



VoxPVoxD: let's say mean things about banana even though the log will preserve them and he'll be able to see them if he scrolls up
here's what I think: banana sucks



Crion (Ghol): agreed on all particulars and generalities



VoxPVoxD: 50 shades of periwinkle



banana (GM): test!!



Crion (Ghol): you are



VoxPVoxD: hello



banana (GM): it has a voice chat option, but that probably isn't super relevant to us right now



VoxPVoxD: any voice chat option would require me to turn my fans off. no thank you sir



Crion (Ghol): agreed



banana (GM): same except a heater not a fan

ok so

can i..?

hmmm

i can't linebreak..

god damn it



tom: roll20 isn't perfect



banana (GM): oh well i guess i'll just say stuff, like, informally
without True Separation



VoxPVoxD: maybe some kind of ascii curtain pulling back



banana (GM): good idea, give me a sec



Crion (Ghol): lol



banana (GM): there should now be.. a handout
but i can't link those here or anything, so whatever



Crion (Ghol): oh its shown up



banana (GM): Western Axis in the rain is a morass of leaves and steam.

The crater walls of the Dragon Empire's capital tower, pristine in this section, over the only wilderness area remaining within. A half mile of dense trees and somewhat more scrub, then the low black stone buildings of the town begin.

Small pools of lava, sustained by the strange magics of the earth, make it a hazardous hunting ground - and a good refuge for anyone who wants time to think. Particularly sure-footed thoughts. The main part of the city is safer, but thousands upon thousands of soldiers and citizens throng it.

There are no breaks in the western wall, only the beginnings of tunnels, and the wilderness runs right up against its sand-and-obsidian edge. From overhead, rain pummels the Conqueror's emeritus home,

bowing the acacia trees that grow in Mount Crucible's fertile volcanic soil.

(btw i'm going to keep typing until someone introduces themselves)

Small animals still live here; if Axis grows into its destiny, they won't have much longer. It is the supply line of an Empire, and chefs would be as much a hazard as the soldiers and mages looking for weird-ass mushrooms to use in their spells.



banana (GM): The heavy rain makes strange passes; an area of calm seems to sweep along a corridor of trees, followed by extra downpour as if a gutter had emptied into the earth. So it has; anyone here to look up can see the glint of copper scales far above.



Crion (Ghol): Ghol has been moving since daybreak. He's been moving for weeks. Down out of the northernmost foothills of the Giantwalk, the great mountains that define the West, through lands he's never seen named on a map, following the curve of the range, avoiding the roads but always somewhat alongside them, distrusting wagoners and cart-merchants and travelling detachments of soldiers, no matter their dispositions. Moving in the day, napping in the evening; moving again in the night. Sleeping only when sure it is safe, and sparingly even then. Hunted. There is only other creature in the world, in Empire or in Realm, on whom he can now rely.

Luckily for him, it's been his best friend since childhood -- and is the size of a small bear.



VoxPVoxD: A deft hand snatches at the lowest branch of the youngest acacia tree at the ashline. The bough bends and springs back, throwing a shower of droplets into the air. When it settles back into position, it does so short one leaf. That leaf quivers in a small hand, offering up the raindrops that cling to it like a jeweler's velvet. Dark and steady eyes are reflected in those droplets, set in a face raw from scrubbing. The volcanic soaps of Axis aren't renowned yet, but they will be in the none-too-distant future.



banana (GM): There's no good reason to be out here. The central part of Axis crater is full of life, energy, organisation; these forlorn remaining woods aren't even patrolled. For two men and a warg to have come to the same clearing, beneath the same scale-slipped rain, can't be coincidence.



Crion (Ghol): Kon is somewhere off in the trees to his right. The heat is oppressive this far south -- he knew that would be the case already, though this is the farthest he's ever ranged in this particular direction. He's already stopped wearing his shirt. The armor on his right shoulder -- the lone pauldron -- remains, however. Its presence is comforting to his spirit more so than his body. He has only recently found himself a devotee of the god Pauldron, but worship of the god of nomads, mercenaries, and those who must leave suits him well.

This, however, was unexpected.

Ghol ranged out this far from the sweltering cauldron to hunt game. Beardless dwarves are not game.



banana (GM): An actual beardless dwarf would be fair game. What a disgusting thought.





VoxPVoxD: A thin sheen of sweat covers the tonsured scalp of a man who stands a proud three and a half feet tall. His brown habit, bound with rope at the waist, doesn't give the impression of being friendly to the shimmering heat of the caldera. If Placidus is hot, he gives no outward sign. The leave tilts and quavers in his unsteady hand, the droplets skittering along the thin and fingerlike acacia leaf. He holds it out, then, about six inches from the end of his long nose, and produces from the depths of his habit a small book, which he balances in his right hand. His lips move silently, and a moment later he's pressing the leaf into a page of the book, and going around it with a small nub of charcoal (this, too, is in great supply and high quality here in Axis).





Crion (Ghol): He drops back into a fighting stance, both weapons already in hand. Has the Orc Lord expanded the search for him? So far, he's only had to avoid orc trackers and half-orc scouts. Perhaps whomever in the host is hounding him has gotten impatient and hired outsiders...? But no, this man is no warrior. And he doesn't seem to have seen Ghol yet.


This man is...picking flowers?


 **banana (GM):** The hunted becomes the hunted.


 **Crion (Ghol):** Kon growls from the woods, moving out into the clearing. Ghol holds up his hand, signalling his faithful friend to hold.


 **VoxPVoxD:** "Ha-HA!" The gnome snaps the book shut with a single motion of his right hand, closing the leaf around it and locking it in place around the charcoal tracings. He rocks the book back and forth with short motions of the forearm, like a drummer keeping time, before he turns to look out across the lavafield and then stride closer to the nearest ember-red pool of it.


 **Crion (Ghol):** Kon tilts his head sideways and sneezes derisively.
"Yes," Ghol says. "this would explain why there's been no deer about this afternoon."


 **VoxPVoxD:** Placidus looks around, having apparently forgotten something. He checks his pockets. About now, given the angle of approach Ghol is taking, he'll see a tiny curved knife, barely fit for cutting bread, embedded in the bark of an acacia tree at about his knee level. Several strips of bark have been scraped away around it.

 **banana (GM):** The fat raindrops send up bursts of steam at regular intervals from the lava pool, but its heat doesn't diminish. If anything, each blotch seems to intensify and renew the glow.


 **Crion (Ghol):** "Your knife is over here," says Ghol, pulling it from the tree. "You were a fool to part with it."
He turns it over in his hand. "And for not having a better knife."

 **VoxPVoxD:** Placidus's habit billows around him as he turns, the heel of his boot scraping a small clod of rich black dirt free and kicking it down into the lava pool, which burbles and hisses. He squints past the treeline. What does he see?


 **banana (GM):** (speaking of sight- Wisdom check from ghol, please. Scout applies)


 **Crion (Ghol):** Kon slumps down into the browning grass, earning him a frown from the half-orc who raised him. The warg just yawns in his direction.


rolling 1d20+8

() + 8

= **13**

 **VoxPVoxD:** Ah. Well. Placidus is pretty sure there's no such thing as a one-man raiding party. And surely an actual brigand wouldn't announce himself - it's not as if the little monk poses a threat. The megalupine alone could've snapped him up in one bite and it's just lying there. So, he ventures: "Hello! Yes, thank you."

 **banana (GM):** Most people wouldn't notice this. Ghol scouted for the horde for years, and it still takes him a moment to catch on to the subtlety. Raindrops land on the gnome's scalp and his nose ...and that's all. The skin doesn't glisten; there's no patter of impact. Then a few breaths pass - and the stains come, a laggard reaction to the world.
Placidus doesn't need to make any kind of check to know he's never seen a wolf like *that*.

 **Crion (Ghol):** Ghol hesitates. It's against his nature and training to, having secured such leverage in an encounter, relinquish it by returning a stranger's weapon to him -- but then, this is hardly a weapon he's holding in his hand, now that his war axe has gone back to his belt. It's cutlery. He sighs, and he tosses

the knife back so that it thunks into the soft ground well in front of the little man.

His eyes narrow and nostrils flare for a very slight moment as he notices how the rain hits him -- but he's used to guarding himself, his emotions, and his reactions now. His face only flickers in surprise.

Now there's a trick.



VoxPVoxD: Well, it's still a wolf, and most importantly it's being very lazy rather than menacing. It's almost cute, insofar as any animal can be cute, which in Placidus's estimation is not particularly. He takes a few steps toward the knife, bends low to- he notices the emotion that crosses Ghol's face, and it makes him hesitate. But there's no further reaction and then he's bent down and swooped up with the knife in his left hand. "I appreciate the kindness. I would've spent the better part of a half hour trying to retrace my steps."



Crion (Ghol): Kon, for his part, rolls over onto his back, tongue lolling out. Is he dozing? In front of a stranger?! Ghol frowns harder at him, to no avail.

The warg opens a single eye, then chuffs and reluctantly rolls back over onto his stomach. Ghol purses his lips. Perhaps he's been pushing the pace a bit too hard over the last few days, given the heat.



banana (GM): Perhaps it's confidence in Ghol's ability to deal with a three foot unarmoured scholar who doesn't even have an orb.



Crion (Ghol): "Think nothing of it," the half-orc says to the other man. It's said like a command, not a pleasantry.

Both Ghol and Kon were taught that there was a proper way for them to present themselves as emissaries of the Orcish Host: strength, always to strength. The training always stuck more with the half-orc than it did with the warg.

And the half-orc still isn't quite used to not being in the Orc Lord's service any longer.



banana (GM): The hard-eyed men at Garrison North probably marked him for that attitude. The black streets of Axis are very open to eyes above.

The city, however, is open to all.



Crion (Ghol): To the dark with Axis, as far as Ghol is concerned. To the dark with all cities. Cesspools, the lot of them. Human ones, leastways. He's yet to see one he's comfortable breathing in.



VoxPVoxD: The monk wears no scabbard, depositing the knife into a leather pouch at his belt like the kind that one might store a potion in. At least he has the thoughtfulness to put it in point-down. It's clear that even if that little thing was of any use as a weapon, it wouldn't be in Placidus's hands. Nothing, save the bizarre behavior of the rain, marks the gnome as anything more or less than a reckless dimwit. He doesn't even seem to be afraid of the warg, though obviously Kon is offering no help on that score. "That's a remarkable wolf, there. Is he specially bred or a natural mutant?"



Crion (Ghol): "He is Kon," says the half-orc, bristling now with anger, "and you'll not call him 'mutant' again."

The warg, meanwhile, takes an interest in grooming his left paw.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus glances again at the warg, taking in his patent disinterest. "Oh, no, I meant no offense. We're all mutants to some degree or other. Some admixture of the traits of our parents, the vagaries of our environment, and a few other things besides. No, no, forgive me. But you must know that a wolf such as Kon is extraordinary, surely?"



Crion (Ghol): Ghol crosses his arms, somewhat placated by the little man's calmness. "He's not a wolf. He's a warg." He glances around, making sure they're not being surrounded even as they speak.



banana (GM): Trees surround you. At a far greater distance, the crater surrounds you. The Empire

surrounds you.



Crion (Ghol): Makes Ghol feel itchy.



banana (GM): This is its heart, and although Ghol's found information and supplies in plenty here, he might not be where he should.



Crion (Ghol): Still... this is the first time he's spoken to someone who speaks the same language as he does in weeks. Well, save the screamed threats and occasional corpse-gloating. He hadn't realized how much he'd actually missed it until now.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus's eyebrows go up an inch. "A warg? You mean to say Kon here is a member of an independent subspecies?"



Crion (Ghol): "...Sure." Subspecies?

Ghol: "Wargs are a bit like wolves, but bigger, tougher, and smarter. And Kon's one of the smartest." A bit of pride creeps into his voice, and he looks over at his buddy with a confident smirk.

Kon has dozed off.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "He's definitely got the right idea, it looks like."



Crion (Ghol): Frowning so hard right now. "Heat just makes him sleepy, is al--" Wait, why is he making excuses to this man?! "Nevermind. I am called Ghol. I would know why you are out here in this wood."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Oh! Where are my manners. We both know the warg's name, and stand here talking about him without exchanging our own. I'm Br-" He clears his throat. "I'm called Placidus. I was out here looking at something not dissimilar to your friend Kon."

Ever since he left St. Orr, he's gotten a little catch in his throat every time he started introducing himself as 'Brother Placidus'. He's still technically under his vows, and hasn't broken them. Though one assumes Megistus would frown on what happened.



Crion (Ghol): You were out here scaring away all the dinner, more like. "Oh?" is what Ghol says aloud.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus walks past Ghol a bit, to the little tree which is the only one with branches he can reach. Even then, he's clearly straining on his tiptoes, the habit rising to reveal boots in dire need of repair and very thick gray socks rising at least halfway up his calves. "Ah!" The branch snaps up and down again, this time scattering some droplets on the sleeping Kon as well as the gnome. He turns back to face Ghol, and a moment later a fresh spat of water-droplet stains darken his habit. "There's a very narrow band of time where the wind isn't blowing sulfur up the treeline, but before the deer come out to feed. Usually they're grazing here around half four."



Crion (Ghol): "Ah." Oh. "Erm, yes. Of course they are. Well met then, Placidus." Certainly this man isn't under Orcish employ. "Tell me -- have you seen any others like me about in the wood today?"

Suddenly, Kon's head shoots up, the warg instantly awake, and Ghol freezes, his hand going instantly to his belt-sheathed weapons --



VoxPVoxD: "But look at this. You see the pinnation? Now, I measured it. The leafstems separate by about 37 degrees. Which isn't remarkable in itself, but- oh? No, I don't think I've seen any other orcs today, or ever. I haven't marked you incorrectly, have I?"



Crion (Ghol): -- then Kon's tail starts wagging rapidly and he darts off into the woods, graceful and quick for such a huge beast, and Ghol relaxes.

Hopefully he'll come back with something to eat.

To the little man: "Yes and no. I am only half-orc, myself. And that is good to hear. Very good to hear." He looks over at the little man straining, and his curiosity gets the best of him. "Do you need any help

with...whatever it is you're doing?"

He's stuck here until Kon comes back anyway.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Oh, yes, please. If you wouldn't mind, I could use a sample from a higher branch. My eyes are sharp but there's no substitute for holding it in your hands."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol grabs the thickest branch on the tree, pulls himself up to reach one even higher, then smoothly cuts a thin, long sliver of bark off the end of a branch. The tree shouldn't miss it much. He deftly catches the sliver in the same hand he's holding the machete while balancing on his other arm, then slides back down to the ground and hands over the sample.

He took a look around while he was out there. Birds in the sky a short distance away in the direction Kon ran. Hopefully he found something.

*up there



VoxPVoxD: Placidus takes it gratefully. "Excellent, thank you." He holds the sample of bark and leaves Ghol cut out at arm's length, alongside the leaves he plucked from the low young branch himself. Then he holds them flat against one another, and then holds them parallel and moves his arms around while preserving that angle, as if he were holding a telescope. "Ah, yes, it's as I suspected. Now, the first thing to notice is that these leaves are green."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol has, in fact, noticed that leaves are green. He just stares at the little man, waiting for him to continue.



VoxPVoxD: "As I said, frequently the wind takes an angle that carries air from the lavafield into the woods. And this air is hot and ashen, but most notably it's sulfurous. Now every plant needs a certain amount of sulfur, and gets it from the soil. But if there's too much sulfur, it becomes toxic to the plant. You'll see the leaves yellow and brown around the edges, like they were burnt. It's called sulfur burn, helpfully enough. But you'll notice that none of these leaves have it."



Crion (Ghol): Oh. Ghol nods, hoping his face communicates 'but of course I knew that.'



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Now naturally these leaves are green, one might say. If they weren't, if the sulfur made the land inhospitable for these acacias, then there wouldn't be any trees here at all. Since there *are* trees here, obviously they've got a higher tolerance for the sulfur than acacias in another place, or some other kind of tree, or what have you. Now that kind of sulfur tolerance is a very unusual trait, certainly not the kind of thing that just, happens by coincidence hundreds and hundreds of times in close enough proximity to constitute a forest. No, these trees are related, and they've flourished in this environment, one hostile to other flora, *because* of that tolerance."

"They're mutants, you see. Prized for their beneficial traits - in this case, hardiness. It's the same way you'll plant seeds from the biggest and tastiest tomatoes, or put the strongest and swiftest horses out to stud."



Crion (Ghol): "I see," and Ghol does, after all -- animal husbandry is a well-known and practiced art in the hills he once called home. "I knew of such practice with the animals of the woods and with livestock; I did not know it held true with plants as well. I--"

Suddenly a deer bursts from the brush on the other end of the clearing, lopes forward a few feet then veers hard left, disappearing back into the trees down a half-hidden trail that its presumable herd had worn into the undergrowth. Kon storms out of the trees mere seconds later in hot pursuit; Ghol points in the direction the deer went but Kon doesn't spare him a glance, disappearing down the trail, gone as quickly as he'd arrived.

Once the forest is silent: "Are you a druid, then? When I was young, the elders told tales of wise men from the south who could talk to plants, and know their verdant secrets."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus doesn't spare a thought to the animal hunting, though he does offer the passing Kon a cheery wave before he vanishes into the woods. "Oh yes, plants can be bred just as true as

cows or horses or any other animal with enough wits to be domesticated. When it happens with plants - that is, when a plant is bred for some specific trait, like ripening quickly or resisting blight or what have you, it's called a cultivar. Now obv- what? A druid? Oh, goodness gracious no. I was- I am- a mendicant brother in the order of Megistus. I'm not a shaman or a wildspeaker. I don't know the first thing about magic."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol nods. Megistus. He knows that name. "Ah, so you're a cleric."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Oh, you flatter me. No, nobody listens when I pray. As I was saying, obviously this stand of acacias represents a cultivar, yes?" He doesn't wait for the formality of agreement. "Well, I'll do you one better." He holds the leaves out again for Ghol's inspection, and then very slowly brings them into alignment with one another, so that one set of leaves overlaps the other in some kind of pinnated eclipse. "You see that?" The leaves overlap each other perfectly.



Crion (Ghol): Ghol remembers the way droplets of steam refused to stick to him. No magic, he says. Well, let the man be modest if he wishes. Ghol nods at the leaf alignment, cocking an eyebrow at the perfection of their match.

*stick to him at first



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Ah, see, you see it. Of course you do, you're a tracker. You don't get to be a tracker if you don't notice things. At least, not for very long. But you see how perfectly these align. As I said, I took the measure of the angle of pinnation. I've been taking them for trees up and down the stand all afternoon. Every one of them is identical. The bark, too, the exact same pattern of flaking. So what does this mean? It means that this isn't a cultivar. It means these are cuttings."

"This branch, and this branch," Placidus holds up each sample in turn for emphasis, "and the whole stand from here to the caldera, all of it, every single acacia in the forest... came from one tree."

"And obviously, you can't do *that* with a warg."



Crion (Ghol): "No. No, you can't. You shouldn't be able to do that with plants, either. Even plants grown in garden, from the same gardened seeds, refuse to grow exactly the same as their parents." Ghol looks about. "And...why here? Why these trees?" He looks over at the lava, suspecting the answer somehow lies in the uniqueness of this particular humid hell.

Just then, Kon comes trotting back into the clearing, the deer's broken neck held lightly in his teeth. He snuffles smugly in Ghol's direction, bobs his head in greeting to funny little man, then slings the carcass over a sturdy, low-hanging branch and tears its throat open to bleed it.



banana (GM): Good dog.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Good question. Now it stands to reason that someone did it on purpose, and I'd say it's the most likely scenario by many orders of magnitude. But given that, we're still left wondering why. I don't have a hard answer yet, but it's easy to theorize." He smiles at Kon, stopping to watch the warg begin to butcher its prey with a totally blank expression, before sweeping a long arm over the lavafield. His arms *are* long, and the joints at his elbow, wrist, and knuckles are quite pronounced. It gives him a vaguely simian posture. "Obviously, this place isn't... strictly habitable."

"But! It's clearly in many people's interests that it be so."



Crion (Ghol): Kon barks once, and as Ghol nods he distractedly takes an oversized skinning knife from his belt and sidearms it in a lazy arc towards the warg. Kon hops up and catches it by the grip in his mouth, then sits down and waits patiently for the deer to finish draining.

Meanwhile: "Not strictly habitable is one way of putting it," the half-orc growls. "That city is--" He pauses. "Ah. Are you a native of Axis yourself, Placidus?"



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "No. I'm not a native of anywhere in particular, really. Up and down the borderlands to the west, between the settlements, once a year we'd make the trek out to Horizon for the Archmage's Jubilee..." He doesn't mention the Bitterwood, where he spent most of the last two

decades. "But no, I don't suspect many people are really natives of Axis. In a few generations, it won't be so, but now it's still a larval capital."



Crion (Ghol): "That city is a blight on the damned land," Ghol says now that he knows he's not insulting the smaller man's home.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Certainly seems that way, given the smell. Heat and sewage do not combine well."



Zarick: A deep, rumbling voice that doesn't sound quite human says lazily from above the pair's heads, "I don't know, it's not so bad. Or at least it wasn't, until all the noise interrupted my nap."



VoxPVoxD: "Er,"



Crion (Ghol): Ghol looks up, startled, drawing both weapons. He was JUST up there--!



Zarick: A high branch in one of the trees creaks and groans, then leaves rustle as something drops from the tree, landing in front of the pair lightly on its... talons?



Crion (Ghol): Even Kon gets to his feet, jogging over to Ghol's side but remaining curious instead of alarmed.



VoxPVoxD: "ER,"



Crion (Ghol): Ghol steps between the little man and the...tree. "Show yourself!"
"Oh."
Today is a day of firsts.



Zarick: If easily startled the two could be provoked to run or attack by the monster that's made its sudden appearance. Even crouched it's clear he's very tall, probably seven feet or so, and heavily muscled. Dull red scales cover his entire body, and his arms and legs end in taloned claws rather than hands and feet. Thin leathery wings sit high on his back. It's a... dragon? You've never seen one quite like this though.



banana (GM): Well, it is the city of men and dragons. Perhaps literally?



Zarick: "Though I suppose I'm pretty uniquely suited to the heat and the ash. It's quite relaxing."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol's vaguely aware that his jaw has dropped. Kon, on the other hand, whips his head to the side and throws the skinning knife into the soft ground to his left to be retrieved later, then pads up to the...dragon?...and begins to sniff him curiously.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus sizes the red dragonman up before glancing from him to Kon to Ghol. "You're all having me on, aren't you?"



Zarick: Teeth that are far too white and numerous split in a grin. "Nice. I've never seen one this big, particularly not one that could clean its own kills."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol, brows furrowed, mouth open wide, looks from Placidus, to the dragon, to Placidus, to Kon, to Placidus again, then back to the dragon. "His name is Kon," is all he manages.



VoxPVoxD: "No, I suspect you haven't seen a wolf the size of a bear, just like I haven't. I also haven't seen a red dragon who walks on two legs or a half-orc with elves' ears. Are any of you real? Am I hallucinating right now? There are certain substances in volcanic ash that have been known to produce delirium."



Zarick: "Ah, yes, I heard. Sorry, I've been listening for a few minutes. I'm Vraknaar. If it's hard to say, don't worry."



Crion (Ghol): Apparently satisfied, Kon chuffs once and pads back to the knife, pulling it back out of the dirt with his mouth. While they were all standing around, the deer finished draining.

Ghol: "Well -- I -- ah --" Shit! He noticed? Just like that?! "-- I -- well, I wasn't aware they made beardless dwarves!" He crosses his arms defensively.



Zarick: "I'm pretty sure I'm real. Not everyone else is though, usually." The dragon snorts, and a tiny plume of smoke issues from his snout. "I come here when I have time, usually, though this is the first time I've seen anyone else here. The hunting is surprisingly good and I enjoy the heat."

The snort becomes a roar, and the dragon-man nearly falls over laughing. "Beardless dwarves! Don't let one of them hear you say that, they'll have you strung up right after the words leave your mouth."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus looks from Ghol to Vraknaar, pursing his lips. Then he says, "I need a moment." and produces another, slightly larger notebook, bound in black leather, with a fine pen marking the place he opens it too, and begins scratching away.



banana (GM): Placidus had never been to Axis before, either. That's the thing about this capital, in the 20th year of the Emperor's reign: it's a place for things that have never been seen before. Wargs on the streets. Dragon-wrought hybrids in the trees. Cats and dogs lying down together. The thick end of the Conquest's wedge.

Many cities are larger than Axis. FedCap may be more powerful, and Drakkenhall wealthier- but this is a place where brand new things begin.



Crion (Ghol): Ghol: "How...long have you been up there?"
Since when do dragons climb trees?!



Zarick: "A few hours, I think? I've been asleep for most of it, though. The higher branches are surprisingly very strong, and even here, sleeping on the ground alone isn't really a good idea."



VoxPVoxD: Muttering, "no, that can't be right.. conjugates are asymmetrical..." A few broad scratches with the pen, and Placidus flips to a clean page and begins scratching again.



banana (GM): It's technically illegal, since all land within Mount Crucible's crater has been declared part of the city, and vagrancy is prohibited. Nobody patrols out here, though- it's not close to either of the main tunnels through the shield wall or to the actual inhabited area.



VoxPVoxD: The gnome is clearly growing increasingly frustrated, looking up at Vraknaar and then down at his notes and then scribbling a little more. Finally he lets out an audible "Phooey!" and snaps the book shut. "Excuse me, Vraknaar, sir - where is your brother?"



Crion (Ghol): Ghol: "Whah?"



VoxPVoxD: To Ghol: "I've tried it six different ways, and there is no other configuration that balances the equation. There has to be another one of him. I mean, precisely one."



Zarick: The dragonwrought's expression changes from laughter to a scowl faster than even the wind could change. "What do you know of it? How did you find out?" It's not unthinkable that even here in Axis, there could be curiosity hunters out to bag unique creatures.



Crion (Ghol): Ghol settles back into a defensive stance reflexively, but now his attention is split between the two men.

Meanwhile, Kon calmly continues dressing the deer.



VoxP**VoxD:** Plainly oblivious to the mortal peril he's placing himself in, Placidus continues. craning his neck up to meet the red dragonman's scowl. "I cannot account for any scenario where both you and I exist without a hanging term. This hanging term has to produce a symmetrical conjugate. In order for that to square up there has to be another one of you. If there is, then this is all... within parameters. Atypical, certainly, but typically so. If not, then I have no reason to assume the rain will continue to fall down instead of up, or that fire will burn instead of freeze, or that we ought to be breathing air instead of diamond dust."



banana (GM): If the Conqueror rather than the Five had come up with him, Vraknaar would have been a state secret. As is there are a *few* who know - no magic can bind a dragon to silence. Rumour does not seem to be Placidus' source of information.



VoxP**VoxD:** "So - respectfully - where is your brother?"
Placidus starts scanning the treeline.



Crion (Ghol): The little man lost him about a sentence in, but Ghol reflexively starts looking around too.



Zarick: Vraknaar would arch an eyebrow if he had one, then says, "He's not here. He doesn't enjoy the heat and sulphur like I do." The dragonwrought shakes his head. "I thought you didn't do magic. Sounded like magic to me."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol: "Oh, he's magic."



VoxP**VoxD:** Placidus scoffs. "Look at me. If I were a wizard, do you think I would dress this shabbily? Do you think I'd be out here taking samples? I'd have PEOPLE for that!"



Crion (Ghol): To Placidus: "Steam drops on your skin."



VoxP**VoxD:** Placidus: "Oh, confound it, that is quite beside the point!"



Zarick: The dragonman looks down at himself. He's wearing a fairly ragged pair of trousers and not much else. There's nothing for him to actually cover, because he's a dragon for crying out loud, but some of the Conqueror's liaisons said it made their men nervous when he walked around "naked", and weren't too happy when he told them to try and make the Great Wyrms wear 'pants'.



Crion (Ghol): How is Vraaknar dressed? Is he dressed?
Ah.



Zarick: They don't look like a beggar's trousers, indeed they look of high quality. They're just damaged by being worn by someone who presumably often sleeps in trees.
"Anyway, lots of wizards prefer to do their own collecting, because their apprentices are too bumbling to get it right."



VoxP**VoxD:** Placidus wipes sweat off of his scalp. "It's not magic just because you haven't come to understand it yet. You, Ghol, you talk to that warg without saying a word. You treat each other like kin. Is that magic? No! It's simply habit and talent and training."



banana (GM): The very leisure in which Vraaknar was engaging says much about him to the others. From what you've seen of the city, Axis doesn't have *time* for people to take naps, or potter around inspecting trees. It's full of workers and entrepreneurs, building the future - on their way to glory or the road gangs. People with such unusual features are everywhere, but transient.



Crion (Ghol): Kon barks once. He's finished dressing his kill.
Ghol: "So...does anyone want some deer?"



Zarick: "I'll get my own, later. I'm afraid that if I had some there'd be none left for anyone else."

Let someone try to tell a dragon not to lazily nap in the sun and volcanic ash, whenever he has time. Bad enough that they're making him wear clothes.



VoxPVoxD: "Is it magic that makes the rain fall? Is it magic that makes the stars turn in the heavens? Is it magic that turns flour into dough and dough into bread? No! These are all emergent processes, ways the world interacts at its most natural, and they are at most directed by some conscious endeavor, but they always, always adhere to the underlying logic that makes all of this--" the gnome waves his long arms about "--possible."



Crion (Ghol): Kon is already lying down, knife buried in the dirt next to him, chewing on a deer leg. Hunting's hard work!



VoxPVoxD: "But no, thank you. I appreciate the offer but I don't eat meat."



Zarick: "But magic can and does do all those things. I heard there's a magic bakery in Axis. Even the Conqueror's been there, I heard."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol sighs. Well, Kon's so big there's no worry that the kill will go to waste. Still, he prefers his meat cooked.

But he's not about to walk away from all of this just yet.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus scoffs again. "Magic is sufficient to produce these things, but it is not *necessary*. A magic spell can make a man fly. What spell do the birds wear?"



Zarick: Vraknaar shrugs. "Hells if I know. I've been around plenty of magic and it all seems fairly ordinary to me, but I don't really know how it works. My brother wields it and I'm not sure *he* knows how it works."



banana (GM): It actually is magic that makes the stars turn in the heavens. Everybody knows that.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "This is what I'm saying! You can't just assume something is magic simply because no other explanation is forthcoming. It's dreadfully unscientific."

"Well, no, obviously you can - but you oughtn't!"



Crion (Ghol): Ghol: "Wait, so if it's not magic that makes the steam drops not hit you right away...what is it?"



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "They do hit me right away. It just takes a moment to get wet. Right now it's--" He holds his sleeved arm out and looks at it. Both Ghol and Vraknaar can see the drops hit, and leave no marks, only for the patter of fresh wet spots to appear out of thin air a moment later. "I'd clock that at just a hair over six seconds. It varies a bit, there's a number of factors. The moon, possibly, is involved. But it's a simple asynchronicity. I extended the interval of my intrinsic periodicity."



banana (GM): That.. sounds like something a wizard would say. At least, it does if you aren't a wizard.



Zarick: Vraknaar crouches and holds out his scaled arm next to the gnome's. The drops strike immediately, even if they turn into steam quickly. "I don't know. That is pretty weird, if you aren't actually a wizard."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol looks over at the dragon doubtfully. "Right. So. Magic."



Zarick: "It's okay if you are a wizard, you know. I don't eat wizards unless they're attacking me."



VoxPVoxD: "Have you ever, in your entire life, seen a poor wizard?"



Zarick: "Most of the magic-users I've met are dragons, so that's not a very fair question."



Crion (Ghol): "I've never seen a wizard, ever, so..." The half-orc shrugs. "Anyway, I'm gonna get some deer." Ghol turns and walks away hopefully before the little man can spit out anymore words the tutors didn't teach him.

Kon's already trotting over with another deer leg, which he presses into Ghol's hand before nudging him back towards the other two. Ghol rolls his eyes. "I told you, we don't need to be making friends, we're --" Snuffle; another snout push. "Oh, fine."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "I see that Kon has convinced you to be sociable. Powerful wizardry indeed."



Crion (Ghol): The half-orc makes a face. It is sometimes painfully evident that the half-orc is barely old enough to be called a man -- evident to everyone but himself, of course.



Zarick: Vraknaar certainly doesn't seem to notice. "You want that cooked? I think it's bad for you more fleshy-types to eat it raw."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol blinks. He's used to outsiders to the nomad-band assuming all orcs and half-orcs eat uncooked meat exclusively, as if they themselves were animals. Not that there's anything wrong with that, Ghol thinks as Kon curls up behind him, big and fluffy enough to sink back into like a cushion, and settles down for a post-meal nap. "Ah, yes," Ghol says. "I can eat it raw just fine, but I prefer it cooked. How...?"



Zarick: Vraknaar holds out a hand for the leg, his mouth open slightly. "You'll see." Though I think you've probably begin to suspect.



Crion (Ghol): "Oh." Ghol hands him the leg and steps back.



Zarick: The dragonwrought turns away (wouldn't do to start a fire or singe his new allies), holds the leg at arm's length, and takes a deep breath.



VoxPVoxD: Placidus, himself, doesn't look much older - though it's so hard to tell with gnomes. It's often said there's no such thing as a middle-aged gnome, and while this is an exaggeration there's some truth to it - gnomes typically retain their youthful looks well into the age when some other malady or catastrophe will kill them, be it plague or sword or simple rotten teeth leaking bad humors into the brain. A truly old gnome, one of advanced years, will over the span of no more than a year shrink down from his youthful looks to the bent and wizened and wispy-bearded look Placidus associates with his great-grandfather Arturo. The upshot of this is that Placidus, a man in his mid-30s, looks scarcely older than 20.



Zarick: When he opens his mouth again, a thin stream of flame issues forth, striking the deer leg and scorching the surface. Vraknaar turns his mouth away quickly and snaps it shut, then turns around with the leg. "Sorry. It's pretty hard to avoid well done."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "What does it taste like to do that?"

"Is it sulfurous? Does it taste like lamp oil?"



Zarick: "I haven't tasted lamp oil. I'm beginning to think you really are a wizard, with a question like that."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "The physics of dragonbreath are very fascinating. I've read it theorized that wyrms possess a bladder in their chests, the size of a third kidney, that secretes some naturally-produced accelerant which combines with air from the lungs and a spark from the gizzard to ignite."

"Of course I've never had occasion to ask before."

Crion (Ghol): "Thank you." Ghol takes the leg and takes an experimental bite. It's NOT well-done -- it's



like...Ghol tries to think. It's like it's been pan-seared, almost. Blackened on the outside, still rare on the inside, but cooked. The juices are exquisite. This technique...



VoxPVoxD: If he thinks THAT'S good, wait until he discovers salt.



Zarick: "Well, I can't really just do it whenever like a full-sized dragon. Takes a while before I can do it a second time."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus nods. "That makes sense."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol half-hears Placidus's explanation, but mostly he's too busy eating his first real meal since yesterday morning. He wasn't aware how hungry he'd been.



banana (GM): From Vraknaar's experiences in the far east, he'd know that dragons do not e.g. dissect other dragons and theorise about how their organs work. It's hard to say whether that's more disrespectful, wasteful, dangerous or pointless? But definitely those things.



Zarick: Vraknaar doesn't mention it. He's not worried about this little gnome assaulting him somehow, even if he was a little impressed by the creature's lack of fear when he dropped from the tree.



VoxPVoxD: People are similarly tetchy about doing medical research on cadavers. Surely, though, surely that's just propaganda about necromancy. A few generations after the Wizard King is deposed, maybe--



Crion (Ghol): Ghol obviously finishes his meal, then carefully sets his weapons down at his feet before sinking back into Kon's fur.

To Vraknaar: "How long have you been in Axis?"



Zarick: "Not long. Unsurprisingly, I'm from Drakkenhall originally. We're just stopping here for a while. Not sure what we're going to do next."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol nods, idly rubbing his belly. "Haven't seen any other orcs around, have you?"



Zarick: "Don't think so. It seems odd that I'm seeing you here. Don't usually see them so far away from the main body of their army."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Oh for- he's obviously a deserter. Do you have any tact at all?"



Zarick: "No. Have you ever met a dragon? Like, a real one? Tact is not our strong suit."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol's face darkens. "I am no deserter, little man." He stands up out of Kon's fur as the warg raises his head drowsily. "Deserters choose to flee."



VoxPVoxD: "Well *obviously* I've never met a dragon. Something like one in a hundred thousand people has met a dragon for longer than it takes to be eaten by one."



Zarick: "An outcast then? Did you kill someone you shouldn't have?"



Crion (Ghol): "I--" He stops himself. "--have reasons."



Zarick: "I bet that number's a lot lower here, gnome. Or did you not see the flights in the sky. They're calling it the Dragon Empire."



banana (GM): Axis is definitely one of the easiest places to meet dragons right now. For all their apparent obedience to the Imperial hierarchy, though, they meet who *they* choose.

VoxPVoxD: "Phooey. Even here you don't just stumble into a dragon by happenstance. Unless they



also happen to walk on two legs and wear trousers."



Zarick: "Well, I wouldn't worry about it, Ghol. If you meet an orc here, he'll probably have more problems than you do. As it is, I've rather taken a liking to you and your giant dog. Letting them haul you out to get tortured or whatever it is they do isn't agreeable."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol stares darkly at the dragon. "If I meet an orc here, his problem is probably me."



VoxPVoxD: "I suspect you're not going to find a lot of orcs inside the caldera, at any rate, unless the city's been breached."

"Are you expecting assassins?"



Crion (Ghol): Ghol: "They sent assassins the first few days. Well, soldiers. Skirmishers."



Zarick: "The Conqueror might welcome emissaries. As long as they agree to keep clashing against the Rotting King's gates."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol: "Last week that stopped. Now they're sending trackers; scouts. Men like me, with nets and chains."

Ghol: "I think I liked the killers more."

Kon whines softly, eyes still closed.



Zarick: "Good thing you found me, then. I love it when they try nets and chains. Did you know that sometimes men think that hunting dragons is a thing you can just, do?"



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "That seems... extremely ill-advised."



Zarick: "One of those dumb bastards tried to throw a net over me. The look on his face when I just sort of exploded out of it was priceless."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol laughs at that, relaxing a bit, leaning back into Kon's fur and idly stroking his side.



Zarick: "I guess humans think that wearing dragon scales will give them our strength," Vraknaar says, much more seriously. "Unfortunately for them, our strength is more than our skin."



banana (GM): Don't mention the White, don't mention the White, don't mention the White-



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Certainly. I mean the tendons of a dragon alone have enough tensile strength to suspend a bridge."



Zarick: No, really, don't.

"Making a structure out of dragon parts seems like a good way to get a whole flight's attention. And if you're strong enough to fight an entire flight of dragons you probably rule the whole continent in secret or something."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Oh, I don't mean an actual bridge. It's just a way of describing the scale of something without having to break out units of measure, which I'd have had to explain anyway."



Zarick: "Fair enough. I could probably uproot one of these trees if I tried hard enough. One of the elders could probably uproot this whole grove with a swipe of its tail."



Crion (Ghol): Ghol feels himself drifting off and snaps back awake. He can't have another dream here. He can't dream about her here. Focus.

"So how long are you going to be in Axis?" Ghol doesn't specify, but he's clearing asking both of them, and there's clearly an unspoken anxiousness in the question that hints towards hope that the answer is

'not too long, would you like to travel together?'



VoxPVoxD: Placidus: "Not too much longer. Would you like to travel together?"



Zarick: "My current mission, much like that of all dragons, is to accrue wealth and power while not dying. So maybe?"



Crion (Ghol): Ghol almost succeeds in looking conflicted. "I don't know...I'd have to ask Kon--"
The warg barks twice happily without opening his eyes.



Zarick: "Someone who can guess that I have a brother from nothing but my presence is either useful or dangerous, and either way I should probably stay close." Vraknaar shows more teeth than is probably necessary.



Crion (Ghol): Ghol: "Well, since Kon wants to, I have no problem with it."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus winces, not at the dominance display but at the mischaracterization. "It's hardly to fair to call deductive reasoning a 'guess', Vraknaar."



Zarick: "If it wasn't a guess then I'm pushing it into 'dangerous', I think. Even still."



VoxPVoxD: "Er, well, dangerous is... ultimately subjective..."
Placidus rubs the back of his neck, avoiding eye contact.



Zarick: Vraknaar pats the gnome on the head without damaging him. "Don't worry. I suspect we're all dangerous anyway, to the right people."



VoxPVoxD: Placidus is used to getting treated like a child or a toy by people way bigger than him. Once you're at that scale, the difference between twice as big and eight times as big is sort of academic. He just frowns up at the dragonman.



Zarick: It could have been a pat on the shoulder but his shoulders are so small!