

Tale of an Industrious Rogue

As this story starts several sessions into the campaign, here is a quick summary of the characters involved:

Hassan Ibn Jaffar: Human Rogue, though he prefers to be deemed as an *Entrepreneuring Explorer and Archaeologist*. Chaotic-Neutral. Native of Katapesh.

Valanar of Noravia: Human Priest of Sivanah (Goddess of Secrets), scammed his own father and got his entire family sold as slaves. Lawful-Evil. Native of Cheliox.

Vorgok "The Merciful": Human Barbarian. Got his nickname after forgiving the life of a gladiator, though he has been turning increasingly insane since then. Chaotic-Neutral (started as Chaotic-Good). Native of Irrisen.

Jack Sandweaver: Human Warrior/Bard/Duelist. Former pirate, travels along with a goblin minstrel he somehow conned into coming along with him. The player actually writes down the songs he sings in the game (and they are all about him). Chaotic-Good. Native of Taldor.

Rakhim Apravarnasi: Human Monk/Sorcerer. The voice of reason in the party, but had the really bad idea of getting romantically involved with an NPC (an elf priestess that helped them early in the campaign), as Valanar (who's a manipulative bastard) keeps using it against him.

Preamble

If you could lend me an eye or two, I would like to tell you a tale, the tale of an industrious rogue...

Early in the campaign, before the events here described had time to happen, the party stumbled on a trapped room inside a dungeon, which contained a rift into the Paraelemental Plane of Salt. The idea was to have the characters face a small Salt Elemental and then get on with the dungeon. After killing it, one of the players -Hassan- asks me about the price of salt, which after an Appraise roll I told him could fetch about 1g per pound. So then he spends a while filling every possible container he had (including his boots) with salt from the elemental rift, and then the session continued as planned through the dungeon. Once back in the city (we're playing in Katapesh), he managed to get a handsome sum of money for the salt.

About half a year of campaign later, when most of the party levels up to 7 (the "Sonk" -Monk/Sorcerer- was stuck at level 6 after missing a couple of sessions), Hassan asks me about taking the Leadership feat and wants to discuss the possibility of

gathering some followers (his Charisma score of 20 and other things qualified him for a good amount of followers), so we get on it during the pizza break (he had notes prepared from before). Most of what he asks sounds reasonable (I'm often a harsh DM, but very flexible when the players are being creative), so I let him go along with it, and so he starts his criminal gang. Or at least I thought that was his goal. Instead, after the pizza break the player announces his character is going to leave Katapesh for a couple of weeks (we were on a between-adventures part of the campaign, so I gave the players the opportunity to conduct some medium-term tasks if they all agreed on moving the time frame a few weeks into the future).

The Story Proper

Chapter I: A Humble Beginning

The idea was to have them craft stuff, meet up with their families, get the chance to set up a proper base of operations in the city, etc. Also, one of the character was getting married to an important NPC who later got kidnapped by denizens of Leng, but that's for a future story.

But before he does, he and his followers go on a pretty odd shopping spree, buying large amounts of wood, iron, smithing material, shovels, carts, weights, et cetera. I began suspecting the kind of thing he was after (I've been playing with these guys for about 15 years, so I know when they are up to something), but I wasn't sure until he had his character visit a local moneylender.

He arrives at the *Honest Abdul's House of Wealth Facilitation* (the party had conducted some business with Honest Abdul in the past, when they helped him rig a gladiatorial fight and score some big earnings, so he charged them less abusive interests and his stealing margins were lower), and starts working on a deal to secure a warehouse in the port district and shipping permits (he knew Abdul had some contacts there from a previous mission they were involved with), for which he requests a rather substantial loan, which would be "*promptly paid back with an offer for a business joint-venture*". Abdul was not quite convinced, so the Rogue had to steal some stuff from a Temple of Desna to serve as collateral (same temple which had served the party as safehouse for most of the initial part of the campaign. He swore he would pay it back with donations, one day).

So he and his followers set up to travel. Keep in mind that while now it seems rather obvious what he had in mind, it had been about 8 months of real time and many sessions between that moment and the time they originally found the elemental rift. However, when Hassan asks Valanar (who among his many oddities is a cartographer -both in real life and in character-, and kept maps of everything) for "The map of that abandoned Osirian temple we stumbled upon when we were chasing that lamia that sliced off Vorgok's left hand" (Vorgok is the party's Barbarian and resident killing machine. He actually killed that Lamia by taking his sliced hand, putting it inside a spiked glove and shoving it through the Lamia's throat until it died

of suffocation. Then cooked the Lamia. He got his hand some sessions later after striking a deal with a necromancer. Valanar and Rakhim got the hand from the local Necropolis, and the necromancer got it "installed". Sometimes it tries to choke him, other times it slaps women in the butt, but as Vorgok says "*Hand holds sword. Sword kills people. Vorgok pleased with arrangement*", I recalled his keen interest for salt. Hassan and his followers take about 4 days to arrive at their destination, and he quickly starts setting up quite an impressive layout of the stuff he wanted done. He clearly had put a lot of thought into it and it was actually quite reasonable, so I allowed it to go through (with a few accidents here and there, of course. I'm a DM, after all).

After making sure the operation in the surface was up and running (set plans for building living quarters for the overseers, started digging a pit where the slaves he would rather get would be locked, sent off a mage initiate with a dowsing rod to find some water, organized a patrol to guard against the gnoll tribes that inhabit the region, among other things), he went into the dungeon with his strongest followers. While they did encounter some creatures (mostly gnolls who had taken residence in the now-open temple ruins), they made it easily to the room with the rift, where they had to fight yet another Salt Paraelemental. But they finished it and got to work on securing the site, so the workers could come in and start digging out the dungeon. Let's move forward in time three weeks in-game, when the rest of the party, now done with their own businesses (which among other things resulted in the Priest becoming permanently infertile and bald for manipulating something that could be best described as "solid doom farts". At least that's how the party's Warrior/Minstrel-Ohgodwhydoeshekeepsigning described it when they first found them), made their way to their friend Hassan.

The salt-extracting operation was now in full swing. The first caravan of salt had been sent to Katapesh a week ago and the sacks were quickly sold among the various merchants. Abdul had spoken with Hassan and felt the operation was potentially profitable, and agreed to gather some investors, so money started pouring in.

The next sessions were dedicated mostly to planning it out. Since most of the money the Rogue originally used to buy the materials he started with was borrowed from the party (and because they were the only ones he trusted), he had them join him, and our campaign took a momentary halt from the main story arch (which involved a bunch of doomsday factions fighting each other over how the world had to end and the characters accidentally caught carrying the object central to said dispute and everyone trying to have them working for their cause) to focus on the salt.

During those sessions, the operation grew from the initial prospecting and odd caravan to a much bigger thing, which employs around 100 people (half of which are actually slaves. I had the Rogue suffer an EXP penalty due to letting 25 of them die after ordering them to "*Pile up over that loose elemental! Don't let the merchandise escape, you gnats!*". He's supposed to be Chaotic-Neutral, but I thought that was borderline evil. Fun, indeed, but evil nonetheless), as well as guards, caravans, traders, a sea ship between Katapesh and Absalom (called *The Really Salty Sailor*, go

figure), hired scribes in each city that handle all the paperwork and port issues, and a host of other minor individuals.

Chapter II: A Profitably Problematic Business Venture

Suddenly, the whole place got caught in a series of earthquakes. Tremors had been common since the operation got big, mostly thanks to the absolutely careless use of an explosive concoction deemed by the group as "*Orcus' Toilet During Taco Night*" (which they originally got very early in the campaign from a bedouin alchemist. The guy was a quack and I never expected the characters to try and replicate his formula, which involved rather worrisome amounts of camel depositions), which has turned what once was a beautiful and very sacred Osirian temple into a gaping hole the size of a stadium in the middle of the desert, with the elemental rift standing at its centre (they had the miners dig underneath the rift, so salt falls out through the portal and accumulated in a massive pile from which it is then loaded onto one of the dozens of leather conveyors powered by slaves inside hamster wheels), but now they were getting particularly powerful.

As Valanar was quick to guess (he's the party's expert on Cosmological stuff), the rift had become dangerous and potentially unstable. His successful Knowledge [The Planes] rolls allowed him to guess what was going on: The rift had been pouring such massive amounts of material from the Paraelemental Plane of Salt that the native elementals were becoming restless (Elemental Planes in the Planescape conception -which is the one I use, even though we are playing in Golarion- are sort of sentient by themselves, with Elementals being manifestations of said planar awareness).

Long story short, elementals started pouring out of the rift, first a few (1d4 Small Elementals) per day, until growing to chaotic proportions (1d100 Small Elementals, plus random amounts of bigger ones, per day).

Workers, guards, and overseers were now getting killed by the dozens each day, but there was enough people to spare at first, since by then a whole village had started to form in the area surrounding the operation, with all kinds of people settling there either to work in the mines and refinery, to serve somehow in the related services or to make money off the people working there, setting up taverns, brothels (lots and lots of brothels with very, very ugly women. Still, Vorgok managed to institute his own version of the *Prima Nocte*, and it became mandatory for every new harlot in Saltspit -that's how they named the incipient town- to spend her first night of service with Vorgok. Some of them don't get to survive past that night), shops and the like. Keep in mind we are talking about 5 months in-game down the road. Since the campaign had become more focused in long term events, we sped up the time rate. So this elemental outbreak quickly turns into a big threat, and the Rogue hurries back to Katapesh to get support from his main associate, Prince Osman Bin Hassir, who sends him back with his personal Mage-Vizier and a host of soldiers from the Zephyr Guard (Katapesh's finest soldiers. The Prince was powerful enough to pull

those kinds of strings). They manage to battle the elementals, but one thing catches Hassan's attention: The Mage-Vizier had somehow commanded the elementals with a rod (I gave him a Rod of Elemental Compelling, which allowed him to force elemental of lesser power to perform certain actions. The idea was to have him push the elementals back into the borehole so the guards would surround them. Purely for stylish reasons. Foolish me. I should have seen what would come afterward). Let's move one week into the future. The situation has been controlled and the mines are being repaired. But wait. Elementals keep pouring out at a regular rate! Ah, but Hassan had noticed how the Rod managed to force small elementals into moving in a particular direction, so he figured *"So far we have been collecting the salt, processing it here, loading it on camels and sending it to Katapesh. What if the salt went there... by itself?"*

And so he managed to convince the Prince to have his Mage-Vizier craft a few more Rods of Elemental Compelling (the components had to be taken from an obscure location in the Mwangi Jungles, which served as the pretext to get these nascent capitalists back into adventuring for a couple of sessions), which were then given to hired Mage Overseers so they would command the salt elementals from the mines to Katapesh.

A special processing facility was built in Katapesh, where the elementals would be lead into a large funnel-like structure lined with metal rings enchanted with Dismissal spells, thus sending them back to their plane and allowing the remaining salt to be refined (the rings weren't too powerful, so it was common for elementals to go through unharmed and cause havoc in the ovens underneath. But they pay was good, so workhands were aplenty). This, combined with the regular caravans that still went back and forth day and night (as a lot of the salt was just regular sand without a CR), skyrocketed profit, to the point that the party could finally start building their much-desired fortress near the mines (which included hiring a Conjunction specialist to make them their own oasis, which led to some other business opportunities. But more on that later).

However, it came with a cost: With the rift churning out elementals day and night at progressively higher rates, alarms began ringing among some leaderheads of Katapesh (how much was envy for the profits and how much was actual concern is another matter altogether), who cited issues like the ludicrous increase of travelers reporting being attacked by rogue salt elementals (which had increased from 0 to Way More Than 0 in less than a year). Prince Osman managed to calm things down a bit by setting a series of permanent guard outposts along the Salt Route to make sure all the elementals that escaped the caravans were slain (which led to an entertaining session where the characters were now the ones hiring adventurers just like them to do the job), but trouble was starting to brew.

No better way to make enemies than success.

Chapter III: Everyone's Getting Mad

The issues with the salt operation and the related incidents managed their way into the Merchant Court of Katapesh, in order to be brought to the ears of the Pactmasters (mysterious masked fellows that have been running the city for the last thousand years or so). Even though Prince Osman is the Grand Vizier of the Merchant Guild, the rest of the katapeshi nobles were pretty upset about the whole thing, especially those whose businesses were somehow being affected. One particular man, Sheik Hossain Ibn Shappur, who owned the largest spice trading company in the city -salt being among his main trade goods-, pulled strings to get this brought to the court.

This part of the campaign was mostly political, with the party negotiating with various groups of interests and individuals (though what *negotiating* means changes from character to character).

At some point, a sudden release of energy had everyone with itching noses. Moments later, one of the overseers shows up yelling "Accident in the mines! The slaves are escaping!" The Rogue panicked. Then the mines exploded in a fantastic display of special effects. Then everyone panicked. It turns out someone in Katapesh got mad enough to sent a wizardly saboteur to bring down their operations. But after the initial surprise, the party got its shit together and climbed down the hole to deal with the matter.

After beating the wizard, they tried using some rudimentary Divination scrolls they had bought in the past, but the man was powerful enough to resist them. So they decided to cast Vorgok.

The Barbarian starts by chewing off every single one of the wizard's toes, without even removing his shoes first (early in his career, Vorgok took *Animal Fury* as his first Rage Power, which gives him a bite attack while enraged. Then around level 5, I think, he took off all his teeth with a clamp and went to see a blacksmith in order to have steel teeth installed, which had to be bolted to his jaw. Vorgok passed all the Fortitude tests to avoid extreme blood loss, but he had a critical fail in the one to handle the pain. Remembering how dangerous was Vorgok the last time he felt actual pain -killed a gladiator that cheated a friend, cut of his head, nailed his hand through the throat and used the severed head as a bludgeoning glove to kill the other gladiator. He still keeps the head, called Wilson, and uses it like some kind of very grotesque puppet when he gets "philosophical", as he says [in Vorgok terms, "getting philosophical" is anything from "did I take a dump today?" onward]. Once he attempted to earn money by using Perform in a square to set up a ventriloquist show with Wilson. He didn't have Perform trained, he didn't know how to do ventriloquism, and he was using a SEVERED HEAD TO TELL JOKES. Didn't work out- Valanar gave him copious amounts of Pesh Liquor -a strong narcotic distilled from local cacti- to control him, but trying to drug up a 2,2 metres tall Ulfen is no easy task, so the party had to chain him down before he killed the blacksmith (who was hammering the red-hot teeth into his jaw over an anvil. The Ulfen had Damage Reduction thanks to his National Feat), and force-feed him every bit of Pesh -or any kind of narcotic, for that matter- they could find. After the blacksmith was done,

Vorgok enraged and ran out, and they found him the next day, dancing naked on a fountain while singing "*I'm a Little Teapot*").

So there's Vorgok with the toes (and half the boot), which he then proceeds to ram into the wizard's mouth and prepares to do the same with the rest of his fingers, when his massively bonafide Intimidate roll breaks down the man and he explains what's going on: The Sheik cashed in some favours with an old associate, Emir Kassan Bin Fashar, an extremely wealthy man owner of a jewel trading company who had ties to a Dao (genies from the Elemental Plane of Earth. In fact, Bin Fashar's mines never produced a single gem, instead all of them come from his Dao associate). Apparently, he managed to have the Dao send elemental servants to the Paraelemental Plane of Salt (which is coterminous with the Elemental Plane of Water and the Negative Energy Plane, so getting his own elementals there actually required a bit of extra dimensional political games with the Marids. That is part of a side-plot that's brewing for further down the campaign, though) and find the other side of the rift, which by then had become a massive cavernous region deep in the plane (to make an estimate, about 1 metric ton of salt pours through the rift every minute, and the operation has been going for about a year almost non-stop. While the rift is much older, now that the salt is constantly removed it doesn't clog, so it keeps pouring. Since the elementals began churning out en masse, the rate practically tripled). The Dao's servants set some kind of magical apparatus that, when combined with a similar artifact placed by the wizard on the other side of the rift, caused it to become unstable and "*break in half*". As Valanar found out, "*breaking in half*" is slang for "*transitive split*", which occurs when a portal has its points of entry severed and both ends instead open to the transitive plane that exists coterminously to both ends (or a random one if the portal connects planes that are not coterminous to the same transitive planes).

In this case, the rift became a portal into the Ethereal Plane. Valanar, who had made his homework and knew a thing or two about this, explained that this could prove rather dangerous.

At first nothing seemed wrong. Sure, the accident had destroyed most of the facility, but as Hassan put it "*At least there is still a lot of salt to sell. Get back to work!*".

Saltspit was mostly unharmed (the village, which by now was basically a middle-eastern version of Deadwood by all accounts. There's even a Mahmud Al'Sherengen NPC who's conducting pretty big business there), so there were people to draw from to get the operation back to work. They hired a band of gnomish mercenaries to hunt down the escaped slaves (or to get them new ones if the original ones couldn't be found) and slowly built the thing back up.

A couple of weeks down the line salt was once again being hauled to Katapesh and beyond, although the elemental processing facility in the city had to be closed and rented to the meat packers (with the rift severed, there were no more elementals to process) to make some margin.

Still, the investors were worried that, even though the rift explosion released a huge amount of salt, the fact remained that no new material was pouring through, and so the operation was now less attractive in the long run.

This hit hard with some of the more fancy projects, such as the group of engineers brought from Alkenstar specifically to work on the design of a cargo zeppelin (they were asked to halt their work and return to Alkenstar until further notice. The ship was barely in the initial stages of construction), the plans to send an enslaver expedition to the Mwangi Jungles to capture a large host of ape-men (intelligent gorillas who live in the jungles there, which would make excellent slaves as they are very strong and can operate tools with all four extremities), and even the grand opening of the Katapeshi Salt Exchange, which Prince Osman proposed as a mean to calm down the competing merchants who were feeling far too threatened by the ever-growing operation in Saltspit.

Needless to say, Hassan was baffled, seeing how his incredibly intricate and thoroughly detailed plans were on the verge of failing.

That's when more shit hit the fan.

Chapter IV: Ghosts, Of Course

Reports started coming up from the Brass Legion (the party had hired a band of soldiers of fortune to institute some kind of order in the town. It was mostly a bunch of abusive bullies, but better to have the bullies on your side), that Saltspiterians -or Saltspitians, or Salspitooners. We haven't managed to agree which one should be. I like Saltspitooners- were being found dead on their beds by the numbers.

Initially this was attributed to disease, which in the festering pit of brothels and alehouses that Salspit had turned into (council almost 3,000 inhabitants), but at these became more and more regular, Rakhim and Valanar decided to make further investigations.

As it turned out, people found dead didn't appear to show any signs of fatal diseases, murder or anything like that, except for the fact their hair, eyes and skin were white as milk. This, in conjunction with the fact every single person died while screaming horribly, led to the widespread rumours of ghosts and other malign entities haunting Saltspit.

As if things weren't bad already, Imam Salim Al'Salam, caretaker of the local Temple of Sarenrae (as people began flocking into Saltspit, religion came along. Sarenrae, the Sun Orchid, is the main goddess in the region. A few other cults have also set foot here, but only that of Sarenrae has a temple already built), began preaching that these deaths were the cause of the excessive greed and avarice with which the owners of the mine had been chasing material wealth, sacrificing countless lives in the process.

The preaching became more and more incendiary as deaths multiplied, and by the end of the month, the makeshift cemetery outside the town counted over 80 dead bodies from what came to be known as the *The White Woes*.

Dealing with a progressively more scared workforce (several workers had stopped going to the mines altogether. That's the problem with paid employees), a string of inexplicable deaths, and a very likely outbreak of religious fury, the party decided to take things more seriously.

Using their contacts within the Church of Desna (Hassan still hadn't repaid what he stole from them, by the way), the party hired a couple of exorcists to find out what was going on. As some of the previous comments have indicated, Valanar was suspecting some kind of ghost or spirit that came from the Ethereal Plane. Yet the exorcists found nothing of sorts, even after covering the settlement with all kinds of "*ghost-sensitive holy water vials*" and other items of dubious effectiveness.

Still, during that night, they heard the same horrible screams reported earlier, and rushed to see what was going on. As it turned out, a homeless was the one screaming, and they found him literally trying to gouge out his own eyes, while his hair and skin turned pale. Moments later he was dead. Quickly, they broke out every kind of Divination spell they had at hand, and managed to detect an evil aura lingering in the area, as well as a strong leftover of Conjunction.

Conjunction? That meant some kind of force -or creature- had been brought here from another location. Rakhim quickly pointed out something else: When they found the screaming hobo, he was yelling about worms and bugs, and actually he looked extremely terrified.

Knowledge roll. Something is lingering at the back of his head, but he can't take a hold of it. He announced he needs to take a trip back to Katapesh to consult the libraries there (the player actually has a pretty good idea of what is going on, but he kept the metagame out. Still, when things like these happen, I tend to allow a Knowledge check with a hard DC to allow the character to get a "*moment of inspiration*", letting the player use a bit of metaknowledge, but only if I notice the party is stuck and the character actually has a chance of having heard something related).

So Rakhim the Sonk takes a leave of absence from Saltspit to visit Katapesh, where he meets up with a fellow vudrani (Rakhim was born in Jalmeray, one of the Impossible Kingdoms of Vudra), who helps him gain entry to the Old Archives of the Grand Lodge of the Golden Peacock, one of the oldest civil organizations in the city, and keeper of quite a vast collection of books and scrolls, most of which were donated by the many members of this tea-and-crumpets (or coffee-and-dates) society of well-off gentlemen with large turbans.

Searching the archives, he finally stumbles on the kind of information he was after. Long story short, Rakhim clears up his suspicions: It isn't ghosts what came through the portal, but Night Hags, denizens of the Deep Ethereal that hunt the souls and dreams of mortals to barter them with nameless entities or engorge them themselves.

He gets back to Saltspit, and as it turns out (he came prepared this time and bought a lamp that emitted an effect of Dimensional Anchor in the infamous Dark Stalls of Katapesh), the party stumbles upon a group of Night Hags.

Chapter V: Well Hello There

Battle ensues for a while, until they manage to subdue and capture one of the hags. Zone of Truth in place, they get the old lady talking and she reveals what's going on: The splitting of the rift resulted in an intermittent portal opening between the salt mine and the Deep Ethereal, which quickly drew the attention of the Night Hags wandering there. After "smelling" mortals on the other end (most importantly, mortals that could have dreams), they went through and began hunting the sleepers for their dreams.

But dreams themselves are not as in high demand in the Great Beyond as nightmares are (since the later can be used to brew quite nasty things, while the former will mostly net you unicorns and candy rainbows), and so the Night Hags have been planting motes of fear and horror in the heads of their victims, waiting them to grow into full-fledged nightmares, and later returning to quite literally harvest them.

At first, the party was troubled. Night Hags are not stuff you often play along with, and truth be told there were some concerns on, you know, people having such horrible nightmares that they died in their sleeps. But as I have come to expect from these guys, where there is a problem, there is an opportunity.

And for these guys, opportunities mean business (and also usually shifts toward Evil alignments. I swear these guys are good people in real life).

So there they are, when Hassan looks at Valanar, and I notice both are thinking the same thing. *"My good... err, lady. We have a proposition"* goes the Rogue with his eyes looking like money signs.

What came out of the resulting conversation (which at first was met with hostility, but after they -rather foolishly, but served the purpose- allowed the Night Hag to read their thoughts and realise they were being honest) was the following: Saltspit would provide *"plenty of fertile ground"* for the Hags to plant their nightmares, and harvesting would be then allowed to proceed at certain designated locations to minimize exposure to fear by the general population, for which the Hags would pay monetary compensations.

Hassan took the issue to Prince Osman (he knew the guy was extremely flexible on his morals when it came to money), and while at first he was a bit troubled, when the Rogue began explaining his plan (which basically consisted of *"we'll make money, lots of it"*), the katapeshi noble was quick to jump in.

The rest of that session was spent working on the operational aspects.

First, the "pots" (term used to refer to the people they'd be renting out to the Hags to plant their nightmares) would be taken from the Prison of Khandassar. The Prince had family connections to one of the most important judges in the city, which in turn had a sway over the prison's overseer. In exchange for payment, prisoners would be regularly hauled from Khandassar to Saltspit, under the pretext that the city was being paid for sending prisoners as slave force to the mines in exchange for

funds that would be, of course, spent in stuff like orphanages and metropolitan beautification (if we consider hookers for the overseer as "*orphans*" and a new palace as "*beautification*").

Once in Saltspit, the prisoners would be put to work on the salt operation (estimates had it that with the remaining salt, the mine should remain functional for about 4 more months). The Hags would plant the fear motes during the night, when the prisoners are sent to sleep in bunkhouses kept a mile away from the town to avoid anyone noticing anything (the excuse was that the prisoners were dangerous, and the administration was worried about the safety of the Saltspitooners. The people bought it quickly, particularly now that "The White Woes" had stopped and they could get back to their normal lives).

Now, the party requested the Hags to prepare a "*control test*", which consisted of 5 poor sods that were chained to a rock far away from the town and implanted with fear motes of differing magnitudes (as the Hags explained during one of the meetings, the fear motes were produced from horrible "patchwork memories" they fished off the waters of the River Styx -the river steals away the memories of those that touch it, and these memories linger there for endless years, sometimes mixing up and resulting in thoughts and ideas that would give an oinoloth the chills-, and could potentially make extremely powerful ones. However, for a nightmare to be worth in the far off markets of the planes, they had to be properly cultivated and grow as naturally as possible. Thus, they often used fear motes of lower magnitude on humans, to avoid the risk of sudden death before the nightmare is ripe for harvesting). These tests subjects would help properly appreciate the rates of degeneration, which was important since, as Valanar pointed out, the prisoners should be put to work on the salt operation while the nightmares grew, which in turn would let them cut down the costs on hired labour and slave purchases (the price they agreed to pay for each prisoner was substantially less than the average price for a strong slave in the flesh markets of Katapesh).

However, they also wanted to know how quickly would the subjects begin to show signs of madness that could endanger the operation or blow the cover.

Second, there was the matter of an "*extradimensional consultant*". Even though the Hags had shown a lot of interest in the deal, they were still Night Hags, and you don't trust Night Hags. Recalling the events that led to this whole thing in the first place (the severing of the rift), the party sought to contact Emir Kassan Bin Fashar (the jewel trader who Sheik Ibn Shappur used as a contact to get the Dao to send his elementals to the other side of the rift).

Their idea was to get the Emir on their side (with money, of course. Works better than any Enchantment spell. Valanar prepared a few of those just in case, though), in order to use his contacts with the Dao and find someone *outside* that could serve as a middleman with the Hags.

As it turns out, the Emir himself was a Dao, long ago banished from the Elemental Plane of Earth, and after a pretty fun encounter (the Emir is supposed to be extremely quirky and quaint, and the players went along with it to create a scene

that would better fit a Terry Gilliam movie) they got him on his side (he never really had an issue with them to begin with, since he had no interests in the salt business. He was just repaying favours to Sheik Ibn Shappur).

The Emir agreed to pull strings within the Great Dismal Delve (the main Dao settlement in the Elemental Plane of Earth, pretty much a continent-sized maze of mines and palaces carved out from rubies as big as mountains), and got working on organizing a formal meeting between the characters, the Hags and his advisors, which took place the following week (the Hag called Irisna became the official representative of the nightmare snatchers).

During the meeting, the party got to set down more concrete rules regarding payment: Since the Hags didn't usually handle actual money (stolen souls and dreams being their coinage instead), they would exchange those for gems through one of the Emir's contacts in the Great Dismal Delve. The gems would be then smuggled into Katapesh through the Emir's mines (which as mentioned before produce absolutely nothing, instead being a coverup for a portal into the Elemental Plane of Earth through which he gets his goods) and traded at the Magnificent Pavillion (the most important jewelry shop in the city, owned by the Emir), where they would get converted into hard cash by selling the gems as usual.

That way, everyone got what they wanted: The Hags got the nightmares they traded with dark entities from beyond reality, the Emir got the income resulting from soul trade (which are in great demand by both the Nine Hells and the Abyss in their endless Blood War) and the party got the money from the gem sell. The Prince would in turn earn his participation from the gold income from the gems, and handle the bribes to his cousin the judge. The prison overseer would be getting paid directly by the Saltspit Trading Company (they had to find a proper name for it when they started the cover up for the prisoner-for-cash), disguised as "*administrative facilitations*", while the money that was being paid to the "*city*" as part of the deal was used to bribe the various tax collectors, bureaucrats and guards involved in keeping the whole thing quiet.

Chapter VI: The STC Is Your Friend

Let's move about a month forward in time. The salt operation is still generating cash (though the party decided to do some undersizing to reduce costs, as it was clear salt would be running out soon), and the deal with the Hags has already generated two batches of gems, most of which were sold at the Magnificent Pavillion for handsome amounts of cash. About 20 prisoners are being sent per week from Khandassar to Saltspit, and so far no one seems to be suspecting. There was some digging a while ago by a few merchants with big noses, but they were shut off when the Saltspit Trading Company (STC from now on) agreed to buy their entire stock supply (they were food merchants).

During week four, a message from Prince Osman (the party had finally managed to get a couple of Crystal Balls installed for quick communications with the noble)

arrives saying that the prison's Overseer is requesting a meeting. Apparently, there was some issues with the last group of prisoners.

The party meets with the Overseer and the Prince at the later's palace. The issue relates to the fact that six of the prisoners sent last week were actually not convicted for life (they were only sending those who were never going to get out of jail), and their families had somehow managed to convince a magistrate to investigate the case. The Overseer explained that they were running out of jailed-for-life prisoners, and had to sent those they thought no one would miss, but failed to check properly. Jack inadvertently gave them a possible solution while singing "*Prisons get empty when booze ain't aplenty*" (the actual rhyme was another. We speak Castillian, so I had to find the closest English version).

Jack's tune gave Hassan an idea: "*Overseer, how many people got sent to jail during last year's Carnival of the Setting Sun?*" (he made the carnival up, but I liked where he was going, so I went along with it), to which the Overseer said "*A lot. Why?*"

Hassan then planned it out: They would organize a festival and get as many people as drunk as possible in order to have them committing all sorts of disorderly conducts (and hopefully crimes). By using Prince Osman's contacts with the judges, they would push to have as many of those convicted for life (bribing the guards and making up some witnesses would help), sent to Khandassar and ultimately to Saltspit.

They had the means, so the Festival of Wonders was organized. They hired acrobats from far away Tian Xia, sword eaters from Qadira, taldoran wrestlers, spinning gypsies from Varisia and exotic animals. They rented several alehouses and taverns to give out ludicrous amounts of really bad alcohol (cheaper and really strong. Taste doesn't really matter once people get drunk enough). While expensive, at the end of the celebration the courts were overflowing and Khandassar was getting filled up again.

With Khandassar hauling fresh loads of prisoners once per week again (after the Festival of Wonders, the party bought three taverns in bad neighbourhoods of Katapesh in order to keep a regular supply of not-so-good people being turned criminals through various activities, and then laid out the chart for the influx of prisoners. During the first month, Khandassar would send 10 prisoners per week –about 180 people were jailed for life after the Festival. While the bribed judges did their best, truth is that katapeshi law is extremely lax, and it's hard to get a life sentence on someone. Most cases were a stretch, anyway, so the party kept having to bribe more people to avoid issues-, and then decrease the rate to 5, with the approximate rate of life sentences being nailed on people from the Crime Makers –term used to refer to the taverns they bought- at 1d4 per week, plus another 1d4 from the standard rate of life sentences being dispensed by regular justice.

That way, they could get a reliable source of materials that should last until the next Festival (the global estimates indicated that with the current supply and rate of imprisonment, they should have enough people for the next 5 months, so they decided to announce the Festival of Wonders would be happening twice per year.

This allowed them to strike some pretty convenient deals with the performers, by asking lower prices in exchange for secure future hirings).

Although the new rate of prisoners was lower than initially, they talked it out with the Hags. Their designated negotiator, Twice-Cursed Irina, explained that they could have a mean to retain the same level of income, if the party managed to improve the quality of each nightmare (they never really explained what exactly they were doing with the nightmares, but at one point the party had reasons to suspect they were being sold to yugoloths who were using them to further their investigations on the true nature of evil. Even this party was wary of having anything to do with yugoloths, but as Hassan pointed out *"We are just providing a service, which helps people satisfy needs otherwise hard to come by. If the bad guys also get them, well, it is a worthy price to pay!"*, to which my response was *"Yeah, how selfless of you. Add yourself another experience penalty. At this point, all you have to do is step on a flower to turn Evil"*, and his answer *"Okay. But I still get the money, right?"* Bastard).

Chapter VII: Let's Go Deeper

Valanar picked it up from there. He had some ideas that involved some pretty nasty things, but he wouldn't say what until they managed to secure a psion. Psionics are not usually featured in my campaigns (I don't allow it as a playable class), but Golarion has a few of them so I allowed them to try and find one. Upon doing some research, they found two relatively feasible sources of psionics: Jalmeray, where vudrani monks engaged in self-perfection sometimes develop the capacity to control matter with their minds, and the unexplored depths underneath the Third Realm of Orv, the deepest of the known cave networks that compose the Darklands (Golarion's equivalent of the Underdark. I really dislike the name *"Darklands"*, which reminds me of Penny Arcade's *"Darkbad"*). There, apparently, aboleths and other creatures had minds powerful enough to develop psionic powers.

However, getting a vudrani was out of question, since Rakhim –also a vudrani from Jalmeray, himself having attended the Schools of Perfection where the psions allegedly could be found- overheard him and he would never allow such a thing, so the only option would be to travel into the Third Realm of Orv and see how the hell they would capture an aboleth and manage to get it back to Saltspit.

The next session-and-a-half (we often play on Saturdays from 4 pm to 12 pm, so we get a lot of gaming done) was dedicated to the adventure leading into the Third Realm of Orv, how the party got a mad explorer to show them an entry through a dormant volcano in eastern Mwangi, the chance they had to massacre a bunch of hostile drows (my party is well aware of my dislike for elves in general and drows in particular), getting lost for a while and having Vorgok be snatched by a roof-crawling kind of ooze (we almost lost him that time thanks to a series of horrible rolls. He tried to eat away through the ooze, which almost had him killed later on as the ooze began multiplying inside his stomach. Wasn't his proudest moment, but he made it all good when he asked me for a Fortitude roll in order to vomit his entire stomach

over an enemy in order to have the ooze still there attack it) and a bunch of other OhmygoditssodarkinherewhythehellidnoonebuytorchesorpreparealightsPELL. Ultimately, they found what they wanted in an extremely remote cave who knows how deep: An aboleth. Specifically, a really pissed off aboleth surrounded by half-turned-into-slime humanoids that made for quite a distasteful (yet entertaining) battle. They beat it and captured Slimy (that's how they named him. Considering aboleths are supposed to be unspeakable superior intellects, I almost had to roll for a Dignity saving throw).

Now, capturing the aboleth was the easy part; it was getting back to Saltspit what I really wanted to see done. Aboleths are, after all, 25 feet long and weight over 6,000 pounds. It began bad, since Valanar mistakenly thought Rakhim knew teleportation spells, but for some reason he had completely forgotten that he was a Monk 6/Sorcerer 4, in no way capable of teleporting anything. Frustrated, he attempted going back to where they defeated the drows in order to see if there was any kind of wizard, treasure or scroll that could help, but of course there wasn't. They would be gone for two days (they were really deep underground), so we fast forwarded.

While Valanar left with Vorgok and Rakhim, Hassan and Jack took a while to explore around, when they stumbled upon a gargantuan cave filled with what appeared to be an underground sea, illuminated by incandescent spherical plants that floated high above thanks to gas pockets, volcanic vents making the whole place warm and sustaining a lush jungle. Long story short, Voyage to the Centre of the Earth, dinosaurs included. The idea was to have them attacked by a tyrannosaur or something, but little did I know. Hassan's player stood there for a moment, thinking. I wasn't sure if he was going to make a joke about Cadillacs & Dinosaurs or something, but instead turned to me and said *"We go back to the aboleth site and wait for the rest to return. I have a plan to get this get Slimy out of here"*.

Fast-forward a bit through meetup with the rest of the party, dinosaur fights, exploring, checking of the gas-filled plants, etc. The group had just killed a pair of tyrannosaurs when Hassan turns to Valanar *"Priest, do you still have the plans we helped design with the engineers of Alkenstar for the cargo zeppelin?"*, to which the man –who as previously mentioned always keeps record of everything, and probably carries more weight in maps, scrolls and documents than anything else, his own weight included- said *"Yes, I must have the schematics here somewhere. Why?"*. Hassan hurried to climb one of the dinosaurs and extended his arms around *"Because Slimy is going to fly"*.

His plan (which got assistance from some mean Knowledge and Craft checks) was as follows: They would skin the tyrannosaurs in order to build a large zeppelin balloon, erecting the structure out of wood from the jungle and bone from the creatures (ended using wood since the bones were too heavy). They would then fill the balloon with the gas plants (getting those plants was a challenge all by itself, which they ended up doing by building improvise delta wings and using the volcanic vents to get the push upward), and then tie Slimy to it, using the wind currents in the caves to propel forward, as well as a few extremely long sticks in

order to push the zeppelin similarly to a gondola (Vorgok would be in charge of that, since he had the strength to do so).

So they built the thing, saw it worked, went back to Slimy (who was trapped under a pile of rocks they used in lieu for chains) and tied him up. They did have to fight again, but the aboleth desisted when they reduced him to near death. He kept trying to control their minds the whole trip, though, and almost got Hassan jumping off the ship after a failed Will saving throw. Vorgok then poked one of Slimy's eyes with the gondola stick, and he stopped his mindfucks.

Chapter VIII: Slimy's Fancy Trip To Far and Beyond

The trip to the outside takes a while, which gives them time to talk about a point somehow everyone forgot about: Why on earth did they need the aboleth for? After granting some extra experience to Valanar for getting everyone to visit the bottom of the world and almost die a few times without even having told them why exactly, he explained.

The idea was to use a powerful psionic creature to feed the minds of the prisoners with information and emotions that would make the nightmares much more powerful, thus getting a bigger bang for the buck. Now, remember when several posts ago I explained that in order to craft the Rods of Elemental Compelling they used to control the salt para elementals the party had to get the components (a special kind of gems) from ruins in the Mwangi Jungles? Well, the ruins they visited had later been identified by Valaran as remnants of the ancient Shori civilization, which built amazing flying cities far in the past. Now, in that place, the party had stumbled upon a faulty device that once long ago was responsible for keeping one of the cities aloft, by using raw energy taken from the very fabric of the cosmos. When they approached said device, they kept getting thrown back by extremely unsettling feelings that made no sense at all, and Valanar's Knowledge [The Planes] check gave him a hint that the device was actually a hole in reality that somehow led into the Far Realms, that place beyond the Multiverse itself where reason ceases to exist altogether.

"Having this zeppelin actually makes things much easier" he said, and once they flew out through the dormant volcano, they steered toward the Mwangi Jungles, back into the ruins of the crashed flying city of the Shori.

Slimy wasn't going to have a good time.

So they get to the ruins, make quick work of a pack of intelligent gorillas, travel down to the device and set Slimy down. Valanar asks me about using a spell in a different way than usual: He wants to use Dimensional Anchor, but instead of it blocking all kinds of planar travel, he wants it to be *"hooked and delayed"*, in order to have it cast on Slimy, throw him through the hole into the Far Realm, and then pull him back. I said it was a stretch, but he offered me to spend two spell slots one level higher to prepare it, and I agreed as long as he succeeded at a DC 30 Spellcraft check, plus another DC 30 Spellcraft check when using the spell or risk having himself sucked

into the portal, Slimy being teleported into the same spatial coordinates as him or some other effect like that selected entirely at my whim, since he would be playing with a spell that is ultimately derived to him by his goddess. He agreed, so we do the rolls, on which he gets a 33 (he still has to wait one day to properly prepare it). They wake up Slimy, heal him up a bit, Valanar casts the modified Dimensional Anchor and asks Vorgok to push the aboleth through the portal. Slimy gets a sudden panic attack when he understands where said portal ends up, but doesn't get time to react when he's falling. The party runs back before going mad by the imagery being spewn by the portal, and after 10 seconds, Valanar pulls the aboleth out. *"Will saves, everyone!"* Whatever Slimy saw on the other side of that portal, he's now psionically broadcasting out some of the most horrible, incomprehensible and twisted thoughts they had never imagined, shaking like a fish out of the water and oozing foam from every pore. They succeed at the saves, tie the aboleth up back to the zeppelin, and hurry up to get back (I told them the gas plants would only remain buoyant for 2d6 days, and the result was 9. They had already spent 5 of those days, and they were looking at a similar amount back to Saltspit, so they had no moment to spare).

Chapter IX: Nightmare Pots

The party barely makes it back to Saltspit before running out of gas plants, and in fact travelled the last day so low on it that Slimy kept bumping on rocks. They had to make Will saves twice per day to avoid going mad over Slimy's mental ravages, so they had to use everything at their disposal to get save/wisdom bonuses, except Vorgok, who kept enraging to cancel off the effects (since Vorgok began going mad and having his enrage happen at random, I gave him the benefit of being immune to confusion and maddening effects while enraged). They landed about two miles north-west of Saltspit.

Jack and Vorgok ran back to the town in order to get some assistance. They contacted the Hags, and Twice-Cursed Irina herself offered help, using magic to lighten up Slimy, while Valanar created water constantly to rehydrate it (aboleths are water creatures, and although Slimy's high Constitution score and the Priests healing spells had kept him alive so far, he was on the verge of death. The constant seizures and oozing weren't helping, either).

With Irina's help, they got Slimy to the bunkhouses used to keep the prisoners being used as nightmare pots. Some other Hags were working on the 15 prisoners that were currently being used (as the control test subjects showed, prisoners with a planted fear mote would remain functional for about four days, time during which they could work at the salt mines. After that, they kept having nightmares during all times of the day, and that's when they were sent to the bunkhouses, until about a week later they died during their sleeps and the Hags pried the nightmares out just moments before they passed away). They built an improvised pool using some shovels, leftover wood and Valanar's Create Water spells.

Now they could focus on carrying out the second part of Valanar's plan, which involved erecting a special facility where the prisoners could be exposed to Slimy's mind-blasting psionic broadcast in order to feed the nightmares planted by the Hags, while at the same time avoiding anyone else from being affected (the Hags were informed of the dangers and would have to provide their own means of protection. Still, two Hags went mad and had to be put down). The price these new, higher quality nightmares would be fetching in the offworld soul markets increased by 3d100 –totalling 212% increase-, more than making up for the smaller amount of prisoners available. The business was now secured, money was pouring in, and life was good.

The party decided to set up monthly Directorate Meetings, which included themselves, Prince Osman, the Emir, Magistrate Belal bin Bassir (Prince Osman's cousin, the judge that had the justice system working for them), and Twice-Cursed Irina. Here they presented status report on the operations, heard news of potential problems and in general made sure everyone was up to current.

I told the party things would be stable for the next two months, and asked if they had anything particular in mind for that period. Since they didn't need to do anything that required direct adventuring, we fast forwarded two months.

Chapter X: The Hags' Hagggle

So the two months pass by, and in the Directorate Meeting of Erastus (the Golarion equivalent of July), Twice-Cursed Irina arrives with a demand: The Hooked Fathom Covenant is requesting an increase in their profit margin due to the regular difficulties they have to endure for using the unstable rift as means of transportation (they could perfectly teleport by themselves, but hey, business are business). The party said they would consider it.

Hassan and Valanar began discussing on how to avoid having to pay the Hags more; they were worried both about the decrease in their profit and about the fact that the Hags were starting to realize they had enough leverage to start pulling stuff like this (and truth be told, the STC had been getting the bigger part of the deal). Valanar proposed stabilizing the rift and turning it into a permanent portal into the Deep Ethereal, and so they travelled back to Katapesh to find someone capable of such a feat.

A lot of talking and money later, they were back in Saltspit with a team of magicians who assured them foolproof portal security. They closed the salt operations earlier to avoid having people sneaking and began working on the rift (which was now completely exposed as the extraction had depleted about 2/3rds of the remaining salt).

According to the magicians, their *"Infallible Interdimensional Sustaining Pylons"* would solidify the cosmological nexus of any portal, thus making it permanent so long as the pylons were kept in place and filled with mercury once per year.

Apparently, though, the system wasn't tested on dissected rifts. *"The rift starts*

humming as a thick, heavy fog pours through it, signaling the ethereal discharge to come. Reflex saving throws, everyone!". Hassan: Success; Valanar: Success; Jack: Success; Rakhim: Success; Vorgok: Epic failure (the player behind Vorgok has a long tradition of critical failures in the worst possible moments. In fact, one of the reasons that had him picking up Animal Fury was the fact that he always had critical fumbles and ended up tossing his weapons into a friend or breaking them up somehow). Vorgok was fully exposed to the blast from the Deep Ethereal, and immediately began hearing voices, but he was already hearing voices prior to this ("*Vorgok never pays attention to his head. If he did, he would be insane!*" he often says), so he wasn't really worried. The effects of this exposure would later play a bigger role. But for now, he just felt "*lighter*".

As the rift kept discharging ethereal fumes from the depths of the between-worlds, the party began noticing a lot of stuff that previously wasn't there now was: Ghostly towers half-sunk in the ground, phantasmal creatures frolicking around, semi-transparent vistas... things were turning quite weird.

The event also attracted the interest of two other covenants of Night Hags, which scented the nightmares being brewed and went in a harvesting frenzy, which quickly evolved in an all-out battle between dozens of Hags and their servants literally made out of bad dreams, catching the characters in the middle, who used Slimy as a mean to turn many of them insane and thus were able to keep them at bay while support came from the Hooked Fathom Covenant.

They lost a lot of prisoners and valuable nightmares during this fight, but the treasures retrieved from the invading Hags (mostly souls and dreams, which while useless to them, were traded offworld through the Emir's contacts in the Dismal Delve later on) made up for some of the expenses. Also, most of the warring took place in the bunkhouses away from the city, which helped keep the whole thing quiet (the party already had hired a band of vudrani illusionists to create diversions whenever trouble happened, so the populace –and, more importantly, the religious leaders that were always trying to find a way to screw with the STC- wouldn't know what was really going on. This time they made it look like a bunch of chimaeras from the Brazen Peaks had attacked).

Chapter XI: A Dream Made From Dreams

Something was bothering Valanar "*So when this portal got severed, it became a tunnel into the Deep Ethereal, right? Now, what we got was Night Hags. But if memory serves, there is another very important thing to be found in the Deep Ethereal, which is in fact the main reason Night Hags are there in the first place*" Glad as always for my player's interest in all things cosmological –the traditional D&D cosmology has always been one of my favourite subjects-, and knowing the guy had a big bonus to his Knowledge roll, I let him go through with it "*Dreams! According to some sages, somewhere in the farthest fathoms of the Deep Ethereal lies the Region of Dreams, where everything concocted by the minds of those who sleep*

takes form. All of this... twisting towers, impossible animals, multicoloured forests, I'd say..."

"Hold on, hold on" Says Hassan looking around "If I get where you're going, and I usually do, are you suggesting all this stuff is made of dreams?"

"Essentially, yes" Answers the Priest

"And where do they come from?" At this point in the story, you know that Hassan never asks something like this merely out of curiosity.

"From anyone dreaming them. The legends tell that when we dream, those things that exist in our heads literally exist in the Plane of Dreams"

"Hey Dungeon Master" goes Hassan "Tell me something: Could a dream, hypothetically, materialize into something real? Very hypothetically, of course"

"Don't ask me, ask the Priest!"

"Priest! Same question!"

"No metagaming..." I go.

"... Hassan asks the same question I just asked him, but with a Katapeshi accent" He goes back.

After some rolls, some private talking with the Priest (who often tells me to give him the information through notes, since he loved withholding important pieces of info in order to use it whenever it is more dramatically appropriate) and a lengthy exposition on the cosmological nature of dreams and how could they, potentially, be made of elemental matter instead of ether, the player behind Hassan stands from his seat "Guys, do I really need to say it?"

Who dreams these things and how do we get to them. That was the subject of the rest of the session and good part of the next. Also, there was the question of why did Vorgok experiment such sudden cravings of random food, why did he feel the extreme necessity of swimming in lakes he had never seen, or why on earth did he break into tears from one moment to another when he remembered his long-dead sister, when he didn't even have a sister to begin with. But as with all things Vorgok, the party has learned to ignore most of the weird stuff unless it has an impact in his capacity to murder things with his bare hands.

After a good while of telling them "Hmm, well, you can try, but -roll- you don't really get any meaningful information", Valanar had an idea I was expecting someone would have "I need to contact Irina. These hags must have some kind of method of tracking dreams back to their owners"

They set up a meeting with Twice-Cursed Irina, who constantly and unsuccessfully tries to press the issue of all the troubles the recent incident caused to her covenant and how she needed a bigger cut, but truth is the battle with the other two covenants left the Hooked Fathom weak enough that it was now the STC that was the one with the better leverage, so eventually she assumed the deal they struck a while ago would take some time to materialize. Instead, she ended up telling the party that one of the eldest hags within the covenant, Ever-Scowling Calpurnia, was a master in the art of torturing mortals through their dreams, and if someone knew how to track them back to their owners, she was the one.

So I get to have a chance to send these guys on a normal adventure again, this time to meet Ever-Scowling Calpurnia in a long-forgotten grotto somewhere in a collapsing demiplane in the Deep Ethereal (filled with all manners of dreams gone very wrong; basically tentacles, tentacles everywhere), where they are confronted with a few requests that involve some cosmological hitch-hiking and a challenge inspired by Plato's Analogy of the Divided Line (Greek Philosophy is great material for symbolic riddles). Long story short, Calpurnia hands them over a bag of Terror's Dust, which when sprinkled nearby a materializing dream (normally within the Deep Ethereal, but after the incident, part of the Dreamscapes was transmigrated near Saltspit) creates a silvery trail that can lead to the mind from which it sparks (works across planes too, but only those connected by a Transitive Plane, or directly coterminous ones).

"There's a minotaur with four arms there; sprinkle some dust on him! And over that tree covered with swords! Oh, and on that room filled with gold pieces too!"

Essentially, I had to spend one hour making up random dreamscapes as the party decided to go on a dream hunt in the mirage-choked desert trying to find stuff they wanted to make real (a Dreamscape, which is a region of space where dreams take form, when remaining in existence for long enough –meaning the people dreaming its content do so for extended periods of time- can materialize. Since this normally only happens in the Deep Ethereal, the results very rarely have any sort of impact in the Multiverse, besides from some odd abominations made of ether and the like. But if for some reason a Dreamscape formed in a planar locale containing actual elemental matter... well, that's another thing).

As it can be guessed, their plan was to find the owners of these interesting dreams and manage to keep them dreaming for long enough for these to materialize. The Saltspit Dreamscape was filled with all manners of odd, amazing and terrifying things –as dreams and nightmares often are–, and several of them had started to take a wee bit of physical embodiment in the way of swirling shapes of dust, sand, and salt (which meant the team of vudrani illusionist had to be put to work on double duty to minimize the impact. Still, the good old Imam Salim Al'Salam was managing to stir some trouble in town).

Whenever they saw something that piqued their interest (particularly stuff dealing with oversized gems, monsters they could use to open a battle arena and dreams about well-hidden artifacts and the means to get to them –like I'm going to put one of those there-), they would send Vorgok to sprinkle the dust, which earned him the new nickname of The Pain Fairy (the player behind Vorgok, who was really enjoying playing a deranged barbarian, was overjoyed with the ethereal blast that got him acting even odder, and this led to some pretty amusing situations, including, but not restricted to a reenactment of Don Quixote, where Vorgok would tilt at rocks and attempt to rescue a piece of wood he deemed Dulcinea –along with a sorrowful scene when he accidentally broke it- and a *"Smoke, I need to smoke!"* that ended up turning Vorgok a cigar aficionado –a practice which he kept even after going back to normal. I can't think of many things more stylish than a Viking-looking barbarian

charging at you with a smoking cigar in his mouth. Since he has to spit them out in order to use his bite attack, he ends up setting fire to a lot of random stuff-); the reason they sent him is because some of the nightmares could prove to be dangerous and mind-twisting, and really, there was no physical or mental blow Vorgok couldn't stand (the former because of his sheer HP pool, the second because of his lack of room for additional insanity).

I wasn't going to make it so easy, but truth be told I was enjoying all these crazy plans, so I gave some chances in the form of 1d100. If the result was under 20%, the dream they sprinkled the Terror's Dust over would be coming from someone in Golarion (after all, dreams can come from any dreaming mind in the Multiverse); if so, I would then roll 2d1000, and the result would indicate the number of kilometers away from where the dream was being had (1 km = 0.62 miles, by the way).

Calpurnia's bag only had 8 (out of 1d10 rolled upon acquisition) uses, though, so there was a good chance of not finding any dream within reasonable distance, or even within their same plane of existence. However, they got lucky on 2 dreams/nightmares:

-*A Horrible and Enormous Shapeless Thing Covered in Teeth That Spat Other Shapeless Things Covered in Teeth* (basically, a gibbering mouther the size of a house. Can't remember the exact distance, but it ended being in the Screaming Jungles in eastern Sargava, which was about 1,500 miles away).

-*The Fountain of Liquid Gold* (ended up being in Jalmeray, Rakhim's homeland, which is about 400 miles away).

It shouldn't be too hard to guess which one they wanted to go after first.

Chapter XII: To Rule a City

There was administrative stuff to settle first, though, and the rest of that session was destined to the following:

-The Salt Operation: Whipmaster Konkaf (a cyclops they bought in Katapesh. Very big, very bad at depth perception, and great at workforce motivation) complained that the slaves at the mines were too weak. As it turned out, Khandassar had been shipping sick slaves, and there was now the risk of an epidemic. Konkaf had been breaking some spines to instill morale, but the men were too weak. On the good side, one of the byproducts of the planar accident was the restitution of the original portal conduct, and salt was pouring out once more, as well as salt para elementals, some of which had been terrorizing the local population like in the good old days.

-The Brass Legion: Hranuf, the ulfen in charge of handling the 60-some mercenaries, demanded better living conditions for his men. Among other things, he wanted an increase in 6 copper pieces per day of work for each of his men, private latrines (the "*Salspit Shithouses*", the public latrines set up in the early days of the city, were infamous for being so foul that some people literally died due to the noxious gases while using them), and right to 1 harlot each week for every man, that would be chosen from any of the city's wenching houses.

The final agreement included a raise of 2 silver pieces a week, plus another 5 for the 10 best-performing mercenaries; this was Jack's idea: The performance would be determined through a system where all the mercenaries would be divided between the four districts of Saltspit in which they operated (Northern Saltspit, the Bazaar –the area where most of the commercial activity took place-, the Ledge –the side of the town that was next to the mine- and the Pit of Prostitutes –the area of Saltspit where gambling and drinking, but mostly wenching, happened, and the turf of Mahmud Al'Sherengen -), where the local population would vote for those members of the Legion they considered had done a good job (what? He's the Bard, and a musician/indie movie maker in real life. Sharp thinking about these things is not his forte). This soon spiraled into an epidemic of leg-breaking, house-burning, and assisted suicides, all in the name of sound, healthy democracy, of course.

The rest of the agreement went on about the private latrines (eight would be build, two in each district. The Brass Legion would be in charge of upkeep, though, which essentially meant they would bully the locals for it or drown them in crap) and the wenches. This last part caused some friction, since Vorgok –who as previously mentioned had the right to Prima Nocte for every new wench in Saltspit- had become very attached to the harlot community, and in fact was quite well received by them, and he refused to diminish them so much. In the end, though, Hranuf was inflexible about his men's necessities, and it was settled that 3 wenches would be sent each night to the Legion's headquarters in the Bazaar –generously provided by Al'Sherengen's Pavilion of Pleasure-, but the men would have to share them.

-City Planning: Saltspit had grown. Indeed, nearly 6,000 people lived there and more kept coming, making it the third largest settlement in the region, after Katapesh (around 200,000) and Okeno (around 13,000). It had also grown into a full-fledged trading nexus, with all the wealth produced directly or indirectly by the STC spilling over to hundreds of other business activities (did I mention the excellent state of the wenching industry?), with caravans going in and out non-stop, carrying all sorts of goods, from katheeran silk to thuvian wine, nexian glowstones and black powder from Alkenstar, slaves from Katapesh and even the occasional load of tobacco from the unknown reaches of southern Garund. All this prosperity, however, was starting to cause more than one headache: Magistrate Kemal Al'Kaffesh had recently been dispatched from Katapesh to sort out the urban status of Saltspit: Was it a city? Did it recognize the primacy of the Pactmasters and Pactbrookers? Did it abide to the –highly flexible- katapeshi legal system? Was trade being protected? Who handled crime? Where were the criminals being sent? And a long et cetera. *"You can't just make a city out of nowhere and expect for things to take care of themselves!"* Were the Magistrate's words. Katapesh was demanding proper recognition of authority and Al'Kaffesh had been instructed to assist the local de-facto governing body –the Saltspit Trading Company- in the proper organization of the city. *"Districts have to be regulated, main streets named, public buildings designated!"*

Far more concerned with a fountain that sprang liquid gold, Hassan basically waved him off saying *“Magistrate, you can take as much gold as the strongest man you can find can carry from our vaults, in exchange of taking care of this whole situation”*

“Hold on, hold on” Interrupted Rakhim *“This is important. Saltspit is our centre of operations; we can’t just handwave its administration. What we need here is a city council”*

Eventually, after some talking, the party agreed to Rakhim’s idea: They would form a city council drawn from people they could trust, which would be given the responsibility of managing the day-to-day aspects of Saltspit. In the end, they decided to summon Al’Sherengen –the local kingpin- to be in charge of all things commercial, Nidaros (a priest from the Church of Desna that was a good friend of the party, especially after they saved him from a cult of man-eaters when they were in level 2, although they were the ones who got him kidnapped by accident in the first place) to take care of social dispositions (the man was a gifted public speaker, although the bite marks and bit-off arm he featured forced him to wear robes and a silver mask –think of the King of Jerusalem in Kingdom of Heaven, but instead of leprosy, add cannibalism-), Abdul Bel’Nabir (one of Prince Osman’s most trusted advisors) to take on the adjudication of law, Iendys Mussburger (the shrewd but quite clever manager of the local branch of the andoran trading company Hudsucker, dedicated to adventuring gear and the main provider of rope-‘n-caltrops for the party since level 1. The party met him during one of their first real jobs –they started off as slaves after being captured by gnolls at the start of the campaign when their vessel shipwrecked-, which consisted in bringing him a blue envelope. Mussburger didn’t like blue envelopes) to oversee urban planning, and Hrulf –the leader of the Brass Legion- to handle leg-breaking.

Chapter XIII: So, About that Fountain of Gold..

With all those things taken care of (well, they didn’t really take care of the epidemic brewing among the slaves, something which would slap them back eventually), they set up to travel to Jalmeray in order to meet the owner of the dream. Although the figment in question had disappeared, Quite-Awful Giselda, a *“Dream Consultant”* provided by the Night Hags, explained that once a dream has been created by a mind, it can be recalled, so if they managed to find the person who sprang it, she could assist them in reproducing it.

At that point, Jack wondered why couldn’t they just dream cool stuff by themselves, to which Valanar replied *“Because we would have to be kept asleep for Sivanah-knows how long. Although thinking it better, you could be a great candidate for that”*. There was also the issue that only a specific Dreamscape had been brought over into Golarion, and the chances of their dreams existing in that particular region were next to none.

Since the party was going to visit Jalmeray, they travelled back to Katapesh to hire a ship, and took the chance to visit the Prince, the Emir, and other friends. At this point, Rakhim was informed that his beloved Falballa –the elven priestess he had become close with- was pregnant, so he decided that from now on she would be within sight whenever possible. So she would go with them to Jalmeray, which was also Rakhim’s homeland, and he wanted her to see it.

So they travel to Jalmeray, meet with Rakhim’s parents (who were of course pleased with Falballa and the child, but very displeased at Rakhim for *“Making child with no parent consent. Very irresponsible”* -they spoke with the same accent as Hadji from Johnny Quest-), left the elf at their house, did some sightseeing, and eventually got to their purpose: To find the mind that about a week ago was dreaming about fountains of liquid gold. The silvery dust trail was still visible, and it led into one of the more populated areas of Padiskar, the second largest city in the island nation. So they scout around trying to follow the silver dust trail –which didn’t really make it easy either, as it flew all over buildings-, and finally saw it entering through a window. They had waited until very late in the night, in order to hopefully find the person already asleep in case they had to get more convincing (as if *“Hey, we need to knock you unconscious for a month so a witch from another dimension can prod your brain in order for your dreams to come true, so that we may steal them afterward”* wasn’t a convincing proposition to begin with). Level 9 by then, Hassan had little trouble opening the locks and getting inside without making any noise, and he found the dreaming person: A thin, sick child about 8 years old with a lame leg, sleeping atop a badly crafted box with some hay sprinkled on it to simulate a bed. The poor kid breathed heavily from the fever, and his forehead was covered in sweat.

“Great. This makes it way easier” So Hassan takes the chloroform he bought from a katapeshi merchant and puts it on the kids mouth to make sure he won’t wake up, ties him up inside a blanket and runs out.

Chapter XIV: A Time for Friends and a Time for Fisticuffs

“No, no way I’m going to agree with that” Rakhim wasn’t too pleased to see the adorable thing Hassan had just kidnapped *“It’s a kid!”*

“So? When did you grow a conscience? Where was it when we began incarcerating people for getting a bad haircut so they could work in our salt mines? Or when we sent an aboleth insanity-fishing into the wrong side of reality so we could fill them with nightmares that would make you pee through your ears? Eh?” Went Hassan. On the back, Valanar was smiling *“No, I know what is really going on...”* He walked closer *“This reminds him of the child his very own elven mistress is carrying as we speak, doesn’t it?”* The Priest had been waiting a long time to take advantage of the romance *“He cannot stop thinking this could be his... that little brown, pointy eared halfbreed, the son of an incontinent excuse for a monk and a priestess with no control of her loins, a harlot in the guise of a saint, a...”*

He is interrupted by Rakhim, who goes all Flurry of Blows on him.

Shock! Conflict! Rakhim decides that he is not taking part of this anymore and goes away. Jack, who had been getting doubts about it himself, eventually follows suit.

"Should we stop him?" Asks Hassan.

All bruised, Valanar stands up *"No need to. In fact, this might be exactly what I needed. Everything so far is exactly what I needed"* The player asks me if during the short fight he got any blood from Rakhim on him, to which I answer positively (he did fight back a bit, and he always has sharp blades under his scarf that could have cut him a bit. That's his favoured priest weapon, by the way, a Bladed Scarf. Don't ask me, ask Paizo). Valanar grinned like he had never grinned before.

"Tell me, Hassan. How much are rubies worth these days?"

Chapter XV: Let's Leng Them a Hand (or a Baby)

What's going on? To understand Valanar's reference, I need to momentarily take you guys back to the early stages of the campaign, when the party was around level 2-3 (the beginning of this story –when they went back to the Osirian temple with the salt rift- was at level 7), because it has a bit of a complicated origin (it is customary for my players to work with me in private when they want to get involved in conspiracies, odd plans and the like. This particular sub-plot had been devised in conjunction with Valanar's player, and eventually with Rakhim's player too –we don't screw over other characters' story without express approval-. The best part of these things are the expressions in the other player's faces when it is all revealed, usually leading to a series of revelations of all the hidden stuff people had going on. This whole story is one great example of all that –Hassan's player keeps me constantly posted with ideas and long-term plans which are not always revealed promptly to the rest of the party-). I did reveal to you guys one tiny bit many posts ago, however, regarding the fate of Falballa.

Around those days, the party was involved in the investigation of a series of ugly murders, in which the victims were all boiled down and stripped of their flesh. Initially, it all seemed to be tied to a bunch of crazy cannibals that worshipped Urgathoa –Golarion's goddess of undeath, gluttony and disease- living beneath the sewers of Katapesh (the same guys who had kidnapped Nidaros -the half-eaten fellow mentioned before that was now part of the Saltspit City Council-). At the climax of that particular plot, the party managed to escape the cultists (which was, of course, chock-full of Temple of Doom references) through an underground river, but Valanar got left behind, because he was checking some relics in the inner quarters of the cultist's High Priest.

Long story short: Valanar was almost eaten alive, but through some very clever ideas and roleplaying (this player has quite the knack of solving almost every possible scenario through diplomacy, blackmailing, and not healing his party. I honestly can't remember the last time he picked up a weapon in a D&D/Pathfinder campaign) managed to talk out the High Priest, who eventually offered him a deal: His life –and, more importantly, immortal soul- in exchange of a host.

Now, the explanation the High Priest gave to Valanar was very cryptic and confusing, but it gave him just enough information to be able to do additional research on his own. As it turned out, none of that had anything to do with Urgathoa; the cult was merely a tool for a more obscure and convoluted plan involving none other than the Denizens of Leng, creatures hailing from a mysterious and terrifying realm that in the scant volumes that mention it seems to be suggested as the last remnant of a long-collapsed reality, prior even to the current multiverse.

The Denizens of Leng do have a presence in Golarion, and several of them exist hidden among the courts of the mighty, influencing the course of history with goals no one understands. They are also not strangers to Katapesh, where they dabble in selective slave trade; for some reason, they seem highly interested in specific kinds of people, which they trade for absurdly valuable rubies (or at least what everyone thinks are rubies). Personally, they kind of remind me of the Yugoloths and their endless quest to experiment and discover the true nature of evil, the kind of villains that are not really bad guys, just uncaring entities for which mortals are just yet another tool in their repertoire.

Anyway. In secret and without the knowledge of the rest of the party, Valanar started meeting with envoys from the High Priest, random individuals whose minds had been blanked out and honestly seemed more like puppets made of flesh and bone. And slowly he began understanding what was going on: The High Priest wasn't working for anyone in particular, but for himself. As it happens, the Denizens of Leng are beings whose bodies are made of a malleable fleshy substance they can control at will –which is one of the reasons they are really ugly when “relaxed”–, but existing too long away from Leng –or regions of the multiverse that are somehow connected to Leng– has detrimental effects on said bodies. So the High Priest, trapped in Golarion since time immemorial, had been working on means to fix that shortcoming; so far, stealing the flesh of certain individuals he had previously identified as useful had helped as a patch measure, but he was getting close to a point where this could simply no longer sustain his physical form. So he needed a host.

To this end, the High Priest had been dabbling in the creation of a perfect host capable of sustaining the twisted essence of a Denizen of Leng, one that would be able to sustain itself in Golarion without decomposing into sticky black jelly, something no other Denizen had been able to manage so far (and as Valanar found out during his investigations, there were many other Denizens interested in such a solution, but they were all too fragmented to work together). For this host to work out, however, it would have to be conceived through a natural process. The High Priest had been trying to implant the host into pregnant women kidnapped from the city above, but it all ended up in horrible miscarriages. But now there was Valanar...

What he had to do was to get the host (which was nothing more than a thick reddish liquid) into a man, that would have to then impregnate not any woman, but an elf (something which was hard to find in Katapesh), as the High Priest figured out

the slower aging rate of elves and their natural immortality would be able to make up for the quick degeneration the host suffered during gestation. Valanar smiled, knowing exactly who to use.

Now, the romance between Rakhim and Falballa would seem awfully convenient, if not for the fact that it didn't exist at the point, nor was meant to happen. Falballa was a priestess, and a chaste one at that. The party did know her and Valanar knew Rakhim had shown –restrained- interest (he was a monk from Jalmeray, with all the stuff about body perfection and purity), but everything was on a strict “friend zone” level. But Valanar knew some alchemists, and the player knew that the Saving Throws of both should be rather low at that point in the campaign. So he spent almost all his money in getting a Love Potion made, making sure that the alchemist “*accidentally*” poured more of certain components than what was advised. And that is how, during a trip to a deserted settlement (the one they visited prior to their first trip to the Osirian temple), Rakhim and Falballa (who had been sent with them to help them escape the city, after the party had been framed in a political murder) kept mysteriously disappearing at nights, and seemed awfully relaxed the next day. With the two “*bastions of purity*” now shaking it like there was no tomorrow, getting the host into Rakhim was child's play: Just add some raspberry and bam, you have the iconic healing potion, if a bit thicker than one would expect. Then Valanar, with the enormous patience that characterizes the player behind him, waited for things to take onto their natural course. He knew it would take very long; adventures, journeys and levels would come and go before getting any result, but if everything went according to plan –which, as I hope you would have presumed by now, wasn't exactly in the same line as the High Priest's-, it would be well worth the wait.

Let's go back to where we left off. Valanar had been quite glad when they got the news about Falballa being pregnant; even though elven pregnancies are supposed to last about two years, this wasn't problematic. The High Priest had informed him that the host would develop at an incredibly rapid rate, and truth is Falballa was quite swollen –she was 6 months into pregnancy-, and had been abnormally exhausted, which was also to be expected. In fact, the host should only require 3-4 months of gestation, after which it would remain there, living off the mother's vital energies until she could go on no longer (which is why elves were such a good idea). At this point in the story, he trusted Hassan's unending thirst for money enough that he felt comfortable with sharing his plan: He needed Falballa's offspring in order to use it as a bargaining chip with other Denizens of Leng he had tracked throughout all this time (he knew of at least 6 in Katapesh, and many more that occasionally visited the city. There was in fact an entire slave trading company controlled by 3 of them); he had no intention of handing it over to the High Priest (whose agents had long become just a footnote, now that he was considerably more powerful and resourceful than he was in level 3). That is why the trip to Jalmeray had been such a boon (and why Valanar had been so mindful of reminding Rakhim that he would do whatever he could as a priest to keep her comfortable and safe), as it would allow him to carry on with the “*extraction*” without the risk the High Priest meddling.

Hassan pondered. It was an ugly business. Sure, they had been using people as nightmare farms, forced good katapeshi citizens into a life of slavery at the salt mines, and now they even kidnapped a kid because they needed the dreams he had. But now they were talking about Rakhim's and Falballa's kid, the former a companion of adventures and the latter being the priestess that helped them survive and escape the authorities. Maybe it was too much...

"The Denizens of Leng carry with them otherworldly rubies that go beyond any kind of gem you can imagine. Not even the Emir and his elemental associates could produce something like them" Valanar was, of course, leaving out the part about the enormous influence said Denizens had over many nations of Golarion. He wasn't after more money; he wanted real power *"Don't think of the children, think of the rubies!"*

But Hassan was still thinking. What Valanar didn't know is that Hassan was now not really thinking about the moral consequences (he had him at "otherworldly rubies"); he was wondering if they weren't going to waste a unique opportunity.

"No, we are not going to give it out that easily. There is an opportunity here" Said Hassan, coming out of his thought.

Valanar was rather confused *"What? Of course there is: We get the baby out, we hide it well, we contact some Denizens, and we offer them the deal, giving it to the one who offers the most"*

"My friend, what have we learned so far? That Hassan knows how to make money out of everything" He tapped his nose *"And when Hassan finds a source of money, he makes sure that more will come after. Let me explain"*

So there, in the warm, starry night of Jalmeray, in a beautiful garden in which plants grew in impossible manners and a small waterfall ran upward, he told him what he was thinking about: Mass production of hosts. If what Valanar had explained about Falballa being the proper way to get these hosts working was correct, then they were going to replicate the process. Why auction one baby among several Denizens who could probably kill them and take it, when they could be making one for each of them? That's a lot more rubies, plus avoiding enemies from a dimension severed from a dead universe within the fathoms of time could be well seen as a positive externality of the transaction.

Valanar was both confused and amazed by Hassan's plan; he saw the logic and he liked it, just that he had never thought of taking it to the next level. Things would get interesting now, indeed they would...

Chapter XVI: A Pound of Flesh or Two

So Valanar and Hassan had decided what to do: They would kidnap Falballa in order to steal her child and hopefully find a way to replicate the process. Vorgok was there too, but it was hard to tell if he was even aware of what was going on, as he kept talking to imaginary friends and staring in awe at a magnificent woolly mammoth that wasn't even there.

I'm not sure if I mentioned it in this thread (perhaps it was in the previous one, where we had a lot of Q&A about the campaign), but back when the party was going along with the original plot, they had to deal with a band of ritual assassins that kept trying to dispose of them or frame them with murders (the assassins had been hired by one of the many crazy doomsday cults that were fighting over a very important artifact the players had, and attempted to sway the party into their side by argument, force, or highly volatile narcotics. They were the original cause of the party leaving Katapesh early on). Thing is, the way they took them out of the equation was striking a deal with their leader, a mind-flayer by the name of Essak; it was essentially a "*Whatever they pay you, we can double it*" solution. Valanar had been in charge of said deal (he has the best Diplomacy and Bluff in the party, plus various "*argument-effective*" spells such as Read Thoughts and Zone of Truth), and throughout the campaign kept contact with him in secret, just in case they ever needed the services of a centuries-old order of green-wearing assassins and kidnapers.

Which was precisely what they needed now.

The idea was to have the Order of the Green Veil (name of the assassins led by Essak) kidnap Falballa while Valanar and Hassan did their best to keep Rakhim away from her; the Sonk just knew far too much delicate information about all their operations (aside from being legally entitled to a big part of it through his share of the STC), and they could not risk him knowing that they were behind the whole thing.

So they set up a situation involving an escaped genie from one of the local training schools in order to keep the party stuck in Jalmeray for about a week, enough to have the Green Veil's agents kidnap Falballa from Rakhim's parent's house (they also had them take the kid. In order to pacify the Sonk, Hassan simulated having felt second thoughts and leaving the kid behind. When Rakhim went there to check, they had to steal another kid from another house with similar characteristics, put it to sleep with magic and use Disguise to make it seem like he was the same. Since Rakhim had seen him for just a few moments, it worked).

As you can imagine, there was much ruckus when Rakhim found out the Green Veil struck back and this time they stole the elf carrying Rakhim Jr. As he was never fully aware of how the assassins had been dealt with in the past (in fact no one knew, except for Hassan, to whom Valanar revealed the truth when they concocted the plan a week ago), he took it as a personal vendetta (shaking an angry fist at the sunset sky and all that), and pressed to quickly abandon everything they were doing and head back to Katapesh (where the Green Veil's base of operations was).

Once there, he stormed every single place they had previously discovered to be somehow tied to the organization (trashing several stores and smoking houses). The rest of the party followed suit, but Hassan and Valanar knew they wouldn't find her, as they had given specific orders to Essak for Falballa and the kid to be sent to Saltspit and hidden until they arrived.

However, things quickly got complicated. In few words:

- 1.-Rakhim found out where she was by using the same means they had previously used to track down Essak (crystal spheres through which the assassins communicated. Yes, yes, they also made lots of Sauron jokes the first time they found it. The fact that the assassin lord from which they took the first one was a cyclops didn't help either).
- 2.-Got to Saltspit, trashed Al'Sherengen's safehouse (which had been used by the assassin's to hide the hostages)
- 3.-Tortured everything that could be tortured to know what happened (earning some points toward an alignment shift, but not quite there yet, since it was balanced out by the ultimate goal).
- 4.-Eventually found out what was going on.
- 5.-Choked Hassan to death (as in quite dead, not just below 0) and demolished his face with his bare hands before getting knocked unconscious by Vorgok (who had a very hazy general picture of what was going on. He was also becoming less and less solid as time progressed, unsure of what was real and what wasn't).

Chapter XVII: A Proper Bastard Never Dies

Through sheer expenditure of money and cashing-in favours with big shots in Katapesh, the party had Hassan revived (resurrection is a very, very hard and complicated thing to do in my campaigns. But they were very, very rich as well, so it was within reach). One of Hassan's eyes was destroyed during the fight, however, so he had to replace it with another one made out of pure gold. As for Rakhim... well, that would come. For now, their long time adventure companion would remain jailed deep beneath the STC headquarters, pumped with all manners of alchemical concoctions to keep him weak and in a semi-conscious state.

Since they were in Katapesh for Hassan's resurrection, they might as well get some business going. Rather than breaking into madness fits, Hassan sent an envoy to Saltspit to get Rakhim's signature, which he used to forge a will in which Rakhim (who allegedly died from a *"slow, painful death caused by a severe case of choleric fever he caught in Jalmeray"*) designated his shares of the STC as preferential for society withholders, which essentially meant the current living owners of the STC (Valanar, Hassan, Vorgok, Jack, the Prince, Honest Abdul, and a host of other minor shareholders who had been joining the ranks of the Company as time went through) had the right to buy them, and if none wished they would be sent to an auction house to be sold to the highest bidder. By offering money to the rest of the owners, Hassan bought Rakhim's shares for himself and became the leading stockholder; Jack wanted to protest, but he had been threatened by the Rogue after he tried to defend Rakhim, and he knew they could dispose of him at any moment; Valanar had no quibbles, since being the leading stockholder meant that he would have to dedicate more time to directing the company and he had other things to worry about; and for Vorgok, all these earthly things meant little (instead, he recited bad poetry to the stockholder assembly).

"I saw no light at the end of the tunnel, Valanar" Had said Hassan after he was revived *"But I didn't see fire either. I take that as simply not being my moment. Let's get back to business"*

While Valanar took care of contacting Denizens of Leng from different parts of Garund, Hassan went to work on the technical aspects of the new business venture. So first there was the thing with the golden fountain. Quite-Awful Giselda had been tasked with setting up all that was necessary to send the kid into a perpetual dreaming state, in a small tower they had built north of Saltspit for that purpose. She warned him that once the kid was sent into such a deep sleep, waking him up later on would most likely result in his death. *"Just get me that golden fountain, witch"* was all Hassan replied before going out.

Chapter XVIII: Time for More... Experiments

Falballa's case was a bit trickier. Valanar had explained him all he knew about the process developed by the flesh-eater's High Priest, and together they made a list of things they saw as essential. These were:

-The substance used to infuse the host: Valanar had wisely kept some of it, although it had already decayed. To replicate it, they hired a contingent of Katapesh's finest alchemists, necromancers, and apothecaries, who worked day and night until they managed to create a copy. There were lots of ugly accidents, of course, and even more to come once they established production, and to that end they had a huge pit built near Saltspit to dispose of these *"flesh spawns"*. So basically my players were setting down the first stones for a future dungeon! I love these bastards.

-Elven Women: As mentioned before, the life energy that runs through elves and makes them immortal is perfect for the severe drain that the accelerated development of the host causes on the mother, so they would need to somehow get more of those. Getting people against their will wasn't really much of a challenge, but the fact that elves were so scarce this far south made things tricky. Through the Brass Legion, Hassan made contact with a band of mercenaries known as Bannor's Bastards, which operated in southern Avistan (the northern continent, which would be the equivalent of Europe in Golarion terms –remember Katapesh in eastern Garund, which is Golarion's Africa. Now that I think of it, Katapesh seems awfully similar to Zanzibar-). They would be tasked with the capturing of elves from Kyonin -an elven kingdom far to the north-, as well as any other elf they could find. Women would be worth 1,000 gold pieces each, men 200 (Hassan thought that using elves on both sides of the "process" would maybe increase the life energy available. They were going to capture the pointy-eared things anyway. Might as well use them for something). I still clearly remember the discussion he had with one of Bannor's envoys who came with the first load of elves *"No, no, these ones are clearly male! Look, you added fake breasts! And... uhm, you, check between their legs. What? Nothing? Let me see... the hell! These won't do! First, I'm not paying for male elves"*

made to look like female elves; and second, I don't need dickless eunuchs either! Take these back and tell Bannor that I'm not going to get scammed this easily!"

-Nursery: Beyond the fact that these were pretty ugly babies (the Denizens of Leng are creatures whose bodies are made out of malleable flesh which they can control with their minds, are unusually tall, with elongated extremities and... mouths that look like anemones. Now mix that with a human and an elf. Aye, not pretty at all), they still had to be kept alive. Falballa's offspring showed that development occurred very fast (in the span of two months, it had grown from a "What the hell is that thing?" to a "What the hell is THAT thing?"), and their dietary needs quickly went from what one would expect from a human or elf baby into not needing food at all. However, since the High Priest had designed these as "blank hosts", they also became rather unsettling, since they had no mind of their own, being essentially large vegetables which had spontaneous bursts of reactive behavior to basic needs. So a nursery was built to accommodate these, with female slaves brought from Khandassar to take care of the feeding and caring (and those who went nuts with the situation were shipped to the nightmare bunkhouses. Everything was functioning like clockwork).

Chapter XIX: It's Mine, Mine, MINE

In the meanwhile (in total it took about 5 months of in-game time, even though it spanned one and a half session), Quite-Awful Giselda had successfully managed to materialize the vudrani kid's dreams, and an impressive dreamscape in the outskirts of Saltspit now displayed a fountain from which liquid gold sprang. It was extremely hot, however, and involved a series of other issues, since when dreams become material, they also try to conform to the laws of nature as much as possible (or maybe it was just me being an ass and recalling Terry Pratchett. Who knows), but the fact was that the STC now controlled the only liquid gold fountain in the world. Salt, nightmares, malformed extradimensional babies... boy, liquid gold! Hassan barely could with his own happiness.

We discussed it for a while and ultimately came to the agreement that the fountain poured gold at a rate equal to that of the fountain that used to be in our school (which we had to measure back in the 90's as part of a physics assignment): 4 cubic metres per hour, or 66 litres per minute, and at a temperature of 1.000 C° (about 1,900 F°). At a liquid density of 17gr per cm³, and taking into consideration that 1lb of gold is worth 50gp in Pathfinder, that resulted in their wallets engrossing by 33.660gp per hour, which is approximately the equivalent Wealth Per Level of an 8th level character, or a bit less than that of a 20th level character per day.

At this point I distinctly remember Jack's reaction "*Isn't that too much money?*", only to be slapped by Hassan "*NO, IT IS NOT*".

As you can imagine, realising how ridiculously wealthy they were getting by the fountain alone kind of relegated the other venues to a secondary spot, because even all their other businesses combined could not produce the fabulous amount of

money that the fountain spewed like it was going out of style. That is not to say they were abandoned (Valanar certainly had more important things in mind than just hard cash), but instead made the protection, sustenance, and monetization of the fountain all the more important. Plans were abounding and the numbers started to get ludicrous:

First, there was the monetization issue. Sure, it was a fountain of bloody gold, but it wasn't precisely a matter of just reaching in and paying out. Word was spread across Saltspit that the STC was hiring construction workers to erect a new smelting facility, as gold had supposedly been found while digging a new tunnel. They got some architects and engineers from Katapesh to come and design the thing, and a site was selected north of the city. The plan was to build the facility right on top of the fountain, but the issue of other dreams materializing in the area made it impossible. Instead, a permanent portal was created to carry the liquid gold from the fountain and into the minting plant (about 5 miles away), all kept to a very tight circle to avoid news of the fountains (and the dreamscape themselves, although this was getting increasingly harder) spreading out. Of course, a few weeks later everyone and their mothers had received word of the findings, and Saltspit began experiencing a gold rush that spiked both population growth and barfight rates; hooker intakes alone were so high that Vorgok himself was unable to keep up the Prima Nocte at a 100%. Soon, every ravine, crack in the ground, water puddle and tiny creek was crawling with gold diggers from Varisia to Sargava, which stretched Saltspit's resources and capacity to the breaking point. On the good side, however, it served as a smokescreen for what was actually going on, and the increased influx of inhabitants (combined with a less than delicate policy of enforcement by the Brass Legion) gave some extra benefits in terms of slaves for the nightmare bunkhouses.

I told the party the facility would take about 3 months to get built to a point of proper operation, and we agreed to have their earnings slowly escalate as it became functional, starting from 0 and reaching full capacity (about 800.000gp/day) in 90 days.

An army of 50 iron golems was commissioned to the great tinkerers of Alkenstar. Valanar was keenly aware that secrecy and prudence had been thrown out of the window when they decided to let dreams come true near their HQ, and he wanted to be prepared for what could happen once the real dealings of the STC came into public light. Besides, he had wanted to get his own iron golem ever since the game started.

Chapter XX: We Might As Well Get Some Camels

Due to the sheer size of the order, the STC got a 10% bulk price discount, but that still set them back by 6,75 million gold pieces, and the artisans demanded an upfront payment of half that amount, since they still recalled the cancelled order for the zeppelin. By then, the STC had an accumulated wealth of about 1,5 million gold

pieces, so they had to request loans from the katapeshi lenders. Honest Abdul had become one of the richest men in the region thanks to his dealings with the STC, however, so he agreed to lend them the 2 million gp they requested, though for that he had to pretty much drain the coffers of almost every counting house and bank in the city (risking almost no actual cash himself, of course). However, the logistics of moving those amounts of money around created a whole new world of problems. Remember that 50gp=1lb, so the 50% payment to Alkenstar had a total weight of 67.500 pounds. Part of it was reduced to better forms of wealth transfer, such as jewels, but due to the sheer numbers not even a city like Katapesh was able to provide the vast amounts needed in such short notice, and Bin Fashar's company was simply not able to meet the demand without raising suspicions on his extra dimensional dealings. In overall, I allowed them to reduce the total weight by about 30%; however, the process caused a massive market dump in Katapesh, devaluing the gold standard and making the prices of gems, spices and other traditional wealth commodities explode.

The Merchant Court was in utter chaos, as while some merchants saw their wallets grow fat, others were having severe issues meeting their quotas; luxury exports, the lifeblood of Katapesh, grinded to a halt, causing whole fleets to stand idle in the ports, which in turn flooded the city with angry drunken sailors with nothing to do and little cash to spend. With the captains refusing to sail with their holds empty, the sea trading lanes began to collapse, both because the piers were choked with moored vessels and because a big part of it depended on those same ships that exported the good returning with much needed things such as wood, food, and slaves. Soon the city would be gripped with problems, but for now it was just brewing. However, the Pactmasters were getting anxious, and rumours among the ruling circles spoke about how they would eventually intervene should it get too bad.

Meanwhile, to transport the payment, the STC had to assemble quite the caravan (teleportation would have been easy, but since Alkenstar is smack in the middle of a huge antimagic zone known as the Mana Wastes -reason why they developed such technological wonders-, it was impossible); though reduced by the valuables, the total weight of the payment was still 47.250lbs, and with camels being capable of carrying a maximum load of 300lbs, that meant gathering 158 camels only for the transporting of the payment itself. Since sending that amount of money across the 400 miles of desert and mana wastes that separated Katapesh from Alkenstar presented the wet dream of every highwayman in Garund, a host of 500 armed men had to be hired for protection, which in turn required a host of additional people to provide services such as food and medical treatment. When all was said and done, the Grand Golden Caravan counted over 300 camels and nearly 1.000 people between soldiers, camel drivers, scouts, medic, slave masters, and what have you, and that's not even counting the hefty group of camp followers that gathered on its wake. Vorgok and Jack were sent to oversee the caravan, while Valanar and Hassan remained in Saltspit.

Chapter XXI: Purple Gorilla, Why Not

Now, it is important to consider that Rakhim's player had to leave us for a while as he traveled outside the country, so we had some leeway in keeping his character in the state he was. Everything was talked with him before doing anything, so it had his approval (hence why I allowed the whole capture situation in the first place. We're all very good friends, so we don't do that kind of stuff unless expressly permitted). He even told Valanar's player *"Go ahead and surprise me. So long as I still have a character to play when I get back, you have a free ticket to do as you please"*. So Valanar decided to turn him into a golem.

Yes, he already had ordered the construction of 50 golems and sent the region into economic meltdown in the process, but turning a party member into a golem had been a running joke of the party for years, ever since he made his first evil cleric about a decade ago. We had talked about constructs some time ago during pizza break, and he was captivated by one *"Alchemical Golem"* from a sourcebook I cannot remember at the moment, so his mind began working on that plan. He would need alchemists, apothecaries, a source of electricity and a long list of "nefarious devices" to finish the job.

The idea was to first create the body, which in this case was essentially a big homunculus. He modeled the body after the intelligent gorillas of the Mwangi Expanses, but purple (since, well, he decided he would use purple chemicals). A lot of blood was needed, which was unintentionally *"donated"* by a bunch of gorilla slaves they had recently imported. Once the body was grown, he had to transfer Rakhim's soul from his current body to the alchemical vessel, which was done through a judicious use of Magic Jar, and left his human form as a mere carcass (though Hassan decided to call for a taxidermist and mount it as a statue in the STC HQ's meeting hall).

He still needed a sufficient amount of electricity to instill life into the body. They tried a hired magician casting Lightning Bolt, but it didn't work. They then tried 10 hired magicians casting Lightning Bolt, yet all it did was burn down a laboratory. After some research, they found out they needed actual, natural lightning, so Valanar was forced to assemble a caravan and take the golem vat westward towards the Shattered Range, the mountains dividing the dry Katapeshi lands from the lush Mwangi Jungles, where anvil-shaped storm clouds would provide the power needed. He took a lot of brass with him and some builders, in order to assemble the lightning-catchers.

Some previous scrying and teleportation handled the trip, and then spent a few days in the mountains as the builders worked on the lightning-catchers and he himself on the complicated wiring required to properly jolt the body.

Chapter XXII: Jack and Vorgok's Untimely Adventure

In the meanwhile, Vorgok and Jack were leading the Great Golden Caravan southward across the dunes. Though they had encountered a few packs of gnolls that attempted to attack the trail, the hired soldiers made quick work of them. However, the further south they went, the more they felt being watched. Scouts were sent on regular intervals, but since they all returned with nothing to report, things proceeded calmly.

That, until Vorgok claimed to have seen an army following their trails. No one else could see it, so Jack attempted to ease things down by explaining the madness that was gripping his steel-toothed friend. It was pointless, though, as Vorgok decided to charge rearwards, past the caravan and into the sands. Soldiers were unsure what to do, so they remained posted, all watching as the crazed barbarian rode into the distance and fought invisible foes.

It just so happened that they were actually invisible foes.

Vorgok's exposure to ethereal blasts from the between-worlds had made him all sorts of crazy; his own dreamscapes had mixed with those of other people (and other *"things"* that don't quite classify as people), so he kept seeing things that were in someone else's imagination. His own body had started to fade at times, becoming half immaterial for short periods of time. However, this also had some unexpected benefits, such as being able to gaze into both the material and ethereal planes simultaneously, which proved quite useful against a band of marauders that had chosen to travel under the guise of the Ethereal. Impacting with the force of a locomotive, Vorgok cut through the lines, breaking the spell and suddenly revealing a multitude well in the high hundreds.

Battle ensued and, while they fought bravely, the tide was against them. Whoever these men were, they had powerful support and were well-equipped. In contrast, the STC had hired mostly second-hand mercenaries to act as soldiers, and half of them fled or got killed ignominiously, the other half eventually realising they were gone and either surrendering, escaping or crawling into turtle formations that got quickly overwhelmed. Sure, Jack and Vorgok -mostly Vorgok- counted dozens of victims each, but they too got over their heads, eventually being brought down.

Now, one thing is for Vorgok to be brought down; another entirely is to capture him. Several soldiers lost their hands trying to catch him, as the ulfen giant chewed and masticated their extremities away when they got too close. At one point no one dared come close, deciding to instead build a makeshift cage around him; the cage itself was no match for Vorgok's otherworldly fury, but Jack managed to get some sense into him as the Bardwarriorwhatshisclass offered to surrender, seeing as innocent camp followers were being butchered and that the battle was lost in any case.

They were eventually taken captive, after several poisoned darts managed to throw the barbarian into slumber and chains brought Jack down. It was evident these guys were not only after the gold, since otherwise they would have killed them.

Chapter XXIII: To Keep Ruling a City

To the north, back in Saltspit, Hassan had his hands full. With Valanar doing some spooky mad scientist stuff in the mountains, Rakhim stuffed as a teddy bear, and Jack and Vorgok travelling to another country at camel speed, the Rogue was left to handle all the loose ends, which had started to pile up:

-The Plague: Remember when Whipmaster Konkaf, the cyclop in charge of the slaves at the salt mines, warned the party about a growing infection? Well, it turned out that breaking the slave's back didn't stop the disease from spreading, much to the one-eye's bewilderment, and the lack of foresight on the party's behalf only helped it get out of control (a properly-timed hiring of priests casting Cure Disease would have solved the matter right away). Over a hundred had already died covered in pustules, and a hundred more were showing signs of going the same way soon; no one even knew how many others were sick. The City Council had ordered an emergency burning of the bodies, but with more dead showing up across Saltspit every day, they had a timebomb in their hands. Unease gave way to fear, fear gave way to rage, and soon uprisings were taking place across the city, with stores being robbed and Brass Legionnaires hanged by the mob. Initially secluded in the party's palace, Hassan was forced into action when one of the merchants bathing at the site's oasis they had previously conjured inside the building -which they used as some sort of tourist attraction and garnered some extra cash- died in the middle of the courtyard. He contacted the Prince through the crystal ball and requested the immediate dispatch of priests and medicaments, offering to pay for all the teleportation spells required (which came at a hefty cost, since the commercial lockdown that sat upon Katapesh had all the richest merchants hoarding scrolls and spellcasters to try to move their goods outside the country).

-The Flesh Spawns: The process was slowly progressing, and while the by-products were indeed horrendous (some of which now crawled in the depths of the pits just outside the city), Apothecary Bin Sabaj -the guy they put in charge of overseeing the works- reported that they had reached a 10% success rate (which, although low, was much better than the previous 0%) and that two dozen elves had survived long enough to be carrying viable spawns. Hassan had all the discarded elven subjects (all of which had died during the miscarriages, either being eaten from the inside, fused with the spawn's own malleable flesh, and other horrible ways of going out. It was Alien 4 with spells and swords) be burned along with the plague subjects, so that at least covered those tracks. He was getting anxious, however, since the working spawns wouldn't be ready for at least 3 more months, and they had already been contacted by ten Denizens of Leng, some of which would be visiting Saltspit at an unknown, but probably premature, date. This led to the idea of speeding up the process by infusing the elves with raw positive energy, so he ordered wizards to be brought. Yet this led to another problem.

-Wizardly Shortage: Even though there is indeed magic in the world, the STC had been abusing the available supply to grotesque levels. Teleportation and scrying had become the standard means for travel and communication not just among the party, but among the many upper echelons of the company. More and more spellcasters were being employed to cover the increasingly more complicated and dangerous business ventures, and some of the industrial units were using them up to the point of collapse: Casters in the mines to handle the elementals and keep the rift stable; casters in the nightmare bunkhouses to keep Slimy from becoming madness incarnate, the hags from stealing the goods, and the "workers" from having their heads explode; casters in the golden fountain to stabilize the dreamscape, to keep the kid secure, to move the liquid gold, and to speed up the construction of the mints; casters in the fields surrounding the fountain, where dream leftovers and ethereal currents still caused all manners of problems; casters in the palace to keep the artificial oasis with water, in the substructure to power up the unusual air conditioning system and to guard the vaults. And the list went on and on. Sure, the current crisis starting in Katapesh had put a stop to most salt imports, but judging it just a temporary issue, the Directorate had decided to maintain operations (plus there were some contingency plans in the making in case the city didn't open up trade to the outside world).

Chapter XXIV: Wizards!

As you can imagine, there simply were not enough spellcasters to keep up with this rate, and that's not even considering those who died in mine accidents or went insane from merely thinking about Slimy. The STC had a dedicated body for spellcasting contracts, the Department of Arcane Services, which in turn was in charge of meeting the magical requirements of all the other departments, and its representatives had scoured the region looking for people to be hired. The wizardly covenants and academies in Katapesh, Nex and Osirion had already taken notice, and though they had been showered with gold, were starting to get anxious at such accumulation of power, as well as the influence the STC was achieving in "The Biz" (I wanted to use "The Art", but Hassan's player thought we were long past that). Concerns ran the gamut from millennial covenants being broken down as its members were convinced with wealth beyond their dreams to magical academies being emptied of students (as spellcasters became more and more scarce, the Department of Arcane Services was forced to start recruiting just about anyone that could light a match with its fingers to meet the quotas), including warnings regarding the excessive use of magic in unethical and uncontrolled ways and all the terrible things that could happen because of this.

Though Hassan was largely uninterested by these issues so long as the money kept flowing, he did have to go through a particularly tense Directorate Meeting where the issue was brought up: There were, simply put, no more spellcasters left in eastern Garund. All were either already hired by the STC, killed in an STC-related operation,

taken -either by will or by force- by the members of the Merchant Court, forbidden by their orders/masters from participating or altogether hidden/runaway. It was a strange time to be a wizard (or even a cheap magician) in the lands of Katapesh. Now, those who have read about Golarion, know that there are two wizardly nations right to the south of Katapesh: Nex and Geb, both founded in times immemorial by archwizards. Nex was a land of immensely powerful spellcasters, while Geb had turned to the arts of necromancy, and everything there ran on zombie power. Both nations depended on their magic users, on a cultural, strategic and pretty much existential level, so this whole thing with the STC attracting so much spell power had them pretty worried and upset. Problems had already started a while back when a Nexian Arclord had been convinced to participate in the company after being granted a 4% share of the stocks, since it was believed the STC could be in tandem with Nex's mortal enemies in Geb (both nations hold a very uneasy peace after centuries of conflict), so the current situation only helped to increase tensions. To make matters even worse, the Department of Arcane Services reported the deeds of one Vernon Bundlebitter, Chief of Elemental Herding in the Saltspit-Katapesh route, who had been stirring trouble by going all bolshevik and was trying to form a union of spellcasters to demand better working conditions. If it had been random miners, it would have been just a matter of getting some gnolls and letting them loose on the protesters, but these guys were wizards, both dangerous if angry and a scarce resource necessary to the operation.

So the STC was forced to negotiate, granting several benefits to the Spellcasters Union, including such things as better pay, the creation of a schedule system to properly sort out working turns, and the always-treasured personal latrines. A library and laboratory would have to be constructed for spellcasters to have a chance to develop personal projects (although the STC would have priority rights for purchasing and owning potentially lucrative discoveries and inventions), and in general it gave the Union a lot of leeway and influence over the company. Words had been discussed about giving the organization access to some percentage of the shares, but Hassan managed to block that deal.

One good thing came out from the Spellcasters Union's formation, though, which was a more organized access to magic users, as well as an optimization on the use of those the STC already had under payroll. Though Bundlebitter tried to keep the relation tense and strained for political gain, a turban-wearing gnome sorcerer and member of the Union by the name of Baba Ganoush opted for a more cooperative approach, and offered the Directorate to handle the acquisition of spellcasters from distant locales. This would give the Union control over who came in and cause future issues, but for now the STC was against the wall, and the board members were very anxious to get the deal going.

A few days later, Valanar arrived in company of a monstrous, dark-purple oversized gorilla with particularly clever eyes. Several workers had died during the process back in the Shattered Range, as the cleric was not in the mood for safety measures and electrocution from handling brass machinery during a thunderstorm took

several out; Rakhim's own awakening also served to crush some spines, and they had to spend several hours looking for him when he escaped. Calm Emotions and a well-placed jolt of lightning took care of the burst of rage, though, and once the monk-sorcerer-gorilla (or Gorilonk, as we ended up calling him) had started to come to his senses, they headed back.

Since Rakhim's player was going to come back in about two weeks, we decided his character would be kept locked away in the dungeons for the remainder, with Valanar and some helpers doing regular visits to help him accommodate his new body. The cleric, however, did make sure to embed a control rune made out of brass into Rakhim's forehead, inscribed in a scroll that he would carry with him at all times and offer him control over his body (though not his mind nor soul).

Chapter XXV: Jack and Vorgok's Untimely Adventure, Part Deux

In the south, Jack and Vorgok were being held prisoners by the invisible marauders that struck their caravan and plundered their gold, and had been taken to a crumbling desert villa to the north-east. As it turned out, the bandits were under the command of a dreaded desert pirate by the name of Poirot Le Fei (a nemesis from Jack's own background story), so that part served to do some dramatic sword and cape adventure which ended with a sword fight while mounting a pegasus and a flying carpet among the exploding remains of a dune-sailing ship and many cheesy dialog lines. They also found some vials of mercurial water drawn from the endless sea spreading at the base of Mount Celestia, which later Jack found out was a legendary means for washing away sins and thus poured some on his head in order to *"correct"* his alignment. He kept more for himself, arguing that the STC *"had a way to make people do really bad stuff and still feel good about it"*.

Before Le Fei's climatic defeat and the mandatory *"You have not seen the last of me!"* prior to being engulfed by an explosion, however, they did manage to discover they had been sent there by none other than Prince Osman Bin Hassir, their most trusted associate and one of the major stockholders within the Saltspit Trading Company. To what purpose, it was yet unknown, but clearly the gold was a factor, as Le Fei's men had brought a dozen desertic oliphants to carry the treasure back to Katapesh.

They decided to leave Vorgok in charge of recovering the treasure (with the help of the handful of their own men who had been kept alive by the bandits for precisely the same task), while Jack would take the flying carpet they stole from Le Fei's personal belongings to quickly return to Saltspit and give the heads-up to the rest of the party.

In theory, at least, it was a good idea. Just that neither of them properly factored Vorgok into the equation.

So Jack gets back to Saltspit within a day, giving the news to Hassan and Valanar. Jack wanted to confront the Prince via crystal ball, but Valanar advised prudence, reminding everyone that the Prince still held valuable assets belonging to the

company back in Katapesh, and that it would be best to pay him a personal visit. With the assurance that Vorgok was in control of the treasure, they took some days to tie up the aforementioned issues (including the arrival of a Denizen of Leng, which had to be convinced to remain within the accommodations of their palace. Valanar did make sure to put the Department of Arcane Services on notice and request some extra spellcasting support around the building, just in case), before taking a portal to Katapesh.

And as it turned out, though, Vorgok had decided to take the initiative by mounting an attack on the Prince's palace with an oliphant stampede.

The logistics of getting the oliphants to Katapesh were not that hard, considering the creatures were trained to go back and forth between the city and the spice farms of Selsasham to the south (the creatures belonged to a vudrani spice-trading company). The problem was getting them through the city gates (they usually unloaded in the markets surrounding the walls), an issue which Vorgok solved by tying them together in a two-per-row formation with enormously thick ropes taken from the nearby piers, and going apeshit behind them until they panicked and began charging forward, steamrolling through the city streets. The barbarian himself traveled inside a boat he tied to the last row of oliphants yelling "*NOW STOMPER, NOW CRUSHER, NOW SMASHER AND CRUNCH! ON SPLATTER, ON BREAKER, ON SPLITTER AND CRUMBLER! LET'S MEET UP THIS PRINCELING AND BEAT DOWN HIS GATE! FOR TREASON COMMITTED HIS NECK WE WILL GET*" (as always, words adapted to make sense in English, as we play in Castilian). So it was an oliphant sleigh.

By the time the rest of the party had arrived, Vorgok's elephantine assault was already cutting through the city, across Golden Peacock's Square and into the Prince's well-guarded yet not oliphant-resistant courtyard. A massive, ground-shaking stomp which seemed to almost crumble the towering palace down brought everyone to their knees, as twelve ridiculously oversized pachyderms loaded with gold (half of which was now scattered across the streets, suddenly making a lot of people very rich) smashed against the gates, crushed most of the palace's guard and broke everything there was that could be broken, and then some.

While everyone had to commend Vorgok for his hands-on approach, the whole thing really cut down the options regarding finding a solution. In a rather impulsive move, the party decided to kidnap the Prince while the barbarian pretty much disintegrated the abode and everyone in it and head back to Saltspit.

Impulsive, I say, because amidst all the trouble, screaming, and rumble, they completely forgot that they left behind millions of gold pieces. Sure, the fountain could give them back in a week once the thing was fully operational, but that was still two-and-a-half months away. And after all that happened, it seemed they would be needing that golem army rather soon.

On the sidelines, dumping all that gold back into Katapesh was the last strain on its already troubled economy. Last time, they spent ludicrous amounts of money, causing severe financial stress in the city as prices went bananas in all directions and

clogging the trade networks, but in a way the effect was constrained by the fact most of the money ended up in a rather small circle of merchants, and given time it would have fixed itself. This time, however, over three million pieces of gold (enough to buy around 170 million chicken) had been laid out all across the city, falling into the hands of anyone who happened to be there and managed not to get crushed by the tidal wave of oliphants. This meant the gold would strike pretty much on all levels of the economy as the people ran to spend the money on just about anything. Within a matter of days, the price of most basic goods skyrocketed, both because of the inflated currency mass and because the buyers themselves started gobbling products in order to sell them later, as they started perceiving the continuous price increases. This created a widespread speculative bubble on almost every imaginable product, from hand baskets to real estate, which in the ill-regulated city of Katapesh could burst at any moment. Not to mention people were getting furious as their newly found riches suddenly devalued by a factor of 100.

If there was any time the Pactmasters would be moved to intervene, that time was now.

Chapter XXVI: Enter the Pactmasters

Yet things were not that simple. As it turns out, the Pactmasters were Denizens of Leng themselves, and unknowingly the party had contacted some of them for the whole fleshspawn business. So as tempted to act as they were, they had the conflicting issue of facing the STC and potentially missing on the deal to have a permanent and stable body for themselves.

That is why three Pactmasters presented themselves to the party with a deal: They would not take any action against them (though they would have to intervene to fix the Katapeshi economy), in exchange for not just the bodies, but the compromise that no other Denizen within Golarion would be granted such a treatment (they secretly planned to deal with the foreign Denizen that had already arrived once the issue was sorted out. The Pactmasters each had an Emerald of Power that gave them control over the hundreds of Aluum -special types of brass golems- that guarded the palaces, vaults and markets of Katapesh, dozens of which they had left hidden outside Saltspit should push come to shove, so it shouldn't be too problematic now that they knew who he was). As much as they were kinsmen, they were all too aware that having any other Denizen achieve such a feat would be problematic for their own plans, and if anything, holding such treasure in their power would grant them unimaginable influence far beyond the reaches of Katapesh. The idea was simply too tempting.

Of the whole party, Valanar was the only one who had a reasonable measure of just how powerful the Denizens were, and to him the deal seemed reasonable given the current circumstances. Hassan, however, was not; he knew they were powerful and influential, but he just wasn't going to hand over their only bargaining chip. So after sending the Prince into comfy incarceration and dispatching the Denizens to their

respective rooms while they discussed the situation, he devised a plan. Once he talked it out with the party, it was time to set it in motion.

At sunset, Vorgok came to pick up the Denizens and guide them through the underground passages to the laboratories. There, a group of apothecaries awaited next to the vats where some previously selected fleshspawns had been placed. In silence, the Denizens inspected the vessels, doing all sorts of nefarious and inscrutable planning within their alien minds.

Suddenly, one of the Denizens -the one who wasn't a Pactmaster- makes an advance to try and get a hold of one of the spawns. These creatures have an unusual connection to each other that dates back to the times before their own multiverse collapsed, and they were all keenly aware of the constant telepathic prodding they were each trying to use on the rest in order to know what they were thinking. However, after thousands of years of depredating on each other, it didn't take a psion to know what was going to happen, and this particular Denizen understood full well the disadvantage at which he was against the Pactmasters.

This led to a pretty heated battle between the Denizens, during which the apothecaries got killed and most of the laboratory trashed. At one point, the Denizens abandoned their facades and went full-on abomination, fleshy tentacles and anemone mouths flashing all over the place. Vorgok just allowed them to fight, waiting for the perfect moment to call on Hassan.

And that moment came when the Pactmasters attempted in panic to switch into the fleshspawns after the lone Denizen managed to take a hold of their minds during the short pause they had to make to activate their Emeralds of Power and call upon the dozens of aluum they had left parked in the desert outside Saltspit. The barbarian ran back, shut tight the heavy metal doors -trapping himself inside, mind you-, and yelled at Hassan through the crystal ball he had brought with him.

Above ground things were nasty. Hassan had ordered some workers to open the discharge canals they used to clean Slimy's pool, in order to have the water current push the insane aboleth through the aqueduct, which also connected to the flesh labs. Valanar had gathered all the spellcasters he could that had even the slightest capabilities to fend off insanity, and they all rushed to the operation.

Problem was that Slimy didn't fit, so they had to start demolishing the whole thing, which was taking too long, until one of the workers had the genius idea to use an explosive discharge on the base of the aqueduct. This would have been great, if not for the fact it ended with Slimy on his back splattered on the sand, with the lab still a good way ahead. Despite Valanar's spellcasting squad's best efforts, workers were already bleeding through their ears and trying to pull their own heads off with a shovel. Slimy wasn't going anywhere.

"Portals, we need to use portals!" Shouted Hassan to no one in particular.

"I have a few at hand. But I cannot teleport anything with safety unless I'm well aware where I'm aiming!" Answered Valanar. He asked me if he could try a teleport to the lab, but since he had not been there in a while, I couldn't ensure him high

chances of success. Plus he remembered the angry Denizens inside, and quickly decided the option was not in his best interests.

That's when Vorgok's voice came through the crystal ball *"Hey! Priest! What about you stop making excuses and use the damned glass thing!"* He sounded like he was wrestling monsters down there. Which he pretty much was.

Valanar and Hassan exchanged looks for a moment, during which a tiny hint of guilt was briefly perceived, before the priest broke out a scroll and asked one of the surviving arcane spellcasters to use it on Slimy and aim through the crystal ball to get a precise destination.

And with a puff of mystical energies, the aboleth was gone.

The screaming, the voices and, worse yet, the images that came through the crystal ball were so horrible that the mage dropped it and shattered it in a thousand pieces. But he did manage to see Slimy appearing next to Vorgok and insanity becoming almost palpable down there.

In the labs, Vorgok entered rage in order to fend off insanity, while the Denizens, still locked in battle and fighting to get into the last remaining fleshspawns, went bananas. It is true that, back in the day, the party had managed to survive a long trip next to Slimy. However, quite a while had passed since then, allowing Slimy's ravaged mind to coalesce into the stuff of pure horror, feeding off the madness that turned the minds of the bunkhouse prisoners into vanilla pudding. Also, when you are an interdimensional being of countless years, you have truly prime crafting material for nightmares in your head.

Eventually, the Denizens got themselves trapped in the fleshspawns, shaking in mental agony as Vorgok finished recreating Wrestlemania on their original bodies. His rage rounds were running out (in Pathfinder, rather than having a specific number of uses for rage, the barbarian class gets a certain number of rounds he can spend enraged each day), so the ulfen hurried up, took the spawns off their vats and put them inside a metal box and ran away from the lab before Slimy could do his thing on him.

Weak and unfinished as the spawns were, the Denizens had managed to get themselves locked in pretty much useless bodies, while the nightmare fits made sure their mental capacity was occupied elsewhere. Vorgok ran to the deepest pits of the tunnel network (which connected with the original dungeon that used to stand there), making his way around the place until he found the leftovers of an old trap-puzzle they had encountered the first time they visited the place oh-so-many sessions ago (which consisted of some stone sarcophagi with hidden pits, magical darkness and guarded by mummies), went to one of the coffins with the hidden pits while dancing around the now much less menacing local undead, hurled the box to the bottom along with all the mummies he could find in the place, and shut it close with several stone slabs, just before collapsing the room's pillars and running away. Things eventually calmed down. Most of the workers and spellcasters Valanar and Hassan brought with them had gone mad, but a quick call to the Night Hags solved that problem and at the same time increased the available nightmare pots (some

unlucky NPCs who hadn't gone mad were taken too). Vorgok refused to explain where he had sent the spawns arguing everyone's safety, but insisted they were securely trapped. Besides some deep cuts, tentacle marks and a broken arm, he was in good shape.

The next few days were mostly devoted to taking Slimy out of the labs and sending him back to his pool. With the facility trashed and all those involved in the works dead, the party decided to close up the business venture; the surviving elves were sold to Al'Sherengen after Vorgok had his way with them and everything else torched and the place collapsed. The whole deal was proving to be far too risky and problematic, particularly now that they had better and more reliable sources of profit.

Chapter XXVII: So We Meet Again

When they were taking out the elves, however, Jack stumbled upon the Emeralds of Power originally carried by the Denizens, and decided to include them into his bling repertoire.

Hassan took them from him about 10 minutes later. He had recognized them as quickly as he saw them (the party had dealt with one in the second or third session of the campaign, back when they were still slaves), and he had already heard the report regarding the considerable amount of aluum that were waiting amidst the sands just a few miles out of town, probably brought there by the Pactmasters who, seemingly, planned on getting their request fulfilled whether the STC wanted it or not.

After leaving some trusted advisers in charge of finishing up and organizing the reconstruction of the aqueducts, the party travelled to the outskirts of Saltspit, using the flying carpet to get a better view. Initially they were hard to find, brass against scalding sands and all that, but after some inspection, they found themselves floating above a legion of aluum. A quick count put the number around 60.

Valanar was speechless, "*Instant golem army*" was all he could muster.

Rakhim's player arrived that same session. He had been working on his character sheet to include the recent changes he had gone through (he was actually quite thrilled to play a mutant gorilla monk, truth be told), and now that things calmed down we took the time to bring him back into the game.

The party returned to the STC HQs. Hassan and Jack went to meet up with the Prince to shake him up and have him reveal how to properly use the Emeralds of Power; Vorgok went to the Pit of Prostitutes to check on the new wench incorporations to Saltspit; and Valanar headed down into the dungeons to check on Rakhim.

And he found him reading a treatise on woodcarving. "*Ah, we meet again, Valanar*". The priest was a bit startled by the image: A hulking purple-haired gorilla with clever eyes, sporting a pair of minuscule glasses and instructing himself in the art of carving wood. He seemed both immensely peaceful and thoughtful.

Rakhim made a gesture to stand, and still nervous, Valanar attempted to control him through the brass rune. The monk made a short pause and then proceeded, tapping his forehead *"I know what you did to me, Valanar, and what you can do. But as long as I keep my mind clear enough, I can fight it"*

Valanar regarded him with distrust *"Then why are you not tearing down these walls and choking me to death?"*

"Because I already tried that, and look where it got me" He regarded the priest with a bright gorilla smile *"I betrayed my vows and gave in to wild emotion. I forgot all I was taught and the punishment for that was... this"* He scratched his head *"Perhaps it is a good opportunity to start it over"*

"What about Falballa? She is dead, you know. It was horrible, bloody. The spawn -your son- ate her from the inside out"

Rakhim tensed for a bit, then relaxed -after some appropriate Will rolls, of course- *"Terrible, indeed. But I have to put it behind shall I ever get back in the way of self-improvement. Do not think of it as me forgiving you -I could never do such a thing. Think of it as me taking back control over myself"* He leaned closer to the bars *"Now, the door, if you would?"*

I was pretty happy by how Rakhim's player handed the whole situation, as it gave me a route with which to get the party working together again, something I was having problems figuring out considering all that happened. So I allowed him to resist Valanar's control as long as he managed to maintain his mind clear and emotions out of the way, as his character was ought to do from the start according to his own background.

Noticeably shaking, Valanar took a while to take the step and open Rakhim's cage. The gorilla would have had no problems opening it himself, anyway.

Chapter XXVIII: A Princely Prize

Getting the information out of the Prince proved far easier than expected. He mounted his whole pedant non-cooperative set up at first, but he broke down quickly after Hassan threatened to bury him alive in salt. As it turned out, each emerald had a word of activation inscribed inside, which could be read if put under light at the correct angle. Once pronounced, the wearer would gain full control of the aluum bound to the gems through a telepathic link.

Ignoring the Prince's demands for better wine, Hassan and Jack walked out and took the flying carpet to check on the aluum again. Jack took an emerald and Hassan the other two, and after some careful inspection managed to get the words, which they uttered as they flew above the brass golems.

One by one they came to life, as the whole brass battalion pointed their glowing emerald eyes up in their directions. It was decidedly unsettling. A nearby traveler hurried away on his camel.

Hassan was awestruck with their newfound power *"Imagine all we can do with this. We could bring Katapesh to its knees!"*

"Indeed" Said Jack, pensive "But what if..." He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking, and then a third of the aluum began dancing the Thriller.

After the appropriate slapping, we spent part of that session setting things straight: I told the party that their contacts in Katapesh informed them that the remaining Pactmasters had enough of their jibba-jabba and were about to mount an attack on Saltspit, so they gathered to plan a defense.

Having 60 aluum would indeed prove useful, but considering the Pactmasters probably had a lot more in their service, plus a myriad of other means ranging from angry katapeshi nobles to nefarious devices no one knew about, five dozen brass golems just weren't going to cut it.

They tried to get the Night Hags to chip in, but as expected they refused to do anything outside their contract, particularly since all the trouble they had stirred in Katapesh had ended up affecting Bin Fashar's business and, in turn, were causing issues on the extraplanar nightmares-to-souls-to-gems deal.

The Brass Legion just took some extra cash to prepare, but the party knew they wouldn't add much more than a barely loyal meat shield. Al'Sherengen got some of his own men involved, and through militia recruitment they managed to get a few hundred highly unreliable hands.

The forges were put to work double time to make enough equipment for the Saltspit Defense Force -SDF-, and the markets were depleted of all swords, hammers, helmets, butter knives, and peeing pots. Baba Ganoush of the Spellcaster's Union was convinced to get his magic users organized into an arcane militia in exchange for a sizable payment bonus; the Slavemaster's Clique also got its own bonus after negotiating the involvement of its members in the SDF -after all, some of the meanest inhabitants in Saltspit worked there-. The slaves tried to organize themselves into the Brotherhood of Involuntary Workers and get a deal out of the whole matter, but a pack of angry gnolls was set loose in their quarters to sort things out. Speaking of gnolls, some of the marauding tribes the company used to hire for muscle jobs were brought in as well.

All in all, the SDF managed to become a rather respectable army, counting around 1,500 footmen, 60 golems, about 90 spellcasters (though just about a third of them could be said to be actually dangerous), 300 gnolls, a few dozen hyenadons, a handful of trained harpies, 5 hill giants, and a bunch of resourceful PCs.

Yet when the Pactmasters arrived in the company of every single aluum in Katapesh -some 300-, including a couple of giant ones that everyone always thought were just statues standing in front of the Pactmaster's minarets, as well as a battalion of mercenary baatezu led by a fallen angel, it somehow felt small.

Chapter XXIX: Stand Down and Die, STC!

Besides Vorgok, who was hardly stopped from charging alone, the party wanted to negotiate a way out. However, there was no room for niceties. Though the Pactmasters were unaware of what exactly had happened, they had managed to

receive warning signals from their associates before being trapped in the fleshspawns. Worse yet, they believed the STC to be in league with other Denizens of Leng, which made the whole thing crystal clear: They had been trying to undermine Katapesh from the very beginning in order to strip them of their power (as the Pactmasters count themselves among the most powerful Denizens in Golarion). So the STC had to be wiped out.

Jack and Rakhim volunteered to approach the Pactmasters on the flying carpet to attempt a deal, getting ambushed by devils when they got too close. After getting sight of that, Vorgok charged away and, after some hesitation, Hassan gave the order to attack. I remember Valanar's player rather troubled, saying that they were going to lose all they'd worked so hard for.

So yes, the table was rather grim that session. We ended it in a cliffhanger as it was getting late and the battle would surely take long.

One of the reasons I like to stop sessions in cliffhangers sometimes is to both give everyone a sense of tension and make them eagerly await the next meeting, and give them time to think. So I tend to do it mostly when I know they are in big trouble. This case was no exception.

The next session, Hassan and Jack asked me about fallen angels, and we talked about how they end up like that after betraying their calling and being compelled by the burden of sin to act as they do. Next, Jack used some bardic lore regarding mercurial waters and whether they could cleanse really ugly sins, to which I said yes. From that point, their plan was rather evident.

On a seemingly unrelated topic, prior to starting the session Hassan also asked about what happened at the conjunction of the Quasielemental Plane of Vacuum and the Negative Energy Plane. I recalled about how that place was supposedly known as the point where "*Death and Nothingness*" meet, how the Doomguard -Planescape faction- had erected their most fearsome fortress precisely in the last point before that place where something could exist, and how it effectively meant absolute and utter oblivion.

When we finished that conversation I had the nagging feeling he didn't just ask me that out of pure curiosity (Hassan's player tends to dislike the whole Inner Plane stuff, probably because I used to torture the group a lot with puzzles related to it and he never managed to solve them), but that plan wasn't so obvious to me.

So, Jack and Rakhim spend the first part of the session fighting through progressively more horrible devils on their flying carpet. The monk had become considerably stronger after his gorillification, and he was smashing skulls left and right while Jack made use of the skill points spent in Fly to get the carpet moving swiftly among spiky chains and horned monstrosities.

Eventually, they made their way to the baatezu's leader, an appropriately edgy fallen angel with excessive use of eyeliner. With Jack orbiting him as fast as he could to avoid his spells, Rakhim took the mercurial water and used his hugely powerful gorilla legs and absurdly high Acrobatics roll to propel himself through the sky and

land a choking grip on the fallen angel, smashing the vials on his head and letting the water take sins away.

Lots of hissing, screaming, and falling took place in a short period of time, but eventually light broke through the menacing clouds and Rimmel evacuated the fallen angel's face, who got a hold of himself just enough to avoid having both smashed against the desert ground.

After some emotively cheesy speech, the redeemed angel took onto his army of devils and gave his life to sever the link that held them in this plane, sealing the wobbles between dimensions and instantly dissipating the entire baatezu force. While the aluum kept fighting -and, in truth, they were winning with or without the devils-, the sudden dimensional blockade left the Pactmasters wavering, to which Jack quickly reacted and shot the carpet in their direction. Slish, slash, some gorilla fist to the face and their emeralds were all taken, sending the whole aluum army into a sudden halt.

It took some seriously lucky saves and Fly rolls for them to avoid -most- of the spells furiously thrown their way by the Pactmasters, but once they managed to get behind their lines, a flurry of fireballs and magic missiles coming from the spellcasting battalion covered their asses.

Without waiting any longer, they checked for the words carved into the gems and began calling them out, rapidly gaining control of the Pactmaster's aluum army and sending them in their direction. One of the colossal aluum got a hold of one of them and squished it against the ground, only to be repeatedly stomped by hundreds of brass feet afterward, while the rest managed to escape inside a tornado of sandy wind (as all forms of teleportation had been blocked by the angel's final actions). An eerie silence swept over the battlefield, as in a matter of minutes all enemies had disappeared. Some drunken Brass Legion mercenaries were fighting between themselves, but otherwise everyone felt rather out of place. After gathering his thoughts, Hassan just waved a hand and told Whipmaster Konkaff to sound the horn and send everyone back home.

"Payment will be handled at the House of Public Services tomorrow morning! Order all the taverns and wenching houses in the city to make their products freely available for the night, at expense of the Saltspit Trading Company! Latrines will also openly service anyone in need! The Saltspit Defense Force is dismissed!" Valanar announced shouting his lungs out, which drew a multitude of cheers and happy chants from the army.

Chapter XXX: Some Puns Take a While to Manifest

After some celebration, the party went straight into planning their next move. Sure, they had beaten the Pactmasters in open combat, and while they managed to kill one of them and held three more locked away somewhere deep beneath Saltspit, there were still 6 more of them alive, and most likely plotting a new way to get back at them.

Both Hassan and Valanar argued that the most reasonable step was for the Pactmasters to use Katapesh's resources to undermine them somehow. Another direct attack was very unlikely, considering the STC was now in control of every single aluum the city ever had, and that besides the City and Zephyr Guards, the trade nation had no proper standing army to speak of. Vorgok deemed it a logical outcome and proposed to lay siege on the city and force the Merchan Court to submit and remove their support to the Pactmasters.

Hassan also argued that it was possible for them to once more attempt to hire the help of devils, which after all they defeated through a very circumstantial and unlikely to work again strategy.

So they decided to prepare for both scenarios and began planning.

The first thing they focused on was the eventuality of the devil mercenaries coming back, since it seemed both the quickest and most dangerous way in which the remaining Pactmasters could react to their defeat. Having seen what a few vials of mercurial water could do, Hassan figured out that a lot more of the same could effectively stop any army made out of evil outsiders.

To that end, they moved their contacts and informants in order to hook up with someone who could make a pathway into the Seven Mounting Heavens of Celestia, from where the water in question originated. One such individual was found in Absalom, the City at the Centre of the World, to whom they offered ridiculous amounts of money in exchange for the magical mirror he had that could be used to walk back and forth between the lowest level of Celestia, Lunia.

It so happens that all portals leading into Celestia do so precisely on the shores of the Silver Sea, the endless expanse of quicksilver waters that surrounds the base of the mountain. Hassan's plan was to use the mirror in order to pour a continuous stream of mercurial waters into Golarion, into a massive cistern they had ordered built using one of the old tunnels of the salt mines.

However, since the portal opens specifically on the edge, water doesn't just flow in. So they decided to hire some craftment from Alkenstar to get them a pump system that could do the job. As previously mentioned, teleportation doesn't work in Alkenstar due to the city being in the middle of the Mana Wastes, a huge expanse of anti-magic territory between Nex and Geb, resulting from an ancient war between those two nations. However, having the flying carpet made travel considerably easier, and within less than two days they were in the City of Invention.

First thing was to revisit the golem purchase.

"You know I love golems, but don't we already have almost four hundred of those back home?" Asked Valanar.

"Yes, but those are brass golems. I need iron golems, like we ordered" Answered Hassan.

Valanar gave him an intrigued look *"Why?"*

"Because I need to put them in orbit" Hassan dramatically removed his eyepatch, revealing his golden eye *"We will rule Katapesh, nay, the world, from the sky!"*

I don't know if he had been planning it all along or not; I mean, yes, a lot of sessions had passed between Hassan getting his eye replaced by a gold replica and the one where he revealed his orbital golem plan, but these guys tend to play like that. I guess it is the benefit of knowing our campaigns tend to last for years, so even the most far-fetched schemes can be brought into fruition eventually with enough patience.

So after a good ten-minute laugh, we went along with the game.

As it turns out, the craftsmen in Alkenstar had already gathered all the materials needed to build the golems when they heard news the payment was underway, but stopped production as soon as they were informed of the assault on the Golden Caravan. Hassan ordered the works to start at once, which wasn't hard once some good Intimidation rolls and some sacks of gold were thrown in the face of the head craftsmen.

Payment would be secured this time by using alkenstari flying ships, and the STC would pay a 10% bonus to cover for the distress caused by the last incidents. They were allowed to purchase 3 iron golems already built which were meant to guard a vault in Druma, much to the complaints of the dwarf representative from said distant nation.

Then came the matter of the mercurial pump system, which hydromechanics from Alkenstar could easily solve if they were handed direct access to the Silver Sea. The engineers made some quick schematics and calculated that, if the celestial liquid behaved similar to actual water and taking the size of the mirror into consideration, they could guarantee a flow of 2 cubic metres per second (that's about 530 gallons). So the party rented a skyship, loaded the iron golems, the engineers, a working crew, and some ingots of antimagic metal just in case, and headed back to Saltspit. I told them things would be calm for the next two months, so we fast forwarded the events.

Chapter XXXI: A Matter of Water

Construction of the mercurial pump went along nicely. Though there had been some issues at first due to the constraints of sending the materials through the mirror, the engineers eventually figured out how to cut them down and rearrange them on the other side. A redundant pumping station was built on the shores of the Silver Sea along with the pipework necessary to carry the water (though it was left disconnected in order to leave as much of the portal unobstructed for now. Once completed, only a single person would be able to pass through the remaining portal surface at the same time, the rest being used by the pipes). Tests showed that mercurial water was lighter than regular water, so the pumps would be able to increase the flow by almost 30%. Some dredging had to be done to clear the area, disturbing some of the local wildlife, but besides some curious lantern archons and some adorable celestial bunnies (which were promptly caught and sold back in

Saltspit as either exotic pets or rare delicacies), the works carried on without interruptions.

On the other side, the cisterns had been completed, and Hassan had another one built just in case. It would be able to hold 27,000 cubic meters, and another pump station was built in order for mercurial waters to be injected into a special pipe network that connected to spray towers placed in strategic locations around the city. The idea was that, should any kind of evil entity happen to pass by, the water cannons on these towers would be able to rain goodness all around.

Rakhim advised testing in advance, so they paid off some mercenaries to capture evil harpies and salamanders from the Brazen Peaks, as well as a mummy they dug up from the temple underneath. After showering them with mercurial water, they either turned good and started hugging everyone, or hissed in pain and melted down. In any case, it did exactly as advertised.

Chapter XXXII: A Date Long Overdue

In the meanwhile, Vorgok gathered a group of the toughest Brass Legion men he could muster and headed on an expedition into the Screaming Jungle in eastern Sargava. He still remembered the *Horrible and Enormous Shapeless Thing Covered in Teeth That Spat Other Shapeless Things Covered in Teeth* he had discovered during his time as the Pain Fairy, and he had all the intention of building a battle arena with that thing. Or at least throw it on the Pactmasters should they come back.

Teleportation could only get him so far, as casting powerful spells in Mwangi territory could anger the wrong guys, so he took the skyship and spent the next three weeks flying above or cutting through jungle, tigers, talking apes, and juju monsters. Eventually, though, they made it through and using the last bits of Terror Dust managed to track the aberration, which was hidden at the bottom of a temple dedicated to a forgotten blood god.

After literally wrestling the horror down, Vorgok cut it into manageable pieces, locked them inside steel boxes and loaded as many of them as he could into the ship (the barbarian had noticed the creature reformed whenever he or his men cut it down, so he figured it would be able to patch itself up once they unloaded it back home).

Back in Saltspit, workers had been turning the deepest slave pit into a battle arena -the poor sods that had "lived" there had been sent to the pit next door, which was so crowded now people died in their sleep from being suffocated, and the slave masters had so many problems moving them through, they ended up building a ramp and throwing the slaves inside, then picking them up with a series of cranes and nets. Human Resources at its finest-, so when Vorgok returned, they hauled the boxes inside.

The arena itself was not finished, but they had already converted some of the tunnels into holding pens, deep enough that Vorgok hoped to be able to contain the

monster. So one by one, he stood on the edge of the holding pen, opened the boxes with a hammer and quickly tossed the gargling monstrosities inside, which began fusing with each other as they piled up.

Rakhim showed up, and asked Vorgok if it wouldn't be safer to keep the parts separated rather than recreating the massive monster right in the middle of the city. The barbarian thought it a capital idea, so he jumped into the holding pen and wrestled the thing into submission once again, chopped it down and boxed it back. After the workers had finished preparing some more pens, he divided the boxes in five groups and left the content evenly split. Five large horrible abominations were easier to contain than one enormous one, after all.

Once it became operational, the arena became a centerpiece of Saltspit, gathering huge crowds to witness the always bloody and spectacular encounters. Hassan pressed for the income generated from bets to be destined to the Department of Public Works, which among other things devised primitive sewage system for the city that drained directly into the horror's pit, as they found out the thing consumed pretty much anything thrown at it, and as long as they kept burning it partially once a week, they could avoid it growing out of control. Eventually, a garbage and rubble disposal facility was erected next to the arena, with everything from broken tools to dead bodies being handed over to Monsieur Mangetout, as they eventually named the thing (Vorgok supposedly could differentiate between all five versions of Mangetout, but I wasn't quite convinced).

This led to the creation of a garbage collection crew, which had both the task of cleaning up the city and regularly setting Mangetout on fire, which substantially increased Saltspit's life quality and rate of disappearing bodies. With the city swelling at a continuously faster rate ever since Katapesh went into economic crisis and immigration exploded, even the generally careless STC saw it necessary to start giving the place some kind of infrastructure.

Chapter XXXIII: A Penny for your Thoughts

The Department of Public Works was given a budget of 400,000 gold pieces per month. Assuming at least half of it would be stolen somewhere in the chain of corruption, 200,000 gps seemed enough to get the place running smoothly and then some. Streets were getting paved, a public hospital was built and put in the charge of the Church of Desna, the Brass Legion got a permanent headquarter made of actual stone with more latrines than anyone could ever need, and there was a brief experiment about using the noxious fumes from the sewers to empower a gaslight system, but after setting an entire neighbourhood on fire, it was determined that simply hiring torchbearers to light up heavy lamps during nighttime was more effective.

By this time, the Coinworks managed to reach full capacity, with the equivalent of 800,000 gp per day being processed. Due to the logistical complications of minting so many coins, most of it was poured into molds and set into 10-foot tall blocks of

solid gold, which was then transported to the vaults beneath the palace. At 16,000 pounds of gold per day, though, even the most enthusiastic estimations grew short. There was simply too much money being produced, and increasingly less room to keep it.

I remember asking the group if they really cared about keeping it all safe, considering they had a virtually infinite supply. The looks they gave me clearly indicated the scale of their greed. So plans to build a monumental vault system were laid out almost immediately, including a flooded section for gondola trips.

As wondrous as the vault plans were, they would still need some serious protection. Valanar had the idea of binding outsiders to act as guards. The first attempt was a disaster, accidentally letting lose a demon with too many G and Z on its name to be pronounceable, which they managed to stop by showering it with a bucket of mercurial water. The demon melted down into a humanoid form that, among tears, could not stop thanking the party for washing away its sins, and pledged its life to their service should they choose.

The *"cha-ching"* thoughts in Hassan's head were almost audible. *"We're so monetizing this right now"*.

Chapter XXXIV: Afterlife Ventures

The idea didn't take long to convince the rest of the party: They would use the mercurial waters pumped out from Celestia in order to wash away the sins of petitioners turned into devils and demons, and then take advantage of the renewed remains to see what they could get out of them. Hassan had originally intended to charge them, but it was soon evident they would probably have nothing to pay with, and it was unlikely that devils and demons would willingly pay in advance to be reduced into joyous leftovers. Instead, Valanar noted, they would have to aim at something else, such as the pledge offered by the one they washed earlier. Who knows, maybe they got lucky and found a long-lost archmage or something.

Rakhim guessed that the waters would probably not work on particularly powerful ones, harming them rather than saving them, given that not all evil entities were originally good, some arising from evil itself, so they would have to keep their clientele on the lower tiers, which made the whole affair seem less interesting.

"We're not in the business of saving souls" Said Hassan *"We're in the business of making business"*

But just when he was about to scrap the idea, Valanar lighted up *"But there might be some willing to pay precisely for that"*

Valanar's plan was to get in contact with someone of power in the Upper Planes that would be willing to offer recompense in exchange of them saving tormented souls from the Lower Planes. They would create a demon-hunting brigade, snatch the wretches into Golarion, throw them into a pool of mercurial water and hope that they don't explode or turn into goo. Of course, they most likely would have to pose as johnny-do-gooders in order to convince the guys upstairs, but that could be taken

care of easily. Jack sort of forcibly volunteered, as no one else in the party wanted to get alignment-changed due to fears about what that could eventually cause given their actions, and was designated as the STC's Heavenly Ambassador.

Vorgok commented over a cigar, a bottle of taldan brandy, and three women doing their best to massage the ulfen giant, why hadn't the angels done that themselves given they had a whole sea of the stuff, but with no one there to listen and the barbarian's mind going in a different direction, that slight inconsistency was left in the wind.

Valanar and Hassan took a leave of absence and teleported into Absalom, the greatest city in Golarion, to find people suitable to work in the demon-hunting brigade, deemed the Tactical Forgiveness Unit, but later nicknamed as the Piety Punchers.

Absalom has a very particular characteristic that makes it suitable to find that sort of labour: At its centre rises a massive cathedral which holds a relic known as the Starstone, a meteorite that fell to Golarion -supposedly summoned by aboleths in order to destroy the human race- said to be able to turn mere mortals into gods. Hundreds of heroes travel to this place from all over the world in order to enter the cathedral and go through the mysterious Trial of the Starstone, which if completed would ensure godhood. Despite the highpoints of heroes such as Iomedae and Cayden Cailean (who succeeded at the Trial by accident while drunk, becoming the god of ale and adventurers), most never accomplish their goal, and end up as depressed swords-for-hire filling Absalom's taverns and wenching houses.

It took them both a week, but eventually they gathered a crowd of 20 men valiant enough to dare venture into the Lower Planes to capture demons, dumb enough to ask no questions, and greedy enough to do it all for bags of gold. They brought the men back with them to Saltspit, and after a few days of preparation, sent them on their first mission: To capture a dozen lemures from Avernus, the upper layer of the Nine Hells.

Things escalated rather quickly. Though they suffered some casualties, the Piety Punchers proved to be quite effective, and soon Hassan decided to expand the operation by creating two additional brigades, the Godly Gobsnackers and the Saintly Stompers. Valanar had figured out that, if they were going to get any endorsement from celestial beings, the whole thing would have to seem honest, so they would have to carry on with some pro-bono sin cleansing for a while before trying to contact someone, in order to have something to show.

In two weeks of work, they got nearly 300 creatures cleansed, between minor devils, demons, and some things without clear classification they found in Pandemonium, before deciding to send Jack to get someone feathery on their side. There were some tense moments when a demonic commander got involved after the brigades apparently kidnapped some of its soldiers, but nothing that a band of 60 disgruntled heroes armed with liquid goodness couldn't handle.

On the side, the workers at the pumps had been reporting a marked increase in archon sightings.

Before travelling to Celestia in the company of almost 300 renewed souls, Jack had taken not one, but three dives in his personal mercurial bathtub before embarking through the mirror to try and contact someone that would hear their "pleas to help the tortured". Jack had become sort of addicted to using the liquid, washing himself with it every time he did even the slightest thing that could be deemed bad. He kept a pristine Lawful-Good alignment in the same way a hypochondriac keeps his hands germ-free by scalding them with boiling water and tears off his skin with industrial-grade cleaner. It was unsettling, to say the least.

He roamed the lovely puffy fields of Lunia for two days before being met by an angelic emissary of Cordelia, the Lady of Charity, which took him in for an audience with her mistress. Cordelia ruled from a monumental house of hospitality, where wounded angels from the Blood Wars were tended by the kindest of petitioners, whose hands could wash away all weariness, pain, and disease.

Or at least that's how it used to be.

Chapter XXXVI: Pissing in Paradise

What Jack was confronted with was more in line with what you could expect in a leprosy house out in Jerusalem after the Crusades: Dank, stinky air filled with the smell of putrefaction and disease, with wounded angels festering in their sores and covered in pustules. The petitioners themselves seemed weary and sick, and the whole place had an overwhelming aura of death and defeat.

Jack was confronted by a particularly angry Lady of Charity, whose blackened hair was dropping in dry tatters, eyes yellow with rheumatism. She gazed at the legion of bright-eyed saved ones with a mixture of disgust, remorse, pity, and anger, before calming down a notch and giving Jack a tour through the facilities. She stopped in front of a big marble fountain, from which thick, greenish water flowed.

"So it has been you who has poisoned our waters" She told Jack, trying to remain as calm as possible, evidently struggling *"Filled our waters with sin and corruption"* All Jack could do was point at her with both hands, smile and say *"Yeah, about that..."*

Jack managed to get himself kicked out of the healing house by a mob of angry petitioners, and eventually made his way back into Saltspit.

After hearing what happened, the party decided on two things:

-First, they would considerably step up security around the pumps, fearing some sort of retaliation, now that they understood why archos were so keen on watching their actions. They thought for a moment about getting evil-infused rock from Avernus, but eventually came to their senses and remembered that the whole point was to seem like they were doing it for good. Instead, Hassan had the idea of sending elderly people from Saltspit into *"healing groves"* devised around the pumps (the elderly were selected through a lottery, which was sold at 1cp per ticket. it eventually became quite a success). The idea was to put so many frail people in the area that no good-aligned being would dare to mount an attack.

-Second, Valanar decided to take the negotiations on his own. Through their contacts in the Church of Desna, they managed to secure a priest in Oppara who would put them in contact with a powerful entity from Celestia. They offered a substantial donation to the church in exchange for the priest visiting them in Saltspit, and carried out the ritual, meeting with Aboras, one of the many servants of Desna.

Though Aboras had an unfavourable reaction at first (after all, Valanar does not exactly beam out with goodness), Valanar managed to convince him that the very reason they were doing this was to atone for their sins. His massively overpowered Bluff roll coupled with a Will saving throw to avoid having his mind read that passed by the skin of his teeth helped smooth things through, and eventually Aboras had to recognize that the party was indeed saving tortured souls from damnation. When one of the saved ones showed up to be a fallen former paladin of Desna (I gave them a 20% chance for it to happen, and they got lucky), it all clicked and Aboras decided to help the players.

After they explained them the issue with Cordelia, Aboras offered to act as an intermediary to calm off the Lady of Charity. Since the pumps were not attacked, the party assumed it worked, even though the waters had indeed started to turn thick, pestilent and slightly acid to the touch as their saving continued.

Valanar kept contact with Aboras, and together they worked on the organization of a better financed force. The angel offered the party access to substantial wealth, but the priest noted that they had enough money themselves. Instead, he asked for assistance in more meaningful, hard-to-attain ways.

Three weeks later, Aboras returned with a pack of old scrolls from Celestia's library, detailing three magnificent treasures that would be able to assist them.

Chapter XXXVII: Artifacts of Amusing Nature

The first was an item known as The Gatecrasher. This relic, apparently, was able to open portals across the planes by simply swinging it and smashing a surface, once employed by a great hero to save his people from destruction.

The Gatecrasher was hidden in Carceri, which gave me the chance to do some actual adventuring, adding a good measure of monsters from Greek mythology. So after spending some days fighting cyclops, chimaeras, and running away from an hecatonchire, they got their hands on a rather crude wood-and-cloth hammer, similar to those used to bang gongs. It was extremely heavy, so Vorgok was tasked with using it after Valanar had conducted some research. The scroll suggested that the person bearing the Gatecrasher would have to call out one of the ancient names for the planes it listed, strike a surface and then a portal would open. They tried out with "Icchabar", the ancient name of Golarion, and Vorgok smashed a wall open, sending everyone else flying in a blinding explosion of light and opening a 60-foot wide rift into Golarion.

The party arrived at a nondescript location in Varisia. Valanar was out of teleports, so they took the flying carpet and returned home after some days. On their way back home, they studied the other two scrolls:

-The Wellspring of Wellbeing: A mystical cauldron said to allow anyone within its vicinity to survive in even the direst of environments, thought to have been abandoned by its last owner in the Worldwound, and later recovered by a traveler who now posed as a prophet of the gods and used the Wellspring to perform miracles.

-The Quill of Carlovac: Made from a golden feather plucked from a sphinx, the Quill was supposedly employed by several powerful magicians throughout history to trap spells within scrolls and grimoires. It was currently kept as a relic in the headquarters of the Pathfinder society.

Chapter XXXVIII: Upping the Ante

The party spent a week in Saltspit coordinating and managing the city, and finally decided to head out to get those two other relics, except for Hassan, who wanted to stay back to work on his orbital golem plan.

This time he finally detailed what he wanted to accomplish, which made me understand his previous questions about the planes: He wanted to get multiple iron golems in geosynchronous orbit above the most important cities of the Inner Sea, filled with all manners of contingency spells ready to open a portal to the null region between the Negative Energy Plane and the Quasielemental Plane of Vacuum, releasing the nothingness there and obliterating everything around the impact area. He thought that, since iron golems heal 3 HP per point of fire damage and any excess gets turned into temporary HPs, they would amass so many temporary HPs due to the heat caused by atmospheric friction during planetary entry, that they would be able to survive the crash and release the spells on the impact zone. The crater caused by the crash proper would be icing on the cake.

Aluums didn't work because, unlike their brass golem cousins, they do not heal with fire, but rather from negative energy. So that explained his insistence on getting iron golems.

I ruled it made sense (Rakhim's player calculated the golem's terminal velocity and approximate heat generated by planetary entry, and from that determined the number of temporary HPs, but I don't have it in my notes. I do remember it being more than enough to survive the impact, even if I considered that the limit of 20d6 falling damage didn't really apply for such a scenario), though I still wondered how he planned on getting the golems up there, but Hassan's player was quick to remind me of the "Interplanetary Teleportation" spell from Ultimate Magic (I had allowed all material from the official rulebooks published for Pathfinder by Paizo, after all). He had originally intended to use a pack of resistance spells to survive the placing, but the Wellspring suggested a much less problematic solution.

So he remained in Saltspit planning the whole thing with Baba Ganoush from the Caster's Union (the gnome had shown to be very easy to buy off, in the end, and as Hassan said *"I trust people you can buy, so long as no one else can match my price. And who can? I have a fountain of gold. You figure it out"*), while the party did some fun adventuring retrieving the relics, exposing the owner of the Wellspring as a fake (and stealing the cauldron afterwards). The Quill involved a lot of planning at first, trying to decide how to assault the Pathfinder Society's HQ, but they eventually found out that throwing Vorgok at things really was a more elegant solution.

Chapter XXXIX: Let's Just Screw Everyone Forever

Once everyone got back together, the party got a visit from Aboras. He had been tracking the party, and had found out about Hassan's plans. Worse yet, he had been running background checks and realized he had been far too trusting. So after an appropriate trumpeting arrival in the company of flaming archons, the angel gave a furious warning to the characters, heralding rains of stones and divine justice and all that. He carried a ridiculously long scroll with all the sins committed by the party, and proceeded to read them out loud in a correspondingly dramatic manner.

"Shit" Said Hassan *"How do we get out of this one? The water will probably make these guys stronger, if anything. Plus we've lost a business venture. I don't like losing business ventures"*

"Well, it is polluted with sin. Maybe it will harm them" Noted Rakhim *"Though then again, he is an herald of Desna, and support will probably come quickly, even if we manage to bring him down"*

Jack just washed himself hysterically with mercurial water, while Vorgok debated himself between charging to chew the archon on the left or charging to chew the archon on the right.

Caught in the absurd bureaucracy of Heaven, Valanar guessed Aboras would not be able to carry actions against them until all their sins had been made evident, so he took Vorgok and whispered to him *"Take the Gatecrasher, run through the mirror, then..."* He shook his head *"Scratch that. I need you to fail your next save"*

The priest figured out it would be easy to just take control of Vorgok's mind than explain the whole thing, and the barbarian agreed.

So suddenly, Vorgok sprinted out of the scene, grabbed the Gatecrasher, jumped through the mirror into Celestia, ran across the pumping station, made a grotesquely high Acrobatics roll to dive into the Silver Sea, swam as deep as he could and, once in the bottom, called the name "Athabadak" and smashed the ground, opening a 60-foot wide rift into Avernus, the First Layer of Hell.

It took a lot of Swim rolls to be able to go up rather than into the rift -losing the Gatecrasher in the process. Valanar's player was pretty upset about that-, but Vorgok finally got out.

Behind him, the Silver Sea began pouring into Avernus, like a gigantic toilet being flushed, mixing the holy waters from Celestia with the corrupted earth of Baator.

Flames erupted from the eye of the ever-enlarging whirlpool, and a shock of blackness began overtaking the waters, rising foul winds and withering everything on it touched.

Things weren't much better on the other side, as a tidal wave of mercurial water washed away sins in what pretty much was Sin Central, breaking the earth in explosions of white light and causing widespread destruction, pulling petitioners out from their tortures just to drown them in the current afterward or smash them against a rock.

Aboras panicked the moment the rift opened and connected Heaven with Hell, disappearing instantly and dropping the scroll, which Hassan promptly burned. *"No idea if it does anything, but just in case they don't have a backup"* He said while sort of dancing on the remains, and then turned to Vorgok *"Now what on earth did you just do?"*

The barbarian shook his head *"No idea. Ask the priest"*

Valanar panted from the effort *"Drove the angel's attention away from us. Their precious sea is now draining into Hell"*

The party remained silent for a moment, until Hassan spoke *"And what will happen?"*

"Worst case scenario, they close it up and come back for us twice as angry; there is also the chance devils get angry at us too, and come to get us as well" Valanar responded *"Best case, Celestia gets poisoned to its core and doesn't bother us anymore. There's also good chance that we have just created a new battlefield for the Blood Wars, and both sides will spend their time fighting around the rift, which won't close until someone finds the Gatecrasher, which considering how it fell into Avernus, seems unlikely for now"*

"So, uhm, shouldn't we close the mirror?" Jack pointed out *"It's kind of a disaster zone"*

The party had been gazing through the mirror for a while, as Lunia quickly turned black from corruption seeping into its waters. Devils clawed out through the poisoned waves and began engaging the bands of angels, archons, and other holy beings gathering above the rift, and the whole thing just seemed right out from a medieval canvas.

"Good idea" Said Hassan, and uttered the words to close it. Some elders and workers had managed to get out, but several dozens were left behind. He covered the mirror and had some assistants take it to the palace *"Perhaps it'll come of use later. If there really is a new battlefield, someone will have to provide them the weapons"*

Chapter XL: Off to the Skies!

Those plans would have to wait, though, as right now the pressing matter was to get those golems in orbit. Alkenstar had been sending packs of 5 golems per trip, and with everything else covered, it was time to get working.

The party had been fearing for a while a retaliation from the remaining Pactmasters, but so far things had been quiet. That meant that either they had been properly scared and decided to stay out of their way, or were preparing for a bigger offensive. Both cases made orbital golems fundamental, noted Hassan.

A considerable amount of money was poured into the project, as as it went through they encountered a couple of issues:

The first one was that Babaganoush people, save for one, were unable to muster the level of arcane magic required to cast contingency portals into the Null Zone (as we ended up dubbing the area between the two planes). Help had to be brought from distant corners of the land, and the gnome was given the task of gathering it. The members of the Tactical Forgiveness Unit, now that good deeds were no longer profitable, were reorganized into the Business Enhancement Division, and their first mission was to assist Baba Ganoush into getting what they needed, even if it needed some steel-glove slapping. Or perhaps especially if it needed some steel-glove slapping.

The second was setting up the whole issue regarding orbital coordinates and golem trajectories. Hassan wanted to set up golems on top of the most important cities, namely Oppara (Taldor's capital), Egorian (Cheliox's), Sothis (Osirion's), Almas (Andoran's), Katheer (Qadira's), Absalom (city-state, but perhaps the most important city of all), and, of course, Katapesh. He also figured out putting some on top of Alkenstar, Geb, and Mechitar would help in case the states directly to the south wanted to get frisky with the STC. So 50 golems spread across 10 cities meant 5 golems per target, more than enough to reduce all of them to nothingness (in his thought, of course, as he didn't exactly know how powerful would the strikes actually be. As per my own interpretation, they were a lot more powerful than what even Hassan thought they'd be, but of course I kept that to myself).

This problem forced the party to start hunting down for mathematicians, natural philosophers, and just about any kind of NPC that could help them with the dense level of calculations needed to get it right. A huge, NASA-like operation was set up next to the STC palace, with the alchemists from Arcane Services working on all manners of homunculi to serve as assistants and abacus-handlers. Number crunching soared when they started casting Owl's Intellect en-masse, and more when Valanar got a hold of some gnomish Smartwater, though those who were given the liquid at first died from cranial explosions due to grotesquely swollen brains (some more died until they figured out the right doses).

We fast-forwarded to the point that the operations started taking shape. There were some minor incidents during that period, the only one of notice being something involving what the party suspected to be spies from someone in Katapesh (wasn't clear whether it was the Pactmasters or someone else from the Merchant Court. The party did still have the Prince in seclusion, after all, and the guy had some powerful allies. Then again, Rakhim assumed they were probably fighting over the scraps left by the former Grand Vizier, rather than worried about getting him free).

The 50 iron golems had been delivered (though the party did have to send a huge number of "hired" workforce to Alkenstar to hurry up the deliveries after the spy situation) and had been set up with the null charges and contingency spells. A landing platform (more for the style than anything practical) had been erected near the palace, on top of one of the old dirt piles left from the mine digging, on top of which the golems had been set up. All manners of working crews, magical analysts, structural inspectors, and whathaveyou skittered around them, magically-enhanced voices echoing through the place just to give it the right feel.

Standing on a balcony, Hassan rose a glass of wine to the rest of the party (except Vorgok, who had been sent to keep an eye on the Wellspring) *"Gentlemen, I think words are in excess here. Let us simply bask in the glory of what is to come"* After they toasted and drank, he turned around *"Mister Baba Ganoush, bring them up"* One by one, arcane crews, assisted by the Wellspring and reasonably scared into efficiency by Vorgok's presence began teleporting away with the golems, setting them up in orbit. One of them had a mishap and almost sent one of the golems intended to menace Oppara crashing down, but the barbarian prevented it by punching it back into place and using an Action Point to conveniently ignore the wonky physics involved.

Chapter XLI: A Display of Power

We wrapped up that session and started the next one with the STC sending emissaries to the heads of state of the most important nations in the Inner Sea, asking for a very simple thing: To surrender their treasures to the STC.

"Wait, really?" Said Valanar *"All of this so we can steal their wallets? We have a freaking fountain of gold! We have all the money anyone, ANYWHERE, could want!"* Hassan scowled at him *"First, no, there is never enough money. And second, I guess I'm a humble man with humble goals. What'd you expect?"*

Since I noticed some lack of coordination, I finally gave in to the request of the other players and retconned that part, allowing them to better detail the message.

Which, really, was essentially only changed to *"Give us all your money AND bow down to the STC"*

Save for an angry response from Nex (which had more to do with the STC's meddling in wizardly affairs more than anything), their emissaries returned empty-handed; a couple just didn't return at all.

That's when Hassan decided it was time to make a demonstration.

They set up some guys on magical flying contraptions and a crystal ball, and sent them to Nex, which the rogue planned to obliterate in order to show the world he was serious. Emissaries were sent back to the other leaders with crystal balls connected to the first one, so everyone could see the evidence.

And without further ceremony, he called Baba Ganoush to issue the planetary bombardment order.

Now, Hassan had expected the city of Mechitar to offer some sort of resistance; it was, after all, the capital city of a bunch very powerful wizards. That's why he had 100 aluum cross through a portal into Nex in order to stir problems near the border and make it look like an all-out offensive, playing on the thought that maybe they didn't know the aluum no longer worked for Katapesh.

As it turns out, the ruse worked and while the nexian arclords were busy fighting scores of brass golems and bombarding katapeshi ports with far too many maximized delayed blast fireballs, five iron golems were racing at terminal velocity right into their houses.

The remaining arclords managed to catch on and stop two of the golems, but three still got through their mass spamming of Wall of Force. One of those golems got teleported into a random location 1,000 miles away by a well-placed spell, the bottom of the Obari Ocean to be precise.

Those three that got through, however, ended up being more than enough.

It wasn't so much that the initial release of null matter tore away everything on its path, bringing down mile-high ivory towers and blasting thousands of people into nothingness, or that the golem's crashing down at such tremendous speeds bore craters and turned the whole place into a slab of cheese. It was that Hassan had not properly gauged the problem of not simply releasing explosions of null matter; he had prepared the golems with dozens of portals, gateways that directly connected into what might as well be the most unforgiving region of the Multiverse.

So yes, Mechitar disappeared from the face of Golarion. The arclords retreated, soon realizing there were forces far beyond a mere war with Katapesh. But once the portals had eaten through everything in their path and created a gaping maw of oblivion, they just kept hungering for more. When there was no more earth or stone or wood or people to devour, they started pulling in any matter within reach, namely air. The wind soon went berserk, as if the whole world had been a balloon and the golems had pierced the surface.

And of course, there was this other one under the sea that just now took care of doing pretty much the same thing with the waters.

"I think the point will get through" Said Hassan, a tad worried.

Chapter XLII: Masters of a Dying World

And it did, but not in the way Hassan expected. I mean, this is Pathfinder, which is just D&D with a new suit. And what leaders do in D&D when encountered by insurmountable enemies is simple: Hire other people to handle it, hopefully in groups of five.

It all started with Sir John the Anointed and his rightful band of adventurers sent by none other than the High Hierophant of Osirion, who after giving a heart-rending speech in the name of goodness and attempting to steer the evil ways of the STC back into the light got thrown into the battle pit and eaten by Monsieur Mangetout, much to the pleasure of the audience.

Then came Molstrom the Destroyer and his steel-clad companions, the envoys from the courts of Cheliox bent on bringing down the evils from the desert that threatened to engulf the world once and for all. Everyone agreed that they made a much better spectacle than Sir John before a tentacle with eyes turned them into goo.

They were followed by Lodenar the Elven Wizard, Arphix the Dark Huntress, Voltazor the Huge, Orphas the Singing Duelist, Barnabas the Pirate and his Bloody Boys, Acamarach the Suntouched, and a long list of heroes with progressively less detailed backgrounds, each lasting less than the previous one.

For a time, it sort of became the new hobby of the party to set up all sorts of traps, mazes, monsters, and puzzles in their palace, just to see how far these men and women sent to end their reign of terror could get.

But, in all honesty, all they were doing was stalling the inevitable. Each day that passed, the darkness in the southern horizon grew larger, deeper, more noticeable. Weather patterns no longer worked as they used to, wind becoming almost perpetually southward. The clouds above lined up, always travelling in the same direction now, and the feeling in the air just wasn't right.

"You all know I dislike stating the obvious, but it might be possible that this plan of yours will end up taking us all down" Said Rakhim during a particularly gloom and silent dinner, during which the gem-encrusted helmets of Ulfmir Hammerbeard and his fellow dwarfs, who had just been killed by an acid-spewing trap set in the eastern wing earlier that morning, served as fruit plates.

Jack nodded in silence. Even Vorgok, usually above the petty matters of mere mortals, seemed to puff from his cigar (from the last box he had. Shippings had stopped entirely a few weeks ago) with certain unease.

Valanar just held his stare firm over Hassan until the rogue acknowledged it.

"What?" The rogue asked *"Don't give me that look. This plan was as much yours as it was mine!"*

"Mine? MINE?" Valanar exploded, something which, although rare in him, had been happening progressively more often as of late *"Care to explain when I made up such stupidity?"*

Hassan narrowed his eyes *"Quite the hypocrite, are we? Perhaps the original idea was mine, but no one jumped on the bandwagon quicker than you. You wanted it as much as me, perhaps even more"*

The priest stood from the table, furious *"You imbecile! All you had to do was threaten, not stab! What good is it now, with the realms of man sending everything they have against us and the world itself breaking apart? Nothing, you hear me, NOTHING! All your idiotic schemes, all you useless gold, it is all pointless now. And there is no one to blame but yourself!"*

Rakhim took off his diminutive glasses and waited for the mild ground shake to pass - a lot of those had been taking place lately, ever the stronger - "Hassan has a point. Any of us could have stopped him, but we all just went along with it. We are all accountable for what happens now."

Jack and Vorgok sort of agreed/sort of grunted, but otherwise remained silent. Valanar pointed a shaky finger at the gorillonk *"You will not..."* His hand closed into a firm grasp, and the control rune in Rakhim's forehead began to glow slightly. But the purple monkey managed to resist the priest's attempts, and in a fit of frustration, the latter stormed out of the dining hall.

"What on earth got to him?" Finally asked Jack while chugging down some mercurial water.

Hassan dismissed the point with a hand gesture *"I do not know and probably do not care. But I have a plan for what's to come"*

Chapter XLIII: Secrets Wrapped in Secrets

At this point I was handed a rather interesting situation, as both Hassan's and Valanar's player discussed secret plans with me regarding, well, how to save their asses.

On one hand, Valanar took a portal back to his homeland, Cheliox, where he managed to hook up a meeting with No One, one of the priests of Sivannah, Goddess of Secrets -and his personal deity-. Turns out no one knows how many members the cult of Sivannah has, and those few priests anyone ever gets to contact all go by the same name of No One.

Through him, Valanar secured passage into the Hall of Veiled Mirrors, a place where supposedly the goddess could be contacted, something which could, at best, happen only once throughout the life of a person, and even then it was a complete gamble and might not happen at all.

He mostly just spoke to cloudy mirrors, not knowing if Sivannah was listening or not. He asked for the following: *"The power to save what he had accomplished. In return, I shall bind myself to a life of secrecy."*

With literally no signal acknowledging whether he had been blessed, cursed or even heard at all, Valanar went back to Saltspit to wait the right moment.

On the other hand, Hassan kept asking questions about Absalom, the Trial of the Starstone, and all that stuff, to the point I told him that he would need to do some actual ground research to get any more intimate. So he took one of the guys from the Business Enhancement Division as a guide and went there to do some checking. Everyone at the table was intrigued at his plan, which he was not sharing in whole for dramatic reasons (which is one of the things I enjoy the most about this group. After all, as a DM there's nothing better than having your party surprising you). At this point in the game, you have to understand we were all imagining pretty much all sorts of stuff coming up from a plan that somehow involved Hassan and an artifact known to turn people into gods.

So after I told him everything he seemed to need, he went back to Saltspit. Yet before he could give everyone a proverbial hug, they were confronted with a gnomeful of problems.

Chapter XLIV: Gnome Way Out

"I want it, I want EVERYTHING" Baba Ganoush spread his arms in an all-encompassing gesture "The gold, the fountain, the gems, the wenches, the LATRINES! THE STC, ALL MINE"

"Hold on your butt, you little shit" Said Hassan "Do you want Vorgok to chew you away? Because that is exactly what will happen in five seconds unless you explain what the hell are you doing."

The gnome laughed *"Ooh, so menacing! I'm scared, indeed I am. But you'll be even more scared unless you give me what I want!"*

The barbarian was about to turn him into a digestive element when Baba Ganoush took a tremendously delicate crystal bell from his robe *"Nah-ah, stop right there. This bell right here is the only thing stopping the command words for golem activation from spilling out and sending the entire network crashing down into the planet."*

The gnome continued *"Yes, not so wise to trust me with the command words and give me full access to the golems now, eh? Ohh, yes, perhaps you thought I'd be loyal to you because I'd be loyal to money! Well, that's partially true, at least." His tone went down a notch, though still ridiculously gnomish "I do love money so very much."*

"Let me get this straight" Said Hassan "If we don't hand you over the company, you will destroy the world?"

"Yes, basically" the gnome responded.

"Aha. And what is there to stop us from killing you and taking the bell once we've handled it?"

Baba Ganoush thought about it for a second, and then everyone noticed the sudden surge of panic in the gnomes eyes. That bastard was going to throw the bell down and take everyone down with him.

Everyone sort of locked into a Mexican standoff.

"Hold on, hold on" Jack tried to calm down the situation, "No need to do something stupid we'll all regret."

"Technically speaking, there will be no one left to regret it" Pointed out the purple gorilla.

Jack gave him an urgent stare *"Let's settle down and discuss this. Maybe we can come to a compromise."*

The gnome took a step back and threatened to drop the bell *"Oh, no, no compromise. I've worked for you long enough to know what a 'compromise' with the STC will get me. Perhaps you'll use my head to plant nightmares? Or drown me in molten gold so you can set me as a statue in your desk? Ah, no, no, I know, you'll stuff me with sand and then chop my head off so you can make a lot of magic powder!"*

"Hm, never thought of that" Said Vorgok.

"Maybe... maybe if you give me the gold and then I find a way out... maybe on the skyships! Or a portal!" He was clearly falling apart *"No, you'll get me anyway! Maybe if I just end it right here. We're all dead anyway! The darkness IS coming! And I'm to blame as much as you, haha! Yes! We did it! We broke the world down!"*

So the gnome drops the bell. Everyone gasps. Jack manages to catch it just before it breaks. Vorgok pulls Baba Ganoush head from his shoulders and kicks it out of the window.

Hassan let out a deep sigh *"Good. NOW GET THAT SHIT DISENCHANTED!"* And walked out of the room, while poor Jack didn't even dare to breathe, holding the impossibly delicate thing between his hands, barely an inch from the floor.

"No, no! If you disenchant it, you run the risk of releasing the command words. After all, that is precisely what the bell does; keep them on hold. We need to find another way to deal with it."

"Where are you going? We do have a crisis here, as you may be well aware"
Snapped Valanar.

"Crisis just got averted. Work to do" And stepped outside.

The priest was boiling with anger, but managed to calm down and whisper *"I don't trust him. Nor should any of you. He knows the end is drawing close and he'll save himself, even if it means stepping on us."*

Vorgok shook his head *"No. Hassan might be greedy, self-serving, murderous, and backstabbing, but even beneath all that, he still remembers who his companions are, who he owes his life to, and who owes his life to him"* He said, in a rare moment of verbosity.

"You shall see" The priest warned *"Sivannah, if I ever needed you, now is the time"*
He said to no one in particular, while gazing at the looming darkness in the horizon.
"Fear not, my good companions! This is but another step in the way to greatness. We have come this far, and we shall go much further. Persevere!" Went Jack, swinging his sword around and stepping onto the balcony.

Chapter XLV: What the Hell, Jack

I'm not usually a killzone DM. In general I try to always give characters a chance to hurt themselves without my help. But this time I just had to ask *"Eh, Jack, what is your character doing?"*

"Swinging his sword and making a dramatic speech in the face of almost certain doom, of course. What else?"

"You know, you did hold the key to Golarion's destruction in your hand just a moment ago"

"Oh..."

"What did you do with it?"

"I guess I..."

"Wait, wait, no one would be that careless. Make an INT roll. If you roll 12 or more, your character didn't suddenly forget what he was doing"

He rolls, everyone at the table clearly tense. Manages it by a thread. A quiet "Shit" is heard.

Only to have it kicked out of his hand by Hassan.

"Master" Says Hassan *"Remember that portal I wanted to use later on to get to Absalom?"*

"Yes, I do"

"I kind of need to use it right about now. I run like hell"

Chapter XLVI: Contingency Plans

Meanwhile, in high orbit above Golarion, 45 iron golems reeking with obliteration start falling down into the planet. It wouldn't be instantaneous (after all, geostationary orbit is about 35,000kms -22,000 miles- from sea level), but certainly catastrophic. Of course, had the party actually tried to be the heroes for once they could have stopped them (I actually hinted it quite directly to them), but at that point other things were in motion.

Initially, the group tried to go after Hassan, but they quickly lost track of him. Just when Valanar attempted to track him with magic, the rogue returned.

"Quickly, through the portal! It's all according to plan!" He said.

It took some convincing, but eventually Hassan got to their senses about what he intended to do: When the golems started hitting Absalom, it would open a tear into the Cathedral and make the way readily available to get to the Starstone, which Hassan hoped would grant them godhood. It was a very long shot (no one knew if the Cathedral could actually be opened that way. After all, if it could, someone else was bound to have tried it. But they weren't thinking so clear at the moment).

Of course, none of them knew that it was Hassan who had pulled the strings to get the bell into Baba Ganoush' hand in the first place. Or that he was well-aware of what would have happened if it had been disenchanting. Or that he had tried to bring all the golems down on his own, only to be thwarted by the fact they had specifically designed the trigger to work with all of them present as a sort of nuclear safe key.

So they get to Absalom, where everyone is staring at the five points of light rushing towards the city. Word had already been spread of what happened to the south, how the seas were rioting and the skies were flailing and the land was breaking apart after the "fists from the gods" had come crashing over Mechitar.

"All we need to do now is wait until the golems crash down and obliterate the Cathedral. Then we go in" Truth is, Hassan wasn't completely sure it could work, but he kept telling me he had this *"nagging feeling there'd be a way to make it work"*. And thus they wait.

Chapter XLVII: Jumping Ship

Riots take over the city eventually as panic spreads. The wizards who remained in the city had no idea how to stop the golems, the others having escaped after knowing that not even the arclords of Nex had been able to stop their doom.

Hundreds if not thousands launched themselves into the Cathedral, in a final attempt to try and find the Starstone themselves and perhaps achieve godhood.

After all, if a drunkard had managed it in the past, why not them?

Most of them died falling off the abyss outside the temple, in any case. As for the party, it served to do some end-of-the-world adventuring for good measure (as the first trial of the Starstone is getting across the aforementioned abyss).

Eventually, the golems came into sight. The party had the Wellspring handy in one of their bags of holding, so worst case scenario they would spend the rest of their lives around it, trapped but unharmed.

Then they fell. The land shook with impossible force, throwing everything around like a tumbling wagon. The dull sound of the portals opening and tearing reality apart came soon after, and the city was speedily engulfed in ever-growing pockets of darkness.

Along with those other ones who were trying to get in and managed to cross the abyss, the party headed into the Cathedral, as its ridiculously tall spires were eaten away into nothingness, revealing confounding mazes, changing hallways, and impossible puzzles just before disintegrating them too.

"Go, go, go!" Hassan pushes everyone inside, before a falling block of marble blocks the way.

Chapter XLVIII: Why?

The cool, seemingly endless main hall of the Cathedral extended before them, unsettlingly empty. Then it begins to change and distort, as if the Trial was trying to compose itself but the sheer destruction overtaking it was making it impossible. Eventually even the roof gave away, and the illusion faltered, revealing an empty, featureless hall of dull stone, with nothing but a glowing object standing on top of a small pedestal.

"*The Starstone*" Everyone said at once, and they all started running.

There must have been two dozen individuals in total, though Hassan made sure to thin that number down to them six before getting to it. Then they all bounced off an invisible shield, and were suddenly confronted with a burning question inside their heads:

"*WHY?*"

They all looked at each other, and they seemed to guess what their companions were thinking.

"*Rakhim, you can't let him get it*" Said Hassan "*He murdered your wife. Nay, he used her as a bag of meat. He made it so your son ate her from the inside out so he could sell her out for power and influence*"

Rakhim attempted to keep his cool "*It does not matter now. Besides, so did you*"

"He is right, Hassan. You are as responsible of this as anyone" Said the priest, his eyes fixated on the Starstone.

"Perhaps, perhaps" He seemed to think for a moment *"You know what, why deny it anymore? Yes, I used her. In fact, I'm glad I did. Would have given me some reeeeeeally nice rubies. Too bad she couldn't take it, the poor wench"*

The gorillonk gave him a puzzled look, somewhere between rage-suppression and befuddlement. He tried to keep it down, but eventually the walls he had built around his anger came crumbling down, all along while Hassan kept pushing it. And so he exploded in utter fury and charged at the rogue, who got out just in time.

Valanar gathered his wits and took the chance given by Rakhim's outburst.

"Sivannah, if I ever needed your help, it was now. Give to me what was asked and I shall give what was promised"

At that point I asked him how serious he was about his promise, making sure to use the *"Are you sure you want to do this?"* tone all DM's use when they want to warn a player about dangerous consequences. He said yes. Then I expressly told him *"Remember that your standing with your goddess is, at best, dubious. There might be consequences. You know Sivannah is known for her tricks"*. He still said yes. I suppose a desperate man will hang onto a burning log if there is no other choice. And so he went blind and deaf all of the sudden. Also, Saltspit disappeared from the face of Golarion and became safely hidden in the perpetual darkness and endless veils of Sivannah's realm. But none of them ever knew that.

Blind and deaf, perhaps, but still had his mind, and remembered Rakhim's loss of composure just in time to will the control rune into activation, making the gorillonk fall under his -admittedly shaky- command. So he used it to attempt to go after Hassan.

Which he almost did, had not the rogue used Jack as a decoy and ended with the poor Bard thoroughly punched. I allowed Rakhim a very difficult Will saving throw when about to hit a companion, but he failed and then discharged his fists all over Jack, whom not all the prose in the world would save now, finally succumbing to the enraged killing machine.

The second time Hassan wasn't so lucky, and Rakhim got him grounded and ready to smash it with all his force (which was no small thing, plus the rogue has the worst luck when it comes to rolling for HPs). However, Vorgok comes in at the last moment and shoves Hassan away, saving him from almost-certain death but receiving the blunt of the attack. They fight it off for a bit, both ending up pretty battered, but otherwise alive.

This gives Rakhim a second try at the Will save, this time succeeding, giving him enough time to turn around, grab Valanar by the neck and, without a single word, crush his spine between his hands.

"Vorgok, help!" Hassan yells when Rakhim, still angry beyond belief and now again free to act, charges at him.

The player behind the barbarian has never been able to properly master the rules, even after all these years, but he has an uncanny ability to survive and get excellent

rolls. Not this time, though. Down to very few hit points, he looks at Hassan and says *"This is probably as far as I can go. Win this one for us, Hassan"* And runs to tackle the purple monster, ending up in a grapple that takes his life away a few rounds afterward.

"Win this one for me" Hassan whispers under his breath, and rises to confront Rakhim.

The duel between the two was quite impressive, but with oblivion closing in around them and what remained of the Cathedral falling as a rain of crushing death in all directions, it was about to draw into a close, regardless who won.

That's when Hassan decided to take his gamble and, after escaping Rakhim's grapple, he ran as fast as he could into the Starstone, only to be confronted with the same invisible field and that ear-shattering question inside his head.

"WHY?"

He took one last breath and said *"Why? Because I want it"*

And with that, the world around them dissipated away into nothingness.

Epilogue

It is said there is a city lost in time, shrouded in darkness and mystery and secrets, where hidden are riches so vast the very word loses all meaning.

It is also said that Greed itself walks through its desolated streets and watches over its empty vistas, knowing nothing but to hoard, wanting nothing but to want more. Then again, these are but tales, among many other tales, and one does not just take them up for what they say. Not even the tale of one rogue who thought he could have it all, that one industrious rogue...