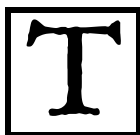


Day 2: The Subtlety of a Falling Hammer



he safehouse of the resistance smelled like reheated soup, damp leather, and fear. Not the group's fear—no, they were mostly just hungry—but the fear of the young rebel watching them from the corner, hands trembling around a chipped tin cup. They had only arrived a few hours earlier, fresh from an "incident" at a tunnel checkpoint that ended with two unconscious soldiers and Korin at the brink of death. Since then, the trio had earned a mix of admiration and unease from the local resistance.

"They could've compromised everything," someone muttered.

"They didn't," someone else countered.

And so, to either thank them or get rid of them (likely a bit of both), the rebels offered a place to stay and a mission that would be discussed the next day. Some sort of loyalty trial.

The Crossing of the Bioluminescent Lake

First in the so-called morning, the rebel leader, Kara, told them about the mission. Something simple. Harmless, even. No need for violence—ideally. Just sabotage. Their task was clear: A supply depot on the far shore of the glowing lake was preparing a shipment—likely military equipment or, worse, tools of oppression disguised as “development kits.” The group had to reach the depot, infiltrate it without drawing attention, and ensure nothing ever left that building.

Simple.

Crossing the lake was oddly tranquil. The adventurers had arranged a small boat from a simple and gentle lizarfolk fisherman, who agreed to rent it to them in exchange for a handful of coins. As he handed them the oars, he scratched the back of his scaly head and mumbled, almost as if to himself, “People say those who go into the water never come back. Some say it’s the current. Others whisper about shadows in the depths. But...who knows?”

The trip was slow—the boat groaned under Garlak's weight and armor—but it offered them a rare moment of peace.

The lake was the primary source of light for the cavern-city of Ner Darul, glowing with an eerie, bluish bioluminescence that painted the water in soft ripples of silver and cyan. Beneath the surface, shapes stirred: blind eels, flickering algae, maybe even some long-forgotten creatures only legends talk about these days.

Trista kept her hand tucked in the satchel tied around her waist, touching and playing with her four little colored rocks, as a lucky charm.

Garlak tried to count how many swings it would take to cleave the lake in two. Emeryn just stared ahead, always scanning, the only one alert during the entire time.



A simple plan... until Garlak spoke

Once they reached the far shore, the depot came into view, low against the cavern wall, square and dull, with a few crates stacked outside. It looked like a warehouse that had forgotten it was supposed to be guarded. Two soldiers stood near the front, leaning lazily against spears and swapping jokes, while from a back window, soft lamplight spilled out onto the gravel.

“Looks manageable,” Trista whispered.

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” said Emeryn.

Garlak grunted. “Window’s our best shot. I’ll handle it.”

And that’s where it all began to crumble.

Peeking through the dusty pane, they spotted two dwarves inside, loading wooden crates with what looked like lanterns—crystal-like contraptions built for lighting, or maybe something else. Useful. Valuable. Possibly enchanted. The dwarves didn’t look armed or particularly alert.

Seeing an opportunity, Garlak—whose understanding of stealth was like a bear’s

understanding of dance—knocked hard on the glass.

“Hey! You two! You’re relieved! We’re the replacement guards—shift change!”

The dwarves blinked. One frowned. “We’re off in five minutes,” he grumbled.

When things started going south and the dwarves grew suspicious, Garlak attempted bribery, jingled a few coins in his palm while flashing a wild grin. “Even better! Here’s a little bonus if you want to speed things up. Think of it as... hazard pay.”

The dwarves hesitated for half a second, then realized something didn’t add up. One dropped a lamp. The other mouthed, “What the...?”

Before anyone could stop him, Garlak attempted diplomacy in his own special way. Coins jingled in his palm. Words about freedom, rebellion, and “sacking this dump” tumbled from his mouth in a passionate but chaotic monologue.

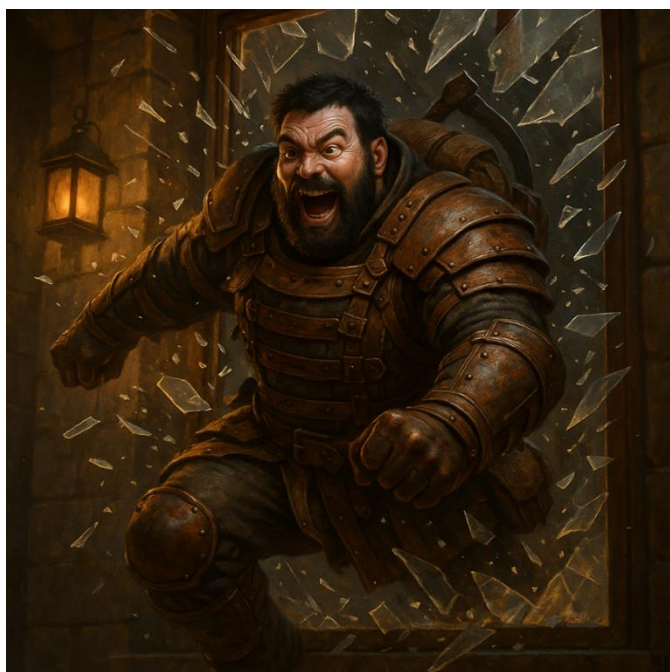
The dwarves stared. Then screamed. And bolted.

“Wait!” Garlak shouted, and with the reflexes of a mountain lion tripping over its own paws, he

hurled himself through the window—forgetting, crucially, that the window was closed.

The crash echoed across the lake. Glass shattered. Blood splattered. Garlak landed face-first on the depot floor, bleeding from a dozen cuts and embedded with glittering shards.

The dwarves didn't stick around to watch the recovery. They were already gone, shouting for help.



Emeryn sighed, readying her weapon. "Well, I guess the plan to do this quietly ends here."

Trista pulled out a small pouch of dried herbs from her satchel and tossed it through the window to Garlak.

"Here, for the bleeding!" she shouted, her voice carrying over the broken glass. "Just press them on the wound until the bleeding stops. And stay still!"

Garlak grumbled, fumbling with the herbs, but did as instructed.

Moments later, two guards rushed in from the front. Then two more—one of them clad in dark robes, the air around him humming faintly. The other moved stiffly, almost reluctantly, as if unsure whether to fight or flee.

the robed dwarf raised a hand and muttered a string of arcane syllables. A sharp pressure clawed at Trista's mind. Emeryn staggered slightly, blinking rapidly. But both shook it off, wills hardened by battle and conviction.

"Nope," Emeryn hissed, eyes narrowing. "Not today."

Trista charged in, morningstar swinging before the guards could even finish shouting. The clash of metal and the dull thud of bodies hitting the gravel marked the rhythm of the fight. Emeryn moved with lethal grace, parrying and disarming with mechanical efficiency. Trista, on the other hand, danced between strikes, her morningstar crashing against armor with brutal force, her shield deflecting blows with practiced ease but the impacts end up cracking the frame.

Garlak, meanwhile, was applying herbs and growling through the pain. He managed to stop the bleeding and haul himself to his feet, face still glinting with fragments of glass. Through the haze of blood and shame, he saw the dwarves fleeing toward the city and his friends battling outside. He leapt back out of the window—this time correctly, through the hole he'd made.

The fight was nearly over. Two guards lay groaning on the ground; only the sorcerer and the hesitant young guard remained.

Then the tide turned when the stiff-moving guard suddenly spun and slammed the butt of his spear into the robbed dwarf's ribs, knocking the breath from his lungs and breaking the

rhythm of his chants, giving Trista and Emeryn the chance to bring him down.

The remaining guard—the hesitant one—stood with his hands raised.

“Name’s Rurik,” he muttered. “I’m with the resistance. I infiltrated this post a year ago.”

That changed things.

“Can’t have them knowing you helped us,” Emeryn said, almost afraid for the poor man’s life.

“Right,” Rurik nodded. “So, you’ll rough me up a bit, tie me up. Make it look like you beat me.”

Garlak stepped forward. Big mistake.

With a single punch, Garlak sent Rurik flying into a stack of rocks. The guard-slash-spy crumpled like wet parchment. Trista winced.

“...Too much?” Garlak asked.

“He’ll survive,” Trista muttered, checking the poor man’s jaw. “Eventually.”

They bound him and left him in the depot with the other three guards, half-conscious but convincingly ‘beaten.’

Sinking evidence, floating problems

The only thing left to do was tend to their wounds and get rid of the cargo.

They regrouped, inside the depot.

Garlak grunted. "They ran off too fast. Didn't even fight."

"They saw you try to negotiate," Trista smirked. "That'd scare anyone."

Emeryn gave a faint smile, then nodded towards the crates. "We've got work to do. Any ideas?"

They hadn't planned this so well. They had no way to set the crates on fire or destroy them, smashing would take too long, even for Garlak.

"We can throw them into the lake" Garlak smiled with a crate in his hands.

"It's the only plan we have" replied Trista looking at Emeryn.

"Sounds better than nothing" They look at each other.

The crates were supposed to sink quickly to avoid detection. Yet, when Garlak tossed the first one into the lake, it bobbed up like driftwood, floating defiantly on the shimmering

surface. His eyes met Emeryn's, confusion evident.

"Are they supposed to...float?" he whispered.

She shook her head, already reaching for a pole to push it under. Trista cursed under her breath, glancing back at the glow of the city on the opposite shore. If anyone saw those crates, their sabotage would be exposed before it even began. After a few tense moments, the crates finally sank, leaving only ripples behind.



Then, one by one, they dragged the crates outside and threw them into the lake.

Once the last crate sank and the ripples faded, they rowed silently to the far shore, their

breaths synchronized with the soft creaking of the boat.

Mission accomplished.

In a very Garlak kind of way.

The reward of the disaster

Back at the resistance hideout, things were... tense.

“You destroyed the window?” Talia frowned at the adventurers.

“Yes.” Responded Emeryn quickly

“Punched an informant?” added Kara, as the things got tenser and tenser

“He said to.” Emeryn responded quickly again

“And bled all over the cargo floor?” Kara continued

“I fixed it. Mostly.” replied Garlak confidently.

Despite the chaos, the mission had succeeded. The shipment was gone. The guards were defeated. No names exposed.

But the noise, the broken glass trail, the injured guards—it was too much. The rebels feared Imperial retaliation. They wouldn’t turn the

group in... but they wouldn't house them anymore either. It was time to leave.

"We should get out of the city," Trista said, packing up her things.

"I agree," Emeryn added. "We've drawn too much attention."

"We can go outside," Garlak said with thirst for adventure.

Everyone turned.

Emeryn and Trista looked uncertain.

Outside wasn't a place people went for more than a few hours. Living there was a myth. No light. No warmth. No walls.

"Going outside is madness. It's safer if you go to another city and start anew," said Kara, breaking the silence.

"I can arrange for you to arrive safely at Nor Badur."

She paused, her eyes sharp.

"But you must follow our rules."

Another pause.

"Then, you're on your own."

Everyone nodded.

Kara gestured to Talia and Farrin with her head.
"Make the preparations, they will leave
tomorrow with the first bell."

Talia and Farrin left the building.

The adventurers returned to the room to
prepare... tired, but strangely proud. The
mission had been a mess. But the job got done.
That was enough. As they made their
preparations for the journey into the darkness of
the tunnels, Garlak leaned toward Trista.

"Next time," he said, "you do the knocking."

