

Ticks and Trades

By Kim Richards and Sam Soza

Unsettled times often call for unsettling relationships. So it came to pass that a dwarven cleric and a human mage sought assistance from a human barbarian and a Kagonesti elven ranger.

At first, Arlo remained skeptical and stoic. How could this barbarian and ranger be trusted? *Nomads and survivalists*, Arlo thought. He, a dwarf and apostle of Kiri-Jolith, found it hard to trust those who didn't live in proper cities—above or below ground. He believed only criminals or those who simply hated their fellow man, desired such a 'solitude'. However, Orinda reminded him the artifact they wanted would benefit both their peoples. If this man and elf truly knew where it was, then it was worth the risk. She argued that a modicum of trust came with the payment of steel. He reluctantly agreed.

The ranger, a Kagonesti elf eyed the crate of dull gray ingots. "I have no use for steel money. Why should we go anywhere near a dragon's lair for it?"

"Garwood," said the elf's partner. Malin was a towering man clad in fur with feathers woven into his braids. "The steel can be be forged into weapons."

"I suppose I could use this for arrowheads."

Malin shrugged his broad shoulders. He lowered his voice and said, "Besides, we can just point to the lair and let them have at it."

That's when the deal steeled, so to speak. Arlo grumbled as he handed over half the promised steel. The after-morn sun finally flashed above the Vallenwood trees surrounding the hamlet as the four of them—mage, cleric, ranger, and barbarian—took to the dusty road.

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Looking over at a rolling hillside where a flock of sheep lazily grazed in the warm morning sunshine, Arlo harumphed. He pointed a stubby finger at them and growled, "Those don't look like dragons to me."

"More like dinner," the tall barbarian beside him replied. His stomach growled in agreement. He hefted the broadsword in his hands.

"The dragon's dinner," added Garwood. "I wager it would not be inclined to share."

At Arlo's glowering, the Kagonesti let out an exasperated sigh. "It is near here. I would not steer you wrong."

"Steer is right. I see livestock, not this dragon lair you promised. Better not be wrong or you won't see further payment from us," Arlo said.

“Boys,” scolded a beautiful, lithe young woman. She smoothed the sides of her white robes as she stepped up to join them. “Garwood, none of us here question your guidance. However, this does seem an unlikely place for a dragon to lair.”

“It is an unusual dragon.”

Again the dwarf harumphed. “Don’t white dragons bed down in places more...shall we say...frigid?”

Garwood cast a sideways glare at Arlo; his hazel eyes flashed green. “It is an unusual dragon.”

The barbarian let out a deep, musical laugh, teasing a bemused smile from Orinda. The mage turned to him and asked, “What amuses you so?”

“Just the idea that a dragon might raise a flock of sheep. Knitting rather than hunting like a normal serpent,” Malin said, waving the image away with a calloused hand. “Do you think it could be injured?”

“If it is indeed injured, I may be able to earn its good graces by assisting. Although I’ve never treated a patient as large as a dragon, I believe the processes would be the same as any other large animal,” Arlo said with a smile.

“Maybe it’s lazy,” Malin said, sounding hopeful. He elbowed the elf who yawned.

The group moved forward, across the grassy hill and among the sheep. The wooly beasties grazed, blissfully ignoring them as they moved among the flock.

Orinda reached out and allowed her hands to run softly across their wool coats as she passed. She remembered how, as a child, she played among the sweet heather with a lamb her father gifted her.

“I wonder if there’s some kind of charm or magic cast upon them. Sheep are usually docile but not this much I think.”

Garwood nodded in agreement. “Aye, and no fences.”

Again, Malin laughed. “I would love to watch a dragon try to build a fence. It would be like me making one with toothpicks.”

“Could be done,” Arlo said. “I could do it.”

“Probably with magic,” Orinda added. She grinned at Arlo and said, “Is that what they teach in your order? Do you also make houses of cards?”

Arlo’s expression darkened. “Absolutely not!”

Orinda and Arlo continued this good-natured repartee, which, much like Garwood’s occasional forward scouting, came and went while the party traveled. Now Malin found himself enchanted by Orinda’s crooked smirk, counterpointing her usual kilter. A simple

jealousy, that this dwarf should possess a special amity with her, lighted on the barbarian's shoulder like a tiny fiend.

Malin might once have laughed at the image of the two of them, a porcelain tea set from far away setting the table beside a wooden plate, but that wasn't exactly who he was nowadays, was it? Not really. Even the old furs he wore, and the red-tipped feather from a castle-rusty braided into his dark hair, were more costume than they used to be. However, Garwood said they weren't supposed to spend or people would wonder where the money came from.

Malin shook away these thoughts and waded into the thigh-high grasses to catch up with his partner. As planned.

Garwood crouched forward, peering down into a very large and dark hole in the ground. His Kagonesti senses picked up on smells of moist dirt, decayed grasses, and lanolin. He gave Malin a slight nod, then made a motion with his hand to attract the attention of Arlo and Orinda...and to indicate their silence. The two employers stepped up alongside their hires.

“Your dragon den,” he whispered to Orinda and pointed at long gouge marks on the stones nearby. He sat on the cave’s edge and inched down, balancing his bow in his hands.

Malin’s large hand clamped onto his shoulder. “Are you going in? The plan was to just show it to them, get paid, and leave,” he said in a low voice.

“Aren’t you curious? I’ve been thinking about this white dragon. The air here is warm. There’s no frost on the cave walls. I want to see it,” Garwood said with a glance at Orinda and Arlo. He hoisted himself down onto the sloping cavern floor.

“Huh. I’ll join you,” Malin said. “Maybe it’s dead already.”

Arlo stepped up beside the barbarian. “If so, scales have worth.”

Orinda nodded to affirm the truth of that statement.

One by one, they climbed into the cavern tunnel. Malin offered his hand to Orinda in a gentlemanly gesture to help her down. Garwood’s eyebrow rose as she accepted, thanking him with a sweet smile.

Orinda pulled out a small amulet she wore about her neck. She murmured a few words and it softly glowed with a white light.

Arlo glared at her. “Behind me. That thing will ruin my vision. I can see in the dark.”

Garwood moved to stand beside him. “Me as well.” To Arlo he said, “You might have clearer vision than me but I prefer to not hit my head on anything down here.”

Orinda apologized and took her place behind Arlo. Within moments, she heard the soft creak of leather and noticed Malin’s presence to her left. He nodded at her.

The large entrance didn't tunnel to the sides but made a straight line forward with a gentle incline. At one point, Arlo stopped and leaned over to stare more closely at the walls. He ran his thick fingers over the cool stone surface.

He patted the wall with his hand and said, "These are not natural."

"Since when is stone not natural?" Garwood asked.

"I mean this is not a natural formation. It's been *carved*."

"Interesting," the elf said. "I do not recall any ruins in this area for a dragon to hide in."

Suddenly Orinda jumped to one side, causing Malin to turn, broadsword at the ready.

"Oh...ewww," she said. "I stepped in something."

She removed the amulet from where it hung around her neck and held it closer to her feet to see better. She stood in a pile of oval semi translucent orange spheres the size of her fist. A mucous like gel covered them and the ground around. She gingerly stepped out of the pile and searched her pack for a rag or something to wipe it from her boots.

Garwood moved over to see what she was talking about. As he did, something moved inside the spheres. "Uh...eggs. Looks like some insect."

"That big?" Orinda gasped. "I don't want to see them full grown."

Malin poked at one with the tip of his sword and a six-legged larvae skittered up the blade. He shook it off and splattered it beneath the heel of his boot. "Burn 'em," he said. Turning to Orinda, he asked, "Can you send fire from your fingertips? I saw a man do that at the autumn fair once."

She shook her head. "Shooting off those inside an enclosed tunnel like this would roast us right along with the eggs."

Garwood pulled a flint from his pouch and his dagger. He looked around the barren cavern tunnel. "Not much here to use for kindling."

Orinda handed him the slime covered rag she used to wipe her boots. "It's something."

Arlo took out his flask of dwarven spirits. He gave it a woeful look. With a deep sigh he pulled out the cork stopper and splashed some over the eggs. "This should help."

After several strikes of the flint on the dagger, a spark ignited the rag. It grew into a bright red flame which raced up the fabric. That's when Garwood tossed it onto the egg stack.

Instantly the whole thing went up, flames licking up the alcohol and spreading across the eggs. Suddenly, a hundred brown insect larvae--each a foot in length--emerged from between and behind the now popping eggs. They skittered up the walls and across the floor in all directions. Their six little legs propelled them quickly as they ran from the fire.

At the sight of them, Orinda squealed and fled into the vast tunnel ahead. The light from her little amulet bobbed in the darkness.

The others sprinted after her, weapons drawn.

Coming to where the tunnel opened out into fog filled cavern, Orinda skidded to a halt. The air was warm and heavy with humidity. Her breath came in quick puffs from the exertion. As the others joined her, she held out her arms, indicating they should stop.

Together they watched the fog swirl as something deep within moved.

“You might as well come in. I know you are there,” said a deep voice.

Orinda put her hand on Malin’s shoulder and walked behind him. Arlo and Garwood took upon either side. They cautiously stepped into the cavern. The fog lightened a little as they stepped beyond the tunnel mouth.

Along the left-hand wall of the cavern lay a beautiful albino creature of white scales and iridescent spines and claws. Its underbelly, foot pads, and lips were a soft pale pink.

The dragon lounged with its white tail wrapped around one side and front legs crossed in a cat-like position. It turned its pink eyed gaze upon the group and blinked slowly.

“So, I suppose you came here looking for my treasure,” it said with a slight lisp.

Orinda gathered her courage, stepped forward meekly, and dipped her head. Her voice quavered as she spoke, “Treasure of a sorts. I am looking for an artifact from the Time of Knights. It may prove beneficial and save lives. Please forgive our intrusion.”

It flattened its ears and swung its massive head to focus on one side while scratching just behind an ear with a back leg for several long moments. Then it buried its nose in between scales and gnawed angrily.

Then, the dragon snorted a small billow of fog and returned its attention to Orinda. “How do you intend to obtain this artifact?”

“Without violence, preferably,” Garwood commented. He sheathed his short sword to emphasize.

“Would you consider selling it to us?” Orinda asked.

Arlo snorted and stamped his booted feet. “Are you daft, woman? The value of that is more steel than any of us will see in our lifetimes.”

The dragon blinked. “Value for one may not be the same for another. For instance, I have no use for steel or gold. Those take up space and draw *adventurers* looking to steal it. There are enough insects in this place. I do not wish to accumulate others.”

“What would you suggest then?” Orinda asked.

“I propose a useful trade.”

“May I confer with my colleagues?”

It waved a claw. “Please do.”

Orinda motioned her companions over. Before speaking with them, she paused and turned to the dragon. “I would know your name, please. I am Orinda.”

The dragon nodded and replied, “Vapor.” It then turned its attention to another furious scratching session.

“Thank you.” The woman watched Vapor curiously for a moment before turning to her companions. She ushered them a few feet away and into a huddle. “Alright gents. What can we offer in trade? I have magic. Maybe something would interest him. What about you?”

“Well...” Garwood slowly said, “...perhaps he’s sick of eating lamb all the time. We could hunt down something else for him.”

Malin grinned and reached for his longsword. “That sounds good. Deer perhaps. Oh...wait, those goblin raiders we avoided. We could dispatch them and haul them in for his dinner. Win-win for everyone except the goblins!”

Garwood shook his head. “While attacking goblins might be something we could do, I was speaking of something else—not dead—he could raise alongside the sheep. Deer would be good; boar as well.”

Arlo spoke up, “That requires traps, which we have none. Also means hauling whatever we get down here. I hate goblins as much as the rest of ya so, am definitely willing to swing a hammer for that.”

Orinda cast a glance over her shoulder at Vapor, who continued to scratch. “The dragon said a ‘useful trade’. I have an idea.”

She gathered the hem of her white robes and spun around. Walking up to Vapor, she stopped and put her hands on her hips.

“Excuse me. I cannot help but notice your constant scratching. Do you suffer from dry skin? If so, I wonder if we could obtain an ointment for you as the trade. Also, Arlo here is a cleric who may be able to offer you a modicum of relief.”

Vapor lowered his head. The tips of his ears drooped. “Dry skin? No. Something worse...ticks. *Damnably ticks.*”

Orinda heard Malin snicker from behind her. She sent him a quick glare over her shoulder.

She waved her hand towards her companions and said to the dragon in a confident voice, “You see our assortment of weaponry and skill potential. We shall rid you of these nasty ticks.”

Vapor's pink eyes brightened and he lifted his head a little. "The ones in my cave as well?"

"Certainly. We will eradicate the entire infestation."

"That is splendid!" He indicated an area at the back of his cavern with a jagged crevice in the wall. "They keep coming in through there. I tried to block it with rocks but the critters only flatten their bodies and squeeze through. If I only had fire breath like Father did." Vapor let out a deep sigh and fog billowed from his nostrils.

Orinda turned to the others. "Malin and Garwood, you two head out to that back area and clean out the ticks around there. Arlo and I will see about removing those on Vapor's skin."

Arlo's bushy eyebrows joined together as he frowned. "I, for one, have no intention of climbing upon that beast and fishing beneath his scales for blood sucking insects. I won't risk one wriggling down inside my armor." He hefted his hammer and stepped over to stand beside the towering barbarian.

Garwood smiled over at him. He reached into his pack and withdrew a vial of yellowish liquid. He poured a dollop in his palm and handed the vial to the dwarf. Then he demonstrated by rubbing the sticky substance over his arms and other exposed areas.

"It keeps mosquitos from biting so perhaps, it will assist with ticks."

Arlo sniffed it and wrinkled his nose. "Won't they smell us comin'?"

"Perhaps they will be too hungry to care," the Kagonesti said. He offered some to Malin who just shook his head.

Orinda stared at the vial and asked, "Do you have more of that? I wonder if it will help Vapor."

"Can't hurt to try," he answered, handing her the bottle.

She gathered the hem of her robe and walked up to the dragon's head. Staring into his pink eyes, she showed him the vial. "I want to put this on your skin, beneath the scales and see if it helps any."

Vapor sniffed and snorted a small puff of fog. "It'll help if they don't like the smell. I certainly don't. What's in it?"

Garwood spoke up from where he stood, "Oils of almond, rosemary, and lemongrass. Also, garlic and milk of a stink cow."

"Very well." Vapor turned his head, exposing his neck.

Garwood joined Orinda. "Before putting the ointment on, we should remove any ticks attached to his skin."

“Hmmm...I’m afraid that’s something beyond my expertise. Burn it perhaps. We can make a small torch if you will give up one of your arrows and I’ll wrap it in cloth similar to what we did to the eggs,” she offered.

He replied, “We burn them after. We don’t want them to dig further in.”

“Pull really hard?”

Garwood shook his head, “That would remove the body but the head likely would remain imbedded.”

“What about a spade? Can we use that to pry the head out?”

“Lady, I do not carry spades with me. Do you?”

Vapor scratched the back of his neck again.

The elf pulled out his bow and removed the bowstring. “I have an idea. I can loop this around the head and pull the entire thing out, since the body will move with the head.”

Orinda clapped her hands together. “Oh, yes. You do the removal and I’ll apply the ointment.”

Garwood looked up at Vapor and cleared his throat. Looking into those enormous pink eyes, he said, “I need to build a fire to toss these bugs in once we pull them out. I just don’t want to alarm you.”

Vapor dipped his nose in a dragon-like nod. “There’s some old boards stacked up behind those rocks to your right. They’re left over from the dwarves who widened the tunnel for me. I wouldn’t mind getting rid of those as well.”

Garwood smiled. “Thank you.”

Orinda helped Garwood as best she could to carry broken pieces of wood to a spot near Vapor. The elf made a ring out of smaller stones and arranged the wood in a conical shape in the middle.

Noticing sheep remains, Orinda picked through them and returned with an armful of wool. She handed it to Garwood and proudly said, “For kindling.”

He shook his head and set the wool off to the side. “It’s not good for that. Wool is resistant to burning.” With that, he removed his shirt and stuffed it between the boards, then pulled out his flint and dagger once more.

Within a few minutes, crackling flames licked the sides of the wood. Garwood walked up to Vapor. “Would you be kind enough to lift us onto your back?”

“Certainly.” The dragon lowered his head to the ground. “Climb on.”

With swift, sure steps, Garwood climbed up Vapor's nose. He held out his hand to assist Orinda who struggled to hold the hem of her robes in one hand and balance the slight climb.

Vapor turned his great neck and swung his head around to the center of his spine. A light fog wafted out of his nostrils as he waited for them to disembark.

Garwood called over his shoulder as he climbed onto Vapor's back, "Grab ahold of his spine and use them for support as you climb around them."

"Great. I can't see anything," Orinda responded, waving her hand ineffectively to clear the fog away.

"Oh, sorry," Vapor said. Once they clambered onto his back, he swung his head around forward. "It should clear up in a minute or two."

They set about removing the ticks beneath the dragon's scales, starting at his neck. Orinda's hands shook as she lifted the scales a few inches so Garwood could get to the ticks beneath. Then, as he tossed the bug down into the fire and looked for the next one, she covered the bite spot with a small dollop of the ointment.

After they removed six of the three foot adult ticks, Orinda looked at the bottle of ointment in her hands and said, "You know...I think I am getting used to the smell. I barely notice it anymore."

Vapor replied, "Only a human would get used to something that rancid. It stinks!"

Malin called out, "Orinda, can you come over here and do something to these things. Don't you mages have lightning or fireballs?"

She gave an exasperated sigh. "Must I do everything?"

She picked her way down Vapor's spine towards his tail. She didn't notice some of Garwood's ointment had oozed out from between the dragon's scales. Instantly her feet slipped out from under her and she fell, skidding down the dragon's body the way she slid on the snow as a child.

Her screams echoed off the cavern roof as she went, her arms flailed about uselessly. She landed in an unceremonious heap beside Vapor's back foot claws. Across the way, Malin doubled over in laughter.

Orinda stood, straightened her robes, and smoothed her hair with a muddy hand. She gave the barbarian a glare mean enough to rival those of Arlo. She lifted her head high and limped over to where Arlo and Malin were straining to push a boulder aside. She stood with her hands on her hips as they rolled it far enough to open entry to the wall crevice. Indeed several dark brown ticks skittered out from the widest part.

"I do have magical fire," she admitted.

Arlo grunted and swung his battle hammer, effectively squishing a small tick before it reached his boot.

“Perhaps a bit of it in this big crack will be helpful,” the dwarf said, lifting his hammer once more.

Orinda stepped closer and peered into the crevice, taking care not to step on the egg stack leaning against the wall. “Hmmm...possible but there’s still risk of flames flashing back at us.”

“I should’ve brought a shield,” Malin muttered. He pinned a foot long tick to the floor with the tip of his sword. Its legs writhed until he twisted the blade, cutting it in half.

“Just do it,” Arlo ordered while smashing another tick. “If anyone gets hurt, I’ll heal ‘em.”

“I suppose a firebolt would work.” She turned to the cleric, “Arlo, would you sacrifice your bottle of dwarf spirits? We need an accelerant.”

He sputtered and cried, “What?”

“Come on. I’ll buy you another when we get back to town. Just toss it in there.”

Arlo cursed under his breath then said, “It better be the good kind...*real* dwarf spirits and not that cheap stuff they pass off at the Scratching Post Tavern.”

He stepped forward and tossed the bottle in with a grimace.

“You two keep those things from climbing on me while I do this.”

The mage wiped her hands again on her robe and steadied her stance. She readied her spell; if she placed the center just right at the widest part of the crevice, she could send a firebolt inside.

She extended her arms, fingers outstretched. Concentrating, the words formed in her mind like glowing sigils.

“Api Anak!”

A mote of fire burst from her fingertips and sizzled across the space, darting into the gap. It struck the bottle, exploding glass shards and flames inside the crevice. Burning ticks small and large flooded out of the opening.

War hammer and broadsword arced as Arlo and Malin dispatched the largest ones. Others died with a pop as their carapaces exploded sending blood and ichor over the stones, dwarf, and barbarian.

Orinda spun around and fled, seeking shelter near Vapor’s body. She barely noticed Garwood jumping off the dragon’s back to stand beside her. They stood side-by-side and watched Arlo kick the eggs into the fire.

Once the flames died down and no further insects came out, Arlo and Malin joined the others at Vapor's side.

Malin grinned. "That was fun."

"It didn't take you long. I'm finished as well," Garwood replied.

"Well done," Vapor said. "I feel so much better already. You have my thanks."

Arlo clapped his hands together. "The best way to thank us is to give Orinda the artifact she seeks."

Vapor snorted a puff of gray fog. "We never made a trade agreement. You offered to rid me of these critters. No bargain was struck *and* I never said I had any such artifact. My thanks should be sufficient."

Arlo's eyes bulged and his face grew red. "What?" He sputtered in anger. Then waving his hands at Orinda, he shouted at her, "Tell him what it looks like. What it does."

The mage looked at him with sadness dampening her eyes. "I don't think..."

"Tell him!" Arlo interrupted in a booming voice.

She let out a deep sigh and turned to the dragon. "It's a silver rod about three feet in length. Affixed to the top is a black twelve-pointed star sapphire. It's reputed to..."

Vapor waved a clawed foot. "That thing? Say no more. I traded that years ago for a flock of sheep."

"Oh, dear," Orinda exclaimed.

Malin tapped the dwarf on his shoulder. "We will be leaving now." He jerked his thumb towards where Garwood stood. "That means we need the rest of our pay."

The elf nodded. "We did indeed lead you to the dragon's lair as promised...and then some."

Cursing under his breath, Arlo pulled out his pouch. He counted out the required steel pieces and placed them in the barbarian's large hand.

Malin tucked them into his own pouch. He met Orinda's gaze and smiled, then walked away, Garwood in tow.

Orinda skipped after them. Arlo watched as she stopped the Kagonesti. He nodded and handed her another vial of ointment. She clasped it in her hand tightly and waived at Arlo to join her. Dejected, he followed her out of the cavern, leaving a happy Vapor to himself.

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A full Solinari cycle later, Vapor lounged in his cavern with a filled belly of mutton. Suddenly he felt something scratching between his scales and then came a short stinging

bite. He let out a powerful shot of breath, quickly filling the entire cave with his thick, wet fog. He knew the ticks were back. He growled in frustration and the scratching began.

Within a few days, he heard soft footsteps growing closer from the tunnel between his lair and the outside world. The scent of human, perfume, and something else...mint perhaps...reached his nostrils. Between scritchings, he looked up and squinted.

Stepping gingerly through his fog, the slender form of Orinda appeared. Her white robes solidifying against the mist. In her hands, she carried one end of a twelve foot length of leather; Arlo came up behind her holding the other end.

She strode up to Vapor and smiled. "Greetings. I trust you are well?"

"Not particularly," he said. "The damned insects are back." Glaring at Arlo, he added, "Both kinds."

The dwarf frowned and opened his mouth to speak but Orinda interrupted him.

"I believe we may have something to swap with you then."

Vapor lifted his head, eyes glittering with interest. "Swap. A trade?"

"Yes. Arlo discovered that the eggs of the ticks can be used to create a salve for easing symptoms of several diseases. Kharolis Mountain Spotted Fever, among others. We suspected you might have an ongoing issue with these pests and created an item, though not magic admittedly, but one which might bring you relief."

Arlo spoke up, "We will give you this in exchange for the eggs. It can be reinvigorated however often you require it...monthly? We get more eggs when we recharge the item."

Vapor sniffed. "Ah, that must be what I smell but with something added."

Orinda smiled again. "Yes, we added mint to mask the stink cow milk. What do you think?"

"Intriguing. So, show me this item and tell me more."

Orinda and Arlo lay the long leather piece upon the ground. On one end a large steel buckle was affixed and several eyelets on the other end. They moved it into a circle.

Arlo explained, "This is infused with some of the Kagonesti concoction that worked when we were previously here. Plus the mint like she said. We clasp it around your neck so that it keeps the ticks at bay."

Vapor raised his head up high. "You wish to collar me?"

Orinda touched his leg gently. "It is a type of collar. You will not be bound but freed with it. Free of the insects. Think of it as a necklace."

The dragon lowered his head. Arlo and Orinda struggled to get it around his neck but eventually managed to clasp it with room for comfort. Pleased, they stepped back.

Orinda pulled out a mirror from her pack and held it up so Vapor could see his reflection. He turned his head from side to side, inspecting the collar.

“Could this be a different color? The leather is just too...plain,” Vapor said.

“Certainly. Any particular shade you desire? Perhaps rose gold to enhance your eyes.”

Vapor’s lips parted in a draconic smile. “I like that.”

Orinda waved her hand over the leather and muttered a magical phrase. The tan leather shimmered and a beautiful shade of pink gold covered its surface. She again held up the mirror for Vapor to see.

He let out a puff of fog. “Excellent! This is lovely. We have a deal!”

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Outside the tunnel entrance, Malin and Garwood hid among the tall grasses. They’d followed the cleric and mage, watching them haul a wide length of leather.

“Why did you have to say out loud what’s in that bug stuff?” Malin asked the elf with a frown.

“How was I to know she would make some and bring it back here? I’m wondering what a dragon needs with a giant belt.”

“Yeah, and Vapor didn’t have the artifact they wanted. What would he trade them with?” Malin asked.

“It’s an unusual dragon,” Garwood commented.

Together they stood and turned away from the lair entrance. As they waded through the tall grasses, Malin asked, “Do you think we can still *lure* folks here with the promise of an artifact?”

Garwood shrugged. “I suppose so. It’s their sorry luck to go in and find nothing.”

The barbarian nodded. “Just be sure we get paid and leave first.”

“Yes. Be sure we get paid and leave first.”