

As a note to readers of this sample, the previous day ends with Dax staying up late working incredibly hard at the Bell, the tavern his guardian, Yimbley, owns.

Day 11:

*Dax's corpse floats up from a river of exhaustion. It surfaces slowly, lazily, waterlogged with sleep. Every joint aches with the memory of motion, its arms heavy with phantom tankards, its legs sore from countless trips between the furthest table and behind the bar. Light creeps through the shutters in thin, cruel, beams, and the body's eyelids flutter.*

*The newly revived Dax pulls the blanket over his face in a futile attempt to block out the day's responsibilities.*

Dax: Ugh... my head... is the sun really that high already? I could sleep till dusk...

*He throws the blankets off in defeat, and sits up.*

Dax: I never want to see another damn party here again.

*Downstairs, Dax encounters Cammenrita, back at work and preparing for the day to come. As he descends the last stair, their eyes meet. The moment stretches half a beat too long, and Dax catches himself holding his breath. What is that on her face? Anger? Sadness? Wait... apprehension? But it's gone as quickly as he breathes again, as she flashes him a smile.*

Rita: Morning Dax. You sure slept late haha.

Dax: Yeah... well I was

Rita: I know, I know, just teasing. Thanks for covering for me.

Dax: Yeah of course...

Rita (simultaneous): Hey I—

Dax(simultaneous): Listen I—

*They have an awkward moment of "oh go ahead" "oh, no wait you?" "sorry, you go"*

Rita: No here, you go for it.

Dax: Right, okay. I just... I wanted to say I'm sorry about what happened the other night. I just was caught off guard. And I get what you were trying to do, so I'm embarrassed I was such a dick. Anyway, sorry.

Rita: Oh that's all? That's okay.

Dax: Huh? Really?

Rita: Yeah. I mean I know it's gonna be difficult to fix things, but I think I made some actual progress with you guys, haha.

Dax: Oh um... I don't know Rita, I don't know if I think— I mean, I still don't really know if there *is* a way to fix things. I... It's like I said before, it might just be best if we leave things as they are.

Rita: Hm. Well Farrig doesn't feel that way. I talked to him yesterday and he *finally* admitted that he's felt lonely without you two hanging out.

Dax: What? But he— did he really say that?

Rita: Hey, I was a little surprised too, but maybe our talk got him thinking a bit more. But he really did. He said he just isn't sure how to make up with you yet.

Dax: Really?

Rita: Yeah! I mean I wouldn't bring it up with him out of the blue just yet but, who knows?

Dax: Right... Well, thanks for telling me. I'm gonna head out now, but see you later?

Rita: Ha. You know I'll be here.

*Dax leaves with the faintest hint of a smile on his face.*

*Rita watches him leave, and when the door closes, Yimbley appears behind her.*

Yimbley: Was that the truth?

Rita: ... Maybe a small... exaggeration? Sometimes they can be helpful.

Yimbley: You truly are Hayel's child.

*She gives him a bit of a confused look.*

*Another late morning starts in the woods. In a familiar enough sanctuary where so many feelings have been felt. Dry leaves and old arguments cling to Stibir as he sleeps, his back against the gnarled roots of a tree. The light is soft, gold hued, and pools in warm patches on the forest floor. Perhaps he deserves some? It can get cold out here, after all. (Cue, light shines on Stibir sleeping).*

*Curious footsteps disturb the hush.*

Mevel (poking Stibir's face): Stibir? Stibir?

Stibir (slapping him away): Argh, what the hell?

Mevel: Oh man, *phew!* I thought maybe you were dead.

Stibir: Why the hell would I be dead?

Mevel: I dunno, you're out here in the woods, people die in the woods.

Stibir: Well, I'm not.

Mevel: Did you sleep here?

*Behind his eyes, something flashes and vanishes again — a voice shouted indoors, the echo of a slammed door, and silence stretched too thin. Remnants of the conflict with his parents flash across the screen. He bites his lip.*

Stibir: I was camping.

Mevel: I thought you hated camping, you said bugs crawl all over you while you sleep. Besides, you could get sick!

Stibir: I'm not sick.

Mevel: You could have been though.

Stibir: I adapted. I'm a ranger now.

Mevel: Huh?

Stibir: Yeah. See around Stumpton all the dangerous stuff is in the woods. Wolves, bears... even bandits! So we've gotta get used to being out here too.

Mevel: Right... I guess that makes sense. Wait, you really think there's bandits out there?

Stibir: Probably not, they know not to mess with us. But you never know. Could be some (term used for red reaver descendents too).

Mevel: (same term)? Yimbley says they're not actually dangerous though, we just say they are.

Stibir: Man, I don't know! Yimbley's too nice. You can never be too careful.

Mevel: Hm... fair enough.

*Stibir digs a rock out from under his side, and hurls it at a nearby log.*

Mevel: You missed.

Stibir: Wasn't aiming.

Mevel: What did that log attack you or something?

Stibir: It knows what it did.

Mevel: So what should we do now? Train?

Stibir: Yeah, good idea, you still need practice. Hm... you know what? We don't do enough... ugh what's the word... con-dish-ing?

Mevel: Is it like? Putting stuff on plates? That's what Rita does. Could work, she's pretty strong.

Stibir: No no no, I heard Hayel say it once. It's like... running and lifting heavy stuff. So we get used to using bigger axes, and can chase bandits further. (sniffles)

Mevel: Okay, that sounds fun. Wait... are you gonna be able to? Since you're getting sick?

Stibir: I'm not getting sick! C'mon.

*They begin to walk away, but as they continue talking, we focus on the stone that Stibir threw by the log.*

Mevel: So... con dishing is what rangers do?

Stibir: Yeah (sniffles).

Mevel: You are getting sick.

Stibir: I'm not, only weak men get sick. (sniffles)

Mevel: ...

Stibir: Maybe I am getting sick.

Mevel: Can I have your knife when you die?

*From behind the log by Stibir's stone, a pair of eyes rises slowly over the bark. Pale blue, nearly silver. Not the color of ice, but the sky just before lightning. They do not blink, and the boys do not see them. The man they belong to stays motionless as the lichen on the log. His clothes are the color of earth and leaves, and his face wears no expression. The boys do not see him. Neither he nor his eyes follow the boys as they laugh and wander off; he notes their place, dissects their giddiness, and files it away with the rest of the terrain he has watched. The undergrowth barely stirs as he leaves. The boys do not see him.*

*The barracks, for their part, hum with the low din of routine—leather tightening, boots shifting, a pot clanging somewhere down the hall. But in the captain's quarters, it's quieter. Only two voices break the stillness.*

Coldyron: —*Complacent*, Hayel, that's what I'd call it.

Hayel: You're calling me complacent now?

Coldyron: Not you... per se.

*Hayel raises an eyebrow.*

Coldyron: But the *people* are. All of Strumton.

Hayel: Or maybe—just maybe—they're getting comfortable. There's a difference, you know.

Coldyron: *Comfort* dulls the senses. Makes the blade rust in its sheath. Three missing shipments. Two this week. That doesn't happen by chance.

Hayel: And I've sent men to check the roads! These things happen. Not every hiccup in trade's a noose tightening round our neck

Coldyron: One drover who *did* come claims he saw smoke on the Southwood trail—says it smelled like pitch.

Hayel: Could've been a campfire. Could've been a hundred things. You can't chase every whiff of smoke like it's a siege tower rolling in.

Coldyron: We're not prepared, and you know it. As well as I do, you know what peace looks like just before it breaks. I know you lived through it. Don't pretend it can't happen again.

Hayel (tenses and leans forward): Prepared for what? Surely *you're* not going to spin me

tales of the Red Reavers and how their offspring are still dangerous—

Coldyron: Of course not.

Hayel: – because that would be mad. They're farmers and shepherds like the rest of us now.

Coldyron (mutters): Well that's just the problem isn't it. (Sigh) I don't fear the Reavers. I'm worried about what fills the silence they left behind.

Hayel: Ahh. So now it's the silence that's the danger. First we feared banners, now we fear *not* hearing them coming.

Coldyron: Three missing shipments isn't silence. It's a signal that something's out of sorts. You're just not listening.

Hayel: Oh, I hear it. I just don't think it's war drums. Could be delays. Rain. Broken wheel. One of the drovers likes to drink. He once spent two nights in a ditch just outside town because he fancied the shape of the clouds.

Coldyron: You speak like someone who thinks the world gives you warning before it comes down on you.

Hayel (louder): I *speak* like someone who's spent a lifetime waiting for peace, and I'll be damned if I won't let these people feel it while it's here. Peace isn't just the absence of swords. It's what you grow when they're sheathed.

Coldyron: And when someone else unsheathes theirs?

Hayel (coldly): Then we act. Swiftly. Surely. But I won't govern in the shadow of the Freelands war. We water gardens for the seeds in them now—not the ones we *might* plant a decade from now.

*A moment of tension hangs in the air. Coldyron shifts his weight. One gloved hand brushes the edge of the table. He does not sit.*

Hayel (more softly): But I hear you. I do. So here's what we'll do. A town drill. Proper training day. Get both the guard *and* the people moving, together as one. Remind them they've got strength in their bones, even if they don't carry a dagger.

Coldyron: You're turning preparing into a festival. Again.

Hayel: Aye. That way, they remember it fondly. That way, they *show up*. You want to rework the guard? We start by reminding the town that the guard is theirs, not just uniforms

marching about. Something useful.

Coldyron: You won't fortify then? Rearm? Conscript? It's not enough

Hayel: It's a start. And if you're right then... well you'll be able to tell me off and we'll have more eyes on the horizon.

Coldyron: If *I'm* right, neither of us may be able to tell the other off.

Hayel: Haha! Well then it's a win for me in either case.

Coldyron: I'll... begin preparing for this... drill.

Hayel: That's the spirit. Now—speakin' of spirit, what's all that going on outside? Did you see those extra barrels headed towards the Bell? Don't you go telling me it's too complacent to enjoy those drinks.

*Some hours (earlier/later), at the Wailing Bell, Yimbley rights chairs and wipes down tables with a steady, deliberate rhythm. Each motion bears the weight of a man who has done this hundreds of times and will do it hundreds more. The tavern is quiet in that so very particular way such places can be between rushes—a welcome respite, I'm sure many of you would agree, even when one knows it's temporary.*

*Yimbley lights light a lantern and marks the moment with a short sigh.*

*WHAM! The door crashes open suddenly*

Wultedra: Aha! How many suns have swept the sky since last we spoke, O keeper of cups and warden of warm stew? Lovely to see you alive in this old barn!

*Yimbley stares across the room. His jaw tightens slightly. His face twitches once. He slowly sets the Lantern down.*

Yimbley: Rita! It appears we'll need to prepare double what we planned to set a side for tonight.

*Footsteps, then Rita appears in the doorway to the storeroom, with a crate in her arms.*

Rita: Double? Why—

*Her eyes land in the open doorway, and light up like festival torches as she beams with delight.*

Rita: Gasp!

*A once innocuous clearing by the river has shifted. Not the ground, or the plants, but the air between it. It holds purpose now, and sweat. It is filled with the low panting and muttering of self-imposed military discipline. This is not play, nor even training. This is “con-dish-ing.”*

*The lowest branch of a tree creaks under the weight of Stibir’s ambition. He hangs from it, legs kicking uselessly below him as he grunts his way through pull ups. He makes it halfway up once before dropping with a thud.*

Stibir: Alright. That’s... one. Maybe one and a half.

*A few paces away, Mevel hurls a flat stone into the river with as much effort as his body can muster... SPLASH!*

Mevel: Phew... Did you see how high up that splash went? That’s got to be worth what... at least twelve points?

Stibir: You’re not trying to score points, you’re trying to build *arms* and *shoulders* and stuff, like Yimbley and Hayel.

*What better way to measure effort, though, than the splash of a thrown stone.*

Mevel: Well how do I know if it’s working then?

Stibir: Your arms get bigger.

Mevel: Hmph... They don’t look bigger now though.

Stibir: Maybe you didn’t do it right.

Mevel: Well... Yours don’t look bigger either!

Stibir: Okay well... it takes a while! That’s why Hayel has the Guard practice all the time and stuff, you gotta keep doing it.

Mevel: That sucks.

Stibir: Yeah. But if you don’t do it, you’ll be weak. And then if we run into wolves or something you’ll die first. Here, your turn for pull ups. No crying

*Mevel jumps for a low branch and dangles like a marionette from a string. He trembles with resolve while his face twists into a knot. And with teeth clenched and eyes scrunched... he pulls himself up once! Twice— well almost twice?*

Stibir: You looked like you were being hanged.

Mevel (grins): Still counts.

*They continue by running winded laps around the tree line, vaulting logs, racing the wind, daring each other to leap from increasingly higher rocks. Their shouts echo like battle cries, though their chests burn and their legs wobble with each circuit. Eventually, they both collapse by a rock near the water.*

Mevel: D'you think we're stronger yet?

Stibir: Probably, but I bet it'll take a while for us to notice. (pants) I think my arms are gonna fall off my body. (he squints) Hey... look.

*Mevel follows his gaze.*

*Down the slope, past the hedges and low stacked stones, a veritable stream of people walks on the path into town. Men, women, older children. Folk from the scattered cottages that ringed the outer edge of town, with baskets, barrels, and bundles, walking in twos and threes toward the center.*

Stibir: That's... huh. That's a lot of people. Is there a party? I didn't nothin'.

Mevel: Dunno, look how fast they're going.

*The boy is right. There's a buzz in their step, an eagerness. Someone waves, another laughs. A woman lifts a small child onto her hip, talking excitedly to a man beside her.*

Stibir: Well c'mon, let's see what it is.

*They get to their feet, joints groaning. With a shared look, they set off down the hill, curiosity pulling at their heels.*

Mevel: You think they'll be bringing sweets into town?

Stibir: Why would they be bringing sweets? And even if they were, why would they give you any.

Mevel: Well, one day, someone *will* be giving out sweets, and then who's gonna be prepared? Not you.

*In Makeen's tent, the smell of cloth, paper, and ink presses in around Dax. The air is thick with the stillness of an afternoon going nowhere fast, and fly traces slow spirals in the amber light that leaks through a gap in the roof. Dax plucks through the forest of scrolls and notes—checking seals, peeking at notes in the margins, unfolding old paths that might never have mattered and certainly don't now.*

Dax: She wouldn't mind right? I mean it's not as if I'm stealing it, I'm going to give it right back in a day or two.

*He furls one map up and slides it into his belt.*

Dax: Besides, she won't even know it's gone if I return it before she comes back.

*Another one crackles open in his hands, with weather-warped edges. His eyes scour it, greedily picking out the names of mountain ranges, deserts, and cities. We see "Yondolfa" near one edge of it.*

Dax: Hm... Is that the one she mentioned?

*He studies it for a second longer, then rolls it and tucks it under his arm. A dull noise outside catches—distant voices. Quiet at first, then growing. Shouting, wheels creaking on the dirt path, a dog barking, a woman calling out to someone, but mostly, laughter. Dax tilts his head.*

Dax: What the hell could...

*He turns toward the flap, and pokes his head out. The young man blinks against the light, half-stepping out of the tent's shadow. He squints. The dirt path is full of a drifting, noisy current of people: farmers, tanners, old women with baskets, men still in work aprons. Some call to each other, others just follow the stream.*

Dax: What are these... Did I miss something at the Bell?

*A blur passes on his left. Then another just behind it.*

Dax: Stibir, Mevel! Wait!

*They stop, turning to him wide eyed and grinning.*

Dax: What's going on?

Stibir: (panting) You're not gonna believe it—

Mevel: He's here! Wultedra! At the Bell, right now!

*Dax's mouth splits open with joyous disbelief into a smile so sudden and stupid it belongs on the boys before him. He clasps the map to his chest.*

Dax: Well don't just stand there let's go!

*With their whoops and hollers added to the stream of people, they rush to the Wailing Bell.*

*The Bell heaves. Her walls sweat. Her floorboards groan beneath the weight of too many boots, too much laughter, and the ever-pouring tide of ale. Beer, smoke, tales, and dreams all spill in equal measure from her patron's mouths. Every corner is packed, from the stone hearth to the splintering stair rail, and still more come: townsfolk young and old, elbows locked, faces flushed, swept up in much more than just drink.*

*Yimbley taggers under the bulk of two full casks, muttering half-prayers. He's red in the face, soaked through with sweat, and knows in his bones the casks won't last more than an hour. Doesn't matter. He nods to no one, and pushes forth to repel the siege.*

*A crowd gathers around a long dining table where the remnants of a drinking game threaten to overtake the table entirely. Empty bottles and mugs lie in every direction, scattered like corpses across the battlefield.*

*One on one side, a brick of a man sways. He leans over the table, his knuckles white as he grips the edge to keep from pitching forward. He blinks hard—once, twice—eyes fighting to focus. His body tilts like a ship in a storm. He breathes so as not to capsize.*

Challenger: How... in the hell... are you still on your feet? I can't feel my legs. Can't feel my teeth.

*His opponent, silhouetted at the moment, lifts the mug. We see a close up of a man smiling, gulping down a mug of ale.*

Wuldetra: Haha, you sound surprised my friend! Worry not, the gods have told me you will not remember this ordeal!

*The crowd laughs.*

Wuldetra: In all my years, I've had three lovers.

*He raises a finger, still silhouetted, for each.*

Wuldetra: One who broke my face, one who broke my heart... And Lady Liquor, who breaks me nightly and who I beg to bed again!

*He smiles again, and drinks the whole thing in one long pull.*

Wuldetra: We simply cannot seem to get enough of each other.

*He places another glass on the table, and slides pushes it towards his openent with a daring scrape. The crowd holds its breath. We finally Wultedra himself, from the perspective of the challenger, with the glass in front of him.*

Wultedra: Well? Don't keep a lady waiting.

*The man goes pale. His lips tremble. He reaches for the mug... then falters, hand trembling in mid-air. His lips part for a word that never arrives. Instead:*

Challenger: BUUURRP!

*With that sonorous note, he collapses in defeat.*

Crowd: Wultedra wins! As if there could have been another outcome

More crowd: Tedra! Tedra! Tedra!

*Ah, there he is, Wultedra. Wrestler of bears. Spinner of yarns. Bane of bandits and barkeeps alike. He is the man who has seen the breadth of Known, and done all there is to do in it, or at least, enough for the people of Strumton to imagine it all. Perhaps some of what he says is even true. He is the closest thing they know to a hero, which, in fairness, may just make him the real thing.*

Wultedra: It seems the battlegrounds of the Bell have grown weak in my absence!

Crowd: No!

*He turns, slow, theatrical.*

Wultedra: Indeed! Are there no more heroes to stand in the way of my conquest? Where are the iron-livered champions of old? (he grins) Where are the ale-hearted warriors who once dared raise mugs against me? Did I drink them all to death last year?

*Scattered laughter. Cheers. Some groans. No challengers.*

Voice: I'll stand against ye, o' tyrant of the tavern!

Crowd: Ooooooh!

*The crowd begins to part. Shouts soften and ale-slick boots shuffle aside. A hush rolls outward like a ripple on a pond, and all eyes turn. Through the pass steps Hayel, and in his hands are two mugs of his own, one already pressed to his lips.*

Wultedra: Haha! And here I thought a noble knight approached my challenge, but no—what is this crotchety thing before me?

*Hayel finishes the mug and throws it into the crowd. The crowd cheers.*

Hayel: This crotchety thing will be all we need to expel the likes of you.

*He finishes the second and drops it on the ground.*

Hayel: Wouldn't be a fair challenge if I didn't catch up first.

*The crowd cheers again.*

Wultedra: Haha! I jest of course, my friend, I'm glad to have drawn you from whatever nefarious band of ledgers was plaguing you.

*They embrace.*

Wultedra: To work then? You're sure you're up to it so quick after that entrance?

Hayel: Who do you take me for?

Wultedra: Apologies! It is good to know you are still the man that I remember. Then drink, captain! The night waits for no man—least of all you.

*They sit at the table, as two bottles of wine are slid across to them.*

Wultedra: A proper duel at last!

Hayel: You've had your warmup. Not worried at all that they've tired you out?

Wultedra: With all respect to your town, 'twas a tragic crop this season. I'm as fresh as I was this morning.

*They open their bottles.*

Hayel: One.

Wultedra: Two.

Together: Three.

*They drink. Not a drop spilled. Cheers erupt.*

Hayel: Again.

Wultedra: But of course good Townmaster!

*Another round. Hayel slams his bottle down first. Yort is slower, but deliberate.*

Wultedra: Careful, old friend. You're pacing like a man with something to prove.

Hayel: And what if I am? What sort of Townmaster would I be if I did not defend my town's honor! Hayel: Or maybe I just want to take my cocky friend down a peg.

Wultedra (to the crowd): Then let them remember your deed here today! Let them sing of how Townmaster Hayel stood for his town in the tavern, though he knew it was futile!

*The crowd roars one again, and affectionately jeers at Wultedra.*

Hayel: You always talk like you're already in the song.

Wultedra: But that is the very trick, my friend. Act like someone's already writing it down.

*They finish their bottles. Hayel's hand twitches slightly.*

Wultedra: Slipping?

Hayel: Just thinking.

*Wultedra shoots him a quizzical look.*

Hayel: Ah, there's something big I've got to sort out tomorrow.

Wultedra: Heh, you always did pick your moments well.

Hayel: I haven't even asked yet! And only if you're able to, of course, I wouldn't assume—

Wultedra: Say no more! If there's a road to walk and something worth the trouble at the end of it— I'll be there to walk it with you.

*More cheers as they clink a new set of mugs. They continue to drink with grim purpose, and soon enough their world is little more than glasses and bottles hitting wood, and the burn of alcohol doing its work. It's clear enough to see what comes next: more.*

*Back in the main hall, the door creaks open, pushing the crowd backward just enough for Mevel, Stibir, and Dax to crawl into the Bell. They push through a throng of elbows, shoulders, and apologies, eyes darting above the heads of strangers for a glimpse of him. Rita passes them, balancing a tray in one hand and delivering food and drink with the other.*

Rita: Did you all only *just* get here? I swear I saw you a half hour past.

Dax: Nope, just came in.

Stibir: Where is he??

*The three of them beam with excitement at her.*

Rita: Why hello, boys, it's nice to see you too. I'm doing alright, thanks for asking, though we're beyond busy as you can see.

Dax: Yes, yes hello, how are you doing, sorry. Seriously, where's Wultedra?

Rita: In the back, he and my dad are making each other sick. Good luck getting past the wall of people around them.

Mevel: Woohoo

Dax: Thanks! Good luck with all this.

Rita: Ha, yeah.

*They begin to push towards the back.*

Rita: If you want anything, you're gonna have to shout louder than all these bastards, or wait for them to pass out!

*In the dining hall, boots stamp the floor in rhythm. Voices rise like waves, a tide of cheers and wagers crashes against the rafters. Mevel and Stibir squeeze under Dax's arms, slipping like fish through the gaps he makes in the crowd.*

Crowd: Tedra! Tedra! Tedra!

Also Crowd: Hayel! Hayel! Hayel!

*Beyond them, Hayel and Wultedra each lean against the table, clearly struggling but still laughing.*

Wultedra: This next one, I'll say a prayer over in your honor.

Hayel: So long as you're not asking her for mercy, I'll allow it.

*Hayel finishes first, slams his mug down, and wavers. For a moment, he holds...*

Hayel: Oh dear—

*...then, with a groan, his face goes pale, and he crumples backward into a chair. The crowd gasps and looks to Wultedra, who gulps down the last of his drink. The crowd goes silent as he backward raises a finger and stumbles a step backwards.*

Wultedra: BUUURP!

*And with that, he stands straight again, raising his arms in triumph.*

Crowd: Tedra! Tedra! Tedra!

Wultedra: The Lady seems to have had her fill of us both, even if she enjoyed my company better. It was well fought, friend! Your town's honor is intact.

Wultedra: And to all of you! Raise a glass to your townmaster, and to Yimbley and Cammenrita, the true heroes of the Bell!

*The crowd cheers, once again, and Wultedra lowers himself into a chair to take a break.*

Mevel: He won!

Stibir: He looks like he's about to die. They both do.

Dax (grinning): He always does, it's part of the act.

*The crowd helps Hayel to his feet, and surrounds Wultedra's chair. Someone brings him water. He waves them off.*

Wultedra: What's the point in drinking if you're just going to fix it with water?

Stibir: He's off guard, this is our chance!

Dax: Stibir, don't—

*Too late. Stibir jumps onto the table, scattering cups, bottles, and some patron's half eaten pork chop.*

Stibir: RAARGH!

*He leaps through the air at Wultedra. Snap! Wultedra's arm shoots up and he snatches Stibir mid-jump with one hand.*

Stibir: Ahh! What the hell! You're supposed to be drunk and old and slow! It was a perfect time to sneak attack you.

Wultedra: It was a noble effort, young warrior! But announcing your presence with such a ferocious yawp means it wasn't much of a sneak attack.

*Wultedra lets out an "oof" as Mevel crashes into his side, throwing his arms around the man's waist. Dax follows a beat later, quieter but no less fierce. Wultedra lets out a wheezing laugh as the three of them nearly topple over.*

Wultedra: Now *this* is a proper ambush. You lot are getting strong.

Dax: What took you so long to come back?

Wultedra: Ah, you know...

Mevel: We got you good, didn't we?

Wultedra: You did, you did. Knocked the wind out of me, you little brute. And you—*(nudging Dax)*—soon enough you'll be as strong as I am. Well... almost.

Dax: You didn't answer the question.

Wultedra: What, "what took you so long?" That one?

Mevel: Yeah! We thought maybe you got eaten.

Stibir: Or arrested.

Mevel: Or eaten then arrested!

Wultedra: You wound me, young Mevel. You think some petty jail or overgrown beast could keep *me* from the Bell? No, no. The world just needed me a while longer.