

The Tale of Demonsgate

An adventure involving many of the Clan of FALO, past and present

As told by the humble bard Merrywater of The Aerie of Tir Thalor mercenaries

Prologue: The Gray Land

Aranek grimaced slightly as he strained to pierce the thick fog which lay before the small band he scouted slightly ahead of. He spoke harshly to himself, cursing the lack of distance that was visible ahead. The kneeling man adjusted his ring-mail tunic and continued his grumbling until the soft sound of Barret's approach close behind made him rise and fold his arms in dismay. He turned to see the fighter adjust his sword as he approached, and then stop and begin to stroke his bearded chin in a much annoyed manner. Granarinth had warned them both earlier not to move too far ahead of the party in their direction-finding, a suggestion they readily agreed with; for the land about was naught but gray gravel and looming rock formations. The great misshapen stones reminded one of towering, shambling beasts which hid their true identities in the shroud of heavy fog that persistently blanketed the land.

Granth's voice could be heard speaking softly in the mist toward the rear half of the small band that was as varied a bunch as could be imagined; Fey and human, mage and bard, warrior and holy man. He was confident that he had made the right decision to lead the venture, even though he could not shake the uneasy feeling he knew came from the dark premonition given to him by the holy man Stalzer. The black-armored half-elf spoke over his shoulder quietly to the white-hooded figure behind him. The figure only nodded as he walked with his hands folded in the arms of a brown tunic, which covered his magic armor and holy warhammer. The red haired man was the high cleric of She-of-storm-and-running-waters. He was Granarinth's oldest and most powerful friend and ally; and the worried bringer of ill omen for that half-blood warrior of Tir – Thalor. Before the journey had begun, the cleric reported having many visions of dark evil, pain and loss, all of which related to this very venture. And, as Stalzer reluctantly admitted, to Granarinth's part in it. The holy man's only solace came from the fact that he believed this knowledge came to him for a purpose, as visions from the divine often do, to have some effect on or control over the future. He swore to be that force in the name of his goddess.

Behind followed the dark tressed elf Arëanna, who spoke to no one save the air about her as she quietly used her travel time to finish study of her new spell, the kai-shaa, which allowed her to manipulate the element of air in many useful ways. She spoke the wispy words endlessly in the memorization process that all mages needed to master. Arëanna Moonbeam was the mate of he whose prize they all sought to reclaim, and northward at the place called Demongate there lay a clue to its recovery. Arëanna would have such a clue for her husband Starshadow, she only hoped the gypsy Satyir who had gone before them alone with their map had not done anything to jeopardize their quest

The fairies Emberon and Angelica followed or flitted behind next, the former squinting her eyes and tightening her lips in frustration as she alternated between trying to look up the cleric's deep hood and wondering how much longer it would take to 'get there,' and the latter fair haired taller fairy being content to watch the rather amusing antics of her mischievous associate. Angelica had long wished to see Starshadow's elfstone returned to him, and was excited at the prospect of helping to reclaim it.

The party was well rounded out by the thin human at the rear, a normally happy man who sought to bring joy and knowledge to others through the power of song. His was the burden of entertainer, moralizer, and record-keeper. His heart was good and his voice was fair, but his belly grumbled at the travel-rations that were afforded him on the journey. Hoot Dreamsinger almost lost the rest of the party twice in only these two first starting days from closing his eyes and dreaming of dozens of golden platters holding luscious roast fowl and other tavern fare. This journey would indeed be hard and most likely be dangerous he thought, but then again he mused, it is often life's difficulties and dangers that inspire the greatest songs...if there's anyone left to write them...

Part the First

The Message in the Mist

Through swirling mists dark, looming rock formations spied with hollow eyes upon the small company of eight that weaved through their haunted land. They had been pressing northward for weeks toward the uncertain goal that was Demonsgate. Granarinth had long ago sought out Celaphir, an old elven sage who lived just a few leagues south of the Drunken Elf Inn. The hermit had told him that the place could indeed live up to its quite descriptive name, for the old cavern had once been used by demonkind as a means to come and go (when they were able) on this plane from their land of many chaotic layered rifts known as the Abyss. But he relayed to the half-elf that the portals had been destroyed ages ago, and the forces of light and order had erringly all but forgotten about that hole-in-a-mountain, until now. Had those dwellers of the lower world found a way to reopen the passages, Granth wondered, or had someone been foolish enough to summon the foul things, inviting them into our world?

Aranek and Barret stood a few yards ahead of the party. Their path had led them into a great cleft of grey sandstone with walls that rose some two hundred feet up into the mist. There they discovered that the ground became sandy as a narrow path about seven feet wide wove through the niche. As the party entered this dark place, Aranek slung his bow onto his back and drew from his belt the black-headed hand axe which he favored in tighter places. Barret's sword was loose from its sheath in the face of this ominous but not yet threatening place. As Granarinth stepped on the soft ground, he bent down to feel the cool moist grains of grey sand beneath his feet.

"An old stream bed," he remarked, "look close for signs of passing."

"I've found something here!" Aranek called back excitedly, "One needs only ask to receive it seems, perhaps this is a good sign for our journey!"

"Only if ye' found something worth lookin' at!" Emberon piped as she flitted into the dark crevasse ahead of the somber cleric, cautious fair-haired faerie, and concentrating mage. Hoot Dreamsinger stepped into the cavernous place and immediately noticed the fine acoustics that the stone had on his voice, which brought a smile to his face and low hum to his throat. Somber song issued softly from his lips as he moved closer to the others to view the scout's discovery;

"And thus, the dark land beckons us

And holds us in its gaze,

We stand alone in lands unknown

Remembering brighter days..."

“Is it our predecessors passing?” Granth asked as he arrived at the scene of fairly defined footprints which could no longer be blown away in the shelter of the high-walled crevasse

“Satyir you mean?” Aranek knowingly asked, “Possibly. Perhaps a closer look would tell you more?”

“Aye,” Granth replied as he stooped over the marks in the ground, his scaled armor creaking slightly. As his fingers traced the depths and textures of the prints he noted what a strange, barren place it was to be using the skills of his most favorite occupation, that of the ranger. Then he stood abruptly and announced his finding; “It was a figure of his size indeed, but long passed, possibly three or four days. He was walking slowly, but not surely.” He then pointed to the ground ahead and frowned. Although the light here which filtered down from the top of the chasm high above through the mist was soft and dim, they could all see that the tracks meandered about widely. This gave the impression of one not moving toward a destination, but of someone unsure of his route and checking all alcoves and shadowy corners as if they might hide the best path. The party followed the marks in the sand for many hours through the winding path, until they came to a branching of many ways, and a strange sight. It was Arëanna who first sensed the magic ahead of them, but a moment later the vision before the band gave all reason to pause in wonder.

“What mystic thing is that?” remarked Hoot wide-eyed as they all stared at the glowing luminescence in the misty air ahead, a glow that was no natural thing, but formed an intricate pattern of lines.

Arëanna stepped past the silent hooded cleric into the center of the intersecting ways, mere inches from the glowing essence. “‘Tis a rune of direction,” she announced, “a mystic marker of sorts. It seems that Satyir has passed this way, for this is most likely his magic, as well as I can guess...”

The tall, scruffy gypsy traveler was known to have some abilities with magic, although his powers always seemed to be quite different than that which most practitioners of the arcane were used to seeing. Satyir’s keen interest in magic items (and a penchant for stealing them) often also expanded his capabilities. One never knew just what chaotic effects would issue forth from the grinning gypsies’ colorful raiment.

“Ooooh, it’s beautiful,” the tiny Emberon remarked, “it glows with the light of a winter moon!”

“See there!” Hoot exclaimed, “It fades even as we gaze upon it!”

“Yes,” the sorceress replied, “further proof of its maker’s identity, for now that we have seen it, the sigil’s job is done and it can pass into the oblivion whence it came.”

“If it was a direction marker” asked Barret, “which way did it say to go?”

“Probably the same way that the tracks in the sand lead.” Aranek said as he glanced at the sorceress, who nodded her circled head in agreement. Although the footprints meandered aimlessly about the fork for a while, of the three ways to go, the tracks and the rune both led down the northwest path, which was the widest of the three, so it did seem the obvious choice.

“Never choose the obvious.” Granth thought to himself as an uneasiness hit him heavily. He looked about and instantly noticed that the Lady Angelica was gone from the main body of the party. He spied her in her well ahead, standing at the entrance to the northern corridor, deep in thought. The half-elf moved to the well-dressed fairie noble as the others investigated the site of the rune. He remarked to himself that it was strange to be in such a dangerous place clad in full armor, yet his two winged fey companions wore only finely made long travel tunics, elaborate and richly adorned. By the time the warrior reached Angelica, he had rationalized that if he had the power to conjure up clothing at will as those two seem to do, he might not spend the entire journey in heavy leather and steel either.

“Something is not right.” she spoke softly as Granth came up behind her, marveling at the intricacies of her large wings, which looked a cross between that of a butterfly and a honeybee. “There is danger to the northwest, I can sense it. Satyir has chosen a poor path.”

“What would you have us do then, lady?” he replied.

“This northern route feels more to my liking. The third path looks to veer away from our destination, does it not?”

“Aye,” Granth softly answered as he looked to the northeastern route. The others had already begun to gather together by the other path and ready to move down it, all he noticed, except Emberon, who lingered behind, flitting a few feet from the ground with her voluminous, dark disheveled hair half covering her thin face. She looked balefully down the parties’ proposed direction also seemingly troubled by that northwest route.

“Hold!” Granarinth called to the party. “Perhaps that path should not be taken.” Emberon seemed to sigh in relief and move toward he and Angelica, and the cleric slowly nodded beneath his cowl and moved with her, but the others stood confused.

“But I thought-” Hoot was cut off by Arëanna.

“The signs clearly show this northeast path, do they not?” Both Aranek and Barret nodded in agreement.

“Aye they do well enough,” he replied, “but it seems that path brings uneasiness to some among us, and there is much to be said for instinct, especially among the faerie-folk. Also, remember the erratic pattern of the gypsies trail? His map did not help him here, and think on it, would you follow him if he were *here*?” A faint, rare smile came to his lips. Arëanna threw up her hand, and shook her head, not wanting to disagree with that, and the others glanced at each other, shrugged,

and soon followed as they moved down the northern path. As they moved on, Hoot took his normal place at the rear and began to daydream of the mysteries which undoubtedly lay ahead, and his song continued softly and gave rhythm to their somber march

“The path be chosen, on we press

Through narrow, winding ways,

Though message found in mists abound,

We’ll heed not what it says...”

Part the Second

The Demonsgate

The eight wanderers surely wove their way through sand-strewn winding path with little speech passing between them. Even Hoot's voice was quiet as the wind howled some two hundred feet above them over the top of the narrow, gray chasm. A day's full march they bore, and yet another, and still the dreary stone walls ever greeted them, their twists and turns belying their length, promising a soon end even as they turned once again throwing off all sense of direction and hope. The soft padding of boots was scarcely heard over the din above, and yet it was loud enough to serve as constant reminder of the long walk they had taken.

Aranek and Barret had been sent by Granarinth to scout ahead and had been gone for almost one half hour before returning with the wrinkled faces that speak of disgust.

"Pheeeuw," winced Aranek as he held his nose with the hand not occupied by his hand axe, "There is a stench ahead that rivals one of my father's manure barrels!"

"Manure barrels?" Granth replied as he rolled his eyes. "Only the son of a cooper would make such a ridiculous comparison- what is the source of the stench?"

The scout of Tir Thalor replied with a smile and a laugh despite his dour news and spirits, "I know not, for we turned around upon smelling it, but you'll see soon enough that I'm not one to jest about such things."

"Indeed we shall," intoned Areanna from under her silken hood, now drawn to keep dust at bay, "for this path has given us no choices since we left Satyir's sign."

The party found the smell soon enough, and their findings were harsh. None could tell whether it smelled more of rotting meat or rancid eggs. Nevertheless, they had to press on, and although the stench was horrendous, at least it was a change from the monotony of the past two days. The group stayed together now, and became a bit more wary as the smell became stronger to the point where breathing through their mouths only brought a foul taste to the palette. The cleric Stalzer, silent for almost a day and a half, got to the point where he found it most unnerving.

"This foul stench assails my senses on all fronts-we must be nearing a source equally as foul!" he decreed. "Such persistent, vile odors have only meant one thing in my past; the presence of evil!"

None had the will to respond to the cleric's statement until they all rounded a sharp curve in the crevasse path, and found an end to their winding way, and the source of the unholy smell.

“Oh!” remarked Emberon as she spied the great bronze door hanging half off its hinges some sixty feet away across a clearing strewn with piles of decaying matter and stained sand.

Here was a great alcove some sixty feet across from which no other paths led, and Granarinth looked across the festering three foot mounds of debris and then turned back to the rest, “It looks as if we now see if we’ve chosen the right path!”

As the party began to discuss the lighting arrangements they would need to enter beyond the doorway, Emberon began unnoticed, to poke at the slimy piles of refuse with an old bleached stick. “Granarinth,” she said halfheartedly, “what do you suppose these are from?”

Not even noticing that she was being ignored, her interest was piqued when she felt something solid inside the pile so she proceeded to push and prod until it emerged from the side of the mass. “Oooh, a scroll box- with silver bindings! I wonder if there’s anything still inside...”

At this point the cleric had noticed her attentions and upon seeing the case, turned to face her. “Have a care fairy, what’s that you’ve found?”

“Somethin’ pretty but kinda smelly though.” She replied, tugging at the case which seemed to be tied to something still in the pile.

“Need some help?” Aranek added as he too turned to see what the fairy was up to.

“No,” she said as the case began to give ground, “I think I’m get-“ She stopped short and gasped with Aranek as a partial skeletal spine yanked free of the pile, still tied with a rotted cord to its former possession. Small bits of tendon still held the moldered bones in their column.

“Stop!” the cleric commanded as all now focused on the disturbance, “Release it at once!”

Emberon needed no second warning as she dropped the case upon the side of the four foot tall mound and took a step back, wide-eyed. A hollow, droning moan erupted in the clearing, loud and low, and all drew weapons and turned toward the door, expecting to see a fearsome beast burst forth and smash the hanging door from its one final hinge.

“Too late.” Stalzer replied as his hammer began to glow among the folds of his robe. Then, from every corner of the clearing came a rustling and creaking sound as almost a full score misshapen forms which once called themselves men rose from beneath the muck and sand. They had been dead a long time, with few retaining any flesh or sinew on their crusted bones, but yet they stood and moved, some eldritch force sustaining a state of un-life. They regarded the intruders with hollow eye sockets that glowed softly with a pale malevolence, a look that told of their utter hatred for all who still possessed the gift of life. With certain, laboring steps, they reached for the party, muttering and moaning somehow from long-missing throats.

It was at this instant that all drew forth what weapons they had, all except Stalzer who left his now-glowing warhammer hanging at his belt. The cleric instead took a firm stance upon the ground, and his eyes began to glow with an inner light. Aranek moved swiftly toward that brown robed figure, for he had seen the cleric display this behavior before and knew what followed.

Areanna was already beginning preparations for one of her faster, offensive spells while Granth, longsword in hand, moved to the front to pull back Barret, who had assumed a defensive stance in his chainmail hauberk. Granarinth knew as well what to expect from the holy man.

“Emberon! Angelica! Move behind the cleric!” Granarinth shouted over the horrid moans of the skeletal undead, “Barret! Move back, there is no need...” But Barret had already been engaged by one of the foremost creatures. A bony hand lashed out at the fighter but he stepped quickly to the side and came down on the rushing limb with a heavy stroke of his double edged sword, snapping it clean off. Coming up just behind Barret, the armored half-elf spied two other of the foes approaching the fighter from his blind side. Glancing back toward the others with a scowl on his face, and knowing what was about to happen, Granth returned his attention toward Barret who was now struggling with his one armed foe. He yanked the fighter backwards out of reach of the other two undead, and then pulled him to the ground with himself, looking back as he did so to his ally Stalzer, whose eyes were now flaring with holy light. The cleric raised his sacred *ankh* and with a commanding voice uttered in tongues long forgotten by most men. A second later the skeletal forms writhed briefly as if in anguish, or perhaps relief, and with a great hollow moan became as swirling dust in the wind.

“I knew this was the safest place to be in the face of such enemies!” Aranek remarked from the Cleric’s side.

Hoot alternated between staring blankly at the dust piles that were the remains of once horrifying apparitions, and looking up in awe at the now calm and reserved cleric. Areanna’s spell of earthen holding had prevented attacks on the members behind Stalzer, and now she rested from the effort of the spell’s use. Granarinth did his best to shake the sand from his shoulder length blonde braided hair and rose slowly, helping Barret to his feet, as both looked about for more danger.

“I wonder how many more surprises await us inside.” Angelica asked no one in particular.

Hoot replied dourly, “Well after that, what could be worse?” Just after uttering those words, the bard was careful to avoid the nasty looks hurled at him by all but two of his companions; Stalzer who remained hidden beneath his white hood, and Granarinth who smirked briefly and looked ahead to the door. Areanna stepped forward with Angelica and they made their way toward the door, stopping but a few feet from it to talk between themselves before the sorceress spoke up to the others.

“This place could, as I remember, be in about the right place to be the ‘demonsgate’ on our map.” she remarked back to the group, Angelica nodding in agreement by her side.

Aranek countered dryly, “Yes, but this place does not seem so noteworthy to me, aside from its awful outer inhabitants.” He pointed toward the normal size, nondescript broken door.

Hoot interjected, “Maybe this isn’t the place we seek, I too expected to see something a little bit more, well, awesome- you know, great looming gargoyles or, orrrr... big impenetrable barriers!”

“You mean you *hoped* to find impenetrable barriers,” Emberon joked with the frowning mustached man. “So you wouldn’t have to go beyond them!”

Granarinth set his jaw and sheathed his black longsword on his right hip, turning to his advisor, “This is the way into Demonsgate, isn’t it my friend, a back door?”

“It is *one* way, I suspect.” The cleric’s words floated from under his cowl, “Beware all, for I feel a presence from beyond that old portal that does not please me, we must be more cautious from here on. Let us at last be rid of this stench...”

All nodded in agreement and formed into their original order of march for the journey ahead. As they proceeded, Areanna’s mind drifted into the wonder of what clue they would find within to aid the returning of her husband’s elfstone, and what price, if any, would be paid to acquire it...

Part the Third

Areanna's Discovery...

The darkness of a somber, rough-hewn passage was suddenly chased away by a pale blue light. Emberon smiled with delight as several small stones in her tiny hand began to glow by the power of ancient faery magic. Each of the eight adventurers took one of the stones, Aranek holding his out before him to aid in his scouting, while Granarinth concealed one in his boot holding it for later use. He preferred to use what little elvensight he could in the hazy light of the stones. Though the path that they walked was wide enough for three and high enough for an ogre to jump in, the party walked in a single line in relative silence with Aranek and Barret twenty paces ahead.

The path at once oddly inclined, then declined suddenly for no apparent reason. The monotony of their journey was to be short-lived however when Barret's voice echoed softly back to the group.

"We've found an animal body, I think..." he stated blankly.

Hoot swallowed hard when he at last came to the sight, nothing more than a chunk-ridden smear of broken bone and rotting flesh. Angelicas hair stood a little higher on her head as she smelled the stench of those grisly remains.

"What manner of horrible end could this creature have met?" she exclaimed as she felt rare beads of the cold dewy sweat of fear forming on her brow. Granarinth kneeled with the cleric Stalzer and examined the remains.

"Ever seen the like?" he asked the hooded holy man.

"Nay, I cannot explain this, it is not something I have ever seen. What type of creature do you think this was?"

"No *creature*." Barret interrupted from the shadows two paces ahead. He approached from the gloom with something large in his hand and disgustedly dropped the object on the floor before the kneeling half-elf and cleric. It hit the floor with a *clang* much louder than Granth would have wanted. Emberon gasped at the sight and Hoot swallowed even harder than he had before.

There on the floor lay a short sword of human make, with its owners disembodied hand still clutching tightly about the grip, bloody, broken bone and ligament trailing from the armless wrist.

"So, it was a man that saw this fate," Granth stated, "and a fighting man at that."

“It doesn’t look like that sword did him much good!” Hoot remarked, his voice almost a whisper. Where’s the *rest* of him?”

“I know not,” Granarinth replied with a snarl on his face, “but I think you should take that sword Hoot, and hope it protects you better than it did him.” Granarinth picked up the grim two foot leaf-bladed sword, pried the hand free, and held it out to the unarmed bard.

“I’m not usually a fighting man mind you,” Hoot ventured, “but I do rather like the look of that blade and suddenly feel the need for some ah...personal security.” Hoot winced a bit as he took the blade, at first not wanting to touch the grip where the hand clutched only seconds ago. He soon realized however, that in order to use the thing he would have to relent, so his sense of practicality overcame his sense of loathing.

Just as the party went to move on a dual sound loudly assailed their ears. It was a sort of both buzzing and clicking at once. The clamor braced all in the party for attack, but none came.

“Stalzer! Do you detect an evil presence here?” Granth yelled over the din to the cleric who was apparently meditating as he stood in the corridor.

“Nay friend, strangely not. Whatever produces this utterance harbors neither good nor evil intent, but let us not linger here!”

Aranek knocked an arrow as the party quickly moved down the hall which now seemed to twist and turn rapidly. Areanna felt chills all about her body as the party stopped suddenly when they rounded a tight curve. Dotted the walls of the path ahead were two-foot wide tunnels moving off in every direction. The question was answered as to their origin as Aranek suddenly loosed an arrow at the ceiling ahead and a dull black hairy thing fell from the ceiling. Four man’s feet in length, a huge spider lay on its back, legs curled into its chest in expression of death. A wide eyed Aranek wasted no time knocking another arrow. Ahead the path could clearly be seen to branch into many tunnels, a confusing prospect even for an unhurried mind.

“AGHHH!” Hoot shrieked from the rear of the party as he burst into motion. The others saw his newfound sword come crashing down on something on the ground, something attacking him, something with many shiny legs. Despite lack of practice, the bard’s blow landed true. Inspection of the attacker revealed not a spider, but some sort of giant beetle-like insect which had tried to seize Hoot with its considerable jaws. The clicking sounds grew louder as Hoot’s stone revealed many shining, scampering bodies coming up behind them in the hall.

“Torches!” Granarinth commanded as all those who had brought them frantically fiddled to get them out. Areanna made flint and steel useless as she turned about and one by one caused each torch to burst into flame with a single word. “Hold them out before you and speed well!” Granth continued, “We must get through!”

The party rushed through the tunnel-ridden hallway, many hungry gleaming set of eyes regarding their progress from the holes. Not caring immediately which split to take, the bulk of the party ran to the far left, all but Areanna who suddenly became overcome by a force she had not felt before. It caused her unwillingly to stand in front of the middle passage and be drawn to that path.

“This way!” she yelled as the others bolted past her down the other corridor, then stopping in surprise but not questioning the sureness in her voice. The party changed direction and ran down this path, looking back as they did to see a number of the insect-like creatures get ambushed by the giant spiders, who no longer had fire to fear. The clicking sounds were soon fading, but they knew that not all of the creatures would be hindered by the spiders.

“Why this path?” Granth asked the panting sorceress as they stopped running.

“A powerful magic ahead, such as I’ve never felt. It draws me near with a force almost too much to resist.” she replied. “It could be the answer we seek...”

They all moved slowly now, confident that the scurrying danger had been left behind. They soon came to a great door of stone.

“The source is just behind that portal.” Areanna pronounced, “It must be strong indeed to affect me so, and not of this plane of existence.” She held forth her arms and pulled up the sleeves of her robe to show the others the soft, slight hairs of her arm standing straight on end.

There was a great iron ring on the door which Granth and Barret put their backs to, but the door did not even move.

“Hold! Let me check something...” Areanna stepped forth to the door, placing her hands upon its rough surface. “As I thought- this door is held with a dweomer of closing, but not for long!” The mage placed one hand on the door and the other darted into a belt-pouch. With the flick of her wrist a small amount of red powder stained the door and a whispered word was heard. There was a sound like the smacking of two stones together and Areanna stepped back from the door with a taxed look on her face. All knew this to be the cost of the use of powerful magiks. “We may now go forth,” She whispered as Angelica and Hoot supported her until she got her bearings. With a great heaving effort from the two fighters, the door opened with a grinding resistance. Beyond lay a bright room. It was at least fifty paces long and twenty wide. Aside from this there were but five features; A great pit of some twenty feet deep with magma below which illuminated the entire place, a stone door on the far wall of normal size, a dais against the center of the far wall about three feet high, a small glowing object on the dais, and what looked like a nine-foot stone statue with glowing eyes standing as a mute sentry right beside the dais.

“This does not look good,” Hoot commented as he peeked over the rest of the group who was now just emerging into the room.

“That is our answer, I know it!” Areanna said as she looked to the glowing object and stepped to the front.

“I don’t think that earth elemental is going to let us touch it though.” Emberon piped from the air as she rose above the party, Aranek’s eyes widened as he looked back at Granarinth. “I’ll try to talk to it, and perhaps it will listen to one who speaks its language!” And off she flew across the room. The others moved cautiously past the pit to see licks of flame periodically reach up out of its limits, almost as if alive.

“*Talk to it?*” Hoot exclaimed a bit louder than he meant to.

“Elemental eh, not something easy to fight,” Granarinth remarked, “I hope it does not come to that.” No sooner did the armored half elf speak than the elemental took a sweeping swing at the unsuccessful fairy with its great earthen arm. Aranek readied his axe, while Granth, Barret, and Stalzer moved in to combat the creature. As the companions each took turns dodging great blows of stone and breaking pieces off of the monster with their metal weapons, Angelica and a much annoyed Emberon used the distraction to fetch the object on the dais.

With well-placed overhead blow, Granarinth’s heavy longsword came down on a crack caused by a previous blow of the cleric’s glowing warhammer, and the forearm of the stony creature crashed to the ground. Though its attack severely impaired, it fought on, positioning itself between the party and the door next to the dais.

“We must make haste!” Hoot howled as he pointed back to the stone door they came through, where many of the giant crawlers had poured in, making their way toward the melee.

“*Kaeliendor oraeonis, sarae aralor; hist, hist, sarae aralor!*” Areanna’s words echoed through the hall as she stepped in front of the fighters to their surprise. Her spell finally ready, a great gust of wind howled in front of them from the sorceress’ hands, pushing the great creature back. Granth rushed over to the closed stone door where Aranek was already pushing to attempt its opening. With all his might he threw his shoulder into the stone, and between the two of them it swung open, throwing them both sprawling into a narrow corridor of square stones. Barret and Stalzer quickly helped the exhausted mage follow as the two fairies also exited with the prize. As Hoot darted into the doorway, he saw the elemental plunge into the pit, unable to withstand the force of the wind. With great surprise, he found that the door closed easily behind him, thankful to have the stone between him and the scurrying death now approaching in the dying wind.

Granth and Aranek dusted off and congratulated each other on a good escape, while the now sitting mage wasted no time examining the object from the dais. It was a scroll case which

glowed with a strong light. After briefly speaking a few words of warding Areanna popped off the cover at one end of the twelve inch cylinder, and a papyrus scroll slid into her hands.

“Do not look upon this with me, lest it may harm you!” she warned the group now gathered tight about her. After a moment of study a frown came across her face.

“Good news?” Angelica asked.

“That depends on your point of view,” she answered, “This is a scroll of lower planar control. It allows one to make a single command to a creature of the lower planes, a command which cannot be refused. This particular scroll must be used within these walls, for we are near an interplanar rift here.”

“So what’s the bad news?” Hoot asked as they all huddled over the sitting mage.

“The scroll will only work on one being and it gives his name...It seems he is a *very* powerful demon.

“Demon?” Hoot gulped.

Granarinth stood and looked sternly down the dark corridor, “Well, the damn place is called Demongate!”

~ Part the Last ~
Satyir's Fate
A Dark Promise

*"He who would desire to speak with demons had best be a mute."
-Tir Thalor, the continent of Endhomes' greatest warrior.*

There in the dimly lit, square-stoned corridor readied a stalwart company of eight. No cleric's wisdom, mages foresight nor fairy magic gave prediction of what lie ahead, but now all knew they must move on. Where once lay mere opportunity for information now stood a realistic chance to actually *retrieve* Starshadow's precious elf-stone. Areanna knew it well and explained it as such; the demon was powerful enough to go and do their bidding wherever it took him, if he could be controlled long enough. She also added that those were famous last words. At any rate, they would find this demon whose name it is wise not to mention and after casting a circle of protection about all of them, the scroll of lower planar control would be invoked. Upon its reading the mage would command the demon to retrieve the elfstone from its distant prison. Once the demon's quest was completed, she told the others, the demon would be free to return to his own plane. This plan, Granarinth agreed, was dangerous but worthwhile, for he trusted in the diverse talents of the party. The plan was set and the party moved on down the tunnel. As it turned out, they would not need to pierce much further into the hold...

"Old gray stones whisper to fools

'O aged bricks that speak,

Of spider-feet and demon's seat

Give guide to what we seek.

The hollow-hole before us,

Dark followings behind,

As pilgrims head by faith is led

So too our path we'll find..."

Hoot sang softly, almost in whisper as he mused to himself out loud. His newfound sword was already annoyingly weighing him down and his belly growled from lack of well supported feast. Just as the bard began his next verse, his voice and thoughts were broken apart suddenly by the hurried quieting of the rest of the party. The scouts had come first to the end, a doorway of normal size, but it was both the obstacle across the doorway and fiendish sounds that alerted them all. There at the end, Aranek poked with his finger at what felt like heavy fabric. Whatever it was, it was opaque, musty, and covered the doorway completely, but this find was second in importance to the sounds of distant screaming that came from beyond.

“Think ye it’s a curtain Granth?” Aranek asked as they all caught up to the scouts.

“Perhaps so, or a tapestry by its weight” he answered. Another, sharper scream tore through the distant air, and now also its own echo was heard.

“What the blazes?” Barret remarked, “Something’s *dying* in there!”

“It’s time to see what we’re dealing with it seems.” Granth spoke in low tones, as he produced a small, sharp knife from somewhere within his armor and moved low next to the scouts. The half-elf then made a small vertical incision in the tough but well-aged fabric and carefully opened it o-so-slightly and peeked through. Beyond lay a fire lit cavern, a large chamber scores of feet in diameter. Truly, he could not see the far wall too well because the room was filled with natural columns which grew from the stone of both ceiling and floor. There was, it *seemed*, no immediate danger beyond.

Granth turned to Emberon and regarded the small fairy blankly. “Will you slip into the room to get a better look?”

“What’s in it for me?” she joked as Granth rolled his eyes heavenward. She made her way past those at the doorway, bumping Aranek with her hips as she did so and smiling coyly as he almost fell backwards. She folded her wings tightly and slid her slim form ‘twixt the wall and fabric until she was out of sight. Moments later she returned with the good news they had hoped for-no danger immediately beyond.

The party, now repeatedly alarmed by the muted, echoing howls of pain and despair from deep within the huge cavern began to file into the chamber one by one. Once in the room, they could see that the barrier was indeed a large tapestry which now served to hide the secret entrance they had come through. It was a rotting thing, with gruesome scenes of torture and bloody wars between misshapen creatures. Several of the tapestries hung along the walls, and all wondered if there were any passages hidden behind those other grim weavings.

They wasted no time lingering there though, and soon were making their way through the cavernous room, walking from one formation to the next toward the torchlight that now beckoned from the far corner of the room. Halfway through, the company recognized with

horror that the screaming was the voice of Satyir the Chaotic, he who set out on his own with their map days before the party, and who now seemed to be the worse for it. Only scant steps later, they could see the source of their worry was well founded.

There in the brightly lit corner of the cavern was Satyir dressed only in shreds of what once were his voluminous gypsy pants. His once cheery multicolored sash now a bloody tatter, hanging from his lower torso like some eviscerated organ. Large portions of his long curly black hair had been torn away, contributing further to his tortured appearance. He was bound to the wall by thick, iron chains which strained to hold him with life of their own, wrapped about his arms and legs like snakes of living metal. There was blood dripping from his wasted form from several nasty, shred like wounds which oozed at a slow but constant rate. Incredibly and unfortunately, he was conscious and breathed heavily as he defiantly gazed up from time to time at what was above him. Bones and other debris littered the floor throughout the clear circle all around his place of binding.

Standing over his broken form was a fearsome, beast of a being who stood well over twelve men-feet tall with a thick, powerful torso and corrupted, hairless bull-like head with great forward pointing horns, the left broken to half the other's length. The thing's eyes were shiny black with no apparent pupils or iris, and its snarling mouth, which constantly dripped a ruddy slime contained many pointed, uneven teeth. It wore no clothing, and a grossly exaggerated physical manifestation of maleness hung suspended from his lions. Great bat like wings protruded from his back, and his glossy black skin was covered only on his torso by wiry, reddish-brown hair which also came to form a mane down his back. His voice could at once rumble like a thunderous sky, or pollute the air with the hiss of whispering wind. His teeth gnashed as he spoke to his victim.

“aaah elfff-ffriend, thou givesst me much pleasssure by the ressilientsss of thy kind. Loooong hafff I awaited the opportunity you 'fff afforded me to tassaate the suffffering and blood of thy racsssse.”

Then with a hiss he ran a black, shining claw down Satyir's chest, tearing a painful wound in the half-elf's vulnerable body. The gypsy's screams filled the hall once again. The demon's great head bent low and warty red tongue shot out, running along the wound's length and filling it with envenomed saliva.

Barret gave a low curse at this instant and made ready to burst forward to battle with rage in his eyes but was silently restrained by Granarinth, who knew that their only hope, and Satyir's, was for Areanna to complete the casting of her protective circle. This was a duty she had already begun with the aid of the fairies magic instantly upon seeing their foe. Aranek looked fearfully at the apparition before them, and his axe shook slightly in his hand as Stalzer came to the archer and placed a reassuring arm on his shoulder. The face of the cleric seemed calm, but obviously burned with hatred for the embodiment of evil before them.

“I...I’ve never seen the like!” Aranek spoke to him in low tones, never taking his eyes off of the beast, “Surely it is something from a horrible dream!” It was a thought mirrored by Hoot as well, who now felt not weight, but reassurance in the sword that filled his hand.

“Nay,” said the cleric, “such things are commonplace on the corrupted lower planes, but on our own existence he is naught but an abhorration which must be removed.”

Areanna’s spell came to a close, and the circle surrounded them all with an invisible barrier that was proof against evil creatures. The fairies flew swiftly to a shadowed corner of the room where they would make ready to free the gypsy once the demon was distracted. The careful mage stepped as close to the edge of the circle as she dared to bring herself to a position where she could see the reveling, unsuspecting demon whose back was currently to the party. Then as all made ready, she began to brazenly utter the words from her newly acquired scroll.

The demon at once heard her voice and felt the magic being worked against him. He howled with rage and reached down to the floor to grasp a huge barbed whip of no shorter than twenty feet in length.

“you daaare to introood upon my dwelling, foolss? I come to rend ttthhee limb ffrom limb! Tremble now upon yooooor deattthhs!”

But the demon was stopped with a cursing snarl by the protective circle, as Areanna continued the spell while the others stood gazing with fear or loathing upon the great beast. The creatures’ eyes were widened with understanding as it realized the spell brought against it.

“ssso you bring your ffool magikss againsst me eh? We sshall ssooon sssee whosss iss sstronger!”

The towering beast reached down to the ground with its fists and swung up with straining claws while bellowing forgotten words in a frenzied rage. It was this chance that Angelica took to lead Emberon to Satyir. They flew like the wind and when the gypsy saw them an elation filled his eyes. The fairies were horrified by the extent of his wounds and marveled that he was still alive. They began to whisper softly to the living chains, which relaxed at their swaying words, causing the gypsy to fall to the ground. He struggled to his feet with the aid of the fairies, and they cautiously made their way back into the shadows. Slowly they took a wide path around the room to make their way back to the others, hiding among the formations as they went.

The demon’s labors had brought forth a host of nightmares to battle the companions. Creatures of the undead with blackened axe and sword, and giant spiders scurried forth, and these creatures though vicious, were not inherently evil and only rushed forth at the behest of the demon. This fact made Areanna’s circle useless against them. The fighters and bard battled all that entered the circle, while Stalzer concentrated on blasting the undead out of existence or

smiting them with his glowing warhammer. Granarinth moved to Areanna's side and gave assurance that her spell would not be ruined by any attack.

The mage completed the spell and the demon's eyes began to glow with a bright white light, much to its dismay. It was just at this moment that the fairies came into sight with the limping Satyir, only steps from the edge of the protective circle. Areanna boldly began to command the demon as she had planned. Knowing he was losing the fight and about to be sent on his quest by the spell, the mighty demon reared his head and then rushed forward to charge the sorceress with his final effort. The battered Satyir lifted his eyes just in time to see saw this charge mounting just as he stepped into the circle he did not even know existed. Unaware of the protections cast about the sorceress and fearing the demon would reach her, he wrenched free of the fairies' grasp with his last strength and threw himself at Areanna. The chanting mage held the scroll before her, almost finished with her command. Granarinth turned his head and saw only the gypsies' hurtling form over his shoulder, and screamed in desperation as he realized Satyir's mistake. The chaotic one's effort to knock Areanna out of harm's way was successful, causing her to drop the scroll which upon hitting the ground, immediately turned to dust. The demon smashed into the unyielding barrier of protection which held quite well, and then was caught up in a swirl of wind and light. With a hollow laugh he was gone, as were his summoned creatures. The room was quiet.

The mage Areanna lay unconscious on the floor from her efforts of casting or the blow from Satyir or both. The gypsy had passed out as well from his effort, and the others sank to rest from the battle. Barret and Aranek had both suffered many painful wounds, though none mortal. The cleric attended them with his mystic healing, giving thanks to his goddess for their lives. Hoot was sitting talking to himself about losing his sword fighting a beetle or something or other. They waited there for almost an hour or so, deeply worried about the outcome of Areanna's interrupted spell. All efforts to rouse the two unconscious adventurers failed, and as Granarinth stood to survey the situation and ponder their next action, a green, rancid-smelling cloud billowed forth just outside the circle. The demon had returned. His words were a hollow, harsh whisper as Starshadow's mighty elfstone hung from his claw...

"ffoul manlings ye aahhre, daring to commaaand me to retrieve ssuch a sstone aass thiss curssed elff-thing, but even sso I wasss bound to complete youhr petty quesst- and now I take my leave withh it! A pity my plaything sspoiled your sspell before you could alssso command me to turn it ovarrr to thheee. Now I sshall be ssertain it nevaar again ssees the ssun in the deepestt bowelss offff the abysssss. Ha! Ffarewell ffoolsss! Youhr painss were ffor naught!"

The demon began to create a glow about him, gesturing with his empty hand in circular motions and laughing to himself as the party stood aghast in despair. Granarinth felt a rage stir in his breast, and with a determination to not allow their efforts to come to miserable failure he lunged suddenly at the demon. Screaming in fury as he flew through the air to snatch the

dangling prize away from the foul beast before he could return to his own realm, Granarinth was caught in a blinding flash and clap of thunder. When the shocked company's vision returned, both demon and warrior were gone. Granth's dagger lying on the floor at the spot was the only testament that he'd been there at all...

At the surprise of the rest of those still conscious, it was the normally reserved Stalzer who suddenly wailed and cursed in dismay as he realized that Granarinth had been dragged to the abyss with the demon, and what little chance of survival any mortal has there. There was naught he could do. His friend was gone with no way to give him aid. In the cleric's mind, he had failed to protect the warrior from the vision he had so long ago foreseen...

And that was how I heard it...

The humble bard,

Merrywater