Snow and Subterfuge

A low level MERP adventure
By Andy Warner

Snow and Subterfuge is an introductory adventure for low level characters.

It is set at the end of the winter of TA 1984, around the Last Inn on the great East Road, in the region of Rhudaur.

Introduction

The year is 1984, in the Third Age of the Sun. It is early spring and the uplands and hills of Rhudaur lie cloaked in a fresh, unexpected fall of snow. As the days grow slowly longer and the winds lose their cutting edge, the first of the melt waters swell the Mitheithel as it flows past the Inn at the Last Bridge on the Great East Road. Soon, the road will be passable with ease and trade will pick up in the small hamlet that has grown up around the bridge, the Inn and the watch tower that guards them. Haldon the innkeeper looks forward to the coming months when his bar will be packed with thirsty drinkers and the rooms host to weary travellers from far afield. The winter is a lean time for all the folk of the North, and coin is hard to come by and even less willingly spent. The local farmers, trappers and traders are running up hefty slates they hope they will be able to clear in the short spell that passes for summer in these high places, and the season for planting and rearing is about to begin.

It is a crisp night, with a rising moon nearing full casting a silvery light across the bleak land as Ulwarth the hill farmer pushes the door to the Inn open and is welcomed by the warm glow of a roaring fire. But he has not come these five miles at this time of night just to warm his bones, he could have stayed at home and done that. Unstringing the bow he always carries, and stowing the string safely under his cap, he approaches Haldon and calls for a drink and his ear a while.
"I be a bit at unease tonight Halds, things is odd up at the farm, and I not be likin' it one bit". He takes a long draft of the slated ale, wipes his mustached mouth clear of creamy froth and continues, Haldon nodding quietly all along.

"Bin seein' wolf tracks this last week, over the far bank, by the old ruin," scratches his chin and shivers the cold from his bones, "well wolf is what I'm thinkin' though I ain't bin able t' check for sure, what with the risin' of the flood, but I ain't heard much bayin' nor howlin', not much more 'n' usual anyhow, an' I ain't seen no pack runnin' neither, so I gets to wonderin' what's goin' on".

Haldon nods, absent mindedly, thinking of other things.

"So I gets to makin' a watch, me and the lad, and you never guess what!" He looks expectantly at Haldon, who by this time is glancing round to see if the odd looking group in the corner need more jugs of ale or a fill up of hot broth.

"Halds, .. Haldon!"

The barkeep is called to his senses and Ulwarth continues.

"You'll never guess! We seen wolves all right, deep into the night, the lad had dropped off, bloody lousy watch keeper 'e always was, but what's this I says to im, what's this?"

He has forgotten his ale by now and has a worried look on his weather worn face, a deep breath and he stutters the words out.

"They was bein' ride-ed, Haldon. Ride-ed I says, by them goblins the Hillboys says live on up the Trollshaws an that."

He remembers his ale and downs the lot.

"So I come at once here, after I made sure the place was secure and the lad and the wife safe inside, what with Grim an Grist to guard em. So anyway I thought I'd come an see if them travelers was still here, that lot in the corner," he tosses his head back in the direction of the only oth-
ers in the Inn "see if they might help a farmer out an see what it is is goin on. I don't like to mess wi' it meself Halds, what with me leg playin up these cold months, an', well, they seems handy sorts eh?"

The Plot
What starts out as a simple adventure to help an old farmer chase off a few Orcs has the potential to plunge the players into a dark world of conspiracy, plotting and political rivalry that may bring the North to the brink of war! The ruins are being used as a drop point for a spy from the North, and the messages he has left lead to an adventure to find an ancient sword of power and might. At present, the Orcs are the main concern...

Ulwarth is a local hill farmer who lives with his family in a small hill farm about five miles North of the Bridge on the west bank of the Mitheithel. He farms sheep on the sparse moorland, and grows what he can in his farm garden to see himself and his family through the cold months. The sheep are his livelihood, so they are pastured close to the farmstead through the winter months where he and his lad can keep an eye on them, with the help of Grim and Grist, the two huge wolf hounds he owns.

The farm lies in a sheltered spot, out of the worst of the weather on the banks of the Mitheithel where it is joined by a tributary in a steep sided valley. Just across the tributary is the ruin of an old keep. Not much is left these days, and Ulwarths lad has whiled away his youth exploring it, fighting battles against imaginary foes, saving Arthedain from the yolk of the Witch king, just like his father and his father before that.

Unbeknown to Ulwarth and his family, the keep has long been used as a place to exchange messages, and is used occasionally by agents of Angmar. They are wise enough to keep their occasional visits secret, and none have ever suspected the nocturnal goings on in that ancient place. The site (and others along the main routes) is checked for messages on a monthly basis by Orc scouts who relay them back to Groth, Lord of Pen Morva, a small town in the foothills of the Ettenmoors, many miles to the north.

Recently, one of the spies of the North, Hoegwar Hoegs-son, has had cause to leave a message for his masters, and true to form visited the keep a week or so ago. However, with the rising flood water, the promontory the keep sits on has become cut off, and the message collectors cannot get to it. These messengers are a couple of Orcs from a scouting outpost based a little to the north, who ride 2 large war wolves.

It was the tracks of these two wolves that Ulwarth saw in the fresh snow, and last night on the river bank he spotted the wolves and their Orc riders.

Now we all know that Orcs are ten a penny in the Misty Mountains, but out here in the hills, quite close to civilization and the threat of the local levy, they are not at all common. Especially since their numbers were decimated in the Great War not even 10 years ago.

So as you can imagine, Ulwarth is quite concerned. Assuming the party (for that is who the odd group in the Inn must be) agree to help old Ulwarth out, we may as well continue.

A little more background information
Hoegwar Hoegs-son is a rather nasty character. He comes from Hillman stock, but was brought up to the South in Tharbad, where he learnt his trade. Its not a trade most would boast about, but to Hoegwar, it is a trade and a hobby, for he is a spy, an thief and, darkest of all, an assassin in the pay of Groath, Lord of Pen Morva, and ultimately to the powers based in Angmars freezing waste.
Hoegwar goes about his business in the guise of a traveling trader, and, as a master of disguise, few recall him in the places he has been. He collects information from all the border towns and villages. He notes troop movements, garrison strengths, political changes and petty squabbles between lordlings and merchants alike. He visits farms and markets where he keeps his eye on the state of the crops and livestock, the levels of harvest and of lambing, he hangs around the inns, taverns and brothels keeping an ear out for gossip and news from afar. All this he collates and sends back to his task masters, in exchange for all the coin he needs and the promise of great power and riches ‘when the time comes to take back the North’. He swaps information for coin at a great many sites along the East Road, and the highways and byways of Rhudaur. These locations are mainly old ruins, standing stones and other places mostly ignored by normal folk. Hoegwar has deposited the messages and has since gone on his way along the great East Road towards the Shire where he will gather information about the events of winter. He may have passed the party, and he stayed in the Inn for one night.

The messages were left at the keep, in a concealed hidey hole in the basement, protected in oiled wrappings. They detail recent changes in the militia of Tharbad, highlighting the withdrawal of 50 Gondorian men at arms back to Minas Tirith, in the far South. There are details on the grain supply and crop expectations at Tharbad, and some political news and gossip too. None of this will make any sense to the party at the moment, but may prove useful later in an extended campaign. Along with the papers is a bone scroll tube, well secured and waterproofed, and sealed with wax. It has some runes scrawled on it, but they are not recognisable or translatable. They are in fact totally meaningless, but designed to make the orc messengers wary that they are ‘cursed with magics and spell-workings’. The tube contains a rough map, a poem and a brief note.

The Map:

I came across two dwarfs in Tharbad, who had this map and part of a poem. After a few drinks (dwarfs being what they are!) I gathered they were looking for an old Dwarf hold where they believe some old artifacts are still hidden. The map is poor. I could not get any more coherent information even with a large dose of blackfish venom, dwarfs, as I said, being dwarfs. They did mutter about some ‘key’ it relates to, but the blackfish dose finally was too much even for dwarfs. I have translated as much as I can, but I still guess at some of its meaning.

Your Servant
H
The Poem
Forged of Fire in ways of Light,
where Dark shall never come,
The One that cuts to deepest core,
the Evil is Undone.

From Rivers fast came quenching thirst
to hiss and spit and boil,
In Deepest Fires the Naugrim smiths worked in Endless toil.

The note is penned in contemporary Westron and explains the other two items. All items have been drawn by Hoegwar, and he has kept the originals himself. The map shows an area of land with a river and several towns and castles marked on it, but the names are confused and thus not easily identifiable (Hoegwar has made several mistakes. The river is the Bruinen, not Mitheithel, and the place he calls Iant Methed is not the Last Inn, but a ruin east of the bridge on the East Road, south of Minas Brethil). The poem is a fragment of a longer work (and is provided in full in Cirith Runes, at the end of this adventure). It describes the forging of a powerful sword by dwarven smiths many, many years ago, as an answer to the dark evil that was devouring Middle Earth. The map shows the location of the place it was forged (The Dwarven Hold of the Iron Fist, Angacan) and of its current resting place (The Tower of the Fist, Barad Cam). The note tells that Hoegwar came across them in Tharbad last autumn, through some dealings with a couple of Dwarves, and may have some bearing on something referred to as 'The Key'. He used blackfish venom to get more information, but the dose killed one of the dwarves. The other, Daggard Dragon Slayer (well, that’s what he calls himself) seemed dead too, but he survived. He has vowed to find and kill Hoegwar himself. Daggard could help locate the places on the map if the party ever meet him......

The Orcs are waiting for the floods to subside so they can make their monthly message check. If the party wait more than 3 days, the flood water will have subsided enough to allow the orcs to check the ruin, locate the messages and retreat into the hills. They can be traced back to a small outpost about 10 miles into the hills, where they will hold up for a few nights before setting out again, traveling only at night.

Assuming the party retrieve the messages, the orcs will shadow them a while. They will only attack if there is a reasonable chance of winning a fight, and even then, they will turn and run as soon as things look bad for them. In either case, any surviving orcs will will report back to Grouth, telling how terrible foes stole away the latest messages. They will give descriptions as best they can, and play up the ‘formidable skills’ of the party. Growths men will be on the lookout for the party from this point, though not actively seeking them out (Pen Morva is a long way north, across difficult terrain).

The Journey to the farm
The adventure works best if (and assumes that) the party leave in good time, although notes are made to indicate other possible situations if they have been slowed down. Taking the chance of another warming drink, Ulwarth relates the tale to the party, and asking for their help. He will then urge them to start out now as he doesn’t want to wait until morning. If they will not leave, he gives directions and sets out alone.

It is a fair distance, along a rough cart track covered with freshly fallen snow. The only tracks of interest are those of Ulwarth himself. Apart from a few animal tracks, there are no signs of others on the road tonight. The full moon and clear sky make stealth difficult, but also means the
party can see well. They can be fairly sure they are not being watched along the road.

Ulwarth will relate the tale again on his way home, and embellish bits as he sees fit! He is a sturdy character, and makes the pace. He will not want to dally along the way, and is eager to get home. He will happily talk about life here, his family and his farm. He doesn’t know too much about other things, as the family do not leave the farm often.

As they near the farmstead, the sheep in the barn start to bleat nervously, and the hounds in the farmstead start to bark and growl. Both these occurrences are in response to the approach of the party. A crack of light appears at one of the shuttered windows, and movement can be seen inside. Assuming the party decide to scout around to see if anything is lurking nearby, any elves among them may notice a brief movement on the top of the ridge across the river above the ruin (too far for mere men to see at night, even with this moon). This is one of the Orc guards checking to see what has caused the hounds to start barking. He is half a mile away at least. If the party are easily visible, he will notice them. If they have taken care to be sneaky, he may assume it is Ulwarth and the boy that he can see, and think nothing more of it. Of course, if he sees a few people, he will tell his comrade, and they will be far more alert.

Around the farm

A reconnoiter of the farmstead will show no signs of wolves or orcs at all. However, if the party cross the river in Ulwarths
small boat, it is a different story. If the boat is checked out, some debris, leaves, grass and dead bindweed will be found in it, - nothing exceptional, except the bindweed grows around the ruin, and not this side of the river. Ulwarth will notice this, but he will get a suspicion that his son used the boat recently, and not point it out. Later, he will rebuke the boy in hearing of the party, 'I told you boy, tis not safe f'r yer ta go dallyin around on yer own, what wi' these wolves an that about!'. The boy will plead innocence, as he hasnt used the boat, which should indicate someone else has..... (it was Hoegwar delivering his message to the ruin). If the dogs are used to track the scent, they will be able to do so for a little way, leading round the back of the farm and onto the track some way away, leading south to the East Road and the Last Inn. The scent is too old to follow with any real success.

The flood water

The river level will drop over the next few days, allowing the orcs to check the ruin for messages and replace the stores there as needed. The longer the party wait, the easier it is for the orcs to make their way clear. The orcs can reach the ruin on the 3rd night after Ulwarth meets the characters in the inn.

On the island

On the far bank, there are several clues to the recent use of the boat. It was tied up to a bush which is now partly under water, but it will be noticeable that some of the branches are broken off. (Remember the water was lower when Hoegwar used the boat so beaching marks, footprints in the mud etc won't be visible). The bindweed around and inside the ruin
shows signs or disturbance, and some bits can be found in the boat (from Hoegwars boots or clothing). There are no wolf prints on the island itself. A Very Difficult perception roll will lead to the location of the wolf tracks at the water edge on the northern bank. Taking the boat over will enable the tracks to be followed.

Scouting the ruin will reveal someone has been inside recently, but not spent much time there.

Good tracking will reveal that only one person has entered here, and wore normal sized boots, thus probably not orcs. A close investigation of the entry where the bindweed grows will show it has been pulled aside then replaced. There is a pendant trapped within the weeds, pulled from Hoegwar as he forced his way in. It is iron, and has a relief of a crude crown on it.

There is nothing of obvious interest inside the ruin, however a very difficult perception role will be needed to spot the secret hidey hole Hoegwar has deposited the information in. Is characters actively searche in the basement area, the secret place will be found with a difficult roll instead.

If the party are too late, they will find evidence that two orcs have been here. They will also be able to find a box of supplies in the hidey, replaced by the orcs. It is covered in runes and sigils and contains a pouch of Arthedainian and Gondorian coins to the value of 20 gold, two small vials containing a herb concentrate to aid healing and a single vial of a strong toxin made from the venom of a swamp fish. In the right dose, the spies of Angmar use this to help them glean information from their captives... or to kill them... The box is not trapped and the runes are not magical in any way.

**Hoegwars actions**

Although they cannot tell this, Hoegwar has been to the tower, retrieved a box of supplies from the ruin and then left his messages. If the orcs have retrieved the messages, they will have left another box of supplies in the hidey.

**The wolf trail**

The tracks lead west along a game trail up the valley, and then up onto the moors above, but do remember fresh snow has fallen, so they will not be obvious or easy to follow. From there, the party may be able to trace them two ways, depending on their ability. They lead north all the way to the orc lair, several miles away but this will be extremely difficult - event he hounds will have problems as snow drifts in the wind on the high moor. They also lead east to a bluff overlooking the ruin, from where the orcs are watching the flood water, waiting to resume their quest.

They are bedded down here in thick undergrowth on the lee of a rocky outcrop. They will be active only at night, and even then they prefer to stay warm and not venture into the cold. The large wolves will sense any approach, especially if the party approach up wind, which is in the direction of the tracks. This allows the orcs time to organise themselves. They will assume it is Ulwarth unless they have spotted the party at night. If they are aware of the party involvement, they will try and evade them, and resort to conflict as a last option. They are scouts and hence good at their craft, including ambush and sneaky attacks. If they assume it is Ulwarth, they will be confident and confront the party head on, suddenly realising they are outnumbered. They will assess their chances, and act accordingly. They are not warriors, so will probably mount up on the wolves and ride off quickly. They can easily outrun the party, and head back to the lair. They will bring
a war party back to fight in a few nights time. If they never return to the lair, the orcs will look for them and if they find them dead, they will attack Ulwarths farm. This will be at least a week or two away though.

If the orcs are caught before they have been to the ruin, they have a small locked replacement supply box with them. The orcs are delivering this to the ruin, as they do every few months.

**Orc Lair**
The orc lair is home to a few warriors, several riding wolves and a few scouts. The group will be lethargic and bored, happy to keep warm inside out of the snow and biting wind of a Rhudaur winter. They will not have any guards posted, though the wolves will be first to raise any alarm as the party approach. The lair is a small cave among boulders at the base of a steep tor (rocky outcrop) on the moors. It will not be obvious to the eye, as the snows cover the signs of life such as churned up ground, refuse piles and midden pits. If battle ensues, the orcs will fight until it becomes obvious they cannot win. One by one they will run or ride away, trying to escape capture. Eventually they will make their way back to Pen Morva and report to Grouth. Orcs are cowardly at heart, so if the stronger leaders are dead or fled, other individuals may surrender if terms look good. Although they will grovel and snivel and plead for mercy, they will also attempt to escape if possible. They don't know much about the plot and they cannot describe Hoegwar (remember he is not the only spy using the drop off points round here).
Winding up

The adventure successfully concludes when the party are sure there is no danger left to Ulwarth and his family. Assuming they are quick enough, they will find the spy messages and realize the importance of the situation. If they are spotted by the orc scouts, but do not follow the orcs, they may be followed and attacked. If they chase or kill the scouts, then the rest of the orcs will be alerted to a problem. They will attack Ulwarths farm to try to keep their presence a secret thinking that dead men cannot talk. They don’t consider the fact that a raid on the farm will alert the local people to their presence. It may be some time before anyone finds out about an attack, due to the isolated nature of the place, but be sure that a levy would be raised and the orcs hunted down. If the orcs escape, then Grouth of Pen Morva will become alerted to the parties involvement, and may try to find them. This would take a few weeks as Pen Morva is a good distance away from the Inn, in the Ettenmoors north of Cameth Brin.

Ulwarth cannot give much to the party, but he will always be grateful and offer hospitality whenever they need it. If pushed, he will offer a small amount of coin (about 1 gold value) and a ring off his own finger. It is a simple gold band, not worth much at all, and it would sadden him to do this. He would gradually come to resent the party too, if they took it. He will be able to dine off of the tale of this adventure in the Inn for the next few months, as everyone loves a story. Alas, this may alert Grouths men to the party if they visit the Inn and hear the tales.

Further adventures

This adventure leads on to an entire campaign, culminating in the party standing against a mighty power in the North. We will publish more parts regularly, with interweaving storylines and plots. There is an important adventure set later in the campaign that has its beginnings here, with the crude map Hoegwar has drawn.

If you found this adventure useful, or have any comments, please send your feedback to us - we really appreciate it.

The Dwarf Poem in full

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