

The Treaty of New Hope or Drum's Quest

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Summary

Employer: Drum – Seagate adventurer

Party: Loxi Party Leader

GoK Strategic planner

Faith Scribe

some humans (Sheminah, Grendal, Phaeton, Human)

a dragonette (Drum)

All the males are pacted, except GoK, who changed his mind.

Payment: A myriad of pence each, which is 39 guineas, 14 shillings and four-pence; plus a barrel of ale or honey-mead. This is roughly 4 cubic inches of gold. Plus a set of still-warm dragon-skin armour each if we rip them off the bleeding corpses. Nice.

Time Line

1st Thaw. We are hired and learn some background of the planes of Rue and Sol.

4th Thaw. We are transported to Sol by StarSong, a dragon. We portal to Rue.

We meet DiamondFlame, a dragon. We get directions, and fly for the rest of the day.

5th Thaw. We sail into New Hope and explore.

6th Thaw. The party splits into three and covers the continent.

7th Thaw. Drum negotiates with DiamondFlame. The elves meet the local wood elves. The humans do cultural research. Sheminah leaves the party.

8th Thaw. The party reunites and update each other.

9th Thaw. The party reaches Bald Hill.

10th Thaw. We meet Sir Warren and lay out the facts.

11th Thaw. We flee from Bald Hill chased by their army.

12th Thaw. We meet Roland at Swansford. It rains like there will be no tomorrow.

13th Thaw. We meet Vandra at Beacon's Hill. GoK & Sir Konrad fight an epic duel.

14th Thaw. We kidnap Sir Konrad. Drum is turned, and punished by exile.

21st Thaw. Drum returns without GoK. The dragon hunters arrive at Swansford.

22nd Thaw. We fly to Bald Hill and meet Sir Warren. A death-warrant is drawn up.

23rd Thaw. We fly to New Hope with Roland, where we meet Father Thomas.

24th Thaw. We start to potter back to Swansford. We get Roland back in time.

28th Thaw. Vandra, Roland & Sir Konrad leave Swansford by barge.

1st Seedtime. Sir Konrad is missing. That evening we are in Bald Hill.

14th Seedtime. Tourney starts.

15th Seedtime. The Peace Treaty is signed by all survivors.

16th Seedtime. We leave to hunt Pig Iron.

27th Seedtime. At last we are attacked.

4th Blossom. An audience with Lord Manfred finally goes well.

8th Blossom. Back at the Guild.

The Dragon Hunting Dragon-hunters

1st Thaw 805. Drum hires the group to compose a eulogy for a group of allegedly deceased famous heroes. These heroes are famous for killing (young) dragons, and the parents of the deceased would like a proper farewell. The heroes are:

- Sir Warren of Baldhill, a chivalric knight of the highest order, whose skill with his lance is legendary amongst defeated foes and their womenfolk.
- Sir Conrad of Heronbill, a red-haired giant, a stalwart warrior and master of the axe and the tankard.
- The Enchantress Vandra of Swansmouth, a sword-wielding sorceress with her skirts slit to the waist and her leading attributes on display.
- Healer Roland, a follower of the dead god Mithros, and herb man.
- Emma Crowdale, an exotic ethnic fortune-teller who can make your silver cross her palm before you know she's there.
- Gloin of Stone Mountain, a dwarven smith.

They all lived on a plane called Rue, in a cluster of planes ruled by ruthless draconic overlords, or "caretakers". This cluster of planes includes the plane of Sol which contains the town of Paradise, which SAG members have visited three times in the last two years.

Despite having a near-perfect mix of colleges (Earth, Celestial, E&E, Namer, plus Ice for blast, a spare Celestial, and an Illusionist for towns), and Mind in case we wish to be first runner-up to the dragons in the evil overlord stakes, we have very few useful all-day spells. Resist Cold on GoK (he left his scarf behind, poor thing), Disguise for me (too distinctive a cognomen), and Strength of Stone, Shadowform and Witchsight for the rest.

We decide to stock up on supplies for three days. Non-magical supplies are to be stored in Drum's rather large backpack. Supplies include a month of provisions (a week fresh, the rest dried), a week's drinking water, basic camping gear including tents, a pavilion for the elves, medical supplies including bandages, splints, and a range of rare alchemical and natural substances that Phaeton wishes to study to allow him to devise antidotes. Many lengths of rope & twine, shovels, axes, knives, and other survival gear are also included. Trade goods, gems, coins. The melons and sorbet are packed in ice, and kept well away from the strawberries to avoid bruising or over-chilling.

Each person has five cubic foot of storage allocated for personal items. These items must be non-explosive & non-magical, and must not leak if broken. Mine include 6 changes of clothes, from formal to working silks, four sets of footwear, three sets of armour, and most of my spare weapons. Also a small supply of coca leaves and dried cocoa beverages for medicinal purposes only. Not to mention

knuckle bones, ornaments, some costume jewellery, dies, cosmetics, paint, cayenne, and various herbs for undisturbed constitutional strolls.

We learn a bit more about the plane of Sol. It has a range of races including humans, nymphs, centaurs, fauns, dryads and rocs. Apparently they engage in normal friendly trade. The settlement of Paradise is new, but a powerful Seagate fire mage called Shizane ensures that it is at peace with its neighbours. We will pass near it briefly.

3rd Thaw. In the evening we set out from Seagate in a hired boat and travel five miles upstream to a quiet pasture. We camp, checking the erecting of the tents and preparation of food. The humans work well. We also have trial watches. With the paucity of elves, there are humans on every watch, so a professional lack of conversation is likely.

Watch Order

1. GoK & Human
2. Faith & Phaeton
3. Loxi & Grendal
4. Drum & Sheminah

4th Thaw. Pre-dawn, we strike camp and wait for StarSong, a young dragon and close personal friend of Drum. Mist starts rising from the pasture. A voice resounds in Loxi's head. Something coagulates from the mists. Shortly StarSong takes the shape of a 20' high, 50' long (plus tail) shiny golden dragon. Her neck is very long and spiny, and her wingspan is over 250 feet. StarSong makes quite an impressive entrance. We all mount up, and wedge ourselves as best we can between the spikes. She levitates into the growing light of dawn.

We blink. We are now in another world, soon identified by Phaeton and Drum as Sol. To the east is a long valley, to the west are the Paradise plains, to the north are mountains, and to the south is the sea. *StarSong indicates the plains and says "I've got humans". Loxi replies "We can treat that".* StarSong descends slowly to the south. We fly over a valley, then hills, then some rough ground with scattered trees. We see a clearing with a portal in it, and land.

Mithrian Portals

The buildings which contain Mithrian Portals are best described in the Wiki. twork is sparsely connected.

After good-byes to StarSong, we use the portal. We find ourselves in another world, soon identified as Rue. The portal is surrounded by mature deciduous forest. There are mountains to the east, and the sun is rising gently over them. It is early spring, and the bright green foliage is pleasant. The tranquillity is shattered as Drum sounds a terrible mating call. It is loud, harsh, and comes from some non-mammalian organ. No one can hear themselves think. GoK explains the dangers of healing himself to Phaeton. Eventually the roaring stops and Phaeton removes the cotton wool from his ears.

Drum explains that he is summoning DiamondFlame – the “grumpy old man” of the dragons. I now have some idea why he is grumpy! After a short while, we hear some singing in elvish coming from the east. A few minutes later, a grey-haired elf strolls in from the woods. He has GTN horse – I guess its like forgetting to match your socks. DiamondFlame is quite an intense individual. He tells us about the dead dragons and the heroes we are to eulogise.

The heroes have killed four young dragons. In order of demise, they were: Firebrand, a troublemaker and sheep rustler; Green Jade, who dwelt with orcs; little Bronze, who got on well with the dwarves; and the Black, who lived near hill giants. They lived 2,000 to 3,000 miles apart. They were the only four dragons born within the last 400 years. Baby dragons grow to near-full size with a couple of years of hatching, but take quite some time to mature in power and intellect. Some of these dead dragons could cast magic. There is no last remaining baby dragon, and its location is secret.

DiamondFlame translates a popular human song describing the heroic feats of the heroes. Sounds like eulogising this lot will be tricky. The heroes met at tourneys. They attend the five major tourneys every year (except when hunting). This year the first tourney will be at Baldhill, and the second at New Hope. They have been hunting dragons for around ten years. The period between kills is dropping. They are also possibly hunting DiamondFlame. They use small numbers of troops to assist them.

The heroes live along a huge river valley in a decentralised series of city states which is spread between 350-1,000 miles away. We are shown a map and the approximate location of Baldhill, New Hope and Stone Mountain. See the map appended to this document. We are given directions to Stone Mountain, and to New Hope, which is downstream. Most of the river valley people come from the

“Old Empire” in the plane of Frigidaire. The Old Empire tongue is a little like Arabique. They also have a common trading tongue and a northern tongue, spoken by local “barbarian” tribes. We don’t know any of these languages.

We convince DiamondFlame that knowledge of at least one local tongue is essential. The last thing we what to do is get our facts wrong and accidentally engage in *character assassination*. He uses spring water & his own blood to create a drink that imparts knowledge of the trading tongue to us for the rest of the season. It has similar side-effects to a restorative. Ow!

The Rules of Rue

DiamondFlame tells us the rules while on his plane:

- No changing the mana
- No changing the climate
- No changing the terrain
- No changing the flora or fauna

These are all trespassing on the domain of the guardians.

We leave, heading in the direction of New Hope, before he starts “mowing” the trees. We fly WSW for an hour, with a cloud of smoke rising behind us.

An Unseasonable Elf

Subjectively, the following is all true. Semiotics is more complex than people realise.

Aunty Loxi and I were over in the south of the Eastern mountains at the start of Spring. Don’t ask what we were doing there – just don’t ask. As it happens, there were some humans in the same area, and they seemed lost. We thought it would be amusing to watch them. They flew down the Wolf River for a while and then landed a mile short of the first village they found. We followed quietly.

The village of Stony Creek was simple retro-agrarian. There were paths to the river, into the forest, and downstream. The village was set in terraces into the hillside, with farms on the valley floor below. There were chickens, geese, dogs, pigs, dwarves and humans wandering the streets and scratching at the ground for food. The humans were beige with brown highlights.

The lost group of four humans, led by the memorably dense Sir Gwithane Gokan, entered the village. With him were his squire Human, his priest Phaeton, and his groom Sheminah. They talked to the locals for a while, and gathered their first intelligence (*and they needed any intelligence they could find*).

- The "East Road" runs around the north of the Eastern mountains.
- There are bandits in the forest around here.
- There is a lumber camp 20 miles downstream.
- The city of New Hope is around 300 miles downstream.
- There is a good wagon-road West/East near Stone Mountain to the north.

Following the humans as they flew for a few more hours downstream, we saw widely scattered villages in the mountains and forests. There were no towns of note as we headed downriver. Finally the mountains and trees stopped, and we landed. Auntie Loxi & I went into the village, and learnt that these people hadn't seen elves before. They believed that elves have blue hens' teeth at full moon or some such superstition. Apparently the segregation saying goes "elves in the west, dwarves in the east".

By now it was nightfall. We met up with Sir Gwithane and his entourage.

5th Thaw. We had a late start, and after morning tea we caught a ride the last 100 miles to New Hope on Captain Grendal's riverboat. More about the cabin-boy later.

New Hope

New Hope is on the inside of a river bend. It is a town a half-mile across, with an impressive octagonal keep at the far side. The Wolf River is around 80 yards across at this point. The humans here are fair skinned with brown hair. There are a few mixed race human/?orc? crosses. Wandering through the town and shopping for cloth, we learn a few things:

- The open gutters in the streets smell.
- We see no temples (they are in a quarter we don't visit until later).
- The guards are low-risk mundanes. They travel in small groups.
- They trade metal & wood from the mountains, wool from the south plains, grain from the river valley.
- Old Empire, Northern, & Trade are all spoken. With only knowledge of Trade (and various Elvii), a lot of chatter goes past us. However, we catch gossip on trade, planting, dragons and hunting.
- There are priests of Mithros, the Mother, the Dark God, etc. More details provided elsewhere. *See the Wiki.*
- Money is strips of silver, most just a little thicker than a silver penny, wide as a little finger, and one to two inches long, with a hole punched in one end. Also copper in similar shapes, all hung on strings.

We choose the same inn that the humans go to. At least we know them a little. Our Inn is 4 stories high, with a central courtyard. We are given a corner tower, to keep out the riff-raff. There is quite a crowd shortly after we arrived. Elves aren't seen in New Hope except around the Tourney, in early summer.

What the Chambermaid said

We chat charmingly with the chambermaid.

- Normally only elven delegations to the noble houses or elven traders for the Tournays are seen in New Hope.
- Dwarves are also uncommon out of the mountains except at Tournays.
- Most city dwellers are not armed, a small knife or a stick maybe.
- The city watch are lazy, corrupt bullies.
- The castle guard are better, but only police during Tournays.
- The Merchant Guild have their own guards for the warehouses across the river.
- The dock workers' hovels are to be avoided even during the day; it's a rough and lawless place.
- Although its not illegal to be out after dark, its not advisable to go out alone; while all the street scum, beggars and lowlifes are supposed to leave the city before the gates close at dusk, the watch is known to extort money or 'favours' from lone travellers or small groups, under threat of arrest and fine for breach of peace. If you can't pay that fine, the court indentures you for five years. This provides a good income for the administration and so is accepted.
- Similar laws exist in most towns, with varying levels of corruption.
- There is no monarchy or central authority. Each noble family runs an independent state.
- Many laws from the time of the Old Empire are now traditions enforced by all the ruling families.
- No one state or alliance has ever been able to enforce its rule on all the others.
- Recent merchant gossip is that Bald Hill & its allies are manoeuvring into a position to attempt this consolidation.
- Bald Hill has been employing steadily increasing numbers of troops. Their forces are larger and much better trained than any other family; and several families owe them large favours for dragon slaying.
- The Merchant Council is thinking of doing 'something' about this.
- The local ruler is the fast-fading Lord Luther. His weak-willed son Sir Theobald has been running the town for a while.
- Sir Theobald has received a promise from Sir Warren that he will bring the heroes up the Wolf River right after the Bald Hill tourney.
- The Tournays are: Spring Equinox, Bald Hill; Beltane, New Hope; Solstice, Swansford; Lugnasad, Swansmouth; Autumn Equinox, Bald Hill.
- The court house, guild halls, and at least twelve temples are on the Street of the Gods, off Castle Way.
- The new guests Sir Gwithane Gokan and his group are Barbarians. Pure Blood Empire nobles look different, and even half-breeds speak Empire.

- A lot more noble Barbarians have been attending the Tournays since the success and fame of Sir Konrad.
- Passage to the Tourney towns is much more expensive in the week before each Tourney.
- Other guests include Cloth traders, a Dwarven Armoursmith, and a Healer.
- The Healer cures burns with a salve in 2 days – sounds like a Herbalist.

Gok & Sheminah head down to the riverside, to check on their cabin boy, Drum. Drum has to sneak into town because he doesn't look right. They cast ShadowWings and Witchsight on him, and return before nightfall. Drum comes into town over the rooftops. The landing location is marked by a circle of warm ash.

The main common room of the Inn has a human minstrel. He murders several songs, including a tune about a lass called Vandra who enchanted half the courts of the Swan River valley. Another lay is about some dragon slayers and their small army – presumably this Sir Warren of Bald Hill. There are reportedly dragon skulls on the wall of Bald Keep. The latest news is about a new Blue Dragon burning the entire countryside to the east. The chorus hook is "*eating the people who pulled the cat's tail*". It sounds like we just missed him. Pity – dragons are more interesting than humans.

Around 2am we meet up with the humans led by Sir Gwithane, and give them their Drum. Notes on New Hope are compared.

Coming and Going

I've flown 1000's of miles,
over oceans and isles,
we fly by the moon,
we're always coming and going,
going and coming,
and always too soon!
Right girls?

I'm tired,
tired of flying and fame,
ain't it a crying shame?
I'm so tired,
God dammit I'm tired!

We meet at 2 am on the **6th of Thaw**, and argue into the wee hours of the morning.

There is a saying that violence is the last refuge of the incompetent. Individually, no one here is incompetent - some of the group want to rule out violence completely; while for others it's their first choice. However, consensus by committee renders this as our last resort. Collective wisdom is an oxymoron.

We decide to first try to save the humans by committing them to a binding oath not to hunt dragons. The strength of this plan is that we get to meet and assess the humans, and resolve the issue via dialogue. The weakness is that they may learn too much about us (i.e. our existence) if we have to implement our fall-back plans.

The first step of any good plan is to see if it has the blessing of the gods. In lieu of a good sacrifice, we go with an ecumenical service involving our seers (GoK, Grendal & Phaeton) staring at stars or their own eyelids for hours. The main advantage of this is that the rest of us get to sleep until dawn. Loxi & I explain the second step of the plan and assure the party that it is simple and sensible, and that they will realise it in the morning, then sweep off to our tower.

6th of Thaw. It is dawn by the time that the men have finished their prayers to their false gods. The answer to the various readings by the men on the question "Will binding the hunters to a honourable oath of truce with dragon-kind suffice to bring peace between the parties?" is "Yes, but...". This satisfies them. See earlier comments on wisdom.

Over breakfast we repeat the plan in smaller words. Thank Inti for acullicar. We then leave New Hope, via Grendal's ship, to which Drum has returned before dawn. We float gently downstream to avoid magically driving all before us at 20 knots. Once a reasonable distance away from the city, six of us get Shadow Wings and disperse.

Divide and Conquer - Humans

Human and Grendal are two of our human-culture experts. We unleash the Sorcerer and Illusionist on the unsuspecting city of New Hope for relentless and personal study of the culture over two and a half days. They talk to some nearby villagers, an acting troupe, and varied townfolk. Through their powerful magicks and masterful acting, no one realises that they are in fact gathering intelligence for a possible socialist revolution. Including them. They fail to burn down the city or inflict significant infra-structural damage before we meet up again in the afternoon of the **8th of Thaw**.

Divide and Conquer - Dragons

Drum, Sheminah and Phaeton head upstream, retracing their wing strokes for three hundred-odd miles to return to the place they arrived in this world. This is comparable to the efforts of salmon and homing pigeons. Aren't humans amazing! It takes a little more than 8 hours to reach the portal, where they rest and request the presences of DiamondFlame.

At dawn on the **7th of Thaw**, DiamondFlame shows up and negotiates with Drum. Thanks to Phaeton, who is poised with charcoal and paper, "sketching", we have some immortal quotes. These include Drum advising the dragon to think long-term, sympathising that he understands DiamondFlame's pain in losing all his children, and telling DiamondFlame that he (DF) will need time to think. However, discretion & sensitivity forbid me from including these quotes.

DiamondFlame is not particularly convinced by the notion of a two-way binding contract involving regular appearances by him to remind humans of the greatness and mercy of dragons. It's a pity – the argument is presented well, but I think it's a cultural gap – DiamondFlame just doesn't want to get tied into a petty mortal tradition. However, he is prepared to go with an oath by the humans in return for letting them live. He mentions a priest of Mithros in New Hope who can bind their oaths (geas?). The oath would be along the lines of "never kill or harm another dragon". In return, he would consider following the strictures "no more burning sheep and eating forests". He mentions that StarSong, as the mother of the slain, and being younger & more emotional, would not be keen on this interpretation of the deal with Drum, preferring revenge.

Sheminah is not convinced that she can help with this high-level negotiation, being primarily a survivalist and blast mage; and as she doesn't want to try to kill the humans, decides to return home. Drum assists her to Paradise around nightfall, and then Drum & StarSong give her some travel advice. StarSong offers to teach Sheminah elvish for some months so that she can talk to the centaurs (if they ever learn elvish). Instead, Sheminah walks and flies for a couple of days, reaching Livingston on the evening of the **9th of Thaw**.

Drum & Phaeton fly back to New Hope during the day of the **8th of Thaw**, arriving back mid-afternoon. Drum is once again sequestered on the ship.

Divide and Conquer - Elves

We elves go to consult with the local wood elves, to gather more of that collective wisdom. We fly west for the whole day, landing at the edge of the elvish forest. Then we spend half the night singing songs at the edge of the forest, then hopping 10 miles north and repeating, hoping to encounter some border patrols or wandering locals. Eventually, we find a rough path leading into the forest, and run down it to a clearing, which is obviously an agreed meeting point. We camp and eat. The trees say that the elves are all farther in. We have light watches and sleep as best we can.

7th Thaw. We have a leisurely start, and then jog along nature trails further into the forest. We meet an elven guide, who takes us to their village. Their village is a collection of houses high up in trees. None of us are afraid of heights at the start of the day. The tree-houses are made by the tree growing into the right shapes, with the occasional encouragement or crafting. The houses are connected by branches or bridges. From a distance we admire the graceful minimalism of the design, with never an excess handrail or overly-thick support. Closer viewing doesn't convey the same emotional reaction.

After a while waiting in a hollow bole some hundred feet up, an Elder visits us. We learn a number of points. These include:

- Not all the planar guardians are dragons
- Some of the planar guardians are elves (not on this plane)
- Elves trade herbs and rare materials with the humans (for what?)
- Sir Warren of Baldhill is the 3rd son and will not inherit.
- There is a tradition for such sons to continue the expansion of the ex-empire.
- Sir Konrad is the primary leader of the dragon-hunters.
- He is from the far north, just south of the dwarves.
- He is a half-blood – his mother is native, and his father empire.
- Vandra is the daughter of an apprentice of the Wizard of Swansmouth.
- She is an E&E.
- She buys supplies from another elven village.
- Roland of Swansfort buys his herbal supplies from yet another elven village.
- No one in this world can resurrect.
- This village needs none of our assistance.
- There is another village on the far side of the forest who can provide weapons.

The Elder is not quite open when answering our queries. None of us can quite put our finger on why we are uncomfortable with what he said. We may have made some social transgressions which offended him and thus made him unhelpful, or possibly this is expected from insular villages, or perhaps the altitude rather than attitude kept us off balance.

We leave the village late that afternoon, and fly to the forest edge. After a brief nap, we fly back to New Hope overnight, and sleep outside town for the morning, before entering the town around noon on the **8th of Thaw**.

The Elvish village



a sketch by Phaeton based on descriptions by the guild elves.

The Reunion and Bald Hill

During the evening, Drum arrives again, and we compare notes. We decide to travel to Bald Hill immediately, and while the ship would be a good option, it is faster and simpler to fly. We resolve to fly the next morning. Drum retires to the ship.

9th of Thaw. We leave shortly after dawn, and after drifting out of sight downstream, discard the ship and fly at a high altitude down the Swan River to Bald Hill. We hide Drum out of town, with various agreed emergency signals. The rest of us go into town, with the elves heavily cloaked. The guards look tough and efficient, with really good equipment. We wander around town, and find an Inn midway down Trade Street, where we get private rooms for the night.

We discuss requesting a meeting with Sir Warren via the Innkeep.

Threatening Sir Warren

Getting to know your mark before beginning negotiation is essential. Everyone has strengths, weaknesses and agendas. The more that is known the more pressure can be applied. To this end, we decide to visit every upper-class public drinking establishment in Bald Hill. We form three teams; Grendal and our Human; Loxi & Gok; and Uncle Phaeton and his "niece". We learn:

- There is a temple district.
- There are lots of dingy dives.
- There are quite a few taverns targeting visiting merchants.
- There is lots of money around, particularly coming from "up the hill".
- The local army is undergoing serious equipage, for an expedition or invasion.
- Warehouses inside the first circle of walls are crammed full.
- The Swan & East River are both navigable across the whole civilisation.
- There is a "secret de Polichinelle" plan to take control of a thousand mile stretch of river. This land area is an empire, not a local power-play. Younger sons of opponents will be on the way to a tourney, or even be "guests" at the time of the move. We can't tell if troops are being marshalled over a wide area for this – any local troops are being marshalled for the dragon hunt.
- Any collapse of the dragon hunt may advance the timetable of this plan – possibly to this upcoming tourney, if efficient communications can be established. If we desire this outcome, we could push for it.
- No word on mages – they are just not part of the culture.

- Sir Warren is positioning himself as a dragon-killing General, not a dragon slayer. This change to statesman is good news for us.
- The expansionist war plan is led by Lord Manfred - Sir Warren's father.
- Phaeton has a new girlfriend.

We return to our inn, debrief, and sleep.

10th Thaw. We decide to send a note to Sir Warren. Being illiterate in the only local language we speak, we go to a scribe in the Mithras temple, expecting the priests to be corrupt and stupid – like all heathen priests. However, we are pleasantly surprised, and get our note written and a promise of delivery. Apparently the local custom is not to fill the scroll case with money when delivering it.

We stay together in a group, and shop for the rest of the day. We purchase clothes, and take the pulse of the common folk. We learn a number of local cultural points, but nothing of note. We arrive back at our inn at dusk and find a reply arrived less than an hour ago. We have an appointment at the Roasted Hog, a fancy inn by the market, an hour after sunset. Our plan is to let Grendal do the talking, as the human with the best social skills. Everyone quickly tidies up. I glide out over the city to inform Drum of the day's events and find formal attire. I have nothing semi-formal, so it's the full Coya Inca act. This wasn't part of our prearranged plan, but I'm sure they will cope.

The Coya Vaithu Yacuna Invades Bald Hill

I sweep into the human drinking wallow. Many of the normal denizens have been replaced with liveried flunkies. I state I am to be escorted into the presence of Sir Warren. There is a short delay due to the incompetence of a guard who is trying to play mind games. Loxi & Grendal toss their cloaks over him as they stroll by.

The private room reeks of humanity. Sir Warren, his master at arms Captain Godfrey, and his mage Hans are sitting. They refuse to rise or even acknowledge as I enter the room. Technically, their hearts should be ripped from their chests and they should then be thrown over a cliff. Even under rules of human etiquette, it is rude. There are several thugs lurking in corners. I sit at the head of the table, flanked by Lord Grendal and Father Phaeton. Loxi stands at Grendal's shoulder. Sir Gok and our Human counter-lurk near the guards, heavily armed and muscled.

I introduce myself and the seated figures, and lean on Sir Warren until he returns the courtesy. Meanwhile, Hans the earth mage is frantically writing as he

turns paler after each D.A. Loxi toys with the guard, ordering drinks and later dinner. Sir Warren is a little thrown by reading the list of colleges. Later we find out that many of the colleges are unknown here, as is such a concentration of mages.

I state that we are here to stop the killing of humans and dragons. Despite his request, I refuse to threaten Sir Warren. Sir Warren admits that he and his group are blood-sworn to hunt any dragon that Sir Konrad wants. This was from their overly-enthusiastic youth, during the slaying of the initial dragon. Sir Warren is bored of killing dragons and wants to move into geo-politics. I intimate that we can assist, but don't lay out our full plan. He says that we must (*!must!*) meet with Sir Konrad, who is due in Bald Hill for the tourney in a little over a month, but is currently in a town around 400 miles away. I suggest that it would be unsafe for the town if we stay for an entire month, and that we could see Sir Konrad tomorrow, if he wished. He is thrown, which means he is not used to celestial or air flight, but adds another 300 miles to the distance. I don't raise the time estimate, but offer that he could travel to see Sir Konrad with us if he was free in the next few days. He prevaricates again.

We make small talk over the first course of dinner. Grendal and the rest of the group have said very little. Certainly I have left enough pauses, and Sir Warren will ignore anything said unless followed up with a good hard stare. He's either completely thrown, or closing down and refusing to commit. He can tell when he is outclassed – a good sign in a human. Not that it makes him any more polite.

Over the second course, I contemplate getting a little imperious and seeing how he reacts. I decide to remain understated. The rest of the dinner passes reasonably politely, with small talk about the tourney and the harvests. Sir Warren promises he will let us know whether he can travel with us by tomorrow. They excuse themselves from my presence, and return to the castle, carrying the unfortunate Hans, whose nerve-steadying had gone a little far.

This gives an opportunity for us to eat properly, and dissect the evening. On the surface, we are very happy with the initial contact and where we feel the momentum of negotiations lies. The only worry is that our over-confidence may cause us to discount countermoves by our opponents or third parties. We return to our inn, and resume a normal watch schedule.

We certainly need to get more intelligence out of Sir Warren. We will need to get information on Vandra and Emma, the two most dangerous members of his gang. These are the people who can take us down, if any of them can. We should also take him with us, as he will provide an element of trust and soften Sir Konrad up for us.

Why you shouldn't threaten Local Lords

11th Thaw. Around half an hour before dawn, Grendal & Phaeton are awoken from a light doze by the repeated ringing of the bell at the inn's front gate. By the time they have cast prep spells and looked out the window, the kitchen has sent out someone to let in a small figure leading a little grey pony. Telepathy informs them this is a messenger for Lord Grendal. They wait, and then Grendal intercepts the liveried page at the top of the stairway. He is Robert, a bastard son of Sir Warren. He says that Sir Warren regrets to inform us that he will not be able to get away, and recommends that we leave immediately. We are to take the page as a token of Sir Warren's commitment. While they are digesting this, a louder commotion erupts outside.

The sound of thirty armoured horsemen cantering up to the inn and reining to a sudden stop finally reaches the keen ears of our watchmen, and they decide to wake the rest of the party, just as the inn gate is being broken down.

Three Shadow Wings, three Star Wings, a Disguise or two, and a Rodentification on Robert prepare us for departure within forty seconds. The rest of us pack and distribute gear. The intruders coming running up the stairs as everyone out leaps out of the windows and fly over the heads of guards armed with spears (but no bows). I run harassment for a while as I check them out. They appear to serve the local lord, Lord Manfred, who is Sir Warren's father.

Intrigued, I fly into the Bald Hill Keep, and make my way to the Great Hall. There Lord Manfred is letting loose on his son, his advisors, and anything not nailed down. Despite judging this to be a poor time to make a first formal contact, our pressing schedule forces me into stepping off the ceiling beams and descending air stairs to his throne. I greet him and offer to discuss the situation. Eventually, concern for his health forces me to retire, as his apoplexy nearly causes him to explode.

We regroup in the forest at Drum's lair a few minutes later. At dawn, we head off on pure Star Wings. It's a long haul after an early start. After around 10 hours on the wing, we find a friendly grove of trees and camp for the night. Watches are had, and a good night's sleep, given the conditions.

What the Page said

That evening we ask Robert a few hard questions, and he turns out to have a good head for detail – unsurprising given his political situation.

- Robert is Warren's son; he has a little sister and a baby half brother. His mother was a seamstress at a tailor's that his father's family used, back when they were both young ...
- She has since married a carpenter from a village east of Bald Hill. Robert came to live with his father last summer to learn to be a warrior.
- His father sends money to help support his sister, when she is older she will come to Bald Hill too. It is a custom supported by the temples of the Great mother Goddess that fathers should support all their children in some form.
- It is acceptable for young unmarried men of rank to have bastard children, ladies are expected to be more discrete and to buy a charm from the temple of the Great Mother Goddess to prevent pregnancy.
- Once the men marry it is only acceptable to add to the children of a prior mistress.
- Robert's tutors tell him that this practice helped the old imperials to secure territory quickly as it effectively makes huge increases in the Imperial population in a single generation.
- Although he is the only son he is known as a Second Son or Younger Son as he can't inherit certain titles and lands - he can settle/conquer land or be appointed as a commander, administrator etc. just like any other younger noble son.
- Even if his father doesn't marry and have more children, he still can't inherit his father's estates.
- His Grandfather Lord Manfred sent the men to fetch us.
- Sir Warren gave Robert a message for Lord Grendal and sent him off before going to see the Lord.
- He wasn't hopeful of sorting it out before the Lord sent anyone out, the Lord is rather strong-willed and hot-tempered and has been in a black mood all month.
- Hans was drunk; he came back and spent most of the night sick - one of the kitchen women he is friendly with was looking after him. He said stuff to her, she passed it on in gossip to the kitchen staff, was overheard by a guard who told an officer, who told the Lord. Mithros knows how garbled and incorrect the information was, but he sent for Warren, Hans and Godfrey.
- Robert heard from the maid who came to wake him that the Lord was in a state fit to be tied because Warren had been consorting with foreign mages from across the sea hired by the Guilds to magic the dragon down river to sink the Lord's river boats.
- Robert thought that if we could magic the dragon why not just magic the boats.
- Lord Manfred, like most of the Lords on the river, is sick of paying guild rates for shipping or carting basic stuff about inside his own lands and to

and from his neighbours, while being expected to pay for the roads, tow paths, and docks, but not being able to tax the guilds to help pay for them.

- Some old Empire law says some Guilds only pay tax to the Emperor, but the Emperor helped the lords pay for roads then too.
- He and others have tried to run their own boats, but there was a sudden rise in bandits and river pirates who hit only non-guild boats, so now he is building escort boats and patrol craft. Once he has control of the river - all of the river - and more of his own cargo boats, it will be impossible for the guilds to force the Council of Lords to back down on the tax and other issues.
- The Lord's black mood is because the Pirates recently hit boats with key supplies for arming patrol craft, stole the cargos and burned the boats. The boats had an escort but they laid a trap for the escort.

Intriguing Roland

12th Thaw. We wake bright and early, and after a hearty breakfast, we are ready for another day on Star Wings . This time, Robert is carried by Grendal. Reaching Swansford, another 70 miles downstream, we hide our Drum, and Loxi and I, with Grendal & Robert, make our way into town. Swansford is not really fortified, although it is walled. Robert leads us to Roland's pleasant little cottage in town. He is out back, reaping herbs. After a moment, the maid allows us through.

Roland is a male human, about 40ish, who smells of herbs. He is a druidic Earth mage and Herbalist with some Healer – bones but not organs, at a guess. His best spell is Lesser Enchantment (15), followed closely by Earth Elemental (14). Loxi and he talk shop for a while. He is also not keen on Dragon hunting, but bound to Sir Konrad's wishes. We assist him into realising that coming along is the best course of action. After some quickened sorting and processing of his herbs, we chivvy him inside to get ready. He comes back wearing Bronze dragon skin armour and with a massive Hand and a Half sword on his back. This is my sort of healer.

We take Roland back to camp at noon. He is a little taken aback by Drum's appearance. We talk interminably about various things, including much human humour. Eventually GoK and I start to train him for flying, but apparently Earth mages need special care when learning to fly. Loxi gives him some much simplified advice. We just have time to squeeze in a little afternoon tea before taking to the air on Star Wings.

It never Rains but it Pours

It is overcast, and the weather worsens rapidly as we fly downstream. Soon the drizzle turns to rain, and the wind picks up. Lightning flashes in the distance, and thunder becomes a steady background rumble. As the rain thickens and turns to hail, the wind starts to gust and swirl. Soon we have trouble keeping a straight flight path and level altitude. As night falls early due to the stacks of black thunderclouds covering the sky, visibility is reduced to maybe a hundred yards in the driving rain, between the rapid lightning flashes. We manage to fly for a total of maybe 4 hours. With the party in danger of drowning, getting lost, splitting up or flying into the ground, we are forced to look for shelter. We find an open barn – a roof twenty feet off the ground, with a thin layer of hay left over from the winter. The humans are comforted by the pastoral smell, and the earth mages are desperate for the feel of earth between their toes, so we land near this pathetic covering, and string up a few paltry tarpaulins to slow the near-horizontal water as it beat itself against our tired and hungry bodies. Despite my rational suggestion of finding a farmhouse, the rest of the party decide to huddle around a small and wind-blown fire, and after meagre portions of gruel, we sleep.

The night is miserable. Grendal does his best, but his waterproofing magic doesn't affect my clothes, and I am soaked to the skin and chilled, although he does stop my hair from frizzing, which saves half an hour of brushing in the morning. The thunder keeps everyone jumpy, and what with being able neither to see nor hear incoming people, and everyone, sane or otherwise, under cover for the night, watches are an exercise in futility.

13th Thaw. Eventually a watery dawn breaks, as the rain dies down to a light drizzle. We fly for three hours, drying out slowly in the cool damp air. We believe we are in the right area for the town in which we hope to meet Sir Konrad. If nothing else, if he has come through or is expected, he is a big enough hero to have people talking about him. We see a village. Roland tentatively identifies it as Beacon Hill. Grendal, Phaeton, and Roland are sent into the village with the instructions "*we want directions, dead or alive*". After they go in, Loxi and I realise our fatal flaw – why did we send the menfolk in for directions? They'll never admit they are lost.

After an hour they return from the village with a woman and two men in tow. Drum and I each take cover in our own way. Grendal and Phaeton introduce the woman as Vandra the Enchantress – the biggest risk to the mission, and they bring her back to camp alive! She's pretty enough to have the men eating out of her hand, though, and I guess you can't blame men for thinking with the wrong organ. They explain to the party how they met her.

What the Enchantress said

- Sir Konrad is due here at Beacon Hill at the junction of the Swan River and the Heron (tributary) river either later today or early tomorrow, he was within range of her Locate last night and she only has a range of about a day's travel.
- She expects him to bring a similar number of guards to her. She has 30 men. He will be travelling by horse with wagons and pack animals.
- The plan is to go up the Swan River together by horse, with the boat for the heavy stuff, pick up Roland at Swansford, and meet the others at Bald Hill just before the tourney. They would then hire on more men either there or in New Hope before going dragon hunting in the mountains.
- Konrad is 6'4" with red hair and has several scars on his arms and body. He has been using a green dragon banner for several years now and wears dark green dragon skin armour.
- He is a younger son of a younger son from one of the local less influential noble houses; few younger sons of such houses can afford to compete in the jousts in the tourneys, and the ones who can are usually employed in the guards of other more powerful and wealthy noble houses.
- Konrad's success without a patron and obvious mixed bloodlines have made him very popular with a lot of the barbarians and mixed younger sons.
- The old powerful noble houses would be more worried about his barbarian and minor noble following if he was more political and less interested in killing giants, centaurs, dragons and other monsters.
- He draws a lot of the restless youth off dragon and monster hunting with him.
- Vandra, Warren and Konrad all have skill in command although Warren is the best at it; each has slightly differing specialties.
- Konrad is a warrior like Warren; he is equally good with either hand. Konrad favours using Axes over Swords like a lot of the northern forest barbarians do, and has a special Great Axe he likes to use.

It is noon, and they sit down for a meal. Loxi asks what Vandra's opinion of dragon hunting is, and it appears that she too is not keen on continuing, but feels compelled by Konrad's presence. After two dragons, the rest of their group said enough, but Konrad overrode them through sheer force of will. This effect seems to be a binding by Konrad rather than a one-off geas. There is speculation that being in Konrad's vicinity, in his presence, or talking to him is enough to trigger some charm or compel – bardic voice is used as an analogy. Vandra says that Emma hasn't divined specifically for this effect, but nothing has leapt out at them.

We set a trap for Sir Konrad

It appears that we move into the plan that Loxi and I discussed when the boys were off in the village. We send an expendable into his vicinity, return and divinate, send one into his presence, return and divinate, get one to talk to him, return and divinate, and finally get one to talk to him about dragons, return and divinate. If the effects are as strong as we suspect, a quick conversation should be enough to test the change. The key points here are to send in people we (a) don't absolutely need; (b) can subdue easily; (c) don't understand the plan and niceties. This rules out Loxi and myself on (c), Drum and Grendal on (b), and Phaeton on (a). Neither the Human nor GoK are easy to stop, both have many resources available, but they are not in Grendal and Drum's league for weirdness, and are not quite up with the full plan. These are our expendables at this point. Plus Robert and Roland, if needed. I will remain in hiding as a reserve, along with Drum. This gives us sufficient movement, stealth, counter-magic, charm and brains to survive unless Sir Konrad produces an overwhelming passive area effect compel. I think I'll back off a little when he arrives.

Konrad takes the Bait

We decide that it is better to meet Sir Konrad in camp before he gets to the village of Beacon Hill. Vandra points out the direction he is in, and I head down there on Star Wings to check out where he might camp. Unfortunately, it's mid-afternoon, and he's only got six miles of road left to go. The good news is that the road travels along the edge of a swamp. In addition, the horses pulling his carts, while unimpressed with the occasional bee-sting, really don't like insubstantial sets of Star Wings appearing out the ground and cruising about under their hooves at walking pace. I think it was the sheets of sparkly lights folding over them. After determining the horses' temperament and the viscosity of the swamp, I judge that they will not be able to make the village by nightfall, and head back to report on a likely camping spot.

We give them time to calm down and extract their horses from the swamp. The party heads through town, picks up a horse and cart, and rides out to near the incoming party. There seems to be around 40 warriors from multiple clans, under green banners of dragons, led by an impressive-looking specimen, wearing green dragon skin armour and festooned with large axes. This brute is Sir Konrad. After careful instructions from Loxi, Grendal fills GoK's mind with so many hypnotisms and mind links and TPs and compels that GoK completely forgets he is only pretending to be a human barbarian. GoK swaggers over the hill to try to get Sir Konrad to use his magical convincing talent.

GoK joins the group readily enough, and falls in with Sir Konrad, chatting away about various issues, like dragon slaying, the place of women, the use of magic, how small Sir Konrad looks, why he hides behind women, why GoK can't be bothered thumping Sir Konrad, and so on. They bond fairly well. The troupe of thugs has decided to push on through the twilight to the village. Suddenly, for no discernable reason, Sir Konrad turns on GoK and draws an axe. GoK is still without a good sword, and so casts a powerful defensive spell, completely unable to remember that he had taken cold iron with him to prevent himself wantonly DA-ing people. Four seconds and two lucky blows later, Sir Konrad has broken both GoK's arms with the edge of a Great Axe. Due to his skill and invulnerability, GoK is almost untouched, rather than cut in four as his audience expects. Unfortunately, he can't raise his arms to defend himself, and after a mighty struggle, the two-score thugs manage to subdue him, and toss him into the swamp.

During the struggle, Grendal has circled their carts, and now skips into the swamp, and casts a water breathing, thereby allowing GoK to maintain his newly lowered profile, and avoid losing any dignity. I skip ahead to the village and book two rooms at the inn, so that the party has somewhere to stay before the horde descends on the village. We manoeuvre GoK upstairs just in time, and Roland & Phaeton set to work on an arm each. GoK is completely unbruised, and the breaks are clean, but it will still be 20-30 hours before he is back to his magnificent best.

Sir Konrad is Quite Reasonable

That evening, Vandra & Roland greet Sir Konrad, and invite him and two of their new-found friends – Grendal and myself – to dinner. Via DA and Mind Speech, the conversation is tracked by an attentive audience. After half an hour or so, it seems that Sir Konrad has won all present over to his point of view on the hierarchy of races, and the need to wipe out all the races apart from the elves – although I think he liked the humans. I think his position is a little OOT, and some mild oppression and education would suffice, but it is not really appropriate to argue with our host.

The rest of the party are horrified, and after dinner, they try to determine how far Grendal has succumbed to Sir Konrad's evil charms. To prevent anyone taking matters into their own hands, I ensure the entire party will remain friendly. This apparently interferes with their aura readings of Sir Konrad's effects. Grendal and I wind the rest of the party up a bit, taking extreme positions, to teach them for doubting our resilience. The rest of the night is peaceful, as neither of us needs take a watch.

So we Kidnap Him

14th Thaw. At dawn we are awoken by Sir Konrad and Vandra chivvying the lads of both their entourages to start shifting large amounts of supplies from the carts to Vandra's barges. There is much to-ing and fro-ing. At a point around mid-morning, Loxi disappears somewhere. We ask around for her. No one can find her or Sir Konrad. We refuse to jump to conclusions. Loudly. Often. Publicly. Shortly after lunch, Loxi waltzes in, looking smug. She has taken Sir Konrad away to be divined by Drum. I should have realised that when I turned him into a mouse and gave him to Loxi for safe keeping. Silly me.

The divination reveals that Sir Konrad has been affected by Confusion of Tongues, Bolt of Energy, Web of Entanglement, Slowness, Illusory Bolt, Nightmares, Lightning Bolt, Thunderclap, and DTJs a few weeks ago. It will transpire later that we learn that this is when he was smiting fauns and sprites for the sin of being different from him. Sir Konrad is still under the effects of our spells and a Permanent Lesser. We take Sir Konrad back to his room, and apply enough liquor and scientifically applied leverage to ensure that when he wakes up, he will have symptoms corresponding to a bender, though no memories of it. We also learn that the only protection against Sir Konrad's golden tongue is deafness – counter spells and charms won't avail us.

We have a geo-political discussion about the travails of the nobility. It appears that the guilds that used to only pay tax to the Emperor, such as the cartage, communication and fine metallurgy (gold smiths, minters, etc.), still won't pay tax to anyone but the Emperor. They are also defending their monopolies by sinking the ships of honest nobles trying to transport their goods without being gouged by the middle classes. As there hasn't been an Emperor for some thousands of years, these corrupt guilds have been getting away with murder, highway robbery, and various social crimes for far too long. In their old plane of Frigidaire, the Military, Nobility, Merchants and Priesthood formed the four legs of governance under the seat of the Emperor. With the loss of the military and the Emperor, the checks and balances on the bourgeoisie have been lost. To rectify this, we need a revolution where the ruling classes and the proletariat rise up and crush the mercantile classes between them. Most of the party don't quite get it – but what's new?

By mid afternoon, we decide to leave Roland, Robert, Vandra, et al. We head out of town, meet up with Drum, and start discussing our options. Suddenly, Drum tries to kill GoK. Fortunately, GoK is still invulnerable, and is only eviscerated. It appears that Sir Konrad got to Drum during the divination. To remind Drum to learn tolerance, he is given GoK to take away to Paradise and get healed. The rest of us are dispatched to the seaside for a holiday by Loxi. She is the only one to spend time alone with Sir Konrad, so we are wary, but decide to play along.

Why you shouldn't go on Loxi's Summer Camp

We walk away from Beacon Hill for an hour or so. Then Phaeton pulls out a huge roll of brightly-coloured silk with lots of really strong silk cords. We quickly turn it into a tent for him. Phaeton likes how his tent is so finely crafted that it is lighter than the roll of silk it comes from. With the remnant, we whip up a garrotte or five, and measure out enough cloth for a number of ball gowns. The night is peaceful, apart from the watches on Grendal and Loxi, who may still be under Sir Konrad's influence.

15th Thaw. At dawn we wake, eat a light breakfast, and then fly for over six hours. We land, eat a paltry lunch, and fly until just before dusk, where we find a desolate plain, and make do with meagre rations and a nearly cold camp. Someone forgot the tents, the food, the firewood, and the giant who could pull them all out of his ... anyway, we all pitch in, and it could be worse. Phaeton is pretty tired after using up four of my enhances on Star Wings, and in a moment of weakness, reveals his grand plan – we should just kill all the humans. Loxi prevents us from putting this plan to the vote.

16th Thaw. At dawn, we wake, eat a light breakfast, and then fly for over six hours. We see signs of large houses in the area we believe has hill giants. There are a number of burnt-out ruins, but we wander up to one of the occupied steadings, and we have a proper-sized lunch with them, in return for helping out with a few chores. We learn about the evil Sir Konrad, scourge of everything civilised, and the depredations on the hill giants, and their neighbours, the satyrs. We talk about possible alliances, and they direct us to their chieftain, to the north. We take our leave after an hour or so, and take to the air. The hour was apparently our holiday. Loxi is a tough task master. At dusk we come across last night's campsite, and have another inadequate dinner.

17th Thaw. At dawn we wake, eat a scanty breakfast, and then fly for over six hours. We land, eat a measly lunch, and fly until just before dusk, where we see Beacon Hill. The inn serves a reasonable meal, but we are too tired to enjoy it.

18th Thaw. At dawn we wake, and fly for over six hours. We land, eat a snack, and fly until mid-afternoon, to Swansford. We camp outside town, and settle down to see if Drum & GoK make it back from their 2,000 mile round trip before the locals sail the 300 miles up the river. We rest.

A Solution Nears

21st Thaw. Drum comes back alone – GoK needs some weeks of healing. It's close, but we just have time to brief Drum over afternoon tea as the ship is docking. Roland goes straight to his house with Robert, and we pick them up there. Roland is glad to be away from Sir Konrad – now that he understands the dire influence Sir Konrad carries, he is quite blunt. He has been doing a lot of solo meditation to avoid Sir Konrad, and is nearly free from his influence. With friends like Sir Konrad, Roland doesn't need enemies, which is fortunate – because we decided not to be his enemies. We wander upstream on foot, and then as dusk sets in, Grendal whips up a little riverboat, and we sleep as we travel upstream at 16 knots.

22nd Thaw. We make nearly 200 miles overnight. We scatter our boat, and fly towards Bald Hill. By noon, its familiar outline is before us. We land in our old campsite, and send Robert in to find his little grey pony. An hour or two later, Sir Warren and Robert wend their way through the tourney fields to our campfire. Roland and the rest of us brief Sir Warren, and we talk about possible options for the empire and for Sir Konrad. Sir Warren is disturbed when we point out how such a charismatic loose cannon could affect the stability and strength of the empire. Sir Warren is keen on his life-long friend and comrade-in-arms having a tragic accident on the tourney field, or maybe just falling off a boat. Remind me not to annoy this man and leave him alive! The rest of us have stronger morals, and would prefer to see Sir Konrad geased if possible. We hope that Father Thomas of New Hope, a priest of Mithros recommended by DiamondFlame, may be powerful enough to lay a Full Geas on Sir Konrad. Sir Warren decides to head back to his father's castle with Robert, while Roland proceeds with us, being a priest of Mithros himself. Grendal & Phaeton nap on and off through this conversation, being pushed fairly hard. Then its up and away for the last few hours of daylight, and another camp on the hard ground.

23rd Thaw. I'm starting to wake automatically at dawn by now. Adventuring is not good for one's biorhythms. We fly upstream for another set of wings, and land outside New Hope with half a hour to spare. After a cup of tea, we head into New Hope itself. We take Drum into the city, cloaked, hooded, and invisible. Keeping the invisibility on him while we walk through the city for half an hour drains me as much as a party's worth of wings. We finally reach a big, flash temple, and head in to talk to Father Thomas. Roland knows his way around, and strides past the acolytes, straight to the Deacon. He directs us to Thomas, who is in the library.

Doubting Thomas

The library is full of books and thousands of scrolls, mainly sealed in large jars or stored on racks. There is an old human man in a corner, reading scrolls. This is Thomas. He has the spark of divine madness in his eyes, and agrees to our proposal quickly. Unfortunately, we can tell at a glance that he doesn't know Full Geas, and, as it turns out, he wouldn't cast a geas against someone's will anyway. He is introduced to Drum, and is interested to meet another servant of the guardians. It seems that Father Thomas is a minion of DiamondFlame too.

He is much more interested in finding a particular a scroll or book about the history of the Guardians on this plane than in helping us. Eventually he casts Mind Speech (there are no mind mages on this plane) and admits that this book he is questing for will actually have to be written by him. He is completing his notes now, and will write it on ancient parchment with old inks in the scratchy handwriting of yore. To my mind, it somehow makes a mockery of religious scholarship, but the religious scholars, who both have similar documents *on their persons* from Frigidaire, are completely happy to help with this, so they rest of us also are helpful.

Phaeton explains *"Thomas isn't writing a fake religious document. He is just faking its age. Just because someone failed to write a few important things down when the imperial ancestors moved in all those years ago doesn't make it any less the truth. The trouble with religious types is they like to take things on faith; if you have a living author they are mortal, fallible and you are able to question them, whereas if it was written by someone long dead then you have to believe it to be true, as you can't debate with the dead."* As a pactee to Dionecht, an analogue of Mithros, I guess he knows about these things.

We agree that he will make his way down-stream shortly, and be at Bald Hill by the 12th of Seed and stay for the Tourney in case we need some geases for the rest of Team Konrad. He will write and then find the holy scrolls and return here to New Hope, the religious centre of the baronies, by Summer Solstice for the announcement of the discovery. It seems religion is as scripted as the rest of politics. I may need to learn more about it.

We say our good-byes to Thomas the "mad old duffer" – who is also an agent of Mithros and a servant of dragons, as well as a con-artist, a forger, and a philosopher / theologian. I think his absent-mindedness is a put-up job as well. Father Thomas is added to my little black book of people not to casually annoy. Making our way out of the city, we plan briefly, before contemplating whether its worth taking to the skies for an afternoon hop, or doing a double-flight tomorrow.

Biding our Time

24th Thaw. Over the next few days, we fly at a more moderate pace back to Swansford. We have time to stop and examine a couple of possible camp sites that may be used by the heroes as they sail from Swansford towards Bald Hill. We also discuss travel patterns, camp routines, and come up with many improbable plans for helping Sir Konrad.

- My favourite is kidnapping him from his horse as he rides with his men.
- swapping Grendal (disguised) for him.
- just kidnapping his horse.
- putting up enough mist and darkness that no one notices he is gone
- For practical reasons, I prefer simply planting a skin change on him, and then picking up the mouse and vanishing before anyone notices
- Of course, using magic would remove any style element. Leaping onto his horse from a tree, knife to the throat, and telling his troops "move and he gets it" and then riding off with him would be the pure solution, but the mages don't get it.

We decide that all these plans are too much fun and therefore risky. I suggest explaining the situation to Konrad and seeing if he will come along quietly. Loxi's policy is *"As adventurers, we are doing something wrong if we need to tell the truth"*. When I point out that lying is wrong, she is confused.

27th Thaw. Roland arrives back at Swansford from his "meditation retreat".

28th Thaw. Roland, Vandra and Sir Konrad leave Swansford bright and early. They travel a couple of days observed by us, travelling and camping much as Roland said they would and covering about 30 miles a day.

30th Thaw. The heroes' camp this night is around 90 miles upstream of Swansford. The camp has 8 pickets. Loxi & I stroll into camp after dinner, eat some of their stew, subdue Konrad with a single blow, place him and most of his gear onto his camp bed, and carry him out of camp. The guards fail to notice anything. This is why you never have only humans on watch. We take to the water, using mage current for 5 hours, to get out of Locate range. We are only a few miles from Swansford again.

1st Seedtime. We talk to Konrad. He is not willing to entertain reason. We want to discuss the situation. Loxi sticks blades in him. He won't talk. We point out we will have to hurt and eventually kill him if he doesn't talk. Phaeton theologises for a couple of hours. Even this doesn't break him. I drop him to the centre of the earth to prevent the party from torturing him until he is a broken husk willing to agree to anything to stop the suffering. A man of principles needs to be respected.

Treaties and Tournays

2nd Seedtime. We make sure we are seen around Bald Hill as an alibi. Sir Warren approaches Lord Manfred, who is a little less apoplectic. Not that he's that willing to meet with us. We rest, train and work on treaty text for a week.

9th Seedtime. Gloin and Emma arrive in Bald Hill. They stay at the Roasted Hog. We avoid them, as a Domani Namer is unpredictable.

12th Seedtime. Roland, Vandra and entourage have not yet arrived. We pick them up in the morning. Their luggage and guards arrive after lunch on the 13th.

14th Seedtime. The Tourney starts. A couple of us participate, for good will. Without magic, we are happy to be eliminated in the early rounds.

15th Seedtime. Father Thomas officiates at the Peace & co-Prosperity Treaty signing, geasing everyone involved. The surviving heroes sign on behalf of humanity. Drum signs on behalf of the Guardians. I sign as the highest-ranking Elf on the plane. No treaty is significant unless the elves are signatories. We are geased to not make war on each other's species, nor to use each other for sport or commerce. Setting fire to each other's forests or consuming our livestock on a large scale is also forbidden. I send a copy to the Elven Forest so they know what we have agreed to.

While it is not part of the treaty, it is suggested that wearing the skin of your ex-enemy's children is not in good taste. We collect all the armour and dragon skulls.

The word around Bald Hill is that Sir Konrad has gone missing and Sir Warren has used some form of magic to tame the Dragon and save the Mountain villages.

Emma's prediction that the previous dragon kill was going to be their last, made on the way back last year, has been recalled by some of Vanda and Sir Warren's people.

Sir Konrad talked everyone into ignoring it at the time, but with him gone, the events at Beacon Hill, with the ghosts and the unnatural GoK, are being told by Vanda's men. Some people are suggesting either he is missing because he lost his nerve or the ghosts got him, and that is what the astrology reading meant. This is all true enough so that we aren't forced to correct anyone.

Gaining the Trust of Lord Manfred

For some reason, the disappearance of Sir Konrad, the unexpected treaty, the arrival of Father Thomas on a religious quest, and our continual appearances and disappearances have not led Lord Manfred to trust us. This despite our initial explanation to him covering all of this (except the religious quest). We offer our services in any minor tasks, explicitly to ensure that future employment would be available to the guild, and to assist him in reforming the Empire. This still doesn't fill him with love and understanding.

However, a barge of pig iron went missing on the way from Stone Mountain. This was one of the few non-Guild ships, and the iron is an essential element in the war plan. There is another load coming down shortly. We volunteer to guard the shipment and recover the old shipment if possible. Our charge is "goodwill".

16th Seedtime. We head up the Stony River (which leads to Stone Mountain). After 200 miles there is a tributary to the north, which we explore, but it is not navigable for far. Another 50 miles on, we find a village and descend on it for dinner. The locals claim that no barge came through at the appropriate time. There are lots of bandits, but they appear to be local scavengers, or from rival villages, mainly across the river.

17th Seedtime. We fly a full 230 miles to the end of the navigable part of the main river, where it starts to descend from Stone Mountain. There is a path from the village on the river up a winding path to the dwarven mines. It is roughly half a day's walk. We send the humans into town to find out when the pig iron shipment is expected to leave. – two to three days.

We fly back 100-odd miles and land at a river-side village. Talking to the headman reveals that the barge didn't pass by, but that their hunters did see it burn a day upstream. Across the river and upstream a ways is a collection of "bad" villages, with more people and better weapons. We sleep at the village.

18th Seedtime. We wake Phaeton with the instructions "Breakfast, then wings". We search up the river and find the sunken barge. There is no pig iron. The barge was burnt to the waterline. There was no magic used on the boat that we could find. Hundreds of yards upstream we find a burnt hawser tied to a tree, and many bolt heads, helmets and a few weapons in the water. It looks like the barge was ambushed, the crew killed, and then the boat tied up, unloaded, then set alight to float downstream & sink. We scout villages from the air and rest until nightfall. That night, we break into a water party and a forest party, and sneak into six villages, searching for bandits, wounded and iron. No luck.

We slaughter some helpless ambushers

19th Seedtime. We return upstream to the mine and catch the barge. I sleep (invisibly) on the barge. Loxi & Drum walk on either side of the river through the forest. Grendal, Phaeton and Human drift down under the boat in a magic current. As the only visible protector, I assure the captain and crew that I will keep them safe. They seem a little doubtful that a single small person can defend the barge while asleep.

20th Seedtime through 26th Seedtime. I get back to a proper diurnal sleep pattern. The others don't seem to mind being awake and marching/swimming during the day and taking watches during the night, but it's all a bit too much like hard work for me.

27th Seedtime. I am woken up after lunch by Mind Speech informing us there are scouts. Drum shoots one with a siege arbalest. Loxi sneaks up to the other and hangs him from his own watch tree. Neither lets off an alarm. We drift a little further downstream until we detect the waiting ambushers. Loxi puts walls of stone around most of one bank. The others close with the remaining attackers. By the time I draw my weapons and say "surrender", the fight is over. One attacker dies. One gets away. The rest are rounded up, put on our boat, and we go downstream with Grendal powering the boat at a substantially faster rate. We reach Bald Hill by the end of the **28th Seedtime.** We then wait for the interrogation, confirmation, recovery of some of the remaining iron, and some kind of payment.

Konrad's spare gear

- A magic Broad Sword (+ 3 dam + 15 SC)
- A magic Great Axe (+3 dam, +10 SC)
- 3 Healing Potions,
- 6 Waters of Healing (water mages come to the port of Swansmouth)
- A Silvered Hand and half made by Gloin (+1 dam +1 SC)
- A Silvered Dagger to match.
- A Silvered Rapier, by Gloin (+1 dam +1 SC)
- A Main Gauche to match.
- A heavy Crossbow and 20 quarrels
- Lance & Kite shield
- His dark green dragon skin Armour (Rank 10 Armourer)
- Amulets of luck, diamond, jade, betony, aquilegias, amethyst, and elderflower
- Silvered spurs
- Camp bed and bed furs

Wrap-up and Return

4th of Blossom. We finally have a formal interview with Lord Manfred. He still doesn't seem that stable, but we are gracious and kind to him. We assure him that when he is ready for his surprise attack on the rest of the river, the Guild will be available to help, and that he can contact us via Father Thomas.

5th Blossom. We fly to New Hope. Grendal has fallen in with a bad influence – namely Vandra the Enchantress – and wishes to stay on Rue, having a few adventures with her and seeing more of the world. There was something said about command of a ship and her father's homeland across the sea, but I suspect this was only part of the offer's attraction. I never realised that Grendal preferred blondes.

6th Blossom. We fly to the Rue/Sol portal. From there the Paradise settlement on Sol is just over two hours flight (around 75 miles from the Sol portal). We reach Paradise's Adventurer House before nightfall, where Sheminah, GoK, and assorted other adventurers are staying. Adventurer House, is a four room rough-cut timber and thatch cottage. Guild adventurers stay there rather than the unfinished inn. The inn is functional enough to provide food and drink, but not yet accommodation.

7th Blossom. We rest until the evening. That day Drum arranges with StarSong for our transport – excluding Phaeton. Shortly after dark Starsong in full dragon form meets us a short distance out of the village – musn't frighten her Humans with a big scary Dragon. She gives us all a ride back to the same field in Carzala we left from just over 2 months earlier.

On the trip back we are joined by a Wood Elf called Menolly and her puppy. Menolly is a two adventure pacifist Earth mage who stayed on over the winter to teach Elvish to some of the settlers, and in the spring went to trade with the centaurs for the puppy. **8th Blossom.** We are debriefed by the Guild. The guild charges on Drum for assaulting GoK do not get taken any further, for some reason.

30 Blossom. Phaeton is Expulsed by Cornelius Livingston the Namer to the point in the sky where he left Alusia. He arrives in time for the Guild Meeting, having learned a counter-spell as well as researching all of the Livingston journals. Phaeton also helps train the local healers.

The other method home is that there is a portal route from Paradise to Pasifica. It is dangerous and without transport magic takes about a week, and then there is a sea voyage back to Seagate; a ship usually leaves Pasifica for Seagate on the 10th day of the last month of the season. This is how the Settlers get to the guild.

Rough Map of Rue

