



THE BURN RUN

18 Arodus, 4707 AR

For someone who claims to be the captain of his own destiny, I seem to spend an awful lot of time taking orders from an inanimate object.

This morning, I crossed into the Cinderlands, the needle on my wayfinder continuing to point me north-northeast. Even though stopping in Kaer Maga again was no picnic, I think I miss it already. There's a reason I've put off going to the Cinderlands ever since I came to Varisia: according to every source I've consulted, it's reputed to be a hellhole, a desert-like scrubland with little to offer but parched earth, grueling heat, and predators. It's only the first day, and it's already living up to its reputation. With the shelter from the surrounding mountains, only the rare wind from the south brings any moisture, and I've come to understand that the Cinderlands are a land of collective patience: everything here—the bugs, the birds, the patchy blades of grass—are all quietly waiting for their miracle.

20 Arodus, 4707 AR

I caught sight of my first aurochs today. I had heard tales of these massive razor-horned bison, and having now

seen them for myself I can report that the stories do them no justice. Crossing the land in their great herds, they appear as a storm cloud rushing low over the earth, the thunderous rumble of their hooves felt long before it's even heard. From a safe distance, I watched a group of Shoanti horsemen strategically isolate two aurochs from the herd, the tattooed barbarians bringing down the enormous animals one at a time with their short bows at exhilaratingly close range. Fortunately, I had been well warned that the Shoanti care little for outsiders in their land—depending on which tribe you encounter, contact just might be the last mistake you make. I kept my head down and waited for the impressive spectacle to pass.

Also, I have decided to alter my course slightly to the west, despite the dictate of my wayfinder. It has become harder and harder to refill my canteen out here, and if I don't stick close to the Yondabakari, my journey might end prematurely of its own accord.

21 Arodus, 4707 AR

I am afraid my journey has hit a small snag. Namely, my being burned alive as soon as the wind picks up. So it

goes—hopefully I can secret this journal somewhere safe before it's time.

Like everything in the Cinderlands, it began with the heat—this time in the form of a wildfire. Having approached the banks of the Yondabakari, I found the succor of the grasslands once again. I cannot express how grateful my steed, Solitaire, became at the opportunity to graze until she was full. I admit I was somewhat jealous; my rations had been growing ever poorer.

But then suddenly there it was: a massive sheet of flame, driven by the wind. I've seen fire spread before, but never like this. Leapfrogging west from one patch of dry grass to the next, the fire was like a charging beast, swallowing everything in its path. Immediately I kicked Solitaire into motion and we headed for the safety of the river.

It was only a few moments later that I spotted a young Shoanti brave on foot. Just like me, he was making a beeline for the river, but without a horse there was no way he would make it.

I'm no hero, but watching a boy burned to death for no reason is beyond even me. With some cajoling of Solitaire I altered course to come up alongside the young brave and motioned for him to take my hand. By this point the flames were already licking his body, and the heat coming off of the blaze was incredible. Half-crazed, the brave seemed not to understand, so I took matters into my own hands, throwing him over my saddle and racing for the river. Hitting its banks, Solitaire plunged into the shallows, and not a moment too soon—behind us the wildfire tore a path straight up to the bank, whereupon it split to the left and right, continuing to eat every last blade of grass and shrub on the river's eastern side. Even in water up to Solitaire's flank, the flames were terrifying. Exultant, I shouted my defiance into the flames.

That's when the boy wrapped both hands around my throat and tried to crush my windpipe. Caught off guard, I flailed helplessly for several moments before recovering my wits enough to land a solid punch to his temple, dropping him into the river. He came up sputtering and screaming, cries of pure frustration, and launched himself at me again, attempting to tear me from my horse.

As I kicked at the boy to try and keep him away from Solitaire, a stampede of a dozen Shoanti horsemen burst from the flames along the bank and dashed into the water, plucking up the boy much as I had moments before. Yet instead of the expected gratitude at saving the child's life, I found myself surrounded by spearheads. I sat motionless as they tied my hands to my saddlehorn and took my reins. They swam our horses downstream as though it were no feat at all. Finding a suitable exit point, we rode in silence until we were safely beyond the wildfire's reach.

I am out of light, and will finish this tomorrow, presuming I see it. I am reasonably certain I will. Reasonably.

23 Arodus, 4707 AR

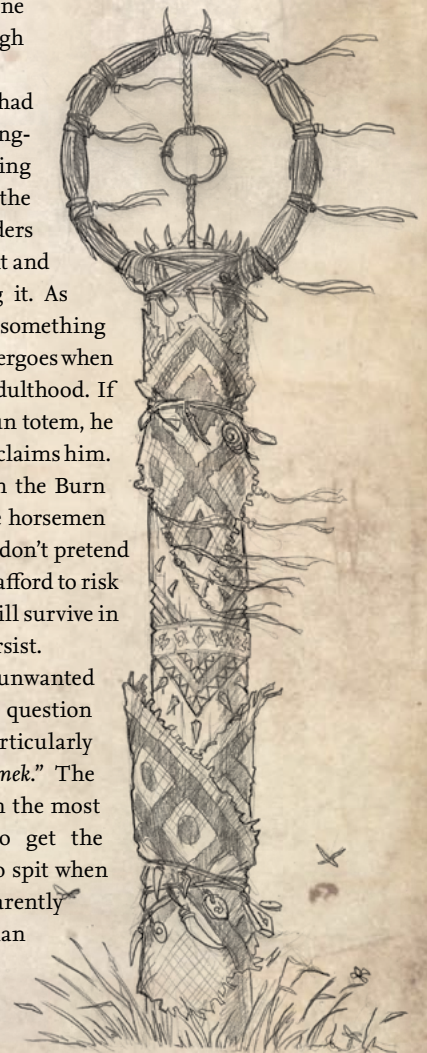
I was their prisoner, yet they did not bother to disarm me. Such was the imposing presence and confidence of these Shoanti horsemen I know now as Burn Riders. From the river they paraded me into their village. A nomadic people, everything about their encampment is designed to be picked up and moved on a moment's notice—a necessity when one lives in a land subject to periodic emberstorms. Their portable aurochs-skin yurts radiated around a central ring of stones that housed a massive communal bonfire. Bordering the fire's sitting area were great woven totems, each topped with a blazing sun carving. As soon as I saw the totems, I knew I was inside a camp of Sklar-Quah, people of the Sun Clan, and my stomach clenched. According to the stories, the Sun Clan is in contention for the most warlike of all the Shoanti, and the least tolerant of foreigners.

The lead brave whistled, and soon the camp's center was filled with curious Shoanti of all ages. It is a testament to my ego that I assumed they had gathered to discuss my fate. Yet instead, all of the attention seemed focused on the boy I had rescued. Seeing my obvious interest in the proceedings, one of my captors was kind enough to explain.

It seemed the boy, Tomast, had been participating in a coming-of-age ritual to earn his standing within the tribe. After setting the wildfire themselves, the riders had placed the boy in front of it and tasked him with outrunning it. As impossible as it sounds, this is something every male Sun Clansman undergoes when he reaches the threshold of adulthood. If he has found favor with the Sun totem, he survives, and if not, the land reclaims him. Survivors may petition to join the Burn Riders, the clan's band of elite horsemen that had stolen my freedom. I don't pretend to understand how a tribe can afford to risk sacrificing its providers and still survive in such a harsh land, but they persist.

In any event, my unwanted interference had called into question the results of Tomast's trial, particularly due to my status as a "tshamek." The word means "outsider," but in the most negative of connotations—to get the right effect, you really need to spit when you say it. All tshamek apparently bear the sins of the Chelaxian

The Sun is sacred to all members of the Sklar-Quah.



invaders who drove the Shoanti from southern Varisia centuries ago. As such, my participation in the discussion of Tomast's truncated Burn Run was not tolerated—apparently, I was to be disemboweled, as *tshamek* are not worthy of the honor of being burned. It was difficult to hold my tongue while my hosts made casual reference to my execution, but I quickly learned that I was not to speak. A young shaman named Narast was particularly emphatic on the point, as my bruises can attest.

Despite my first impression, however, Narast was not calling the shots. He was but the apprentice for an extraordinary elder who bore both name and title of Sun Shaman, who unbeknownst to me was present the whole time, listening to his clan's debate. For the Sun Shaman was in the bonfire—or rather, he *was* the bonfire.

I have to admit, I was impressed by his entrance. As the discussion ground on, the counsel fire suddenly rose up and coalesced to its full height of about 15 feet, towering over me, then condensed into a wind-burnt Shoanti who quietly took his seat on a straw mat next to Narast amongst the bickering braves. Tomast continued to shout loudly at those who implied he had failed his Burn Run. As for myself, I was more interested in the Sun Shaman's views as to whether I was to live or die. I was rather hoping he might find himself in the "live" camp, but based on the Sklar-Quah I had met so far, my hopes were not high.

The Sun Shaman let everyone shout over one another for several more minutes before he spoke at last, rendering his decision. As soon as his first whisper came out, everyone fell silent. Apparently nobody talks over a guy who turns into a giant fire elemental. There was much nodding at his words, but I could tell a lot of people were unhappy. I figured that had to be a good sign. Tomast in particular was fighting to bottle his rage.

I had to wait for the translation, but apparently it was decided that Tomast would have to be re-tested. Tough break for the young one, to be sure. As soon as a suitable wind returned, another wildfire would be set, and again he would risk his life attempting to outrun the flames. "And," added my translator, "so will you." Apparently, the Sun Shaman had decreed that I was now a part of Tomast's challenge and if it was to be reconstructed, I would again have to be present. The price of my interference was that I would run alongside him.

Although none dared to disagree out loud, it was obvious that, like Tomast, the clan was displeased with the Sun Shaman's decision. I had to have it explained to me a few times, but apparently there are a few ramifications that the tribe is none too happy with. Firstly, if I survive, tradition dictates that I become part of the Quah. Although Sun Clan membership isn't what I had in mind, I do like the fringe benefit of being allowed to live.

A *tshamek* with membership in the Quah is not something that's particularly amusing to the clan: It borders on blasphemy, and is particularly offensive to Narast, who lost face over my involvement, since he was in charge of organizing the failed Burn Run. My sense, though, is that the clan ultimately tolerates the decision not just because it came from the Sun Shaman, but because they largely share the view that once the wind returns and the fire is re-ignited, I'll be burnt to a crisp, and further debate will become something of a moot point.

Additionally, once Tomast and I do the run together, he and I become *nalharest*, which I take it is something akin to a blood brother. Tomast seems insulted by this prospect, and a part of me almost wants to stick around and complete the run just to vex him. Fortunately, the part of me that intends to continue living is well aware that my best course of action is to plan my escape before the wind returns. As soon as I can find where they hid Solitaire, I'll make a break for it and take my chances.

Arriving as a fire elemental makes for one hell of an entrance.



24 Arodus, 4707 AR

You don't have to be a sage to appreciate that sunrise is an event of deep spiritual significance to the Sklar-Quah. This morning, as every morning, the entire clan, from youngest to oldest, rose to bathe in the first of the luminous red rays. With their heads drawn back, the entire clan joined in a chanted prayer in which they bore witness to the miracle that they've survived to see one more day in this harsh land. After partaking in the communal experience, even as a prisoner looking forward to getting roasted, I have to concede that I found it extremely moving.

Perhaps part of the reason I enjoyed it so much was that I, too, have reason to be thankful. There's no wind today, which means no Burn Run—for now, at least. Instead, to my surprise, Tomast has shown up at my "guest yurt" to train me. No question, he still despises me, but he treats his direction from the Sun Shaman with all seriousness.

The first order of business is that one cannot expect to survive inside a fire with a full head of hair. This accounts for why every last Burn Rider religiously shaves his head (and probably a few other places to boot). Not willing to let Tomast catch on that I have no intention of sticking around for the actual run, I decided to play along. That's right, I'm currently as bald as a baby. No tattoos though—Tomast grew quite agitated when I inquired, saying "those have to be earned."

After our little grooming session, much of the day was spent practicing breathing exercises. I humored Tomast, as he takes this part very seriously. I imagine it's a precursor to some kind of sprinting technique.

25 Arodus, 4707 AR

Even though my fascination with the Sklar-Quah's morbid manhood ritual grows daily, I still have enough rationality to know that escape is my better option. Unfortunately, this is getting tougher—while I've found where Solitaire and the other horses are sequestered, I've also pieced together why the encampment is unguarded. Those who enter and leave follow a very specific path—I remember now being struck by the zigzag route I took when the Burn Riders first brought me into the camp. Narast has laced the surrounding area with his magic so that many harmless patches of rocks and grass are illusions cast over rows of sharpened spikes. You can't tell by looking at it, but any attempt to enter or leave the camp without knowing the route is suicide. I've tested it along the camp's edge—I'd be cut to ribbons if I tried to flee through it.

I still have time, though. If I can observe enough comings and goings, I'll have the path paced-out and memorized. I still need the weather to cooperate to buy me time—the wind has got to stay calm.

27 Arodus, 4707 AR

My training with Tomast grows intense. If I didn't know better I'd say he's become proud of himself as a teacher, even though, as best I can tell, I'm a lousy student.

Today we graduated from breathing exercises to the war cry trance, a technique somewhat akin to a self-hypnosis. At one point, while I was in the throes of it, Tomast had me look down, and I discovered he had lined my legs with hot coals. Of course at that point I snapped out of the trance and screamed with abandon. After repeats of this exercise both Tomast and I have burns all over our legs. The war cry trance enables one to ignore the pain and fear of fire but not its effects—not for long, anyway.

I am impressed with Tomast, who bears his burns like badges of honor. Mine are covered with salve, and when no one is looking I have been using healing magic on the burns. I have kept the salves on though, to hide the fact that the wounds are gone.

In addition, we also practice running. We run lap after lap around the inside of the camp every morning and evening, when the Cinderlands are at their coolest. I have suggested we run outside of the camp, hoping for an excuse to learn more of the hidden route through the spiked stones, but Narast has forbidden it.

Tomast is several times more fit and youthful than I am, and his skill as a runner far outstrips mine. One thought keeps coming back to me: last time, as I saw it, he had failed to keep ahead of the wildfire. What chance do I have?

29 Arodus, 4707 AR

If I didn't know better, I'd say one of the braves actually gave me a smile today. I must be wearing them down.

In addition to the exercises in which we leap through flames, today's lesson was to actually eat fired coals. I've never been burned on the inside of my body before. No question: I should have passed out from the pain. But there's something about the war cry trance. Something almost transcendent.

In the evening, we spent time in the sweat lodge, a steam bath inside a small tent made by pouring water over red hot rocks brought in from the council fire pit. The sweat lodge, at least, is a tradition I could get used to. I am honored that Tomast shared it with me.

Although the sun has not yet come again, I need to add to my previous entry. I am so angry, yet there is nothing I can do, no one I can tell—so I write. I was returning from my nightly walk to clear my head (and study my escape) when I heard chanting from Narast's tent. I crept up to his yurt, hopeful that I might at last catch him in the act of re-setting the camp's wards and gain clues to their exact location.

Narast was indeed inside and unquestionably in the act of spellcasting, but he was up to something else entirely. I'm no expert, but I've seen enough arcane lore to recognize basics. He was manipulating the weather, calling for wind. Already as I write, the wind is picking up. The Burn Run will happen tomorrow. But if I am right, it won't be just any burn run—the wind will be fierce. Narast can't stand the thought that a *tshamek* just might pass the Sklar-Quah's challenge. He's got to stack the deck. I don't mind that he wants me gone. Hell, I want me out of here too. But the fact that he's prepared to burn Tomast just to get to me is going too far.

I can't tell Tomast—not yet. It would shatter the confidence he's built in the past few days. My best bet is to tell the Sun Shaman, but the chief druid is nowhere to be found. Was his absence what Narast was waiting for? And here I'd let myself think they'd accepted me. I'm such a fool.

30 Arodus, 4707 AR

Morning came and the wind was strong. Many of the Shoanti I had won over the past days glanced quickly away whenever I caught their eyes. They know what I know: that the wind is too fast for a successful Burn Run today. Yet we're going anyway.

The fire was going to be larger and faster than the flames Tomast faced last time. I only had one last card to play, one I had been sitting on for the past week. If Narast was going to cheat, so would I, with a little enchantment known among my adventuring colleagues as “expeditious retreat.” The spell's energy would temporarily increase my speed, and might just give me the edge I needed to make the river and escape the flames. It wasn't a great plan; I didn't know how the Shoanti would react to magical interference. Once they figured it out, they might try to run me down anyway. And even if I got away with my enhanced speed, once the spell was exhausted, I'd still be facing the prospect of crossing the Cinderlands without a horse. That would be a huge risk, but one I figured would be slightly better than being burned alive by Narast's wildfire. Truth be told, the biggest flaw with this plan was that I couldn't share the spell with Tomast. I'd have to leave him to burn. That didn't sit right with me. I wanted him to come through this, to have the place in his Quah that he deserved. I'm tired of leaving people behind.

The fire for the Burn Run was lit with embers from the grand council fire and Tomast and I waited for it to find its legs. Then, at the Burn Riders' signal, we made one last war cry to summon our courage and were off. Let me tell you, there's nothing more motivating than an onrushing wall of heat to give you a lift. We raced hard, eyes always focused on the river in the distance—our salvation. The fire spread fast and wide and soon a number of smaller animals were bolting out of their shallow burrows and fleeing ahead of us.

BLACK BLIZZARDS

Emberstorms, known also as “black blizzards,” are powerful duststorms composed of ash and embers left behind by large brushfires. Raging across the plain, an emberstorm typically takes hours to pass overhead. Shoanti legends tell that the emberstorm is the Cinderland's way of claiming those for whom the gods have called away. These violent duststorms typically occur during summer months, when wildfires are more common. Winter emberstorms are seen as particularly bad omens by the Shoanti, but those that occur during the summer have become little more than an accepted way of life for these hearty people. The natural lay of the land shapes and funnels the path of an emberstorm to a certain extent, and knowledgeable tribes seek out low-lying areas like these out of habit.

The edge of the storm assaults those it envelopes with strong winds of 30 mph. Anyone within the storm's edge suffers a –10 penalty on Spot, Listen and Search checks as well as missile attacks beyond ten feet. In addition, targets in the storm's outer rim benefit from concealment (a 20% miss chance).

The wind deeper in an emberstorm can reach windstorm levels, but is normally severe wind (DMG 95). The scouring ash and grit in the air in an emberstorm functions as a typical duststorm (DMG 94), save that they normally leave behind only 1d4–1 feet of dust and ash in their wake. Additionally, whenever a character takes nonlethal damage from an emberstorm, he also takes 1 point of fire damage from the hot ashes.

It was inevitable—there was never really any hope. In the end, the fire overtook me. I could have sworn Tomast slowed down deliberately, trying to encourage me to find another burst of speed, but it didn't matter. The wind provided the fire with a sudden leap, and in another moment the flames were ahead of him too. It was time for my final card, and I needed to concentrate to cast my spell before I burnt in the conflagration.

Suddenly I heard the sound of hoofbeats behind me. I risked a desperate look behind, and found myself staring down a charging aurochs, the panicked creature bursting from the heart of the blaze and making a crazed break for the water. Waves of heat rose off its singed coat.

“Cut it off!” I screamed to Tomast, suddenly hopeful. He understood immediately. “It's a gift from the Sun!” he cried, and then it was upon us. I ran alongside it for two steps and then grabbed two fistfuls of its hair. The beast was furious, but frantic enough to focus on its flight instead of bucking me off. Tomast did the same on the other side.

Every second we were at risk of being trampled, but it was the salvation we needed, for only moments later the aurochs charged into the Yondabakari, its blessed waters closing over our heads. I came up howling with triumph

once again, and this time I was joined by Tomast, his expression rapturous.

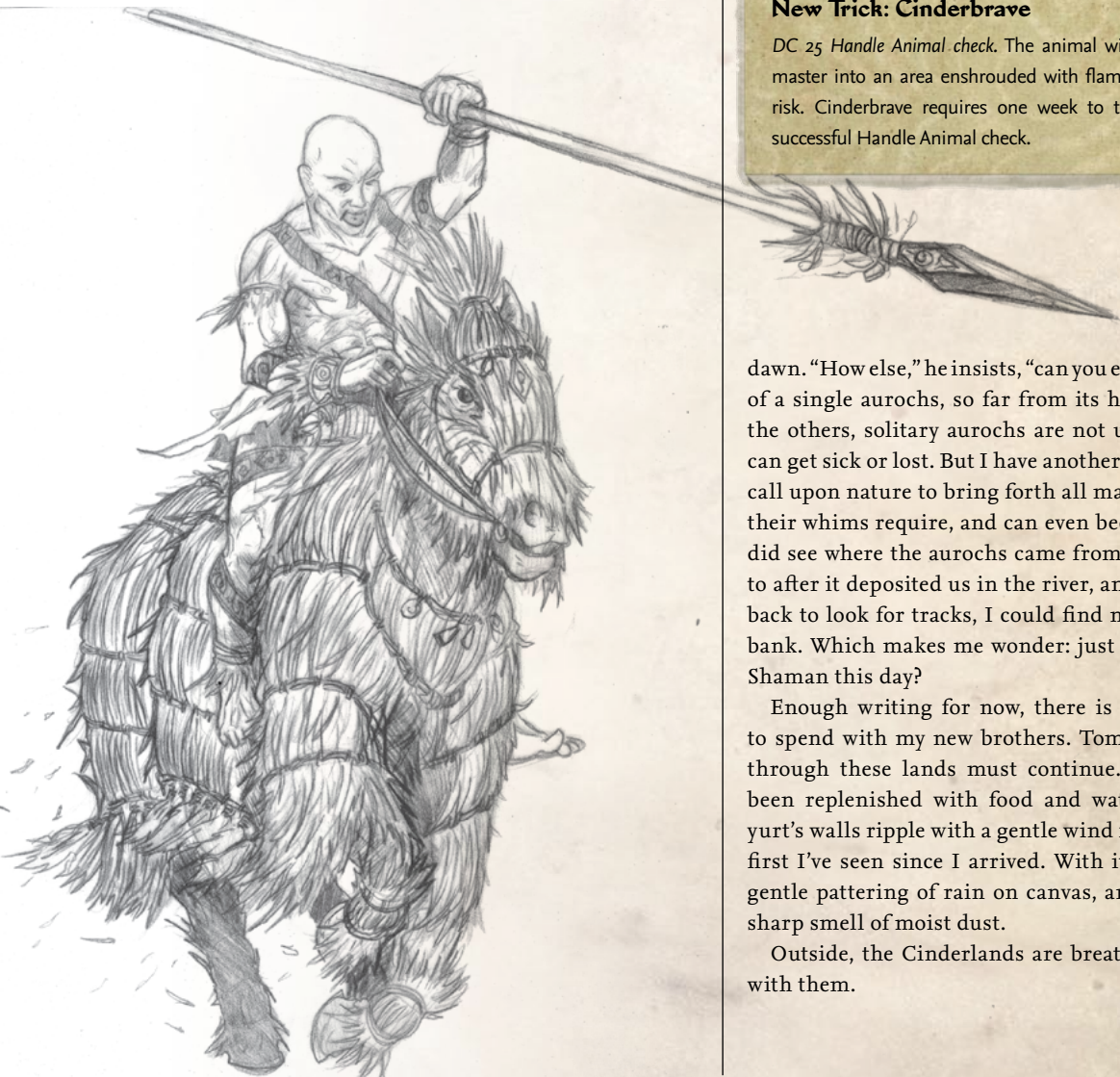
I clasped arms with my *nalharest*, and together we screamed in a celebration of survival.

3 Rova, 5707 AR

The Sun Shaman has predicted an emberstorm, and in a few days the clan will migrate. Although I have not yet broken the news, when they go, I go my own way. As a member of the Quah, I am free.

I've now had more time to reflect on recent events. Tomast has retold the story of the aurochs emerging from the flames many times now, and each time the beast gets larger and more fantastical. He reverently believes the aurochs was sent by the Sun in answer to our prayers at

The horses are wrapped in special flame-resistant grasses, but the Burn Riders themselves are not so fortunate.



BURN RIDING

Sklar-Quah Burn Riders display both their horsemanship and courage by galloping their steeds through spreading wildfire. Burn riding is frequently used in raids on enemy clans or Varisian settlements, with deliberately set fires blazing suddenly into the opposing camp as a screen to conceal Shoanti cavalry.

New Feat: Burn Rider

Through the ancient tradition of the Sklar-Quah, you can protect both yourself and your mount from flame while traveling at high speeds.

Prerequisite: Mounted Combat, Ride 6 ranks, Handle Animal 6 ranks

Benefit: As long as your mount travels at least 40 feet in a round, you gain fire resistance 3 for that round. You also receive a +4 bonus on all Reflex saves to avoid catching on fire and a +4 bonus on all Fortitude saves against choking on smoke (DMG 303). Each round, as a free action, you may confer the same bonuses to your mount with a successful DC 20 Ride check.

New Trick: Cinderbrave

DC 25 *Handle Animal* check. The animal will carry or follow its master into an area enshrouded with flames, even if placed at risk. Cinderbrave requires one week to teach, followed by a successful *Handle Animal* check.

dawn. "How else," he insists, "can you explain the presence of a single aurochs, so far from its herd?" According to the others, solitary aurochs are not unheard of, as they can get sick or lost. But I have another theory. Druids can call upon nature to bring forth all manner of animals as their whims require, and can even become them. I never did see where the aurochs came from, nor where it went to after it deposited us in the river, and though I've gone back to look for tracks, I could find no prints on the far bank. Which makes me wonder: just where was the Sun Shaman this day?

Enough writing for now, there is little enough time to spend with my new brothers. Tomorrow, my journey through these lands must continue. My supplies have been replenished with food and water. Beside me the yurt's walls ripple with a gentle wind from the south, the first I've seen since I arrived. With it, softly, comes the gentle pattering of rain on canvas, and in the air is the sharp smell of moist dust.

Outside, the Cinderlands are breathing as one. And I with them.