














	banana (GM): San Meat is very much a white-elven city. It's built on the edge of a forest, but held at one remove; the woods are the citizens greatest non-meat resource, not their home. Yetanotherwood holds life and power which are the natural domain of elfkind white or otherwise, as the ocean does for fish - but white elves are not made of water.
	Ghol, Going East: Ghol's reasonably certain, anyway.
	banana (GM): The western and northern parts of the city are marked by a high stone wall (painted, but nobody could afford enough alabaster to enclose a town) and whitecrystal towers. The eastern edge has a stockade and the cliffs, but south is just the treeline, and the lowest of the buildings blend into it. The lodges of hunters and trappers are here, and older streets; no butchers, only tanners, and a single squat sage's tower which is the apparent home of Silesias the Grey.
	Kon: Kon's with Ghol today -- he was willing to let him visit Arry by himself, but insisted on coming along to this meeting. It's not that he doesn't trust elves, it's that he doesn't trust anyone who lives in groups of more than twenty.
	banana (GM): They've well qualified for his distrust. Axis was larger, but San Meat must still hold fifty thousand people during this tourist season. ..of course Estella's split-off horde was larger, but it was spread out through a vast and treacherous swamp, moving slowly during the few unmoist hours of each day. The fires went on for miles, but so did the mosquitoes, and their fevers discouraged gatherings.
	Kon: Oh, he didn't like them, either.
	banana (GM): It's easy to tell which home belongs to the sage - the tower is the only building which <i>*doesn't*</i> have either children playing outside in the morning before schooling, or an awning with a sign like KERRODEI & VAN ALTEN FINE DEERBAIT It just sits, squat, gardenless, on the edge of the road and the wood. Multicoloured lights are visible in high-up slit windows.
	Ghol, Going East: Ghol's still got his weapons -- stone bird magma hell is still about 12 hours away -- but he's got them slung over his back instead of ready to quick-draw from his waist.
	Kon: Kon insists on going ahead a bit, sniffing around the hut gingerly and from a respectful distance.
	banana (GM): There are occasional soldiers on the streets. A garrison of the Dragon Army is stationed here, and the priests have their own guard corps; both types of patrol appreciate the sheathed blades. While I wouldn't describe Silesias's tower as a "hut", Kon can pace up to its arched entrance - there's no signage, but a big knocker indicates that visitors might occasionally be expected.
	Ghol, Going East: Ghol will stride up and knock three times -- he wasn't instructed to use any sort of special knock or anything, at least not that he recalls -- and then step back.
	Kon: Kon doesn't stand quite between Ghol and the door -- he's off to one side -- but he's very much ready to intercede if the reception isn't what he's expecting.
	banana (GM): After half a minute there are footsteps and an old warrior opens the door. 'Warrior' springs to mind: the grey elf (who I'll assume is Silesias) has the sort of calves people call 'thews', leather clothing arranged so as to repel weapons from strategic areas, and so on. He <i>*is*</i> old, though, with a lined face and hair the same ashen colour as his skin. Inside, the tower's ground floor is full of handmade wooden furniture - mostly bookshelves. It's dim, since the only light comes from conjured mageglows- open flame Would Not Do in here.
	Silesias, probably: "What?"


	Ghol, Going East: Ghol sort of braces himself as the door opens. First time he's seen a grey elf, at least this close up; he wonders if there's going to be any, like, weird reactions...?
	banana (GM): Compared to the white ones.. well, grey elves have darker skin. White elves are so fair as to be almost literally white; this guy's got a strong black-brown shade which would actually let him use the stone walls as camouflage. They're also taller, or at least Silesias is; Ghol rarely sees anyone in San Meat that's close to his own height. The ears are just the same, and the sharp elegant features - grey elf eyes don't *glow* like the white ones but they're sort of liquid pools rather than having separated retina and iris like more modest races.
	Ghol, Going East: Huh. Neat.
	banana (GM): Presumably the other stuff is the same. Before Ghol ever had dreams, he knew he was different when he could get by on less sleep, when it took him more effort to build up muscle strength, when he found out what 'farting' was and that he didn't do it...
	Silesias: He's looking you up and down intently.
	Ghol, Going East: The first thing he'll do is ask: "My name is Ghol, Going East. ...Do you know what I am?"
	Silesias the Grey: "Well, young man, my job is to know things from books. But I've never seen your like in one."
	Ghol, Going East: "Yeah...I guess I should have expected that."
	Silesias: "Sallow skin, sharp teeth, friendship with a terrible beast. Have the meat priests summoned a friendly demon into an elfin host?"
	Kon: Kon chuffs once, disdainfully. He's standing Right Here.
	banana (GM): Indeed, all three of you are standing awkwardly in a doorway.
	Ghol, Going East: Ghol laughs. "Not unless they sent away to the Movement by mail. ... Can we speak inside...?" He glances about. No one LOOKS like they're listening in, but. You know.
	Silesias: "That word I know, which explains what, but not how. You'd better come in."
	Kon: If Kon can fit, he'll come too. If not, he'll stand watch.
	banana (GM): The sage steps inside, moving with an economy which describes a history of exercise- but then he sits down as quickly as possible in a soft chair. There's a knife beside it, which he slips into a sheath at his belt. Kon can fit through the door, but he's going to have to be very careful when he turns around, or risk sweeping shelves of books to the ground!
	Kon: Then he'll just sit physically blocking the doorway, glaring at anyone outside who comes too close, keeping an ear on the conversation inside. Door warg.
	Ghol, Going East: Ghol will follow the older elf inside and take a seat if one is offered. If not, he'll just stand around kinda fidgeting awkwardly, as teens do.
	Silesias: There's no other chairs, get owned. "With philosophical terminology like that you must actually be *from* the horde."
	Ghol, Going East: "Yep. Uh, I mean, yes." Mind your manners in front of your elders, Ghol. "I served as

 an Emissary for a year, and a Scout for the...three years? before that. Ever since my nomad-band was taken into the Movement."


Silesias: "And I assume there's more to the story, since you aren't burning down the city." The sage fumbles on the end table to his left for a pad and a charcoal pen, and begins scribbling notes.

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol nods. "The head of the Movement's southern spur -- they're coming for Axis, incidentally, moving south -- she, uh, didn't react as well to the revelation of my heritage as the elves I've met have."

Silesias: "'Incidentally', the boy says. Well, I'll put off packing to flee until we've finished this discussion. I can see why an orc would be upset by the idea that you've cheated their own fate.. because you're no *former* elf, are you?"


 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol shrugs. "I saved the Conqueror's spies that were delivering the news to him in Axis, their lives won in fair, Doomed combat. If the Orc Lord has a quarrel, it's with the weak corpses he called warriors."

Silesias: pauses in his writing for a moment, then goes on even faster than before.


 **Ghol, Going East:** He shakes his head. "No, I was born this way. I think. My nomad-band elders were vague on the circumstances of my fostering."

Silesias: "Then you haven't had to give up what your former comrades had. Good for you, a shame for the rest of us that it isn't more common."


"My recent nightmares are beginning to make sense, Ghol, Going East."

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol blinks. "Really? What has She been sending you?" He pauses, chuckling nervously. "I've gotten a shopping list."


Silesias: "Despair, shattering, retreat into dubious comfort. The usual, lad."

 **Ghol, Going East:** The teen shifts on his feet. "Oh." Not much to say to that.

Silesias: "It's been a pretty rough twenty years. But this week is a celebration, they tell me."


 **Ghol, Going East:** "Meatfest..."

Silesias: "I'm sure that's why you're here. But why are you *here*, if you take my meaning?"

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol takes a deep breath. "A crown of thorns, a crown of leafs, a crown of twigs...and an egg."

"I mentioned a shopping list. She needs these things. I've...no idea where to even start looking. Or if they're even real things instead of, I don't know. Metaphors. Symbols."

Silesias: The sage Silesias sucks in air through his teeth, puts the notepad down, strokes his chin, and looks disconcerted and then concerned and then fascinated. He says: "I'm not sure I can help you with the egg."

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol nods. "That one just showed up last night. Different kind of dream from the others. More confused. Probably going to have get Her to send it again." You know, somehow. The connection doesn't seem very two-way.

Silesias: "I don't usually offer help for free. If you're looking for the Sharded Crowns, odds are you can't pay or you were brought here by a destiny so strong I'd be loath to oppose it..."



Ghol, Going East: Ghol lifts an eyebrow and looks pointedly at the notes Silesias is scribbling. "Knowledge for knowledge. You ask me a question, I answer. I ask you a question, you answer."

Silesias: The grey elf cackles. Only *really* old elves can make such an undignified noise. "A fair deal!"



banana (GM): Across the street, a child passes. "Mummy, is there a BEAR in the old man's door"



Kon: Kon puts his paws over his eyes, then pops them off, playing peek-a-boo with the child.

Silesias: "Here's my first, for resale to the Empire. Just what kind of force does this southern spur constitute?" Considering Ghol briefly. "As far as you know?"



Ghol, Going East: "To my knowledge, the southern spur consists of some 88,000 orcs, half-orcs, and assembled Movement irregulars from conquered lands such as they are, under the command of Estella, Getting Wider, former celebrated chef, current general and trusted subaltern commander of the Orc Lord's host. The Scouting corps is some 2,000 to 3,000 strong, mostly half-orcs for speed, agility, and stealth -- we cause less concern if seen on the road, so long as we don't fly one of the Movement's known standards." There are dozens of 'standards' used in the Movement, most of which incorporate the Orc Lord's personal crossed-axe insignia, but some which do not. "Another 4,000 to 5,000 is camp staff -- cooks, cleaners, provisioners, so on. The remaining 80,000 are regulars, split into 20,000 or so cavalry -- assorted mounts, mainly wargs, giant boars, or urquines -- and three commands of infantry, each 20,000 strong."

"The head of assorted cavalry is the Ridemaster. That's Orton, Flying Fast. He's a bit of an oddity in that he prefers a plain old horse over one of the more exotic mounts, and his horse, well...there's a reason he's 'Flying Fast.'"

"The heads of the three infantry commands are the Gruntmasters. I never worked much with them; scouts fell under the purview of the Ridemaster, since many of us had mounts."

Silesias: "Shuman ignore us, Cacaric preserve us." There are millions and millions of people in the West - but the Empire's people are not like orcs. Most of them do not and cannot fight. It takes civilisational infrastructure of many to support even one soldier, and the Dragon Empire is on the borders. "Eight-and-eighty thousand orcs present an existential threat."



banana (GM): *the Dragon Army is on the borders

Silesias: "I hope the garrison pays for this, but I have to give it to them either way. ..what's your question, then?"



Ghol, Going East: "How did the Sharded Crowns come to be? By their name and number, I assume they correspond to the three shards: thorn for black, bark for grey, leaves for white. Do they come from the beginning of elfdom, or were they...forged?...later?"

Silesias: "You've got the Crowns' nature exactly right, Ghol, Bearing Portents." You're not sure if he knows about half-orc names or is just making fun. "But they are not old."

"Eighteen years ago was the black bastards underlandgrab. Three years later our King was killed for it. Kings and Queens do die, of course."



Ghol, Going East: Ghol nods.

The Elf King's death is a historical event to him, of course. He never dreamed of that old man.

Silesias: "This was different. Too early. A girl-child barely conscious of right and wrong came into her power and made the.. made a choice. With the Crown of Stars still blood-slick in a dwarf's hand we were torn apart."



Ghol, Going East: "I'm sure She had her reasons." That's not actually a defense so much as an empty

truism, but there it is.

Silesias: "Some agree. Some don't. The degree of disagreement is the problem."

"The Crown broke into three pieces and came into the hands of each.. each race. Where only one had been. You're looking for the ruling symbols of the shards of the elves."



Ghol, Going East: "How dare they take--" Some of the orc asserts itself. "How dare She ALLOW them to take the symbols of Her throne??"

Silesias: "Reluctantly, I'm thinking. Given your quest."

"But cut our lady a *little* slack. She was less than one year old."



Ghol, Going East: "Where were Her stewards?!" His eyes narrow as the obvious answer occurs to him. "Ask me a question. I already know my next one."

Silesias: "Gladly, and something less depressing:"

The old elf shifts his chair a little to face the door and points. Kon is there, goofing for several of the neighbourhood children now as their appalled parents try and pull them away. "What the heck is that?"



Ghol, Going East: Ghol turns and shrugs. "Oh, that's Kon. He's cool."



Kon: Having heard his name, Kon rolls over in place to consider Silesias with clear, unblinking eyes.

Silesias: "You young people and slang. 'Cool' mean something you approve of, something that your peers would agree to be novel and worthy of discussion?"



Ghol, Going East: Manners, Ghol. "Yes. He's my friend. I found him alone in the woods when I was off, ah, hunting. When I shouldn't have been. The other boys tried to take them from me, so I broke some of their arms. He and I have been together...ten years now, or thereabouts."

Silesias: "This must have been a long way west. B- Friends like yours aren't generally seen in the farmlands of Marrow."



banana (GM): Farmers would violently object.



Ghol, Going East: "North, and west. Off most of your maps."

Silesias: "When I was young and the world was at peace, we used to say 'mint'. Years later the kids had moved onto 'mintox', and I stopped paying attention..."



Ghol, Going East: "He's a lot smarter than even most wargs -- wargs are surprisingly intelligent creatures, once you get to know them, with pretty advanced social behaviors. They don't go in for the alpha/beta male stuff that you hear about with wolves -- you know how a group of wolves is called a 'pack?' A group of wargs is called a 'moot.' But even among wargs, Kon's special. He's not a pet, or a mount. Something the Movement didn't quite...appreciate."

Silesias: "From the glare, I'm sure he appreciates your partisanship."



Kon: Kon nods strongly, then rolls back over to commence playing with children again.

Silesias: The sage gets up and heaves one hinged bookshelf aside to reveal a little kitchen, where he pours himself a drink. Not looking forward to the next question.





Ghol, Going East: Icily: "What 'stewards' are these that claim to act for the Queen of Stars, yet have allowed the proof of Her claim to slip from Her court?"

"


Silesias: "Varied. The thing is, none of the old King's stewards are still serving in that particular capacity. Things were.. chaotic.. and even as a noted sage with the Empire's ear it was hard to keep scribed in to just what was happening where. But I know **some** things about where each of them went."

"Let's start with Gomer, Steward of Bark. He's still alive, and calling himself 'King of the Wildwood'.. and 'High Druid of Coven'.. and 'Dragonsbane'. Not titles that have much credibility around here or, perhaps, anywhere."

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol's lip curls up in a sneer. "King, is he."


 **banana (GM):** "Of a Federated State, no less. I don't think that crown rests easy, though it might be buoyed by arrogance."

"The thing is, a lot of grey elves don't really like.. well, with the whole situation. And in the East in particular. Gomer **does** have his followers."

 **Ghol, Going East:** "The elves have no king. They have a Queen. Gomer needs to be reminded of the facts of this world."

Silesias: "Does me good to hear it."


"Ross Roy might not have been so foolish. The Steward of Thorns took a Crown and fled underground, but can you blame him? Fleeing was the in thing for black elves. So far as I've heard, they're still going, deeper and deeper, trying to hide both from dwarf hammers and the things they themselves unleashed."

 **Ghol, Going East:** "There is no hole yet deep enough to hide from Her. Or me. He will be found."


Still, 'underground' is a pretty large area to search.

Silesias: "Sure, only you'll have to. I don't know where he went."

"Ylitthe is a different story. The Steward of Leaves was loyal."

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol nods. At least one of them comes with some good (?) news.

Silesias: "Something tells me you haven't grasped the implications."

 **Ghol, Going East:** "Loyal to Her? Or...to the old, dead king?"


"...Tell me she didn't go to the Lord of Necromancers."

Silesias: "No! Like a lot of whites, Lord Ylitthe was totally loyal to the Queen. Had no qualms about her order. No distrust, no pangs of cynicism, no resistance and no disobedience."


"Unlike, say, every remaining elf over the age of fifteen years old."

 **Ghol, Going East:** "So she's being hunted."

Silesias: "You don't GET it, boy! You're likely to have met Ylitthe already, wearing scraps of slaughtered goblin skin and carrying a chunk of iron!"

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol facepalms. "You've got to be kidding me."

Silesias: "Do you realise the nature of this dreamquest?" It's one word in the elven tongue, but one the sage almost spits. "You're being asked to reunite us under the child who broke us apart, before the horde she turned us into can kill the rest."

 **Ghol, Going East:** Ghol's temper flares. "What I realize is the story of the elves before Her is one of

treachery and cowardice, and one of treachery and cowardice it remains! The Court of Stars and those who pretend to its throne could stand to learn a thing or two from the 'horde' you so casually deride, old man!"

Silesias: The sage's face twists for a moment, but.. it's an old argument. Not one he wants to have again, and not in front of the warg.

"I'm not saying it isn't the right thing to do."



Ghol, Going East: Ghol calms himself, kicking himself on the inside for losing his temper.

"It's your question."

Silesias: "The King was wrong, wrong, wrong to sanction the invasion. My grey kin are *wrong* to still trust Omen. And when She called to Her race for the first time, that tiny clear voice giving one command, I- for a lot of us, it's not that it was wrong. We were scared."

"'Atone', she said. I wanted to. I just didn't want to lose myself and become a creature of carnage."



Ghol, Going East: THE WAGES OF FEAR ARE IGNOMINIOUS DEATH, the Orc Lord's teachings roar in Ghol's head.

Silesias: "I've got no more- no, wait. One last question. Why do you defend the orcs?"

"You aren't like them. They've written off questions and answers."



Ghol, Going East: "Because I am Her servant, but I am their son." He shakes his head. "I share the Movement's dream of a world without borders, and without warmongers like the One-Eyed King and the Conqueror grinding the people and the land together into paste. A world of simple collectivism, without Archmages or 'Kings of the Wildwood.' I do not think that the only way to this future is through unspeakable brutality. I expect that I share my Lord's opinion in this -- that his current brutality is a tool, not a lifestyle. We are not a people of savagery any more than dwarves were in the Kingswood or the black elves were in the dwarven halls. And I am as much elf as I am orc -- and vice versa. I refuse to turn away from either. If She can be changed -- redeemed -- then my Lord can be convinced to turn away from the fist when the palm is needed. And if not..." Ghol's face darkens. "Orc power transfers aren't so different from Elven power transfers. Both require death. One isn't hereditary."

Silesias the Grey: The sage doesn't write any of that down.

Carefully, he sets the pad aside. "I'm not sure that I can believe in what you describe, or whether it's possible to achieve. Perhaps if I lived in Glitterwood or Ostgard the point about paste.. but I believe you believe it. You've got charisma without suasion, kid."



Ghol, Going East: Ghol blinks. Monologue over, he now feels self-conscious.

Silesias: "I've really got to go and give these notes to the garrison."



Kon: Kon, meanwhile, has been watching and listening to all of this with cautious approval. His estimation isn't so different from the old elf's.



Ghol, Going East: "Of course. Yeah."

Silesias: Mostly he didn't put Ghol's philosophy to paper because if there's anything to it, it's too damn dangerous.

Standing and stretching, putting a few things into a carry-bag: "Sometimes the things we want for the world are not what others would choose. Maybe it'll be up to you whether to let them decide."



Ghol, Going East: Ghol nods. He's actually mulling over his own words now -- it's the first time he's actually said it out loud like that, but it's something that's been building for months within him, ever since his first day in tutelage to become an Emissary, Siroc, Drawing Out the New Words had been

quite a teacher.

*Emissary. Siroc



banana (GM): If he hadn't been who he was, Ghol would likely have ended up a spy-ambassador, dealing with the likes of the Fisher's agents and disgruntled rebel forces in civilised lands..



Ghol, Going East: The dangerous ideas that came from those lessons -- those might have set him on the run just as surely as any hunting party. Perhaps, in some indirect way, they still did.



Kon: Kon, of course, having the benefit of perspective, knows there's another thing at work here: no amped-up teenage boy is ever going to even have it cross his mind to murder a pretty teenage girl who is insisting in dream that only he can save her.

The Orc Lord, though? That guy knew the risks when he took the job.



banana (GM): Applicant should have strong skills in the following areas

- set themselves against all the thrones of the world
- use every tool of power, politics and punishment to root out the cancer at the heart of civilisation
- command men and women in struggle against might and magic, winning again and again
- motivated self-starter



Kon: Kon doesn't talk about it much -- well, you know what I mean -- but he himself HAS seen the Orc Lord, fairly close up, too. Slipped out one night and snuck into his tent compound when the Orc Lord came through to review the troops, while Ghol was out on a mission. Was pretty much what Kon expected. Didn't impress him overly much. Certainly not worth the blood of all those wargs.

Certainly doesn't understand why the other wargs rave about him so.



Ghol, Going East: Ghol, meanwhile, caught just the barest glimpse of his entourage a day or two later and felt his pulse pound with martial pride. But then, he is at least part orc.

Either way, as he leaves Silesias's tower and parts ways with the old elf, Ghol has learned a few more things. He has names -- Gomer, Ross Roy, and Ylitthe (what little good that last one will likely be) -- and for at least one of them, a fairly concrete location.



banana (GM): Depending on interpretation, he also got screwed out of a question.

The main deal is there. Stewards, Crowns, the sins of the past.

Elves were once the most populous and perhaps powerful of races - the eld and fair folk, the starry ones. Mistakes were made. The world is ending. And in its end comes the other half of Ghol's heritage, so who says he **can't** unite everyone and fix everything?

Has anyone ever tried?



Ghol, Going East: Oh, he hasn't forgotten. He got information he wanted, to the degree that could be expected. Having an old, respected sage owe him an answer could come in handy down the line.

No one's succeeded before him, that's true. But then there's never been an elf -- or an orc -- quite like Ghol, Going East.