

## **Lions Faction Packup Spring 2017**

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### **Editorial**

Hello all! In a shock move, I'm going to keep this one brief. Welcome to mains season 2017! It feels like it's been forever since we last got together to cause havoc, lick the plot, and do what we do best. I've been playing in the Lions since 2009, and I can honestly say that I have never been this excited for a new season of LARPing with you lot. We've had some pretty big changes over the last year, and I think that we're all ready to really build on the great ideas that have been brewing recently. The faction AGM was apparently a roaring success, and with the ideas that people have been having there, and on Facebook, and on the forums ([www.forums.lionsfaction.co.uk](http://www.forums.lionsfaction.co.uk)) I get the feeling that we're in for a very special year.

Don't believe me? Well, read on. You've all done a stonking job with submissions, and there's a lot to get through. Thank you to everyone who sent things in, and I hope you enjoy the read.

I had intended to do a kit supplemental with this packup, but I'm sorry to say that I ran out of time. It's not something that can be thrown together at the last minute, and to do so would be unhelpful at best. I'd like to ask that anybody with tutorials\*, tips, tricks and resources to send them to me at the usual address, and I'll do one up in time for GEF. And not just for kit. One of the big plans for the faction as a whole is to make a big group effort to up our visual game - we're all about the set dressing, and ways to make the Lions camp look badass and properly Lantian. If you don't make clothes, but do know how to whip up other IC things, we want to know about it.

\*bonus points if you're willing to take photos or send shonky drawings

Normally by this point in proceedings I'd have descended into nonsense, but I'm all out today. I'll just say that I can't wait to get back to the field with you all, and to get this year off to a gutstomping start.

Love,  
Noodle

### **Special Announcement**

Alex and Pete Fishdougall are proud to announce the birth of their second son. Casper Matthew Fishdougall was born on the 21st of April 2017 at home in the New Forest. Alex will be back with you at Fey Fables 2 and the Summer Moot. We're looking forward to introducing him to you all and will hopefully see you at the gathering.

### **New Players**

We're looking forward to see some new faces around the camp this year. If you are new, and find yourself a bit lost, confused or overwhelmed, don't worry! We've all been there, and know what it's like. There is a field-wide newbie support group called The Sanctum (also on Facebook at: ). If you're new in camp and not sure where to get started, come find Hayden (also known as H) or

Noodle (also known as Noodle) and if we're in camp we'll be happy to help. Even if we're not, the faction as a whole is a friendly, welcoming spot and you won't be short of people who can give you a few pointers. All you have to do is ask.

### **Shameless Event Plug**

Burn The World Productions, in conjunction with the Lions Faction, are hosting a sanctioned event this summer! 9th - 11th June 2017 @ The Grange in Coventry  
Player tickets - £40 right up to and including paying on the gate  
Meal tickets - £30 (menu TBC) Go to [www.burntheworld.co.uk](http://www.burntheworld.co.uk) for more information

**From the Plot Team:**

### **Character and Group Backgrounds**

We really need your character background. Everyone has one, and we can't get enough of your submissions, and love each and every time we receive one. Please send them (and group backgrounds) to [plot@lionsfaction.co.uk](mailto:plot@lionsfaction.co.uk). **However please mark on it if you don't want us to be inclusive with it in plot, a clear line of affirmation or a clear NO WAY.** We understand it's not everyone's game, but the act of writing it down and crafting can bring a lot of depth to your character personally, and sometimes might even bring to light aspects you hadn't even thought of.

Note: We will assume if there's no hint of a "no thanks on the plot hammer" in the document you send us we'll mark it as inclusive.

### **What can happen if you mark it as inclusive?**

Have you ever wondered what would happen if the past came back to haunt your character? If the fate of your character's brother was not what you thought? If a group of angry-looking Orcs came knocking on the gate, asking for you? Or a letter is found, stained in blood, with your name on the cover? Well, submit your background to Plot Team, or you'll never know!

### **New player?**

Awesome! Welcome to the Lions! We'll be happy to help you make sure that your character concept fits with the game-world in general, and the Lions in particular.

### **Research requests**

If you submit a research request to the LT please follow this up with an email to [plot@lionsfaction.co.uk](mailto:plot@lionsfaction.co.uk) with the details of the research so that we can ensure that you receive a timely and accurate response. If you are interested in *doing* research but are not sure how to get started, come talk to us, or to the Library, who issue the research paperwork.

Lions

## **Lions Plot Team Guidelines.**

What follows is a brief FAQ covering how the Lions faction plot team operates and how to get the most as a player from us as your plot team.

### **Will I get my plot on the field?**

We at the Lions plot team always aim to use personal plot and backgrounds if they are submitted, because we enjoy reading them as much as you enjoy writing them. They often help lay deeper foundations for existing plot lines or new ones. However we simply can't fit them all into the brief time we get on the field, so whether yours runs is a roll of the dice but we can promise we will try.

### **Is there downtime?**

Short answer: No.

However, with some exceptions, we won't tell you what your characters have been doing over the gaps between events. If you want to pad out your in-character discussion by saying you have been working in 'X tavern' or travelling to see 'Y character' for a non-plot related chat, we will not contradict you. We will not, though, tell you about plot that is going on, even if you live at the location of the plot, nor is it possible to talk to NPCs over a gap period, but you can send letters to them from the field and should get replies.

### **If I can't act what's the point emailing?**

Even if you can't act in the gap time we love hearing what you would like to be doing (not conducting troop movements or information gathering for example, as previously stated) such as whether you're becoming an alcoholic or just starting to gather rabbits in your house on Gallathrix.

Chances are these emails will be added to our 'just for information pile', but now and then there is a gem we can use and it can help with plot and or character progression.

### **What questions can I ask plot team?**

There are a lot of things that are unknown in terms of plot to the average player (or there were to me at least) so if you have a question sling us an email and we'll try to get back to you with an answer.

**No question is stupid.** [If computers could support it, this sentence would be in 12 foot letters of fire. Noodle.]

### **How long can I expect to wait for a plot reply?**

We try and get back to you as soon as we can but our plot team is made up of amazing volunteers that give their spare time to sorting what is sometimes a raging torrent of plot, so be please be patient. We always try and get it done as soon as we can but no true time scale can be given.

### **Backgrounds and background submission?**

Backgrounds are great to receive and give us a great starting point for some plotlines or how to interact with your character. They can take the form of a few descriptive paragraphs or pages of story, however we do ask that once a background is submitted that changes be kept to a minimum (we are not going to hate you if you make the odd change). If we decide to use that character 'Evil Uncle Bill' and then when he reaches the field we discover he's been written out in favour of 'Kind Aunt Margaret' it's a tad awkward.

**Update:**

We are revising how we store and work with character backgrounds, and would love if you could send in any previously submitted backgrounds to make this easier. Based on player feedback at the recent AGM, please be sure to specify whether you do or do not want your background to factor into plot.

**Plot requests. E.g. Evacuations etc?**

If you have made a request *in up-time* about for example evacuating your island because 'it's got ants' or some other perfectly valid reason pop a reminder to us on our plot email after the event (preferably soon afterward) to make sure its logged and we will get back to you. These tend to take one of the two following ways, either an email of what's happening or a brief at the next event. We may also run encounters to give the results.

**Players in Peril?**

If you are a player in peril, e.g. you transported to a battle zone or dangerous area at the end of an event or you live in area that has been invaded, just pop us an e-mail detailing this. We will either give you an emailed brief before your next event (we don't know your next event unless you warn us) or we will brief you in the field before you go IC in some manner.

If you have any other questions please ask – [plot@lionsfaction.co.uk](mailto:plot@lionsfaction.co.uk) or ask any of us in the field.

*Will McKeever*

**A Lions of Lantia production.**

**Contents by (in no particular order)**

Will McKeever

Brian Roberts

Elizabeth 'Killer' King

Niamh 'Noodle' Carey

Nick Fitzgerald

Gail Holliday

Gareth Marklew

Aoife O'Connor

Sarah Johnson

Rachel Prince

Darren Nellies

Matt Stockton

Tom 'White' Edwards

Pete Fishdougall

Mark Bateman

Sarah Wadelik

Johnny Fairchild

The ever-prolific Anonymous

**Tip of the season:**

Think you have enough socks?  
You can never have enough socks.

SOOOOCKS.



*- No Lion Stands Alone -*

Lions Faction Dispatches

Spring 1117

Compiled and Published in Camelot by the office of the Adjutant General of the  
Lions faction

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Writings intended for publication can be submitted to:  
The Office of the Adjutant General  
Publications Department  
Camelot  
Lantia  
([lionspackup@gmail.com](mailto:lionspackup@gmail.com))

#### *A Note from the Adjutant General's Office*

The office of the Adjutant General thanks all who contribute regularly to this publication.  
We would like to remind all readers that the invitation to contribute is open to all Lions, on  
any topic pertaining to the business of the faction, personal notices and obituaries, or material  
of a diverting or entertaining nature.

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Why do we never get to go on quiet holidays to the seaside? Why do we always seem to end up staying in a war zone? Does Erdreja hate us or something?

Curious

To whom it may concern,

Greetings! My name is *Isaiah Staines*. If my name seems familiar, that is because you had my brother executed in 1115 on the isle of *Ceryphus*. But that is neither here nor there. He was an idiot.

One thing that was good about him was his passion for zoology. To that end, I am undertaking a personal project to find, view, study and catalogue the indigenous wildlife of our beautiful jewelled islands.

So far, I have noted that there are certain species that exist on all the islands, depending on the climate, and certain species that seem to exclusively inhabit one particular island.

My work will be freely published to the *Lantian* peoples, both as what will hopefully be an interesting journal of our fauna, but also serve as a potentially lifesaving tool should they be faced by the more ferocious inhabitants of our wilds. I also intend for this to be a way to honour *Varen*, and, hopefully, drag our family's name out of the latrine he threw it into.

Yours in knowledge,

*Isaiah Staines*

## **Announcements**

### **Campaign Announcement**

*Fellow Lions,*

*Two weeks after the Great Erdrejan Fayre, we will be mustering a campaign in Lantia. I have been asked by the Seelie and Unseelie Princes of the Fey, and by Queen Elspeth, to lead this campaign as we seek to neutralise an ancient threat to the fey. We also aim to remove the false Darkendales, and to make progress on scouring the land of the bugs.*

*Make no mistake, this will be a tough fight. But we have several advantages. From the Lions, fresh research, talented scouts, effective healers, and sharp blades. The fey, and the Knights of the Accord, bring with them stopping power, ferocity and powerful magics. Our allies bring perspective from across the world, and more skills I cannot even begin to list. We can do great things in the time we will have. It would take too long to explain all here, but we will speak more at the moot and the Fayre, and make sure that all have a sound understanding of what we face.*

*Lyn*

*Lord Silver, Alpha Nightstalker*

*Knight Spinner of the Accord*

*Sirene of Indifference*

*Lions High Diplomat*

### ***The Lantian Central Library and Associated Museums annual statement:***

*The Draken Citadel - Azurlon*

*It has been many months since we have opened the doors once again, and daily new documents are reviewed and added to our extensive archive, all fully available to those who ask.*

*The History of the Lions is vast, spanning ages we have yet to investigate fully. Even the smallest documents are scrutinised by our dedicated students, for who knows what gems of information exist in the simplest forms.*

*So far our work has been concentrated on our existing documents, the vast collection of Lady Althea taking much of our time.*

*Installations and displays of Lantian items from times past and present are on display and talks can be arranged by our expert scholars, and are proving popular with budding historians of Lantia and indeed, Erdreja. Many reputed scholars from the surrounding lands have enjoyed hospitality and education here.*

*To the Lions of Lantia, we offer our services and are always looking for new areas to research, past or present, we have dedicated teams of field researchers always searching, always learning.*

**Professor Mikolai Scholdar.**

*The isles of Lantia have long had a group of priestesses who are known as the Sirene, each sharing a connection to a specific island in the chain, helping to maintain the balance of Lantia.*

*Then there are the Wardens. The Wardens are also a long standing part of the islands' history.*

*They exist to work with the Sirene and Circle Guardians in various ways and are an integral part of Lantia.*

*The islands themselves are attuned to specific aspects and gemstones. These aspects are;*

*Service, Balance, Assurance, Peace, Creation, Destruction, Indifference, War, Pain, Freedom, Fortune, Justice, Duty and Knowledge.*

*Each Island needs its own Warden and Sirene, whilst some of the islands are represented by both a Warden and Sirene, some are not and we are looking to the people of Lantia to join us in serving the Draken.*

*So if you have ever felt an affinity to an island or if you just wish to serve in a dedicated capacity then come and talk to the Wardens, talk to the Sirene and we can tell you more.*

*Ser Malcolm Krafter*

*Warden of Pardulon, Isle of Creation.*

### ***Wanted: Musiceers***

*If you can sing, play, perform in any way, we would welcome you around the campfire situated on the sandy bit at nights. Invite friends, allies anyone and everyone pertaining to the current laws and statutes of the Lions at the time of implementation.*

*Let song be heard around the light, and keep safe.*

*Adamu*

## Letters to the Faction

*To all Sirene, Wardens and anyone who is interested,*

*There will be a Sirene & Warden meeting at 6pm on the Saturday of the Spring Moot at the Command Tent (just outside of the weather is nice).*

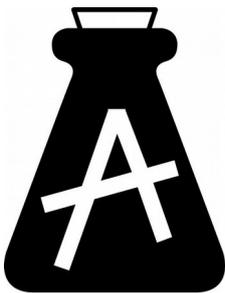
*Stay safe  
Cassy Ever'Ard  
Acting Deputy High Sirene  
Sirene of Orlagnon*

*Deer Lians of Lanta,*

*My friends say I am strange and am imaginin things and they are not something to talk about and keep quiet and it will go away but I think they are in trouble and we should help but dad says to shut up and mum thinks we should and they fight about it when they think I am sleeping but I keep lookin at the blue light in the mountains that reaches to the sky and its goin off and on off and on off and on sometimes wich it has never dun before but its real nice to look at in the nite*

*Thank you for keepin me and my sister and my mum and my dad safe even though he can be a bit shouty. I have made some models of the crowns wich I keep near my bed and say thank you to each nite. I keep the smiler one facing away becuse he scared me but he must scare the bad people more.*

*Timmee*



*Unique potion ingredient endangered.*

*Reports have come in of irrevocable damage being caused to regions where the Alchemists Guild collect some of their more rare ingredients.*

*Most notably on the Island of Ontarix, the Black Bullmoss grows only on the north facing stones around the Onyx Ritual Circle.*

*This unique environment appears to have been attacked and the majority of the moss has been scraped away and destroyed, leaving only a few small patches untouched.*

*Alchemist Guild guards have been sent to patrol the area, but it is vital that these raiders be identified and stopped so that the continuous supply of ingredients for production is not interrupted. Please can anyone with information contact Grandmaster Nik at the Alchemists Guild (BestGuild™).*

Lions,

If you are reading this either I've been declared dead or a Free Blade has been in my room and will be in a lot of trouble... Thorg!

I write to you to make my last wishes known in case I die alone while trying to fight the good fight.

This time I have gone off to clear my head. Its been a heck of a year with groups leaving and the faction being thrown into a state of chaos.

I have gone to do the only thing I know how to do well, protect those who need it. Now Gallathrix has no Warden I feel I need to do double the fighting for him as his Sirene.

This year I was heavily involved with the groups who decided to leave and I very nearly left myself. However, my choice to stay was strongly influenced by what Lenia taught me when I joined the faction. That being a Lion is about making the right choice, not the easy one.

I had disagreements with my group, but know that I never stopped looking out for you or caring for you.

My dying wish is to be planted on Gallathrix so I can remain connected to the Drakken and still be part of the Lions land.

Lions, remember, we are not good or evil. We are balance.

Abby

Knight of Lantia

Sirene of War

## *My fellow Lions,*

*As some of you know, the events relating to the Paragon during the past year have been difficult for me more than most. As a follower of Ancalime, an ancestor of the Unicorn pantheon, it has forced me to make some difficult decisions. I have spent a lot of time away from my faction, away from my clan and I was forced to face you all on the battlefield in the honour battle at the Gathering of Nations, to support my ancestor and to fight against you all whilst trying my best to avoid Lions and clan members in particular on the battlefield during this fight. It was not an easy time for me and I thank you all for your understanding on this.*

*The reason I write this letter to you all is regarding the final portion of the Gathering of Nations. After the honour battle was concluded and the decision was clear, I took a knee and begged the crown and the faction to support me and the Unicorns to help in any way possible to restore Ancalime to her true self. What resulted gave me the most immense pride imaginable to be a Lion. The preparation for the final battle with the avatars of the affected ancestors and the Paragon, led by the Lions, was incredible. Nations pulled together. Military might and the power of incantation were coordinated in their efforts to prepare and to control the outcome of the battle, to help to restore the ancestors to their true selves. The coordination of rites. The control of the field. It was humbling to see.*

*But for me, the moment in which it became clear at just how good and honourable the Lions faction are, was at the end of the battle. The avatar of Ancalime was one of the last standing on the battlefield. The Lions brought the avatar down. They coordinated the rite. They gave their power. They protected the rite. They succeeded to help me. They answered in the way the crown had predicted. Queen Elspeth had said to me, "Tyrion, the Lions will help you in any way that they can." And in that moment, when the avatar of Ancalime was on the floor, I looked around me and what did I see? One Unicorn and a mass of Lions. A defensive circle of Lions. Lions using their skills and power to assist in the rite, not once but TWICE, after a minor issue of timing. Lions, everywhere.*

*I thank you. Each and every one of you. With all of my heart. You have helped me when I would have been alone to slow the corruption of my ancestor. You have given us the time to try and resolve what the Paragon has started. You have saved my ancestor. You have saved me.*

*Truly, No Lion Stands Alone.*

*Tyrion Olufson*

*A Ghostwalker, a Lion and a Knight of Ancalime*

### *Attention inquisitive types!*

*Hello, it's me, the elf in the tricorn, otherwise known as Su, commonly found at or near the Alchemists Guild.*

*Do you like solving puzzles? Are you observant and willing to take notes (or have a really good memory?) Do you have a strong stomach for gross and squishy stuff? Do you think it would be fun to solve crimes?*

*Then you should talk to the Alchemists Guild about forensic investigation! You don't need to know about potions and poisons to do it, just be inquisitive and observant.*

*It helps if you're the knowledgeable type as well, in any direction. I've seen herbalists, people who can evaluate items' worth, surgeons and physicians, as well as people with more esoteric skills such as Kaliyo's entomology, use those skills in conjunction with their forensic investigation to glean more knowledge from a body or a crime scene.*

*If this sounds fun and interesting, then come on down to the Alchemists Guild and talk to Su, or ask around the guild or faction for Kaliyo or Malcolm and we'll show you the ropes. (And by ropes I probably mean corpses.)*

## Extract from the Book of Lantia

Lions,

*Since becoming the Master Scholar of the Bards Guild I have inherited a lot of documents and a lot of stories from our history. I particularly like this book, not only because it is the story of our Drakken, but because it is a story about us. We can learn from history and our myths. This book, and the principles within lean towards balance, balance between the elements, balance in the islands, balance between our leaders, and balance in ourselves.*

*We have changed over the last year. We are finding our pride and our fury, and we are finding our teeth. These are good things, but we must temper all things with balance.*

Arya Darkendale

### *The Book of Lantia*

*I write not of beginnings or endings, for none may see to the utmost future and the veil of time is drawn over the primordial origins.*

*I take this brief space to tell of what has been and what may yet be; if in the little time allotted I and my kin can work our last enchantment. If we can bind the wounded geometry of this place and hold still inviolate this island realm, this calm center to the storm of existence that cascades through unknowable realms in the unending cacophony and tumult of being.*

*Praise the Maker and Creation Unfinished.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*I am Lantia, first among the thirteen. I am High Drakken, possessor of all, beholden to none. I am balance, the eye of the storm, the still point amidst the*

*fury of creation that permits creation.*

*I am one of thirteen and I am all of twelve.*

*We dwelt in peace amidst geometries of pattern and matter in the dawn of creation. We fashioned light in solid forms, re-shaped ourselves as we saw fit in the light of the first days and cast the seeds of creation across the formless void.*

*We were the makers and the shapers, masters of Shadow and Light, demiurges on the face of this skein when it was newly formed.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*We were thirteen. Sammarix, Emerix, Ontarix, Gallathrix, Rysarius, Tamarus, Ceryphus, Andulus, Akamon, Azurlon, Pardulon, Orlagnon. Choose your words wisely my kin. Those who come after will have little counsel to guide them, unless the Gallowglass proves stronger than we can hope.*

*But I speak out of place, breaking the topology of my intent.*

*We walked this realm when Dragons still flew, when the cities of the Elder folk were still the marvel of many realms, in the dawn of the world.*

*The world grew and changed and so we with it.*

---

## Miscellany

*Roses are purple,*

*Violence is due,*

*We have your castle,*

*See you in June...*

### *Interesting Animals Facts!*

*Badgers are venomous. If you join the current badger-grafting craze, never be tempted to lick the badger.*

-----

### *Battle worm facts:*

*Fully grown battle worms are hundreds of feet long.*

*The battle worm's natural environment is the void.*

*They are gentle herbivorous creatures, except when their naps are disturbed.*

*The unicorns faction once found a dead battle worm in a volcano and now worship it as an ancestor.*

*The volcano had erupted and woken the battle worm which was napping happily in the warm spot.*

*The volcano nearly lost that fight.*

## *The Laundry Song*

*There is a place on Tamarus, a castle in the North*

*Where those who do the Laundry are paid more than they're worth.*

*A simple matter really, to clean a little Dyrt.*

*You think they'd understand at least the way to wash a shirt.*

*They are a Knightly Order, with battle honours won;*

*But the silver shines less brightly now the red and black has run.*

*A little further East, you'll reach the Palitanate*

*Where even there the sheriffs can't get the matter straight.*

*It really should be obvious, but people make it hard*

*To clean a little whitewash from a Prince Bishops tabard.*

*Drinkers and carousers, with tales of glory done*

*But the colours shine less brightly, now the blue and gold has run.*

*And finally the Citadel, where washerwomen cry*

*Because a little egg has gone and stained the orange dye.*

*The housekeeper is furious! The girls should know their place!*

*It really shouldn't matter that it dripped from Ramsay's face.*

*The Lions lost a general; The Laundry's never done.*

*And the sash looks bloody silly when the red and yellow run.*

## Advertisements

*Lions, Allies and Others,*

*I am proud to announce that the Fifth Annual Tea Party will once again be held at the Great Edrejan Fayre, two hours after noon on the Saturday. Bring your cakes and bakes. And, I will bring the tea.*

*Previous years of the Tea Party have proven to be a great success, with many cakes being consumed by not just Lions, but members of other Factions too. And, I hope that this year is even more successful than the last.*

*I look forward to seeing and conversing with you there.*

*Amy Redman*

*Sirene of Andulus*

*After every major battle,*

*After every calamity,*

*Who tends to the wounded long after the forces have gone?*

*Who helps rebuild the communities gutted by war?*

*Who brings poultices to the sick and infirm?*

*You may not see us on the battlefield, but we are there long after you are gone,  
to  
continue your good work!*

*If you are not currently on the battlefield and have an affliction that is too trifling to worry your stalwart, heroic healers, seek us out!*

*The Speedwagon Foundation*

*Head Office located on Orlagnon*

*~Message paid for by Robert Speedwagon, Founder*

## Obituaries

### *Friends of Abby and Thorg*

*It is with a heavy heart I must inform you that both Abby and Thorg fell in combat while assisting the Jackals on Campaign.*

*I myself witnessed the Jackals warband do everything in their power to recover the fallen, and lost many of their own number in the same ambush.*

*Knowing they both had many friends in other nations, I would like it known that I am organising a wake in their memories, in neutral grounds outside of the Lions camp.*

*All friends of the fallen are welcome. As are those with other losses to lament. I expect the place to be teeming with Jackals in remembrance of their own lost.*

### *The Spring Moot*

#### *Friday Night*

*10:30pm*

*The Tavern at the Guilds.*

*Yours,*

*Mause Auterne nee Fleetfoot Hollysword.*

*Second of the Free Blades*

# Fiction

## *A Tale of the Jewelled Isles*

[OOO Note: You'll have heard that there have been lots of discussions about the identity of the Lions, what the Faction is, and how it should look. Having all the artistic skills of a dead haddock, and not having the means to transport a metric ton of tentage and set dressings even if I could make it, the best I can do to try and explain what I think we should be aiming for, is to put it in writing. I put some stuff on the Facebook group, which people seemed to like, and so, to develop the thinking a bit further, I thought I'd do a bit of a "This is the Lions and Lantia" story. Of course, there is no downtime in the LT, and even if there were, it'd be plot team who write what happens, and not me, so this story is in no way "canon". It's not what has happened, it's not what will happen. It's merely what might have happened, one summer night in northern Lantia... GJM]

The problem with warm summer evenings ashore, Kurt decided, was that you still got wet. Sure, it wasn't the spray that scoured your skin with salt, it wasn't the driving rains that came out of nowhere, drenching everything before vanishing as fast as they came, and it certainly wasn't the waves that could pound ship, and crew to their doom in the depths below in naught but the blink of an eye, but the sun left you just as wet when you were trekking up and down hills on ancestors'-damned islands. He hated the way the sweat dripped from his brow and trickled, stinging into his eyes. He hated how even the light silk shirt he'd had off the Estragallean merchant boy clung uncomfortably around his chest and shoulders, and the only thing he hated more than the rank stink of his own body was the smell of his two shipmates that hung moistly in the air, stirring as they moved past him. When he'd seen the sun start to dip down below the horizon, he'd hoped that the dusk would bring some cool, some respite from the clagging, sweltering heat, and the oily, rancid sweat, but instead all it brought was dark, heavy and damp like mouldering sailcloth, and flies, fat, black and bloated flies. And for what?

"Orlagnon," the captain had said as they pulled into the quiet, sheltered cove that morning, "softest and richest island in Lantia. The Lions' breadbasket. Nothing but fat farmers, their fat daughters and fat sheep, all just waiting for a likely pack of wolves to gobble them up. You three take a stroll and round us up some easy pickings whilst the rest of us fill the casks and grab some fish. Nice easy lay over, and then back to sea."

It wasn't even as if they needed anything more. It had been a good voyage. Their bellies were full, so was the hold, and their purses would be fuller still when they hit port. The Estragallean trading ship had been a stroke of luck and no mistake – the crew couldn't hand the merchant and her family over fast enough. The old woman had made for some fine sport, and the youngsters would fetch good silver in any one of a dozen markets. The Graecian fishing village had proved a good landfall too. They'd caught that one on a wedding day, with half the population gathered at the alter, in their gaudiest finery and with their most precious trinkets all on display, and the other half dead drunk with not a closed door or an unaddled wit between them. So why did the captain want them to waste their time looking for more plunder? It was all Karsten's fault. Just because he'd answered the captain back one too many times, the three of them in the same watch got to trudge through these blasted hills, under the merciless sun, whilst the rest played in the sea.

And what had they found? Nothing. Not a village, not a person. Not a farmer, not a farmer's daughter, not a sheep. Not a hide, not hare, not a hart. Not even a damn, thrice blasted chicken. Just the swarms of flies, and the endless hills. There hadn't looked to be so many of them when they'd first struggled up the ridge from the beach, just a line of gentle mounds, blending off into forest a few miles off in the distance, but every time they crested one, they found another, and none of them gentle either. They should have been back at the ship hours ago, but now they'd have to stay the night in the accursed place, and struggle back in the morning with nothing to show for their troubles but sunburn and sweat. It just wasn't fair.

Kurt was so caught up in his own misery, he didn't realise that Karsten had stopped and dropped

into a crouch until he walked right into him. The wiry ginger ferret of a man turned on him angrily, pulling him down with one hand, placing a finger to his lips with his other. Bjorn, the hulking bruiser joined them with practiced ease, his blue eyes a gleam in the darkness at the prospect of trouble, and Karsten motioned them forward. Crawling on their bellies like snakes, the three silently made their way forwards, senses straining for whatever had caught Karsten's attention. After about a dozen yards, Kurt saw it, and he felt his heart rate start to quicken. They'd have something to bring back to the ship after all.

They'd come to a ridge. Beyond it, the land dropped away into a bowl, as if some giant had taken a scoop out of the top of the hill with a spoon the size of a villa. Trees lined the far side and the edges of the bowl, their shapes blacker even than the dark of the night around them, but in the middle was a small campfire. Next to the fire, Kurt could see three shapes, a smallish man, sitting upright, he thought, and two dogs sleeping. And just beyond them, at the outer edge of the fire's light, some sort of stone wall. From behind the wall came the unmistakable sound of bleating. There were sheep in them there hills. And now the wolves were closing in.

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*If it hadn't been for Arrow, it would all be over. He'd been dozing, letting his mind drift, dreaming of other times, of other places, other lives, completely oblivious to the men making their way down the hillside, and heading fast and hard toward him. That was stupid. How many times had he been told, how many times had he learned? Never drop your guard. Never sleep unprotected. Always be ready. Not being ready was what had done for his brother, the night the demons came. Caradoc should have had his pack ready to go, not been scurrying back to grab his favourite cloak. They said his father had been sleeping too when the Nosta Kar burned the town, which was why Griflet couldn't remember him. He was only alive because his mother had chosen to wake her children rather than her husband. She'd been brave, people told him, but it hadn't been bravery that was needed when folk claiming to be "neighbours" came to the door. It was alertness, guile, vigilance. He knew all that, knew the stories by rote, but still, here he was, entrusted with the villages flock, by people who'd taken him in when he had nowhere and nobody to call his own, and he'd been dreaming of a home and family long since lost. If Arrow hadn't been alert, hadn't barked a warning as the men descended on his fire...*

*But Arrow did bark, jerking Griflet back into the land of the living. Three men were running towards him, hard looking men, with weapons in their hands. He fumbled for the old crossbow, breathing a prayer of thanks to whichever Ancestor was watching as his hand closed on the old wood of the stock. He stumbled to his feet, bringing the bow up, shouting a warning which must have sounded as high and thin to the attackers as it did to his own ears. The dogs, praise be to that benevolent Ancestor, were more certain of themselves. As they flowed like shadows to his heels, Arrow's deep booming baying shattered the silence of the night, whilst Dart's growls sounded like a rolling drum around the pasture. Startled from their slumber the sheep added their plaintive bleating to the cacophony, adding their own confusion and panic to the chaos that had descended. For a heartbeat Griflet was sure that the men would just keep on coming, knocking him down before he even had a chance to loose his bolt, but it seemed that his sudden waking, the barking and growling of the dogs and the sight of a loaded crossbow pointed in their direction had between them served to startle his assailants. They came to a stumbling halt just on the other side of the fire. One, the dark, dirt smeared lad of about his own age, dropped to one knee to Griflet's right, tossing a wicked looking dirk from hand to hand. He wore a grimy silk shirt, with its sleeves crudely hacked away to show arms and shoulders corded with hard, sinewy muscles. It looked like it had once been a bright yellow, but was now faded, spotted and stained, and by the way it strained against the young man's chest, it had been made for someone smaller. The young man's eyes darted here and there, before coming to rest on Griflet appraising, weighing. Apparently he liked what he saw, because a smile played around his lips. And the other two were just as worrying. To Griflet's left was a bearded giant of a man, with blonde hair hanging in lank and greasy ringlets about his shoulders, a massive iron bound bludgeon in his hands, and shining bands of golden*

*metal around his wrists and neck. He was smiling too, the happy, relaxed smile of a man content in his work. Directly across the fire from Griflet, the last of the three was also smiling, but the short, red haired man's smile was amiable and easy, as if they'd just met for a tankard of ale by the roaring fire in the village tavern, not with weapons drawn across a flickering camp fire in the black of night. He'd even lowered the short sword he was carrying. It was him who broke the silence first.*

*"Hey there, no need to be alarmed. We're just passing by, and saw the fire. You from around here then?"*

*Griflet almost smiled himself at that. Did they think that shepherds were stupid or something? Not that there was much to smile at. The old crossbow was heavy in his hands, it was all he could do to keep the bow from shaking in his hands. If it hadn't been for the warmth and weight of Arrow and Dart pressing on either side, comforting him, reassuring him that he was not alone, he'd have folded then and there. Carefully he edged backwards, towards the entrance to the pen, bringing the dogs with him, fighting to keep both the bow, and his voice steady and level.*

*"Pass on then. There's nothing for you here. My friends will be back soon."*

*The red headed man raised an eyebrow. "Friends?"*

*Griflet swallowed, thinking fast. "Yes, friends. They just went to fetch supper, they'll be back any minute." He was bluffing, of course. Nobody would be around until morning at the earliest. Still, what else could he try? "Edmund! Jak! Cora! You back yet?" He shouted into the night, but his words faded almost as they left his lips, muffled by the night, and deadened by the mist that was starting to cling around the edge of the pasture.*

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He was bluffing. Kurt knew it, Karsten must have known it. Even Bjorn probably knew it, and he insisted that the world was a giant egg with a baby dragon nesting in the middle. Why didn't Karsten just let them get on with it? The crossbow that the idiot boy was holding had to be older than he was. The string would probably snap when the trigger was pulled, and even if it didn't, the lad couldn't even hold it straight. The way his hands were shaking the bolt would end up going anywhere save where it was aimed. It was probably the dogs, Kurt decided. The way they were snapping and snarling, they were far more dangerous than their master. Those teeth looked sharp, and, when you came down to it, Karsten was a coward who dreaded the sight of his own blood more than he enjoyed spilling that of others. He would try and talk the boy down, and would only act when he was sure it was safe. So, for now, they waited.

Kurt shivered. What had happened to the heat of the night? A mist had risen, hiding the black shapes of the trees that edged the bowl from view, and the dampness in the air was suddenly as cold as ice. He shook himself, mentally pulling himself together, cursing himself for his lack of attention. Now wasn't the time to lose focus, not if they wanted to get something out of the night. He forced his attention back to the surroundings. The boy, the man he'd probably call himself, was nothing special. Well enough made to take to market, with a good thatch of curls, but on the scrawny side, with a simple tunic and a cloak that was nothing more than a blanket fastened by a brooch. The brooch was worth looking at, heavy metal of some sort – bronze maybe – formed in the shape of a cross, with a dark coloured stone in the middle. It flashed red when the sparks from the fire caught it – glass most likely, garnet or ruby even if they were lucky. Worth something any way, maybe even more than its owner. There was a flash of metal at the boy's wrist too – a woman's bangle, Kurt thought, thin silver wire, and two paler stones hung on leather chords around his neck. Strange things for a shepherd to wear, but there was no accounting for taste, and it wasn't like the shepherd would be wearing them for much longer. A good thing too, Kurt decided, because the way the light from the sparks from the fire was reflecting off the red stone, and bouncing off the two pale ones and gleaming in the mirror of the bangle was just odd. It fair unsettled his stomach. He tried to ignore it, and those evil looking hounds, and concentrated on the sheep pen. A good flock would be a decent prize, particularly if they could bring the shepherd back with it. Looking at it, it probably hadn't always been a sheep pen. The light of the fire illuminated pale marble steps

leading to a raised platform, and a broken layer of weathered stone, which had been topped, patched and backed with a higgledy piggledy wooden fence. The fence had seemingly been thrown together with whatever flotsam and jetsam was to hand – Kurt was sure he could see broken rafters, chair seats and half a door in there, all mixed with woven branches, and a few well-dressed planks which might have come from a boat – although he almost pitied whichever fool had dragged them all the way from the coast over those damnable hills.

“Look son,” Karsten was sounding reasonable, a sure sign that he was getting impatient. “Here’s what we’ll do. Come along with us quiet like to the *Gorgon’s Head*, bring your dogs and your sheep. A likely lad like you, sure the captain will be happy to have you join us. It’s got to be a better life than you’ll get round here.”

The boy blanched. “The *Gorgon’s Head*?”

Karsten’s smile grew. “You’ve heard of us, then? Good.” He took a step forward, pointing with his sword, confident now. “Two options, boy. You’re with us, or you’re against us. Throw in your lot with us or...”

“Or you kill me.” The lad’s voice was barely above a whisper. Kurt reckoned if he’d been any closer he’d have smelt piss. Karsten just kept smiling. He was, Kurt had to admit, good at this. “Oh no. There’s nothing for us in killing you. No. If you don’t put down that bow, Kurt here will take it off you, Bjorn will deal with your dogs, and we’ll all have some fun before we take you and your sheep back to the ship. Two weeks from now we’ll all be in the biggest whorehouse in Maurabia. It’s up to you whether you’ll be taking your pleasure, or working there.”

“Oh.” The boy looked down, and the crossbow started to drop. “That’s it then.”

Karsten’s smile broadened and he stepped forward again. “Wise man. Just put the bow on the ground, then and set those hounds of yours to rousting out those sheep. We’ve wasted enough time here”

The shepherd looked up again. “Nah, that’s not going to happen.” In one smooth moment, the crossbow came up and he pulled the trigger. His hands were still.

Karsten’s forehead hit the grass. His body hit the fire, scattering burning sticks, sending sparks flying everywhere, swirling bright against the dank mist that rolled all around them. Bjorn just stood there, seemingly dumbfounded, but Kurt was already moving, the dirk held low, every nerve of his body alive. He darted towards the youngster but was met part way by the smaller of the two dogs, which launched itself at him teeth crashing together just short of his leg. He kicked hard, struck out with his dirk, and was rewarded with a squeal of pain as the creature fell away into the mist. Where was the boy? Where was Bjorn? Kurt looked around, but all he could see was the mist, and the scattered sparks of light from the fire, still dancing madly as if they were all somehow still being reflected from the stones the youngster had worn – but that was impossible, because there’d only been the one shepherd, and now there were hundreds of these points of light, all around him in the mist, yellow, and red and orange, green and blue and pink, and a blinding white that shone clearly against the cold, dank, grey. He stumbled back ready to flee now, but found himself backing into something hard, and rough. It was a tree. A tree? How was that even possible? There hadn’t been any trees anywhere near them. He was scrambling now on hands and knees.

Somewhere – was it far? Was it near? Bjorn screamed once. Whether he’d screamed in pain, or in terror, Kurt couldn’t tell. Sobbing he tried to run. He was soiling himself, but he didn’t care.

A twig snapped. Close. Something – (brambles? A root? A hand?) grabbed at his ankle, hauling him down once again.

Another twig snapped, closer.

And Kurt could run no more.

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*From where he cowered amongst the sheep in the pen hugging the whimpering Dart to his chest, Griflet waited until the screams stopped, and then waited some more as things sniffed and whistled around the outside of the walls in the quiet of the night. At one point he heard them move towards the gap, where a simple wooden pole barrier kept the sheep barred in. He heard a low warning*

growl from Arrow, and whatever was sniffing moved off. Then, when he was sure it was safe, he crawled forwards, joining the dog near the entrance, peering out to see...nothing. Just the remains of a campfire smouldering across the pasture, and some trails of something dark and sticky wetly absorbing the pale light of the moon.

He didn't really know what had happened after he had pulled the trigger, but he remembered how clearly and simply he had seen things at the time. He just couldn't do it. He just couldn't let the brigands take what little he and the others had been able to save. He remembered thinking quite clearly that he was going to discover just what people meant when they talked about a fate worse than death, but that hadn't mattered. Some things were more important than what happened to him. Kurt didn't have a lot, but what he had, he would cling to. His possessions, yes, his father's brooch, his mother's bracelet. His opal, Caradoc's peridot, but more even than them, there was the trust his village had placed in him, his duty to see their flock safe through the night. The three men could have taken his body and broken his spirit, but no bully or brigand was going to take those from him.

The old sage who visited the village on occasion had always said that the sheep pasture was a safe haven. That was why it had seemed like a good place to keep the flock they all depended on. That was why, after he shot the man, and the mist rolled in, Griflet had closed his eyes and crawled for the gap. That was something else he knew. Sometimes you didn't want to be outside the walls without a fire at night. And there was one more thing he had known. There had been a ship called the "Gorgon's Head". They'd been pirates and plunderers. Word had reached the village with a travelling trader that it had made landfall on Orlagnon, only to be met by the island militia, who had managed to raid it, and free captives from the hold before its crew had taken it back out to sea. They thought they had escaped justice, chuckled the old peddler, only to meet it in the form of the Kraken of the Steel Sea. According to the freed prisoners, some few members of the ship's crew had been sent off into the mainland the morning of the raid, but they had not returned by the time the ship tried to set sail once more.

That had been a year ago.