered to him, sure that it would open the lock he had found. If the objects in the minor stash had been of such high value, what about the probably bigger stash? Perhaps more clues could be found.

---

**A Very Special OOC**

SV: So Egoliah needs Ameshia to interact with a pedestal in the catacombs beneath Cloesia. To reach those catacombs, he has to remove the Talons, which he sent to Anari to retrieve the princess, and will kill them all with the armies of Vassagonia, leaving Cloesia wide open for the taking. Once he gets his info from the catacombs, he'll go find a book to invoke a ritual which will create an unstoppable army to ride through Desi.

S: So the Talons really was in Anari? I've figured out that they were Vassagonians dressed as Talons. The unstoppable army... Hmm... Why do I think Vashna and the Chasm of Doom, when I hear that? Could it be as easy as an resurrection attempt? And by the way don't the acolytes of Vashna wear crimson? Perhaps this could be the start of that accursed brotherhood!

KL: Oh I love it! You can't see the forest for the trees!

And you think I've given away the whole plot...I've just given you something to look forward to: Teph, war, Cloesia, Maakenmire, Egoliah

There are clues all in that post I made.

KL, who stayed awake long enough to read these reactions, update AC, and do another test on the LLWP

Sh:

Simyn of Quarten wrote:

We need a clue for his whereabouts, what was it you found in that hidden compartment Sol?

What do you mean? Are you talking about the key I found? Which compartment?

SV: 

KaiLord wrote:

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Yup, lots of looking forward to. Act IV, Assassination, will probably have something to do with assassinating Kubudei as he rides through Chahdan or Teph... Then Act V, War, will see some major action between Teph and Chahdan, as you've promised us a great big combat grid for that time.

And hopefully lots of level 1 and level 2 warriors that we can exert our combat skills upon.

Alasi, who loves battlefields.

S: Ah, levelling Kai Lords are fun, you get so much! Five new tiers of Kai power. And an extra +1 in strength as a loyalty bonus. And soon I'll have the opportunity to level this character as well and Xex game is beginning again. My oh my what date is it? Christmas Eve?

Sh: Congrats, Simyn! Wow, levels 4 U in both games. Nyce. I will get to level Solar Death as well. He will have all the new ability bonuses. Sol Hawk's next level is a ways off, but now that Sol Hawk has Glancing Blow, I mean WOW - he is doing quite well. When he hits Savant at the end of Act IV he will get a boost to his mind powers. Exciting, cool. Also you get so many skillpoints when you have a decent INT score. Solar Death really doesn't - I definitely felt the pinch when I was working on HIS skills. You know, I was all spoiled from having Sol Hawk who is skilled in almost everything.

Peace,

Sol

KL:

Quote:

And hopefully lots of level 1 and level 2 warriors that we can exert our combat skills upon.

What? Fodder? No no no. By that time you'll be facing L5 Sharnzim commonly. L2 in Act II, L3 in Act III... I think you understand my pattern.

And the only clarifications I'll give are these two:

The Vassagonians masqueraded as Talons in order to place the blame upon Cloesia. This would create an unstoppable army to ride through Dessi.

And this one, which you would learn soon enough: The desert nations all have "standard" military uniforms. Some have abandoned their old uniforms to sever ties with Vassagonia. And this one, which you would learn soon enough: The desert nations all have "standard" military uniforms. Some have abandoned their old uniforms to sever ties with Vassagonia.

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**Act IV, Conclusion – Mirage**

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Vassagonia - red

Cloesia - green

Casior - blue

KL, who says you must be 54" tall to ride this ride
**Rules, Rules**

**OOC:** Sol, as a Jedi, you never miss a beat with your Perception rolls. It seems that you are more determined to uncover KL’s mysteries than the rest of us!

**OOC:** Thanks, Cadet! I love a good mystery. With KL, there seems always to be more than enough to go around.

**OOC:** KL, thanks for the info on Sol Hawk’s finds. I have incorporated it into my char sheet.

The room where you were tortured was the room where the horses were.

This will be my last post of the Act. It will remain open till Friday, at which time I will lock it, move it, and open up Act IV. If you need anything mentioned in the Dice Rolls thread or OOC thread, now is the time to copy and save it.

Re: Pouch of Souls – Know(geography) (if you have it) at DC 20 to discern what it’s for.

Re: “Even though they were not on the best of terms with one another, they seemed to realize that they were fighting a common enemy at the moment, and this must force them to be civil with one another. *ahem* I love how you pulled the game into your little side-story.”

**OOC:** Healing Check (DC 15 needed) to provide longterm care. All of you (but not me) can recover twice the normal number of EP because of my success. For everyone (I think) that means 16 EP.

**OOC:** Kaelth would get to lose 10 EP of Subdual Damage as well.

**Rolled a 28**

**OOC:** long term care wouldn’t that mean that we need to stay in the cave for at least 24 hours? Which I think is a good idea! We need the rest. And one of daylight rest would mean that I get 14 Endurance (since I’m not level 8 yet) and return to 43 Endurance. Nice! I vote for a little R & R!

**OOC:** Hope. There is an even greater benefit (I forget what it is) for characters that get the full 24 hrs rest. Only 6 hours is required for the double EP. I wouldn’t mind a longer rest period also since I am also pretty beaten up. That reminds me, if any kind person wants to try a roll for Long Term Care on ME (Heal, DC15) I wouldn’t mind some extra EP either.

**OOC:** Well, ask the brooding Vakeros (Cade), he’s the other one with healing skills. I also vote for resting.

**OOC:** KL, let’s say that the group is getting 24 hours of complete rest. I assume this doesn’t have to be all sleep, but no more grave digging. Each person will probably have to stay off of his feet as much as possible. The bonus would be: each player under Sol’s care can regain 32 EP, and would also get to lose 32 EP of subdual damage.

Anyone suffering Ability Score Penalties can regain 4 points.

I myself would regain half that: 16 EP and 2 Ability Score Points. I also get to lift my "fatigue" state.

Adjustments made. I also removed 2 more meals from my action chart. Let’s say also that we have all refilled our waterskins before leaving the cave which should (since it will have been 24 hours) be sometime at night.

---

**Act III, Conclusion – Mirage**

Once Sol had packed away his belongings, he relieved Blade of his saddlery for the night and made ready his sleeping gear. Before bedding down for the night, however, he did a final search - this time of the Kivosh. Carefully, he removed each item from the Kivosh that might be magical in nature and laid them out in plain view of the others. When Sir Victor mentioned shows, Sol Hawk said, “I know not what there might be. Perhaps Simyn has found something. Apart from the Supply Room, there is a room Koralth and I had not explored - it is the room in which we were tortured. Perhaps we are not overly eager to return there, but there may be something of value to find there yet.

"Finally, deeper in the caves is a larger room where the Black-Clads kept their horses and possibly more supplies. And I do not know if there are even more rooms within these vast caverns. This place seemed to be an established base for the Talions which has been in use on a regular basis. Oddly, some of the people Koralth and I encountered seemed to be of Stormland descent, not just of eastern lineage.

"I will go check with Simyn and see what he has found. If there are no showels, we could possibly toss the bodies to the desert sands where they would be devoured quickly by the carnivorous insects that dwell here. I do not fancy the idea in any case of sleeping in the midst of corpses or of drawing the undue attention of beasts into our midst as we sleep."

Sol Hawk joined Simyn then to see how he fared and also to present the items found on the Kivosh for the Sage’s inspection.

---

The sun had set fully now...the silver crimson left on the low horizon when Makala arrived was now seen in another part of Magnamund further west. Sir Victor and Makala discovered a makeshift shovel in the room where the horses were kept, and set about digging the shallow graves for the bodies. In a couple of hours, with their teamwork aided through massive strength, they had the task finished.

At this point, Makala slept, preparing to keep true to his promise to watch over the land so they could all gain a much-needed sleep without interruption.

Finding hope to bring items of worth, Sol Hawk checked the sand mage’s gear. He had nothing unusual, save a small pouch of sand tied to his belt. Sol Hawk could only guess as to the purpose.

Tense looks passed between the two Vakeros, mostly battles fought with the eyes and faces alone now. They knew that—despite the past—the present weighed much more heavily upon their lives. Even though they were not on the best of terms with one another, they seemed to realize that they were fighting a common enemy at the moment, and this must force them to be civil with one another.

Simyn thanked the gods as he checked the potency of the Lauruspus. It’s odor was not strong, meaning it had deteriorated with time, but still—lauruspus was lauruspus. He set it aside and looked at the other items inside:

- a long sinewy string, wrapped back onto itself on each end and a blowgun and dartcase, containing 4 blow-darts
- a set of dark boned bracers (boned as in the way corsets are—strips of metal running through them lengthwise)
- a pair of rings with a small gold chain connecting them
- a full black-clad uniform
- a bluevein dagger
- a small elix statue

Simyn checked out the objects carefully. The piece of string he guessed was a device used to strangle people. The blowpipe’s use was self-evident. These were the tools of an assassin. The bracers could be used as protection. Simyn guessed that the gold rings were just jewelry, but you couldn’t be sure. They might have some mystical purpose. The sage had never seen a bluevein dagger, but he had heard about them. This weapon could only have been done in Desii. Perhaps it belonged to Koralth? Simyn took a mental note to ask him about it in the morning. Hopefully he wouldn’t use the weapon to poke Arcadian’s eyes out, but it seemed you could never really know with the Vakeros. The statuette might be a magical object or perhaps just a piece of valuable art or even a lucky charm. Feeling tired Simyn decided that he would continue to investigate the objects next morning as his sense for magical auras. Perhaps there was something magical. If there was time he would also take time to speak with Makala. The desert warrior from far away Telchos fascinated the sage. He had heard some rumors about that far away land, but most of the rumors seemed to implausible to be true. Simyn would be intrigued to find out. Perhaps he could write something upon the subject. A secondary source was of course not so good as seeing things for yourself, but Simyn hardly believed that he would get the chance to travel to Telchos himself. The sage had begun to take a dislike to send by the way. Tired but happy about his findings, the sage went to bed.

As Sol Hawk headed for the supply room, he could see that Simyn was already headed up. Sol Hawk presented Simyn with the bag of sand he had found on the Kivosh, but Simyn was apparently ready to clamber instead. The Sage promised to have a look at it in the morning.

"Not a bad idea," said Sol Hawk, "I definitely could use some rest as well."

Even wounded as he was, the Kai took the time to tend to each of his companions before taking his leave of the waking world. Bloodied limbs were cleaned and wrapped with whatever cloth was on hand. He had the knight elevate his legs in order to keep the blood flowing to his feet. He tended, too, to Simyn’s leg, taking measured steps to prevent infection.

Then finally, having removed his armour to sleep more comfortably, the Kai Lord drifted off for the first time in two days. Bliss.

---

Koralth rested quietly, a little apart from the others. His eyes were often on Arcadian as he went about the room, even while Sol helped tend his wounds.
So the only ones still in need of healing would be Korlaeth and me.

OK, done. I'm also adding the contents of the pouch Cade threw me to my character sheet, if anyone needs any money I have plenty.

Two meals deducted. If you need any healing you can have a couple of the laumspur potions I found.

Probably we can buy some Laumspur in town. With the shape we are in, I don't see any other option but to resupply. I hate to lose time on our pursuit, but I wouldn't head for Teph without getting Sir Victor up to full. Plus we might want some other supplies as well. We may want to consider a Healer's Kit for Arcadian - he seems to have earned it! I want to buy the supplies I need to modify Aymodani's armour. Needless to say we will buy all the Laumspur we can. Food might be smart, too. We can buy more in Teph, but it would be dangerous, I would think. Who might be best with the bartering skill? What skill would that be?

More: At first, I thought it might be interesting to masquerade as Aymodani and his men. THAT would be interesting. But I don't have a clear idea what to do with that advantage since we don't know where to find Murdach. So Victor would probably be Aymodani, maybe Kamlah could be Panu, you know. We would need lots of disguises. Well, anyway... last time I went sneaking around, it turned out pretty bad for me, so I am losing my appetite for doing any kind of solo recon. :Z

Bla bla bla I like to type.

Simyn, maybe you would put your rolls here for the "detect magic" that you will be doing during the rest period. I think Korlaeth and Arcadian, even Victor are probably OK with moving ahead to morning.

I vote we leave the horses. I think that the worst thing we could do would be to draw special attention to ourselves. Murdach isn't stupid, Aymodani isn't worth the hair off that man's foot. And I sincerely doubt that he believes us to be exterminated. Whenever and wherever we catch up to him we will be waiting for us, this I am sure of. But that doesn't mean we have to run up screaming 'Sommerlund'! 😄

As for healing for me. Just sleeping this night will fully restore my Endurance and Willpower. I have already taken the liberty of adjusting these scores. And yes, I too have a few things that I want to pick up in town, including a healing kit. Heal rolls seem to be the only rolls I don't fudge completely these days so hey...might as well.

---

**Quote:**

Who might be best with the bartering skill? What skill would that be?

Depending on how you are talking to someone, it'd be Bluff or Diplomacy. If you're trying to get a lower price, bluff. If you're being genuine, diplomacy. Note that diplomacy doesn't have an opposed check while bluff does.

---

**Quote:**

masquerade as Aymodani and his men. THAT would be interesting.

I think that course of action could best be summarized by our dear friend the Crocodile Hunter: "Danger danger danger."

---

**Quote:**

Simyn, maybe you would put your rolls here for the "detect magic" that you will be doing during the rest period. I think Korlaeth and Arcadian, even Victor are probably OK with moving ahead to morning.

I'm going to post the boards for the next Act tonight. They will begin approximately 24 hours from "now" in game time. I figured everyone would rather move out at night than day. The fun part is going to be merging the two parties...I'm still working on just how that interlace is going to happen.

---

**Quote:**

Want to take the horses? We can take some in order to have faster mounts, or if we really want, we could take the whole herd.

There's one small problem with that--there are no Vassagonian steeds. The diversion drove all but three away into the desert. Those three riders were dispatched back to gather horses and send word that Aymodani and his detachment would be delayed. You'll see that in the first post or two of Act IV.

Unless anyone has anything else to add here, I'll lock this one in the morning when I get home.

KLS, surprised that everyone is still alive

Are you kidding?! That last fight disappointed me!

Alaai, who is probably going to eat these words next Act... 😊
**Rules, Rulings**

Rolled 28 on my Occult check. Should be able to identify any magical auras.

Arcadian wrote:

Are you kidding?! That last fight dissapointed me!

Alaïa, who is probably going to eat these words next Act.... 😆

For you maybe, but the rest of us got plenty of fun 🤣.

Giving the magical manacles to Sol Hawk. Putting on the bracers of protection thus increasing my AC by 1.

OOC: Added Thumb Manacles to my Inventory as a Special Item

Actually, I'm not sure if that's mine or not...KL never told me if mine had been taken. Also, SV, you could probabably drink that Laumspur Simyn found.

Korlaeth, I think it isn't yours... KL let us know that all of our equipment had been recovered when we were in the Supply Room. Or wasn't it your bluevein dagger that I used to cut us free? This must be a totally different dagger. Ah, the mystery.

Korlaeth wrote:

Actually, I'm not sure if that's mine or not...KL never told me if mine had been taken. Also, SV, you could probabably drink that Laumspur Simyn found.

Agreed, since it's already old, better not waste it any longer! Did Korlaeth need any more Laumspur? I'll drink them one at a time.

Ok, all 4 potions healed me a total of 30 EP, not too shabby.

I think I'll be ok without the Laumspur.

Quick clarification, then I'm locking the thread.

When K&SH were captured, almost all items were removed. The bluevein was missed in Korlaeth's boot, and the arrows were missed. So, this is another one. Remember that in Vassagonia, bluesteel trades at high prices on the black market. Less so at this point in time because of future plans....

All further in-character discussions should be put in the Act 4 main thread when it appears. The OOC thread will open shortly, as will the dice roll thread. If someone wants to open a "clues" thread or whatever, you can place all the facets of this elaborate plot in one place, I'll make it Sticky.

KL, Str5 Dex11 Con7 Int16 Wis14 Cha9

KaiLord wrote:

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KL, Str5 Dex11 Con7 Int16 Wis14 Cha9

That would be useful KL.

KaiLord wrote:

One thing caught the Sol Hawk's eyes immediately: a dagger with a slight blue tinge to the blade. If he could only figure out a way to use it effectively and quickly. He heard the Shamnam in the cave moving about, shouting something about tying strips of oil-soaked cloth to the backs of arrows, near the fletching, and shooting them in the sand so they could see any ambushers approaching.

This one was from Round 2. I assumed that this found dagger was Korlaeth's Bluevein Dagger (the one I used to cut us free). A typo or a second dagger then?
And in Round 4, he “returned” that dagger to Korlaeth, assuming that it belonged to him.

**Sol wrote:**
Sol Hawk needed a weapon. After returning the dagger to Korlaeth, he searched the room for whatever it might provide and takes a weapon that he deems worthy.

**KaiLord wrote:**
The bluevein was missed in Korlaeth’s boot, and the arrows were missed. So, this is another one.

Ah, wait, I see. This is the second of two daggers. Gotcha, I get it now. Korlaeth had 2 daggers, one discovered, one not.