

My name is Teppic Ulrickssen and I am a Black Lotus addict. I tell you this because High Priestess Rahima tells me that admitting my affliction is the first step on the road to recovery. The account below, in part, is a cautionary tale about how the drug may lead you into a downward spiral of depravity.

We were led forth from the towers by High Priestess Rahima to the edge of the Oasis of Souls to find the missing Grey Gauntlet Priest Garion. He had last been seen at the Desert's Gate Inn in the company of Arathorn, a Ranger who had managed to return to the Alliance, acting in a mad and disorientated fashion, and was often heard to ramble on about the Lady of the Inn, how pretty she was, and how good the tea was. Hence our other goal was to find a cure for him.

### Those present on the mission:

Rahima, High Priestess of the Holy Hospital	WH	Leader	
Squire Arithis, Intendent Hero Paladin	WH		Battle Leader
Althea, High Priestess of the White Path	WR		
Khortaz, High Priest of Huelac	WR		
Renown, Champion of the Rangers	VAT		
Tersius, Hierophant Druid Hero	VAT		
Harlequin, Sorceror of the Yellow School	VAT		
Brother Cuddles, Priest of the Hospital	WH		
Thumper, Veteran of the Iron Guard	WH		
Marik, Journeyman Scout and Monk	WH		
Jack, Druidic Priest	VAT		
Skorne, Reaper Priest	WH		
Myself, Grey Path Priest	VAT		
Gravesong, Champion of the Crusaders	WR		Joined later

### Earthday 20th Fools Moon

Night had fallen, our journey had been arduous. The grass underfoot slowly turned to sand and rock as we drifted into the desert borderlands. Strangely rain began to fall. Apparently months go by in this desert without rain, just our luck to arrive just as the rains do! We felt on edge as the first few tendrils of the mists were seen creeping over the low rises to our left and right. Then the Hordelings came, at first one or two, but then growing in numbers, increasingly emboldened and enraged by the rapidly gathering mists. We held tight and dispatched them, then moved with a new urgency in our step towards the safety of the Desert's Gate Inn.

A low light was seen from a single arched doorway in the distance at the foot of the small hill we had crested. We hastened towards it. A group of Greater Undead, mostly skeletons and zombies, gathered from the surrounding cover and barred our way. They seemed to have no master, but nevertheless were resolute in blocking us. We despatched them and moved forward to the courtyard in front of the archway.

The Desert's Gate Inn was a strange place from the outside, somewhat rambling and ramshackle, patched up here and repaired there. Whether it was old or new I could not tell. A tall sturdy ogre stepped out from the warm glow within. He said his name was Gruk, clearly a common name. He said he was the doorman and served his mistress. He would have no troublemakers come inside and said we must stack our weapons in the weapon rack on the way in. We complied and moved into the warm and dry.

The Inn was small and cluttered with old bric-a-brac and trinkets. Serena the Lady of the House greeted us. At the time I remember being intoxicated by her beauty, sweet scent and witty charm, though now my opinion of her is somewhat soured. She seemed to want to deal with me rather than Rahima, our leader, for some reason. She offered us the hospitality of her rather cramped Inn for 3 gest each a night, I was so enamoured of her I felt it too rude to haggle down the price. There were only beds for half a dozen or so of us, the rest of us would be provided with tents up the small neighbouring hill. Dressed in purple and black, in the style of the desert people, Serena seemed to belong to no tower and carefully deflected enquiries about her background.

**Also present or visiting the Inn that evening**

- Dubai of the Qorath Estate, more of her later.
- Ling Su Visitor of the Celestial Bead and the Inn.
- Darkiri of the Order of the Scouring Wind
- An Eastling of the Republic
- Abdullah Manservant to Lady Serena, quite formal, quite creepy.
- Marius Dressed in dark blue with black cloak, headscarf and facial tattoos. Claimed to be an ex DFD

In small groups we acquainted ourselves with the denizens of the Desert's Gate Inn. Wine and ale of passable quality were served; various meat and pastry products were served, covered in a thick sauce as if to hide their taste.

A DFD trader ran from the darkness to the door frantically asking for sanctuary. He was pursued by Kalid. In line with the current political situation between our towers we swiftly sided with the

DFD trader and slew the Kalid raiders.

When he was calmer, we talked to the trader, named Zaheer Mahmood. He says many Kalid have incurred into these lands of late. He engaged our services as guards and for a fee we agreed to escort him further into the Oasis of Souls tomorrow where he is to meet Easterling traders, apparently to buy the Black Lotus herb.

The evening drew on and our group began to relax, Cuddles, Thumper and I sat with the Celestial Beurocracy representatives, they offered to share their tea with us. As we subsequently learnt this was no ordinary tea, but an infusion of the Black Lotus plant, which they had come to the Inn to seek. We shared it and it tasted pleasant. Within minutes I began to see sprites of fire dancing and leaping from candle to candle. Then the floor fell away completely with just the chair and table I was sitting at remaining, and just blackness below. I carefully walked the fraying tightrope slung between the chair and the bar without falling into the pit below where I heard baying beasts, and again from there to the front door. I then went outside to lie on the ground and watch the stars move in and out of their pretty patterns, only then to be swallowed by a blue dragon flying from east to west. A sense of inner peace prevailed.

### **Fireday 21st Fools Moon**

I woke the next morning in one of the tents on the hill with a headache and no knowledge of how I had got there. I could now see the visions of the night before for what they really were, drug fuelled hallucinations. The sun was burning and unlike yesterday, it really did feel like we were on the brink of the desert.

The staff of the Inn served us tasty bacon sandwiches, which at the time were most welcome. We all talked about the previous night. Several people had noticed the Celestial Beurocracy members, and the Ordos and Hashishan tribesmen go up to Serena's room but never saw them come back down the stairs. What had occurred to them? We had got no further with finding Garion; no one we questioned seemed to know anything about him. Perhaps we might learn more accompanying Zaheer Mahmood deeper into the desert on his trading venture? So we set off with him.

On the fringes of the desert we met Saldorians, they seemed to be led by a Novanti of the Brotherhood of Purity and Light who befriended Renown. We slew him and his group, power stealing from him as he died. A second group moved forward, clearly holding a Thissessin as

hostage, at the first sight of us they slew the hostage, the exact reason why is unclear to us. We slew the group, unfortunately little information was gleaned from talking to the dead Thissessin, except that he was of low status and little importance and remembered being captured in a lush glade far from the desert, before being force marched to his death in front of us. Strange.

Whilst resting in the now bright sunshine after this battle we heard Hordelings crashing uphill through the undergrowth. A huge purplish troll carrying a weighty hammer named himself as the 4th son of Bethelim, and said that he was looking for us as we had offended the Earth Mother and needed teaching a lesson. Jack had previously met the Earth Mother who seems to be revered by the Mist Weavers and might represent an Aspect of Nature. He had met her at the previous year's All Hallows and said it had been a cordial exchange with no promises made that he might have defaulted upon, so the Troll's claim seemed strange to us. We fought him and his horde, he was fearsomely strong, with awesome powers of regeneration and able to conjure biting blasts of cold. But win we did.

In the aftermath of this more aggressive Easterlings were seen down the hill, several of the group went down the hill to hold them up whilst Skorne, Harlequin and myself sat down to cast. We joined the rest of the group fighting some Ordos and Scouring Wind warriors, our ritual spells and invocations sealing the inevitable victory.

We journeyed on, the suns rays beating down on our brows. All were thirsty and felt compelled to cover their heads against the sun. The wind whipped up and soon we were in the midst of a great sand storm. We were blinded and reduced to crawling on our bellies, the sands scoured us but Harlequin's Radial Static Field protected us against the worst of it. We were now aware we were far further into the Oasis than was comfortable for us. Those who were not especially strong now felt too weak to fight. Fortuitously we met some Easterling traders who sold us two potions of protection against the desert. When applied to the skin it provided protection against the harsh sun and one felt rather refreshed. I was lucky enough to have one of these.

As we headed on, those with a connection to the good sphere became uneasy. The source of this was an area of power guarded by some Easterlings of the Denier tribe. They claimed it was a forming well of evil and necromantic power. They also had some desert demon with them. Fortunately we were able to draw them out of the safety of the well into the field and finish them. After the fight, Arithis, Skorne and I investigated the well, it seemed to have a nourishing effect on the Evil Sphere and those of us with a connection could rest back power more efficiently there. What it may become in time I can only speculate. Some of our group meditated; meanwhile we met a Priestess of Ungoliant, Harlequin talked with her though we learned little from her I gather.

We settled down near a watering hole and gained respite from the desert's heat. It was here we met Mustafa Ala Huma, Vizier of the Quahib tribe, I believe he is known to the Vanguard in the past. Zaheer greeted him warmly and the two engaged in private negotiations. Zaheer purchased a pouch of Black Lotus about the size of a small fist, the price paid for it I do not know. Mustafa left and did not seem interested in us particularly; Zaheer was buoyant following his dealings. A few magical creatures of the desert assailed us here and there as we left, Skorne got caught out by them and very nearly paid for it with spirit strength.

As Kalid had previously targeted Zaheer, possibly after his Black Lotus, we were on our guard watching for them on the journey back. Just as the bright sun began to wane and the first chill of the cool desert evening was felt, we saw them. They were a well-drilled detachment from the 2nd Legion and were well trained in martial skills such as our warrior guilds teach veterans and champions. They were strong opponents but our front line was growing in resolve and coordination and swept them before them.

We arrived back at the Inn at dusk, the group fragmented somewhat to mend armour, tend wounds and eat. The various staff and guests of the Inn milled around. Champion Gravesong joined us having returned from spending some time back with his tribe in the desert. He was a most welcome addition, his enthusiasm for battle seemed unquenchable and his Fire Wizardry very useful also. In this hour or so it came to pass that Zaheer, our guide for the day died in unclear circumstances. It appeared he had been poisoned, but by who and why? It was unknown to me at the time but before anyone (including the inquisitive ex slave Marius) could get their hands on Zaheer's Black Lotus, it was 'safely' sequestered by Brother Cuddles.

The Inn's staff served dinner. A spread of chops, meat balls (again drenched in sauce) and meat pies was provided with bread and butter also. Most of our number tucked in, a few (Arithis, Harlequin and possibly others) had ceased to trust the place and did not partake. Having enjoyed the chops and meatballs I thought I would finish off with a little of the tasty looking pie. As I sunk my knife into it to cut a piece, the blade hit resistance and would not budge. Hmm... A little gristle I thought? I pulled the pie apart to find a fresh severed human finger in the middle. I suppressed my gagging after a few moments enough to show my equally shocked comrades, though not all were entirely surprised. I challenged Serena about the food, she said it was a simple oversight on the chef's part, perhaps an accident and that she would admonish him and she would only charge us 1 gest a head tonight in apology. I was still in the thrall of her beauty and accepted the apology without further question.

Rahima being a keen observer of behaviour felt my gullibility was uncharacteristic. She examined me and felt I was under external spiritual influence. She cast an invocation to free me of this, thereafter I began to see Serena in all her terrible deceitful glory, though I tried not to show this to her.

Brother Cuddles approached me and quietly whispered in my ear "I have tea, do you want some?" Over the last few hours I could feel my pulse racing and hands shaking and I longed to feel the feeling I had felt the night before. So he brewed up a little of the Black Lotus he had appropriated from Zaheer Mahmood's fallen body and made some tea. Cuddles, Thumper and I passed it round in a dark corner, away from the gaze of others. It tasted good.

My memory of the next hour or so is not entirely lucid, as I believe I went on what is known as a 'bad trip'. You can try and recreate the rush of the first time, but it's never the same. I remember being outside and calling the group to attention as I saw a group of Valley dignitaries approach. The group consisted of Dreadlord Arakis, Sir Onyx and Dunstan. However it soon became apparent I was hallucinating again and they were in fact a large group of undead that had been summoned to destroy us. Immediately the staff of the Inn revealed their true colours as murderous cannibals and joined with the undead against us. Abdullah the manservant was the Necromancer who had presumably raised them, and the cook had come forth from his kitchen, a stout and hardy giant of a man dressed in a blood soaked apron wielding meat cleavers that would disable a limb with a blow. I stood in the midst of the fight as it raged around me, unfortunately now the sky was raining luminescent green rain that burned my skin to touch, and I held my shield above my head to protect me. I wasn't really sure how to fight anymore but somehow managed to avoid the worst of the carnage around me. Khortaz unleashed a timely cosmic invocation to dismiss one of the fouler looking undead before it could lay a finger on anyone. Gruk, the doorman fell protecting Serena. I could now see her for what she was, she did not discern as undead but was a cannibal Succubus who lures her prey with her many charms. I watched as Gravesong rained blows against her, Marik snuck behind to slash her throat. As the knife found its mark, both Marik and Serena instantly disappeared.

Some time later after wounds were healed, my hallucinations mellowed out and I felt more in control of myself. In fact I felt more in control of myself than I had ever done before. The plaintive calls of Marik were heard in the distant darkness. We gathered ourselves together and followed them to a low partially ruined building we had previously noted but not explored. The entrance consisted of a rickety wooden walkway with a significant drop on both sides. Some of the boards were noted to bend under Squire Arithis's feet; somehow the stout warrior had a habit of finding the weakest boards under foot. A low arch lay ahead guarded by two Skeletal Warriors. Gravesong and Thumper set about them, but it soon became apparent that after the Black Lotus tea Thumper was not up to it, still striking imaginary foes and being distracted by unseen events. In the cramped room beyond were several Greater Ghosts, which Khortaz, Jack,

Tersius, Skorne and I mostly destroyed at range with power hammers. Within this room we found a small treasure pile and the withered corpse of the Gauntlet Garion, still bearing the purple ring we knew he wore. His legs and most of his pelvis were consumed and gone and teeth marks were widely visible across his corrupted flesh. Serena lurked in her inner sanctum beyond, Marik lay on the floor. We tried to avoid her seductive gaze whilst throwing power hammers at her, though she soon spirit shielded herself. Gravesong caught a glance of her sparkling eyes and he was entranced to step forward, where upon she bit his neck and he fell to the floor. A plan was hatched, I sat and cast a ritual power hammer to kick off the offensive, when this struck she reeled, Skorne struck her to cause wounds, and Khortaz would repel her before she could strike Skorne enough to fell him, he would heal up and the process was repeated to excellent effect. Serena was destroyed and the malign influence on the Inn was lifted.

We returned to the now quiet Inn to rest. Representatives of House Tilduring visited us. Sorcerer Harlequin greeted them and won the obligatory 'most impressive title' contest. Much bowing and scraping then followed from our visitors. I believe some drow business that I am not party to was discussed, though I think they may have offered some help against the Kalid if push came to shove.

Before retiring some discussion occurred about the reason for the Kalid interest in the area, and in Zaheer Mahmood and his Black Lotus. Some thought the Kalid might want to control supplies of the drug for financial gain, or to help their seers to have more intense visions or to supply it their enemies to make them a less credible force in the event of war. Then those of us sleeping in the tents went up the hill to our camp en mass.

### **Steelday 22nd Fools Moon**

The next day, it transpired that after most of us had headed up to the camp, two Hashishan accompanied by two Morgul Wraiths came sniffing around the Inn. Few folk were down there, Harlequin was one of them and it seems his persuasive manner may have saved the small group down there. They came seeking their brother who we had last seen being led up to Serena's room the night before, but had never come down. In all likelihood he had probably been served up to us in pie form yesterday. Harlequin explained to them that it was Serena who had slain him not us and offered to let them inspect the evidence and the tomb, they then left. Garion had been resurrected and filled us in on what had led him to his death.

A wave of Hordelings looking for Serena and her 'lovely meat' disturbed our strictly vegetarian breakfasts. We guessed this might be how she keeps them from attacking her. Dubai, the Easterling trader was around the Inn again, it was apparent she was heading into the desert

some distance today to find her master who deals in Black Lotus. We were interested to find out more about this trade. She (of course) could not lead us directly to her master but was 'persuaded' that if we were to 'accidentally' follow her at a discrete distance and come upon her master that would be acceptable.

We skirted along the deserts edge for the rest of the day, but never penetrating as far in as yesterday. We met two groups of Dymwan with their accompanying undead, clearly neither group were in their right minds having taken Black Lotus, perceiving us all to be Humacti, and claiming ignorance of the Wolfhold/Dymwan Alliance. They initiated combat both times and we defended ourselves robustly as you would expect. A similar encounter with a Black Sorceress of the Celestial Beurocracy and her entourage occurred, again clearly intoxicated with Black Lotus. They thought that we were Oni (A kind of Hepath I gather) whom they were hunting. We later encountered a further group of more reasonable Celestial Beurocracy members looking for their crazed brethren, whose mental health they were concerned for. We explained we had engaged them when they assaulted us and slew some but only incapacitated their mistress who they might yet save from death. They were grateful of our honesty, thanking us, and quickly moving off to help their colleagues.

A most interesting encounter with the local Shadowsfall enforcers was had. They were aware of the trade in Black Lotus in the area. This is not the only area in Orin Rakatha where this has occurred. Although the trade is not strictly illegal, they were not happy with it as it made those taking it act in an unlawful, almost 'Towerless' way. Their judges were considering the matter and would issue a proclamation in due course. They were also interested in the goings on in the Desert's Gate Inn which they were also not happy with. We explained what had occurred at the Inn and they said they would investigate the building to determine the truth. In their trademark patronising manner they warned us from taking Black Lotus or getting involved in its trade. We said we were investigating the trade in order to disrupt it, they begrudgingly accepted this, and they left without conflict despite Renown's best efforts to bait them. I was racked with conflicting emotions; the rational part of me saw how this trade was debasing both myself and those around me. I wanted to get clean, but I didn't feel strong enough to go 'cold turkey' here out in the field, it would be easier to get clean back in the comfort of the towers. All I needed was one more fix, just one, to see me through the mission and get me home.

We followed Dubai further and came across a large group of Quahib Easterlings. As usual Skorne and myself hung back to cast whilst the others stalled the fight. By the time we arrived it was in full flow. Sunburn magics, pillars of flame and mighty bolts of fire raged through the air. We were pushed hard to win this fight. Arithis fell, but was saved by the attentions of our healers. After the fight I believe Renown asked Dubai who they were, were they bandits? She seemed to agree but there was a suspicion she might have led us out here to be killed. In fact maybe she had been doing this all day to avoid leading us to her masters.



Whilst recovering from the Easterling fight I ambled back up the hill to where I had laid out my casting kit. As I crested the hill I saw a large group of Kalid soldiers stood in discussion yards from my ritual kit. I ducked down and crept back to group to alert them. Knowing they would find us in minutes, Skorne and I sat down using borrowed kit to invoke. I must applaud the pragmatic inventiveness of Skorne, the Reaper Priest trying to quickly adapt his ritual to use a Hospitler casting kit. The Kalid came down the hill, a well-drilled group of soldiers of the 2nd Legion again. Once again they used advanced fighting skills against us and some channelled lightning magic through their blades. Their battle healer ran from the field faster than our warriors could pursue into far woods. To our surprise a few minutes later the trapper Marius came out of the woods, dead Kalid in one hand and crossbow in the other, having finished him off for us. He said he just happened to be hunting in the area and stayed a short while to see what we were up to. In one of the Kalid soldier's pouches we found a note, addressed to Cadet Till from General Krell of the 2nd Legion. It directed him and his warband to one of 6 camping grounds in the area to await instruction. It seemed Kalid were being massed in the area for some purpose.

Although I was not aware of this at the time, Arithis tells me that this is around the time the Easterling Dubai went missing. Upon finding her body some time later he talked to her dead spirit, it seems she had been killed and robbed by Marius also. Other interesting information was revealed, that she was indeed a courier and dealer of Black Lotus as we knew, but that her true suppliers were various groups from Akari Island. As the previous fights had not wore us down she had had no choice but to lead us to a large group of them to find our deaths.

We returned toward the Inn across a field dotted with small saplings. On the brow of the hill a group of finely but outlandishly dressed men and women stood. They were from Akari Island and framed against the dimming sun they rhythmically performed a series of fighting postures and stances as if to inwardly prepare body and mind for combat. Some discussion occurred, they appeared displeased that their 'Courier' (Dubai) carrying the Black Lotus had been intercepted, and all that she carried was lost. Over the course of the discussions it became clear that one of the Akaran monks had been entrusted with the safety of 'the courier' but had somehow allowed her to go missing. A strange Akaran ritual occurred where he knelt before his master expecting death as his punishment for failure. Instead, to atone he was charged with single-handedly attacking us and slaying our leader. Unfortunately I was suffering some severe Black Lotus withdrawal symptoms at the time and so was not paying full attention. He asked who our Leader was, unthinkingly I piped up 'Rahima is', and the monk charged at her in the full expectation of death whilst trying to kill her. He was ferocious but he was killed before he could kill Rahima. Sorry Rahima.

Combat was joined and they displayed a series of fighting techniques known to few in these lands. One of the warriors called upon his 'dragonstaff' to repeatedly break shields with ease. Another warrior twirled his spear whilst threatening to unleash his horse-laying technique, or was it whore-slaying technique? What ever it was it cut through armour like butter. In a later mission this man would come back to best us, his name was Oshiro Yamamoto. They had several master monks and a psionist also, and were a formidable and talented group. We managed to capture one of the group, who, with his comrades slain around him responded to our offer to lay down his sword. We questioned him but he did not speak, the dishonour of surrender was clearly painful to him and he bit down hard on some secreted pill or some such and died quickly.

We returned to the Inn. The door was secured shut by a few narrow ropes and a note was hung on the closed door. It declared that the Inn was now closed down by order of the Shadowfall because of the activities that had occurred there. The ropes had paralysing magics on them that halted anyone who tried to sever them, but nothing that we could not disarm. We settled down for the evening. We mused further on the identity of the mysterious trapper Marius. Had he poisoned Zaheer Mahmood yesterday to get his bag of Black Lotus? How come he just happened to be around when the Kalid attacked? Why had he killed Dubai the Easterling courier? By this point I could feel the craving for Black Lotus fully returning, it was clear I would be in full-blown withdrawal soon if I didn't do something. Rahima, unsurprisingly, was unhappy with Thumper, Cuddles and my behaviour the night before and had confiscated all of the Black Lotus to stop us taking any more. And so the darkest hour of my addiction approached, I am not proud of the details but give them here as a warning to those who might be offered the drug. I carefully enquired whether Rahima had mediated yet, but she had, so I quickly realised I wouldn't be able to take it from her then. I kept close to her for a while and she slung her belt and pouches over the back of a chair in the tavern then went outside to stand by the fire Gravesong had built. I sat there for a while and waited until everyone had followed her outside. When the coast was clear I rifled through her pouches, took some Black Lotus leaves from the bag and replaced it with some dirt from outside. I then closed the pouch and tried to make it look like it had not been disturbed. I brewed some more tea, now under the noses of my fellow adventurers then drank my fill. I discretely handed the cup to Thumper; she gave a knowing smile and eagerly gulped some down. Cuddles, however, was repentant of his addiction and had been praying to the good sphere all day to help him through this difficult time. As soon as the sweet smell of the tea caught his nostrils, his will was broken and he turned once more to the Black Lotus. The feeling this time was different; there were no raw hallucinations, although if I stared hard enough it was as if things had a slight halo or echo to them. The most striking thing was a sense of confidence, self determination and inner drive, I felt if I applied myself to something hard enough anything might be possible. I listened to my comrades discuss tower politics and guild business, but I felt strangely above all that, the master of my own destiny. It became clear to me, as much as I love the Alliance, the time of the Towers was coming to an end and it was up to me to determine my own destiny. Later in the evening we were assailed by a small group of dark clad monks, of unknown origin, perhaps from Akari Island. They used magic blades and psionics. I found that when they tried to affect my mind with their psionic powers, if I stayed steadfastly resolute not to let them in my head, I could, reaffirming earlier

feelings.

Two waves of 2nd Legion soldiers struck us in quick succession. The first group especially, was weak, like a group of veterans who have just achieved status. They seemed poorly motivated and poorly briefed about their mission and quickly fell. The third group were well armed and drilled. Their leader, Major Bren, was a man of some skill who channelled lightning magic through his sword. We were spread out to begin with and he and a couple of others burst in the building to corner a couple of our number, though I can't remember whom. He appeared to be man of principle as he agreed to let those inside lay down their weapons and cease fighting, with a promise of safety if they abided by it. The fight moved outside again, now organised as a front line again we drove the Kalid back with force against a closed gate and they began to crumble. Major Bren called parlay, Renown, irrepressible as he is, pushed the fight on. Other voices interjected, pointing out he had spared some of our cornered fellows with the building and it was only fair to hear him out. After initial reluctance he offered to lay down his sword and enter the Inn to talk. His manner was that of a knight and it clearly pained him to have to effectively surrender and enter into talks with us in this way. It transpired he was the leader of many men of the 2nd Legion sent to find some of their number who were missing, we presumed eaten by Serena and company. A man named Gabrille Chide had been sent by Kalid superiors to join the mission, I don't think he was of their legion but his rank was high enough to be able to pull rank on Major Bren and redirect the legion's men to his own personal business. The business he was pursuing was amassing as much Black Lotus as possible. He now had a considerable amount, but the purpose of this hoarding was unknown to Major Bren. In fact Gabrille Chide had ordered the previous two waves of Kalid and indeed Major Bren's own personal guard to attack our group in search of our Black Lotus. Enough was enough, he said. His first duty was to his men and as many as 60 had already died to pursue Gabrille's goal. We enquired as to Gabrille's appearance, it seemed he looked just like Marius the trapper, however without the facial tattoos. Moreover, didn't the apparently ex DFD/towerless Marius wear dark blue? It was now clear he had poisoned Zaheer Mahmood to get his Black Lotus. It was him that ordered the Kalid to attack us the day before, and it explained why he 'happened' to be around at the end of that battle. Indeed it was also him who had intercepted the courier Dubai earlier that day that had so displeased the Akarans. We had a score to settle. Major Bren told us where Gabrille Chide's camp lay and said he would order his guards between the Inn and there to stand down if we passed, on the understanding that Gabrille was taken care of. And so we let Major Bren go.

We busily set about casting spells and invocations appropriate for such a key fight. We quickly headed toward the camp and followed their lights through the pitch black. We came upon them efficiently and without discussion using our most effective spells and invocations. It certainly worked and we very quickly had Gabrille's guards on the back foot. Gravesong fell to a single well placed blow from Gabrille's poisoned knife, Jack also fell near death, both would have been lost without the excellent care of Rahima, Althea and Cuddles. A large bag of Black Lotus was recovered from Marius's belt.

The Hashishan returned like the night before with their Morgul Wraiths, perhaps unconvinced by our arguments that we bid not kill their brethren. A defensive line set around the door prevented them flanking us and again our power hammer battery destroyed the undead at range.

### **Sunday 23rd Fools Moon**

Morning was greeted by the arrival of Hordelings, come asking for Serena's 'special' meat again. Gravesong informed them there was none left, except a few bits of 'spicy ninja' left from the night before. In all, three waves attacked us but were repelled.

The two Shadowsfall we had met the day before returned, this time with a full detachment. They strode into the Inn and positioned themselves on the stairs so they could lecture us lesser mortals with the most gravitas. They demanded we justify why we had re-entered the Inn after they had shut it down. We merely said we were using the building before setting off back to the towers shortly. By order of the Shadowsfall Judges they declared the trade of Black Lotus illegal on Orin Rakatha and demanded we hand over any we had on our persons. Indeed we had some, but it was felt keeping it was key to the recovery of those addicted to it and therefore we refused. Once again Renown baited them (quite rightly I feel) and combat began. They were a mix of assassins and wizards and priests and had many stored spells and invocations that they used well to disable some of us in the cramped Inn. Skorne successfully maimed one as he tried to step back out of the front door, the last of numerous successful attempts this mission. The two assassins were taken down as they tried to flee down the road.

We prepared our baggage for the long journey home. Just before departing two Emissaries of the Omar tribe came to greet us, called Elisa and Natascha. We told them of what had occurred, of the Black Lotus trade and the Kalid plot to gather up as much of it as possible. They were pleased with our work against the Kalid and offered us the hospitality of the Well of Peace in the desert itself if we should visit again. Arithis took the opportunity to invite them to discuss coordination of resources in protecting DFD caravans in western Orin Rakatha. We departed and returned to the towers. I mused on my way home how well we had fought as a unit, in the true spirit of the Alliance. Remarkably no one had died.

I write this report as I wait in the Hospital for the next cycle of my treatment for my addiction. I have since learnt that to try to go 'cold turkey' from Black Lotus is a terrifying process and usually results in madness followed by death. It seems this process was happening to the Ranger Arathorn who originally had returned from the Inn and told us of Garion going missing. He has been saved just in time by administering a reducing regime of doses of Black Lotus,

until finally he can come off it entirely. The same regime is now being administered to Thumper, Cuddles and myself by the Brothers and Sisters of the Hospital, to whom I am eternally grateful.

The attractions of the Black Lotus plants are many, but it is also one of the most addictive and dangerous herbs on Orin Rakatha. Remember - Just say No!

### **Summary**

A powerful Succubus known as Serena has recently been operating an Inn on the edge of the Oasis of Souls as a front for cannibalism. The Inn is now abandoned.

A focus of Black Lotus trade in the Oasis area has been disrupted. Its source seems to be from visitors from Akari Island, probably using Easterling couriers, though the exact structure of the operation is not certain.

A high status Kalid of unknown legion called Gabrille Chide coerced the local 2nd Legion troops to accumulate as much of the drug for himself as possible. He was slain.

The Shadowsfall have banned the trade in Black Lotus. This is not the only area it exists in.

Black Lotus induces hallucinations and meaningful visions in some. Chronic use encourages independence of spirit and something of a 'Towerless' mentality. It is highly addictive. The only safe way to withdraw is a slow reduction in dosage over time.