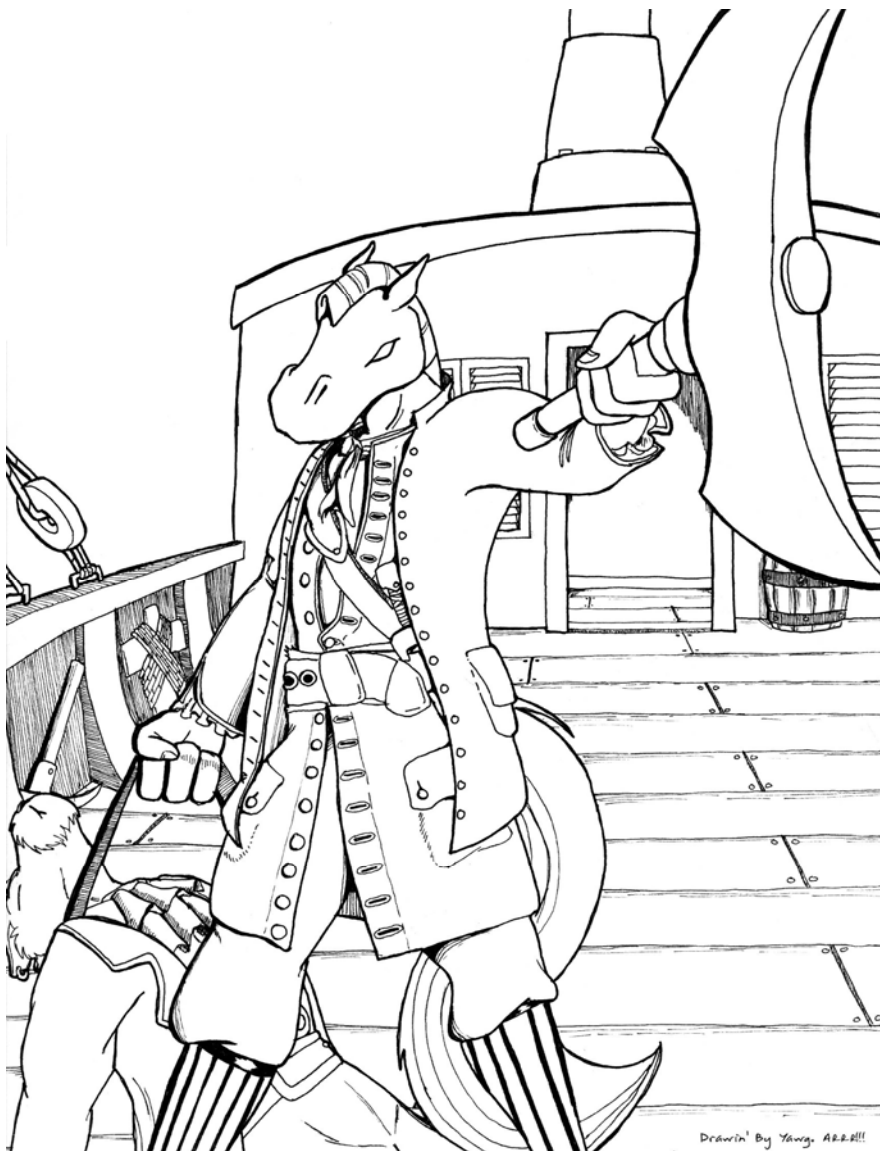


# *Otherworlds*

By Pflarrian  
Collifox



## **Otherworlds**

By Pflarrian Collifox

## A few notes...

The following work of fiction is a chronicle of events played out in the mind of the Author, who in no way condones violence of any sort and wishes to apologize in advance if he has offended anyone.

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Some thank-you’s are also in order, here.

I would like to thank my Muse, who helped me to create large chunks of the setting and most of the characters contained herein over the last decade or so.

My most generous thanks must go out to Mike Regan, the ‘Old Grey Raccoon’ (a.k.a., the Masked Librarian) for allowing me to post this in the Raccoon’s Bookshelf in the first place. Without this assistance, my story likely wouldn’t have gotten any further than chapter 2 or 3.

Thanks must go out to the wide variety of Sabrinaverse writers out there (Josh, Rava, Evan Mayerle, Chris Fox, James Brunner, and all the others [you know who you are], and of course to Sabrina’s creator, Eric W. Schwartz) for giving me the drive to write this in the first place. This was originally written because I felt that I had to give something back after having read all of their stories.

Thanks must go out to the readers for putting up with my twisted plots and contrived wordings, and to those RPG players who have sat with me at the table on Saturday nights for several years for providing much of the inspiration needed for this

project...

...and finally, I must thank my RL alter ego, Brian Panthera, for beginning this whole project in the first place. ;)

I've probably missed a few things in all of this, but I think this should do for now. Meanwhile, sit back, grab yourself a snack, and enjoy.

- Pflarrian Collifox ^..^

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# Act I

## *Otherworlds*

### *Prologue...*

*The soft sound of rustling paper can stimulate your imagination.*

*Where is it coming from? A vast library, repository to the works of the ages? A small schoolroom, students prepping their books for their next class? Some office desk, strewn with a days' - or perhaps a weeks' - worth of work? Or maybe a makeshift desk perched atop a leaky barrel, in a battered, worn tent in some lost wilderness?*

*What is making the sound? A magazine, the pages filled with images of scantily-clad females? (You wish!) Perhaps a great novel, someone's favorite book, the pages worn from years of being read and re-read? Some ancient tome of forbidden lore, an occult text that should never have been written, let alone opened? Maybe a cluttered stack of papers, someone's research notes? Or perhaps a water stained notebook, normally kept in the bottom of some battered, well-used canvas satchel?*

*The rustling of paper can, indeed, spark the imagination. Sometimes it does a better job of doing so than other times. Sometimes the noise catches the attention of people immediately, and sometimes there is nobody around to hear it, or to care.*

*This is not one of those times.*

*[World of Tayrik: Mirial's Rock (Academy Dormitories);*

*Universal Calendar date: 05/07/11999 (Friday)]*

In this particular instance, the paper is a worn journal of college-ruled, lined paper with a green cardboard cover. The journal is somewhat worse for wear, the cardboard bent and warped with age and overuse, but it is still being written in on a regular basis. In this instance, by a tall, stocky human with nondescript brown hair, several days' worth of stubble, and ink stains on his fingertips. He is young, in his mid-twenties, and rather tired at the moment, both with his life and the conversation he is currently having with the other occupant of the room. He yawns, not bothering to cover his mouth, and sets the tip of the ballpoint pen he's been using against the journal once more, before stopping to think. He makes random swirls on the journal's open page

with the pen, making an irritated face before he tosses the obviously dead pen into a nearby trashcan.

“Let me see if I understand this,” he begins, not bothering to look at the person he is addressing before he speaks. “We warned you weeks ago that we were all going to be busy this summer. Oeshar and myself with classes, Marani and Hakarra with their assistant teaching duties, not to mention the repair work on Copperhill Keep that Johnathon is performing, and so on.” He reaches up to adjust his glasses and sighs. “When we told you this, you said, *and I quote*, ‘Oh, that’s fine, I’m just interning with Professor Verdigris this summer, I’ll be fine by myself,’ *endquote*.” The person he is talking to winces and nods.

“Yes, I know I said that, but...”

“Hup-up-up-up! *No* interruptions!” A wry smile spread across the human’s face as he raised his head to look at the other for the first time. “We *warned* you we would be busy! I hate to say this, Pflarrian, but you’re kind of screwed.”

“Aw, c’mon, Scribbles...”

That made the smile vanish instantly. “I seem to recall asking you to *not* call me that. My sister has the right to, as do one or two others. *You* do not, *Pfluffles*.”

“Fine, Scrib then.”

“Thank you.”

“Seriously, Scrib,” Pflarrian continued, rubbing his hands nervously over his oddly vulpine ears, “Verdigris is making me go off-dimension for a week! I don’t have too many places I can easily access, even with that spell you found, and I don’t feel comfortable being alone in any of them!”

Scribonius sighed and cast his gaze over Pflarrian. The latter was human like Scribonius, or rather, human-*ish*, to a point. He stood about half a head shorter than the taller, stockier human, his gaunt physique at stark odds to the heavyset Scribonius. But what really stood out were those things that made him both more, and less than, human. Pflarrian, near as anyone could tell, was part fox. He had a long, bushy red tail sticking through a hole in his jeans, and a pair of large, pointy red furry fox ears sticking up from under a shock of long reddish-brown hair that was usually pulled back in a rough ponytail.

“Look, fuzzyface, there’s not much I can help you with. I’ve got classes to attend that I *have* to take during the summer session. What is this, just another term paper about your experiences and stuff that you have to write?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Then why not just draw on one of your past experiences in other dimensions to write the paper? Verdy doesn’t have to know you didn’t leave campus to write this one, does he?” Scrib brushed a stray lock of medium-brown hair away from his eyes then began to idly scratch his head for a moment before he realized what he was doing, then stopped, looking a little embarrassed. “Sorry, nervous habit.”

“Yeah, got the concept.” Pflarrian’s tail waved about nervously behind him as he began to pace back and forth through the dormitory’s common room. “I already thought about that idea, and it won’t work this time. I’ve already told the Professor about most of my trips, and I can’t remember which ones I have told him about, and which ones I *haven’t*. If I write about one I’ve already told him about, he’s going to be livid, and trust me, making a dragon angry isn’t a good plan.”

“Yeah, I suppose that one would make you lose your hat, wouldn’t it?”

“Not to mention my fur, my hair, and my sanity, among other things.”

Scribonius thought for a bit, then cast the vulpine-featured human a confused look. “Um, I thought ol’ Verdy was of Cuperious descent?”

“He is.”

“Okay, how would you lose your fur, and so on? Your hat I can understand, cause he’d probably just knock it off your head with a claw or his tail. But he doesn’t do the whole fire-breathing thing, does he?”

“Naw, but he’s got enough magic at his disposal he doesn’t need the fire schtick.” The befoxed human’s tail was whipping about at a furious rate as he paced about the room, his vulpine ears twitching almost uncontrollably as he walked about, waving his arms around for emphasis. “But you know what’s worse?”

“No, but I suspect you’re going to tell me. What is worse?”

“There’s really only one place I haven’t really explored much or told old Verdy about, and that’s the Demesne of the Mogref.”

The smile on his face gone in an instant, Scribonius’ breath hissed out through his clenched teeth. “Okay, now you have a worrisome point. That place is *dangerous*! You dragged me through there on a whim that one time, and I have *no* desire to go back there. Regardless, I wasn’t kidding. I have classes, and I can’t just hare off on a wild goose chase for a week so you can write a term paper for an internship! I hate to have to say this, but you’re on your own for this one.”

“I know, you’ve said it often enough and I got the point.”

“At least with the Markstones you can get yourself *out* of there in a hurry, right?”

Pflarrian stifled a groan, but the comment from Scribonius stopped his pacing. “Yeah, I guess that’s a saving grace of sorts.”

“Likewise, it isn’t like you don’t know a bunch of ward spells you can put up around wherever you’re hiding in that dimension. It’ll make for a really boring trip, but there’s nothing saying you can’t just pop in and find a place to hide for a week, right?”

The bushy fox ears twitched once, twice, then stopped. “Hmmm...” A thoughtful look began to spread across Pflarrian’s features. “Hadn’t thought of that.”

“Good plan?”

“Yes, it is, and I think I know *just* the place to hide, too!”

“Good, then you should go start packing for your trip and let me go back to my writing, yes? Because unlike a certain vulpine-ish human, *my* semester doesn’t end until tomorrow, when this paper is due.”

“Wait, you still have a term paper due?”

“Alas, yes.”

Pflarrian cocked his head to one side curiously, staring at the stockier human. “If you have a term paper due, then why are you editing my stuff instead of working on it?”

“We all have different ways of organizing our thoughts, fox-butt. I find that my thoughts organize better when I’m concentrating on something *other* than what I should be working on, *capiche?*”

“Yep! Later!”

“Oh, Pflarr?”

“Yeah?”

Scribonius held up the notebook he was scribbling in and scowled at the vulpine human. “Your handwriting is atrocious and so is your spelling. I’ve almost got this first section completely edited for you, should you wish to do a final proof-read before you leave, but you *owe* me for making me muddle my way through your chickenscratch.”

The fox-eared one laughed and waved at his friend. “Technically, it’s *foxscratch*, isn’t it? Anyway, gotta get going. I’ll look it over when I get back.”

Scribonius watched him go with an inward sigh of relief, and slid another pen out of a pocket of his vest. *Now*, he thought, *where was I...?*

*Oh yes...*

*Chapter One: The Beginning...*

*‘Samuel Clemens, better known to the world as writer Mark Twain, is reported to once have said that ‘history doesn’t repeat itself, it merely rhymes.’ I can’t remember where I read about that, but it makes a lot of sense in a way. Historians around our world and others have found similarities between present events and things that happened decades or centuries beforehand. The events are similar in context or perhaps events or other ways, but not the same - different people involved or different countries, perhaps. Either way, because of this similarity, it can be said that history ‘rhymes’ with itself.*

*The same can be said about dimensions. I don’t mean the standard set of length, breadth, depth, and time, but a different kind of dimension. Sort of a ‘parallel universe’ kind of thing, if you know what I mean. The largest dimensions, encompassing entire planets or even solar systems, are known as worlds. Worlds ‘rhyme’ with each other, much like history.*

*A pair of ‘rhyming worlds,’ or ‘parallel dimensions,’ as the scientists like calling them, are two worlds that look the same in almost every way, save for one key event in the past that played out differently in each of the two worlds. Generally speaking, the events that cause new parallel dimensions to form are those that could affect a large percentage of the world in question. Perhaps the best known example of such an event would be the Second World War. For years now, theoretical historians have pondered what the world would be like had the Axis won World War II.*

*However, I am getting away from the point, which is that parallel dimensions do exist, and there are a lot of them. Most of them branch out from events within the last several centuries. World War II, World War I, the American Civil War, and the Industrial Revolution are the really major ones for some reason. But while recent events have spawned a large number of new dimensions, events much farther back in the past have created dimensional splits as well. There are worlds out there where the dinosaurs still live, worlds where humans are not the dominant species (or where humans are so rare as to be legend), and worlds where the continental plates moved in different directions, creating radically different topographical geography. Events as far back as the ‘big bang’ have created new dimensions.*

*Those that travel the dimensions know of these other worlds, but the big world-dimensions aren’t the only dimensions out there. Smaller ‘pocket’ or ‘personal’ dimensions, or ‘dimension-planes’ are common as well. Many such dimensions were actually created by the inhabitants of the dimension-plane, and these minor dimensions will frequently reflect the whims and desires of their creator(s). The planes the Catholic faith know as ‘Heaven’ and ‘Purgatory’ both qualify as minor dimensions, despite their virtually infinite size. Likewise, Hell is a minor dimension, or rather a collection of linked minor dimensions. Other examples are the domains of the powerful individual immortals or groups of immortals that folk of old called gods - Zeus, Isis, and many, many others...’*

- introduction from *A Study of Dimensions*, by Pflarrian Collifox

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*[Domain of Xolotl the immortal (The 'Library of Lenasia');*

*Universal Calendar date: 05/07/11999 (Friday)]*

Speaking of immortals...

Some of her followers, no matter which world, believe the goddess Isis to be both omnipotent and omniscient. What they don't know is that omniscience in mortal affairs seldom extends to the affairs of other immortals. That knowledge requires a more personal visit.

It was for this reason that Isis had come to her present location. Gradually, her luminescent form wavered and reformed as a demure golden-furred jackaless. Clothed in white robes seemingly made from spun light, she made her way through the empty halls, her soft footfalls echoing in the austere solitude of her surroundings.

This was not the first time she had visited this place, merely the most recent. As she walked, memories of other visits in earlier times flooded her mind. She recalled a time, centuries earlier, when these halls had been vibrant, full of life and sound.

Now the halls were empty, occupied only with the ever-present shelves full of dusty books and cobwebbed scrolls. Chips of fallen plaster and threadbare rugs lay strewn about in mute testament to the grandeur once evident here.

In one room, Isis stopped to gaze impassively at the rows of bookcases, empty where the others had been full. A great stained glass window filled one wall of the room from floor to ceiling, depicting a laughing male collie and a feathered serpent. Long ago it had been majestic and awe-inspiring, sending beams of sparkling colored light dancing across the marble floor. Now, it seemed forgotten, dirty and dulled with time, the wan light illuminating only dusty shelves.

Sadly, the goddess gazed upon the empty bookshelves. Once, these shelves had been full of books - fat and thin, new and old, rich and plain. One book for each follower of the power who resided here. Now only a scant few of the shelves had anything on them.

Turning away from the empty shelves, Isis passed through a door in the wall opposite the great window, entering into a large domed chamber. Here alone, of all the rooms she had seen, did some of the former glory of this edifice remain. Yet even

here, time's passing had done its work. Beneath the opulent wall hangings, the ornate Aztec-style rugs, and the finely-crafted hardwood furniture lay an air of decay and age.

It was here, finally, that the goddess found the one she had come here to speak with. The bronze-furred collie stood in the middle of the room under the apex of the dome, wearing once-splendid Aztec finery. He leaned on the edge of a great marble reflecting pool, gazing into the depths at something only he could see. Slowly, the collie reached out one arm and waved it over the pool, causing the images contained within to flee.

She waited for the collie to finish before she spoke, her quiet voice softly filling the silent room. "Hello, Xolotl. Still keeping an eye on your followers, I see."

The collie turned and bowed lightly to her. "Indeed, I am. I've little else to do anymore, and it comforts me to watch them."

She smiled on hearing his sonorous tones. "Which one do you watch now?"

Xolotl just shook his head slowly. "All of them, my dear. I've but a hundred or so left on Furth, and few other worlds have even that many. I view each of them in his or her turn."

She gave a soft nod. "I meant which in particular seems to entrap your attention currently."

"As if you need to ask."

"Ah. The 'Halved One'." She nodded again and smiled in remembrance.

Xolotl stood before her, calm in demeanor, seemingly motionless as he gazed at her. Then, suddenly, he spoke. "Lady, why do you come here?"

"To speak with one that makes sense."

"Ah." Xolotl smiled wryly, an amused glint in his ageless eyes. "You've been speaking with Bastet, again, haven't you?"

She nodded.

Xolotl continued to gaze calmly at the Goddess. "It figures. There are few of us immortals that can irritate you, and yet she seems to manage it each time you speak with her." The anthromorphic canine half-smiled at the Goddess, one corner of his mouth curled up a little in his muzzle. "Hard to believe that some mortals thought you and she were one and the same once, no?"

"Funny. You *would* bring that up."

Isis watched calmly as Xolotl turned his attention back to the reflecting pool. “That is not really why you are here though, is it? You wish to question my interest with the ‘Halved One’.”

She smiled and nodded once. “Astute of you, dear Xolotl. Tell me - you, Xolotl, have kept out of your followers’ affairs more than most others. Yet suddenly, you change that policy for one who is not even a follower of yours. A policy that you stood by for over seven centuries. I would know why.”

“You know the answer.”

“True, but I would hear it from you.”

Xolotl sighed, leaning against the marble edge of the scrying pool. “Because his grandmother asked that I keep an eye on him from time to time.”

She nodded, content with his answer. “You seem quite inclined to listen to Taynith Grauvolf of late. Sometimes I wonder why.”

Xolotl smiled, gazing into the pool’s depths. “What occurs between Lady Taynith and myself is my own business. Suffice to say that I owe her.” He continued to lean on the marble bowl, staring calmly into it. Then, “Tell me, if she irritates you that much, why do you bother speaking with her?”

The Goddess stood lost in thought for what seemed like an eternity. Her thoughts strayed to the empty halls, her frequent arguments with Bastet, and to the great stained-glass window in the foyer, now ruined and dark. Finally, she spoke. “Do you miss him - Quetzalcoatl, I mean. For centuries the two of you stood together, allies against whatever any others sent against you. Do you miss him now that he has left you?”

“Of course. He was as a brother to me.”

She smiled. “That is why I bother to talk with Bastet. She is a friend, as are you and most of the other immortals. Some more than others, of course, but friends none-the-less.” Xolotl gave her a skeptical look. She walked up to him, resting her small hand on his shoulder. “It is the truth, as I see it. Without all of you, I would likely be as lonely as you seem to feel. I like knowing that someone will be there for me to speak with, should the desire arise.”

“Ah. I understand now.” Xolotl smiled and leaned on the edge of his scrying pool. “Was there anything else you wanted?”

She thought for a moment, and then shook her head. “Not really. I am still trying to convince the others that we need to forge some sort of alliance against those who would cause trouble for all of us, but it is not an easy task.”

Xolotl chuckled softly. “I wonder why? Perhaps because as immortals, our memories run deeper than the roots of mountains and our feuds run longer yet.”

She smiled at the images that brought to mind. “Perhaps. Would it be too much to ask that you join the alliance? Bastet and Pan have already agreed, and Horus is still thinking about it.”

Xolotl shrugged. “Seven hundred years of neutrality are hard to give up. I would need a good reason to do so, I’m afraid, but I’ll think about it.”

Isis smiled at that. “Ah, well. It never hurts to ask. I must be going now, but please reconsider. An alliance could be beneficial to all of us, if only so we have others to talk to.”

Xolotl watched her leave and then turned back to the marble pool, gazing silently into the depthless waters. Waving his hand lightly over the still waters, he returned to what he had been doing when she had interrupted him - keeping the occasional eye on the grandson of one of his followers.

Slowly, the image in the glass cleared, focusing on the now sleeping form - a black-furred male anthropomorphic wolf, tall and rail-thin. Xolotl smiled, satisfied that the wolf was fine, and dismissed the image from the pool. *An Alliance...*

Slowly he walked through the halls that the goddess had walked through minutes before, stopping in the dim light that filtered through the dirty panes of the stained glass window. Turning to face the bookshelves that filled the room, a wave of sadness passed through him.

“Each bookcase a world, each book a follower.” Calmly, he turned and started back the way he had come, but paused at the chamber’s door. To the left of the door lay a shattered ruin of wood, all that remained of one of the bookcases that graced the room.

Shaking his head, he continued his walk. “I think I will check on the ‘halved one’ again, and then go call upon Lady Taynith,” he said to himself. “I have not seen her in quite a while. Perhaps she can assist me in deciding upon this ‘Alliance’.”

Stopping once again before the marble pool, Xolotl once more focused the pool’s power to gaze across the dimensions. Slowly, the picture came into focus, showing the same black-furred wolf as before. But this time, something was wrong.

*That’s odd*, he thought. *What is he doing there, of all places?* Xolotl motioned with one hand, and a cushioned chair came floating across the room, allowing him to seat himself. Curiosity getting the better of him, he settled down in the chair to watch.

## Chapter 1: The Isle of the Moghref...

*'It is fortunate for us 'mortal' beings that the immortals seldom bother to 'interfere' in our lives. Some mortals worship a variety of immortals as gods, others serve them in more business-like positions. Hephaestus, for example, has a large population of cyclopes working for him in his foundry. My own personal opinion regarding the immortals is a rather straight-forward one: I respect them and the powers they command. To do less would be foolhardy.*

*Unfortunately, while most immortals tend to ignore us mortals, there are exceptions...'*

*- from A Study of Dimensions, by Pflarrian Collifox*

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*[Domain of Aluciar the immortal (The Isle of the Moghref);*

*Universal Calendar: 05/08/11999 (Saturday)]*

Dashell awoke to pain. It filled his head to the tips of his fuzzy black ears, ran down his arms and legs, caused his furry wolf's tail to twitch in irritation, and made it feel as if someone had been trying to use him as a pincushion.

In other words, he had a hangover.

Dashell wasn't prone to drinking, but yesterday had been the last day of finals at the University - until Fall semester, of course - and his friends had managed to convince him to join them for a couple of beers in celebration. He remembered having gone to the bar with them. He remembered drinking a couple of shots of hard cider. He remembered, *vaguely*, stumbling back home at about two in the morning, totally smashed. He had fuzzy memories of having managed to reach his bed before passing out.

But he also knew that his house didn't have any rough stone floors, and he was definitely lying on such a floor. The chill of it stole into his limbs, making him shiver. Tentatively he opened his eyes to see where he was. "Owwwwwwww!" He shut them much more quickly than he'd opened them. His howl of pain at the brightness of the light only served to make his headache worse. Placing one paw in front of his eyes

to block as much of the light as he could, Dashell tried opening his eyes again. The pain was still there, but subdued.

“Wh-where am I?”

The floor he was seated on was indeed rough-cut stone. The walls, ceiling and floor were all crafted from the same style of rough-hewn stone, a kind of speckly grey-black in color, with lighter grey mortar holding them together. Three walls were made of this coarse stonework, with the fourth wall consisting of a series of iron bars running vertically along the wall with a single iron door set even with the bars. The room was lit by a pair of glass-covered light fixtures embedded in the ceiling. In other words, not a place that Dashell recognized.

He blinked in amazement as he lowered his paws and looked around. The room was spartan, with its only furnishings being a low wooden table and a coarsely-woven rug.

The wolf shook his head. “This is unreal. What is this place?” He thought for a moment, and then came to a simple conclusion. “I’m dreaming. That must be it.” He reached one paw down and pinched himself on his arm. It hurt a good deal, but the room didn’t change. “But-but I *must* be dreaming - this doesn’t make sense otherwise...”

“You are not dreaming, wolf-boy.”

Dashell spun around, staring at the being that had appeared outside the door to the room. It stood about five feet tall, resembling a pale, hairless ape with odd silvery skin and wispy grey hair over a pair of sharply-pointed ears that resembled bat’s wings. A single flame-red eye lit up the left side of its face, the right eye an empty socket surrounded by reams of scar tissue. The being smiled - a nasty grin, showing a large number of sharp teeth between its ash-grey lips. It - *he*, Dashell now realized - unlocked the door to the room with a large wrought-iron key and entered the room, closing the door behind it. An almost palatable aura of terror surrounded the creature, which increased as it pulled a large syringe out of the hidden recesses of the tattered robe it was wearing. As it advanced towards Dashell, all he could do was shrink back in terror, whimpering.

“Hmph. Silly creature. You should not be afraid of the likes of me. I’m but a simple scientist, looking for a few test subjects. You should be happy, in truth. Out of the millions of people on your world, I chose to pull you and you alone into my home to be the subject of my next experiment. Now, hold still...”

Dashell stared in horror at the syringe that was slowly inching towards his arm. His ears lay flat against his skull and a low growl of fear and panic began to escape from his throat. Then, suddenly, the creature stopped what it was doing, cocked its head at an odd angle, and began to talk to itself.

“HmMMM? What is that? A problem in the arena pits? Well, deal with it! What? Fighting? An *intruder*? Not *again*! Oh, dear. That won’t do, not at all.” The creature gave an irritated sigh and slipped the syringe back beneath its robes. “I’ll be there in a minute or two.” It looked Dashell right in the eyes and smiled nastily. “I have to go. Something’s come up. You’ll be fine as you are for a time, I wager, so I’ll leave you here for now. I’ll be back in a few hours, and then we can administer your first dosage of the new test formula.” Slowly, the creature turned and left the cell - for Dashell now recognized the room for what it truly was - shutting the door behind it. It turned to the left and walked away down the hall, muttering to itself.

Dashell waited for a time until he was sure it was truly gone. The hangover burned out of him by the sheer terror of the creature, he came to a swift realization. *I have to get out of here before that... that THING returns.* Dashell swiftly got to his feet and began to examine the cell, starting with the barred wall. He checked the bars for any loose ones first, and then turned his attention to the cell’s door. That’s when he noticed something that sent his hopes soaring.

The creature had left the door unlocked.

Dashell wasted no time pondering this discovery. He slipped out of the cell and looked both directions. The hall to his left was row after row of cell doors, to his right only stark grey stone. He set off at a quiet jog down the hall to the right, trying to put as much distance between himself and the creature as was possible. He’d only gone about fifty feet or so when the hall grew dark and he realized that he would need some sort of portable light source. While the hall outside his cell had been lit, the remainder of the hall was not. Returning to the cell he’d just left, Dashell first tried to pry one of the lights loose from the ceiling. When that failed, he took the only other course he could think of - he smashed the table.

Taking one of the legs from the now broken table, Dashell pulled his cigarette lighter out of its familiar keeping place and tried to light the table leg on fire to make a torch. When that didn’t work, he tore a few strips from the room’s rug, tied them around one end of the table leg and lit *that*. Soon, he had a decent - if somewhat unsteady - light source. Working fast, lest the creature come back before he had time to leave again, Dashell wrapped more scraps of the rug around the other three table legs and tucked them, unlit, into his belt. Holding the lit torch in his left paw, he set off again down the hall to the right.

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*Oh, crap. This is NOT good...* Xolotl had watched Dashell's awakening, seen the creature's arrival, and Dashell's escape. Continuing to watch the pool, Xolotl pondered what he should do.

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(Some time later)

*This place is weird - kind of a real-life game of Diablo with fewer monsters and less treasure,* Dashell thought, as he came to what had to be the seventh or eighth intersection that connected to the hallway. He stopped in the middle of the intersection, trying to decide which way to go. *I know I don't want to go back the way I came, but am I really getting anywhere by following the main hallway...?*

A faint shriek of fury from back the way he'd come interrupted Dashell's thoughts. He flinched in terror and set off down the right-hand branch at a dead run. *On second thought, it really doesn't matter where I go to, at this point, so long as I go as far away from that creature as I can get!*

Holding the torch in front of him as if it were a shield, Dashell ran down the hall, barely looking where he placed his feet. Terror-stricken, Dashell stumbled into walls and over barely-visible obstacles, scraping his arms and shins raw. But despite the pain, he kept running.

Every so often, he would glance behind him, expecting at any moment to see the horrid visage of the creature that had brought him here bearing down on him. Panic ruling his thoughts, he chose side passages at random, hoping that each choice was leading him further away from the creature and not back the way he'd come.

It was during one of his backwards glances that he noticed the stairway. It lay concealed in the shadows of one of the side passages he'd chosen not to follow. Some subconscious part of his mind registered its significance before his panicked state let him realize what it was. Dashell slowed to a jog, and then to a walk. Finally, he stopped dead, gasping for breath, his lungs aching. A ragged cough burst unbidden from his lips, as it often did when he overexerted himself. He clamped his free paw over his muzzle in an attempt to muffle the sound and staggered over to lean on the nearest wall as he tried to bring the ragged coughing under control. The exhaustion filling his legs warred with the pain coming from the scrapes and bruises he'd gained during his mad dash for safety.

His panicked mind starting to clear, he began to wonder just how far he'd run. The coughing finally subsided, allowing him a chance to take stock of the situation.

Somewhere during his mad run, he'd lost two of his extra torches, leaving him only the one that he clenched in his left paw and the one extra one tucked into his belt.

Shoving off the wall, Dashell slowly walked back to the last intersection and over to the stairwell he'd seen. *It goes up*, he thought to himself. *If this is anything like the computer games I've played, up should be the way out.* Cautiously, he sniffed the air coming down from above. *It smells a bit fresher than down here, but there's something else there that I can't place.* He thought for a moment longer, glancing around anxiously. *On one paw, I have no guarantee that the next floor up is any safer than down here. But on the other paw, I know what's down here. These torches aren't going to last forever, either.*

Cautiously, he took a few steps up the staircase and sniffed again. *That other smell... It's strange, and yet familiar at the same time. Where have I smelled that before?* Taking another tentative step upwards, he took in one more good breath and then smiled. *Water! It smells like that river that runs in back of grandma's house!* Licking his drying lips in anticipation, he climbed the stairs, a bit faster now. *Good. Running like that makes me really thirsty...*

Reaching the top of the stairway, Dashell cautiously peered around the edge of the door frame. There was another hallway here, of the same stone as the lower level, but Dashell could smell the water easily now. He took a few steps down both branches of the hallway, sniffing the air in each. *It's stronger to the left, I think.* Sure enough, after only a few minutes of walking down the left-paw branch of the hallway, Dashell found the source of the water. The hallway widened into a large room. Moss and mold grew along the floor and the walls, and there, running through the center of the room, was a river.

From the look of things, the river had likely been here first, and the hallways and rooms had been built around it. It entered the room through a tunnel in the right-paw wall, ran across the room in a twenty-foot-wide stream, and exited the room through another tunnel in the left-paw wall. A five-foot wide walkway followed the course of the river down each of the two tunnels.

Smiling in relief, Dashell staggered, exhausted, over to the river. Cupping his paws, he dipped them into the river and took a drink. He spit the first mouthful back out the instant he tasted it. *Bleah! That's horrible! Tastes like... like...* He paused for a moment and then sighed. *Like the well-water at grandma's place only with a higher iron content. Tastes nasty, but at least it's drinkable.* Screwing his mouth into an expression of distaste, he rested near the river and drank his fill of the mineral-rich water. Having drank his fill, he collapsed, utterly exhausted, into one of the room's corners, his breath rasping like a set of split bellows.

After what seemed like an eternity but was only - according to his wristwatch, anyhow - about half an hour or so, Dashell finally began to relax a bit. Glancing

around, he began to survey his options. *Which way do I go now?* He looked around the room, and settled on the river's exit tunnel. *Water flows downhill, right? So with any luck, if I follow the river, it'll take me outside. I hope.*

Continuing to ponder his situation, he absently reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a cigarette from the half-crushed pack he always kept there. *This is not my idea of a summer vacation. At least I got away from that creature.* Carefully, he held the cigarette to his dying torch to light it, and leaned back to calmly smoke it as he tried to decide where to go next. As he neared the end of his cigarette, he noticed the smoke from it was wafting away down the left-paw tunnel.

*That cinches it. If the smoke's going that way then there's probably an opening, drawing the air down the passage like a chimney,* he thought. Slowly, he got to his feet and began to walk off down the left-paw tunnel, pausing only long enough to light the other torch he was carrying. The path along the river was slippery with moss and little droplets of water rained down from the ceiling in some places, but as he continued walking the air began to get noticeably fresher.

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"This looks like a good place," Pflarrian said softly as he glanced around.

The gaunt, red-haired human who stood before the door to a secluded area of the dungeon complex gave a tired sigh and wiped a linen-clad arm across his sweating forehead. Lifting his left hand to his head, he took off a battered, broad-rimmed, leather hat, revealing a pair of vulpine ears atop his otherwise human head. With a resigned sigh, Pflarrian knelt on the stone floor, making sure not to kneel atop the long bushy fox's tail that extended from his rear.

Reaching into the satchel sitting on the stone floor next to him, he withdrew a small wooden case. Opening it up, he examined the contents and then selected a long, thin stick of what appeared to be pure silver. After looking at it for a moment, he slipped one hand into the right-hand hip pocket of his khaki trousers and pulled out a small Swiss army knife. Unfolding a short blade, he carved a point onto the silver stick, cleaned the residue off of the blade, and returned the jackknife to his pocket.

The long, vulpine tail began to wave and a smile crossed the human's lips as he scrutinized the point he'd carved. *Heh,* he thought to himself. *Silver-wax crayons with real powdered silver for creating spell-runes. Sure beats messing around with trying to glue powdered silver to things. Less wasteful, too, and they work on most surfaces, right-side-up or upside-down, wet or dry. I have to hand it to Scrib, he had a good idea here. My instructors at the Academy all thought I was wasting my time making these. I wonder if they still think that now?*

Brushing dust and dirt away from one of the larger stones on the floor in front of him, the human began to draw on the floor in wide, sweeping motions. The silver crayon left a thin line of shining wax behind it. After only a few moments of drawing, the completed spell-rune lay upon the floor. The human returned the crayon to the small sandalwood box he kept them in and put the box back into his satchel. Slowly he got to his feet, again taking special care not to accidentally step on the tail, and brushed off his trousers. Claspings his hands together, he calmly proceeded to crack his knuckles and then rotated his wrists oddly, as if testing to be sure that they worked.

“Now to empower the spell-rune,” he said. He cleared his throat and closed his eyes, concentrating. “*Rune of silver here you lie, to trap my foes when you they spy. When touch triggers, mist you weep, to place my foes in silent sleep.*” As the odd rhymes floated from his mouth the silver mark on the floor, already shimmering in the light of a nearby lantern, began to glow faintly with its own soft light. Satisfied, the human lowered his arms and picked up his satchel, slinging it over his left shoulder.

“There. Now anything other than me that approaches the door will trigger the rune and fall asleep. I’ll set a second rune next to it to let me know when it’s been triggered, and we’re all set.” Smiling to himself, he set the second rune on the door itself before opening the door and heading back to the room that was his temporary home away from home. “I wonder if there’s any tea left?”

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Dashell swore as he slipped on a patch of moss and fell against the tunnel wall. Righting himself, he glanced at his torch and gave a groan of dread. *I had better hurry up - the torch’s almost burned down, and I don’t want to try walking through these tunnels blind.* Lurching to his feet, he staggered down the tunnel towards what he hoped was an exit. The water dripping from the ceiling soaked his shirt and his fur, chilling him to the bone. The tunnel seemed to continue onwards for miles.

About half an hour later, the torch finally died. Left in darkness, Dashell gave a slight whimper of fear as he tossed the torch in the direction of the river. Instead of the watery plop he’d expected, the spent torch landed with a wooden thud against something. *Hmmmm?* Carefully, Dashell dropped to his knees and felt his way towards where he’d thrown the torch. *What’s this?* Feeling outwards with one paw, his fingers found his spent torch - and what seemed to be a wooden plank. As he felt along the plank with his paws, realization dawned. *A bridge? There’s a bridge here? I didn’t see anything before the torch went out,* he thought. *But then, I was paying more attention to my feet and the torch than to my surroundings.* Dashell paused for a moment, and then noticed a faint glow coming from across the river. *I wonder what*

*that is? Light, maybe?* Hoping that it was, indeed, light, Dashell carefully crawled across the bridge, using his paws to guide his way.

Eventually, his fingers met the stone on the other side of the river. Looking up, Dashell saw that the source of the light lay mere feet in front of him. *A scribble?* He slowly crawled towards it, confused. As he neared it, he reached out a paw to poke it. As he did so, a faint pinkish mist suddenly swirled out of the glowing mark on the floor, tinting Dashell's limited vision and engulfing him.

*What on earth?!? Smells weird... Ooooooo.... I feel dizzy.....*

With a faint cry of despair, Dashell slumped to the floor.

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Pflarrian suddenly looked up from the lukewarm cup of tea he'd poured from a battered metal thermos. Calmly, he set his cup down on the table before him and stood. *Something's triggered the sleep-rune already? That was quick. I'd better go see what I've caught.*

He turned away from the table and walked down the hallway to the main door, pausing only to grab a lantern. Setting the lantern down on the floor before the door, he drew a rather plain-looking saber from its worn leather sheath and carefully unbarred and opened the door, gazing out upon his captive.

“Oh, crud...”

Sheathing the sword, he bent down to examine his captive, a worried look slowly spreading across his features. Confused thoughts began filtering through his mind as he knelt down. *A canid? That's certainly not what I expected. I figured I'd get an orc or one of the Mogref's weird creatures or something, and I know there aren't any canids native to this dimension. He looks like he's injured, too.*

Carefully, trying hard not to cause further damage, he began to probe the canid's wounds. *Hmm... This is not good... None of these injuries are bad by themselves, but there's a lot of them. He looks like he's been running for his life. I wonder if it's okay to move him?*

The human muttered something under his breath and stared intently at the canid for a time, his eyes taking on an odd bluish glow. After a minute or so, he turned his head away, blinking furiously. *Ouch. Danged spell is hard on the eyes, but at least it verified my own diagnosis. There's no internal bleeding or anything, so I can take him somewhere safe.*

The human scooped up the lantern and jogged quickly back to where he'd left his cup. In one swift motion, he poured the rest of his tea out onto the floor and stuffed the cup in a pocket of his worn doublet before returning to the canid. When he got there, he pulled an odd-looking device from another one of his multitude of pockets and held it near the lantern. After making a few quick adjustments to the device, the human pressed a small switch recessed into the side of the device. A split second later, a small glowing point of light appeared in mid-air about a foot from the device. The human tucked the odd device back into his pocket as the point of light expanded to become a glowing green disc, about five feet across, its bottom resting on the stone floor.

Making sure everything was secured; the human slowly lifted the canid up off of the stone floor, grunting with the effort. *Oof... He's a heavy one, isn't he?* Wincing as he did so, the human half-carried, half-dragged the canid into the glowing disc. A few seconds later, the disc winked out of sight. The only thing left in the room was the lantern, sitting forgotten on the stone floor as it slowly ran out of fuel.

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Xolotl swore softly as the scrying pool went dark. He'd been watching the proceedings calmly, knowing that a special magical charm he'd placed on Dashell was working correctly. The serendipity charm, as it was called, was a subtle but very powerful magical spell known to a select few. The charm had only one direct result: to increase the likelihood of beneficial events. The unlocked cell door, the water, even this chance encounter were, indirectly, the results of that charm.

But now something had gone wrong. Xolotl waved a paw over the scrying pool, trying in vain to bring the image back, but nothing worked. Finally, in a fit of irritation, he gave the scrying pool a solid kick in the hopes that it would fix the reception.

Unfortunately, the scrying pool was not a television, and it was a LOT more solid than it looked. Yelping in pain, Xolotl stumbled backwards and landed on the threadbare carpet with a soft whump. The scrying pool remained dark. Slowly Xolotl regained his feet, and wincing from the mild pain that now filled his right foot, began to pace around the marble pool, trying to figure out why the pool had failed.

*Let me see... The scrying pool went dark the instant Dashell went through the portal, which means... Xolotl stopped his pacing and smacked the palm of his paw into his forehead. It means that the portal leads to a place that has really powerful anti-scrying wards. I won't be able to scry his location until they leave that place. Or I could try to break through the wards, I suppose, but that'll probably be more work*

*than it's worth. No, I think I will just have to wait until they leave whatever dimension they've gone to.*

Solemnly, he gazed into the imageless pool for a moment then finally dismissed the scrying spells, allowing the water to clear once more. *But, he concluded, one thing is certain. Tomorrow morning, I had better go tell Taynith what has happened to her grandson...*

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*[World of Tayrik (The Island of Mirial's Rock);*

*A few seconds later.]*

The other side of the glowing disc opened up into a sort of courtyard, surrounded by a number of grey stone buildings. As the human stepped through, he was met by a female jaguar who had come running when the portal opened.

"Pflarrian! You are back early! Is everything all right?" Then, her eyes fell on the canid. "What in the...?"

"He triggered one of my sleep-runes. I haven't a clue as to where he came from, but I don't think he's native to the Moghref's dimension. Plus he's hurt and may need a healer. Help me carry him to my place - we'll put him in the spare room."

With both of them carrying the canid, they made much better time crossing the courtyard to one of the smaller buildings. As they approached, the door swung open and a tall, stocky human cast both of them a quizzical look. "Well, this is unexpected."

Pflarrian scowled and motioned with his head for the other human to move. "I'm happy to see you too, Scrib. Now, if you don't mind, could you give us a paw here?"

Scribonius scowled and stepped aside, holding the door open for them. "Ouch, he doesn't look so good," he said, looking at the canine as they passed. "You want me to run and get the healer?"

"Might be a good idea," Marani replied as they carried the wolf into a small room off to the right of the entryway and lay him down on the bed that filled much of the room. Gasping from the effort of carrying the canid, the jaguaress gave Pflarrian a curious look. "So, what now?"

"Now?" Pflarrian paused in thought, pondering the question. "To be perfectly honest, Marani, I'm not sure." He turned to the taller human standing in the doorway.

“Scrib? See if either Arilynn or Eremus are available. They know me and I can trust them to be discreet if the need arises.” Scrib nodded and turned to leave, grabbing a cane from the umbrella stand next to the door before limping off. Pflarrian turned back to the canine, then shook his head. “Other than that, I think I’m going to wait until he wakes up, and then apologize profusely for enspelling him. In the meantime, I think we let him sleep. He looks like he needs it.”

Marani backed out of the small room, nodding. “Good idea. Um, you mind if I raid your pantry while we wait?”

Pflarrian shrugged and reached up a tired arm to pull off his hat, which he tossed onto an overstuffed chair - the only other piece of furniture in the room. “Might as well. You’re not going to find much though unless Scrib or Oeshar have something tucked away.” As Marani slipped away to the pantry, he walked over to the unconscious canid, and set a calm hand on his shoulder.

Dashell felt horrible. He had felt himself being dragged somewhere, but something kept him from moving his body, focusing his eyes, or speaking. He’d felt himself being lifted onto something softer than the floor, and then a face, made fuzzy by his failing vision, came into focus. The last words Dashell heard before he finally succumbed to unconsciousness were words that calmed the fear gnawing at his mind..

“I don’t know who you are, but don’t worry. You’re safe here.”

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*‘My own homeworld, like many others, was populated by a single ‘sentient’ species. Due to this, it is not surprising that many enterprising dimensional travelers suffer from what I call ‘species shock’ during their first forays into unknown dimensions. The countless dimensions that exist are likewise home to countless different ‘sentient’ species, or ‘races’ as some call them, and most of these races have some knowledge of dimensional travel. Prior to my first dimensional journey, I had long suspected that the various creatures of myth and legend from my own world had simply chosen to go elsewhere. As near as I can tell, this is for the most part a good theory. I know for a fact that the beings my own people call ‘elves’ actually do live in other dimensions and occasionally have visited my home dimension. Likewise, ‘dwarves,’ ‘gnomes,’ and many other ‘mythological’ races really do exist in other dimensions.*

*Keeping this in mind, try not to be too surprised by what you meet, and never assume that the natives of a given dimension are friendly, even if they look familiar to a race you know...*

*...oh, and above all, when in a strange dimension, always BOIL THE WATER before you drink it!*

*- from A Study of Dimensions, by Pflarrian Collifox*

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*[World of Tayrik (Mirial's Rock);*

*Universal Calendar 05/08/11999 (About 6 pm Saturday evening)]*

Ten minutes passed while Pflarrian waited for Scribonius to return with a healer. He was about to go look for one himself when he heard the outer door of the house open and two pairs of footsteps approached the guest room. Scrib stepped through the doorway behind a balding human wearing utilitarian clothes of a pale grey color. Thin to the point of gauntness, the grey-clad human cast an odd look to the figure lying upon the bed before speaking.

“Hello, Pflarrian. Brought us another one of the Moghref’s castaways, I see.” A wry but genuine smile came over the aged healer’s features.

Pflarrian respectfully nodded to the older man, who continued. “I must admit I was worried when Scribonius here,” he began, motioning towards the taller human behind him, “burst into the infirmary and told me you needed a healer urgently. None of us expected you back until the day after tomorrow.”

Pflarrian gestured to the canid lying on the bed. “Given the circumstances, I decided that a sudden return would be a good idea. Thank you for coming so quickly, Eremus.”

Eremus waved the thanks away with a brief gesture. “Not a problem, Pflarr. It’s been rather quiet around here lately and I was actually considering calling it a day when Scrib showed up.”

“Well, thank you anyway, Eremus.”

A soft chuckle came from the healer as he approached the bed to examine the unconscious canid. “You’re welcome, I assure you. Now, what can you tell me about the patient?”

Pflarrian sighed in frustration. “Not much, I’m afraid. I was settling down to eat dinner when he triggered one of my sleep-runes. Paranoid as I am, I like to set wards up so nothing can sneak up on me.”

“Hmnh.” Eremus shook his head sadly as he spoke. “I’ve told you this time and time again. No matter what some of the others think, you’re not being paranoid when you do that, merely cautious.”

“I know, but try telling that to Johnathon or some of the younger students. Anyhow, I think he caught the full blast of the spell. If he did, he’ll have one heck of a headache when he wakes up and he’ll probably feel like throwing up. Otherwise, he was like this when I found him.”

With a soft frown, Eremus began to inspect the canid’s wounds, then glanced at Pflarrian for a moment, “No clue as to where he’s from?” A quick shake of Pflarrian’s head confirmed Eremus’ suspicions. “Another poor soul that the Moghref pulled into his domain to ‘experiment’ on, then,” he said, his frown deepening in distaste.

“That’s what I’d figured. I don’t think there are any canids native to the Moghref’s domain.”

Eremus nodded curtly, and then began fumbling with the canid’s shirt buttons. “Help me get him undressed so I can clean his wounds, please, and Scribonius?”

He glanced up from the canid as Eremus spoke. “Yes?”

“Could you please boil some water for me? I’m going to have to clean his wounds, so I’ll need some hot water.”

Scribonius nodded and slipped out of the room towards the house’s small kitchen.

Eremus continued his examination. Every now and then a quiet ‘hmm’, or some other exclamation of professional interest escaped his thin lips. Finally, he straightened up and moved over to the room’s only chair to wait for someone to bring the hot water. Thoughtfully, he contemplated the patient, and then turned to Pflarrian. “I assume you used that wound-checker spell I taught you before trying to move him?”

“Of course, Eremus. I wouldn’t have moved him unless I had some sort of reassurance that it wouldn’t injure him further.”

“Very good. It’s heartening to know that someone around here actually listens to what I say.” The elder human leaned back in the chair to wait. A few minutes later, the jaguaress Marani stepped into the bedroom holding a heavy brass teakettle by its worn wooden handle.

“Scribonius told me you needed this, Eremus.” With graceful caution she placed a chipped, grey stoneware plate on the bed-table and then set the kettle down upon the plate.

“Ah. Thank you, Marani.” Turning to the small bag he had brought with him, Eremus pulled out several rolls of clean linen and a small pouch. Pouring some of the water into a ceramic bowl, he stirred the contents of the pouch into the water and let it steep. Then he reached back into his bag and pulled out a small metal hip-flask.

Marani watched curiously as Eremus began to clean the canid’s wounds, first with strips of linen soaked in the herb-filled water, and then with fresh strips soaked liberally with the contents of the hip-flask. Curious at the smell coming from the flask, she asked Eremus what it contained.

“Liquor.”

“Oh.” She thought for a moment longer. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

Eremus shook his head. “Well, yes and no, actually. I need to sanitize his wounds,”

“What does san-ih-tiize mean?” Marani asked, interrupting him.

“It means that I need to prevent the wound from going bad. Sanitizing a wound prevents the person from getting wound-fever.”

“Ah. Continue, please.”

“As I was saying, while it will sting a bit when I clean the wounds out, doing so will prevent wound-fever, thus preventing further illness and possibly making him heal faster as well. For deeper cuts I use something known as powder-of-mold.” Eremus chuckled briefly. “Besides,” he added, “being unconscious, he probably won’t feel much of the sting anyhow. Better to do this now than when he wakes up.”

“Ah. That makes sense now. The elders back home knew to use alcohol for that purpose, but were not very good at explaining why they did so.” Marani watched him work for a while longer and then shook her head. “If you do not need anything else right now, I think I will head home. Is this all right?”

“Certainly, Marani,” he replied. “Thank you for your help.”

Inwardly, Eremus smiled as he listened to her pad softly from the room, then frowned suddenly. *Hmm? The pad’s dirty already? I’ve only cleaned two cuts out with it...* Confused, he glanced over his shoulder towards Pflarrian.

“Pflarr?”

“Yes, Eremus?”

“Can you think of any reason why the liquor would cause the cloth to stain like this so quickly?”

Taking the piece of stained linen from Eremus’ upraised hand and bringing it to his nose, Pflarrian took a tentative sniff. *Hmmm... It smells like the liquor, but there’s something else there too. I wonder...*

Calmly Pflarrian cut another piece of clean linen from the roll, dampened it with the liquor, and re-cleaned the first cut with it as Eremus watched. Then he took a close look at the cloth. *It’s turned grey already!* Setting the cloth down on the edge of the cot, he calmly examined the fur around the cut. *That’s interesting... I’m sure his fur was a uniform dark grey when we started, but this area’s getting lighter as I clean it...*

“Oh! Duh.” Pflarrian smacked one palm lightly against his forehead as realization set in. “Fur dye, Eremus. That’s what it is. Alcohol-soluble too, which is why it’s coming off onto the cleaning cloths. He must have some lighter patches and he wanted them to blend in with the rest for some reason.”

Wincing as he stood, Pflarrian moved out of the way as Eremus returned to his work. *Vanity, thy name is furdom.* An odd feeling in Pflarrian’s gut distracted him for a moment. *Uh-oh, more stomach problems? Hmm... Actually, now that I think of it, it’s long past dinner time and I haven’t eaten yet. Better fix that problem.* “Eremus? I’m going to go get some dinner. Do you want me to bring you something?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay. Let me see if either Oeshar or Scrib want anything, then I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Eremus concentrated on the cuts. By the time Pflarrian returned with two bowls of stew and a loaf of warm bread from the hostel down the way, Eremus was just about done. Eremus finished up his work, and then helped himself to a bowlful of stew and half the loaf of bread. Then he calmly recited a short list of instructions to Pflarrian.

“If you keep the wounds clean, he should be fine in a few days. When he wakes up, try to get him to take a hot bath. I don’t need to tell you to make sure he gets fed, I should think.”

“Of course, and thank you again for coming so soon, Eremus.”

Eremus nodded calmly as he headed towards the door, but paused in the entryway. “One last thing, Pflarr. Be careful. You don’t know how he’s going to react when he comes to, and I’d rather not have to treat you as well.”

“Yes, Eremus.”

Pflarrian watched Eremus head for home and then shut and secured the heavy oaken door. *He'll be out until dawn, at least, but I think I had better keep watch over him just to be safe. No telling how he'll react to waking up in a strange bed.* With those thoughts in his mind, Pflarrian softly climbed the stairs to his room on the second floor and came back down a few minutes later carrying a wire-bound notebook, and several thick, leather-bound books. These he set down on the bed-table before he returned to the kitchen long enough to make another thermos of tea.

Pouring a fresh cup from the thermos, Pflarrian selected a book from the stack and settled down to wait.

Waiting, however, was not one of Pflarrian's strong suits. His quick mind, coupled with a short attention span, tended to result in eventual boredom unless he had a strong interest in doing something at a given time. The net result of this was that after three hours of reading and taking notes from the selection of books set on the bed-table, Pflarrian was more than bored enough to set the books aside and look for something else to do.

As his mind pondered other tasks at hand, his eyes wandered the room, looking for anything that either needed fixing or could serve as a distraction.

Then, suddenly, his eyes fell upon the canid's clothing, neatly folded and draped over the bed's footboard. Something about the clothing nagged at the back of Pflarrian's mind, but he couldn't figure out what, until suddenly, it hit him.

Bolting from the chair, Pflarrian crossed the short space to the foot of the bed in a flash and dug the canid's wallet from the pocket of his neatly folded jeans. He opened it up and began to chuckle softly to himself.

"Dumb, dumb, dumb. You're being foolish again, self." Carefully, he pulled a thin piece of plastic from the canid's wallet and returned the wallet to the pocket. He continued to berate himself softly as he returned to his seat, where he examined the thin plastic card.

*I wonder why it never occurred to me that he might have one of these?* Held between the first two fingers of Pflarrian's right hand was the canid's Driver's License. While a rather poor photograph graced the card, it still resembled the canid lying on the bed. According to the card, he went by the name of Dashell Grauvolf. *Ah, Pflarrian thought. At least now I know his name. Hmmm... Grauvolf... Where have I heard that name before?*

Ten minutes passed as he pondered that question. *Maybe Scrib has an idea, I'll go ask him.*

Slipping from the room, Pflarrian made his way to the dorm's small kitchen area, where Scribonius sat, reading by spell-light as he tended to a pot of, well, *something* that simmered atop the wood-burning stove. "Hey Scrib, dumb question for you."

“Dumb answer right back at you,” Scribonius replied, setting his book down carefully on the table. Turning away from the foxed human, he pulled the spoon out of the pot on the stove, sniffed it, then took a ladle from a hook attached to the table and dipped it into the pot.

“Um, what’cha making?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” the stocky human said with a smirk as he tasted the contents of the ladle, then made a face. “Too bitter still. Could you pour about half the contents of that jar into the pot, please?” he said, gesturing with the ladle to a chipped ceramic jar that looked to be about half full of somewhat over-ripe looking raspberries. Pflarrian picked up the jar, poured a little over half of them into the pot, then sniffed the air around the kettle.

“What is this, some kind of jam?”

Scribonius licked a finger on his free hand and made a short vertical motion in the air, as if marking a score on an imaginary chalkboard. “Point to you. Ship came into the dockyards this morning with a bunch of lemons and other citrus fruits from the Felinid Empire. I bought some of the damaged ones for cheap. They’re a little more tart than I like, but that’s nothing a little extra sugar won’t solve.”

“Ah. Did you ever get that term paper done?”

Scribonius gave him a sour look. “No,” he drawled out in a sarcastic tone, “I let it lapse and have to take the class over again.” He took a couple of other jars off of the table, including several minced bits of plant and one jar that looked suspiciously like brown sugar, sprinkled tiny amounts of the former in and dumped most of the contents of the latter into the pot, then returned to stirring the pot. “I turned in that paper three days ago. You *were* gone half a week, you know. Might not feel that way from *your* perspective, but it was four days from *our* perspective. You should really put a chapter on relative time-passage into that book you’re working on.”

“It isn’t that time didn’t pass, it’s that I was *underground* the entire time and didn’t really have much of a time-reference to use as a guide.”

“Same idea, regardless. What did you want, exactly? I’m sure you didn’t come in here just to quiz me on the contents of my little cauldron here.”

“Oh,” Pflarrian said, trying to stop the gears in his mind to return them to his earlier thoughts. “Our guest.”

“What about him?”

“He’s got a Driver’s License.”

“Lovely. He’s from a modernish society then. No big surprise there. I figured that out from the bluejeans and tee shirt,” Scribonius said calmly.

“Um, right, according to his D.L., his last name is Grauvolf. Does that sound familiar to you?”

Scribonius blinked and had to scramble to keep from losing his spoon into the pot. “Grauvolf? Hell yes, it’s familiar. Taynith Grauvolf has been the Dean of the College of History for five years now! I’m surprised you don’t know that!”

“I’m studying Transportative Spells in the College of Magical Theory. I set foot in the College of Knowledge as seldom as possible, for reasons I would rather not go into. What I do *not* know about the faculty of this Academy would fill a *very* large book. I knew the name sounded familiar, but couldn’t place it anywhere specific,” Pflarrian admitted, a flush coming over his face.

“Which is ironic, since I know for a fact that you’ve *met* Dean Taynith at *least* once, when she stopped by for lunch that one time. She called you, um, what was it, ‘Fay-larr-yan?’ Something like that, anyway.”

“Oh. Well anyway, do you think she’s related to this Dashell person?”

“Dashell?”

“That’s his name, according to his D.L.: Dashell Grauvolf.”

Scribonius paused his stirring for a bit to think. “Um... I don’t know. Have to admit, the subject of family never really came up during our chats. We usually discussed regional history of *this* world, not her own personal life. I think the main reason she stops by at all is she knows that I’m from a world similar to her own, and I don’t give her a blank look of confusion when she uses words like ‘computer,’ and ‘television.’ If she *is* related to him though, you may want to check him for any magical charms or weird guidance spells. That’s much too much of a coincidence to be likely.”

“Serendipity Charm?”

“Or something similar, like a ‘Benevolent Guidance’ Spirit or Talisman of Lucky Coincidences.”

“Ah, good point. So, any chance you could find out if she is?”

He thought, then shrugged. “She’ll be asleep right now, unless she’s taken up star-watching with one of the Astronomy profs again, but if you can keep stirring this for me, I could run a letter to her mailbox, I suppose.”

“That would work. Let me grab some paper, quick-like.” Quietly, he returned to the room where Dashell lay unconscious and pulled a page from the notebook on the bed-table. He paused just long enough to do a quick magical-scan of the patient, before scribbling a quick letter. Frowning, he went back to the kitchen and handed it to Scribonius, who in turn handed him the spoon. ”Yeah, he’s got some kind of

Charm or something on him, all right. I'd have to do some serious Divinations to find out for sure, but I'm guessing Serendipity Charm. There's a *lot* of power behind it, though, and that worries me a little. To be blunt, I'm really surprised I hadn't noticed it before."

"*That* powerful? Well, nothing we can do about it right now. Let me run that to Dean Taynith's mailbox, and you worry about my little concoction there. Stir it slowly. You don't have to whip the stuff, just keep it from burning." Scribonius paused just long enough to grab a cloak that hung from a peg next to the dorm's back door before giving Pflarrian a nod. "I'll be back in about twenty minutes."

Pflarrian returned the nod and began to slowly stir the pot, taking a sniff of the contents every now and then. "Wow, that'll clean your sinuses," he muttered to himself. *Well, I guess we'll have to see what happens. She won't get the letter until sometime tomorrow, but if I'm lucky, she knows this sleeping wolf and can help him get home...*

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*[Same location, 7:35 am, Sunday morning]*

Time passed.

Pain filled Dashell's head again, but much more muted than the last time. Blinking at the soft light that filled the room, he opened his eyes.

"Mmmmmm..."

Pflarrian looked up from the book he was reading and glanced over to the canid lying on the bed.

"Oooooo..."

Slowly he set his book down, grabbed a pail off the floor next to him and stepped across the room to stand next to the bed.

"Finally waking up, are you?"

Dashell slowly turned his gaze to the figure standing over him, and took a look at Pflarrian. He took in the mostly furless head, the large vulpine ears, the oddly-shaped hairless paws, and the steel-blue eyes, all on a gaunt frame that stood almost six feet tall. Gasping in shock and terror, he tried to sit up.

“Who in the he-ellllllp,” was all Dashell managed to say before nausea overcame him.

Surprised, Pflarrian could only stammer out a scattered response. “What in the... wait - you don’t want to do... oh, crud.” Somehow Pflarrian managed to shove the tin bucket under his patient’s head just as Dashell was overcome by his nausea and vomited.

Pflarrian sighed, handing Dashell a large mug full of water from the pitcher he’d prepared a few hours beforehand as Dashell finished throwing up into the bucket.

“Here, rinse the taste out with this. As I was going to say, don’t try to sit up just yet. You’ve been under the effects of a powerful sleeping spell and you’ll feel sick for the next hour or so.

Dashell rinsed his mouth, and spit into the bucket. Lifting his head from the bucket, he whined a bit as he looked at Pflarrian. “Who...? What...?”

“I think that leaves out ‘where,’ ‘why,’ and ‘when.’” Pflarrian arched one eyebrow, confused. Then he suddenly understood. “Oh. I see.”

“W-what?”

Pflarrian nodded solemnly. “Yes, that’s got to be it. You’re from a world that doesn’t have my kind. That’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

Dashell nodded frantically, staring at the strange being in front of him. “Wh-what *are* you, some kind of elf?”

Pflarrian chuckled softly. “No, elves have a much thinner build, and while their ears are pointy like mine, theirs tend to be much longer and furless. Also, elves don’t have earlobes.”

“But... Huh?” Dashell, now utterly confused, could only stare.

“I’m a human. Well, sort of. My name’s Pflarrian.” He smiled and extended his hand.

Stunned, Dashell gave the hand a tentative shake. “Um... Dashell... I’m Dashell...”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Y-you’re human?”

“Yep.”

“B-but, humans are just creatures out of myths. I mean, they don’t really exist, and...”

Pflarrian smiled in wry amusement, his bushy vulpine tail waving back and forth behind him. “They don’t? Hmm... That could be a problem then, couldn’t it? Because I’m fairly certain that I exist, which puts some holes in your theory, doesn’t it?”

Calming down a bit, Dashell paused to think and then gave a snort of amusement. “Yeah, I guess it does...”

“Yep.”

“Only,” Dashell began.

“Yes?”

“Two questions. First off, all of our myths said that humans didn’t have tails, and then there’s your ears...”

“Yeah, they are kind of noticeable, aren’t they?” Pflarrian chuckled and sat down on the bed next to Dashell, pulling his long vulpine tail around to his lap so he wouldn’t sit on it. “I wasn’t born with either the tail or the ears, if that’s what you wanted to know.”

“Oh?”

“Nope. You see these?” Pflarrian rolled up his sleeves to show Dashell a pair of wristbands, some six inches long, made from some sort of golden metal and decorated with pictures of various canine beings.

“Ah-hah.”

“Well, they’re magical. More to the point, they’re *really* magical. Better than most such things, but not quite on the level with, say, Excalibur or something...”

“But,”

“...and if you haven’t figured out that magic works reasonably well in this dimension then you’ve got a big surprise coming. Anyhow, they allow me to do certain things, but there’s a price. If I try doing anything really major with them they exact that price - by gradually transforming me into a fox.”

Dashell just stared at Pflarrian for a moment. “Really?”

“Yes. It’s not fun, either. Let me tell you, growing an entire tail overnight *hurts*. Plus there’s my not being used to having the tail, even after half a year.” Pflarrian sighed. “I keep catching it in doors or sitting on it.”

Dashell smiled.

“So anyhow, what’s your second question?”

Dashell chewed his lip for a moment before continuing. “Where are we? This doesn’t look anything like those tunnels I was in before.”

“I should hope not. Currently, you are in a spare bedroom of the student dormitory house I share with three other students at the Mirial’s Rock Academy of Spellcraft and Learning on the Isle of Mirial’s Rock, in a dimension-world known as Tayrik.”

“Ah-what?”

A soft chuckle escaped Pflarrian. “You’re someplace far away from those tunnels I found you in. Does that help?”

Dashell nodded vigorously.

“Good. My question, now. What were you doing in those tunnels in the first place? How did you come to be there?”

Dashell shuddered as he recalled the horrid creature. “This... *thing* claimed to have brought me there. It looked kind of like you, but thinner, paler, and much nastier. I thought you were it when I first woke up.”

“Ah. That was probably the Moghref...”

“The Moghref? Is that the name of that thing?”

“That’s what most people call him. The Moghref. His real name is Aluciar or something similar. He may or may not have been human once, but he certainly isn’t now. He’s the wizardly equivalent of a mad scientist with genetic tinkering capabilities.”

“Oh.”

“Not a nice person. Rumor has it he’s totally out of his gourd, and from what I’ve seen during my brief stays in his domain, I’m not going to argue against it.”

“Um... He’s not likely to try coming after me here, is he?”

“Probably not. Mirial’s Rock has enough magical firepower to put a severe crimp in his hair if he tries anything. That and we’re in another dimension. He doesn’t really leave his own domain that often.”

Gasping in relief, Dashell sagged back against the wall. “Thank God. I don’t suppose you can help me get home from here?”

“Ah. Good question.” *That all depends on Dean Taynith, I think...* Pflarrian got a blank look on his face as he contemplated an answer. After he thought for a few minutes, he finally sighed. “Unfortunately, I need to do a bit of research to be able to answer it.”

“That I can’t help you with.”

Pflarrian turned and gave Dashell a half-smile. “Actually, ‘o monochromatic one, I think you can.”

“Monochromatic...? What?” Dashell blinked in confusion until Pflarrian pointed at Dashell’s fur.

“Two-tone. Left side of face black, the other white, left side of neck white, the other side black, and so on.”

Dashell looked down at himself and swore. “Oh, no...”

Pflarrian chuckled softly. “Hate to say this, but the fur dye you used was alcohol soluble. Eremus, the healer I had brought in to tend to your injuries, used liquor - brandy, to be specific, though I would’ve used something else - to properly sanitize some of your wounds. The fur dye came out when he used it.”

Dashell shook his head, totally embarrassed. “Oh, no...”

“What? It’s not so bad.”

“But I look like a harlequin without the fur dye...”

Pflarrian shrugged his broad shoulders. “So? I think it looks neat. Besides - you may as well get used to it. While fur dye is available here, it isn’t exactly a cheap substance in this dimension.”

Dashell sighed. “I guess you’ve got a point. Anyway, how exactly do you think I can help you with that research?”

“Simple. All you have to do is tell me about your homeworld, and then I’ll have a pretty good idea of where to start looking.”

“Oh. Well, my homeworld is called Earth,”

“You would be surprised at how many of them are.”

“Really? Weird. Anyhow, it’s called Earth, although I heard grandma Taynith call it ‘Furth’ once.”

A half-smile crossed Pflarrian’s lips as he heard that name. *Bingo! Has to be a Serendipity Charm. Chalk up one point for odd coincidence!*

Dashell smiled as he continued. “I miss her. She’s still alive, but she’s a college-level professor. She took a job at some foreign university a few years ago and I haven’t seen her since. She’s been letting me use her house while she’s away. I just finished my freshman year of college at St. Cloud State University. I’m working on a computer sciences major - no specific area of that yet, but I’d like to be able to combine it with my music hobbies.”

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Pflarrian nodded, rested his head in one hand, and settled down to listen.