

## October 5th, cy 717, 5am: Family Tavish

It was cold and foggy and Grandma Tavish's bones ached which meant it was going to rain or possible snow. The small old lady climbed up on to her wagon and pulled her shawl tight around her neck. Her breath came out in white puffs. Even at 62 years old, she still could not resist exhaling deeply to see how big a cloud she could make.

"Oh Grandma that was a big one!" exclaimed a skinny 6 year old girl from the ground. She had her thick black hair pulled back in a braid. She wore shorts, a much too large shirt and a pair of sandals.

"Clopina!", Grandma scolded her grandchild. "You go back to your wagon and get a jacket!"

"But Grandma, it's not cold!"

"Don't you see our breaths child?"

Clopina nodded excitedly and exhaled to create another big cloud.

"No no child. That is not what I meant. Where is your fath..."

"I've got her grandma." A taller version of Clopina emerged from the fog. The pretty 14 year old took the shawl from her shoulder and wrapped it around her tiny cousin.

Clopina looked up wide eyed. She obviously felt very special to be wearing her most favorite cousin's shawl.

Grandma smiled. "Thank you Natasha. Your uncle Garridan was never one to worry about what his girls wore or to brush their hair." Grandma tilted her head sideways and looked hard at little Clopina. "Who DID do the child's hair. I do not think I have ever seen it so .....well managed."

"Mom, my sisters and I. We actually did all the little girls with the fog being so wet."

Natasha turned to Clopina. "I remember when Clopin was doing your braid, Aoide commented on how warm your jacket looked. So what happened between when my sisters were braiding your hair to now?"

The big eyed little girl looked up at her older cousin and pleaded, "Oh Natasha that jacket is so ugly, why can't a I wear a shawl like you and Aoide and Clopin and Esmerelda and Jessica and ..."

Natasha silenced the child with a finger over her little lips to cut short the long list of cousins. "Your sisters do not wear shawls. Francesca and Rupa wear the same sturdy jacket you had not more than one hour ago."

Clopina looked confused. "They would ruin them hunting." She shook her little head. "I don't think there are any shawls big enough for them." She then laughed, "Oh Natasha, they would look so funny with shawls. No shawls are for us ladies."

Natasha silently agreed with Clopina. The thought of her two tall, broad shouldered cousins wearing shawls was funnier than say Uncle Hugo wearing one. The strange thing about it was that there was nothing the tall Francesca liked more than sitting by the fire and knitting shawls. Not only did all the cousins have one, but cousin Pias sold them for her as fast as she could make them. Natasha took Clopina's hand. "You know very well your sister makes all of the shawls and that she could make one any size she wanted. I am sure she will make one when you become a young women. Now let's get you back to your wagon. I see Uncle Hugo coming and you know how he gets when the children are running about instead of in the wagons."

A large curly haired, bearded man burst from the fog nearly running over the two girls. He wore chainmail and had a long sword at his side. "Oh uh....Natasha... sorry. Please child get the little uh...Rawnie....back to her wagon."

Clopina stomped her foot. "Uncle Hugo! I am not Rawnie! I am Clopina. Rawnie is only five!"

Uncle Hugo climbed up next to his mother, "Oh yes I can see you are much taller. Now go with your cousin and get loaded up." He then yelled so all eight wagons could hear, "10 MINUTES EVERYONE. WE LEAVE IN TEN MINUTES."

The caravan came alive with dogs barking, horses stomping, and people yelling out last minute instructions.

Natasha hustled the still talking Clopina back through the fog to her wagon. Natasha first passed her own wagon, which was right behind Uncle Hugo's. Well Uncle Hugo's wagon was Grandma's but after Grandpa died two Winters back, it was now Uncle Hugo's. Pias, Uncle Hugo's eldest, was now running Uncle Hugo's old wagon.

Natasha's mother "Aunt Mnemosyne" was already loaded up and sitting next to her eldest son, Saule, Natasha's brother. Saule sat straight backed with the reins of their four matched wagon horses held loosely in his two hands. The left two horses in his left hand and the right two in his right hand. Although Aunt Mnemosyne could certainly handle a team of horses, Saule took great pride in "running" his mother's wagon for they had never had a father. Well actually they all had different fathers but none really knew who they were. Mother was very fond of a dozen or so men.

Saule was concentrating on the back of Uncle Hugo's wagon mutter something under his breath.

Natasha knew he was saying the Driving Horses Prayer. Natasha smiled. Her brother was so serious when driving the wagon. Natasha could not help herself, "Uphill, go easy. Downhill, light and breezy...." a second and third voice joined in.

"...On the level, watch me trot and in the barn, forget me not,"

Natasha's beautiful sisters, Aoide and Clopin jumped out of the wagon laughing. Aoide said to Saule, "You do not really have to sing that song every time we start off." Aoide was Aunt Mnemosyne's oldest at 22. She had a dark mandolin and pale composite short bow slung over her back. She wore intricately tooled leather armor and a gypsy made long sword. All

adults wore their weapons and armor while traveling. Uncle Hugo was always very clear on that.

Clopin, was two years younger than Aoide. She wore a bright colored shirt and leggings as she was too skinny to wear armor. Across her back was a light wood short bow and on her belt was the thin rapier she loved so well. Both young women were stunning in looks and manner. In towns, they turned more heads than even mother did. The three of them together created quite a stir. Natasha, at only 14, was just growing into her own. She could not wait to get whistled at too.

Saule smiled at his three sisters, "I do what works for me now hurry. Uncle Hugo said 10 minutes. I do not want us to hold up the caravan."

There was still a good many children roaming about. Natasha was not the only young woman escorting a child back to their wagon.

Clopin waved up at her brother and mother, "Aoide and I have to go find Aunt Kerry's twins."

Saule looked alarmed and slowly shook his head.

His sisters all laughed and his mother patted him on the knee. "My child do not worry. I will tell Uncle Hugo I sent your sisters to find the twins and that you were ready to go on time."

This seemed to relieve Saule somewhat, but he still was anxious. He looked down and pleaded with his sisters, "Oh please hurry. Maybe we can still make it before Uncle Hugo calls 'wagons ready'."

"We will try brother," Aoide said. "If the call comes, just let our horses loose and declare us riding. Come Clopin I think I know where they are hiding." The two women disappeared silently into the fog. It was common knowledge you caught the twins with stealth. Calling their names only gave away your position and gave them a chance to relocate.

"Saule," said Natasha. "I will only be a minute." Natasha lead little Clopina back to the next wagon, Uncle Garridan's. She saw that Beval, who was just a year younger than Saule was at the reins. He wore the same proud grin as his older cousin.

Beval yelled down to Natasha, "Hello Natasha. Uncle Hugo said 10 minutes. You need to get up to your wagon."

Two hulking women on horses halted before the two young girls. Besides Uncle Garridan, Natasha's cousins Francesca and Rupa were the biggest and strongest people Natasha ever met. Both wore their black hair tied back. Neither was overly friendly, especially to the children. Natasha was one of the only children not afraid of them. She knew they were just quiet and had nothing to say to children.

Francesca, at 21 was 1 year older than Rupa. Although both were rangers like their father, Francesca was the better hunter and Rupa the better fighter. Francesca wore beautifully tooled studded leather and Rupa a breastplate embossed with the Tavish family crest.

Rupa, like her father, was a master blacksmith. Rupa specialized in armor and had made more than half of the family's armor in the 3 years she had been raised to master.

Both women, like their father, were most comfortable with axes. The family Tavish had several artifacts that had been passed down through the decades or maybe even centuries. The axes Uncle Garridan's two eldest daughters carried were three such artifacts.

Francesca wielded a battleaxe named Rax and throwing axe named Rex that magically came to her when called. They were both scary looking weapons. She fought with both in complicated, beautiful dance.

Rupa wielded an ancient greataxe named Vorst that was always cold to the touch even on the hottest day. Rupa had only to say a command and it became sheathed in an icy cold that froze flesh on contact. Rupa had learned to throw the huge axe with surprising accuracy. It too came to her when called.

Francesca gracefully dismounted and swooped up Clopina.

"Brother," she said angrily to Beval. "Running the wagon doesn't just mean driving it." She handed the smiling Clopina up to him. "You have to account for everyone before answering Uncle Hugo's 'wagons ready' call."

Beval looked horrified. He knew full well his responsibilities and had personally loaded Clopina into the wagon. It was no excuse and he knew it. If you ran the wagon you were responsible for everyone in it. "Oh please Francesca do not tell father. I will keep her up here with me from now on."

Francesca shook her head in disappointment, but said nothing.

Rupa, who was even wider than her sister said in a deep voice, "You disappoint us brother. Are Bidshika and Dudee up there?"

"I am here Rupa!" answered, Bidshika, her 13 year old brother in a quiet voice. He was afraid for Beval.

"Me too!" shrieked Dudee, their 9 year old sister as she stuck her head out. "Please, please Francesca, get back on Billy. Uncle Hugo said we leave in 10 minutes." Dudee was obviously worried her big sister would be the one holding up the caravan.

Dudee's excitement broke the tension and made Francesca and Rupa smile.

"Ten minutes cousins," said Natasha as she backed toward her wagon. She then continued in a deep voice imitating Uncle Hugo "Come on ladies. You heard the 10 minute call. Now the entire caravan is waiting on you."

Francesca remounted with a smile.

Pulling out on time was something of a Tavish tradition.

Francesca froze when she caught a glimpse of something slipping through the fog. She reached for Rax which caused Rupa to pull Vorst from her back sheath.

“What is it Francesca,” whispered Rupa straining to see.

“Steady there my tall friends. Those two shadows are your cousins Clopin and Aoide looking for the twins.”

Although neither ranger had heard the man approach, both recognized his voice. They turned in their saddles to look down on Master Jak, the family’s halfling friend that had been running wagon 8 for over two years now. At a towering 3’3”, he was an excellent bowmaker and archer. He seemed to take great pride on being able to sneak up on the two women without being detected. The little rascal was bloody good at it.

He too wore some of Rupa’s beautiful studded leather. The short bow slung over his shoulder was magical like Rupa’s Vorst. Its arrows froze anything they hit.

Francesca looked into the fog again to find her cousins. A moment later she spotted the two women slipping through some trees. Francesca moved to help her two cousins find the twins when Rupa stopped her.

“Francesca,” said Rupa. “Let our cousins take care of the children, we need to catch up to dad.”

“Ay Rupa. I know. I just do not understand why they all wander off at the Ten Minute call. They know they are going to get whipped.”

“They always wander off. It is part of the excitement. Remember how we would hide with Aoide and Clopin? Dad would finally have to track us down.” Rupa smiled. “Remember how you and I would try not cry when he paddled us because Aoide and Clopin always cried so loud from Aunt Mnemosyne wagon.”

Francesca smiled and nodded. “I remember those paddling’s. I think if we cried more like our cousins we would have been able to sit rather than stand. I think Dad just kept paddling us until we would let out a yelp.”

“You two go find Garridan,” said Jak. “I will help Aoide and Clopin find the twins. Worst comes to worst, I’ll ask the Dr. Bombay to pound his drums. That always gets the kids moving.”

Dr. Bombay ran wagon 7 with his assistant, Toby. The incredibly tall black man and Toby had joined the caravan just after Jak. Doctor Bombay was a voodoo witch doctor of Baron Samedi and Toby was a deaf mute with limited faculties.

Baron Samedi was technically a god of death, but his role was to guide the dead to the crossroads between life and death, and make sure they crossed over. He could be a terrifying god, appearing at night, demanding tobacco, rum, and money.

Jak liked the Doctor. He was a great crowd pleaser and while the people were listening to him and watching his flashy rituals, it was easy to slip through them and examine what they had in their pockets.

Pick pocketing was sort of a gypsy tradition, which was one of the reasons Jak liked the family so much. Jak knew he was good, but, being amongst so many pick pockets was interesting. Uncle Victor was by far the best and Clopin was almost as good as Jak was except when she cheated and stole from the town's men. The men got so dazzled by her beauty and attention, they did realize she was stripping them down.

Jak ran off into the fog. He figured he knew where the twins were hiding.

xxx

A dark wolf, nearly invisible so cloaked it was by the fog and brush, watched the halfling run towards the rear of the caravan. Neither the horses nor the dogs smelled the wolf because it had positioned itself downwind next to a mint bush.

Although large, the wolf looked normal except for the eyes. They were intelligent eyes, not the eyes of an animal but of something twisted and unnatural. The wolf was not interested in the nasty little halfling but in the two women who had just snuck by. Although they were a little old, he thought their beauty would more than make up for it. He was most interested in the dark haired girl who had just climbed into the back of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wagon. Yes she was everything his masters had asked for. They needed one more, he thought. Oh it would be so easy, but hopefully not too easy. They would struggle. Oh yes and they would be terrified. They needed one more. The wolf slipped low through the brush and headed towards the back of the caravan. He was joined by a second male and two females. They all moved like shadows.

xxx

Dr. Bombay, the nearly 7' tall black voodoo priest, sat atop wagon 7 waiting for the Wagons Ready call. He wore a black top hat and a ragged black trench coat open in the front to expose a muscular chest. His black wagon was packed to the roof and required a team of 6 horses to pull. The only other team of six was Garridan's wagon that carried a small forge. Dr. Bombay never could figure out how the others got by with so little.

He said to himself, "Mon, It feels good to be a ready instead of a rushin' around." Though schedule meant nothing to him, Hugo was a good friend and he knew how upset the gypsi got when the caravan was delayed.

First Mnemosyne's daughters then Jak materialize out of the fog.

Aoide looked at Jak with a raised eyebrow, "Looking for the twins?"

"Aye m'lady. I volunteered after stopping your two large cousins from hurling their axes at you in the fog."

“Well thank you Master Jak,” said Clopin bowing deeply. “You should know by now those two are always ready to throw those old axes, but be confident, they always know what they are aiming at.”

“If you say so pretty lady.” Jak said shaking his head.

Aoide looked over at Dr. Bombay’s wagon and then up at the priest. “Dr. Bombay do you have any stowaways?”

Dr. Bombay sighed and shook his head. “Those demons got in there agin did they? Mon they be quiet ones aye. I be checkin’ all the time I be a loadin’ mon and I see nuttin” The nearly 7’ tall priest stepped down from the buckboard and, with the others, circled around to back.

With his hand on his hips, Dr. Bombay said in a booming voice, “Ya two be comin’ out right now or I be putting a hex on ya to crave horse drippin’s”.

Moments later two young boys scrambled out the trap door and made a run for it. They were fast, but their cousins Aoide and Clopin had anticipated the old maneuver, having done it many times themselves. They caught them within two wagon lengths.

Holding one of Aunt Kerry’s six year old twins, Aoide said, “Gallie, you are not making this any easier on yourself. You know your mom is going tan your hide.”

“Oh Aoide, don’t tell mom we were hiding in Dr. Bombay’s wagon. Tell her we got lost.”

“Yeah Aoide,” said his brother Gillie, “just tell her we were chasing off some wolves. We really did you know.”

“Aoide, Clopin,” said Jak bowing, “It looks like you have everything well in hand. I need to get back to my wagon before...” Jak was interrupted by Uncles Hugo’s loud call.

“WAAAAAGONNNNS REAAAADY!!!”

They all ran back to their wagons. The two girls had to drag the screaming twins.

The girls heard their brother callout “AUNT MNEMOSYNE’S WAGON READY. AOIDE AND CLOPIN HORSEBACK!”

Jak sprang up into his wagon. “Hurry you two!”

“UNCLE GARRIDAN’S WAGON READY. UNCLE GARRIDAN, FRANCESCA AND RUPA HORSEBACK!” Yelled Beval, his voice breaking badly.

Poor Beval, thought Aoide. He would get a good ribbing at the campfire tonight. She noticed her skinny sister was having problems moving with Gillie so Aoide grabbed his other arm. “You are not making this any easier on yourself Gillie.”

Cousin Pias and his wife Camlo encouraged them as they passed their heavily loaded merchant wagon.

Uncle Victor yelled, "UNCLE VICTOR'S WAGON READY!"

As they reached Aunt Kerry's wagon, Lyanka and Porcelain, the two eldest jumped out of the back of the wagon. Their shawls caught the wind and flew off their shoulders.

"WE HAVE THEM MOM!" They yelled together. Each grabbed a boy and started shoving them in the wagon.

"AUNT KERRY'S WAGON FINALLY READY," yelled Aunt Kerry.

"Oh thank you," said Lyanka. She was seventeen and just pregnant with her first. "Mom was beside herself with worry." She finished loading the boys while Porcelain retrieved their shawls.

"Try a leash next time," said Clopin. "Come on Aoide." Clopin grabbed her sister's hand and they ran for their horses.

"Thank you my dears!" Yelled Aunt Kerry as they passed.

"PIAS'S WAGON READY!"

"JAK'S WAGON IS READY!"

"I'M READY!"

The caravan was uncomfortably quiet.

"SORRY! DR. BOMBAY'S WAGON READY!"

Uncle Hugo called out "WAGONS HO!!!!". With a chorus of "giddy up" "get up there" "move along" the eight brightly painted wagons moved south.

Four dark shapes followed a few miles behind.

.....

When moving camp, the first few hours of traveling was always the best. The horses were bristling with energy and everyone was excited about the places they were going and the things they would see.

Aoide and Clopin caught up to Francesca and Rupa who told them Uncle Garridan had circled around to take up rear guard and that they were suppose to stay up front and "keep their eyes open".

The four cousins rode and talked. It was a beautiful, crisp morning with no Aunts or Uncles trying to marry them off and no younger cousins to look after. As the four oldest cousins, they were always responsible for the cousins. It was a little tiring at times. They were also not popping out children as good gypsy girls were expected to do. At 15 both Aunt Mnemosyne

and the late Aunt Dooriya already had Aoide and Francesca. Aunt Kerry had 4 before turning 20 and at 30 was pregnant with her 12<sup>th</sup>, nine of which still lived.

By midmorning they had flushed out all the most urgent conversation and decided to do some hunting. They were well ahead of the caravan and had seen no other tracks so the road was clear. They traveled for another 30 minutes before Francesca found some turkey tracks.

Turkey's were fun to hunt. It was great sport seeing how close you could get to them before they spooked.

They strung their bows and let their horses graze away from the road. Francesca lead them through to a meadow where a flock of turkeys milled about. Although Francesca and Rupa were the best shots, Clopin was able to get the closest before hers spooked. In the end, they killed 10 for the night's dinner.

The four girls returned to their horses and continued scouting.

....

It was mid-afternoon when Francesca found a suitable campsite beside a small stream. They rode back to the caravan and lead them in.

Uncle Hugo ran an efficient caravan. He quickly circled the wagons and people went about the business of setting up a travel camp. Travel camps were setup for a one or two day stay. No tents, no equipment, minimal cooking. All in all a lot less work which was one of the reasons everyone was in such a good mood by the time the turkey was served.

After dinner, Aoide and Clopin got the family dancing with mandolin and song. Uncle Victor and cousin Jessica backed them up with their fiddles.

Jak and Dr. Bombay sat atop Jak's wagon and smoked their pipes.

The night was a little chilly, but the fire was warm. They family danced and talked late into the night.

By midnight, only Natasha, Jak, Bombay, and the four oldest cousins sat around the fire in their camp chairs. Bombay and Jak smoked their pipes. Rupa was repairing some leather armor. Francesca was knitting. Clopin was juggling 4 small balls of fire. Aoide was softly playing her mandolin and humming.

"I am surprised Mom has not called you in yet," Clopin said to Natasha. The four balls hung in the air.

"Me too," said Natasha.

"She thinks you are old enough to decide your own bedtime," said Aoide.

Natasha tried to hide a proud smile.

"I agree with Aunt Mnemosyne," said Francesca. "You can take care of yourself. Only Beval is a better shot and he is two years older. Keep practicing and you will best him one day."

"Thank you" said Natasha. After a moment she added quietly. "You are all better than him."

"We are older too," said Rupa.

Jak puffed out a ring of smoke. "I'd wager you four were better than him at 14 too." Natasha's face turned sad. "But, with some practice, young Natasha here could be better than you were at 16."

Natasha's face lit up. "Do you really think so Master Jak." Only Uncle Gerridan was a better archer than Jak and Jak's bow was the envy of all the children. It was small enough for them to handle and it shot frozen arrows.

"I do little lady. The simple fact is you have more raw talent. If you focus it on the bow <he looked over at Clopin> instead of balls of fire. You will be fine archer." He paused for a moment. "How about trying my bow tomorrow?"

Natasha's eyes lit up, "Oh Master Jak that would be wonderful."

The others smiled at Jak's rare offer. He seldom talked to the children, let alone offer to let one fire his bow. This was a special month for Natasha. She had received her shawl, was out late with the older cousins, and Master Jak was going to let her fire his bow.

They stayed up another hour or so. Young Natasha tried to be like one of the older cousins, but could not keep her eyes open. Aoide and Clopin woke her up and the three of them crawled into their bedrolls under the wagon.

Although the small pack of dogs owned by the various family members would alert the camp if anybody came around, Uncle Hugo still posted a guard.

.....

## **October 6th, cy 717**

The next day, they met four men on horseback going the same way. The men were low on supplies so they bought some from Uncle Victor. Some of their weapons and armor needed repair, so the family offered to stop earlier and fix it.

Uncle Garridan and Rupa setup their forge and applied their trade. In the meantime, Aunt Kerry flirted with Brady, the leader of the men, while Jak rifled through their unattended saddle bags.

Jak saw Clopin flirt with one of the other men. When he asked her how much for a toss, she slapped him. The other men laughed at their comrade's misfortune which made him mad. He grabbed Clopin and pulled her in for a kiss.

Jak shook his head in disgust as she "struggled". The man thought he was getting the best of her and she was emptying his pockets. On queue, Francesca appeared and gently pressed

Rax's impossibly sharp blade on the back of the man's neck. The man froze, as they always did, and the 'poor defenseless girl' made a break for it.

Jak sat down on a log behind some brush and mumbled to himself, "She cheats. What skill does it take when the chump is trying to get closer to you." He counted his money and appraised a ring. "She cheats. That is all there is to it."

"This from the thief that 'sneaks' up on saddle bags."

Jak jumped. "Damm it Clopin!" He settled back down.

"Oh Master Jak! That was splendid. You just about jumped out of your skin." Clopin sat down next to the halfling. She was very pleased with herself. Nobody ever surprise Master Jak. She pulled her loot out and counted it.

Jak looked up at her, "So how much cheater?"

She shrugged, "10 platinum, 52 gold, 25 silver, and 18 copper."

"And...."

"And what?"

"I saw you take his necklace."

"Oh that." She held up her hand and a necklace fell from her sleeve. She smiled from ear to ear. "Men are such chumps when they are kissing." She handed it to Jak. "How much is it worth?"

Jak shook his head. "When are you going to learn what things are worth? What good is nabbing something if the shark you sell it too rips you off?" Jak examined the necklace carefully.

Clopin rested her elbows on her knees and her head on her hands, "Why should I. Someone in the caravan always knows."

He held the necklace in front of her. "It is worth about 200gp. You should be able to get 100gp for it in a town."

"Oh I think I could do better than that." she said with a smile. She did not take the necklace, but instead tilted her head and stared at it.

"How much did you get Jak?"

"Over 500gp."

She still stared dumbly at the necklace for a long time. "That will make for some excitement."

"It always does." He still held the necklace in front on her. "Take it m'lady so you can sell it."

She broke out of her trance with a smile. "Oh you know I will not be the one who sells it." She took the necklace and slipped it into a hidden pocket in the bodice of her dress. "Aoide well get almost the full 200 for it."

Jak knew she was right. The family always had Aoide sell the most expensive stuff. He did not know how the bard did it. She did not now what hardly anything was worth, but once they gave her a target price, she usually got it or more.

"BRADY!!!!" Yelled Clopin's amorous friend from the camp.

"And it begins...." whispered Clopin as she and Jak slipped through the brush to get a better look.

The four travelers were standing by their horses frantically going through their saddle bags. The two rogues watched as the men first asked then accused then threatened. The family feigned first ignorance, then denial, then steadfastness.

It always fascinated Jak how the marks didn't realize until the end that almost every one of the gypsies were carrying weapons and that these seemingly poor homeless people were actually a small platoon that had practiced this dance for over a century.

The men waited by their horses until the armor and weapons were finished. They then argued a little about the price since they had very little money left. They finally paid for the repairs with two rings and a nose pin. The four men hit the rode even though there was only an hour of daylight left.

Franseca, Rupa, and Uncle Garridan followed for a few miles to make sure they did not double back.

.....

As promised, Jak gave Natasha archery lessons and let her use his bow. Predictably, fourteen of the teenagers soon joined in to test their skills. All the kids under 10 sat and watched. Dudee, Francesca and Rupa's little sister was especially excited. She would turn 10 next week and could hardly wait to get her first bow. She gave Louzsa, who had just turned 10, so much advice, that Louzsa called her a bad name and got spanked by Aunt Kerry.

As usual, Beval came out on top, but Natasha was much closer to him this time. Saule and Chal scored the next highest. Uncle Hugo and Uncle Garridan must have decided this was bow practice because they signaled for Rupa and Francesca to gather up Esmerelda, Jessica, and Lankya (the only teenagers not already practicing) and run all 17 of them through the drills.

Later that night, Uncle Hugo was in a good mood, even though they had not made too many miles that day. The family had made some money and met some interesting people. He clamped his hands in rhythm to the music as Esmerelda, Jessica, and Lankya (the oldest teenage girls) taught the other girls a traditional gypsy dance. Aoide and Clopin even got Aunt

Mnemosyne to sing a song. She had a fine voice, but seldom sang anymore. She said she preferred to listen to her daughters.

The last ones around the campfire were the same as the previous night with the addition of Pias who, with Jak had pulled the first guard shift. They all were tired so did not stay up too late. Pias and Jak got a fresh pot of coffee brewing and lit their pipes as the rest turned in.

....

The camp awoke to the sudden barking of the dogs, followed shortly by Pias and Jak screaming "Attack!" "Worg riders!".

Aoide, Natasha, Clopin, and Saule scrambled out from under their wagon and grabbed their weapons. The camp was in chaos. Worg riders were everywhere.

Aoide and Saule were immediately engaged by two riders.

Aoide used her bow as a quarterstaff and sang out in a clear deep voice, "A gypsi's home is flesh and bone. A moving bed the road ahead."

Saule, with sword and dagger, shivered at the sound of her voice. "Ahhhh!!!" He slashed the worg across the chest.

From atop the wagon, Aunt Mnemosyne fired her short bow and added her voice to the old gypsi campfire song. "A wagon creak a snow cap peak."

Saule and Aunt Kerry added their voices, "A man's long stride the valleys wide."

Meanwhile, Clopin and Natasha had rolled back under the wagon and out the other side. Natasha had ran to the back of the wagon and Clopin to the front.

Clopin got behind the orc attacking Aoide, pointed her finger and said "Brand straal!" A fiery ray shot from her finger and exploded the back of his head.

Aoide nodded her head in appreciation but kept singing. She knocked an arrow as she turned and fired point blank at the rider attacking Saule. At the same time Saule feinted high and then buried his dagger in the worg's right foot. The brother/sister combo dislodged the orc from this mount. Saule advanced on the worg while Aoide fired another arrow at the prone orc.

Cousin Pias was fighting two of them and slowly loosing ground, until one of them fell from his mount with a frosty arrow through his throat. "Much obliged Master Jak!" Pias yelled as he concentrated on the remaining orc.

Jak knocked another arrow and drew the bow back. He felt the arrow freeze under his glove. He let loose at a rider charging down Aunt Kerry's twins. It caught the orc in the back and knocked him from the worg. Unfortunately the worg kept going and was just about to overtake the children when he got blasted sideways by a bolt of lightning.

“STAY AWAY FROM MY CHILDREN!” Grandma stood on top of her wagon and shook her fist.

Meanwhile, Uncle Hugo had leapt from the back of his wagon to tackle an orc as it rode by. Uncle Hugo was an excellent wrestler and easily pulled the unsuspecting orc off the worg. The two tumbled on the ground. Uncle Hugo was choking the life out of the orc when the worg circled back and attacked him. The worg’s sharp teeth tore through Uncle Hugo’s nightshirt and took a hunk out of his shoulder. Uncle Hugo rolled to his feet and slowly backed up. His right arm was useless. He switched his sword to his left as a second and then a third worg rider appeared and began advancing.

“DOWN UNCLE!” “DOWN UNCLE!”

Hugo hit the ground as his nieces’ axes, flew over him. Rax, Francesca’s throwing axe spun three and a half times before burying itself in the first orc’s head. Her little sister’s greataxe followed a moment later sinking deeply into worg’s chest.

One of the worgs lunged for Uncle Hugo’s throat but its head was turned by a jaw crushing blow from a skull shaped mace. “Get up mon. Ya be missin’ the fight! Ha!”. The tall priest wore his traditional top hat and flapping black coat. He held back the remaining riders long enough for Hugo to roll to his feet and engage.

Several of the riders had torches which they tossed into the wagons.

As Francesca and Rupa ran to help Pias, they called for axes.

“Rax kom!”

“Vorst Kom!”

The axes pulled themselves free and streaked toward the women. They had just caught them when they heard their grandma cry out.

“ONE HAS PATIA!” Grandma raised her hand like she was going to claw the orc from 60’ away and yelled “BRAND RAKET!” 4 darts of energy sprang from her finger tips and hit the orc, but it did not let go.

“Brand straal!” Clopin’s fiery ray hit a second later and exploded its head. Little Patia dropped to the ground and rolled 20 yards before coming to a stop. Aunt Kerry ran to see if she was alive.

Francesca and Rupa hacked their way to Pias who was completely defensive against 6 riders even with Jak’s help from the top of Pias’s wagon.

By this time, all the teenagers and many of the women were on top of the wagons with their bows.

On the ground, there were three fights going on. Rupa, Francesca, Uncle Victor and Pias fought off 4 riders. Uncle Hugo, Uncle Garridan, and Dr. Bombay fought off 6 riders. Saule, and Aoide fought their last 2. Cousin Chal laid nearby in a puddle of his own blood.

Aoide was using her bow as a staff again. She needed to get to Chal, but the rider would not give way. She could see Clopin had moved behind the orcs again.

“Brand han!” Fire fanned out from Clopin’s fingers and scroched the orcs and worgs. The combination of the fire and the arrows from the teenage cousins dropped Aoide’s orc from its mount, but the worg bit deeply into Aoide’s shoulder causing her to drop her bow.

Saule tried to step in front of his sister but he slipped on some blood and went down. One of the worgs grabbed him by the head and dragged him 30’ before it was dropped by one of Grandma’s lighting bolts.

A horn sounded in the distance. The orcs roared then turned and rode out.

Aoide leapt onto Chal and whispered her spell.

Francesca and Rupa ran to Saule.

“Garridan make sure they are gone!” Uncle Hugo stumbled toward the fire. His whole right side was covered in blood. “Rupa! Check the horses!” “Beval you and the boys take care of the fires. Clopin distribute the remaining archers better. Pias’s wagon only has Master Jak on it.”

Everyone moved.

Aoide helped Chal to his feet, “I know cousin it is a little disorienting but you were dead and now you are not.”

“Francesca your with me!” Uncle Garridan whistled for his horse.

Francesca helped Saule to his feet and whistled.

Chal shook his head and looked down at his bloody shirt. “But...”

Aoide let her cousin be and moved to Saule. She laid her hands on Saule’s head and whispered.

Two horses ran into camp. Both were covered with sweat and blood. From their gait, most of the blood was not theirs. Francesca and Uncle Garridan jumped up onto the horses’ bare backs and left camp the same way the orcs did, South.

Saule dizziness cleared and he looked down on his smiling sister. “Thanks.”

“The hair will take a month or two to grow back.” She kissed his cheek and moved out to help someone else.

Saule saw Rupa heading for the horses. He turned to Uncle Hugo. "I'll help Rupa." Uncle Hugo nodded. "Come on Chal." He grabbed his cousin's arm.

"No, Chal needs to help with the fires." Uncle Hugo pointed to Aunt Kerry's burning wagon. Have the boys give up on Aunt Kerry's and concentrate on the other two.

"Yes sir," Chal moved out.

"Mothers take count!" Uncle Hugo continued yelling orders even while Dr. Bombay healed him.

"Mon, don't ya know they already be callin' after their babes?"

.....

Young Porcelain ran into camp holding a short sword smeared with blood, "Oh Dr. Bombay come quick one of them got Lyanka real bad." The 12yr old did not wait for a response. She turned and ran towards Aunt Kerry's burning wagon.

Aoide and Uncle Hugo started to follow but Dr. Bombay stopped them. "Look to Victor lady. He hav a nasty gash and he won't leave Carmen."

"Aunt Carmen?" Aoide said wide eyed.

"She be with Baron Samedi now. I be sorry lady."

Aoide bit her lip and nodded. She moved out to find her uncle.

He turned to Hugo, "Look after ya family Mon. Trust Dr Bombay."

"I do Doc. I do." Hugo said clapping the man on his back.

Dr. Bombay followed after Porcelain.

Uncle Hugo turned his attention to the fires. Chal worked with half the boys on Victor's fire and Beval with the other boys on Grandma's wagon. It looked like they were going to get the fires under control. Kerry's wagon was a loss, but then it had been in very bad shape anyway so the loss was minimal.

His wife, Jessenia ran to him and grabbed him by his night shirt. "I can't find Esmerelda or Tawni! No one has seen them since the fight started."

"ESMERELDA, TAWNI!" Uncle Hugo yelled.

"It is no use. I have asked everyone."

"HUGO!" Mnemosyne came running to him. "They have Natasha too."

Beval's group had just finished putting out the fire and Chal's group was just checking for any they missed.

"BEVAL, CHAL!" Uncle Hugo called out. "Take the boys and find Esmerelda, Tawni, and Natasha"

"Beval, look for Jessica too," said Aoide as she joined Uncle Hugo and her aunts.

"My dear are you sure Jessica is missing too?" Aunt Mnemosyne asked her daughter. "I don't think Uncle Victor is any condition to be counting his children."

"He had Marilis track down her brothers and sisters. She just told me before shooing me away."

Mnemosyne looked at up Hugo, "They took the girls. All teenagers...."

"I know. I know." Uncle Hugo shook his head. "Those bastard Slave Lords. They will be taking them to Highport to sell on the block." He turned to Aoide. "Get Rupa. See if you and her can find another set of tracks. I did not see any orcs ride out with captives. It was probably another group. Take Clopin and Jak with you."

Aoide gathered up Clopin and Jak and headed out to the horses to get Rupa.

"Uncle Hugo!" Little Porcelain ran up to her uncle. She still carried the short sword and looked dirtier than before. "Dr. Bombay said to meet him by his wagon. It is real important."

Uncle Hugo nodded and ran towards Bombay's wagon with Porcelain two steps behind him.

He found the doctor rummaging through his potion supplies.

"Good girl. Now be tellin' ya uncle about the animal that done attacked ya sister."

"Doc, just tell me is the girl is going to be alright. I am missing 4 girls and don't have time for the details yet."

"Ah whether the child lives or dies depends on ya hearing Porcelain's story."

Hugo bowed his head. "Ok Ok." He turned to his 12yr old niece and said, "Ok Porcelain please tell me your story, but make it fast. I need to find some of your cousins."

Porcelain tightened her lips and nodded. "Those of us with bows were climbing up on top of our wagon like you always taught us. Lyanka was last 'cause she was the oldest. I got to the top and got an arrow out when I saw a big black wolf jump up out of the night and pull Lyanka from the ladder."

"Do you mean worg Porcelain?" Uncle Hugo said.

Porcelain put her hands on her hips which made her look like one of the aunts. So much so that Uncle Hugo flinched.

“Uncle Hugo I am twelve years old and practically a woman. Don't you think I know the difference between a worg and a wolf?”

Uncle Hugo held out his hand to forestall anymore lecture. “I just wanted to make sure because I did not see any wolves this night only worgs.”

“I know Uncle Hugo that is why this story is interesting.”

“Ah mon, let the girl finish while we get back to Lyanka.” The doctor held a small bag in his hand. “Stop interrupting her mon, let her tell it the way she wants.”

“Ok, sorry Porcelain please continue.” They followed Dr. Bombay back to the remains of Aunt Kerry's wagon.

“Thank you Uncle Hugo. Well the wolf was really big and it grabbed Lyanka by the shoulder and dragged her away from the wagon.

“I aim real good and sank one, then two arrows into the wolves back but it did not slow so I slung my bow across my back and swung into the wagon to get mom's pretty short sword.”

She held the bloody sword up for him to see.

“I saw the sword. Keep going please.”

“So I grabbed the sword and jumped down from the wagon ran after the wolf. He was easy to catch 'cause he was dragging Lyanka and she is kinda heavy being pregnant and all.”

They reached were Lyanka was laying on the ground. She was conscious but not responding too well to Aunt Kerry. Although her night dress was torn to shreds and covered with blood, Hugo could see that Dr. Hugo had healed the child because he did not see any open wounds.

All the other remaining adults had come too.

“She looks like she is going to be ok doc, what is the problem?”

“Listen to the child mon.”

“Oh.” Porcelain had forgotten she was telling a story. “So I grabbed the sword in both hands and swung real hard like we have been practicing. The pretty blade slashed open the wolf's head and it howled. It dropped Lyanka right where she lays now and I got between her and the wolf.

“Chavali and Louzsa saw what was happening and started firing their bows at it, but it didn't seem to care. I was real mad so I yelled at it ‘You leave my sister and new niece or nephew alone!’ The wolf cocked its head sideways and growled again. I swung at it again, but it moved back. It looked at me real strange. His eyes were wrong Uncle. They were too smart for a wolf and they glowed red. He then looked at Lyanka as if he was frustrated. He then looked up at my little sisters on the wagon and shook his head. He turned and ran off.”

Uncle Hugo had lost some of his color. "Let me see your sword Porcelain." She gave it to him hilt first like she was taught.

He looked at the sword and then at Dr. Bombay, "Silver"

Aunt Mnemosyne gasped, "Maybe Natasha and the other girls too."

"Ay mon Silver." He took a packet of leaves from the bag and held it up for Hugo to see. "The child hav only one chance with this but you know the risk so make the call mon."

Aunt Kerry looked up in terror. "What is he talking about Hugo. She is fine. You can see that."

Hugo knelt down next to his sister. "She is not fine Kerry. Didn't you hear Porcelain's story. It was a wolf and the arrows did not hurt it."

"I don't understand Hugo. The children chased it away. Who cares if the arrows hurt it."

"The only thing that hurt it was your fancy sword." She shook her head confused. "You had Garridan plate it in silver because you wanted it to shine. Remember Garridan said it was a waste of good silver but you would not listen to him. Your sword is plated in silver Kerry and it, not the arrows, frightened the wolf away."

"So wolves don't like silver."

"Not wolves Kerry, werewolves."

Aunt Kerry gasped.

Grandma knelt down too. "The doctor has some medicine that may save her." Aunt Kerry wept.

Uncle Hugo looked up a Dr. Bombay and nodded.

"Hugo, ya know this could kill her too."

Aunt Kerry wailed and fell across her daughter.

"Get it done doc. I know the risks."

Dr. Bombay took a sprig of belladonna out of the bag and began feeding it to Lyanka. "Hugo, I don't know if it, but I be thinkin' the unborn child had more to do with the wolf a runnin' than the child's small sword."

Uncle Garridan and Francesca rode into camp, dismounted and made their way to the others. They looked like they had seen more action. At the same time Rupa, Clopin, Jak and Aoide emerged from the brush.

“There were four werewolves,” said Rupa.

“The girls?” asked Aunt Mnemosyne.

Rupa nodded, “They were dragging the girls for a while then met up with a dozen worgs. They loaded the girls up on the worgs and headed East.”

Francesca and Uncle Garridan looked at each other. Francesca said, “That make sense. We tracked the 13 remaining worg riders South than East. They met up with 12 worgs. We followed them for sometime and then we were attacked by four huge black wolves. They did not stay too long. We thought they were after our horses.”

Dr. Bombay stood up. “Did ya get bit girl?”

“No.” She looked at her father.

“Damm it yes.” Uncle Garridan grabbed his thigh.

“Eat this mon and pray Baron Samedi no want ya yet.”

Uncle Garridan took the sprig and chewed on it. “I will lead a group within the hour to track them down.”

“Garridan, mon ya won’t be a leadin’ anything. Them workin’ for the slave lords done planned this good. They will be at the coast by morning and on a ship bound for Highport.”

Garridan finished his belladonna and looked at Dr. Bombay. “We go as long as it takes. I don’t need your permission and I am not asking you to come with us.”

“Garridan, the good doctor knows we are going do whatever it takes to bring back the girls. He is just saying you want be going.”

Uncle Garridan eyes went wide, “What are your talking about....”

Hugo held out his hand, “Brother, you have been bitten by a werewolf. If you live through the belladonna we still will not know if it has worked until the next full moon. That is a month away.”

“But....”

“Do you want to be alone with your daughters when the madness takes you?”

Uncle Garridan’s head dropped. “No.” A moment later he looked up at his girls. “You bring them back like I taught you.”

“Yes sir.” “Yes father.”

Aunt Mnemosyne looked at Aoide and Clopin with tears in her eyes. “Bring her back please, oh bring her back.”

Aoide and Clopin embraced their mother and all three cried.

Saule, Beval and Chal stepped forward and Chal said, "We will go too."

Uncle Hugo and Uncle Garridan shook their heads.

"But Uncle Hugo..." Saule started but his uncle cut with a firm hand on the shoulder.

"With your older cousins gone, I need you here to protect the family." The boys nodded and hugged their cousins.

"So its Highport you are heading to," said Jak with a pipe in his mouth. "You are going to try and rescue your cousins from the Slave Lords."

Aoide wiped the tears from her eyes, "That is the general plan Master Jak. Why? Can you offer us some pearls of wisdom."

"What do you know about the Slave Lords?"

Clopin folded her arms under her chest, "They steal young girls and will all die a horrible death."

"That much is probably true, but they have been stealing girls for decades and many brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, and cousins have died trying to rescue them."

"Master Jak," said Aunt Mnemosyne "I know you are not saying we should let them take our children."

He let out a puff of smoke, "No No, just do this with your heads not with axe and bow."

"Are you volunteering to come with us?" asked Aoide.

"Well of course I am coming with you." He jumped down off the blacken wagon wheel.

"Natasha has the makings of a fine thief, but she still needs a few more years of practice." He puffed on his pipe. "As fate would have it I lived in Highport for a time and can probably keep you four out of trouble long enough to find them."

Aoide bowed. "Master Jak, we welcome you and your pearls of wisdom."

"Ya be havin' me as sixth if it be ok with your uncles. Baron Samedi not be a likin' dees Slave Lords."

**October 7<sup>th</sup>, cy 717**

tbd

## October 13<sup>th</sup>, cy 717 Elredd

Jak sat atop a hay bail and re-counted the money they had taken off the muggers. There were nine in all. Five lay dead around him and four got away.

It had been a profitable trip so far. Five days ago, they had left the caravan in pursuit of the kidnappers. They had tracked the worgs to a beach where, Francesca had deduced that Natasha and Jessica had been loaded onto a ship with the werewolves and Esmerelda and Tawni had continued North with the worgs.

The group had headed north and had caught the worgs. After a frightening battle, they succeeded in rescuing the two girls and brought them back to the caravan.

After re-supplying, the group headed North to the city of Elredd where they had learned was where the ship carrying Natasha and Jessica was bound. They arrived in Elredd around noon and had spent an hour talking to an old boyfriend of Aunt Mnemosyne, a man by the name of Jamven.

Jamven said the Slave Lords did not sell slaves here, but moved them to Highport. The man most likely to be holding the girls was a dwarf named Ragnar who could be found at a tavern called the Broken Rudder. Dr. Bom'bay had hoped to buy back the girls, but Jamven said it would mean a side deal with Ragnar and those sometimes went bad.

The group decided to spend the night in town and had made their way to Aunt Rose. It was a cat house run by Madame Fritts but it also rented out rooms. It was in the Aunt Rose barn that the group had been attacked by 9 muggers.

Aoide and Rupa had just left to tell Madame Fritts of the attack.

"Francesca could you carry the money?" asked Jak. "It is getting too heavy for me."

Francesca nodded and took the heavy backpack.

Moments later Madame Fritts appeared with Rupa and Aoide close behind. She apologized for trouble and sent somebody off to get a constable.

The group went up to their rooms and stowed their gear. It was early evening, but the bar was already filling up. Everyone washed up and then made their way down.

Aoide and Clopin sashayed across the room to the bar and were immediately offered drinks. Jak followed in their wake and helped himself to items he was sure the slaked jawed men would not miss.

Two men at the end of the bar pointed at the gypsy girls and yelled to Madame Frittz, "How much for those two?"

"I wished those two worked for me," answered the madame. "Like the sign says, " she pointed to a sign behind the bar. "Only those wearing chokers work for the house. Any one propositioning any other will be escorted from the house."

Madame Frittz then turned to Aoide and Clopin, "I would appreciate you not practicing your trade while under my roof."

Aoide gave the Madame a wicked smile and said, "Ah Madame Frittz not all gypsies are tramps and thieves." She then sang out in her deep tenor.

<play this while reading....

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOSZwEwl\\_1Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOSZwEwl_1Q)

>

*I was born in the wagon of a travellin show  
My mama used to dance for the money theyd throw  
Papa would do whatever he could  
Preach a little gospel, sell a couple bottles of doctor good.*

Aoide's deep clear voice silenced the crowd in expanding waves. Clopin added her alto to create a perfect harmony.

*Gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
Wed hear it from the people of the town  
Theyd call us gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
But every night all the men would come around  
And lay their money down*

Now everyone in the bar had turned to listen. Clopin and Aoide had performed this song for many crowds and knew how to entertain. They were all smiles and began dancing to their own rhythm. Aoide locked her eyes on a big sergeant sitting at the front table and began the next verse alone.

*Picked up a boy just south of Blowhole  
Gave him a ride, filled him with a hot bowl  
I was sixteen, he was twenty-one  
Rode with us to Highport  
And papa woulda kill him if he knew what hed done*

The crowd cheered, the sergeant blushed, Jak stole some more, Dr. Bom'bay light a cigar, Rupa hummed along, and Francesca went back to the room to fetch her cousin's mandolins. Francesca figured entertaining the crowd was as good a way as any to gather more information about the Slave Lords.

Aoide turned to Clopin and the two sisters danced as they sang the chorus. Once the crowd recognized the word they began clapping and cheering, but the sisters practiced voices cut through it all.

*Gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
Wed hear it from the people of the town*

*Theyd call us gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
But every night all the men would come around  
And lay their money down*

Aoide turned back to the sergeant as she sang the next verse.

*I never had schoolin but he taught me well  
With his smooth southern style  
Three months later Im a gal in trouble  
And I havent seen him for a while, uh-huh  
I havent seen him for a while, uh-huh*

Aoide turned back to Clopin as they sang the final verse to each other. Both girls were all smiles and danced even faster.

*She was born in the wagon of a travellin show  
Her mama had to dance for the money theyd throw  
Grandpad do whatever he could  
Preach a little gospel, sell a couple bottles of doctor good*

*Gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
Wed hear it from the people of the town  
Theyd call us gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
But every night all the men would come around  
And lay their money down*

*Gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
Wed hear it from the people of the town  
Theyd call us gypsys, tramps, and thieves  
But every night all the men would come around  
And lay their money down*

The bar was all cheers and whistles and applause.

Madame Frittz clapped and said, "My dears you can practice THAT trade here any time you want. That was wonderful. Please, please sing another."

Francesca pushed her way through the crowd with the mandolins held above her head. "How about 'I'm here for the party' Everyone always likes that one." Francesca said as she handed her cousins their instruments and settled herself next to Aoide. Rupa moved to a seat a couple down from Clopin.

Dr. Bom'bay sat by himself at a booth in the corner of the tavern. A server had finally brought him a bottle of rum and he was settled down for a nice evenin'. He noticed the his little buddy was still slipping through the crowd. He hoped the little guy would not push his luck too much.

The priest turned his attention back to the bar, which Aoide and Clopin were now sitting on with their instruments. They began signing and playing. The crowd fell silent again and the doctor smiled as he took a puff from his cigar. The sergeant Aoide was toying with had that

dumb look on his face that people got when Aoide had them enthralled. He would sit and listen to her for hours now. The guard next to him also had that dumb look on his face.

He caught Clopin's eyes narrow for an instant. He followed her gaze to find Jak smiling back at her. She did not like being the distraction for Jak's profit. She would probably try to convince him that some of his take was due to her.

One of the men got up and moved in close to Clopin. Clopin just smiled and kept on signing. Dr. Bom'bay knew she was happy her first mark had stepped up to be fleeced. He saw Rupa turn slightly to watch the man. Those rangers were always within an axe haft length of their cousins when men were about. He hoped his nice evening would not end in another fight.

The doc was knocking back another shot of rum when he spotted something odd. He slowly set the glass back on the table. Jak was leaning against a post, seeming to clean a figure nail with his knife, but Dr. Bom'bay could tell he was saying something. The closest person was a dwarf sitting by himself in a booth. It did not look like Jak was in danger or at least it did not look like Jak thought he was in danger. Dr. Bom'bay watched for a few moments and then the Dwarf got up and left the bar.

.....

Jak made his way through the crowd to the Doctor. They exchanged quick words and the doctor got up and headed to his room. Jak then wisked his way to Madame Fritz. They exchanged words and she took out a piece of parchment and a quill. Jak quickly scribbled something down and gave the quill to Fritz and put a gold coin on the counter. He left and then returned to exchange the gold for 30 silver and proceeded to where Rupa and Francessca preside. After some words exchanged Franscesca left to her room while the mammoth-Rupa picked the halving up and put him on her shoulders. She carried him to the dancing gypsies all the while he's hooted and hollered trying to blend in the crowd of girl crazy bar urchins. Upon reaching Aoide he took the note and stuffed it in her cleavage. Aoide, not expecting the manuever, slapped Jak off Rupa and into the crowd where he disappeared.

Aoide re-adjusted her boobs to the cheers of the crowd. Nobody noticed that she recovered and read the note.

*"About 2 b atacked. Tel clopin try & 2 get lover to help. Docs getting the gear. We got less than 10 mins"*

Aoide gives Clopin a meaningful look and starts up a general stage song for them. Clopin listens to hear what message Aoide is trying to convey with the song.

(June Carter and Johnny Cash -or Carl Smith- in "Time's a Wastin")

*Aoide: Now I've got legs*

*Clopin: And I've got legs*

*Together: Let's get together and use those legs*

*Aoide: Let's go*

*Together: Time's a wastin'*

*Aoide: I've got hips*

*Clopin: And I've got hips*

*Together: Let's get together and use those hips*

*Aoide: Let's go*

*Together: Time's a wastin'*

*Clopin: A heart's no good if you don't have the stomach to break it*

*Aoide: And life's full of trouble even if you're not the one to make it*

*Together: So if you're free to go with me*

*Together: I'll take you quicker than 1-2-3*

*Aoide: Let's go*

*Together: Time's a wastin'*

*(Instrumental Break)*

*Aoide: Now I've got woes*

*Clopin: And I've got woes*

*Together: Let's get acquainted and lose those woes*

*Aoide: Let's go*

*Together: Time's a wastin'*

*Aoide: Now I've got feet*

*Clopin: And I've got feet*

*Together: Let's start dancin' to the poundin' beat*

*Aoide: Let's go*

*Together: Time's a wastin'*

*Clopin: You've got me wantin' to call this cat house home*

*Aoide: We can stay till Saturday comes then it's time to roam.*

*Aoide: Now I'm your friend*

*Clopin: And I'm your friend*

*Together: Let's get together and wow some men*

*Aoide: Let's go*

*Together: Time's a wastin'*

Now of COURSE Clopin understood that they were in trouble when Aoide switched around some words in their song to point out that TROUBLE was coming their way. And of COURSE Clopin was clever enough to sing back in code to Aoide, asking if it they were safe in the cat house. And of COURSE when Aoide said "Saturday" Clopin knew it was code for "Samedi" seeing as "Samedi" is "Saturday" in English. And of COURSE Clopin made the connection between Samedi and Bombay. And when Aoide said "till Saturday comes" Clopin knew she meant that when Bombay came back down it was time to split. After the song was over Aoide mouths "10 minutes" to Clopin with her back turned to the audience.

Next Aoide and Clopin will sang "I Can't Do it Alone" (from Chicago). This will give them a perfect opportunity to mime and plan while still performing on stage. That way the rest of the group can kinda work on what we're doing to get outta this.

Aoide and Clopin spotted the halfling sneak up stairs.

Rupa, who did not understand any of the song, knew there was trouble coming because Jak told her. She moved to the stool next to Clopin which crowded her "boy friend" a little.

Aoide and Clopin started another song. Fran, Jak and Bom were still upstairs. Two big men with long swords come into the bar and sit at a table. They are trying to look casual. A few seconds later another man comes in armed the same. He makes eye contact with the two at the table and finds himself a place at the bar. Three sailors come in, nod to the two at the table and find a place against the far wall to listen to the song. Two female fighters, probably sell swords for how well they are armed, ignore the men at the table but are obviously interested in Aoide and Clopin. Two more pairs of men make eye contact with the men at the first table and find tables themselves. Finally, Jak's dwarf friend comes in and sits down at his same booth. He makes eye contact with Clopin and mouths, "Leave the horses. Men at stable".

.....

Jak slipped up stairs and found Bom,bay and Francesca packing the bags. They all heard the girl's song downstairs and understood the hidden message. The girls were waiting for the three of them to come down stairs.

While they packed Bom'bay said maybe it wasn't such a good idea coming into town as gypsies being as the Slave Lords were probably expecting a rescue from gypsies. Bom'bay will suggest that Gypsies dressed like Gypsies asking questions about kidnapped Gypsies is a bad idea. He suggested disguises.

"Time to go. We'll leave separately, but wait for each other just outside the tavern. I don't want us seen leaving together, but it'll be worse if we split up," said Dr. Bom'bay.

"I will be the last one out, after our dancing queens safely exit."

Jak said, "I gonna look for people entering the place and check if they look suspicious. Wait here."

"Be quick, mon. My father was brought here on these slave ships and I'm not goin' back on one, mon. Come back up in thirty seconds in ya spot trouble, othawise the pretty lass an' me will start da exodus, mon."

.....

Jak got to the top of the stairs and looked around. The bar was more crowded and he noticed his friend the dwarf was back in his booth. He leaned out a little to catch the girl's attention.

Jak silently mouthed to Clopin, Aoide and Rupa "Ok to come down?".

Aoide and Clopin bowed low once their song ended. They saw Jak and Aoide glided over to the bar near the staircase while Clopin began the next song alone. Aoide asked the bartender for a couple drinks and when his back was turned she looked straight ahead (not making eye contact with Jak), let her hair fall on either side of her face so no one but Jak could see her face, and mouthed sporadically.

"Go back upstairs. I think I can get the 3 of us upstairs safely. I can get 4 of us invisible and Rupa and Frank can go out as men. We'll just go back down the stairs and everyone will think we're still upstairs."

Once served her drinks Aoide turned around and settled herself in between the sergeant and guard she had fascinated.

"Sorry, I don't mean to crowd you guys. I just need to sit down for a minute." Aoide giggled as she stroked the arm of the nearest guard. She didn't wait for them to answer. Usually when she had them stunned that took too long anyway.

"I would love it if my sister and I could just go upstairs for a half an hour or so to rest, instead of having to stay down here. You know, so we didn't get bothered while we're trying to rest. But whenever we perform people follow us to our rooms so we don't get much rest anyway. What's a girl to do?" Aoide giggled again. "Unless..." Aoide began her Suggestion "I mean, if her and I were to go upstairs, would you two gentlemen be so kind as to make sure no one follows us up? Just for half an hour or so. I'm sure that would make a world of difference and my sister and I would be so grateful to the two of you." Aoide batted her eyes up at the sergeant while she rested her hand on the guard's knee.

"Sure nuff m'am," the big sergeant said dumbly.

"Yeah, sure," his friend added starry eyed.

Aoide flashed a final smile at the men before turning back to the where Clopin sat at the bar. She bumped into Rupa as she made her way across the room. She feigned an apology and then quickly moved in closer to Rupa and whispered.

"Go upstairs when I give the signal. Change and leave with Frank immediately. Wait outside the gates of town for us."

Rupa made no indication that she had heard what Aoide said, but Aoide continued anyway.

Aoide stepped up onto a barstool to climb back up on the bar with Clopin. Clopin reached out a hand to help up her sister, but when Aoide went to take Clopin's hand she lost her balance and fell backwards off the barstool. Her skirt flew up around her waist exposing colorful gypsy undergarments to the room. Several men ran to her side, pushing others to get to her first till finally four men had lifted her back onto her feet. Aoide reemerged from the fray blushing violently. After a quick scan of the bar she saw that Rupa had snuck away and it looked to be unnoticed. The distraction worked.

"All right, fellas." Aoide said finally getting herself up onto the bar. "It looks like I've had a little too much to drink. One last song and then my sister and I are going to take a break. Give us

an hour and we'll be back on our feet." Aoide laughed at her own pathetic joke, but the rest of the room began laughing on cue anyway. Clopin handed Aoide her mandolin and Aoide began playing.

.....

Shortly after Jak left, Dr. Bom'bay and Franseska heard Clopin start a song by herself. About 15 seconds later, they heard Aoide scream and fall on the ground. This was followed quickly by lots of laughter. They were about to go down stairs to investigate when they heard Aoide and Clopin start another song.

About that time Jak slipped around the corner and signalled them back to the room. They were just about to the room when Rupa whipped around the corner and joined them. Clopin and Aoide were still signing.

Bom'bay began swearing nastily in the Infernal tongue. Then he hissed in Common through gritted teeth, "What da hell are those jezabelles doin' down dere! By the spit of Wee Jas, we need to leave dis place, and now, mon!"

.....

Aoide and Clopin continue singing and playing. Two more sell swords come in and sit down in the booth with the dwarf. That makes 15 thugs that are very interested in the two girls. Some of them are looking around a little confused. Rupa's exit seemed to have worked. One of the two female sell swords looks upstairs and whispers to the other woman at the table. She then turns to the three sailors leaning against the wall by the foot of the stairs and signals for them to go up. The three saliors start up the stairs.

Aoide lets Clopin sing the next verse alone while she twirls on the spot. When her face is hidden she mumbles the incantation for Grease. She casts it on the stairs two steps above the step the first sailor is on. Then she waits.

.....

Jak shushed the tall priest, "Aoide said she could get the three of them up here safely. She said she could get 4 of us invisible and Rupa and Frank could go out as men. We'll just go back down the stairs and everyone will think we're still upstairs."

Rupa added, "Look like men. Swell. I guess we have to look stupid and drool at the whores. Aoide said we should all meet outside the gates."

Rupa checked her pack and then added, "Oh and there are 12-15 thugs down there waiting to jump us and more in the stable. Jak's dwarf friend said to abandon the horses. Ok, I am ready."

From down below they heard some men yell out on the stairway and then tumble noisely down to the tavern floor. The tavern erupted in laughter.

.....

The two female sell swords scowled at the men and signaled them to go back up.

Meanwhile, Madame Fritz had arrived and helped the men up, "Fellas. Take it slow. My girls are here all night. You just sit right here and I will have next three that are available take you on up nice and easy."

"Uh m'am we just want to go up to our rooms," the 'leader' of the three said.

"But you do not have rooms and I am all booked up. You just wait here."

"We want to go up and wait."

"Now that is not how it is done," she said signally to her bouncers.

A pair of stereotypic bouncer waddled over and stood over the three sailors and the madame.

"Nop and Dan, would find these three a nice place to sit and wait."

The three sailors looked at the two female sell swords for guidance. One of the females nodded for them to go sit down while the other glanced up at the stairway just as Clopin and Aoide rounded the corner at the top.

The sergeant and his friend noticed the girls were gone and moved their chairs to the base of the stairs.

.....

Clopin and Aoide ran down the hall and into the room with the rest of the people.

The group spent some time catching everybody up on what was what. They then started making plans but were stopped when they heard people running down the hall yelling and searching rooms. Their door busted open and one of the female sell swords tried to rush in but was stopped by Rupa.

The gypsies jumped out the window and out ran the thugs. Unfortunately Kingsley was killed and they lost all their horses.

## **October 14<sup>th</sup>, cy 717 Elredd**

They camped the rest of the night outside of Elredd. In the morning, Dr. Bom'bay convinced the group that the Slave Lords must keep records and that they needed to go back into town and find them. The dwarf Ragnar and his place of business, the Broken Rudder seemed like a good place to start. Ragnar was some sort of minor slave lord and the head of the local slave ring.

It was decided that only their two thieves, Jak and Clopin would go in. They disguised themselves as children and went back to Elredd.

They cased the Broken Rudder during the day and then snuck in through the top story at around midnight. Searching through the rooms, they discover there were three key people at the Broken Rudder. Ragnar, the minor slave lord; Hazzard, the elderly bookkeeper/wizard, and Carn, the tavern manager. They also found the following documents.

### **Ragnar's Room**

Account Ledgers: This is a sheaf of yellowing parchment (about 100 pages) bound with red ribbon. Each page is covered with columns of crabbed writing. The first column lists the item, the second the receiver of the payment, the third amounts paid out, and the fourth amounts paid in. Unfortunately, Ragnar used a system of simple shorthand and abbreviations, written in dwarvish, for most entries. Most deal with routine matters.

After examining.....

The following name abbreviations: Ag., Haz., MO, Hath., BP., CJ., Orc, Tar., Sturm-HP." Of these, the first entries are payments out and the last always records payments in. A careful examination reveals that payments in exceed the combined total of payments out and the coins in the pay chest.

One of the last entries next to BP is "2 Teens" 2000gp dated (10/11/717)

### **Message from the Slave Ship 'The Bloodwort' Captain Joinville: (10/11/717)**

*"Msg. from 'The Bloodwort'-Capt. joinville. Rding in Hath area. Voy. good, profit expected. Losses light. Met Capt Sparrow (Black Pearl) and off loaded 2 teens, of good stock, gypsy, quite sellable. Ok to pay Sparrow. Expect two more teens of same stock from orc clan via overland route. Raided Port Hathaway. inv. 3 boys, fit to stand on block; husband and wife, trained servants, suitable for special needs; 4 males, mid-20, no visible trade, suitable only for block; trained artisan, giving good treatment, suggest arranging patron for teens; scholar and alchemist, special auctions required.*

*"Expect possible rescue of gypsy teens.*

*"Cargo too valuable for overland caravan. Will take direct to Temple."*

*-Capt Joinville*

**This message is written on white linen paper, edged with red gold.**

*Ragnar of Clan Hargirt, Greetings to Your Illustrious Self; Much warmed is my heart to harken to thy recent successes. So much do the virtues of your spirit shine, my heart yearns to call thee to my side. Thou art the source of my courage and the headwater of my desire to pursue the course which lies ahead of us. Patience is the counsel I give to thee. Our stars must be arranged before we can act. Alas, that the token I send can only dimly reflect the love that I feel.*

*I think often of last Spring. The two of us in that tiny south entrance killing time before our meeting in the Temple. I look forward to you returning to Highport and us getting lost again trying to find the door.*

*I write to advise thee caution, my love! Send the aid that you must for us to succeed by the most circumspect route, for old Illim grows nervous. I must watch him carefully. For thyself, remember the traps of the others on the Council are many and convoluted.*

*If thou art discovered now, then thy life is lost!*

*Edralee*

### **Hazzard's Room**

The following was from Jak's incredible memory because they had decided not to take the documents in Hazzard's room so they would not be missed.

Orders from Ragnar dated 10/11/717

*"Bloodwort not stopping, continuing down coast instead. Cancel unloading plans. Let out that masters are displeased with support here and considering diverting traffic. May require friendlier attitude from the locals to keep our trade. Make them nervous. Highport may become port of choice.*

*"Only expected rescue attempt from Gypsies. Orc clan lost two teens to Gypsies group. Most likely they will try to disguise themselves. Look for tall black man and two large axe wielding women."*

Clopin and Jak finally decide to take what documents/money they could and set the tavern ablaze to cover their tracks.

On the way out of town Jak and Clopin stole 6 horses.

### **October 15<sup>th</sup>, cy 717**

The group deciphered from the documents that the girls were not in Elredd but in Highport. The next morning, the group started off down the road.

A caravan wanted to join up with them, but it would be going too slow, so the group declined.

That night, four mercenaries (2 women/2 men) joined their fire. Although wary, they let the mercenaries camp with them. When the mercenaries suggested that they travel to Highport together for mutual protection, Aoide sensed there was something odd and they let the mercs go on ahead.

A few hours later, a posse of 25 guards and mercenaries were spotted on the road coming from Elredd. The group quickly got off the road and hid.

The group decided to travel through the forest rather than on the road and the next two days passed without encounter.

On the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>, they were attacked by 4 werewolves. Although they were able to kill all four attackers, Jak, Rupa and Aoide were bitten. Dr. Bom'bay immediately administered belladonna but they knew the real test would be the next full moon, which was over a week away.

Although they saw the tracks of many humanoids, the next eight days passed without incident as the group traveled through the forest towards Highport.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, they were at the fringe of Highport. They waited there for five days and nights to watch the Jak, Rupa, and Aoide for any signs of turning.