

*The Pilgrim's Trial
and Faith
(Part 3)*

*by Marc H. Wyman
& Chris Bogues*

A Gushémal Story

Other Tales
From the World of Gushémal

- Call of the Dragon, Parts I & II
- Shield Maiden
- Warrior Eternal
- Ruins and Hopes
- The Pledge
- Childhood of a Fighter
- Rock of Discontent
- A Tale of the Gods
- The Miracle of Solstice Day
- Life's Values
- Tangled Elves

Visit our site on the web to read these tales:

<http://www.gushemal.com/stories.htm>

Also read the Travellers' Tales in the World!

Download from the following site:

<http://www.gushemal.com/si/download.htm>

© 2003 by T.I.P. Entertainment

This text may be freely distributed, provided the copyright notice and the names of the authors are included (or alternatively, the integrity of the text has not been altered).

If you have any comments about this story, please send an e-mail to marc@gushemal.com. We always look forward to hearing from you! (If so indicated, your comments may be published on the website.)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bluff was the first to swing his blade at the creature opposing us. The lizard hissed cat-like, let go of Cardsleeve's arm – the man, relieved of his single support, collapsed, cradling his arm, staring at nothing – and slammed its flank into the broadside of the sword. It hit more than the broadside, thrusting Bluff's arm forward, forcing him to leap aside lest the entire mass crash into him.

By that time Torrindas had joined in, stabbing at the creature. His sword tip brushed off the scaly armor, and then he had to dance away when the lizard jaws went after his arm as well.

A lizard? It seemed so much like a tiger! And also like a dragon. I thought about that while trying my own attack – all too afraid of the jaws and clawed feet, so my blade missed the beast by a full yard.

Scraps had recovered from his shock, remembered his bow and fired an arrow at the beast. It did no more good than Torrindas' stab. Neither did Red, who also sped an arrow.

"Dammit," he cursed, a brief word before he cast his bow aside, drew his bow.

Cardsleeve howled, finally recognizing the pain in his arm.

The dragon-tiger, the *driger*, as I came to think of the beast, swiveled its head – on a short neck, rather than the sinuous affairs of true dragons –, and it sniffed at Cardsleeve, as if marking him. It had little time for more, since Bluff and Torrindas attacked in concert. The driger reared up, instinctively avoiding Bluff's low blow – but instinct failed for Torrindas. The driger's head drove straight into the head laborer's blade – but from below, on the less sharpened edge.

Enough to nick the beast, drawing a howl from it. Along with a swing of its forepaw. And I realized that the paw was rather long, set high on the body, giving it good reach. As Torrindas noted with a shout when the claws slashed over his breast.

Thank the gods for our armor! It hadn't helped Cardsleeve against the jaws, but it was enough here and now.

I shouted, fortified by that realization. I ran forward, next to Bluff, taking care to be well away from the head. My blade went down, my full force behind it as I was set on piercing the driger's flank.

The beast had a different plan, as I found when it shot sideways, gliding out of the way of my blade – which wound up embedding itself in the ground, my body following it as if intent on empaling itself on the hilt. Before I could curse my ill luck, something slammed against my chest, thrust me upward. I was in the air all of a sudden. For just a heartbeat or two, then I crashed into something barely resistant – and shouting.

Red went down along with me, flailing his arms as wildly as I did. "Abyssal fires!" he yelled, while we hit ground, and while he pushed me off him. My head swam, my vision was spinning. I saw Red jump up, about to attack anew. I heard the roar of the driger, the shouts of my comrades – fortunately none of the latter showing pain.

My helmet had flown off. I wasted several heartbeats grabbing for it, as it rolled away from me.

A scream came from behind, a distorted voice that I took to be Cardsleeve's. The others shouted abuse, and the driger roared – not in triumph, but in pain. I was sure of that, and I had to grin.

My helmet was still rolling.

I launched myself forward, reaching for it, but it rolled away, into a crevice in the ground where several flowers lay buried under fresh dirt. "Dammit," I muttered. Another roar – more a whimper now, I thought – reinforced my grin. Dirt fell on my helmet. I crawled closer, reached down to pluck my helm, shook it clean, then put it on my head.

The fight was still going on, I heard, rolled around to see.

My comrades had surrounded the driger now. Their blades were flashing, stabbing. Such a beautiful sight to see, if it weren't for Cardsleeve, leaning against the stalactite and the cadaver. He was still alive, thank the gods, but he looked so pale. Blood was flowing from his arm. Somehow he had the presence of mind to wrap something around it, as well as he could with only one hand, and the pain. He wasn't doing a terrific job of it, I saw.

Better that I attend to him, even though I had precious few clothes left to spare for bandages. I rushed over to Cardsleeve's side. His arm was seriously mangled, but still fully attached to the body – one good thing, surely. Maybe, the thought brushed through my mind, a prayer to Decalleigh would now work!

Of course! "Great healer above, grant us the boon of healing," I began the formal prayer, as I gently pushed Cardsleeve's good hand away. The remains of the armor were in the way of putting a good bandage on the wound. Fortunately it broke away quickly, and a few heartbeats later it was gone, revealing the grisly sight of my comrade's arm.

I suppressed a curse, rather continued praying fervently, "Grant that my hands may relinquish pain and give succor!" Something had to happen! Something *better* happen. Once more, just as it had been with Carter, blood drenched my hands. I wound the shred of cloth around Cardsleeve's arm. He moaned, not having the strength to yell anymore.

"Grant us the boon of healing," I repeated over and over. "Grant that my hands may relinquish pain and give succor!"

Was there less blood flowing out? Was it because his life force had spent itself, or because of the prayer?

I didn't look too closely, worried only that I kept speaking and kept my hands pressed tight on the bandage. "Relinquish pain!" I yelled. "Boon of healing!" The other words I mumbled, punctuating with yells the important parts.

Behind me, beside me, the fight had continued for a while, the noise without meaning to me for the time being. I didn't want to pay attention to it – no, the driger had been surrounded, about to be skewered by a blade –, and just as little did I want to look up, to see whether Cardsleeve was still alive.

I did, though, only a moment after thinking this. You know how you tell yourself not to do something, and then you go right ahead doing that? It is an ill habit, one that I ought to break one of these days.

That time was not one to make me recant. There was rose color on Cardsleeve's cheeks, his breath was ragged, but evening out, reclaiming some regularity. His eyes were clear – not glassy at all as I had feared. "Pilgrim..." he whispered, his voice sounding broken, but there *was* a voice.

He was mending! Thank you, Decalleigh, oh Great Healer! It must have been you, using me as a conduit! Yes! Yes! Yes!

And then Cardsleeve's eyes widened, his jaw fell down, his face consumed with utter fear.

It was all the warning I had before a massive body slammed into my back. I was torn aside, rolled over, and my face was suddenly only inches away from fangs dripping ichor on my skin. A roar bellowed, deafening at this proximity. The fangs descended – time passed so slowly, they seemed to move an inch in a minute. I wanted to bring my arms up – where was my sword? A bladestroke, right into that maw, and I would be rid of the creature.

But my sword was embedded into the ground, after my forceful attack. It was far gone. All I had left was my helmet.

I remembered how these jaws had dealt with the armor on Cardsleeve's arm.

My arms still moved, of their own accord it seems, flapping together, slamming the sides of the skull above me.

The fangs continued – no, they... What?

The driger shook its head, roared again – its maw directed upward, away from me. For the most part, anyway. Its head convulsed, and realization slowly dawned that my hands must have slapped its ears, sending a wave of shock through the beast.

Don't think, act! I followed my advice as best I could, pinned down by the beast's forepaws. My armor would protect me against the claws – I hoped, though aware that the driger's strength far exceeded my own. No, it was the jaws I had to be afraid of, really afraid of.

Then keep away from the jaws! I contorted my upper body, rammed my shoulder into the creature's throat. That did little more than anger the driger – but very well, it didn't matter. The paws shifted, enough so that I wrapped my arms around the left forepaw, tugging with all my strength. Not much remained, but the thought raced through my head that the driger had only a short neck – it couldn't turn enough to bite at me, right? Right?

An image appeared before my mind. A dog, one of those large, stocky breeds, gnawing on a chain around one leg. The dog's neck had been about as short, and I was much bigger than the chain had been.

My head swiveled around, just in time to see the driger coming to the same conclusion, launching its fangs at me once more. They never reached me.

Bluff and Torrindas were behind the beast, stabbing their swords into its back. The driger roar-whimpered, suddenly off my chest. I rolled over, not quick enough of wit to nod thanks to my comrades, I just gazed after the driger as it ran, muscles bulging under it, bloody streaks on its back, dripping more streaks of greenish red into the ground.

It launched itself into the air, perfect motion, flying over the dark cleft in the land, crossing the four yards in seeming ease – and on the opposite side its grace evaporated. The driger landed, its paws entangling itself. It roar-whimpered again, more on the side of a whimper now.

Bluff cheered. Scraps did the same, singing a few bars of a victory song I had heard occasionally home in Mercurham.

Oh, the driger recovered, more or less. After a few moments it got its feet under its body, shook itself, drops of blood flying like the spray from a wet dog. Its eyes glanced at us, then it hissed – a dismissing sound, I felt – and disappeared into the bushes.

I was taken aback. Why had it dismissed us like that? That was... odd. Wasn't it happy to see us gone? Or...

"Where in all the demons' abysses did that crevice come from? It wasn't there before!" Scraps yelled.

The cleft in the ground. The one over which the driger had jumped.

The small ditch from which I'd plucked my helmet. And had to clear it off the clumps of dirt freshly strewn on it.

Because the crevice had widened to the four yards it now had. And continued to widen.

There was no song in the air, but the rock-grinding was louder than I had ever heard it before. It pursued a different beat, a different rhythm, menacing and immediate.

"Abyssal flames!" Scraps cried. "There's a rift all around us! We're on a bloody, flaming island!"

An island that was shrinking.



"Where's Valanda?" Red asked calmly, as if the earth wasn't crumbling away from under us. I admired his calm, wondered how he could possibly maintain it.

And then I realized the contents of his question. The wizardess had been right behind me when I had inspected the Tyrant's warrior's body. She had... That had been the last time I had seen her! She hadn't moved far away from me before, but I couldn't place her anywhere in my memories of the driger's attack, of my helping Cardsleeve – surely she would have assisted me there, or, no, she would have cast a fireball at the driger, and –

"Valanda!" I yelled, frantically scanning the island we were on.

"Val?" Red joined in, his voice less frantic.

My comrades looked about, to no avail.

Until we looked across the chasm around us. There Valanda was, in her underwear, alluring with or without a glamor on her face. But she wasn't on her feet. She was hovering in the air, on her back, her head lolling around as if semi-conscious.

In the air. Hovering. Under a magical spell.

The cause of that spell was standing a short distance away from her, twisting his fingers, murmuring to itself what might have been a song.

"A dwarf!" Scraps yelled unnecessarily.

The small man was of the same kind as the wild dwarves we had encountered above, the same cut of gray face, the same build – but it wore a tunic of cured leather, with burnmarks like sigils and signs all over it. He didn't look like a fighter, more cerebral – if one could attribute that to a cúchulain.

Had I been able to hear his voice across the rift, I knew it would have been the same we had heard singing throughout our descent. The one that had now fallen silent. That was the wild dwarves' bard.

"Shoot him," I whispered. "Put an arrow through him."

It was all I could do at that point, frozen as my muscles were.

It was enough for Red and Torrindas. Both men drew their bows in unison, knocking arrows and speeding them towards the dwarf. One missed the bard completely, bouncing off a tree. The other was true, aiming for the dwarf's eyes.

The bard didn't pay any attention to it. With good reason, for the arrow suddenly slowed down, as if moving through liquid, losing speed bit by bit, finally, gently, sinking to the ground well before the cúchulain.

"Shoot him," I repeated. "Please."

The dwarf finished his spellsong. Valanda's prone body started moving, sliding on a cushion of magic and air towards the bushes, away from us. The bard followed at a short distance, oblivious of us. It took both only a heartbeat or two to disappear from sight.

All our glances sank down then, towards the rift consuming ever more stable ground around us, eating its way toward us. The rift was deep, diving away to a floor further away than our eyes could see. Enough to shatter any bones we had in our bodies.



Was that how I would end? At the bottom of a chasm? Would my last moments be spent flailing my arms about, trying to find some purchase on soft dirt walls? Tumbling head over feet? Seeing the ground come ever closer each revolution of my body? And finally the impact?

I didn't want to believe that. The gods had finally accepted me. Me, who had never really thought of seeking them. And yet, and yet they had accepted me.

This couldn't be the end. I refused it! There had to be a purpose for me! The gods couldn't possibly have been playing with me! No, I was *meant* for something, for something more!

The chasm kept widening. A bush lost its roots, tumbled down. I watched it fall for interminable heartbeats until it disappeared out of sight. There wouldn't be any noise of it hitting the ground, it was too soft. Besides, I had now become aware of the noise of the ground slipping away, too. It would cover pretty much anything.

Not any screams, of course, but...

There was a lizard squirrel close to me, hanging on valiantly to a small bush. Raspberries, well before ripening. They would never become good enough to eat. And the squirrel, it would...

Well, kind reader, I should not bore you with the despondent meandering of my thoughts. Obviously I didn't perish there, or else how could I write these lines? How could there be more pages left in the pile you are holding? (Or is it a book? Printed and bound? Dare I hope for such an expense to be made for my meager words?)

While I was losing myself in the conviction that I would survive, my comrades were more concerned with doing something about that.

Bluff suggested felling a tree, so we could tramp over it to the other side.

Torrindas countered the suggestion. "It would only slip off, with the rims trembling as they do." Scraps joined in, unwilling to say as much, "Besides, look at the speed of that thing. It'd eat us up before we can get a tree down."

"Rope," Cardsleeve groaned. "Use a rope."

Yes, that was Cardsleeve. My newly found healing powers had brought him back to enough livelihood that his mind was working. It was our gambler comrade who realized that the rim on the other side of the chasm wasn't trembling half as much as that on our side. The bushes and trees – especially – were firm in their rooting.

"A rope!" Red exclaimed. My comrades started digging in their compartments behind their breastplates, excavating the provisions they had thought about putting in. They were good spelunkers – naturally so, since they had all grown up here.

I haven't mentioned ropes before, have I? Chalk that one up to my own ignorance of the matter. We hadn't needed any – to the surprise of my fellows, I should add. Not all the areas of Deersrun Hill are as easily navigable by foot as those that we had passed. Passing from one level to another, you sometimes needed a rope and didn't have a convenient corkscrew tunnel available.

Was it merely luck, or had there been something guiding us? I don't know – I wish I could tell you that such was revealed to me in communion with the gods, but... No, my friend, I will only find out the truth of that when the time comes for me to travel with the Messenger of Death. Wherever I am headed, perhaps I shall have the time to inquire of the gods what the meaning of our adventure was.

Enough of that!

Red and Torrindas unearthed goodly lengths of rope, coiled, five inches wide. Thick and strong. Other equipment followed, none of which would aid us now. Bluff, Scraps and Cardsleeve produced tinier lengths of rope – enough for exploratory lines, or such that could hold a small person. (Which was confusing, considering Bluff's large frame. As Red would argue later, our friend had thought he was the only one to think of that thin line of rope. It was useful in many places, no matter that it couldn't possibly support its owner's weight.)

By the time the lengths of rope were dropped on the floor before us, with Cardsleeve lucid enough to frown and growl, the chasm had grown to more than ten yards. Its speed of consuming the island we were on had increased slightly. We had, by my own estimate, about fifteen minutes or so left.

We were forced to move further inland, a few paces only. The squirrel accompanied me – vacillating between nervous stares at the rift and at me. Clearly it thought me a lesser danger, licking its scaly lips again and again.

Poor little squirrel, I thought, retrieved a piece of bitten apple from my breastplate and threw it at the small animal. The lizard creature dived for the fruit, took nervous bites. "Yes, my sweetie," I whispered, only half aware of my comrades' efforts, "eat up, and enjoy your meal." At least the lizard squirrel would have a slice of happiness before...

"Weight the bloody rope," Scraps said. "Else we can throw it only into the chasm!"

"Right," Torrindas seconded, removed his helmet, and tried to tie the rope around it. Five inches thick, tying a knot was truly difficult.

"Now we could use that idiot Wharfrat," Scraps commented. "Stupid as he is, he can knot a fence railing."

Bluff snorted. "Forget that dungworm, here." He picked up the thin line he had carried with him – fortunately he hadn't discarded it as the others had theirs, now taken by the chasm crumbling into the abyss. (Demons were down there, I was suddenly convinced, and I discovered myself licking my lips in the same manner that my lizard squirrel companion did. If the latter noticed, it gave no sign. It? No, that wouldn't do. His name was Jitters, I decided. "Hello, Jitters," I said to the lizard squirrel. He didn't seem to mind having a name all of a sudden, so that was all for good. Of course, he probably hadn't minded going without a name all his life, either. By the way, Jitters is a he, so I was fortunate in that.)

“Let’s tie one end to the thick rope, and we’ll –” Bluff obviously had no idea of what was going on in my corner of the island, the self-indulgent lug. He threw one end to Torrindas, holding out his free hand to receive the helmet. Torrindas was quick on the uptake, exchanging helmet for thin line and tying it to his thick one. Bluff knotted the helmet into his thin line, let it drop slightly, swinging it in a first try. The knot held, the line swung nicely.

“Throw it at that oak over there,” Cardsleeve said eagerly, pointing across the chasm. “Can’t argue against some good acorns showing in your cards, can you?”

It was a thick, stout oak, standing some four yards from the rim. Some of its roots protruded from the lip of the chasm, a little below it, but they were the tiniest signs of that great old tree’s foundations. Yes, it would hold our entire band hanging from it, that much was sure.

“Coming up all acorns,” Cardsleeve grinned. He was still pale, but he had the look of a man whose cards were about to win him the pot of the evening, allowing him to buy more jewelry for his would-be girlfriend, the tanner’s daughter.

Bluff nodded, checked with Torrindas to see if the thick rope was tied to the exploratory line. It was, the thick one starting half a foot behind the helmet. “All right,” Bluff told himself, feeling the looks of his comrades upon him – save mine, I’m sorry to say. I was rather busy being sorry for Jitters and myself.

“Go!” Red hurried Bluff on. The tall man did as he was told, breathing deeply as he started swinging the line and helmet over his head, slowly at first, picking up speed as the helmet started to circle him steadily. “Go!” Red repeated, and Bluff let go.

Helmet and line flew across the chasm. Easily they did. Even I had to look up, to see their flight.

Both missed the tree. Of course. That never works the first time, does it? Three’s the charm, or how does the old saw go?

Well, it’s wrong, let me tell you. Bluff grunted, drew the line back, started swinging it again as before, and this time when he let go, the helmet flew straight at the oak tree, heading for the trunk. A great throw! The line hit the trunk, the helmet was stopped, recoiled, going the other side around the trunk – was stopped again –, and the line was wrapping itself around the massive trunk in perfectly tight coils.

Bluff tugged at it. Much of the thick cord had gone around the trunk, too, strengthening our would-be bridge. “It’ll hold,” Bluff said.

“Let’s see about that,” Red muttered, waving at Scraps. “Go, Tiny. You’re least likely to fray the rope.”

The chasm was eating its way toward us. Jitters decided it was way too close and hurried towards my legs, hiding behind my right foot. I smiled, reached down and caught the little creature. Jitters didn’t fight me – unless you count that one small bite, mind you –, and I put him in the compartment behind my breastplate. He moved around right away, discovering the remaining apples quickly and munching on them whenever he wasn’t peering out, to watch both me and the rift.

Bluff and Torrindas were holding the rope taut. Scraps shook his head, sent a prayer to the heavens, spit on his hands and wrapped them around the rope. He was right at the lip of the rift,

didn't look down, just hurried to curl his legs around the line, then moving across it. Hands first, follow with the legs. A yard or two above the chasm, he changed tactics – rather than relying on his hands, he added his arms, the strength of his biceps to keep him close to the rope.

He was moving with his eyes closed. Just push ahead a little, then a little more.

And he was fast, I can tell you. So fast that he let go a little scream when his helmet bounced against the trunk of the oak, and there were four yards of solid ground under him. "Bloody drums of the abyss!" he shouted, dropped onto the grassy spot, yelling for us to follow him.

"Pilgrim," Red said. "You're next in weight. Get on with it."

"Me?" I stared at him in stupid confusion. Oh. There was a way out of here. I had been watching Scraps, and I hadn't quite realized that I could take the same route.

"Yes! You!" Red shouted at me, losing his cool for a change.

Cardsleeve chuckled. "Hey, pilgrim, I mean, Ahnfredas," he said, tugging at his good sleeve and producing a card that he held out to me, "we're coming up all acorns here, so get going. Thanks."

I took the card, numbed. It showed an acorn, of course. The others drew sharp breaths, provided with the final proof that our friend wasn't honest when he sat at the gaming table. As if they needed any proof – why else had they chosen that name?

"I'm going, I'm going," I hurried to say, took the time to push Jitters' head back into the compartment, then I wrapped myself around the rope as Scraps had done. (Jitters stuck his head out right after my hand had vanished, of course, but looking at the abyss beneath us, he decided that the apples looked – and tasted – a whole lot better.)

The rope was rough under my hands, but my armor had been chafing me in every other part of my body anyway, now that most of my undergarments had been transformed into bandages. Considering the alternative of staying on our island, I'd happily take some rope burns.

I changed my mind halfway over the chasm. Those burns hurt like all the demonic abysses put together! *Just let go*, I thought, *and it'll be over*. Yes, that would have been easy. And pretty painful, after all.

Scraps had done this, so I could do so as well! That thought propelled me for a yard more, then the pain shooting through my fingers, the ache building in my arms and legs was so much that I longed for a bit of release. *This can't be true. This can't happen to a pilgrim-turned-priest. The gods have plans for me.*

Yes, to meet you very soon.

Oh, Valanda would laugh at that, wouldn't she?

No, she won't. She's been abducted by the dwarven bard, remember?

I did. My mind went cold. Valanda, sweet, fragile Valanda, who appears so hard, and who...

Who needed me. Who –

"Whoa, pilgrim, that oak tree *hurts* when you hit it!" Scraps laughed. Very close to my ears, and there were his hands prying my arms from the rope.

I was on the other side?!

"Yes, I am!" I cried triumphantly, dropped to the ground, rolled aside and jumped happily up and down. I made it! I was safe!

Scraps laughed. "Is that a squirrel in your breastplate, or are you just happy to see me?"

"Huh?"

I looked down. Jitters looked out, licked his lips, then retreated to demolish my store of apples a little more. Oh, he could eat them all, he deserved them! I waved across the chasm, to those remaining behind. "Come on over, it's easy!" I yelled.

All right, so I lied to myself, but I *was* safe.

The others weren't. Not yet. And the ground was still crumbling away, and away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Red was next to cross over the abyss. It was now a goodly eight yards wide, and deep – my heart nearly stopped when I dared look down. So far, so ungodly far!

Bluff and Torrindas held on tight, their legs at a sharp angle, their feet such a short distance away from the cleft's lip. But Red made it across safely. He for one kept his eyes open all the way, dropping to the ground the instant he was across. "Come on, Torrindas!" he yelled. "You're next! Hurry up! Hurry up!"

The head laborer hesitated, exchanging words with Bluff. "Come *on!*" Red shouted angrily. The two men across argued, then Bluff nodded quickly, spreading the rope out, walking to one of the few trees remaining on the small island.

At the same time another of those trees fell down in the chasm. I watched it plummet, turning over, its leaves scraped off by the walls, they themselves scraping a lot of dirt. I felt the tremor in my boots. So did Jitters, my lizard-squirrel, who poked his head out once more and let go a trilling, nervous sound. "You're safer inside," I said, fully aware how ridiculous I sounded as I pushed him back inside. The squirrel would escape shortly, I knew, as soon as it had finished the apples. So much for choosing a name. So ridiculous, wasn't it?

Bluff tied the rope around a wide tree trunk, taking the time to check the knot twice.

Torrindas had taken the second thick rope, Red's, and tied it around Cardsleeve and himself. Red quieted down when he saw that. Of course. We had to get Cardsleeve out, after all, to come up all acorns.

He'd given me a card before I had ventured across the abyss. It was underneath my breastplate. I pulled it out – getting another bite from Jitters who thought I would take one of *his* apples. (*Now who collected them, me or you?*) The card flat against my palm I watched as Torrindas pulled Cardsleeve close to him, shifted him to his back and put the gambler's good arm around his back. Torrindas said something, probably told Cardsleeve to hold on tight, then he tightened the sling around both of them, to make sure. Can't trust an injured man to have enough strength, now can you? Good, reliable old Torrindas.

Bluff stood by the edge of the cleft, slapped Cardsleeve, then wrapped his hands around the rope, steadying it. It would swing when Torrindas took to it, that was for sure, and Red motioned for the three of us on the safe side to do as Bluff had.

Torrindas started, making good speed. I was surprised – Red had taken longer, and he hadn't carried an injured man on his back! Oh, yes, you could always rely on Torrindas.

But you couldn't rely on the powers around us to leave us alone.



Torrindas was halfway across the abyss, his arms and legs pumping hard to keep moving at the pace he'd set before. I couldn't help but cheer him on, and so did Red – although his words were harsher and sounding more like an army sergeant's. (Although I don't think that Torrindas minded some of the insults that were peppered into Red's encouragements; he probably didn't hear either of us.)

Cardsleeve was doing his best to hang on tightly to the head laborer's back, burrowing his face in the neck armor. A strange picture they made, those two gleaming carapaces proceeding along the rope – like two spiders on top of each other. Or rather on bottom.

It was Scraps who noticed the change. "The music!" he suddenly yelled, letting involuntarily go of the rope.

"Get back to it!" Red screamed at him.

"But the music – Red, it's changing!" Scraps yelled back. (He did grab the rope, though.)

He was right. It was nearly the same rhythm as before, but now it picked up fresh speed. And the voice returned to accompany it. The bard. He'd brought Valanda to wherever his destination had been, and now he was finishing us off. (It hadn't been that long since he'd disappeared from our sight. Judging by the slow pace he'd shown, that destination must have been nearby. We could get to Valanda quickly.)

What was the effect of the change? Tremors. Quaking beneath us. The abyss jerking, tons of dirt suddenly plunging into the deep, along with bushes, trees, and animals caught inbetween. A fox-like reptile, or dragonkin, was yipping, holding on for a moment to a branch – then the entire tree it was attached to fell, along with the lizard-fox.

Jitters in my breastplate squeaked.

So did I, only marginally more dignified.

Torrindas stopped when the quakes started hitting, looking at the cleft around him growing. He stared back – our gazes travelling along with his –, towards Bluff whose feet had been planted on more or less solid ground a moment earlier. Now that ground was cracking, tumbling, moving, shifting.

Bluff had been holding onto the rope, stabilizing it. Now the rope was stabilizing him.

And the cracks were eating towards the tree he had chosen. The island would be gone shortly, along with the tree, which would then be a weight on the rope. The rope had been tied firmly to the tree over there, but on our side...? Only the exploratory rope swinging around it. And the three of us holding it.

“Bluff!” Red cried. “Your sword! Hack the bloody rope off!”

“I –“ the tall man shouted back, precariously perched on the shaking ground. It was the only chance. We three might be able to hold our friends – but not if the weight of that tree was added.

“Do it!” I joined in.

Bluff finally listened. A heartbeat before the earth under him crumbled away, he jumped backwards, towards the tree, drawing his blade in a swift motion. He landed, came up like a cat, but unlike my first imagination, he didn't start hacking right away. Bluff had to take a second, orient himself, sight the rope and then –

Then my gaze switched to Torrindas. Cardsleeve on his back had yelled. Not the head laborer, no matter that the rope was shaking, vibrating heavily after Bluff had let go. No matter that Torrindas legs had slipped off the rope, and his arms were all that separated him from the abyss below. He was straining, but made no sound. Probably didn't have breath left to spare for that.

“Demons' flames!” Scraps yelled. Red strengthened his grip on the rope.

I am destined for more. Where did that thought come from? From myself? From the gods? Oh, me of little faith.

Wrong. At that moment, my faith was so strong I would have tried moving mountains with it. And you know what happens when one feels that way.

I moved past Red, barely thinking more than that one line, *I am destined for more, I cannot die*, and I found myself shinnying on the rope again. Red and Scraps screamed, shouted for me to stop, to come back.

It was rather easy, you know? Jitters was hopping up and down, surely commenting on my sanity, and were he able to speak, he would have outdone all the comments that Red and Scraps rained down on me. You know something else? He would have been right.

“Fool!” Torrindas grunted when I got close to him. “Turn back, we'll die!”

He was as much a fool as me, wasting his breath like that. I unhooked one hand from the rope, grabbed for Torrindas' breastplate. Hoist it up, so that his legs could get the rope again.

Hoist *two* men up? “Cardsleeve, push him!” I shouted.

“From what?!” my gambling friend responded. It was futile for him to help me. He was swinging with very little purchase, his good hand barely grasping the rope, adding precious little support.

“Turn the bloody flames back!” Torrindas grunted.

His arms were slipping. He couldn't hold two men, either.

Jitters slipped from my breastplate, dancing nervously up and down. I saw him out of the corners of my eyes, a small scaled dervish darting hither and yonder – before deciding that he could rush along the rope far more easily than heavy men like me. I knew more than saw when Jitters ran off, towards safety and a tree that wouldn't plummet into nothing all of a sudden.

Things changed then. One heartbeat the rope was horizontal, spanning the abyss clearly. Then a voice cried, “Hold *on!*”, and the rope slammed away, toward the safe side.

Safe side. I cringe, using that word. Yes, it was stable, but for us at that time, all the fools on that rope, it was a wall of dirt racing toward us. Bluff had cut the rope, you see, and he'd caught hold of it in the last possible instant. Now he was dangling beneath us, scrambling to get higher, to add his legs to the force of his hands and arms.

The wall crashed into me – yes, technically, it was the other way around, but that was how it felt to me. I was right above Torrindas and Cardsleeve now, and my own grip was slipping. Slipping. And losing.

I fell, for a tiny instant, my hands darting towards the rope.

I got it.

And my body slammed into that of Torrindas. That was more than his weary arms could take. He let go. For a heartbeat.

Cardsleeve's hand brushed past my leg. He grabbed my boot. It slid down. I brought my foot up, tried to stop the slide.

Then two other arms wrapped around that leg. Torrindas. The weight of two men pulled at my leg, the force travelling through my body to my hands.

Get your arms around the rope! I yelled at myself. My arms must have heard the message before I had, doing just that. But two men hanging on the frame of a scrawny man such as I was?

Abyssal flames, it was impossible for me to keep a grip! Absolutely impossible.

I didn't realize at the time. I didn't have a chance.

Bluff came up below us, shinnying as fast as he could, and he was a good rope climber. Somehow he must have pushed himself under Torrindas and Cardsleeve. The gambler noticed him first, his feet slinging around Bluff's neck. Stopping his ascent for a moment as the armor smashed into his face. Bluff didn't let go. Bluff kept going, after that slight pause.

We were all crying, as much as our breaths allowed. Scraps and Red above us did the same.

Time slowed down. The weight pulling on me lessened. Just a bit, but enough for the moment.

Gotta get up! And how was I supposed to pull off that miracle? Hanging on was all that I could do!

Torrindas found the rope. Bluff was close enough that the head laborer's feet could use him as guidance towards the rope, slinging them around, too. There was only my own weight left on my arms.

“Move, pilgrim!” somebody below me shouted. Was it Torrindas, was it Bluff, or was it Cardsleeve? I don't know. I did as I was told, though. Hand over hand, push the legs up. Up. Up. Higher.

Red and Scraps were trying to haul us up, pulling on the rope. They were too weak, managing only a few inches before I reached the lip of the abyss. My mind was dazed, almost so that I wanted to go on climbing the four yards of solid ground behind the rim. Red yelled at me – I don't remember his words, but it broke through my shell.

I rolled aside, panting heavily, forcing my legs under me, pushing myself back up. Standing. Yes, I was standing. And there was a stretch of rope waiting for me. My weight was gone from the rope, and I could add my paltry strength to pulling.

Red was closest to the lip, Scraps behind him. I took the spot right behind, grabbing the rope once more. It hurt more than it had when my life had depended on it. My hands burned, were on fire. I held on. I pulled.

The rope barely moved. We were still too weak.

From Red I later learned that our friends had stopped moving then. Torrindas wasn't able to go on. He did his best to push further up, but he couldn't. He was panting, grunting, like a wild beast. Only five feet separated him from the cleft's top. Only five feet. Less than a man's height. And he couldn't go on.

Bluff was trapped under him. He couldn't go past Torrindas – he would have had to clamber over both him and Cardsleeve, putting all their weight on the head laborer's arms.

My friends were doomed. So much for that destiny. If there truly was one, it only meant me.

And maybe Jitters. The lizard-squirrel had stuck around, and now it was leaping back up my leg, heading straight for the breastplate and the apples inside. Apparently he had decided this was his nest now, albeit moving and not very tree-like.

I felt heartened by that, a little bit. Jitters hadn't given up on us, and so I shouldn't either. I put more strength into pulling, groaning and half-shouting with every push that I gave. So did Red and Scraps after a moment.

The rope moved. Half a foot. *Grab the new spot! Now! There, you've got it! Now that's the way to go, Ahnfredas!*

At that moment Red shouted, "Cardsleeve, don't! We've got you!"



The gambler had realized that he was the weakest link in the chain of bodies on the rope. Torrindas could barely support them both. He couldn't move up with our comrade on his back, tied to him. So Cardsleeve had started picking at the knot holding him to Torrindas. He used both hands. The arm that the driger had nearly torn apart was healed enough.

Yes, it was healed. Magically. Divinely. The Great Healer Decalleigh had heard my prayer.

"No!" Bluff shouted beneath, seeing what Cardsleeve was doing.

Torrindas didn't shout. He was hanging onto the rope. I doubt he knew what was happening. All he knew was that suddenly the weight on his back was gone, and his strength sufficed to push him further up.

The rest of us saw everything. "Coming up acorns!" Cardsleeve shouted, just as the knot finally gave way under his prying hands. The rope fell away. So did Cardsleeve. Bluff twitched, as if he were trying to grab our friend's body, but he didn't.

Cardsleeve fell.

Remember my vision earlier? Tumbling head over feet? Cardsleeve didn't. He just plummeted away into the dark abyss beneath us. His face kept looking at us. I have never seen another face as serene as his had been.

"Giving your life for another man to live," a priest of Seram, the god of war, had once told me, *"it is the greatest deed you can dream of. The Heavenly Abodes will sing your praises, and they will open up to you."*

They had better.



Torrindas and Bluff made it up the rope safely. Dazed, we got the rope up, stowed in our respective breastplates, and then...

We must have started moving, for when I came around to reality and looked about, the chasm was nowhere in sight. At first I just took that for granted – then the thought hit me I had no idea which way we had gone!

Were we following the trail of the dwarven bard? The trail where he'd taken Valanda?

"Gods!" I exclaimed, getting everybody's attention. Good. That made it easier for me to ask Red about our direction.

He shook his head, looked about in a confused manner. He didn't know, either. We milled about, trying to get our bearings – find a landmark we'd noticed before being trapped on our shrinking island. Before we did, Scraps noted that there weren't any more tremors. No matter where my comrades stepped, the ground stayed silent. As if it didn't matter anymore which way we walked.

Because Valanda had already been taken. And we didn't have a chance to save her – at least as far as our opponents were concerned. (Did I think the dwarf was alone? I don't know. I couldn't imagine why he'd killed all his comrades up in the cave with his magic. Factional fighting, that sounded more likely. And quite frankly, I probably didn't waste much time on that topic. We had to free Valanda, that was the only thing that counted.)

"There!" Bluff shouted. "That stalactite was to our left when Cardsleeve called us over to the body!"

Right! I remembered that I had been looking that way when the blue flash had blinded me momentarily. It had passed, I had followed my friends, and Cardsleeve... Cardsleeve...

Don't think about that now! Think about Valanda!

I forced myself not to think about that too closely. My friends were having the same problem, I saw by the way their shoulders drooped forward. A sorry sight, with the magnificent armor we had on. But armored we were, and we had swords to fight, and –

I didn't.

Damn! I'd lost my sword fighting the driger, and Bluff – I checked his scabbard, it was empty -, he'd lost his blade when hacking off the rope a few moments earlier. What about the others? Scraps still had his, so did Red, and Torrindas... He didn't even have a scabbard anymore! When had he lost his? Had he taken it off, before carrying Cardsleeve –

Focus!

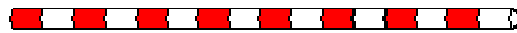
"Right," I muttered and brought the matter to the attention of my friends.

They cursed, then Red silenced them. "Break off some branches from the trees. Make-shift clubs are better than nothing."

We did that, aided by those swords we still had with us. Red's and Scraps' were nicked, and hacking at branches didn't do wonders to their sharpness. But then we had some more weapons, in addition to our bows and arrows. (We'd lost some of those as well, mostly arrows. Please don't make me enumerate how many we had left. It's depressing to think of how ill-equipped we were at that time.)

"That way," Red said forcefully when we shouldered our clubs and pointed in roughly the right direction. We walked off, finding the chasm within a short matter. Neither of us spared it more than a brief glance.

Before we'd gotten there, I'd worked at remembering which way the dwarf had left. Standing at the rim of the abyss, it took me a few heartbeats to work out where to head next. We set off to find and rescue Valanda.



"Dammit, I – Stop, will you?" Bluff shouted from behind. "I've got a stone in my boot!"

I kept on walking. Bluff could catch up with us easily – a man that big could match three strides of mine with two of his, after all. I'd measured that during our descent, in an odd moment of idleness. Valanda was somewhere ahead of us, alone with the bard. Still asleep? Or stunned? Or was she awake, was she battling the bard with her magic, and was she –

"Pilgrim! Hold it!" That was Red's voice. I stopped, cast an angry glance back at my comrades. They were standing in a circle around Bluff, Scraps resting his arm on Torrindas' armor. What? Was it that interesting to watch a man pull a stone from his boot?

Red was a step or two ahead of the others. "You're walking like a man possessed, pilgrim," he muttered. "In a minute or two you'll keel over senseless at that pace."

No, I wouldn't. I was destined to continue. I knew that now. There was no other explanation. The gods had saved me, and now I would save Valanda.

Ahh, my reader, you wonder at my change of heart? You're waiting for me to admit that all of this was the doing of the gods, and that my faith had guided me to this point and beyond? If that is the case, you'll spend a long time waiting. It was only my younger self at that point who was filled with conviction. True or false conviction? To be frank, I do not know. Maybe I will find out one of these days.

“Sit down!” Red ordered me. “Also the rest of you. Gods damn you to the abysses, we’ve been through a demonsload of dung, and now we’re going to take a breather. Am I understood?”

“Sure thing,” Bluff said, falling to the ground and only then continuing to pry the stone from his boot.

I was of a different opinion and voiced it loudly. All I got was Red walking over to me and slamming me to the ground. “Sit down, I said! Five minutes! We aren’t good for any rescuing right now, and Val’s gonna last that long.”

Was she really? I shouted that we had to continue, that we couldn’t allow ourselves even a heartbeat of rest.

Red didn’t listen. Neither did any of my companions. Not that they complained about my eagerness. Had I acted like this a day earlier, I would have been facing a wall of complaints. Now they only looked at me wearily, taking my eagerness for a sign of the gods. They were weak mortals, and the pilgrim was filled with divine strength – that’s how they took it.

No, Red didn’t. I don’t quite know why; he knew what was happening to me, yet he knew – somehow – more than the rest of us. I needed the rest, desperately, even though it took me a heartbeat or two to realize. Once I had shut my mouth, taken another breath, the pain and weary fatigue reflected in my companions’ eyes flooded me as well. My limbs grew leaden. How would I manage to get them moving again. Just rest a little. Just a little. Maybe close your eyes. Whom will it hurt?

Valanda!

My eyes shot open again. I was sure I’d only closed them for the tiniest moment, yet my companions had slid down noticeably, and Red was sitting, with his eyelids drooping shut. Minutes must have passed. Minutes!

I shook my head vigorously. Clean out the fatigue, throw it out! Shake your arms, your legs. Get the blood flowing again. “Five minutes are over, aren’t they, Red?”

“What?” Red’s head jerked up, looking at me. “Bloody – yes, you’re right, pilgrim. Come along, folks, up and at them. Brightly, now!”

He was moving slowly, but his efforts to get going again were more successful than the others’. Mercifully they remembered Valanda, a thought that reinvigorated them noticeably. Red had been right. They’d needed the break.

A little later he’d be proved right in a way I didn’t like one bit.



The bard must have stopped when he’d sung us into the abyss, I reasoned a quarter hour later when we still hadn’t found the dwarf or Valanda. His voice was still around us – but it sounded as far away as it had when we’d stepped out of the tunnel into this underworld.

Magic. Obviously.

That didn't help us one bit. Tracking did, though. Scraps had noted the footprints of the dwarf a bit earlier, dug well into the grassy ground. He hadn't paid any attention to them, sure that nobody would follow him. A reasonable assumption since we might all have perished in the death trap behind us.

Scraps turned out to be a good scout. He kept finding the trail again and again, no matter how often rocky ground cut through the meadows we were on now. Jitters in my breastplate peeked out occasionally, commenting on the proceedings (and particularly my continued movement) with displeased trills. "Shut up," I told him. "Don't you have any apples left in there?"

Jitters turned his perfectly dark eyes at me and squeaked. *Yes, but this restaurant should stay in one place*, I took that squeak to mean.

I pushed his head back inside – for once not getting bitten –, and after a bit of rummaging, Jitters fell quiet. Sleeping, I suppose.

Scraps was right before me, his eyes focusing on the ground ahead of us. Now and then he was muttering, then pointing out the next set of footprints. "Anything from Valanda?" I asked after a little while. My small comrade turned his head sharply, ready for a harsh answer, then reconsidered. "Nothing yet. A couple of fallen twigs, so I suppose she's still in that hovering spell or whatever."

"Oh, I see."

"Look," Scraps shook his head irritably, "this is tough work, all right? The trail isn't that easy to follow, so –"

"I'll keep quiet," I nodded, smiling at him.

"Thanks," Scraps grunted before returning to his task.

I shouldn't have bothered Scraps in the first place, I knew that. It wasn't smart, but I was starting to get nervous. So much for my faith, right? It kept wavering in and out, like the flickering flame of a candle. Not a nice image, that. Especially when you think how easily a candle can be blown out.

A few hundred paces after that conversation, we found something new. The area before us had been covered with bushes and meadows a few days or weeks earlier. Only torn shreds of the foliage remained now, scattered wildly about the place. The winds must have swept the better part away.

They didn't affect the sharp-edged stones lying all around the area. They seemed like a second layer, above the thin strata of earth, covering most of this area – roughly circular, some twenty yards in diameter – with a blanket of black stone, the edges sparkling strangely. Obsidian, I recognized it. Primitive tribes use it to fashion weapons, thanks to the sharpness of the edges. Knives, for instance.

It must have been like a whirlwind of knives that descended on this area, shredding the bushes, the grass – and the four men whose remains lay in the middle of the circle.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I can only assume they were men we saw torn to pieces in the devastated clearing before us. I will spare you the details of the destruction that were wrought on these men. Some of their clothing remained, enough for each of us to see that it had been identical to that worn by the Tyrant's warrior we had seen staked before. These had been his comrades, just as I had predicted. Tyrant's warriors never travel alone, always in groups, with a Jengchan priest leading them.

"Any idea who the priest is?" Bluff asked while we were walking carefully across the circular area.

"No," I answered truthfully. There might have been pieces of the typical clothes – but then again, I wasn't sure about anything here. Just too much destruction, you know? What I could see, though, were some pieces of armor that had survived. Badly scratched, but otherwise hale. Including –

I stopped, staring at a scabbard a foot or two next to me.

"Weapons," Red grunted. He'd figured it out at the same time as I had. "See if they're still usable."

The blade of a Tyrant's warrior? At another time I would have run away, had someone suggested this to me. That sword must be blessed by the dark priest, wasn't that right? Couldn't that blessing – or curse, for someone like me – pass to a new wearer?

All we thought about were the swords, and the chance to defend ourselves with them. None of us, not even me, dared ponder the matter further. I knelt down, drew the blade from the scabbard. A crumbling, rustling noise accompanied the motion – pieces of stone, tiny debris caught in the scabbard.

The blade I drew was bifurcated, like the sword in the Jengchan emblem. A narrow gap running through the middle, separating the two parts, both double-edged, with sharpened tips. A nasty weapon – as nasty as its god intended it to be.

It didn't fit into my scabbard, was just an inch or two to wide. Without thinking much I replaced my scabbard with the scratched up one of the Tyrant's warrior, fitted it to my belt. I straightened up, practiced drawing the blade quickly. It left the scabbard surprisingly quickly – but there was still this annoying noise. The blade in one hand, I upended the scabbard, shook the grains out. Quite a lot of them there was.

Bluff and Torrindas were going through the same motions. Bluff had the biggest sword we'd found – suitable to him, I'd say. He swirled it around in his hand once, twice, thrice, and grinned at the swooshing noise of the air. *Very* suitable.

And, yes, had this been another time, we all would have been at least a little scared how easily we took to these new weapons. I felt better having this blade by my side, and my own practice motions had gone a good deal better than I had ever done with Longstick's sword.



Who had killed the Jengchan warriors? You're right, we should have wondered about that more. As it was, we exchanged a few words on the topic, caught up more in our new blades. Scraps and Red stuck to their accustomed swords, of course, and – come to think of it – they were the ones truly concerned with that clearing of stones.

Where had the obsidian come from? How had it been whipped up to a storm?

More importantly, who had wielded that power? It was clearly magic, and none could say whether it was priestly or wizardly magic. Red and Scraps spoke about that when we continued, the two walking next to each other, a step or so behind the rest of us. An unspoken agreement to leave us some space – rightfully so, since we walked faster than they did. Well, we didn't talk and waste breath better spent on moving our legs.

Torrindas had taken over from Scraps as a scout. He wasn't as good as the drummer, but he kept us on the right track. Literally, of course.

How much further could the bard be? He hadn't walked fast, that much I remembered. And he had been encumbered with dragging Valanda behind. Although she'd been hovering in the air, the bard must be expending strength on that spell, so...

I was losing myself in reasoning one way or another. All of a sudden I found myself walking well behind Bluff and Torrindas, closing the gap to Red and Scraps.

"... sign of the priest," Scraps was arguing. "Where is that cleric? Red, I don't *like* it. That music around us, it –"

"What?!" Red interrupted him sharply. And not a little bit tired.

How can he be tired? We've got to find and rescue Valanda!

Scraps grunted. "I can't say for sure, but I'm remembering some stuff. Songs, you know? Er, more like hymns, actually. From the dark temples." He spat – I clearly heard the sound. "Leastways that's what I've heard. Some of our regular songs – pretty good, and pretty clean stuff –, the melodies are descended from hymns. A couple of those hymns are from..."

"The Tyrant's temple?!" Red exclaimed. "Scraps, why would anybody do that?!"

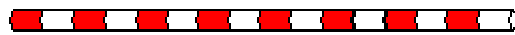
"I'm just saying what I heard! Maybe it's just a load of dung, but – abyssees, Red, that rhythm out there sounds just like that bloody song, *The Hedge-Walker's Egg!* Gods, the silliest song you can imagine, and it could be a hymn about bloody Jengchan! Originally, I mean, and –"

"Shut up, Scraps," Red sighed. "I don't want to hear any more. I don't –"

Scraps sighed as well, the urgency evaporating from him. "Yeah. I know."

What did I make of these words? Nothing, to be honest. I needed to walk on. I needed to find Valanda. All of that blathering was useless.

Oh, sure, kind reader. *You* know it wasn't. Take it from me. Had you been in my place, things might not have been as obvious to you.



Remember the prayer I sent to Nash'Geo about an hour earlier? The one that had sent the blue flashes across my eyes? Prayers aren't what they used to be. Sometimes they're more than you expect from them.

The same light rushed across my vision again a couple of minutes after leaving the devastated circle. Danger was coming! The light flashed again, again and again, leaving me disconcerted, groaning while my vision was swept away, replaced by a wash of blue.

"What is it, pilgrim?" Red muttered.

"Danger!" I croaked – how very helpful of me. I heard my friends move about, blades drawn, as they sought the danger I'd announced.

They didn't find any, and slowly my vision returned to me when the blue flashes mercifully dissipated. Torrindas shrugged. "I can't see anything," the head laborer said. Bluff and Scraps shook their heads, while Red made a grim face. "Keep the blades ready," he said, "and we'll move on. Unless..." He raised an eyebrow towards me.

I could do no more than shrug. "It was... The same thing that warned me from the driger, Red, it happened again, and... I don't know what it's about."

"Let's walk on," Red sighed.

We did, and the blue flash returned the first step I took. I shook my head violently, tried to clear my vision. Slowly it came back, and I found my comrades standing around me, glancing at me now, then at the bushes and meadows around us. So peaceful. There was nothing even remotely dangerous in sight. Why the blue flashes then?

"I'm all right again," I said, stepped forward – and stopped when another flash assaulted me. What the abyssees was going on?

"You know," Scraps said after a moment, "we're standing in a ditch."

My friends looked around and found that he was right. Perhaps the word ditch was wrong, for it was more like a dried-out river bed. A gentle slope, curved, with ridges here and there in which bushes had found their niches to grow. But it was noticeably lower than the surrounding meadows, running in a straight line through the landscape. A kind of ditch, yes, with its rims about seven yards apart.

Red told us to leave the trench. The flashes kept running over me until we had cleared it, and then – I shook my head. They were gone. I could walk as far as I wanted away from the ditch, and not a single blue spot appeared before my eyes. But just putting my foot into that groove running through the meadows, and the blue blinded me again.

"I won't claim to understand the gods," Red grunted, "but I take it that this ditch is dangerous."

"It's like the ridges outside, isn't it?" Bluff commented. "The old battle lines."

Scraps and Torrindas nodded to that in agreement. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I was quickly told that there were ridges outside of Deersrun Hill – miles above our heads –, trailing towards the hill. I had mentioned that in the beginning, hadn't I? This place has once been the site of a major war, terrible battles and the like. Some legends said that the infamous magepriests had once ruled here. The locals called those ridges battle lines – for no particular reason, I take it. Nobody knows their meaning – perhaps they were walls thrown up for defense, perhaps... Oh, I don't know. It's strange to compare this ditch with the ridges outside, and I never studied the battle lines in depth. Unlike my companions, obviously. They've spent all their lives here, and the battle lines have been commonplace to them. Apparently the ditch we were in seemed like a reverse image of the ridges – dug down rather than up –, overgrown with bushes and grass.

Ancient battle lines. Reversed in this underworld. Was there a connection?

"The magepriests," Scraps muttered and made a warding sign. I think it was one. I can't remember having seen it ever before, a complicated gesture – the fingers twitching while the hand moved in quick circles over the breast.

A local custom, I assume. Perhaps dating back to the actual time of the magepriests, millenia ago. And perhaps it was just something foolish associated with the legend. Could any gestures survive millenia? In a localized area such as this?

Magepriests. I had heard about their legend before, in particular since wandering closer to Deersrun Hill. Nobody seemed to know when exactly they had waged their terrible war on Gushémal. Nobody wanted to know exactly. It had been a long time ago. Millenia, yes. They had perverted magic in a way that none had imagined before, and none wanted to imagine today. Valanda, in a quiet moment much, *much* later, told me that some wizards researched the magepriests and how they had accomplished merging wizardly and clerical magic. As far as she knows, no wizard has ever been able to understand it. Perhaps it's only that the ones who uncovered the secret were smart enough to have it burned along with their corpses. Another magepriest unleashed upon the world, that would be... unthinkable.

Well, I didn't think that far – nor did I know that I would be able to speak to Valanda again. Not that she was quite the same...

We pushed on again, following the side of the trench. Scraps and Torrindas took turns braving it to check on the footprints. The bard had stayed inside – unaware of any danger, or part of it?



The ground suddenly took a dip before us, the edges of the ditch getting flatter, merging with the surroundings after some fifteen yards. *A valley?* I was surprised – a few steps earlier, I would have thought the land would continue more or less flat, yet now there was a bowl-shaped valley before us. Something else occurred to me a moment later: there was a circular trench running alongside the valley, looking almost identical to the one we had been following – except that only the hardiest of plants had taken root there, and there were no animal tracks in its expanse. There also were other trenches joining the circular one – the nearest some five hundred feet away, barely visible, unless you saw its counterpart on the other side.

If these were the battle lines of the surface, we were coming to their center.

“There!” Torrindas growled and pointed down the sloping valley. “The bard and the wizardess.”

Yes! Valanda! My heart jumped when I saw the two figures slowly descending the slope – one walking, the other, wonderfully female, still hovering in the air. The bard didn't look back. His eyes were concentrated on the center of the valley, where – My heart stopped. So far this subterranean landscape had seemed untouched by human hands, yet there was indubitably a building. Old, built in the style of the turn of the millenium, about a century ago, dilapidated. Shingles had fallen from the roof of the three-story building, cracks had appeared in the yellowish plaster, some of the glazed windows were broken. Otherwise it looked like any mansion vacated for a few years – not decades. What *was* that place? And why was the dwarf heading towards it?

“Get down!” Red ordered quietly, adding, “Bows.”

I didn't want to – I wanted to run down the slope, attack the bard with my naked sword, free Valanda. But Red was right, and I got to my knees. I didn't have a bow left anymore, by the way, only two arrows which I handed to Torrindas. He was, I take it, the best archer in our number.

It occurred to me that we had tried shooting the bard before. Fortunately, Red was ahead of me, as his next words proved, “Quiet, everybody. We don't want the dwarf to notice us. He might not have time to get his shield up.”

Torrindas nodded. He nocked an arrow, along with Bluff and Red. “On my mark,” the latter said, counting down from three. “Now!” he said forcefully, exhaling at the same time as he let his arrow fly.

All three were launched at the same time, flying in parallel for the better part of the way. Then Bluff's arrow trailed away, aimed too far to the right. It would fly on for several yards before losing speed and falling to the ground. Red's and Torrindas' arrows were better aimed, headed straight for the bard.

Who turned around a heartbeat before the arrows should have impacted and waved them off with a negligent gesture. The arrows rushed off, danced erratically for a moment before dropping down.

The dwarf focused on us. I could see his eyes. How, you ask? Did the gods enhance my sight? No. I am quite sure that all of us could see the sparkle, that glint of magic flash, like a colored wraith shooting towards us. It grew weaker and weaker, dissipating, sinking into the ground.

Another tremor. Different from the ones before.

Red let go another arrow before jumping up, dropping his bow and drawing his blade. I never found out what happened to his arrow. I was admittedly too busy drawing my own sword, swishing the double-bladed weapon at the air around us.

The air had grown thick. Strange, almost like the morning fog at a river. Cloyingly sweet and earthy. Earthy. Dirt. Ground.

My mind was stuck on those words, and the blue light flashed before my eyes again, blinding me. It came from everywhere. No definite direction where a threat was coming from.

"Blast it!" I shouted. "I undo the prayer!"

Ridiculous, right? You can't undo a prayer. Or can you?

All I can tell you is that the blue light vanished. Suddenly, and my sight didn't need any time to adjust. I could see what was happening around us.

And wished I couldn't.



The grassy ground around us broke open. Swathes of grass were sent flying, their blades glistening from the dew of glowwater above. Clumps of dirt followed. The thin top soil covered us in heartbeats in a dusty, brown layer. I wiped my eyes. Instinctively, believe me. Had I been rational, I would have cowered on the ground, sent a prayer of help to any god watching over us. Anyone. Even the Tonomai One God would have been welcome to me.

For the rock beneath the dirt rose up. At first it seemed as if boulders were rising, sent up by some volcanic movement. Then the boulders straightened up, and I realized they were backs. The backs of stone creatures. About eight feet tall, with heads, with arms, with legs. The arms.

Long. Massive. Rock. Inlays of metal glinting. No fingers. They weren't necessary. The arms were instant clubs.

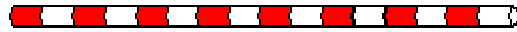
One of them smashed down on Torrindas. Faithful, reliant Torrindas. Laboring to get out of the abyss a few minutes earlier, proving superhuman strength in his – failed – attempts to save Cardsleeve. Now he was unlucky enough to stand too close to a stone creature. The clublike arm came down on Torrindas' head.

His helmet crumpled up like paper. The skull caved in. Blood sprayed.

The arm didn't stop. It smashed through the torso, tearing my friend in twine. More blood. It tasted metallic. I wanted to retch.

"Torrindas..." I breathed while his body fell back from the creature.

“Fight!” Red yelled, his voice breaking through the silence. He swung his blade at the nearest stone creature. I was frozen, could only watch as the metal bounced back from the rock. Red’s sword was dented. The stone wasn’t. “Fight!” Red repeated, jumping out of the way of the creature’s arms.



I counted seven stone creatures around us. Oh, I had the time to count, seeing as I was frozen in horror staring at them and what they did to Torrindas. I’m not proud of that. Earlier I had acted quickly, and now I had even been given warning by the blue light. Yet I could only stare at the creatures. And think about Valanda. The bard was carrying her further off towards the building.

I had to go after her. She needed salvation, and –

Bluff struck one creature with his powerful Tyrant’s blade. Chunks of rock scattered under the blow. The creature trembled, making no sound, but the tremor ran through the ground, into its comrades.

“They can be hurt!” Scraps shouted, snatched up Torrindas’ scabbard and withdrew the split blade. Then he dove under the arms of another of the creatures, twisting his new sword into the pit of that being’s arm. More stone flew off. In response, the creature twitched its arms down, about to smash Scraps.

Wily old drummer boy, he simply dropped to the ground, rolled aside of both the arms and legs.

I had no time to cheer him. Nor did I have time to continue my dumbfounded staring. Another of the creatures was lumbering towards me – not very agile, more like a boulder being rolled by a dozen men. Its arms were swinging, more like a fat man walking. But they were moving towards me.

I jumped aside – and recovered my dumbfoundedness. The creature had twisted its arm aside from me, avoided hitting me. What the abysses...?!

Noise of battle around me, I stepped back towards the creature. Its head turned towards me – there were features on it, like a face, roughly sketched by a hasty mason -, and it stopped. I stood in its way, and it couldn’t figure out how to get around me. Why the abysses didn’t it attack me? (Not that puny me was begging to get smashed by it.)

“Get out of the way!” Bluff yelled, and I was torn aside from the creature when he tackled me. We rolled aside, under the blows of several of the beings. Outside, outside.

“Godsdammit, Bluff!” I yelled.

He pushed himself up from me, his eyes already checking the creatures. “You were getting yourself killed, pilgrim,” he growled, angry at my lack of gratitude.

“That’s not what I mean!” I smacked his head. (What possessed me to do that? Anger? Stupidity?) His head swiveled around, disbelief obvious on his face. “They’re *slow*, Bluff! We can get away from them!”

I realized more than that. For some reason the creatures didn’t attack me. They would step around me if their silicone brains could figure out a way to do it. “We don’t have to bloody fight them!”

“Oh.” Bluff shifted away from me, clambering to his feet. I did the same, measuring the distance to the nearest creature. It had turned around to follow Bluff – not me, I was sure. Each step brought it a yard ahead. But each step took at least half a minute. It would take five minutes to cover the short distance to where we were.

Valanda! Don't forget about her!

“Bluff!” I shouted, and he grimaced since my face was only a foot or so away from his ears. “The bard! Get Valanda, I’ll get the others!” He didn’t react. I shoved him, the hilt of my sword still in my hand. The twinned blade was getting very close to his face, and he saw his own face reflected in it. That was strange enough to get him going without asking any more questions.

I turned around, checked on my two friends remaining in the circle of the stone creatures. Except for the one following Bluff, the other six were closing in. Scraps and Red were weaving their blades and their bodies around the assailing arms, avoiding injury as far as I could tell. If they hadn’t been able to, they would have followed Torrindas into the divine realm.

Torrindas... His bloodied corpse was being smashed by a stone creature carelessly stepping into him. I felt bile rise in my throat. I fought it down. It worked. (How could I have been so callous? How?! I remember the time, remember the numbness in my mind, but today I am looking for a bowl to relieve my stomach.)

My sword was trailing aside of me when I rushed back to my friends, sending a glancing blow to the creature lumbering after Bluff. It barely reacted when the split blade cut into its arm, but the tremor ran through the ground and its comrades.

That was a pause my friends used to send some more chunks of rock flying. Create more tremors. Create more breaks. And cracks. Gods, why hadn’t I thought of you before?!

“Ahnfredas!” Red cried. “Get away from here! Get Val, we’ll –“

“Watch out!” I responded, slammed my blade in the way of a stonecreature’s arm that had been about to bludgeon Red to pulp. The fool! He’d been paying more attention to me than himself! Didn’t he understand I was safe from the beings?

No, of course he didn’t. But he learned when that stonecreature halted its arm a goodly distance from my head, its own rock-skull twitching – like the stones before the quake, dust and debris on its top dancing up and down. Red nodded tersely, realized what the matter was without my speaking up. He was thinking fast. Fast enough to leap behind me, grabbing Scraps in the same motion.

Good. The stonecreatures wouldn’t attack me, and my friends would be safe behind me, so –

Wrong thinking. The creatures were all around us, could pluck out Scraps or Red without ever harming me. Dammit, I would have had to run circles around them to protect them. My breath was too short, I couldn’t possibly keep that up long enough to ford us a way out of their circle.

What to do? What to do?

Scraps dove aside from one creature, scrambled across legs that were lumbering to squash him like a bug. Red grasped around me, heaved me around. The world was whirling around my eyes before I really comprehended – and then there were massive rock trunks rushing towards me.

"Gods!" That was my voice, turned to a screech, sounding right after the arms froze in their motion. Perfect. Just two inches from my head.

Red let go of me, I heard him swing his blade again. Scraps danced before me, he was trying to get outside as well. But always there was a wall of stone arms or legs before him. How had they managed to get so close? How could my friends possibly avoid the massive rocks?

And why hadn't I pursued the thought about the gods?

I swallowed a curse, sank to my knees – angry that this would take away some space from my friends, space safe from the attacking arms, but it needed to be done. Deswellyn, god of artifice. God of miners. One of his prayers, there had to be one that fitted. Or I could make up one of my own? One that sounded right.

"I pray to the artificer god Deswellyn," my hurried voice whispered, "to see in stone the sword-dug crack, that needs be brought to ruin, have its scraped width ground back!" A poor rhyme, one so silly that Deswellyn might have been dismayed. And how many prayers relied on rhymes to begin with? But I put my faith into it, begged the great lord to hear my voice, to grant my plea.

Grant my plea. Sounded like the Leaves and Wreaths. *No, don't think about funerals, imbecile!*

A scream of agony. Red's voice.

I shot up, my blade flying – of its own volition, or did I still have control over it? I'm not sure, it happened so fast. I saw the sword's twinned edges digging into a stone creature, tearing a gash into it – then I saw Red crumpling, so slowly, as if he was drifting through molasses. Blood was on his arm – not on his head, not on his torso, only his arm, but he was screaming. My sword! *Dammit, concentrate!* The blade was still moving!

It was cutting through the stone! It hadn't done that before, right?

No, it hadn't. But the cracks that the metal dug into the rock widened, were ground back. Like drills were following the route of my blade, biting into each particle of stone that my blade touched. The prayer! Deswellyn, thank you, thank you, thank you!

I severed the arm, and it fell apart. Just crumbled to dust in the air. Turned to soil, with so many nutrients in there to feed generations of plants that would grow on it.

My blade was hungry. Or was that me? I don't know, I can't recall. All I can say is that I was suddenly filled with a frenzy, swinging my sword around, at everything even remotely rock-like. Fortunately that didn't include my friends. According to Red I was like a whirlwind, moving around restlessly, so fast I seemed a blurry ghost, eating up stone and turning it to ground up dirt.

I'm sure he exaggerates. The tension of the moment clouding his memory, you know?

But the creatures turned to dust. Including the one lumbering after Bluff. I hadn't touched it, but the cracks in it must have been enough to be affected by my prayer. Ahh, the power of prayer. It can be so invigorating.

The creatures were gone. I was panting, doubling over, stabbing my sword in the ground. A part of me screamed, *Not again!*, remembering how I had lost Longstick's blade. But I would pull it out of the soil, I thought. Later. Just a little bit later. Once I got rid of that stinging pain in my ribcage.

"Scraps, you all right?" That was Red. A moment later Scraps grunted something I couldn't make out. I looked over to them. Both were injured. Not that badly, but they were bleeding. Red's arm. Scraps' torso. Scraps was on the ground, and he wasn't all right. Not by a long shot.

I pulled my sword up, thrust it into the scabbard and heaved my darn aching carcass over to Scraps. Sank to the ground, laid my hands on my friend. Bloody armor. In the way. Trembling fingers sought for the joints holding it together. "Gotta get to the skin," I murmured. "Heal." All the breath I had left.

Red was near to me suddenly, undid the joints, flipped open the breastplate. I barely noticed, still gasping for air. My hands reached my comrade's skin, and somehow I got the air to chant Decalleigh's healing prayer.

Strength coursed through me, like a mighty river. I was so weak, it was a miracle I wasn't swept away by the flow. A god's power was filling me, so much, so godsdamn bloody much! (Blasphemy, I'm sure. Bad education, raised with too much cussing to avoid it. Thankfully, the gods don't seem to mind a little bit of blasphemy now and then, provided you have true faith. True faith, hah!)

"Oh, that's good, sweetheart," Scraps muttered, shifting under me with a silly grin pasted on his lips. Then his eyes flew open, and he saw me. How I wish I could enjoy the memory of the ghastly terror on his face when he recognized me. "Uh. Thanks. Uh. I'm... take care of Red, please?" He whispered hurriedly, trying to undo the damage of his previous words.

I think I smiled. Such a waste, letting a perfectly good line as that go ignored. But I was too weak. I was reeling under the god's power, and what strength I had left sufficed to reach out to Red, grasp his arm and repeat the prayer.

They were as good as new, Red assures me. I don't remember. I keeled over backwards. No, I didn't fall unconscious. I just gazed up at the gleaming heavens above me, barely realizing that it was a rockface covered with glowater. Looked like sky to me, except there were no clouds. I didn't mind. There were the gods above, and they were smiling at me. I felt happy.

Not even Red's frantic scream for Valanda shook me out of that happy feeling. "No! Bluff! No!!!" Red shouted.

I felt happy.

Until I remembered.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was me who had told Bluff to go after the bard. To rescue Valanda.

Guilt. I wasn't guilty of any of the other deaths. I hadn't been in charge. First, it had been Carter. Then Red. But Bluff... I had sent him into danger, and when he faced the dwarf, I had been staring at the heavens, feeling oh so happy. As if I were with the gods, and they smiled upon me.

Have you heard about crocodiles shedding tears when they feed? I think the gods smile when they hurt you.



Valanda had been in a daze ever since the dwarf's spell hit her. Dreams had merged with reality, much as I had felt during her spell of memory at the beginning of our tale. Part of her had remembered where she was, part of her had understood that the bard was near her, and that she should fight him. Part of her did fight.

Not enough.

She started waking up more when Bluff showed up. He came in swinging that Tyrant's blade at the bard, shouting like a madman. I suppose he was, at that point. None of us was still sane; in our own special ways, our minds had cracked a little during the descent. Bluff had turned into a berserker, holding on to a tenuous shred of reason.

His blow bounced off an invisible shield around the bard. The dwarf turned around, and his eyes gleamed in the way we had seen before – when the stone creatures rose up. The same thing happened again, right around Bluff. He wouldn't have had a chance, had it not been for my prayer.

Oh, yes, my prayer. Such a wonderful help it was. Bluff smashed his sword on the ground wherever a stone giant tried to rise, and they crumbled away before they could ever break through the soil. The bard didn't react. Valanda was drifting through her dazed dream-reality *mélange*, starting to return to the surface. She hadn't quite gotten there, but she remembered that the dwarf's face was absolutely still, frozen into a sort of grimace of anger and pain. The face didn't change, stayed as it was. She wondered about that, couldn't understand.

Bluff didn't worry. He swung his sword again. It bounced off, and he whirled about himself to pick up more force for the next blow. That one didn't penetrate either, but it proved strong enough to knock the dwarf over.

The bard was bowled aside like a pin you set for the throwing game. Just sprawled on the ground, head turned up, unmoving. His face remained in the same grimace.

Bluff stopped, stared for a moment – then he regained his wit and brought his sword up to stab at the prone dwarf. He didn't have enough strength to pierce the shield. His sword slid along the shield as if it were substantial, and Bluff wound up doubled over, leaning on that very shield. He was panting, looked up, straight into Valanda's eyes.

She was getting close to waking up then. She remembered his eyes. Blue. Sparkling. Lovable. She thought of his wife then, back home in Guardpeak, wondering what took her husband so long to return from a nightly hunt for wild dwarves. Valanda thinks she whispered his name, but she isn't sure. The spell was wearing on her still.

Bluff shook himself. He kicked the dwarf. It was lying still, and the boot bounced off as surely as the sword had. Nothing physical could hit the bard, Valanda was sure. She wished to tell Bluff that, to say that he needed to light a fire, drop the sparks onto the bard. That would penetrate the shield, hopefully set the bard aflame.

Or a fireball? Wizards could cast that, and Valanda was a wizard, wasn't she? She was quite certain of that, and suddenly she knew that she had to wake up.

In the meantime Bluff had grabbed her, tried to push her away from the dwarf. He must have reasoned that was one way to save her, as long as the bard didn't do anything.

He was too much taken in by the still face. The bard didn't have to move to act.

Wind gusted in from the side. Up on the ledge, overlooking the valley, we might have felt a moment later – had we not been busy battling the stone creatures. Just a slight breeze. It moved well beyond that in a few heartbeats. Bluff looked up, confused by the sudden gust – and then he was torn backwards by the wind, away from Valanda. He shouted, his voice lost in the howl of the wind.

The bard was still as a board.

Valanda fought out of the semi-consciousness, up, to full awareness. She was overcome by a spell! And spells could be countered. She gathered what strength she commanded at the moment, focused on the fatigue and hovering spell. It took her a long while, and she lost sight of Bluff for the moment.

Fatigue spell. Hovering spell. Overcome both. It was so difficult! But she had to! She had to!

None of us were watching Bluff at the time. I can only assume he was battered by the sudden storm, slammed this way, then the other. Valanda was also buffeted by the winds – but the bard's magic somehow protected her. She was driven about the landscape, yet none of the ferocious force reached her body. Bluff wasn't as lucky. Blades of grass must have been torn from the earth, propelled at incredible speed – so much that the light, flexible blades turned into true weapons, cutting his face, his hands, everything that wasn't covered by armor. He was starting to bleed, he was hollering, he was fighting against the wind, trying to reach Valanda. Or to reach the bard and somehow kill him.

Valanda remembered what to do about the fatigue. A simple spell that was taught early at wizard's colleges, to stay up long throughout the night – keyed up, really, not just awake, and overly focused. (Forgive the smudginess of the following comment; Valanda snatched the sheets a few moments ago and told me to add this in the margins: The students are *not* taught that spell, it is whispered about and exchanged secretly – handed down from the elder students to the newcomers. There are dangers inherent in the spell, apparently. It keeps sleep at bay for a while, increases the user's thinking – but sleep will demand its due after a while, and lest the student fall asleep for days on end, he is tempted to use the spell again, and again, until it can become addictive. As nice as it seems to not need sleep anymore, the mind cannot exist without sleep and dreams. Fortunately Valanda stresses that accidents of that kind are rare or, at the least, usually caught by the teachers early enough. After all, the teachers once had been students as well. There, I have cleared that up.)

She felt fresh all of a sudden, her mind cleared. The hovering spell? Oh, that was child's play to her! Yes, so very easy, so –

Valanda hadn't quite realized the storm raging around her. When she fed her now revived powers into the counterspell, she suddenly found herself in the air, without any protection. And the greedy winds tore at her, swinging her upside down, downside up, flinging her about.

It was then that she noticed Bluff. Very easily, for he grabbed her out of the air. From one heartbeat to the next, his arms were around her, dragging her to the ground. He slammed her down, hard, she yelled, he threw himself on top of her. For a moment, anyway. Then the winds grabbed *him*, tore him off her – as if they had particular interest in doing him harm.

Valanda dared not move too much, lest the same fate affect her. Another spell, more magic. Thoughts rushed through her head, ideas for spells, quickly discarded. Wizards cannot affect that what is, they can only create something new. Hard as it is to believe for the ordinary person, a wizard cannot transmute anybody into a frog. Nor can one still a storm.

But they can create something much like winds, a counter-force, a shield keeping out the winds.

How many heartbeats did it take for Valanda to wrest that idea out of her mind? To find out that her bag of ingredients was still at her side, and that she had the proper parts ready? To put them together and add the words of the spell?

She has no idea. The shield was implemented around her, she bounded up, safe from the winds, and looked about, searching for Bluff. Our friend was doing his best to get back towards her, but now

he was assaulted by thorny bushes, tearing deep gashes into him. Bluff. Strong, powerful. Fighting against the winds and the pain.

And losing.

Valanda ran towards him, as fast as she could. A hundred feet separated them, less paces for her. Just when she had nearly reached him, another – particularly strong – gust of wind blasted him away.

Then Valanda realized she had been going after the wrong man. It was the *bard* doing this. Stop him, and the winds would stop. So simple! How could she have probably missed that?!

Oh, yes, kind reader, she actually spent moments chastising herself for that mistake rather than turning around and putting her plan in action. It was her own spell, keying her up like that, making her think faster, but it also affected priorities.

Still she realized that mistake as well, and then her hand clawed up a fireball. Easiest weapon a wizard has. Also one of the deadliest. A globe of fire formed in her hand, within the confines of her fingers, while she looked about for the bard. The dwarf was still on the ground, motionless, except for his lips, singing softly the storm into action.

Valanda hurled the fireball at him. Once it passed through her own shield, traveling at high speeds, the winds tore at it, tried to blow it out – as a gust of wind may to a candle. Fireballs aren't candles. They are too hot. They burn away air more than the other way around.

This one was a true example of its kind. Its flames flickered but didn't die down. It flew at the bard who suddenly regained mobility. He threw his arms about, tore himself to the right, out of the way of the fireball.

Not quite fast enough.

The fireball caught his leg, a blaze enshrouding the limb – but as fast as the fireball had been, the bard dropped his shield, let the winds eat at the flames with all their ferocity. The storm hadn't been able to do much against the fireball itself. The fire it had set was a different matter.

A howl coursed through the valley, enough that Red up on the ledge heard it. By that time, we had bested the stone creatures and – for want of a better pun – dusted them. Red was too hurt at the moment, shortly before I would heal him, but he remembered the howl, so inhuman.

Valanda stared at the dwarf crawl forward. The winds subsided suddenly, and in her peripheral vision she noted Bluff who was doubling over instinctively, catching his breath. But it was the bard who had her full attention. He was in obvious need of another fireball. And another one after that.

She breathed deeply, clawed both her hands, called up the strength for the fireball. The globes were barely formed when she hurled them at the dwarf.

The bard's eyes gleamed when he looked up, flailed his arms.

A concentrated burst of wind rushed for the fireballs, sent them off course. They missed the bard by inches only, as powerful as before, tore into the ground some ten yards behind the bard. The grass burst into flame.

Valanda fired another pair of fireballs. They suffered the same fate. She had to use another tactic, obviously. A weapon that couldn't possibly be affected by winds. But were those real winds? Storms weren't known to veer fireballs aside.

The spell's strength was coursing through her, and she came up with dozens of ideas – most of them impractical since she lacked the ingredients in her pouch, or if she had the parts, it would have taken too long to effect the spell. So much time wasted! Actually, those were only heartbeats, barely enough time for Bluff to regain his breath – much as there was left in his battered body – and move forward.

They were time enough for the bard to come up with an attack of his own. His voice picked up volume, much more than could be accounted for by his lungs, and his words crashed out of his mouth like rocks hurled at high speeds.

Fittingly so, for small stone projectiles seemed to form out of empty air, shooting towards Valanda.

Danger! *Real* danger to her! The stones were fast enough to pierce her shield! That touched her keyed-up mind, more than had happened before. She had fireballs readied inside her fingers, but there were so many more projectiles heading for her. Valanda altered the words of the spell slightly, brought her hands up, and the fireballs flew away from her.

But inches after leaving her fingers, they burst apart into dozens of smaller balls, much less powerful individually, but enough. Each picked out one of the stone projectiles, crashing into it, burning it, eating it up.

"You want a battle?" Valanda hissed at the bard. "You'll have it!"

The bard didn't say anything, he continued chanting, conjuring up a new form of attack.



Grass fires. Have you ever seen one? I was spared the sight until that day. Once it starts burning, and the leaves are sufficiently dry – let's say that a rainless storm has just whipped all the moisture out of them –, it keeps leaping from one blade of grass to the next. It is hot, it is fast, it is merciless.

And dwarven bards in the middle of a magical battle may be too concerned with figuring out the next spell to notice them starting right behind them.

It can get worse when out of nowhere – apparently – a six-and-a-half feet tall man tackles them, ploughs them back, right into a swathe of flames. The bard may be distracted by the sudden weight on him, by the flames licking at him – from an entirely unexpected source. Distracted so much that he forgets for a moment to call up any winds to extinguish the flames.

Especially if the man on top of him – bleeding, battered, hurt beyond pain – keeps slamming his fists down on the bard, blow after blow, blow after blow. That man continues even while the flames grab at him. The fire finds a way under his armor, sets the clothes underneath ablaze. Singeing him. Cooking him.

Yes, that can be quite a distraction for a bard. In this case, it was a lethal distraction.

Bluff? No, he didn't die. Not then. Not quite.

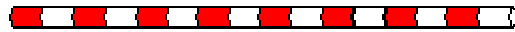
Valanda contained the flames with her magic. A spell that created water, I take it. Not really rain, just a couple of buckets of water emptying themselves over the burning grass and Bluff. He went on slamming his fists down, demolishing the bard's face. He was already bleeding, already in pain, so that it didn't matter to him when his knuckles split. Bluff was angry, so much anger penned up from two or three days of marching down deadly caverns, surrounded by this dwarf's singing.

Yes, the bard died. Did the fire kill him, or was it Bluff? We'll never know, and frankly, I don't care. He was dead. Leave the charred corpses lying out there for the predators, that should be my motto. At least in this case.

The singing stopped, obviously. So did the accompanying music, the rhythms that had been driving us mad all that time. All at the moment when the bard died.

So, is that the end of my tale? We had been hunting wild dwarves. What may have been the last of the cúchulain lay broken and dead on the slope of the valley. Nothing else left to do but find our way back home, right? Exploit the riches we have found down here – like the glowwater stream, perhaps?

There are pages left in the document you're reading, aren't there?



"We're done now, aren't we, Red?" Scrap said, fists on his hips, looking down on the burned corpse of the dwarf.

Next to him Bluff was lying unconscious on the ground, looking little better off than the dead bard. Valanda was wandering up and down, looking about herself nervously, as if she needed something to do. That spell she put on herself, it was still working, but there wasn't anything left. Lights sparkled around her hands, the beginnings of a variety of spells, none of which she dared pull through. A waste of strength, and moreover, she knew what was driving her to this.

"Red?" Scrap repeated, turned his head.

Red wasn't in the mood to answer. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground, amidst the ruined landscape. Blades of grass, bushes, torn asunder by the storm, strewn across the slope surrounded him, but he didn't see anything. His head had sunk forward, barely supported by the cradle of his arms. Was he sobbing?

Oh, don't ask me. Half an hour had passed since the bard died. My friends had walked down the slope, supporting me. I hadn't been able to walk – not so much for lack of strength but for an overabundance. Magic was within me. I had never been trained to deal with power, and now I felt it all through me. So intoxicating! I didn't want to let go, wanted to bathe in that power. Which is pretty much what I did. My mind was somewhere within that ocean of magic, drifting flotsam.

Scrap tried to get my attention again, when it was obvious that Red wouldn't answer. "Pilgrim?" he said, to no effect. I was standing, my eyes closed, my mouth half open and pretty much drooling.

(The spittle was on my chin. I noticed it later when I had to wipe it off.) Scraps punched me carefully, afraid a little push would keel me over backwards. "Pilgrim?!"

Remember my lizard squirrel Jitters? He was still with me, sleeping through most of the excitement. Now he looked out of his new home, after Scraps had jolted the breastplate, and commented angrily on the drummer's behavior. Scraps couldn't help but grin helplessly while the squirrel proceeded to climb up to my shoulder, brushing its tail over my face. It wasn't really a bushy tail, like you know from real squirrels. Jitters' tail was more like feathers – if you can imagine that a lizard could have feathers, as if they were related to birds!

But it was Jitters who got me out of my reverie. I looked down, into the squirrel's little face, was rewarded by a long trill about to pierce my eardrums. "Sorry, what's the matter?" I asked him, plucked him gently from my shoulder and stroked my fingers over his back. Jitters was very unhappy about that at first – ready to try if my thumb tasted like apples -, but then I found a particular spot on his back, right behind his head, that he probably couldn't reach himself. Jitters trilled again, a lot more pleasantly, and relaxed in my hand. Well, his eyes were focused on Scraps, suspecting that the evil biped might disturb his sleep once again.

"Pilgrim, are you –" Scraps started, stopped himself. He looked at me askance, holding and stroking the lizard squirrel.

A silly sight, I realized after a moment, forced a smile onto my lips – which faltered when memories returned to me. The stone creatures, my prayer to Deswellyn, and then there had been Valanda. Valanda!

Scraps shook his head involuntarily when I suddenly stalked past him, shouting the wizardess' name – full of fear, I'm sure. It hadn't quite impacted on my mind that Scraps was looking very calm, unlike any of us had done the past couple of hours.

I saw her about four hundred yards away, pacing quickly. She noticed me, nodded and smiled towards me, even waved, then she immediately returned to her pacing.

What the...? "Scraps, what has happened?"

He shook his head, then filled me in on the events during which I had lain on the ledge, covered by the stone creature's dust and gazing in utter stupor at a glowwater sky. I felt much as if I still were in that stupor, but somehow I understood that Bluff had been hurt, and that Scraps and Red had tried to get me to heal him when we'd made it down the slope. With no success, obviously.

Now, though, I understood. "Have to heal, yes," I muttered, returned Jitters to his perch on my shoulder (he didn't like it when the stroking stopped, complained loudly, then whisked himself into my breastplate to pout – loudly) and sank to my knees before Bluff. The power was in me, I knew.

But... It felt so difficult remembering how to heal. It had been such an easy task with Scraps and Red such a short while ago, yet now I didn't know what to do. *Speak the prayer! Decalleigh's prayer!* I had to tell myself. So difficult speaking the words. So difficult doing *anything*.

Then I comprehended. The magic inside me, I didn't want to let go, didn't want to share the power with Bluff. The realization pounded into my head, bounced about, driving out all the stupor. "Yes," I said with new resolve before reciting the prayer and willing the magic into Bluff's body.

His injuries were severe, almost enough to beckon the Messenger of Death. Bluff's pain echoed inside me, each spot of his body that was hurting. Fortunately it was a weaker echo, or else I would have passed out as surely as he had done. (It must be same for true Decalleigh priests. How else could they deal with dozens of patients? How could they suffer the pain of a ward full of earthquake victims, for instance?)

The magic flowed from me. In a strange way it felt good to have it leave me, to share it. Why hadn't I wanted to before? How could I have been so selfish? Easily, of course, is the proper answer. But putting the power to good use was wonderful, in a way much better. Not that the process gave me joy, not like holding the power within had, but – how can I explain it best? – this was what the magic was meant for. It felt *right*.

Healing Bluff took some time. I don't know how long, but I guess it was about an hour. When his breathing grew more regularly, and unconsciousness passed into sleep, I looked up and saw that Valanda had rejoined us. I was weak – the magic gone, only my fatigue remaining –, but she seemed a divine messenger of beauty. Hope. A nervous messenger, her breath coming fast, lifting those wonderful breasts under her shredded shirt regularly.

Ahnfredas! My good manners were complaining, but they needn't have bothered. I was so tired, I automatically pushed any dreams of that sort in the furthest regions of my mind. "Valanda, you're... It's so good to see you."

"Yes." She just said that word, her lips quivering as if she had to work to suppress a torrent of far more words. That spell on her, but I didn't know about that yet.

I wanted to drink her sight into me, as if that could replace the magic I had fed into Bluff. But remembering that friend made me remember the others. I looked about, saw that Red and Scraps were curled up, sleeping. Still wearing their armor, not even bothering to remove the helmets. They were too tired.

So was I. But I remembered one moment such a long time ago, such an eternity ago. Two days. The basement of Carter's house, when I had been dragged from bed to start our descent. Valanda had woken me up, Grapes had been there, and together we had walked down the stairs to that basement where Carter, Red and ten complete strangers had been standing in gleaming armor, readying their weapons and minds.

There had been fifteen of us at that time. Except for bedraggled old me, missing my trusty staff, and scared out of my wits, they had all been so – so alive. They had been eager to get going, to drive the wild dwarves from their home. And I? I wanted to get back to bed.

A memory drifted lazily into my mind. That bed had belonged to Torrindas.

I remembered him in that room, as fervent, as steady as he had been throughout our journey. A pillar of faith. Up on that ledge his remains were, open to the air, and to any animals that wanted a snack. My stomach was empty. Fortunately, or I would have thrown up.

"Torrindas, he..." I whispered, gagging on the words.

"No need," Valanda shook her head, her lips tightening. "I sent a fireball into his... his body. Later we can... We can put up a marker, but... It's all right, Ahnfredas."

“No, it’s not,” I said, surprised at the harshness of my voice. It must have been the dry heaves. I forced myself to my feet, locked my gaze with hers. “What was it good for, Valanda? Were all those deaths worth it? Or could we have...” The fury evaporated. Looking into Valanda’s eyes can do that to me.

She shook her head, reached out one hand and stroked over my cheek. I shivered. Dry heaves again, I thought at first, and then... Then the tears were coming, and I sank forward into Valanda’s arms, crying and sobbing. “They were my friends! I’ve only known them for a day or two, but –“

“Yes, Ahnfredas, I know,” she whispered, her voice barely breaking through the sound of my sobs.

Somewhere during the next moments Jitters came out, gave Valanda a threatening glare to leave his home alone, then he ran down my leg and vanished across the valley’s flank. Foraging. He came back some time later, I don’t recall when, but I found that now there were several nuts and other fruits in my breastplate.

At some point she lowered me to the ground, took the helmet from my head and let me rest my head on her stomach. I was still crying, she was brushing her hands over my back gently. “Sleep,” she told me. “I will keep watch over you.”

I think I fell asleep then. I’m not sure, it may have taken me a little longer to embrace sleep’s oblivion. But then, was it a dream that I glanced over towards the mansion at the center of the valley? Was it a dream that I saw a humanoid figure standing on a balcony watching us?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I woke up first, while my friends were still sleeping. Including Valanda who looked like she had collapsed from one moment to the other, once her spell had faded and the full force of fatigue dragged her down.

Was it the figure I had seen – or thought I'd seen – at the mansion? An ominous boding, or perhaps a helpful sign from the gods?

Not really. Unless you count Jitters as a veritable divine envoy, and his house-cleaning a godly affair. As far as I'm concerned, he was an annoying, trilling shrill mess, and so was the stuff that he shoved out from under my breastplate – remains of his meals, which had included more than the apples that I had put there; while making room for a load of various kinds of nuts as well as several leaves and twigs so he'd have a comfortable place to rest.

I didn't sit up at first, just craned my head up to watch the lizard squirrel busy himself. "Jitters, you *are* aware that I'm going to be leaving soon, are you?"

He froze in mid-step when I spoke, turned his large eyes towards me and gave me a hard stare. *Don't you dare! This is my home now!* Once he was sure that I had gotten his message and was sufficiently cowed by the mighty (eight inches long, plus the tail) squirrel, he dug back under my breastplate, rummaged around to shove all his newly acquired treasures into the right place.

"We really have to talk about that, boy," I grunted, then gently got up. Jitters complained with trills, stuck out his head at one point and tried his stare on me again. It had as little effect as before, he was sorry to see. After some more trills, and my taking a couple of steps to shake the clammy cold from my body and loosen the muscles, Jitters made do with his mobile home once more. After diving

out for a moment to relieve himself – aiming well away from myself. Smart little animal, didn't want to soil its home. So I wouldn't have to worry about that part of keeping a pet, would I?

Oh, my, I had truly acquired a pet, hadn't I? (Yes, yes, yes, it was probably the other way around, but either way, Jitters seemed willing to stick with me. Or at least my armor.) What was I going to do about that? Would Jitters be happy to accompany me on my travels, to wrest hard-earned coppers (and perhaps silver coins) from fools believing that I was actually going towards Faithhold?

Perhaps. As long as I kept that breastplate, and –

Wait a minute! Why would I be allowed to keep this breastplate? It had belonged to Longstick – or had it always been Carter's property that he had distributed to his men?

I brushed over the metal of my breastplate, noting that my arms were armored as well. The metal was scratched, hadn't suffered the journey too well. The magical light of my breastplate had diminished as well. Parts of the branded design had been scuffed out, others were clearly broken. What had once been complete, gleaming brightly, was now a dim mess.

Far from worthless, of course. Would Red ask me to part with it again? It was his due, yes. But... Gods, I didn't want to give this up. I didn't even want to slip out of the armor, even though it was chafing much as if I were lying in an anthill. The armor and me, we had been through so much, it had become a part of me.

I had to laugh. Softly, so I didn't wake my friends. This really was the attire to resume my travels as a fake pilgrim. Yes, nothing like armor and a Jengchan split blade to make people trust you. *"Please, good friend, pay for my journey. I am a poor pilgrim who really, really isn't about to carve you up and take your money anyway."* Right. That would work beautifully. I'd do better hiring myself out as a guard in these clothes. I might have to work up an entirely new plan how to make money, and how to –

"No," I told myself. "That isn't right."

It truly wasn't. I didn't want to be a fake anymore. Fake pilgrim, fake believer, fake priest. Oh, yes, kind reader, part of me still felt that I wasn't a priest. Sure, I had worked blessings and curses as only a cleric can, yet I was never consecrated at a temple and that felt wrong to me. I couldn't be a priest serving all the gods equally. If that were possible, there should be hordes of people like that in the world. As you know, there aren't.

It was wrong. I was wrong.

What was I to do? I couldn't pick up the life I had led before coming to Guardpeak. I was... a different person now. The gods were with me, even though I wasn't comfortable with that. But that didn't matter.

Maybe the question should be whether I wanted to be a true pilgrim, travel to Faithhold after all? The direct route, as fast as I could, without any detours. Honestly going to Faithhold, to ask for an audience with the Divine Speaker, to bask in the shine of the gods on that city.

No. I didn't want to do that, either. It felt... Well, not meaningless, not really. It would be an intriguing experience. I had heard much about Faithhold, and the Divine Speaker was said to be an impressive man. Yet...

I had been wandering up the valley's flank during my ponderings, and now I found myself at the ledge where we had fought the stone creatures. Their dust was still scattered over the ground, barely whisked away by the slight breeze. One spot was gratuitously burned by a fireball, and I knew this was where Torrindas had fallen. Nothing of him remained, except for the occasional glint of molten metal. One fireball, Valanda had said. This looked more as if she had fired volley after volley down.

Death. A friend had died here. Fighting for his life, for those of us – his comrades –, and those of the people on the top of Deersrun Hill.

I spoke the Leaves and Wreaths then, the ancient funeral prayer. Torrindas deserved it.

Was that who I had become? A companion of the Messenger of Death? A priest of Decirius?

I didn't want to be that, either. I didn't want to be near death, I wanted to be near life, wanted to give life. "Grant that my hands may relinquish pain and give succor," I whispered, repeating the healing prayer of Decalleigh.

I had done that, too, hadn't I? Bluff would have died without me. So would have Scraps, and Red – oh, well, he wouldn't be sleeping so peacefully without my healing him.

But that only reminded me of Cardsleeve. I had healed him, and then... Then he had let himself fall to his death, so that Torrindas and Bluff could climb out of the abyss to safety.

Death. Again.

Could I ever shake its bony grip around me? Or was it supposed to follow me?

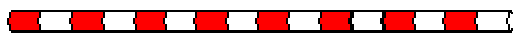
I hadn't spoken the Leaves and Wreaths for Cardsleeve. For a moment I tried to avoid it, wished that I could avoid thinking about his death – about death in general. But Cardsleeve had been a friend. And somewhere on me had to be the card he had given me minutes before dying. I had stowed it away, hadn't I? Or had Jitters perhaps thrown it out? (Dear reader, to put your mind at ease. The card was still under my breastplate. Jitters seems to consider it a rather pleasant part of his nest. He snarls every time I try to pull it out, and I don't like to get bitten.)

I could not get away. The Leaves and Wreaths, I spoke them again, listened to the words roll away on the slight whisp of wind, the moisture from the glowater gently dropping down every now and then. Maybe the wind would carry the words to the place where Cardsleeve's body lay. It didn't matter. The words would reach Decirius, judging the destination of Cardsleeve's soul.

The Taker. The Just God. He Who Decides. Decirius.

My lord.

Seems I had made my choice after all.



Red woke up a while later. He blinked, patted at his armor, then sat up with the look of a man who has no idea where he is. His eyes focused on me, standing guard over them, my hand on the hilt of the Jengchan blade. "Pilgrim?" he said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes (noting with concern that he still wore his helmet).

"No, not anymore," I said with a weak smile.

He didn't understand. It was in his eyes, and some part of me could see further than his eyes. I had become a priest of Decirius now. It is His part as Ruler of the Afterlife that commanded me – no matter how much I despised that –, but I had also acquired the aspects of the Eternal Judge. I cannot claim that I could see into Red's mind or heart, but I had an inkling of what went on inside him. The same would be true of all other people I should – and shall – meet. Maybe there is a blessing that would allow me deeper insight, but I have never been to a temple of He Who Decides. And I never will.

I reached out my hand to help him up. Uncertainly he took my hand, stood, then shook his head. He didn't seem like a tough Cayaborean sergeant anymore, only a man who had seen his brother and several of his friends die. He had kept on going on determination alone, but now... Now Red was starting to realize that a part of him had died as well.

Yes, I saw that. It wasn't difficult, I probably could have done as well before I had become a priest. (And don't believe I could have said so easily at that time!)

"My name is Ahnfredas," I said softly. "My pilgrimage is over."

"Yes," he said slowly, then shook his head again, stared for a few moments at our sleeping comrades. "So is mine. I want to go home."

He said it much like a child whose father has taken him on a long journey, to some dull place that was anything but exciting, anything but that which his father had promised him. Except that the child was so fatigued and empty, he couldn't even whine anymore.

I didn't know what to say, honestly. The man before me bore Red's face, had his voice, yet he was a stranger to me. He wanted me to guide him home. Me! It should have been the other way around, that was what nature had intended, right?

Only that wasn't the situation.

"Yes, so do I." Those were the wrong words, empty of the comfort he needed. I realized as soon as I had spoken, and I tried again, "Red, do you have any idea which way we should go? The passage we came down through won't take us back outside, and –"

I stopped myself. Wrong again. His face hardened, locked down. I wouldn't give him any reprieve, couldn't just tell him which way to go, wanted him to act, to decide. Something that Red – *this* Red – couldn't do anymore, not at this time.

Meaning that somebody else would have to find the answers. Preferably somebody who was awake at the moment. Yes, you did the arithmetics, right? It was up to me.

Me who had no idea of Deersrun Hill or this underground world. All right, the same was true of Red as well. He had never been here before, either. Was there any other way up? Except for the one we had taken? It was blocked, I knew.

No, that was silly. Well, maybe not all the way, but it seemed to me that as vast as this realm under the surface was, there ought to be plenty of passages back to the top. Maybe not close to Guardpeak, but – well, on the surface we could find our way easily enough. Find a village, an inn with some good beds to sleep in. My friends – Red in particular, I guessed – were likely to carry money, and if they weren't... Well, my skills at sweet-talking people into a free bed weren't quite

that rusty, and if push came to shove we could offer some services. Valanda was a wizardess, and I was a priest of Decirius. Which meant that I could serve as a judge, right?

My thoughts were drifting away, dealing more with my potential future than with the current problem. (Although I must admit that my ponderings held some fascinating possibilities. Imagine me, Ahnfredas Bluekeg, serving as a *judge!* Oh, my father would love that! And my siblings would die of envy!)

How to find a way out of this place? We needed a map. A guide was rather unlikely to be found here. But...

I looked over at the mansion. I didn't like it any better than I had at my first cursory view of it (and let's not forget the one where I thought I had seen a person there). But it must have been built by people who had a way to pass from the surface to here and back. They surely hadn't just stumbled upon this place, were stuck here and then suddenly discovered they had not only the manpower but also the skills to build a mansion like this! Whoever had done this, they must have gone back up to get the proper people. Perhaps the materials had been taken from a quarry in this underworld, but the rest...

"Let's take a look at the mansion," I told Red. "We might find maps there."

"That sounds... good," he said slowly, unwilling to commit himself or his hopes.

"We'll only find out once we get there," I added, with a bright cheer on my face. I didn't feel cheerful, but I couldn't bear the look on Red's face. Gods, it ought to be *him* making the decisions! We weren't home yet, were we? He ought to take charge, ought to...

Red did none of that. He just waited for me to tell him to start walking.

"You –" I started to say angrily, but the feeling didn't last long. I couldn't possibly shout at this man. He seemed so fragile, so... unlike himself. "Let's wait for the others to wake up. They need their sleep," I resolved to say and squatted down on the ground next to Valanda.

Red shrugged, sat down and gazed emptily at the sky. Up towards his home, separated from him by miles of rock.



Scraps was whistling a jaunty tune while we hiked the half mile towards the mansion. Every couple of steps he skipped sideways, clapping his hands loudly on his thighs. A man with not a worry on his mind, you'd think. Practicing the sets for next night's session at the drums.

I was beginning to feel grateful for the gift of Decirius, understanding that Scraps was distracting himself from his memories. And doing it for Red's sake as well, sticking close to our erstwhile leader. As did Bluff. The large man was walking with a slight limp – I hadn't quite succeeded in healing him, even though I had powered so much magic into him. A Decirius priest isn't terribly good at healing, I remembered. (I wanted to feel regret for that, but I couldn't. The choice had been made, and it had been the right one.)

The laborers were crowding their employer. (At least the man who was most likely to take over from Carter, until Grapes came of age.) Would they have done that before, or had this friendship formed during the descent?

“Who built that place?” Valanda wondered, barely raising her voice. She was on my left, on the far side of Red and the others. The wizardess was uncomfortable. Most of her clothes were gone, the clammy air was assaulting her. Bluff had taken off his shirt, under his armor, and given it to her. The sweat-stained, dark shirt hung over her shapely body like a sack, barely reaching her thighs. She was tugging at it every now and then, scratching herself under the shirt. That was a bit gratifying to me – Bluff’s donation wasn’t all that pleasant. Oh, such a silly thought. Bluff wasn’t Grapes, after all. And I wasn’t the fool I had been before.

I shook my head, focused on her question. “I don’t know,” I shrugged. “It looks like any old mansion to me.”

“One that is located in a subterranean world,” she sighed. “Could it have been Tyrant’s Men who did this?”

I noted the sudden attention of Scraps and Bluff shifting towards me. When had I become the all-knowing around here? “I don’t know,” I repeated myself. “The Jengchan followers are... Look, I don’t know all that much about them. They don’t sound much like the type who build anything, they like destroying, don’t they?” Too loud, too frustrated. My friends jerked back, even Valanda, from me, and I quickly shook my head, forced my mind to think faster, come up with something – anything – more informative. “That place reminds me of houses in Coopershire, towards Cayaboré. Old houses, about a century ago.”

“Cayaboré?” Red said, lifting his head a little. Was there a sparkle in his eyes? A memory of good days – even though he had deserted from that army? Whatever it was, he focused his glance on the mansion for a while, then shrugged, and his head sank back down.

Scraps had noticed the change, pointed at the roof and the balconies set in regular intervals around the top floor. “There are reliefs inset there. Can anybody of you recognize them? Maybe there’s some Cayaborean insignia there, the dragon or something?”

We were still too far away to make out any details. But Red was walking a bit faster, a bit more interested in our surroundings.

More time passed, Scraps resumed his whistling – soldierly marching songs, like Red might have known in the Cayaborean army. The storm hadn’t ravaged the ground here, so well contained had it been by the dwarven bard’s magic. What damage there was had been done by animals, by the steady breeze, by the rot in timber. A pen for animals – horses? cattle? – had once stood near the house, and behind it, there had been a garden. A year ago, none of us could have easily told what that patch of darkened dirt had been, but somebody must have worked at it recently. Slim, green stalks rose from places here and there. Wheat? Could be.

Whoever had worked at the garden, he hadn’t been a very orderly fellow. The seeds had been scattered wildly across the area, not that many weeds had been removed when the garden had been turned up. But that fellow must have had some idea how to treat the plants. A wild dwarf?

I chuckled at the idea – reaping curious looks from my comrades, so I had to repeat my thoughts. Scraps and Valanda joined me in mirth, while Bluff scratched his chin and the beginning beard there. “Wish Slim Tim were still here,” he muttered. “He’d probably have read something about that, but you know what? That looks like the gardener had seen other people at work, and now he was trying to repeat what he’d seen. Pull the weeds, plant the seeds. Dump dirt and water on them, that kind of thing. Sounds easy, looks easy, but you keep messing things up if you don’t have somebody to guide you.”

There was an undertone in his voice, one that told me that he had made similar mistakes in his youth (not *that* long ago) when he had started at Carter’s winery. Somebody must have spent a good time shouting at and teaching him about the proper way to treat the grapes.

A thought occurred to me. Why were we speaking about that gardener in the past tense? I remembered the humanoid figure I had seen/dreamed earlier. Could there be some dwarves left? More than the corpses in the cavern above, and the bard we’d killed?

My hand slipped to the hilt of my sword, felt reassured by the touch of the wood within my fingers. Then I shook my head. Cúchulain weren’t known for patience. They would have attacked us while sleeping, slaughtered us, and I would have woken up to find the Messenger of Death reaching out to me with his pasty-white hand.

But the bard had been bringing Valanda to that mansion. If anybody *was* there, moving about freely, he would have to be in league with the bard. Right?

I held up my hand, bade the others to stop and squinted at the mansion. A prayer to Nash’Geo would be good now, call up that blue light of warning again. Unfortunately I remembered that I had chosen Decirius as my lord – making it doubtful that Nash’Geo would heed my plea. “Hello?!” I shouted at the mansion, now only some two hundred yards away.

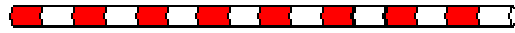
Nothing happened. Valanda said, “There isn’t anybody there, Ahnfredas.”

“Or he doesn’t answer,” Scraps growled. I shot him a glance of gratitude, but he was busy drawing his sword. “There was movement at one window. Could be drapes moving, or something. Red,” he turned his head, “we should be careful. There might be danger.”

“Danger?” Red shook his head, looked emptily at the blade in Scraps’ hand. Then a light flickered on in his eyes, and he nodded, once, twice, with growing resolution. “Yes, there could be,” he finally said firmly, drawing his sword as well. “Bluff, stay with Val and the pil-, with Ahnfredas. Scraps, you and I take the lead. Ten paces. Be careful for any movement you see up there. All right? Let’s get going.”

He moved forward, the ten paces he had announced. Scraps followed, but not without turning around and winking at me with a grin. Red was back as our fearless leader, for the time being at least. Scraps thought that had been the idea behind my caution, and he’d played right into it. There hadn’t been any movement he’d seen.

Strange how I felt elated and downcast at the same time. On the one hand it was so good to see Red like that – and also to know that Scraps thought me smarter than I was -, on the other hand they didn’t believe that I might have been serious.



A stairway of seven round steps led up to the main entrance of the mansion. The stout oak door had weathered the decades well, with a few scratches at the bottom – small animals that had tried to enter. The iron hinges hadn't suffered the time, and the constant moisture in the air half as well. When Red tried to open the door, the hinges creaked once, let go a menacing hiss, a *cre-ack*, and then the entire door valve plunged backwards. It landed with a resounding noise on the ground, and both Red and Scraps jumped back involuntarily. Scraps needed to take some extra steps to steady himself, having dropped down one stair.

We came up to the others while the cloud of dust was settling on the oak door. "I don't think anybody's used this door in a long time," Valanda said.

"Side entrances," Bluff commented.

He was probably right. A house as big as the mansion surely had several doorways – the common service entrances. Didn't the garden border on an outcropping of stone that might conceal another door from our view?

Red shrugged. "Whatever." He peered inside.

I could only see a dark foyer, covered with dust and shadows that might be pieces of furniture. There were windows all around the building, and it was constantly light. Why wasn't the foyer bright? I took a step back, scanned the glazed windows. Some of the glass panes were broken, but all on the ground floor seemed painted a dull, near yellowish white. When I concentrated, I realized I had been wrong. The glass was clear, but behind them were drapes that had once been clean and bright. Decades ago.

Somehow I realized the sense behind that. Human beings were used to the change from day to night; it was a part of our lives we couldn't do without. For someone like me who'd always had a problem sleeping in the daytime (and marveled at some people who regularly took a nap after lunch), it seemed that living in this eternal day down here would drive me mad sooner or later. So the people who built this mansion probably pulled the drapes shut regularly, creating their own night-time.

(And, yes, I just had spent several hours sleeping soundly in this brightness. Utter fatigue had made me forget about it. Believe me, the regular tiredness of an ordinary day won't do.)

That also meant that they had left the mansion during their own night, forgetting to open the drapes. Why had they left, anyway? Had they accomplished whatever task they'd set themselves? Or had they spent themselves, finally died here?

Besides, whyever did I assume the builders must have been humans? Couldn't they have been, say, elves?

Remember the reliefs that Scraps had pointed out? From our current vantage point we had a better view of them. Most were meaningless designs, decorative flowers, other items. Perhaps they hadn't been devoid of meaning to the architect and sculpturer, I'll admit that. Now and then human figures were carved into the stone – quite clearly human, with the comparatively squat bodies and

the rounded ears of our kind. I felt a bit relieved that the bloodthirsty elves weren't connected to this mansion. Not that my fellow humans cannot be cruel and merciless. The idea of the Tyrant's followers involved here was not one to bring cheer to my heart.

Red stepped into the mansion. The light from his breastplate suddenly intensified, as soon as it was encased in darkness, and the familiar powerful beam cut through the darkness. (Which explained why the breastplates had seemed so dim in the past hours. Apparently the magic could sense the ambient light and adjust its own brightness to fit.)

Scraps followed, then I, and Valanda behind me. Bluff stayed outside for a few heartbeats longer, scanning the valley around us.

All our breastplates switched back on – with the obvious exception of Valanda who hadn't put on any armor. (Later on I learned that there was a very good reason for it. None of them fit her, not even as haphazardly as mine did. Otherwise, she had had ample opportunity to acquire one.) The beams of light cut through the darkness, reflected by dim surfaces, a few mirrors, some glazed pieces in closets, some glassware jugs.

The foyer was a large and airy space, putting me in mind of several temples I'd seen, not least of all the Decirius Hall of Judgment at Mercurham. The size did it, the setting of the windows – albeit covered with the drapes –, and perhaps some of the measurements followed the sacred formulae, but the furniture was more that of a luxurious private home rather than the austere setting of a courtroom.

I was still reminded of that Hall of Judgment, and I marveled that from now on, if I ever returned, I would have a very different view of the place if I so chose. I could very well sit at the head of the room, on the judge's chair.

We were all taken up with looking at the foyer, the paintings and gobelins on the wall – colors bleached, but not so much that the scenes depicted could not be made out –, the chairs and tables under their coating of dust. Incongruously enough, there were several sets of weapons mounted on the walls, some even close enough to be reached. Swords, lances, crossbows; an old soldier's set of remembrances from his wars. It took us a while before one thought to direct his beam of light and the ground.

Footprints were clearly visible in the dust, without an extra coating of their own. Somebody had been here recently. Several people, some with boots, and some without. The naked footprints were so small they would have to belong to a child. Or a wild dwarf.

The latter was obvious. But who had been the ones with human-sized boots?

We exchanged glances, wondered in whispers about it. Then there was a scuffling noise from the top of a flight of stairs at the opposite end of the foyer – wide, carpeted stairs, with an elegant wooden railing to either side. We looked up, and there was a diminutive figure on the gallery to which the stairs led, crouched over, hiding behind the railings up there.

Too tall for a dwarf, and besides, the figure wore a scratched set of metal armor. With an intricate, gleaming sign of magic branded into the breastplate. Strange how the first thing I wondered about was why his breastplate wasn't cutting a beam of light through the darkness.

Only the second thought – while the diminutive figure yelped, shot up from his crouch and darted off into the darkness behind the gallery – was that this person should never have been here. My third thought was that I should race up the stairs and follow him with my blade drawn.

Red was thinking faster. He hadn't bothered with much thinking, rather he shouted a name full of fury and murder while he started running.

"Wharfrat!"

***CONTINUED IN PART 4 (CHAPTERS 16 – 18 +
EPILOGUE)***
