



a 5th Edition D&D campaign

SESSION #14
Return to Red Larch

Last Session...

Our heroes had entered the Vale of the Dancing Waters, hoping to garner support from any dwarves still loyal to the Order of the Gauntlet. The Emerald Enclave contact in Beliard, Markus Damascus, told them at one point that there were such dwarves in the Vale. Hadrian the paladin thought it was worth checking out. Besides, it was SORT of on the way to Red Larch where they are taking the hundred or so refugees from Beliard.

But all was not well in the Vale.



Besides the priests in the shrine all being DEAD and drowned, the shrine had been overtaken by evil priests of another sort, ones seemingly devoted to an elemental being named **Olhydra**, and they were currently in the midst of a dark prayer to their watery benefactor. A blue-skinned ogre mage served as their drummer, but through good tactics and good luck, the party was able to eliminate the ogre before it could even move and then systematically wiped out the rest of the enemies in short time.



Seven male humans plus the ogre are littered in the shrine, but the remains of the water elemental are gone, sucked up by Brey's dust of dryness and now pocketed as a weird little bead. So they search the bodies, finding little except for some pouches of gold coins and one gold and platinum chain necklace with the water symbol, until someone reaches into the ogre's vest pocket and pulls out a folded sheaf of paper.

The letter is sealed with red wax and on the outside are the words:

“OPEN ONLY WHEN LONELY AND ALONE”

Perplexed, and not a little scared, Serena opens the letter and silently reads it, her eyes widening with each word...

*LOVE ODE
to an
ONI*

Oh, Obratu,

There is only you.

Our love is forbidden,

Our lust always hidden.

No others can ever know of this tryst.

Hold it close to your heart, I insist.

Here in the dark of this sacred temple

I await your return, for your touch so simple,

Until it turns rough, rapid, violent

and I squirm beneath your bulk, so silent

And then you bow before my stony cock,

my loins bursting for you like liquid rock.

*Not even the GODS shall sever our bond,
so long as you always worship my wand.*

*As Water and Earth mingle to mud,
as flesh always rips to spill hot blood,*

*As the bodies of my foes stiffen for eternity,
so shall our passion endure, in all its purity.*

*Your Lord and Lover, **MARLOS***

WELL, OK THEN...she hands the letters to the others to read. They're not sure what to make of it. What the hell is an oni? Who is Obratu? Who is Marlos? What in the hell is this homo-elemental thing going on here?

Then Serena recalls a name scribbled on Thurl's map. She pulls it out, sighing, and points it out to the others. She taps the Sacred Stone Monastery.

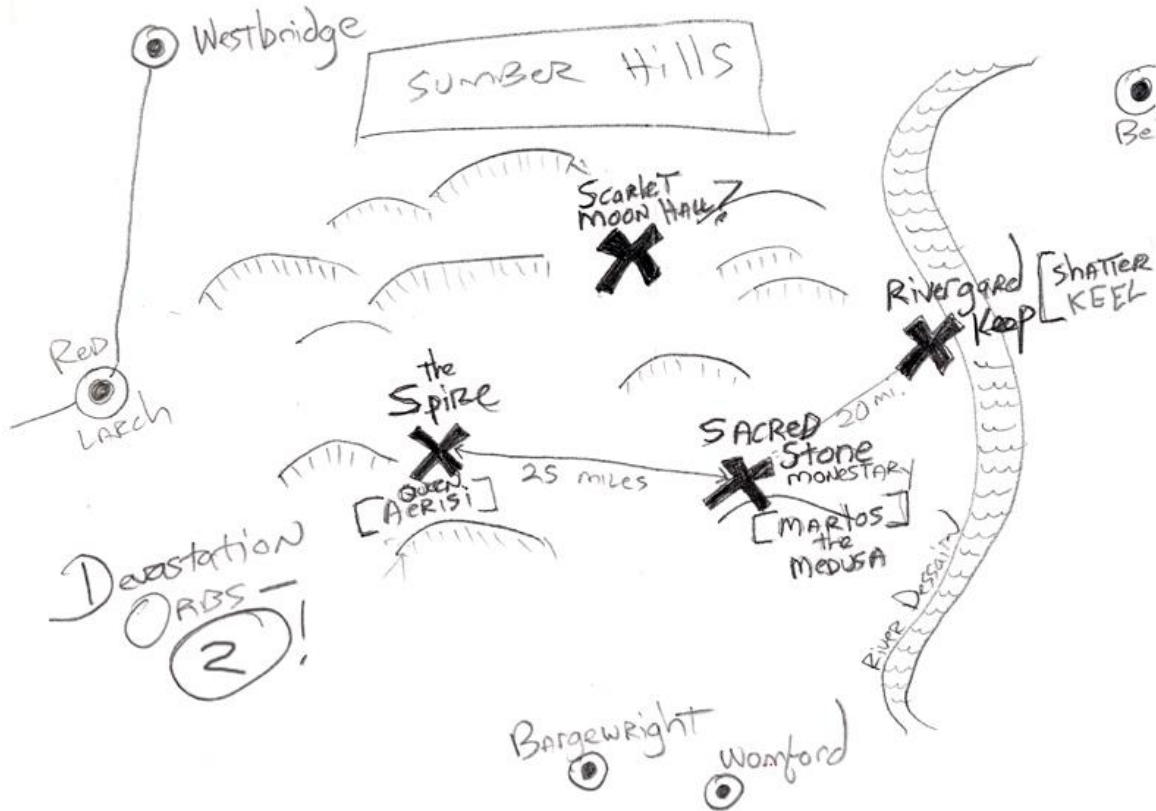
*"Marlos. The **Medusa**."*

Now, the group doesn't know jack squat about medusas, but the little they DO know, besides their petrifying gaze and snaky hair, they thought they were all female. If they're interpreting this love letter correctly, this Marlos character is definitely MALE, he has a penchant for the earth element, he definitely has male physical attributes and he has some kind of deep emotional connection to the now deceased ogre mage who is probably **Obratu**, who had a diametrically opposed affinity to the evil elemental water. *And the PCs are to blame.*

Maybe they had some kind of secret tryst reaching far, far back, before their allegiances parted ways but their love bond could not break? ?

They just don't know.

[DM Note – Here is the sole reason for me including this whimsical and totally unnecessary yet amusing development for the ogre mage and Marlos – they killed the ogre so fast that it became a non-entity in the encounter. Aside from, “Whew! Glad we took HIM out so fast!” So I found a different way to use him that effectively made Marlos a notch more interesting as well.]





“Our vengeance is sated for now,” growls Malbeck, leader of the small band of dwarves who were patrolling the Vale when the PCs stumbled across them. “But our work is not done. The dead must be buried and consecrated, according to our customs.”

One dwarf died in the battle so there is only three left. They quickly work with the help of the PCS to bury all of them, and then Malbeck checks out the breached wall where something entered the Shrine of the Tender Oath.

“Gorm!” he shouts. “I call into question your stonecunning skills. This was not breached from without. Something inside this temple

broke THROUGH!”



Malbeck toes the rubble and sniffs the air. The PCs gather around him. How far down does it go they wonder? Malbeck cannot answer that question. The only way to find out will be to descend, and after some discussion they think this is going to be the best thing to do.

It is only midafternoon on the second day after they left the refugees camped outside the Vale. They have instructions to leave the next DAWN if the PCs have not returned, so theoretically they should have plenty of time to at least poke down this tunnel a little ways and see if more foes are imminent.

“How many dwarves in the Vale?” asks Hadrian. “Can you get more help?”

“Less than fifty,” answers Malbeck. “It will take half a day to rout any of them from the other outposts.”

That’s just too long, the PCs can’t waste that much time waiting, so they elect to go as a group. The problem is that Ghrol the Priest and Vinny the Veteran and Serena the Sorcerer don’t have darkvision unlike the three dwarves and Hadrian and Brey, so the former three have to use a light spell and stay back further as the others scout ahead.

They enter the tunnel, the dwarves at the forefront.

[MAP NOT TO SCALE]

Ten feet of stony wall had been hacked through, and Malbeck says it looks it was done by something immensely strong, possibly with a hammer. The ogre? Maybe. The breached wall enters a pre-existing tunnel and angles sharply downward, ranging from just three feet wide in places to ten feet wide, and five feet high to fifteen feet high, rolling up and down and zig zagging and sometimes branching off side tunnels that open onto drop offs that plunge into dark holes whistling with wind and echoes. They stay away from those.



An hour passes.

A whole hour of clambering down a difficult passage until they reach a junction. The dwarves' stonecunning gives them an excellent idea of their location. The west tunnel bears sharply down and carries the scent of water and humidity. It goes into deeper, unknown places. The right branch heads south and east, roughly following the Dessairn River if Malbeck's calculations are correct. It is more level than the other route, so they take this direction.

Another hour passes.

They've come further than the PCs wanted to and still no sign of any living thing. Finally they reach something – a locked metal gate barring the passage.



Brey searches for traps, finds none, and picks the lock winsomely. The

passage continues in a long dark straight line and then they see a small alcove containing a COT, a pair of slippers, an unlit lantern and a half eaten loaf of bread and meat. Someone has been here recently.

And given their trajectory, according to Malbeck, they are heading south and east along the Dessarin, several miles already, and this is going to put them on a path straight to Rivergard Keep.

“You don’t want to go there,” they tell him. “Bunch of crazies.”

They turn back. This is getting too risky. Malbeck wants to make sure more enemies won’t swarm up this damn tunnel and invade the Vale, but there’s just not enough of them down here to ensure that. Brey jams the lock on the gate and they trudge back up the slope, many long hours passing and still they encounter nothing dangerous, and finally they exit back into the Shrine and the three dwarves hastily begin bricking up the tunnel as best they can.

“We owe you many thanks,” grunts Malbeck as he works. “You are welcome here any time. In fact, I insist that you return at some point and bring us news, or even try to send magical correspondence. Long have we known that weather in the Hills has grown sour, but we are insulated and never leave. We did not know it was so...bad. And Beliard. What a horrible fate. But we must do what we can do defend ourselves now. An enemy is close to our home and they have already invaded. They may well do so again. We must rally and repopulate the Shrine as soon as possible.”

The PCs agree. They had come to get the dwarves’ help but they ended up helping the dwarves instead. There is nothing else they can do for them. Nighttime is approaching, it is early Spring and it will be dark in a matter of hours. The refugees outside the Vale will leave by dawn and the heroes want plenty of time to get back.

They say their goodbyes to Malbeck and the others and march down the switchback trail from the shrine and meander back to the waterfall from where they initially climbed.

Hours later, after the sun has fallen and the moon risen, they see the distant glimmer of campfires and smell smoke, and soon enter the camp of the refugees from Beliard who are overjoyed to see them return. The night before was not uneventful. A mated pair of OWLBEARs attacked, killing five people, but their combined counterattack slew one beast and drove the other off.



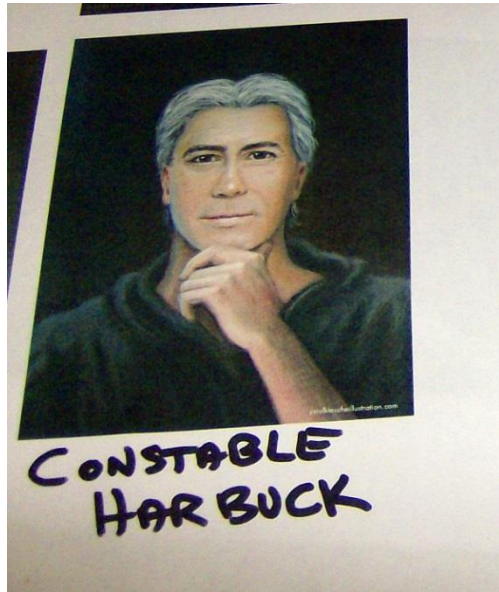
Dawn arrives without any trouble and from there it is a five day trek through the Sumer Hills to Red Larch along the Larch Path. The group is lumbering and slow but the path is clear, and 10 random encounter rolls later they only get hit ONCE the last day.

Arrows strike the rear flank from a small group of gnolls situated on a hillside. Hadrian was on his paladin's warhorse and he charges them with Brey on his back, while Serena leaps into the air with a Fly spell, her hands cracking with energy.

The gnolls run without a fight.



By evening they've reached Red Larch, having been gone for nearly two weeks now. They're relieved to see that the town is not a smoking ruin like Beliard. The 95 refugees shuffle into town, much to the surprise and chagrin of Constable Harbuck and every other citizen.

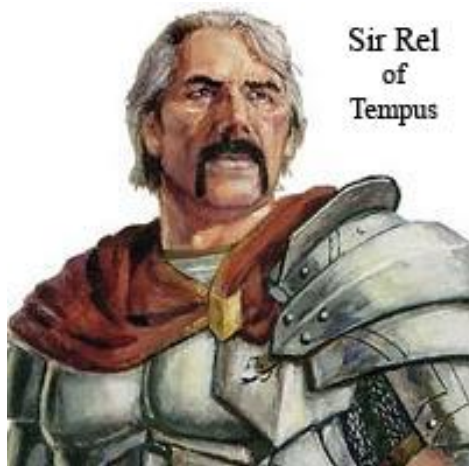


“What is this? What happened?”

The PCs and refugees are the first people to arrive from Beliard and the first to bring word of its destruction. That was six or seven days ago. Constable Harbuck is horrified, but the townsfolk make do with the stragglers as best they can, accommodating them in the warehouse and barns and inns until they are overstuffed.

It will work temporarily.

In the meantime, while all that is going on, the PCs reach out to some of their old acquaintances, namely **Sir Rel** of the Order of the Gauntlet, **Lady Ghaele** from Phandelver (both in the Allfaiths Shrine) and **Leelya** of the Bathhouse and secret member of the Emerald Enclave.



Sir Rel
of
Tempus





Besides those folks, they're also relieved to see that the Wyndweirds made it back safe and sound from Feathergale Spire after being transported by the aarocroka.



Well, first things first, Constable Harbuck brings them up to speed on everything that has happened since the PCs unearthed a cult brewing in the Tomb of the Delvers beneath Red Larch. This, along with the Necromancer kidnapping two little girls is what instigated this whole quest into the Sumber Hills, which has steadily grown more convoluted.

They fought the Black Earth cult leader **Larakh**, but he escaped, only to be killed by the Necromancer later before the PCs in turn took down the Necromancer.



This unveiled the allegiances of a group called The Believers, just normal townsfolk who had secretly long worshipped some strange rocks under the village known as the Tomb of the Moving Stones, which they believed could foretell signs and portents. Larakh and his followers showed up one day and claimed to know exactly how to interpret the stones and slowly indoctrinated the Believers into their little religion.

Before the Believers could be fully “cultified” the PCs stepped in.

Some of them escaped that night, namely “Bert” Berthunder of Berthunder’s warehouse, Wally Waelvur and Berthunder’s son who was being punished under a pile of rocks (this was all way back in Session #3).

The next day Constable Harbuck took it upon himself to get this mess sorted out and told the PCs to go on and check out what they needed to do in the Hills, which at that point was some strange graves that a shepherd had found.

Some of the Believers leftover were Smoky Melhiko, Ulhro the Tanner and Doren Finestone. Still denying any involvement in anything illegal, Harbuck put them under house arrest anyway in what amounted to the town's drunk tank.

The morning AFTER that all three of them were found dead in their cell.



This was nearly 12 days ago.

The PCs were already at the shallow graves by then, and Constable Harbuck was furious; there was just too much chaos and death going on in his little town.

He immediately recruited the help of Sir Rel of Tempus and asked if he could commune with the dead and find some answers. So he did.

Only the disembodied spirit of Mellihiko could be retrieved, but she did reveal some information before departing back to the netherworld.

- A) Larakh promised the Believers to teach them the holy messages of the Delvers and Moving Stones and indoctrinate them into their Faith.
- B) The first night the three of them were in the holding cell, someone came to the barred window late at night and whispered to them. They did not recognize the voice.

“Psst! Psst! Listen carefully! Larakh has not forgotten his faithful! He will rescue you by dawn, he promises. He has a plan. He asked me to bring you this cheese and fruit and water. The Delvers and the Moving Stones have told him what to do. Just wait. Freedom is coming!”

- C) They partook of the offering. She remembers choking, then darkness.

So someone eliminated the last of the Believers before they could squawk too much. Was it Berthunder or Wally Waelvur, or is there another pair of eyes in town who doesn't want the cult presence unearthed? The PCs aren't sure.

Hadrian contacts Sir Rel and Brey and Serena contacts Leelya.

Sir Rel is soon to end his rotation at the Allfaiths Shrine and head north to Westbridge. Given the sudden influx of refugees, he thinks it's a good idea for a caravan of thirty or so to travel together and relieve the burden on Red Larch's resources. Sir Rel is pleased to hear that Hadrian partially fulfilled his mission and found the lost knight from Icewind Dale. His body has not been returned yet to Goldenfields, but that can wait until later.

Leelya did not know about the four SPECIAL delegates from Mirabar who had a secret Enclave mission to uncover the elemental presence in the hills, and possibly some plan to stop it? No one knows for sure, it was very secret, but Markus Damascus told the PCs in Beliard before the Devastation Orb destroyed the town and killed Markus too.

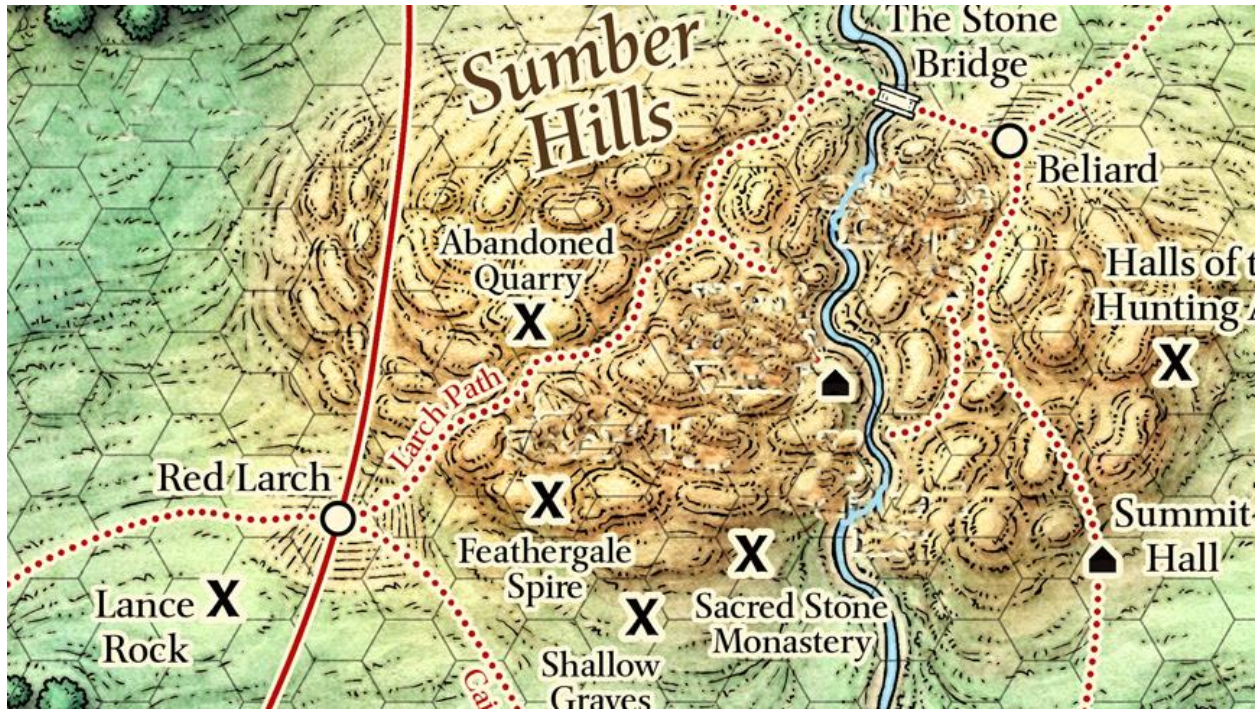
Other than that there have been no more developments in town, aside from the strange weather. Oh, and what weather! Not long ago they saw a horrible storm of red lightning rip across the area near Feathergale Spire!



Oh, yeah, they remember that clearly. They were there. **The Fury Storm.**

So after discussing their options with Leelya and Sir Rel, they decide that the most pressing matter is probably taking the fight straight to the Air Cult. They have reason to believe that a second devastation orb is in the region, maybe Yartar, but that's too far away for them to worry about right now. It's not even certain, just a rumor pieced together from what Markus Damascus said.

And as all heroes are wont to do, there is no time for rest when adventure beckons. They DO rest for the night and then head out in the morning, getting some mounts first so they can make quicker time and less random encounter rolls, and off they gallop into the wild hills toward Feathergale Spire and the Temple of the Howling Hatred!





Not long after they finally see the now-familiar Feathergale Spire jutting into the sky like a cruel spear. The sun is setting behind them in a red ball of flame and the tower is growing dark.

[They also avoided any random encounter rolls]

Nighttime will be upon them soon and they need to decide what to do. There is no light in the tower's windows, no movement that they can see and no horn to call reinforcements, they made sure it was destroyed before they left.

The portcullis is still closed.

They elect to head north half a mile to where the canyon is shallower and use the horses to trot down and make camp a long ways from the entrance to the Temple.

They'll watch the Spire overnight and head to the entrance at Knifepoint Gulley first light.



The sky is barely tinged with dawn's light when they gather their gear, leave the horses, cast *Pass Without Trace* and silently as possible move up to the entrance. All is still and quiet. They crouch and wait, looking for guards but see none. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

They advance, letting Brey take point as he's the stealthiest, and he enters the cool confines between tall rock pillars that flank the entrance to the narrow canyon.



All is clear, still no one, and he steps in, motioning to the others, and that's when the wind whips up around his feet and two solid blows WHAM! BAM! smash his face twice, nearly snapping his neck from their force.

Brey staggers from surprise, loses initiative, and then WHAM! BAM! something invisible and powerful slams him again, and before he knows it he's been crushed down to 6 hit points. He's nearly dropped and can't survive another round. He backs off and fluidly slips into a dire wolf form to regain life.

Utter chaos ensues.

Serena leaps in and unleashes a crackling lightning bolt, but it strikes nothing, and then something hits Vinny HARD, disappearing again in a whirl of invisible wind.



This is a hard fight. A VERY hard fight. They can't target the thing. They can't see it, it's fast, it's intelligent, it deals a lot of damage and it doesn't stay in the same place twice. They have to guess where it might be and even then they have disadvantage. Plus, it has a boatload of hit points. It keeps hammering them from all sides, changing targets fortunately and attacking randomly [which was nice of me or Brey would have simply died in 3 rounds, and then somebody else]

The tide changes when the thing is luckily hit with a guiding bolt and it briefly flickers into view as if struck by a tracer bullet.



For a fraction of a second it is there and then gone, but it's enough time for them to yell" "FOCUS FIRE! THERRRRRE!"

Missile weapons and spells unleash, most missing, and then the creature pummels Hadrian.

Everyone resorts to readying attacks as soon as the thing nears them, which isn't a perfect solution but it's better than nothing.

The dire wolf might have the best idea; it uses its keen senses to detect the things approach and cancel out the disadvantage.

In fact, a critical hit from the wolf's jaws ENDS the battle. The air monster dissipates in its jaws like the refreshing rush of a Mentos, and the group sags to the walls, exhausted and beat up and demoralized. This actually took a long time.

That's when I decided to tell them that TWO Invisible Stalkers were *waiting for them inside Feathergale Spire*. I don't usually spread metagame knowledge like that, but in this case it felt DM appropriate. I also had to cut its hit points in half because it felt like the right thing to do.

[DM Note – Here's another tidbit for the players: this is from **Session #11**]

[The orb approaches the tower, circles it from bottom to top and then disappears momentary on the backside, only to soon be seen flickering through the wooden slats inside the structure, inspecting it from within.]



After ten minutes or so it leaves and returns Knifepoint Gulley and vanishes into the cleft.

“What deviltry was that?” asks Crowkakatak.

“I suspect some sort of remote scrying,” suggests Brey. “Perhaps they were...watching. We cannot stay here much longer.”

But they still decide to wait a little longer until the sun has fully risen and see if anymore reinforcements are sent out. They’re using the brass telescope pried from the tower so they can easily see what comes in or out.

And just as the sun is rising, dark clouds suddenly form over the plateau at Knifepoint Gulley and

three streaks of lightning rumble through the clouds in three evenly spaced bursts. Now they DEFINITELY are not sticking around. They suspect some kind of ritual has been cast, but for what purpose they cannot fathom...]

(DM Note – Three invisible stalkers were summoned to guard the region.)

The group catches their breath and decides to keep going. They’re at the entrance to the Temple of the Howling Hatred, and gods knows what lies beneath. The canyon descends sharply and they see a path hugging the walls.

They follow it.



Soon they reach an area that looks like it was hollowed out for large birds to roost, probably griffons, and piles of dry spoor lie as proof. The gorge narrows to the point that their wingspan could not clear it, and the Feathergale Knights must have disembarked here.

The heroes continue down the canyon, the light growing ever dim, dim, and dimmer until shadows enclose them and the narrow blue ribbon of sky is lost and they are surrounded by rock on all sides and still they descend into a cold world of blackness and granite and silence. They know not what awaits them but they forge onward, those without darkvision finally using sources of light so that they can see, and miles later, after navigating narrow paths that turn and twist they finally reach a windswept plaza that overlooks the remains of an ancient dwarven city.

“Huh. Great. Another one,” mutters Hadrian.

