

Perazzo Green, Dyneburg Gray
by Harrison Gallen

The bells of Carlisle's cathedral tolled throughout the night to indicate the hours of the Twilight Period, with the twelfth eventually coming, followed shortly by quicker and louder tolls that gave Org alarm, and caused him to stir out of his slumber. Feeling it was close enough to the morning of Neptune 4, he decided to rub his eyes, get out of bed, and stretch. He went to his window, which faced north, and opened it to witness the town, illuminated by torchlight, with many soldiers passing through the streets and headed north out of the city, perhaps to increase security at the border with The Shadowlands.

Curious as to what exactly was afoot, and perhaps believing that he and his party would be necessary at the border as well, Org exchanged his nightgown for his travel clothes, heading to his door and hearing a few knocks before he approached it. Mina's voice alerted, "Org, Org! Wake up! The King wants us!"

"Way ahead of you," responded the white otter as he opened the door to reveal the Princess of Dragonia, already in her own travel gear. "I heard the alarm bells."

"Well, let's get to the throne room, then!"

Org joined the dragon in the hallway, with the other Crusaders joining as well as they headed to King Carl's court. The reptilian monarch began, "Grave news has come from the border with The Shadowlands."

"Has an invasion begun, Your Majesty?" wondered Org.

"Indeed; the Nidhoggr have already lined themselves upon their wall and killed many of our soldiers with their arrows and magic."

"Then surely we must join them at the border, sire. One of the Seven Satans could easily be leading the assault."

"Indeed, but you in particular must be most careful, O Runeless one."

"I am certain my good companions will cover me," suggested Org, removing Cardinal Rabbitt's sword from its sheath, "although I am certainly not defenseless."

"And you have my hammer," added Brandon, shifting his Rune into its hammer form.

"My claws," noted Ariana, gauntletting her hands with the White Wood Rune.

"My mace," contributed Mina, morphing her Rune into its mace form.

"My axe," affirmed Christian, transforming the White War Rune into its Weapon form, a gold-handed axe topped by a cross with twin ruby blades.

“And my swallow,” finished Prince Edward, metamorphosing his Rune into its Weapon form, with twin topaz blades connected by a golden handle.

“The border with The Shadowlands is but a few kilometers north,” King Carl indicated. “Make haste there, for we know not if the battle will flow here.”

“Best to keep Carlisle safe, as well, Your Majesty,” admonished Org.

“On sea and land are our soldiers seeing to that, we assure you. Now go, my friends!”

The Crusaders then departed Carlisle Castle, wandering north through the decently lit capital and eventually exiting into Cumbria’s winter wilderness, even colder due to the twilight. Darkest was the day before the dawn, for certain, with the Runebearing warriors needing to illuminate the gem-blades of their weapons to advance across the highway. Org himself had a lantern, with other lightbearing soldiers occasionally traveling north and south, whether on foot or cricket. Carriages full of soldiers traveled in either direction, as well, with many wandering through the forest, sure to be a difficult battleground for either side.

Eventually, it came—the tall border between the Kingdoms of Cumbria and The Shadowlands, similar to that between Anglia and Caina, about half a hectometer tall, with a great pair of doors likely leading into a stone passage between the two nations, and many skeleton-armored soldiers and Nidhoggr patrolling the top, both of which seemed more common for this boundary. Many were busily trying to dispatch the Cumbrian soldiers that had come to fight them, many defending against their arrows with their shields, although some of the Nidhoggr shot fireballs, bolts of lightning, or ice, and those sentinels targeted by these were far less fortunate.

Battle raged on the ground before the wall, as well, with Shadowlandic skeleton soldiers exchanging blows with Cumbrian soldiers, whether on foot or on cricket, and neither side having the advantage. The woods were a definite obstacle as both sides attempted to fight, with the battle in some cases occurring within the branches of the trees. Many were ablaze with the fire of the Nidhoggr, with these flames spreading slowly but swiftly, and providing plenty of illumination for either side to battle. Reinforcements the Crusaders would be for Cumbria, with the seven warriors hoping they could perhaps turn the tide of this skirmish.

Princess Jeremina eyed the wooden doors, inhaling and spitting out a few fireballs, all of which struck the entrance and set it ablaze with expanding rings of fire that swiftly connected and transformed the doors into a wall of fire. While a few Shadowlandic soldiers did take concern at the blaze, they lacked the means to extinguish it, with the Nidhoggr atop the barrier also unable to see the flames. The doors’ flames gradually began to precipitate as ash to the highway, revealing behind a large crosshatched metallic grating further protecting the tunnel between the two nations, naturally immune to fire.

Adding to the flames upon the wilderness was a great beam of fire that suddenly came from the southwest, with the Crusaders immediately fleeing into the woods northeast of the road, watching as the great ray incinerated all in its path, with many Cumbrian soldiers getting out of

its way as well. Across the highway ran the beam, with the warriors then fleeing out of its path back across the road and noticing the burnt trail the ray had left, with the charred skeletons of a few soldiers sadly among the wooden ash.

Gazing back across the road, the Crusaders noticed that the beam eventually stopped, and gazing back southwest, they could discern the apparent source of the deadly inferno: a gray stone tower extending from the end of the Shadowlandic border, which rested about a hectometer beyond the seas and was about the same height as the boundary below. Topping the tower was an observation deck whence came some mysterious glows, and stood some Nidhoggr wraiths, the likely masterminds of the weapon, which now seemed but a typical lighthouse. Such a weapon, knew the Crusaders, deserved destruction, with the seven now heading for the border tunnel.

Their journey to the tunnel, however, was not without resistance, as many Shadowlandic soldiers charged them, with the Crusaders managing to fend them off with their weapons, the skeleton soldiers not scratching them at all. While the guards posed no problem for the warriors, their skirmish made them more vulnerable to the walltop snipers, with the Crusaders needing to dodge a few fireballs, icebolts, and lightning bolts as they closed the distance between them and the tunnel. An arrow managed even to contact Mina, but surprisingly, it rebounded from her skin with no damage whatsoever, her Rune perhaps hardening her skin against non-Runic forces, as it possibly did for the other Runebearers.

Thus, Org took especial caution as he followed his companions to the tunnel gate, with the wingspread Princess Jeremina keeping near her love, both her hands tight upon her mace. At the gate, Brandon stepped forth, drew back his hammer, and let it fly at the metal, knocking a sizeable chunk into the tunnel and allowing the Crusaders inside, its darkness pierced by a few torches in arched holes lining both walls.

In the middle of both tunnel walls were smaller pairs of wooden doors, each defended by a pair of Nidhoggr that immediately noticed the intruders and raised their hands to conjure magic upon them. However, Brandon promptly made rise from the ground stone spires that impaled and dissipated them, with only their cloaks remaining. The spires themselves crumbled, with the Crusaders heading to the left pair of doors to reveal a tunnel that evidently ran through the border, with several more Nidhoggr wraiths noticing the unwelcome guests, the badger promptly dispatching them with stone spires that sprung from the left and right walls.

Being the most effective Crusader in the tunnel, Duke Brandon naturally led the company through as he continued to impale Nidhoggr, afterward crashing through the spikes he created and securing the path for his allies. About a kilometer later, they reached another pair of doors; as Brandon prepared to crash through them, Ariana admonished, "Wait."

"What for?" the badger wondered.

"I can check what lies beyond the doors first," the foxotter suggested, afterward camouflaging herself with the wood, her form then disappearing. Following a pair of slashes and thuds, Org's first cousin reappeared within the tunnel, noting, "The coast is clear."

The foxotter then opened the doors, revealing a pair of deceased skeleton soldiers with trios of slash marks on their throats. The Crusaders began to ascend the nearby spiral stairs, with Brandon again leading the company, believing that he would be the most effective warrior in the winding and ascending stone corridor. He eventually turned to signal the others to stop, after which he snapped his fingers, continuing into the following chamber, which appeared similar to that below, what with another pair of doors and deceased pair of guards, this time impaled by spires the badger had conjured.

Ariana then fused herself with the pair of doors, perhaps to spy upon what lay beyond, after which she reappeared within the tower and noted, “The top of the wall is outside. We’d best remain in here and go further up. But just to be on the safe side...”

The Otterlandic Princess then made thick thorned vines appear all across the doors, perhaps to prevent entrance by the Nidhoggr and skeleton soldiers on the walltop. Brandon took the lead again as he guided the Crusaders further up the tower, eventually turning again to signal his allies to stop as he knelt and crawled up a few steps, the sound of stone spires being audible, after which the badger got back on his feet and continued into the following chamber, where the mysterious weapon was. Several Nidhoggr cloaks surrounded a large amber crystal that glowed orange, with the companions first gazing outside in all directions.

To the south was a small wooded Cumbrian peninsula with several charred paths indicating that the Nidhoggr had used the lighthouse fire upon it, with many remaining trees ablaze and royal soldiers busy fighting the Shadowlandic invaders. To the west upon the seas were many Cumbrian and black-sailed Shadowlandic ships bearing the Emblem of Niflheim that exchanged cannonfire. To the east, the Shadowlandic border continued to the mainland, where it suddenly jutted northeast and undulated somewhat, and atop which a combination of skeleton soldiers and Nidhoggr sniped at the Cumbrian defenders.

To the north within The Shadowlands was an unusual town that surprisingly appeared to have greenish flora, but it was not the kind that the Crusaders knew in their homelands. Instead of trees, bushes, and grass were giant roses that surprisingly had dark green petals and thorned stems, with many thorned vines surrounding them, arranged in numerous gardens throughout the town, and which seemed somewhat animate. The town’s buildings were of gray stone and had wooden roofs, with smoke coming from a few of their chimneys, and many soldiers and wraiths naturally patrolling the streets.

As Brandon walked to the crystal, he wondered, “Should we destroy their little weapon?”

“We could maybe use it to our advantage before we do so,” suggested Mina, breathing some fire on it and surprisingly causing it to glow further, “but where to shoot its fire?”

“Perhaps along the wall,” answered Org. “The wraiths and soldiers atop it are the most immediate threat to Cumbria.”

“True,” Mina agreed. “Everyone, get on the western side of the deck! Time to see if I am able to put this weapon to good use.”

Mina joined the others on the west side of the deck, its ceiling and floor entirely metal, with open windows separated solely by single metal bars, where she faced east toward the orange crystal, making glow her mace's spikes, which consequentially resonated with the large gem as it glowed it return. Then the dragon set her mace's head ablaze, holding it by the crystal, which brightened more, and afterward shot a great ray of fire outside the tower. Afterward, she leapt and held her mace at the top of the crystal, altering the beam's direction so that it shot diagonally near the tower's base, part of the observation room glowing orange from the heat that touched it.

The dragon, her wings spread, then allowed herself to float to the floor, heightening the beam's angle, during which she moved herself rightward, moving the beam northeast and eventually touching the floor, releasing her mace from the crystal, whose light dimmed, ending the incinerating ray. The company moved towards the eastern edge of the observation room when it cooled to see that the top of the Shadowlandic border smoked for many kilometers with a combination of skeleton soldiers and Nidhoggr cloaks, with the very weapon that had devastated some of Cumbria's territory and soldiers having instead done the Kingdom's forces a good service.

"Nice job, Mina," Org commented. "How else should we use the weapon, now?"

"We've done Cumbria's Army a good service, so why not their Navy?"

"A sound plan. Alright, let's all get to the eastern side!"

The Crusaders carefully moved to the eastern side of the deck, with Mina again leaping and torching the crystal, firing its beam upon the Shadowlandic Navy and soon landing. The dragon then wondered, "Should we torch that town, too?"

"No, for we would risk killing innocent peons. Best we take the town by land."

"But first..." Brandon indicated, swinging his hammer at the orange crystal and sending many cracks through it that ultimately made it collapse. "I'll lead the way, again."

The Crusaders descended the tower and traversed the passageway between the walls to reach the tunnel, through which many Cumbrian sentinels were storming. The royal forces the warriors joined, finding that the opposite end leading into The Shadowlands was open, its metal gate raised and its doors open, immediately leading into the town they had witnessed from the tower. Interestingly, many Cumbrian troops were in retreat back into the Kingdom, with the flow of sentinels having somewhat slowed and reversed, although no skeleton soldiers or Nidhoggr had come into the tunnel at all.

"What's happening?" Org wondered.

"The roses are attacking us!" one of the soldiers warned.

"Attacking you? How so?"

“They’re lashing their vines at us, and spewing poisonous clouds! We cannot advance!”

“Have you tried fire?”

“We cannot get close enough to fully set them ablaze!”

“Fire arrows, perhaps?”

“They spout water from their flowers and extinguish themselves! They can regenerate as well! It’s madness, I tell you! The border is secured, but that’s as far as we can go, sadly!”

“Perhaps we can do something about it. Stay in the tunnel, men, and don’t advance until we say that the coast is clear!”

“Very well! Men, fall back!”

“Yes, sir!”

The Crusaders then advanced to the Shadowlandic end of the tunnel, with the first sight beyond being an orchard consisting of dark-green-petaled roses with thorned stems and vines, below which was a bilingual plaque bearing Gaian (Gaia including the territory of Britannia aside from Anglia) and Niflheiman scripture. Org, having learned the Gaian alphabet (although his skills in speaking the language itself were marginal at best), could determine that the name of the town was Perazzo Green, which definitely upheld its colorful moniker, though he unfortunately knew not the town’s namesake.

“Perazzo Green,” repeated the white otter. “Who is Perazzo, exactly?”

“The town was called Gretna Green before the Nidhoggr conquered Scotia,” noted a soldier.

“Don’t know who Perazzo is myself.”

“Sounds like a name from Italia,” Mina suggested, “but whatever the case, it’s time we ravage his or her ‘Green.’”

Mina then inhaled and exhaled a fireball at the entrance orchard, setting it partially into flames; however, nearby roses curved their flowers at the flames and spouted water, extinguishing the fire, the damaged stems and afterward regenerating quickly. The soldier affirmed, “See, I told you they’d regenerate! Fire won’t do the trick, for sure!”

“Let me have a shot at them,” urged Brandon, snapping his left fingers and making rise from the orchard a giant earthen spire that forcefully uprooted the dangerous flora, precipitating it upon the gray stone streets of Perazzo Green, the earthen spire collapsing afterward.

“Well done, my good sir!” lauded the soldier. “But the flora moves still!”

“So it does,” observed Brandon, facing Mina and suggesting, “Now I think is the time for fire, dear Princess!”

“Sure thing!” agreed Mina as she breathed flames upon the scattered rose parts, this time incinerating them with no regeneration.

Suddenly, several Nidhoggr and Shadowlandic soldiers approached the entrance, with one of the former screaming, “How dare you desecrate Lady Perazzo’s orchards!”

“So it’s a she,” observed Org.

“Prepare to die, you bastards!” one of the enemy soldiers taunted.

The Princess of Dragonia immediately spouted fire upon the Nidhoggr wraiths, setting them ablaze, after which she ignited her mace and hammered into the soldiers, knocking them apart and in most cases crushing both their exterior and interior bones. More soldiers and Nidhoggr reinforced them, with a few of the latter attempting to revive the rose orchard, although Brandon made rise from the dirt an earthen golem in his image (sans reproductive parts) that crushed the nearby necromancers and sentinels, afterward leaping onto the streets to do its master’s bidding, and evoking awe from the Cumbrian troops.

“Well, looks like we’re in excellent company!” the head Cumbrian soldier noted. “Who are you all, exactly?”

“Friends of His Majesty,” responded Org.

“Well, then we’re certainly lucky to have the likes of you all as friends! We may yet liberate part of The Shadowlands!”

“I may be able to give your golem some extra power,” suggested Nicole, pointing her trident at Brandon’s earthen ally and spouting a long stream of water that muddied it up, afterward snapping her left fingers to freeze the absorbed water and further solidify the drenched golem, which now bore a brown crystalline appearance.

“Now we can seize Perazzo Green,” Brandon affirmed, “but stay away from the orchards until my dear friend here has uprooted them, and Lady Mina has burned them.”

“Will do!” the head of the Cumbrian battalion assured.

Brandon and his golem then led the invaders through the streets of Perazzo Green, taking care of the Nidhoggr and Shadowlandic soldiers that got in their way. The golem did a decent job uprooting the town’s deadly orchards, with Princess Jeremina incinerating it afterwards and thus allowing for further liberation of the border town. To ensure that none of the Nidhoggr attempted to restore the deadly rose gardens, Princess Nicole stuck her trident’s prongs into their dirt and muddied it, afterward freezing it, with ice shards arising and in sense transforming them into different kinds of orchards.

The invaders eventually reached a two-storied mansion in Perazzo Green that a few soldiers entered while the others at first continued on their way through the town, although a few masculine screams came from the abode, causing the Crusaders to draw back and see what had become of the infiltrating sentinels. To get a view of what occurred within the manor, Princess Ariana fused herself with the wooden doors leading inside. However, she did not return after a few seconds, although the sound of clashing weapons replaced soldiers' screams.

"I think we should check in on her," suggested Org, drawing near the entrance.

"Something's definitely going on inside there," agreed Brandon, then telling his golem, "You might be able to help in there, soon."

Org slowly opened one of the entrance doors, observing what was taking place inside the mansion. The entrance hall spanned two storeys, with the bleeding cadavers of many Cumbrian sentinels littering ground floor. Princess Ariana now engaged in combat with another green female with demon wings, her weapons surprisingly being a pair of emerald claws as well, although they seemed to extend from between her knuckles, with Emblems of Niflheim upon the backs of her hands. She had a long braided ponytail and wore a platinum mask with eyeholes and nostrils, not to mention another black Emblem of Niflheim on its forehead area.

Ariana's antagonist, however, noticed that someone was peering inside the mansion, with Org promptly drawing back to avoid several thorned vines that grew from the wooden floor to block the entrance, forbidding anyone from interfering with the duel. Brandon then informed his golem, "Now's the time to help!"

The golem nodded, advancing to the entrance and kicking the mansion's front façade to give everyone a good view of the duel. As the golem wandered into the entrance hall to contribute to the battle, however, the masked fighter caused many spiked vines to sprout from the wood floor, wrapping around the earthen warrior's appendages, melting its enforcing ice with friction and absorbing the water. The vines then planted themselves into the golem's muddy body, taking control of it and turning it against the invaders, its badger form now being indiscernible and faceless as it pounded the ground.

Another vine from the mansion floor propelled the masked duelist upon the head of her new vine golem, which she allowed to battle in her place. Immediately, Mina exhaled fire upon the spiked vine-man, although her efforts were in vain as the vines perspired water that extinguished the flames, the damaged vines promptly regenerating. Taking a hint from this, Princess Nicole raised her trident, made its sapphire prongs glow, and caused the golem's quenched legs to freeze, with the freeze steadily extending up its body, and the masked duelist leaping back to the floor to continue her fight with Ariana.

Org's second cousin lunged her trident at the golem to crack the ice and make it shatter, its frozen parts precipitating onto the street and mansion's floor. Both duelists avoided the debris, with neither seeming to have the advantage, and the two moving too quickly for the other Crusaders to intervene. However, there came a moment where the masked fighter leapt back and

landed within one of the melting puddles, with the Princess of Lancaster eyeing it and causing it to freeze, managing to entrap her to her waist, with everyone watching her struggle vainly to free herself; Nicole further made the ice rise to freeze her arms and wings.

“Go ahead and kill me, you frigid bitch!” taunted the masked one as she made vanish her emerald claws, the Emblems of Niflheim upon her hands disappearing as well.

“I’m not going to kill you...yet,” insisted Nicole.

“Well, then this damn ice will get me, for certain. Obviously you and your companions wield the Runes of Asgard, and I do very much envy your talents.”

“One of the Seven Satans, no doubt. The Lady of Envy, I presume?”

“Who else could I possibly be?”

“Perhaps you could further identify yourself. Care for me to remove your mask?”

“Go ahead,” invited the Lady of Envy as Princess Nicole reached for her mask, hesitating somewhat. “Don’t worry, I cannot harm you now.”

Still perhaps fearing retaliation despite her entrapment, Nicole quickly removed the mask to reveal the Satan’s canine visage. “Are you perchance this town’s namesake?”

“Indeed; I am Cylia Perazzo, a maiden from St. Francis Abbey in the Kingdom of Ursina over in the Ymir Continent.”

“You were once of the Church of Asgard?”

“Aye, I was of that blasted Church. I used to be Mother Superior of my order of nuns, in fact, a post I will concede I acquired through murder.”

“How could someone such as you become Mother Superior?”

“I poisoned the previous Mother Superior. I was popular among my fellow nuns and had earned acceptance among them despite being a demon, proving that my kind could do good for the Church of Asgard despite our exile from the Sacred Realm. Incompetent fools they were to trust me! I was Mother Superior for but a few days, as they soon found that I was responsible for my predecessor’s murder. I envied the compassion they had for me, as I was merely excommunicated for my actions, forever banished from St. Francis and utterly forbidden from every stepping foot inside a church.

“I was naturally an outcast, with the brand upon my neck proclaiming to the world my sins against the Church of Asgard,” Lady Perazzo continued, with the Crusaders then wandering behind her to see the word “Heretic” in Asgardian lettering upon the back of her neck.

“However, a few wraiths from Niflheim saw my brand, and felt me to be a worthy recruit into

the Order of the Nidhoggr. As I envied the glory of Niflheim, in addition to Asgard's, I accepted their offer, and proved myself a worthy warrior, enough to be trusted with the Black Wood Rune.

“This was several centuries ago, before all the Seven Satans had been assembled again and Niflheim decided to establish its puppet Kingdoms here in Britannia. I just so happen to be Queen of Dire, in addition to Lady Mayor of this lovely little town. I had no idea the Crusaders of Asgard would all be in this wretched archipelago, although I have recently heard that my dear companions, Lord Sweeney and Lady Quen, met worthy opponents in Anglia. You may yet seize all of Britannia from Niflheim's hands, but we won't give in so easily! Farewell!”

The mansion floor then rumbled, with everyone drawing back, and several spiked vines suddenly breaking through, wrapping around Lady Perazzo's frozen body and then pulling it into the earth below, the ground closing afterward. Cursed Nicole, “I knew that bitch would have a few other tricks up her sleeve!”

“We should count ourselves fortunate she did not kill us,” suggested Org.

“I should've just killed her, no questions asked!”

“Don't worry; she's gone now, and we can complete our siege of this town.”

“Well, I suppose it's no use fretting about it anymore. Let's take care of those other damn orchards so the Cumbrian Army can take control here.”

Thus, the Crusaders and accompanying soldiers departed the ravaged mansion, with Princess Nicole freezing the other poisonous roses from the inside, making them shatter. The remaining Nidhoggr and skeleton soldiers were no match for the invaders, with the entire town eventually under Cumbria's control, the oppressed townsfolk emerging to celebrate their liberators. The Shadowlandic terrain outside the town appeared similar to that in Caina, what with barren decaying wilderness and stormy clouds that had hovered above Perazzo Green as well, although these had dissipated somewhat, with the Runes of Asgard perhaps banishing the Nidhoggr's influence.

“A job well done,” lauded the battalion leader. “Will you help us take the rest of Doomfire Gallows, dear comrades?”

“Doomfire what?” wondered Org.

“The Shadowlandic Province we're in now.”

“Oh. We would definitely love to stay and help you further, but I'm afraid we have other business, and we should probably tell His Majesty of this victory.”

“Very well. Thanks again for your help!”

The Daylight Period had begun by the time the Crusaders returned to Carlisle, with King Carl lauding, "Well done, friends. By the looks of it, we have won our first victory against The Shadowlands. The Battle of Perazzo Green will hopefully show the Nidhoggr that we are able to make a stand against them, perhaps one day free all of Scotia."

"We may perhaps return to help once I have found the White Rune," suggested Org, "but we intend to venture into Humberland and take a ship to the northern Shadowlands."

"You could inform its King of our victory, as well."

"We could most definitely stop in the capital along the way, sire."

"One of our soldiers would be happy to take you to Berwick."

"Our thanks, Your Majesty."

"But I am sure you are starving from the battle. To the dining hall!"

After breakfast, the Crusaders went to Carlisle Castle's ground floor stable area, somewhat quiet perhaps due to soldiers having taken their beasts of burden to the Shadowlandic border. No soldiers were visible now in the halls, though there was a black donkey in ragged clothing that walked around. Noticing the Crusaders, he greeted, "Well, good morning!"

"Greetings, sir," returned Org.

"The name's Jack Duncan! Looking for someone to drive you, I take it?"

"Yes. Could you perchance take us to Berwick in Humberland?"

"Of course! I know these parts well, so I'll get my carriage ready!" the donkey then went to one of the stables, pulling out his black carriage and hitching a black roach to it. Getting on the driver's seat with his whip in hand, he invited, "Well, hop aboard, friends!"

The Crusaders did so, with Duncan lashing his roach and provoking it out of the stables and onto the road alongside Carlisle Castle. East through the capital the donkey drove, ultimately exiting into the woods of Cumbria after crossing the Eden River, which the vehicle crossed again after a few minutes. The highway soon bordered mountains to the south, eventually reaching the international border between the Kingdoms of Cumbria and Humberland. Only about a minute was necessary for the border patrolmen to validate everyone's identity, with the carriage afterward passing into Anglia's northernmost nation.

The vehicle soon bordered a river, crossing one that intersected it from the north a few minutes later, with distant bells then indicating that three o'clock had arrived. Mountains were visible to

the north in addition to the south, with the highway surprisingly crossing the stream it bordered a few times. In the middle of the hour, another international border, this one between Humberland and the Grand Duchy of Thyme, became visible, although Duncan turned his carriage onto a road that ran alongside the boundary to the northeast, with plenty of guards wandering the top of the wall monitoring the vehicle's passage.

The border with Thyme eventually took a sharp turn eastward, with the highway continuing in its current direction. At the turn of the fourth hour came Humberland's capital city Morpeth, a homely community with many apparent friendly folk and small businesses largely consisting of tailors, dyers, smiths, and butchers. Eventually, the carriage reached a fortified building significantly smaller than Carlisle Castle, surrounded by iron fencing interrupted occasionally by stone pillars, likely the monarch's residence. Into a stable building outside the fencing Duncan drove his carriage, beckoning his passengers to depart and taking care of the vehicle and roach.

"Well, here we are!" Duncan proclaimed. "Off to see the King, I take it?"

"But of course," responded Org. "You're welcome to join us, Mr. Duncan."

"Please, call me Jack!"

"Sure thing, Jack."

The Crusaders and Duncan then exited the stable building, approaching the doors leading through the fence, a pair of guards blocking their passage. Inquired one of them, "Who wishes to enter His Majesty's palace?"

"Org of Otterland and his companions," the white otter noted, presenting his passport.

"Otterland?" the second guard repeated. "Are you perchance related to its Grand Duke?"

"Depends upon which Grand Duke you speak of."

"Ferid II of Otterland."

"Yes, I am his nephew. Is he here?"

"Indeed, and we are sure you'll probably want to meet him."

"It would be a pleasure."

One of the guards unlocked and opened the gates, allowing the company into the palace circumference. To the wooden entrance doors they walked, with the sentinels there gladly holding them open, and the Crusaders then finding themselves in a palace significantly smaller than those they were familiar with during their journey. The doors into the throne room almost immediately followed the entrance, with the royal sentinels parting their halberds and holding these doors open as well. At the end of the hall naturally sat the monarch, a blonde, blue-eyed,

brown-furred hamster wearing Humberland's yellow and red hues, with a few familiar faces nearby as well as other fancily clothed individuals.

The Crusaders and Duncan bowed before the King, who eventually spoke, "We welcome you to our court. I am Hamlet II, King of Humberland. You may rise."

The newest visitors did so, noticing the other visitors, including Uncle Ferid, now dressed as Grand Duke of Otterland, with a white buttoned shirt, red sash, red pants, and golden epaulets. Org greeted, "Good to see you again, uncle."

"You as well, my dear nephew. And daughter. And first cousin once removed."

"Orgy-dear! Ari-dear! Nicky-dear!" Aunt Odessa, also present, greeted as she hugged her respective lutrine relations. "Good to see you all again, too!"

"How have things fared since our last meeting, Aunt Odessa?" Org inquired.

"Well, I met with the King of Yuris to rally his support for an invasion of The Shadowlands, and got the same support from the Duke of Duran and the Grand Duke of Thyme! Now I'm here to get His Majesty's support, too!"

"I have performed my share of diplomacy as well," assured Uncle Ferid. "I've gotten the Foxwood Otterland clan moved into the Grand Duchy, and have largely reclaimed the country for Otterlanders alone. However, the Duchy of Hertford and the Kingdoms of Buckwood, Scurry, Berk, Esel, and Kent have insisted that I entitle them to a share of Otterland's government revenue until the country's debts are relieved, to which I have agreed. I have also agreed to their demands that they keep soldiers in the country until the Grand Duchy's debts are no more. Parliament, furthermore, is dissolved until the elections next winter, so until then, I am in large control of the country's national affairs, though the town councils still control civic affairs.

"The leaders of Otterland's neighbors further suggested the need to increase international cooperation among the nations of Anglia, and thus, we have formed the Anglian Alliance. They appointed me the Alliance's first Chairman, suggesting that I could symbolically repay Otterland's debts to them by traveling Anglia to recruit new member nations, and fortunately, no one has refused membership, given the threat of the Nidhoggr. Your Aunt Odessa has done her part as well, rallying the nations of northern Anglia against The Shadowlands, while I myself have focused on the nations near Caina."

"Are we related to its prior royal family as well, Uncle Ferid?"

"No, but Supreme General Lezard was once the Crown Prince of Cymru before the Nidhoggr seized power, and fled with his sister Cordelia when their parents, the King and Queen, were murdered. I can understand if he wishes to reclaim the throne."

"So I could very well inherit Cymru's throne," Mina suggested.

“I think your Uncle Cornelius would want his own scion to bequeath the throne,” retorted Org, “and I am certain my good friend Camellia doesn’t want to wage a succession war.”

“Yeah, I suppose so...”

“And your mother has told me she wishes to remain Queen of Dragonia,” another dragon Org recognized as Derek VI of Dragonia noted.

“Father?”

“Indeed, my dear Mina. You must tell me about your travels when you get the chance. I am here with the Grand Duke of Otterland to prepare for an eventual invasion of Anglia by The Shadowlands, and have in fact brought many of the dragon soldiers of Dragonia into the mountains of Humberland so that they can cover twin fronts, the ground and the sky.”

“But Caina is closer, is it not, father?”

“Dragonia’s winged troops have been lent to all the nations near Caina, as well, so rest assured that we are not squandering them solely on The Shadowlands.”

“But is Dragonia itself secure?”

“Of course! We have the Britannian tunnel plans stolen from Caina a few days ago, and are quite ready to defend on that front as well.”

“And the Nibelung might just lend their support, too, since they don’t take well to being in the path of the Nidhoggr’s passages,” added Aunt Odessa, her nephew well aware that the Nibelung were halfling Terrans that tended to dwell underground, none of which the white otter himself had seen in his lifetime. “We could very easily begin a full-scale invasion of Caina and The Shadowlands once we’re sure we have them on our side!”

“We may want to hold out on a full-scale invasion until I’ve found the White Rune, Aunt Odessa,” Org cautioned, “since the Seven Satans could very easily take on entire armies. Only those with the Runes of Asgard can stand against those who wield the Runes of Niflheim.”

“True, Orgy-dear.”

“We could take a ship from Berwick, and with Nicole controlling the White Water Rune, our trip will be faster.”

“The sea may be a risky front, my nephew,” Uncle Ferid countered, “for the Navy of The Shadowlands has lately increased its nautical presence near Humberland, and this country’s own Navy has done the same. A speedy ship would most easily grab the Nidhoggr’s attention, and your journey to the White Rune would still be risky. Perhaps you could travel through The Shadowlands if not around them.”

“I’ve already been in the domain of the Nidhoggr once, uncle, so I know not the risks of entering their lands again, for one of the Runes of Asgard, no less.”

“Hell, I’ve been in and out of The Shadowlands plenty of times!” Duncan then boasted. “I could help get you to your Rune!”

“How, pray tell, has a commoner such as yourself been able to slip in and out of The Shadowlands without major repercussion?” wondered King Hamlet.

“Well, it just so happens that I’m a citizen of The Shadowlands, with permission to leave and reenter the country!” Everyone in the throne room then gasped, a few royal sentinels even pointing their weapons at the donkey. “Relax, relax! I’m with the Scotian Resistance, an organization trying to reclaim The Shadowlands from the Nidhoggr, but they sure as hell don’t know that! I’ve managed to get on their government’s good side, and have thus earned the privilege of going in and out of the country as I damn well please!”

“But the Runebearers are not citizens of The Shadowlands as you are.”

“I could pass them off as captured Nidhoggr or soldiers, then!”

“But Humberland has not been at war with The Shadowlands and would likely be aware of the ‘return’ of their men as a false gesture.”

“Cumbria could have prisoners of war right now,” suggested Org, telling of the recent conflict between the Anglian Kingdom and The Shadowlands. “So offering them captured prisoners as something of a peace offering might just work.”

“And if it doesn’t, they would surely be provoked into war.”

“A risk we are willing to take, Your Majesty. My good companions have Runes, and are certainly willing to help again to secure Humberland’s borders, as we have Cumbria’s.”

“Very good! Our soldiers would be willing to provide you disguises as Nidhoggr, Shadowlandic soldiers, or a combination of both!”

“We will probably go into The Shadowlands as soldiers this time, Your Majesty, since we had already entered and left Caina as Nidhoggr.”

“So be it! After lunch, we shall provide your disguises.”

Lunch was a momentous occasion, with Org and the other Crusaders acquainting themselves with many of the leaders of Anglia’s nations, among them being Prince Edward’s father, King Andrew XX of Scurry, happy to see his son again. To hear of the Prince’s aborted marriage to

Princess Maria disappointed the squirrel monarch, although he was grateful his son still intended to marry her after Britannia was free from the Nidhoggr. Though the dining hall was smaller than average, there was luckily room enough for all the palace's residents and the visitors, with everyone eating plenty and enjoying both the meal and their conversations.

Afterward, a royal guard led the Crusaders to the palace's bathing area, with a pool containing white paint. The sentinel requested, "I'm going to have to ask the women to leave."

"Why?" wondered Mina.

"The men will bathe in the paint here, as will you once they're done."

"We can't just paint our faces like we did back in Caina?"

"If you want to be taken seriously as Shadowlandic soldiers, then it is best that you color yourselves completely white as all their sentinels do, after which we will give you black patterns across your bodies. Then can you possibly pass yourselves off as soldiers of The Shadowlands?"

"I suppose I can skip straight to the black paint?" wondered the albino Org.

"Indeed, although you and your companions will still have to strip, which is why we ask that the women leave."

"Yeah, that would definitely be for the best," suggested Mina, "but we don't want you seeing us in the nude when our turns come!"

"The washwomen will see to your disguises, rest assured."

"Should be a fun experience," the dragon suggested as she and the other female Crusaders departed the washroom.

All the men stripped themselves, with Org standing as one of the royal guards patterned his body with black paint, completely dyeing his hair black, surrounding his eyes with black rings, blackening the edges of his mouth, and providing many bizarre patterns across the remainder of his body. His companions, in the meantime, individually submerged themselves in the pool of white paint, emerging afterward and drying for a few minutes. Once they had done so, they received their own black paint patterns, which too required some time to dry; Brandon in particular seemed to relish at the process of becoming a Shadowlandic soldier.

Org was first to receive Shadowlandic soldier garbs after he put his underpants and coat of mithril back on, receiving a black shirt bearing a gray Emblem of Niflheim along with black pants, white socks, and black boots. Afterward, he received many ivory armaments, including a skull helm that was large enough to fit over his whole head, the skull having belonged to a deer, and thus having brown antlers. Ivory bracers he received on his upper arms and forearms, not to mention his upper and lower legs, as well as dried taut intestine serving as a belt (he handed Cardinal Rabbit's sword belt to Duncan, not receiving a makeover). Over his torso and back,

finally, went stringed mail consisting of many straight bones of varying lengths, topped off by a gray cape having a black Emblem of Niflheim.

Once their own black paint patterns were dry, Org's companions received their own soldier garbs, Brandon receiving a badger skull as his helmet, Christian receiving the skull of a lion from Jotunheim, and Prince Edward receiving a ratskull helm. All the Crusaders put their Runes in their pants' pockets, with the donkey commenting, "You all look like the real deal!"

"Our thanks," commented Org.

"You may want your hands tied to your backs as well to note the fact that you'll be prisoners until I've taken you all into The Shadowlands."

"A sound idea," suggested Org, putting his wrists against his back and feeling one of the royal guards tie his hands with the very intestine serving as his belt.

"Now march, prisoners!" Duncan feigningly taunted as he cracked his whip, with the disguised Crusaders finally exiting the washroom.

"Your turn, ladies!" noted Org, with the women Crusaders at first alarmed at the sight of apparent Shadowlandic soldiers exiting.

"Looking sharp!" Mina commented as she and the others began to go into the washroom.

"Wait, does The Shadowlands have women soldiers?"

"Sure, as commanders and spies, mostly," assured Duncan.

"Definitely looking forward to seeing you all as Shadowland soldiers!"

The female Crusaders as Shadowlandic soldiers were definitely remarkable sights. Org's first cousin wore a foxskull as her helmet, his second cousin a dolphinskull, and Jeremina a batskull, its jaw open for her to look out, her horns jutting from its eyeholes. All wore bone breastplates with curving rib-bones keeping in mind their endowed structures, with the other cousins wearing capes like the men. The dragon, on the other hand, wore no cape, aware that it would get in the way of her reptilian wings, painted black and white. Once the women had exited the washroom, Duncan tied their hands to their backs with dried intestine bonds.

"I like your new looks!" the donkey brayed, cracking his whip and commanding, "Now to take you all north!"

The sight of Duncan escorting the false prisoners through the palace evoked plenty of attention from its residents, some frightened by the presence of apparent Shadowlanders. Regardless, no one asked any questions as the donkey took the incognito Crusaders out of the castle and through

the gates, guiding them to the stable building and herding them into his carriage, afterward pulling it out into the hall and hitching his roach to it. Onto the driver's seat Duncan leapt, lashing his beast of burden and provoking it outside into the streets of Morpeth.

Sitting in the carriage with their hands tied to their backs was certainly uncomfortable for the Crusaders, but luckily, their driver kept the windows open so they could scope the scenery during the trip to The Shadowlands. The vehicle quickly departed into the woods of Humberland, the highway running north for about an hour, and turning northwest once nine o'clock arrived. Once the road had turned, the Crusaders could barely glimpse through the northeastern woods the Humberland coast; through the southwestern woods, some mountains were visible. The middle of the hour brought the town of Berwick, Anglia's northernmost settlement.

Sentinels from many Anglian nations wandered through Berwick's streets, ready for impending war with The Shadowlands, although the community's most striking feature was a tall stone bridge spanning the River Tweed, onto which Duncan drove, his passengers getting an excellent view of the North Sea, upon which many Humberland and Shadowlandic vessels sailed. They could also notice that the river ran through a heavily guarded aqueduct forming part of the tall stone border with The Shadowlands, many wraiths and skeleton soldiers patrolling its top. As with the southwestern termination of the barrier, moreover, the northeastern end spanned across the sea for about a kilometer, with an apparent lighthouse extending well above the border.

The bridge eventually reached level ground, the highway continuing to the large wooden doors leading into The Shadowlands, before which a pair of Nidhoggr stood, coming to the vehicle as it halted. Duncan hopped to the road and saluted as he provided his passport, "Greetings, my good men! The name's Jack Duncan, and I'm just returning from a nice trip through Anglia!"

"Who are your passengers?" one of the wraiths icily hissed, returning the passport.

"I'm sure you heard of the recent battle at Perazzo Green, where a few of The Shadowlands' men were captured. These here just so happen to be prisoners of war that Cumbria, in cooperation with Humberland, wishes to return as a peace offering!"

"Prisoners, eh?" repeated the other wraith, gazing into the carriage and eying the incognito Crusaders, then asking, "Did you tell them any of our nation's secrets?"

Org, however, could not contemplate a response, with his companions remaining silent as well. The interrogator observed, "Yes, silence is a virtue for our forces. Even when they torture you it is good to hold your tongue, resist the temptation to scream be the torture intense."

"We shall indeed accept their pitiful peace offering, Mr. Duncan," the first wraith agreed, "but that doesn't mean we'll return the favor."

"Yeah, those bastards are nice and stupid," brayed Duncan as he hopped back onto the driver's seat and watched the wraiths telekinetically open the doors into the tunnel, with skeleton soldiers inside elevating the iron grating.

The donkey whipped his roach, driving the carriage into the bleak passageway, with sentinels on the other end elevating the metal grating protecting the wooden doors there, which began to open as well, likely through telekinesis. Smaller pairs of doors on the left and right sides of the tunnel defended by wraiths seemed to lead through the barrier itself, as had been the case near Perazzo Green. This time, however, there was no town to greet the vehicle's passage into The Shadowlands, with the skies having suddenly become dark, cloudy, and stormy, the woods to the southwest decaying, and the northern seas full of Shadowlandic ships protecting their waters against the fleet from Humberland.

A few kilometers into The Shadowlands came its first town, Eyemouth, a gloomy seaside settlement where many wraiths and skeleton soldiers patrolled, perhaps on lookout for potential invaders, given the town's proximity near the border. Here, Duncan stopped his vehicle, beckoning his passengers to get off and taking out a bone-handled, platinum-bladed sword. This sight naturally stirred attention from the nearby wraiths and soldiers, although the donkey simply cut the intestine bonds from the incognito Crusaders, glad to be able to move their arms freely again, although the guardsmen still eyed them suspiciously.

"What's going on here?" a true Shadowlandic soldier inquired.

"Prisoners of war from the recent battle at Perazzo Green!" Duncan insisted.

"Yeah, it was a really grueling battle," Org informed, "and those bastard Cumbrians unfortunately conquered the town."

"It won't stay under their control for long!" one of the wraiths hissed.

"Death to Anglia!" Duncan then shouted.

"Death to Anglia!" echoed the town guardsmen and wraiths.

The onlookers then scattered, with the donkey afterward facing Org and giving him the bone-handled sword. "You'll need a weapon here!"

"But I already have one..."

"I'll be keeping it, since they'll know it came from Anglia!"

"I suppose you can think of it as payment for taking us here."

"Yes, indeed! Now let's continue!"

Duncan hopped back onto the driver's seat, with his passengers reentering the carriage, and the donkey again lashing his roach and continuing the trip. Once outside the town, the vehicle again traveled between the northern seas and the decaying wood, the highway curving between northwest and west as it exited the Borders Province and entered the Loathing Province. The first community here was Din, where bells tolled to indicate that nine o'clock had arrived. Din itself

was a small town with some notable fortifications and plenty of wraiths and skeleton soldiers, at whom the donkey gladly waved as though he had been here before.

Din also sat at the base of great mountains to the southwest, though these fell away when the carriage exited the town, the highway now going roughly westward. Next came the town of Burning, with many torches lining the streets upholding the town's moniker, and piercing the general darkness of The Shadowlands. Fishing was this community's main specialty, with peons, soldiers, and wraiths alike seeking catches at the bay, with the peasants receiving lashings when their efforts were in vain. Difficult it was to behold the sight of forced labor from these innocent citizens, though the Crusaders knew that helping them now would provoke unknown fury from The Shadowlands, which Org wished only to do after acquiring the White Rune.

After Burning, the highway curved roughly southwest, eventually passing through the larger harbor town of Muzzle, its most significant feature being a black church that Nidhoggr entered and exited, perhaps being a sanctum for the Order of the Nidhoggr, maybe a former Asgardian cathedral as well. Due east the road ran after the settlement, with a great walled city approaching at roughly the middle of the ninth hour. Dyneburg was this city's name, with the city itself having many towering gray buildings, and a great hill centering it, atop which sat a stone citadel that occasional lightning illuminated.

"This, my good friends, is Dyneburg, capital of The Shadowlands!" Duncan informed.

"A beautiful city," commented Org, "but I can sense great evil here..."

"What do you expect? It's the Nidhoggr's domain!"

"I'm sure it was even more beautiful before the Nidhoggr came."

"Oh, yeah! I remember when this city used to be called Eden; it was paradise, I tell you! But you gotta hand it to the Nidhoggr; some of the great bridges, buildings, and other architecture in The Shadowlands were their creations!"

"That doesn't compensate for their other atrocities."

"Maybe, but don't you go spouting that when I go to meet the King!"

"Are you mad?"

"Hey, I gotta assure His Majesty of my alleged loyalty so that he doesn't get suspicious of my dealings with the Resistance! And you're all welcome to meet him, too!"

"But our Runes..."

"His Majesty won't know a damn thing about them, I assure you!"

"How?"

“Well, you could say I have some tricks up my sleeve...”

“What kind of tricks, Mr. Duncan?”

“Just trust me, alright?”

Sighing, Org capitulated, “For now we will.”

The carriage approached the bottom of the hill atop which the castle rested, with a pair of iron doors, defended by a pair of Nidhoggr, undoubtedly leading inside the hill itself. Here, Duncan halted his vehicle and descended, greeting the wraiths as he presented his identification, “Afternoon, men! The name’s Jack Duncan, and I’m just here to meet His Majesty on important business! I’m just needing someone here to take my carriage, that’s all!”

“So will it be,” one of the wraiths hissed, with him and his partner telekinetically opening the door; out from the revealed passage came a few true skeleton soldiers.

The false skeleton soldiers departed the vehicle, seeing the palace guards transport it into the dark passageway, the iron doors slamming shut afterward. Duncan then approached Org and company, indicating, “Up the stairs we go, friends!”

“Couldn’t we have just gone into that passage?” Org inquired.

“Through the stables and prison? Hell no! We’ll be going through the *main* entrance!”

Duncan then led Org and company around the hill to a wide, extensive stone staircase the travelers began to ascend, slowly bringing them above the main skyline of Dyneburg for a nice view of the grim but beautiful city. The stairs spiraled around the hill until they reached its top, with a vast plaza before a bridge leading to a gatehouse, water-filled ditches bordering both sides of the bridge. True skeleton soldiers, Nidhoggr, and Shadowlandic bureaucrats dressed mostly in black, gray, and white clothes wandered the plaza, with the sight of a tattered-clothed man such as Duncan evoking many unwelcome stares.

Regardless, Duncan led his passengers to the crosshatched iron palace gate, behind which a skeleton soldier stood, ready to raise it with a nearby spoked wheel. Another pair of Nidhoggr defended this entrance, with the donkey again showing his identification, and the necromancers greeting, “Welcome back, Mr. Duncan.”

Once beyond the gate, the guests could notice a tall barrier atop which numerous cannons stood ready to attack invaders, which Org believed would assuredly come once he had retrieved the White Rune. North between the battery and the gatehouse Duncan took the soldiers, reaching another stone building with a long open window having a suspended wooden overhang, behind which stood a skeleton soldier with a scroll and pen. The donkey took the pen and wrote his signature to indicate his visitation, after which he guided his companions west between a northern barrier and the curving battery.

The path curved northwest and ran through an arched tunnel, with a pair of doors on the right side leading into an observation tower that stood above. Beyond the passage, the walkway widened, with a meter-and-a-half-tall wall to the northeast providing another excellent view of Dyneburg. From this wall's northwest end was another building atop which skeleton soldiers patrolled near cannons. Southeast from the center of the new plaza was a curving wall, atop which more Nidhoggr and Shadowlandic soldiers kept lookout. Northwest was a path leading to more soldiers and cannons, with the left side of this path bordered by a building from which came much buzzing, a few flies coming out and soaring towards the city.

Due west from the plaza center were stairs leading to an upper area of Dyneburg Castle, and southwest was a building near which a few Shadowlandic bureaucrats conversed with Nidhoggr and soldiers. South Duncan took his passengers across the plaza, with more buildings becoming visible, including a noticeably large one southwest with soldiers walking in and out, and one due south into which soldiers and wraiths guided a peon in chains, perhaps a new prisoner of this citadel. Southeast rose yet another stone building where Shadowlandic bureaucrats talked, and between this and the curving wall north of it was a stairway that curved northeast.

Up these stairs Duncan led the disguised Crusaders, with the donkey needing to present his identification to pass through another gate to reach the upper sector of Dyneburg Castle. Immediately to their left was a building with a partially round façade where a few Shadowlanders wore black robes, although these were not Nidhoggr, and their hair was wet, a likely indication the building housed the citadel's bathing facilities. North in the new smaller plaza was a black spire-shaped building from which Nidhoggr came, perhaps another sanctuary for the Order of the Nidhoggr. To the southeast was a vast field with many smaller dark spires of various sizes alongside rectangular earthen plots, maybe a cemetery, bordering a large mausoleum.

South the donkey took the visitors, turning east alongside a large rectangular building and passing through a narrow path between it and the mausoleum to a square plaza, its northern side having stairs leading into the crypt. The western side bore the entrance into the new building that they had passed, with Shadowlandic bureaucrats wandering nearby, and the southern side bordered by another building with many pairs of doors through which a combination of bureaucrats, wraiths, and soldiers went. Dark-clothed nobles also wandered about near the eastern building, towards which Duncan led the disguised Crusaders.

A pair of halberd-wielding skeleton soldiers defended the entrance into this building, one of them inquiring, "Here to see His Majesty?"

"But of course!" Duncan brayed, showing his identification.

"Well, you're out of luck, as old King Willem's on a trip across The Shadowlands to rally support for an invasion of Anglia."

"But His Lordship, Grandmaster Carob, head of the Order of the Nidhoggr, is here and would be willing to meet you in His Majesty's stead."

“That’d do just fine, my good man!” assured Duncan, leading his companions inside.

A platinum chandelier hung from the entrance hall’s ceiling, providing dim but sufficient illumination for all within the palace. A pair of stairways led to the second floor balcony, with the company ascending and finding a pair of doors defended by two skeleton soldiers with bearskull helmets. Upon seeing Duncan, they uncrossed their halberds and let him and their apparent fellow sentries into the throne room, with its throne, consisting of bones and red cushioning, unsurprisingly having no occupant. However, standing nearby was a gray-sorcerer-robed reindeer, with ivory antlers, dark gray hair, dark gray eyes, light gray fur, gray demon wings and, surprisingly, a ferret tail with a dark gray end, his brown-booted feet likely being like those of a ferret.

Duncan bowed before this sorcerer, signaling his companions to do the same, which they reluctantly did. Tapping the bottom of his platinum, crescent-topped, moonstone-centered staff on the ground, the wizard beckoned with a droning voice, “You may rise...”

Everyone did so, with Duncan greeting, “We meet again, Your Lordship!”

“Indeed, Sir Duncan...”

“This here’s the Grandmaster of the Order of the Nidhoggr!” introduced the donkey.

“Johann Wilhelm Ferrum Carob...”

“Your Lordship,” Org simply greeted.

“Why do you bring these men here, Sir Duncan?”

“Well, you see, they were captured by Cumbria in the recent skirmish of Perazzo Green, if Your Lordship hasn’t heard of that yet, and they were returned to The Shadowlands as a peace offering, I guess in hopes that they won’t invade Anglia!”

“A foolish proposition...we will invade regardless...all Britannia will soon be under our control, with no hope for those infidels...”

“Yeah, those Anglians are nice and stupid, eh?”

“Introduce yourselves...”

As Grandmaster Carob eyed Org, he falsely introduced, “Or...in Lothar.”

“Nic...Nikita Lothar,” Princess Nicole gave her own false identity.

“Siblings or cousins, I take it...”

“Dachs Baden,” Brandon more quickly gave his fake name.

“And I’m Rydia Lothar, with my dear cousins,” Ariana stated.

“Cousins, I see now...”

“Drachma Dragonbane,” introduced Mina.

“Croix Chatmerde,” stated Christian, obviously knowledgeable of Gaulish.

“Marcus Ardent,” Prince Edward completed the fake introductions.

“Well met, all of you...you are fortunate to have escaped the grasp of those wicked Anglians...regardless of the outcome of the Battle of Perazzo Green, we will emerge triumphant in our war to seize all Britannia...”

“Death to Anglia!” brayed Duncan, then telling his companions, “Why don’t you all just leave and wander the Castle until dinner? The Grandmaster and I have some personal things to discuss that aren’t for soldiers’ ears.”

“Sure thing...Sir Duncan,” Org reluctantly agreed, leading his comrades out of the throne room, down to ground floor, and back outside.

The incognito Crusaders exited the plaza northeast, finding themselves near the cannons they had noticed when first entering the castle grounds. North they gazed beyond the Castle at the cityscape of Dyneburg, with a great stone bridge being the most prominent sight on the channel bordering the city’s northern side, a few black-sailed Shadowlandic vessels drifting east, perhaps en route to Anglia. Org dearly hoped that he would find the White Rune before all-out war began between Anglia and the Nidhoggrian nations in Britannia, further wondering what Mr. Duncan and the Grandmaster discussed, though he remained silent, aware that true soldiers and Nidhoggr were all around them, and that discussing private matters would blow his cover.

The white otter took shock and even winced when he noticed a Nidhoggr conjure fire in the palms of his hands, combining it into a massive fireball that he hurled far into the skies, afterward snapping his fingers and causing it to explode with a great boom, with nine booms afterward that perhaps indicated that ten o’clock had arrived. More surprisingly, the wraith eyed the lead Crusaders and icily asked, “Something the matter?”

“Telling time with fire, I take it?”

“Aye, that’s how we do things here in Dyneburg. I suppose you’re newcomers here?”

“Indeed; it’s our first visit to this city.”

“A foul but fair city Dyneburg is.”

“A pretty accurate description, from what we’ve seen thus far. By the way, do you know when, and where, we’ll have dinner?”

“At twelve o’clock in the mess hall, right across from the mausoleum.”

“So we still have two hours until then.”

“Well, you can walk around the Castle, or sleep in the barracks until then.”

“And where would the barracks be?”

“The big building straight across from the stairs when you get to the lower plaza.”

“I see.”

“There are quarters for men and women. The women of your little party will probably get better rest since their quarters are a lot smaller than and not as populous as the men’s.”

“We’ll see about that,” suggested Org as he led his companions away.

The incognito Crusaders headed west to the gate into the upper area, descending to the lower plaza and keeping their direction to the mentioned large building. Through the entrance doors they went, with a small entrance lobby where a Nidhoggr behind a wooden desk monitored those who entered and exited. At the end of the lobby ran a hall, with a sign bearing two strings of bilingual Gaian and Niflheiman text above arrows that pointed leftward and rightward. Mina inquired, “Can you read what it says, Org?”

“Yes; the men’s quarters are to the left, and the women’s are to the right.”

“Thanks; see you at dinner.”

The male and female Crusaders then split, with Org, Brandon, Christian, and Edward traversing the leftward hall, through which plenty of noise echoed with conversations and even the clash of weapons from some of the chambers, many of their doors wide open. Indeed, some of the true Shadowlandic sentinels practiced fighting, although in one chamber, soldiers played billiards. Many of the chambers, unsurprisingly, contained beds, with the Crusaders finding one that was vacant (and only with four beds) and entering, shutting and locking the door. Org took off his helmet and lay on one bed, although his companions hesitated to do so, pacing in thought.

“Actually not such a dismal place,” suggested Org.

“Let’s not get too comfortable,” insisted Brandon.

“I hope that asshole Duncan isn’t selling us out to the Grandmaster as we speak,” Christian suggested. “Otherwise, I’ll tear his goddamn head off!”

“He does seem a tad suspicious,” Prince Edward conceded.

“We outnumber him, so even if he does betray us, we can take him on,” Org indicated. “Well, I’m going to rest now, and you all are welcome to join me.”

“We could go and play billiards,” suggested Brandon.

“Yeah, I’m pretty good at the game,” added Christian.

“We should probably stay in here, so none of us get the temptation to use our abilities if we were to play,” Edward advised. “They would definitely get suspicious of us then.”

“Well said, Edward!” lauded Org, going to sleep.

Org slept through the eleven o’clock explosions, and awoke when those at twelve o’clock came, noticing that his companions had joined him for rest. Out into the hallways they departed, noticing that the true sentinels in the barracks were heading for the mess hall as well. Once in the lobby, the female Crusaders joined the men, departing into the plaza, across which they wandered to ascend into the upper area, where they headed south for the many-doored building. Inside, the Crusaders managed to take a whole table for themselves, with ragged-clothed peasant slaves providing each a tray containing soup, bread, and water.

“Thank you, kind sir!” lauded Org, the slave simply sighing before heading off. Looking around, he saw no sign of Mr. Duncan. “I wonder where Jack is...”

“Good evening, soldiers...” greeted Grandmaster Carob from the raised table on the other end of the hall, where he and other leaders, except the King of The Shadowlands, his bone-lined, red-cushioned seat vacant, sat. “I am glad to visit The Shadowlands on my long diplomatic trip across the Niflheim Empire’s colonies, and to bear witness to an invasion of Anglia in coming days. We most appreciate the support of the Gaians of Britannia, so we can bring these isles entirely under our control, and enslave all that oppose us. Although we have had setbacks at the recent Battle of Perazzo Green, we will reclaim our land and retaliate in greater force. May the Order of the Nidhoggr lead us all to victory, and may the Dark Lord rise again...”

The soldiers in the mess hall then cheered, although the incognito Crusaders were somewhat tardy in feigning their own applause, with several chants of “Death to Anglia!”

The Crusaders finished their meals, which they found surprisingly good, afterward seeing a mass vacation of the dining hall begin, although they remained standing near their table, watching for the Grandmaster to draw near. Once he did so, Org alerted, “Your Lordship.”

“Ah, a familiar face...Mr. Lothar, was it?”

“Aye, milord. We’re just wondering if you’ve seen Jack Duncan around.”

“So I see...he departed after our talk on other business across The Shadowlands...”

“Our thanks, sir.”

“Don’t mention it...”

As the Grandmaster wandered away, Christian cursed, “That ass...”

However, Org interrupted him by stepping on his foot. “Not here! In our room!”

Fortunately, the male Crusaders found the chamber where they had rested vacant, taking it and locking its door. Here, Christian fully asserted, “I knew that asshole would betray us!”

“The Grandmaster just said that he had other business across The Shadowlands,” countered Org. “He *did* say he was involved in the Scotian Resistance.”

“You seriously believe him?” wondered Brandon.

“I do not think he would abandon us like that without telling us,” insisted Edward.

“He could return in the morning,” hoped Org.

“How the hell will we continue if he doesn’t?” Christian asked.

“With Duncan or not, we can still make it through The Shadowlands, as long as none of you openly slanders anyone here, Christian.”

“Hey, my lips are sealed!”

“Then that’s that, unless any of you has anything else to contribute.”

“No,” noted Brandon.

“I have nothing,” indicated Edward; thus, the Crusaders extinguished the chamber’s lanterns and began their first slumber in The Shadowlands.