

REIGN OF WINTER



THE WINTERMARKET

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: THE BONEDUST DOLLS 1 OF 6

Esteemed members of the Decemvirate, my name is Norret Gantier. As I am Galtan, I trust you to redact my name from these proceedings, or simply delay publication until such date as I am no longer alive or likely to become so again. Yet despite this need for anonymity, I hope that this missive and the secrets contained within will be sufficient to earn me a place in your august Society.

That said, let me lay out the matter of “The Bonedust Dolls” as it transpired.

Spring had come early to Isarn. It was the morning after Merrymead and its attendant costume balls, and everyone was nursing hangovers, at least in the Eglantine House. My friend and occasional paramour Mistress Philomela had engaged my services to build the temple of Calistria

a still to turn their copious supplies of young mead into a Five Kings Mountains liqueur that translates from the Dwarven as, roughly, “you’ve been mauled by a bear.” Certainly that is what it felt like. Dr. Orontius—the noted arcane scholar and one of our oldest tenants—and I were taking as tonic a bit of the bear that mauled us while we lounged in his apartments.

“The Osirians do not hold the record, however,” the good doctor, still dressed like a sphinx, pontificated on his latest metaphysical tangent. “While some of them believe the soul may be divided into five parts—six if you count the body, and nine if you go with certain heresies—there are philosophers in Tian Xia who say the soul can be divided into two, three, ten, or even a dozen separate pieces. However, losing one or more of these parts generally results

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in some significant handicap—being without one’s shadow, one’s conscience, even the ability to die no matter how much one might wish it.” He ticked off his points on the claws of his lion-pawed gloves. “Have you read of any of this in your studies of alchemy?”

“A bit,” I admitted, omitting the fact that since my brother Orlin’s resurrection, he had been suffering some metaphysical peculiarities. “My scholarship in Tian alchemy is sadly lacking.”

“As is mine,” Dr. Orontius commiserated. “The older I grow, the more lacunae come to light. That said, the most tantalizing fragment of necromantic knowledge I lack is held by the Jadwiga, the witches of Irrisen. The common folk whisper that by their craft—the otherworldly secrets taught by their ancestress, the witch queen Baba Yaga—the Jadwiga can steal the tiniest shard of a soul, so slight that the former owner will scarcely miss it.”

“You make it sound like a cook sneaking out a sliver of cake, then icing it over before serving.” The speaker was Orlin. Just turned twelve, he had become a fair chef. He was back in his usual clothes rather than his costume from the night, before when he had gone as Gigas Minor, the young giant.

I am tall as well, so had gone as Gigas Major, all the while acutely aware that I was wearing nothing more than a loincloth fashioned from a swatch of lionskin from before the Revolution. I suspected my club was still in Philomela’s chamber.

Orlin set a Merrymead ring on the coffee table between us.

I winced, but Dr. Orontius perked up at the prospect of sultana-studded yeast dough and honeyed frangipane. “A very astute metaphor. Indeed, the ancients baked soul cakes, and a cake may be divided into layers or slices. But the more pressing question is this: Which piece hides the bee-eater?”

He referred to the custom whereby votive trinkets were baked into the Merrymead ring. Getting the songbird in one’s slice obligated the finder to buy the next honey cake.

The good doctor dithered until the knife flew up of its own accord. It cut a slice that levitated onto a napkin and into his paws.

I believe I mentioned my brother’s “metaphysical peculiarities.” The main one of these was that, since his resurrection, he had been haunted by Rhodel, the spirit of an aging prostitute. Orlin also has a propensity for manipulating objects without using physical touch. Either of them might have been responsible.

I flipped down a lens of my monocle to ascertain which, but all I saw was my brother with his soul’s hands where they should be. Rhodel’s shade stood beside him, appearing in her preferred form as a beautiful girl of fifteen. She smiled at me, head cocked and hands clasped in a classic attitude of feigned innocence.

I flipped the lens back up. Dr. Orontius nibbled his honey cake in the awkward silence that ensued.

“You were mentioning witches stealing souls?” I prompted.

“Oh, yes.” The wizard brightened. “According to what I have read, the Jadwiga store the shards in exquisite jewels or filigreed phials.”

“To what end?”

“To what end indeed? The Pathfinder Society believes it may have something to do with the dancing huts, the fowl-legged sentries that guard Irrisen’s borders, or perhaps the porcelain crone dolls rumored to dwell within. But even the witches’ formula for porcelain is something that the winter kingdom keeps a closely guarded secret.” The old scholar took another sip of golden liqueur from a pre-Revolutionary crystal flute. “Your late duke made some inquiries into Irrisen’s porcelains, did he not?”

I cursed my loose tongue and then cursed it further with another sip of liqueur, the liquid burning like a honeyed bear claw. “That is true,” I admitted, “but even he was unable to pry loose the secret.”

I had sometime let slip that I had come into possession of the alchemical formulary of Arjan Devore, the last duke of Dabril. He had journeyed to Irrisen with his young bride, the infamous Anais Devore. While there, they had hoped to produce a “magical child”—standard alchemical code for the stone of the philosophers—and thought they might gain aid in this endeavor from “the mistress of the ivory tower.”

The last was likely an oblique reference to the white elixir, one of the two penultimate substances used to form the philosopher’s stone.

My brother cut a slice for himself and perched on the arm of a sofa. “So,” he said to Dr. Orontius, “you’re working your way up to sending us after one of these phials.”

The good doctor nearly choked on his honey cake. “Am I that transparent?”

“You are when you’re drunk.”

“Well,” said the old wizard, flustered, “it’s a bit more than that. I am a Pathfinder venture-captain, emeritus. And while I long ago retired from that august body, I find it tragic that a city as great as Isarn currently has no Pathfinder lodge, even in secret. Yet this house would make an excellent one, so I have made inquiries to the Decemvirate—mentioning those of your brother’s past exploits I am privy to, and others I suspect—and they have indicated that, as Norret is not a known operative and thus might more easily mingle in Whitethrone society, they hope he would undertake an inquiry of utmost urgency on behalf of the Society.”

“Getting you a soul phial,” Orlin surmised.

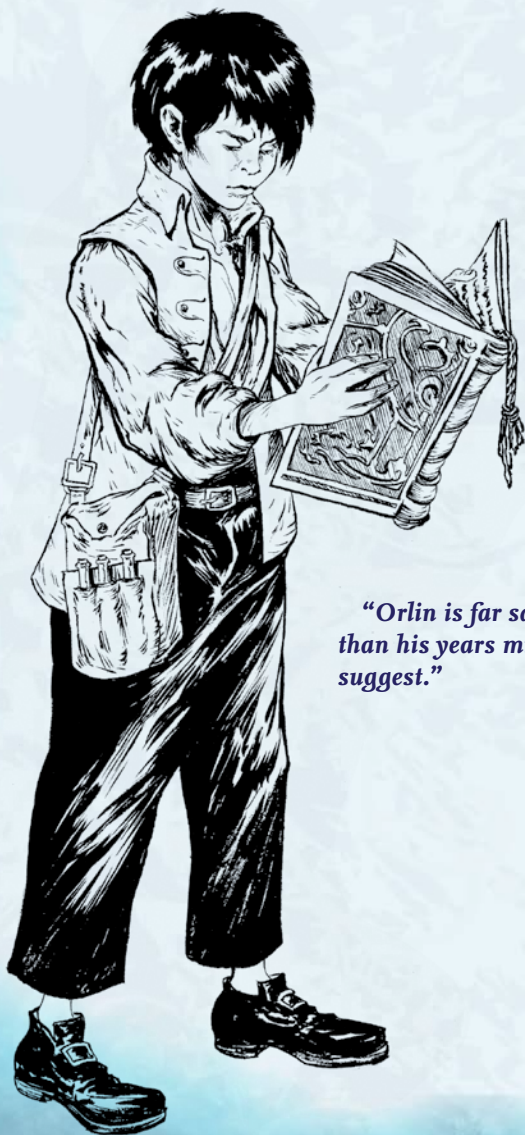
“Not just that,” said Dr. Orontius. “We’ve recovered a number of porcelain phials, but all they held was bone dust. It appears the common folk of Irrisen keep these

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as mementos of those who have passed into Pharama's Boneyard. Similarly, all the dolls we have examined, while finely crafted by the artisans of that cold realm, appear to be nothing more than playthings for the idle rich such as we used to have in Galt, and that still exist in decadent lands such as Taldor. None were the slightest bit magical or even in the form of crones. As for the porcelain shards we sent out for analysis, all our consulting alchemists could tell us was that they were unusually hard, brilliant, and lustrous."

I raised a finger as a point of order. "I believe I also posited that the sample you gave me came from Irrisen."

"And that is what caught the Decemvirate's eye!" the old wizard exclaimed. "Having a man tell you that the hardness, luster, and translucency index matches what is known of Irrisen porcelain from the time of the Forge War, after simply turning it over in his hands? That's impressive."



"Orlin is far savvier than his years might suggest."

I shrugged. Modesty is sometimes the best cover for secrecy, but in point of fact, I had been trained in the science of alchemy by Powdermaster Davin, a dwarf with an almost gnomelike passion for porcelain figurines. "You hadn't mentioned *who* I was doing that analysis for. All you told me is that the job would pay handsomely if your contacts were pleased."

"And indeed they were!" Dr. Orontius's eyes sparkled. "The Decemvirate is so pleased, in fact, that they have deputized me to make a most unusual offer: If you complete this mission, they will grant you a Pathfinder field commission—full membership, with all rights and privileges. Indeed, I myself will induct you, and pay your way south, should you wish to visit the Grand Lodge of Absalom."

I fortified myself with another dose of liqueur. Every child in the Inner Sea, even in Galt, dreamed of being a Pathfinder, of following the open road and searching for lost treasures. Or at least I did, before going to war and viewing countless horrors. Or creating them myself.

The drink burned, doing what it could to salve my conscience.

"So Norret gets to join the Pathfinders if he swipes a soul phial from the witches," Orlin concluded.

My brother has a crass method of summation, but he did put a fine point on it.

Dr. Orontius was not perturbed. "What the Decemvirate requires is not just a soul phial, but knowledge of the relevant rites and information on how they relate to Irrisen's porcelain trade, the crone dolls, and ultimately the dancing huts." The old wizard took a tiny bird-shaped charm out of his mouth and looked rather crestfallen. "Oh, look, I have found the bee-eater," he said. "Did you know that in Irrisen, rather than almonds, they stuff their Merrymead rings with poppyseed paste?"

Orlin was unimpressed. "We're not journeying anywhere with a drunken wizard."

"That can be remedied." Dr. Orontius stood with great dignity—especially impressive considering his costume with the eagle's wings and lion's tail in the back. He proceeded to a cabinet and removed a crystal flask. "Do you have that formula I asked you to prepare, Norret?"

"Yes." He had given me a recipe for some effervescent salts but no notes as to their use. "Right here." I may have forgotten my club, but an alchemist never goes anywhere without his pack. The giant's bag made a good place to conceal mine.

He took the foolscap I retrieved and expertly poured a measure into the clear liquid in the flask. It foamed violently, and he replaced the stopper just before it overflowed. Then it settled, becoming clear and sparkling as champagne.

He poured a glass for each of us. "May Calistria and Cayden overlook the indulgence." Our glasses rang, and then he downed his draught in a single swallow.

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I followed suit. It was extremely refreshing. Invigorating, in fact. Then I belched, and with the carbonation came a huge wave of alcohol fumes.

"I trust you kept some in reserve," said Dr. Orontius. "It is a formula every Pathfinder should have handy."

I was aware that somehow I had accepted Dr. Orontius's mission without ever quite formally agreeing. But the old reprobate knew me and my curiosity too well. I had gone on far more perilous errands for less.

Orlin scowled. "How long will we be gone and what should we bring?"

"Oh, perhaps a week? I understand the Frosthall Theater is mounting a revival of *Kostchtchie the Deathless*, and I was meaning to catch that anyway. They found a frost giant who can act! Can you imagine? Beyond that, simply wear your warmest clothes. Pretend it's the heart of Kuthona and then double that." Then to me, he added, "Bring your perfumer's sample case and any fireworks left from All Kings Day. The witches of Whitethrone are starved for novelty and luxury. You will find doors opening to you as a purveyor of both."

It seemed reasonable. I left and changed into my winter traveling clothes, packed a spare bottle of spirits for good measure, and came back to Dr. Orontius's suite to find my brother swathed in what looked to be the entire scarf collection left behind by the late Madame Eglantine, whom I will not speak of other than to mention that she was known for her knitting.

"You look like a Varisian carnival," I told my brother.

"It's Merrymead. Who's going to notice?" Orlin shrugged. "Besides, at least it should be warm."

Dr. Orontius had donned an over-robe, fur-lined mittens, and a matching peaked hood. He had his owl Muco upon his shoulder. "Don't count on that." He turned to face a wall crowded with landscape paintings, reached out with his catoblepas-headed walking stick, and touched one frame.

Dust disappeared and the gilding began to glow, illuminating the scene within and the brass title plaque. "*Market Square, Merchant's Quarter, Whitethrone*," the catoblepas head bleated in a tinny voice, reading it aloud.

High buildings faced the square, their slate roofs and gables frosted with snow. Market stalls lay below, tented over with swags of white canvas like snowdrifts. Lanterns punched with stars spangled the scene with white lights like the drifting snowflakes. They began to move and dance, then swirled out of the painting and around us, whirling in a blinding whiteness. Then they cleared.

I felt cold creeping through my boots. The Katapeshi rugs of Dr. Orontius's parlor had become a carpet of snow. The chill in the air was so sharp I gasped in surprise, my breath turning white.

Orlin offered me a muffler from his collection. I gratefully took it, winding it over my mouth and nose. My monocle protected my left eye, but tears started from the right.

Dr. Orontius waved his cane expansively. "Behold, the Wintermarket!"

The market appeared much like in the painting, but it was day instead of night. The sun slanted low in the east. Morning had just come to Whitethrone.

Wizards and sorcerers were appearing about us. Here was a Taldan, dressed in robes embroidered with the imperial lion, escorting a cadre of young nobles. There appeared a woman in a black gown dagged with red, an imp on her shoulder, accompanied by a group of halfling porters bearing an ironbound chest.

No one was taking any note of this, so I could only assume that it was just another morning in Whitethrone's Market Square.

Behind us stood the iron statue of a crone, a broomstick in one hand, a bundle of sticks on her back, and a plucked rooster at her waist.

"Till anon." Dr. Orontius saluted with his cane and stepped away. Orlin pointed a finger straight up, then jerked his head to the statue and walked off as well. We had a standard procedure when splitting up—the gesture meant we would meet here at noon.

"Galtan knitting!" my brother cried. "Fine scarves and hosiery! Knit by the brave women of Isarn before the guillotine itself!"

I admired his initiative. I had thought only of my own handicrafts. I hadn't considered that anything quintessentially Galtan might command a good price.

A light snow was falling, just enough to leave a sparkle in the air, and here and there roared open flames that drew folk like moths. One was the merry brazier of a pine nut-toasting cart. Another was the flame of a forge, a dwarven smith before it, ringing his hammer on the anvil in a familiar rhythm. A third was the flame beneath a bright copper cauldron steaming in the winter air, filling it with a heady scent. Three lapis-eyed maidens in veiled headdresses and heavy brocade pinafores danced around it singing a madrigal.

The words became clear momentarily:

Bilberry, blueberry, blackberry brew!

Sweetened with honey and cardamom too!

Come warm your mittens!

Come buy our sbiten!

Come to our cauldron—we brew it for you!

Their stall was festooned with garlands of bees and wasps, fashioned from wirework and tinsel. Merrymead was indeed celebrated in Irrisen as it was in Galt, if in a somewhat different fashion. I moved over to the cauldron, warming my gloves before the life-giving blaze as they bade me. After I had thawed a bit, I took my lidded tankard and passed it to one of the maidens.

She examined it, taking note of the pewter lid and cobalt diamonds of classic dwarven salt glaze—it was a gift from Powdermaster Davin—then nodded, deeming it fit. She held

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it as her sister ladled the hot drink and passed it back with a smile in exchange for silver.

I took a sip, tasting to identify any unmentioned herbs or spices in case their alchemical virtues were needed for an infusion. I detected red clover, which could impart industriousness, and melissa—sometimes known as lemon balm—which was popular among Calistrians and the witches of Galt. Cinnamon and ginger from Jalmeray? Warming spices whichever way you looked. I unbuckled my trusty nutmeg grater and added shavings of a few other reagents to improve the concoction's function as a catalyst, then downed the tankard.

As warmth moved through my veins and the ice melted away, sensation returned to my extremities. I tossed the maidens another silver coin to refill my mug and a third as thanks for a more pleasant winter warmer than what I had brought with me. Citizen Cedrine, former confectioner turned grenadier captain, had taught me the acclimatizing infusion, as well as the importance of using local supplies.

I loosened my scarf and sipped the sbiten, this time just savoring it for its flavor and the delight of discovering another culture.

The market was indeed doing a burgeoning business in imports, and while it was odd to see the fruits of early spring in the middle of winter, it was odder yet to see the peaches of late summer and the apples of fall beside them. I realized I had wandered into the fruit merchants' row.

A white-haired woman who was far too scantily clad for the season—flaunting the same immunity to cold I possessed rather than concealing it—made a great show of displaying some exotic fruit. It looked like a large golden pinecone topped with the crown of an aloe. "Calistria's crown," she declared, drawing a curved silver knife, "brought at great expense from the farthest corner of the world, but now grown by our arts in the Hidden Gardens. Who shall have a slice? A coin of gold for a piece of our golden fruit."

The price was ruinous, but as a Galtan, I was used to absurd prices for food. I tossed her a gold piece and was rewarded with generous wedge, yellow as Mistress Philomela's favorite silk gown and almost as perfumed. "The bottom is the sweetest," the witch confided coyly.

I took a bite. The flesh was dense and sweet, juicy as a peach, acid as an orange, with the scent and aftertaste of a sun-warmed apple.

I was growing to like Whitethrone already.

Other shoppers clamored for a taste of the dainty. I sucked mine down to the last bit of the leathery skin, which I folded in oilcloth and stowed for later analysis. The rest of the sbiten went well with a salmon-and-buckwheat pastry from the next aisle. I noted Dr. Orontius in line at a baked goods stall with a signboard in the shape of a cat sitting before a hearth.

"I believe this should be a lucky one," Dr. Orontius said softly as he passed me the white paper box prettily tied with red string and marked with a gray cat.

Wizards could be cryptic, so I stole a peek inside. The Merrymead rings of Whitethrone were apparently saffron dough dagged to reveal poppyseed filling, these sections forming the abdomens of Calistria's wasps, with gilded marzipan for the wings and bodies, and toasted pine nuts for eyes. Then I glanced at the signboard and nearly dropped my monocle. The tokens baked into Merrymead rings—the Whip of Vengeance, the Fan of Deception, the demon Kostchtchie, and all the rest—were usually tinted tin, sometimes gold-washed silver, occasionally true gold. Before Galt's Revolution, decadent nobles sometimes had them wrought with precious jewels, making the divinatory cakes a gambling game as well.

The witches of Irrisen had done them one better, for the signboard promised that some trinkets bore actual witchcraft.

Enchantments aplenty were on display in Whitethrone's market. Here an ice-eyed Jadwiga man modeled a traditional kaftan embroidered with folk motifs, hounds and horses and the like, only more threadbare and tatty. He ripped a loose applique off one sleeve and tossed it to the ground. All at once it sprang to life, becoming a tiny animal I first took for a white rat, but which rapidly expanded, increasing in size like an image projected on fog when the magic lantern is pulled back. A white mule then stood there in the snow, saddlebags and all, twitching its ears and looking at the witch in the kaftan both crossly and expectantly.

Not every enchantment in the market was so quaint or charming, however. One crone sold severed hands, some ancient and mummified, others as fresh as when they were separated from their rightful owners. I flipped down the relevant lens of my monocle as I walked past, but was not surprised to see the bloody aura of necromancy.

What I was not seeing were dolls.

Stalls sold witches' wands and warriors' swords, wizards' staves, walking sticks and musical instruments, even an assortment of broomsticks and besoms. A white-haired matron held up one of the latter, swearing it would fly me through the air with the grace of a goose.

Then I saw the mammoth. Two giants were admiring it, inspecting its ears and tusks and patting its shaggy flanks the way a person of normal stature would a pony. Then one lifted a young giantess, half again as tall as I am, and placed her atop it. She clutched a porcelain doll the size of a human child.

I suppose I should have mentioned the monsters. Along with the giants, blue-skinned trolls and white wolves the size of horses mingled freely with the humans and dwarves and other denizens of the cold realm, cheerfully inspecting the bales of tea and other exotic wares of a caravan that could only have come over the Crown of the World.

I was considering the wisdom of asking the giants where they had bought their daughter her doll when a gaggle of frost-blue goblins ran by, gabbling in delight, pointing out a sight that delighted me as much if not more: a Tian fireworks dealer. He was just setting up his display, and his wares were covered in the exquisite papers of Tian Xia. I recognized the familiar dragonfly rockets and witches' candles, a complicated Shelyn's rose pinwheel labeled *Chrysanthemum Lady*, siren fountains, sparklers, strings of firecrackers, and a large assortment of the fireball-launching goblin brands that had the goblins so exited.

Two guards with wolfhounds and wicked halberds idled nearby. I surmised that these were from Whitethrone's storied Iron Guard, and that the alchemist had paid them to keep an eye on his wares.

What I did not see were hop-frogs, the tamer and more festival-friendly version of the venomous toads Powdermaster Davin had taught me to make for the battlefield.

An alchemist's trade is in secrets, but fortunately the alchemist spoke better Taldane than I did Tien. He was interested, but desired a demonstration.

I set a hop-frog in the snow and touched the fuse with a sulfur-tipped Asmodeus match. It burned down and disappeared inside. For a moment, the frog sat there, doing nothing. Then the folded paper of its throat sack expanded and it let out a croak, to the delight of the goblins. This was followed by its mouth opening and its long pink blow-out tongue flicking in and out, the last time with a sparkling dragonfly attached with flames shooting out of its tail. The squibs in the frog's legs then caught fire, causing it to hop as per its name before finally retrieving the struggling dragonfly. Then the jewel in the frog's forehead went bright as the Eye of Aroden, and all at once it exploded—presumably not like Aroden, as I doubt the dead god vanished in a swarm of flaming fireflies and green smoke perfumed with lime blossoms.

The smoke dissipated and the fireflies burned out in the snow, leaving scorch marks and cinders—and a crowd of delighted goblins, each of whom wanted to buy a dozen.

More to the point, the alchemist wished to obtain my formula. While of course he could see the individual components, it would take a long while for him to reproduce the effect on his own. We then set to dickering, and he named one secret or another, all of which I either knew or were beyond my price, until at last he whispered, "You know perfume. But do you know the formula for the famous Tian Wash, an elixir for the banishment of evil?"

That I did not, and I imagined that in a place like Irrisen, banishment of evil might be exceptionally useful.

We traded notes, and I had just tucked my formulary back inside my greatcoat when I heard the scream.

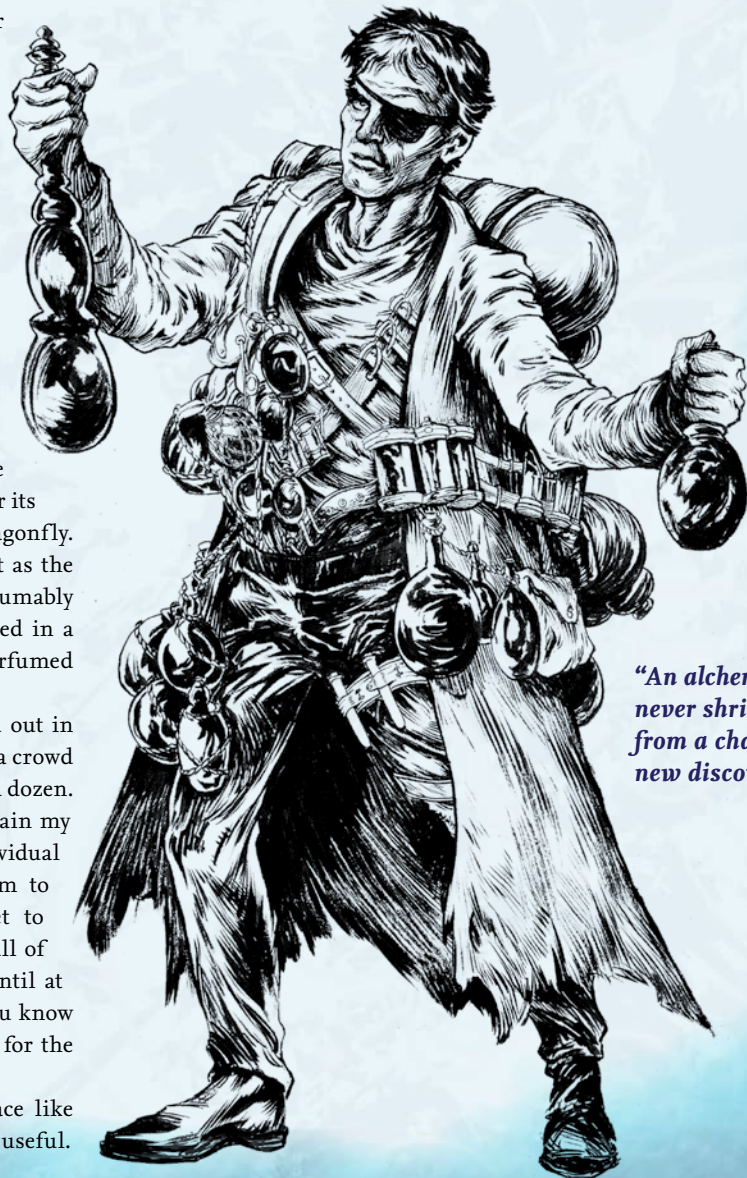
It was not a human sound, but rather the sound we in Galt knew as Liberty's Cry. Wolves howled or whined and pawed their ears, but I looked high into the air and saw the blue plume of smoke mixed with the light snowfall.

Soldiers of my regiment used Blue Liberties as signal flares when they were in distress. I had made sure to entrust one to Orlin.

The stalls of the market, however, were a maze.

I looked at the goblins, grinning at me with their perpetual expressions of wicked delight. "A hop-frog for whoever takes me to where that flare came from."

The goblins grinned even wider.



"An alchemist never shrinks from a chance at new discoveries."