

Chapter 17 Visit to the Shrine

Back and Forth to Tolbi and Dale:

I told Stark about the new Tolbi religion what I saw him. He wanted to check it out. I had my own reasons for going to Tolbi – to check and see if Kedro and Temek were available and would sail with us on the Vigilance’s upcoming season. (That is, if we could get enough sailors.) Logan was in Madra too, and I was looking forward to a bit of adventuring with him, even if it was just a trip to Tolbi. Stark, Clethara and I were mounted. Logan didn’t bother. With those amazing boots of his, he could keep up easily.

We had not gone far when we saw, next to the road, a swarm of giant rats. I was thinking that we could evade them, but it became apparent that they were dining on a human body that lay there. A few sleep spells and some sword swinging by Logan disposed of the rats. The body was a fighter wearing chain, and a shield with the crest of Madra Militia (Foxtrot symbol). We also found his helm, longsword, and some coins. He didn’t seem to be carrying dispatches, none that we saw, anyway. This was a serious matter. We returned with the body to Madra, and took him to Militia HQ. They recognized the fellow. I don’t recall the name. No explanation was given, and I don’t think we ever found out what his business had been.

So, that meant we started out the next day all over again. This time we reached Tolbi with only one encounter, that with a black robed man, cleric maybe, who gave a greeting as we passed. In Tolbi, I asked about Temek and Kedro. Both of them were currently serving with the town Guard, but Temek planned on rejoining Vigilance. There was a sailor looking for a position, so I took his name to pass on the Grisham. No other crossbowmen interested though. I think Stark went off and spent some time listening to the Polyhedrae prophets.

It turned out that the religion of the Polyhedrae was not the only new thing in Tolbi. An arena had been built, and gladiator fighting contests were planned. I was supposing these might feature enslaved prisoners from Ocienia. Logan, always eager for a contest of arms, expressed interest. But, all that was still just planned, for now.

We traveled on to Dale the next day. Logan was disappointed when we found nothing to fight on the way. We did meet Lickban there. He told us that our friend Filian the Dwarf had died. He and Chacklow and a couple of others had some sort of problem at a spider farm down near the isthmus. We also happened to meet Alias. I told her of a planned trip to Kalay, and she was interested, and joined us. Clethara and I looked for scrolls, visited a few people, then we traveled back to Madra via another stop in Tolbi. Logan stayed in Tolbi to look into fighting in the Arena.

We traveled on to Kalay the next day. I still had in mind visiting the mountains above Kalay, to see if there was some sort of signal station that communicated with the one on the island. Alias, Stark went with Clethara and I went. We got to Kalay, and heard in The Tired Miner that people were happy because Lord Miank had lowered taxes.

Maybe you’re not surprised, but I was! “Lord Miank?” Why, Miank was Earl Markak’s right hand man. What happened to Lord Rexter? And if this Lord Miank was in charge of Kalay, Kalay must be back under the Earl’s control. If you recall what had been happening in the last several chapters, you’d see my reasons for apprehension. Even though the Earl of the Northern Reaches had written that letter saying all was well between us, I didn’t see any reason to trust him.

I adopted my usual policy for such situations. I decided to leave with no delay. We were exiting in the direction of Madra when I happened upon Dendrum. You may recall he was serving as an officer in the Madra Militia, and had been stationed here in Kalay. Well, he was still stationed here, to keep an eye on the King's interests. Furthermore, he'd been promoted to Captain. After I congratulated him, I asked about the situation.

"Well, there are no arrest warrants out for you from the Earl," he reported.

Well, even so, I didn't want to dally, and told him we had things to do "farther south." We actually left the road, cut over toward Kalayport, and found a cave to hole up in for the night. The next morning, we hiked up the ridge leading our horses. I wasn't finding anything. Then, the giant idol, the Shrine of the Sea God Presdy came into view. Wait! I took a good look at it, you could say with different eyes. Why, the statue on top Was the signal tower! We had seen before that sometimes the statue appeared with one arm raised, sometimes the other. But I'd never even considered why. The answer was there in front of me all this time! The statue communicated to The Island by semaphore! Presumably it would pass on information to Flame, waiting there at The Island, when to move or attack. We started to make our way toward the shrine.

We just about stumbled onto two dwarves, who were sitting behind a rock roasting something, a rabbit maybe. I greeted them in dwarvish with a "Hello!" I asked about the shrine. They told me it was Black Dwarf territory; it had been "taken back" with some involvement by the Earl. I told them that "We were just passing by." We continued on and finally sought shelter for the night amid some rocks. A light snow began. We reached the shrine early the next day.

The Shrine of the Sea God Presdy:

The base of the structure was 30 by 30 feet, basically a tower four stories high with the statue on top, inside a low fenced plot. I took a close look with my spyglass, and could see joints in the arms to let them move up and down. The statue had a trident in its left hand, which was down. The right hand was up. (The most common pose was for both hands to be up.)

We stepped over the fence and approached the door. There was a carving of the god on the door, similar to the statue, holding a trident. Alias, who is good at things like opening doors, couldn't find the trick. Eventually we solved the problem by unhinging the doors. Whoever designed the structure had put the hinges on the outside. We went in.

The bottom floor was one big room. There were four carved likenesses of the god, one in each of the four poses. A rug, tapestry, and fireplace were about all else there was. No fire had been made in the fireplace for quite a while. Steps wound upward to something of a shrine.

Clethara, who was keeping watch at the door, heard some voices from outside. Dwarves! We all prepared. Four Black Dwarves came into the room. They didn't charge in swinging, so I greeted them. "We're just looking around."

"Do you have the Earl's permission?" one of them asked.

"I don't think so," I admitted.

"You're coming with us!" he said.

"I don't think so," I told him, and cast a sleep spell, as Clethara did the same. Three went down, and I hit the last one with magic missiles. That put him down too. We tied them up and relieved them of weapons and valuables.

We resumed exploring, and took a look around the chapel on the second floor, finding nothing remarkable. The third floor was a dormitory containing 18 beds in double bunks. Like

the other room, it looked as if it had not been used in weeks or months. Alias discovered a hidden trap door above one of the bunks. That issued into the room on the 4th floor, which held the mechanism for manipulating the statue's arms, a table, and an unlit candle. No chests.

This satisfied my curiosity. Now I understood the communications between Dalia and The Island. My business was done. In leaving, we took the bold route of using the trail down towards Dalia (upon which I had conducted those negotiations so long ago), then took the main road toward Madra as fast as we could manage. At one point it looked like a horseman was following us, but we didn't see him after the road cut off toward Lunpal. It was late as we got to Madra. Just before we got there, we could hear riders behind us. We got off the road to hide and let them ride past. There were five of them, two with torches. We didn't see anything to identify them. We saw them admitted at the gate.

Maybe I'm just a scared rabbit. I get suspicious of riders who are out for no obvious purpose when I'm out riding for purposes that I'd rather not disclose. Dare we enter Madra? I decided, no. Our horses were tired, but we could walk. We turned away from Madra and walked toward Tolbi. By this time, we were all very tired. I could walk no further and ended up slumped over on Newmoon. Antares was having a hard time going. We all struggled slowly on.

Then, again, riders behind us! As before, we hid. There were only three of them. When they got close, they slowed down. The leader called, "Thumper? Is there trouble?"

"No. Nothing at all," I replied. "We came from Daila." That was approximately true; we'd been very close.

"Well, we wanted to be sure nothing was going on," the leader replied.

"We're on our way to Tolbi. I'm hoping to hire some crossbowmen," I explained. That much was true, in a general sense.

"We're not here to arrest you," the horseman said. Then he and his companions left to return to Madra.

My memory is hazy at this point. We were all very tired. I think we just found a little cover and lay down to rest a bit. Then we rose and continued, somewhat refreshed, when morning came.

At the bridge to Tolbi, a somewhat rotund man with a quarterstaff barred the way. "You must pay a toll," he said. "Three gold per person, five per horse."

That was outrageous. We departed from the road and moved downstream to where it looked like there was an easy ford. But this obnoxious fellow followed on the far bank, saying, "The toll is for crossing the river, not just the bridge! I won't let you pass without paying."

I knew a solution to the problem. I cast a "sleep" on him. That gave us time to cross, then fashion a small raft, put the man upon it, and set him adrift to follow his river toward its mouth. "Bon voyage!" We then continued on to Tolbi. We found a store that would give us gold for the dwarf battle axes, helmets, and chainmail shirts. And an inn where we could all collapse and rest.