

# *Gathering*

*a free magazine of dragonlance fiction*





# Cover art

## *Gilthanas: Journey to Icewall*

*Janet J.E. Chui*

*Janet J.E.Chui is currently in the US on a student visa. A journalism major with an art 'hobby', Janet changes her address (and that of her web site) at a rate that would make the government suspicious. What stays the same is her addiction to Dragonlance, and the fact that her work can be found in various places on the web. One of the more permanent installments is at <http://elfwood.lysator.liu.se/loth/j/a/janet/janet.html>.*

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## Editorial

*Samuel Marshall*

Welcome to the second issue of 'Gathering'. I hope you'll enjoy it.

You can thank Marrael (Janet Jia Ee Chui) not just for the excellent cover art, but for this issue's entire existence. I was minded to leave the previous magazine as a one-off, but she nudged me into doing it again.

On a personal level, perhaps I should curse her instead – it was a real struggle to get to this point. There was never an official release date for the magazine, but it's nine months behind my personal schedule. Getting enough story submissions was very difficult and without the help of Paladin ([dragonlance.com](http://dragonlance.com) webmaster) the magazine would have been even later.

But, the magazine is done now, and I hope it's been worth the effort. I think we have a diverse collection of stories here, far more varied in style and content than most of the published story collections. Sure, there's a kender tale – but for those who didn't think it could be done, we also include a funny story that *doesn't* involve a kender. There's grim revenge, but also quiet friendship; honour-bound knights, and deceitful wizards.

I'd like to thank all the authors who were accepted, but also those who submitted stories which didn't make it to the magazine. I hope that my comments on their

work might help both groups of people to improve their writing in future; that's one of the aims of this magazine. (By the way, I hope to get around to posting an example of the kind of comments I give on the Web site, which might be of interest for anyone considering submitting a story for the next magazine.)

The other aim of the magazine is, of course, to raise the profile of fan-fiction authors. 'Gathering' takes the work from its normal context in emails or Web postings, and puts it into a more professional magazine format. The stories are selected to improve quality, and a touch of editing helps smooth out the flaws. Hopefully, people who ordinarily wouldn't read fan-fiction will get a more positive impression. (On the other hand, authors published here shouldn't expect to be contacted by hordes of eager publishers – I doubt anybody from WotC even reads the magazine.)

As I write, this magazine is pretty much complete, after about a hundred hours of work on my part. I'm a pretty busy elf, with a full-time job, a part-time job, occasional freelance work, and a whole host of interests too. So, will I find time to put together another issue?

Check the website for submission details. Damn, I never learn.

--sam

# The Kender's Watch

by Kevin Lannon & Matt Dusek

The night was quiet. The fire crackled, crickets chirped, owls hooted, wolves howled, warriors snored, and Winger whistled a shrill and tuneless tune. But still, the night was fairly quiet. Gleaming white stars flecked the chocolate sky, and Lunitari shone brightly upon Wingerwin's small camp.

Wingerwin and company were situated in a large clearing some distance from the main path. The ground was covered with long blades of grass that seemed to Winger like a mop of shaggy green hair, and he was readily able to see the entire clearing, up to the point where the forest formed a dark curtain of privacy. All in all, Winger considered this to be an excellent place to camp.

He watched the members of the party as they slept. They had traveled great distances on their quest for the Tower of High Sorcery at Wayreth. The tower continued to elude them, and they had ventured deep into a dark and foreboding wood in search of it. Wingerwin Spiritmind, holy warrior, Paladin of Reorx, Kender, guarded his companions in this vilest of forests.

It was the most dangerous part of the night. All of the mightiest warriors and wizards had trembled at the mere prospect of sitting awake through these dark hours. Winger knew that only he could guard his companions' repose against the fell horrors lurking in the forest beyond the protective circle of light. He had gladly volunteered his life as insurance during this most perilous watch.

Winger shifted apprehensively in his resplendent full-plate armor. A brilliant silver helm – with a hole through which Winger's noble topknot flowed gloriously – perched atop his valorous brow. Winger's hoopak was a valuable artifact, forged by the hands of his god Reorx as a gift for Winger's invaluable services towards his god's cause. Striped alternately bright green and pink, it was the most powerful weapon ever to grace the surface of Krynn. Winger's circumspect eyes roved about the shadowy clearing. He could sense the oppressive presence of great evil enshrouding the entire area.

'All right, you big evil dragon, I see you. Come on out, right now. No use trying to sneak up on me. I'm great, after all,' called Wingerwin in a clear and confident voice.

From seemingly empty gloom appeared a huge black dragon, moonlight glinting off its armored scales. 'How'd you see me sneaking up on you like that?'

'Creature of darkness, I have bested you without even the need for a trivial battle. It is enough that I spare

your meager life; do not question my ways. Begone!' proclaimed Wingerwin magnanimously.

'Yes, sir!' said the subdued dragon as he flew off.

'Yeah! And don't come back.'

Now that Winger had vanquished that foul miscreant he felt slightly more relaxed. This was pretty easy. Off in the distance a bird chirped, and Winger's face wrinkled with irritation. He hated birds even more than he hated dragons, mostly on account of their irreverence for his highly inspirational homilies and benedictions. Winger shot it down with a stone from the sling of his hoopak – damn bird.

From that point onward, the night began to look rather uneventful. Another black dragon and a few red ones all tried their hand at Winger, but he bested them each in turn. Soon Winger began to grow bored and restless.

'Boy,' he said, 'once you've beaten one devious black dragon in mortal combat, beating the rest gets to be a real drag.'

Suddenly, Winger's infallible sixth sense alerted him that a new danger was approaching. With sharp eyes he scanned the horizon, searching for whatever dastardly force might attempt to catch him at unawares and slay him. The thought of any peril – even Takhisis, Dark Queen of Evil – posing the tiniest threat to Wingerwin, mightiest of the clerics and warriors on the face of Krynn, brought a low chuckle forth from his throat.

'How unlikely,' he mused aloud.

A sight on the horizon caused Winger's brow to contract with concern. Bearing down on him, accompanied by a cloud of churning dust, was what seemed to be ... a forest.

*How could this be?* thought Winger. *Wait! I know. This is that magical forest, Wayreth. That's the one that moves around and can appear anywhere on Krynn. Wow, I never knew that it moved like this!* Winger watched in fascination as the forest drew closer.

It seemed mostly the same as any other that Winger had seen. It had trees and branches and leaves, though it did not appear to house any avians.

*What a wonderful forest,* thought the powerful Kender.

This grove did deviate from the standard variety in one minor way. The magical forest was moving at such a pace that it could easily have outdistanced a horse at full gallop. At this speed it created a dust cloud that obscured the bases of the trees and made it impossible to discern what manner of magic or device propelled the

forest at such a tremendous pace. Jutting from its rear-center portion was what Winger supposed must be the Tower of High Sorcery, and from the top of the tower twin beams of light lanced out to illuminate the forest's progression.

'Beep! Beep!' emanated from the wandering wood.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to the mighty Winger.

'Omigosh! That thing's headed straight for the camp. I'll have to act fast to save my friends.'

Jumping to his feet, Winger strode confidently towards the onrushing orchard. 'Stop!' he cried. 'In the name of Reorx, supreme god of Krynn.'

At the top of the tower next to the double beams of light a window opened, and an old, gray-bearded mage emerged. He wore mouse-colored robes and a tall, pointed, floppy hat. The moment he stuck his head out the window, the wind tore the hat away. It was all he could do to make a desperate but successful grab for his hat and then avoid falling from the window as he was temporarily thrown off balance. Upon regaining his feet, he stuffed his hat under one arm and then cupped his hands to shout, 'That authority is not great enough to stop the progress of Wayreth, traveling forest for the Tower of High Sorcery.'

Wingerwin pursed his lips in frustration. He hadn't wanted to show off, but....

'Fine, then! I command you to stop in the name of Wingerwin the Great!'

*SCREEEEEEEECHHHH!*

The forest of Wayreth came to a great screeching halt.

'Well, why didn't you say so?' exclaimed the wizard, replacing his hat on his head now that he was no longer in danger of losing it. 'I'll be right down.' With that he disappeared from the window. Several minutes later he emerged from the forest and hurried forth to see Winger. As he approached he called out, 'So, what seems to be the trouble, lad?'

'Hail, Great Wizard!' greeted Winger.

'Where?' exclaimed the wizard, eyes widening in alarm as they glanced skyward for signs of precipitation.

'No, dummy!' cried Winger in frustration, jumping up to grab the old wizard's hat from his head and slap him across the face with it a few times. 'Not hail like that; "hail" as in "hello", "howdy", "how-are-ya."'

'Oh,' said the wizard, looking humbled as he accepted his hat back from Winger. 'I'm sorry. Well, happy sleet to you, too.'

'No. Not sleet; hail.'

'Where?' asked the wizard again, eyes shooting towards the sky.

'Argh!' Wingerwin gnashed his teeth in frustration. 'No! Not that "hail"; greetings "hail."'

'Greetings who?'

'Yaaaaaah!' screamed Wingerwin. 'What is your problem?'

'My problem? I don't have a problem.' A glimmer of tears crept into the wizard's eyes. 'I thought you were the one with a problem, but when I asked, you just started screaming at me about the weather. Then you started greeting some guy called Hale, and he isn't even here. I'm so confused! I....' The wizard looked very near tears.

'ENOUGH!' shouted Wingerwin, breathing heavily between clenched teeth. 'Okay, I'm fine. I'm under control. Everything's fine. I'm okay; you're okay. Let's start from the beginning.'

The wizard collected himself, snuffled a few times, but managed not to burst out sobbing.

'Greetings, mighty wizard,' began Winger again. 'We have much to speak of, but first, I feel introductions are in order. I am Wingerwin Spiritmind, Mighty Cleric and Paladin of Reorx.'

'But I thought you said you were OK,' said the wizard, puzzled. Winger shot him a baleful glare. 'Um, never mind,' the wizard hastily added, deciding he would have to put up with a few inconsistencies here and there. Then his brows shot up as something occurred to him. 'Wait, you don't mean *the* Wingerwin Spiritmind, mightiest cleric ever to walk the face of Krynn?'

'Well, one of the mightiest, anyway,' Winger replied, bashfully tracing a circle in the dust with his toe.

'Holy cow! Wingerwin Spiritmind. I can call you Wingerwin, can't I?' said the wizard as he vigorously clasped and pumped Winger's hand. 'Hang on, I've got to get your autograph.' He rustled about in his robes until he found a rolled sheet of parchment. He unrolled it and frowned as he read the spidery script of magic scrawled across its front. 'Here, you can use this,' he said, offering the parchment to Winger. 'It's a magical scroll, but the back is blank.'

'But won't that spoil the magic?' asked Winger with an expression of curiosity on his face.

'Oh, don't worry about that. It's nothing important, really – just a *Wish* spell. Do you need a quill and ink?'

Wingerwin was used to having fans constantly after autographs, so he had a quill ready. 'No, thanks,' he replied. After signing the scroll he asked, 'So, what's your name?'

'Well, let's see. That's a tough one,' mused the wizard. 'Um – let's see. Was it Furball? No. Um ... Filibuster? No. Dustbin? No. Um – Fuzzbuster? Na. Herman, maybe. Nope. Um–'

'Oh, well, never mind. It's not that important,' interrupted the Kender.

'So what seems to be the trouble?' inquired the nameless mage.

'Well, for one,' began Winger, 'you were about to run over my friends, there.'

'Where?'

'Right there, over by that tree.' Winger pointed to the spot with the sling end of his hoopak.

The wizard squinted in the indicated direction. 'I still can't see – wait. I see them. Boy, that's some camouflage job.'

'Yeah, I did it myself. Pretty good, huh?'

The wizard nodded in agreement. 'Well, if that's your only problem it should be no trouble at all. I'll just go around them and be on my way.' The wizard turned and started to head back towards the forest.

'No, wait! There's more,' called Winger.

The wizard turned and listened, eyebrows raised.

'You see, we – my friends and I, that is – we're kinda looking for the Tower of Wayreth. I'm leading us on a real important mission, and Westhalas – he's a mage, too – has a message to give the wizards in the Tower. So, if you wouldn't mind waiting around, I could wake him and he could give his message to them.'

'I'm afraid I can't do that,' replied the old wizard, removing his beat-up hat and scratching his gray-haired head. 'You see, I'm making an important delivery of spiced potatoes to Solace, and I'm on a very tight schedule. I'm afraid I'll be late as it is.'

'Huh?' asked Wingerwin.

'Oh, I'm sorry; let me explain,' clarified the wizard. 'I thought you knew about this. Well, anyway, you see, being a wizard just doesn't pay well enough to make a decent living. You follow me?'

'Uh huh,' replied Winger, confused.

'And you know, being a mage in a Tower of High Sorcery isn't cheap. There's rent to pay, rare and nasty spell components to buy....' He reached into a pouch on his belt and produced a handful of lizards' tails, eyes of newts, frog tongues, strange fungi, and brightly-colored feathers.

'Wow, nifty!' interjected Wingerwin.

'... And then there's Kender – er, I mean small rodents to purchase for experiments and sacrifice in magic rituals. Let me tell you, it sure gets expensive.'

Winger nodded in agreement.

'So, anyway,' the wizard continued, 'we at Wayreth Tower decided we needed a second job to stay in business. Thus, by day we are a Tower of High Sorcery; at night we are *Wizzo's Express*, overnight priority mail and package delivery service. You see, that's why the Tower moves around so much. We're always making deliveries.'

'Oh,' replied the Kender sagely as he finally

understood.

'Well, it was nice chatting with you. So sorry I've got to run, but this potato shipment is a rush job. Seems there's a real shortage in Solace right now. Gotta run. See ya 'round.' With that, the wizard turned and headed back towards the tower, taking long, swift strides.

'B-b-but–' stammered Winger.

'Sorry, all orders must be placed with our home office in Cleveland; check or credit cards, please no cash,' the wizard called out over his shoulder.

'But, we've got to see the wizards in the Tower,' Wingerwin cried out. 'We've come so far!'

The wizard paused for a moment at the edge of the forest. 'Well, you could always try to meet us in Solace. We'll be there a couple days, and then we'll be off to Paladine-knows-where.'

'We just left Solace, and it's such a long way back. We'll never make it in a couple days.'

The wizard appeared genuinely sorry. 'Well, I don't know what I can do for you.' Then he pushed back his sleeve and stared at his bare wrist for a moment. 'Holy cow, would you look at the time! I really must be going.' Without another word, the wizard disappeared into the forest. A short while later a low rumble began deep within the woods, and, slowly, the forest began to move. As it approached the camp it made a wide turn to avoid Winger's sleeping friends. Once safely past, the fleeing forest began to gain speed at an alarming rate. All the while, Wingerwin could do nothing but stand and watch it depart, feeling confused and helpless. Suddenly, leading a brave band of adventurers on a perilous quest wasn't so much fun.

Then came the final straw. Just as the Forest of Wayreth was nearing the edge of the clearing Winger had camped in, his super-sensitive ears picked up a faint sound. It was almost drowned out by the noise of the forest, but Winger knew that sound anywhere. It was the sound of a chirping bird in the boughs of the trees.

Winger saw red. He had had enough! Enough senile old wizards. Enough forests-turned-mail-service. Enough endless questing after elusive goals. And most of all, enough damn birds! Winger was taking matters into his own hands now.

He thrust his hands deep into one of his many pouches and, after a moment's fumbling, brought forth a fist-sized object, tapered to a point at one end and blunt at the other. Engraved in the side of the object were the words: *Holy Magical Super Sling Bullet of Slaying Anything I Want To, +7; Forged by Reorx, all rights reserved.* Below that, in smaller letters it read: *not suitable for children under twelve (12) years of age.* The whole affair was forged of adamantite that shone brightly with reflected moonlight.

Nobody snubs Wingerwin Spiritmind, the Great.

Placing the holy bullet in the sling portion of his hoopak, Winger took aim on the forest. One, two, three mighty swings and – *FFVOOOOM!* – he sent the bullet speeding towards the trees. Wingerwin's only wish was that the bullet at least injure the chirping bird.

Wayreth had almost exited the clearing when the projectile struck. It impacted on the left rear quarter of the forest and pierced deeply with the sound of many breaking branches. Suddenly, from deep within the interior came a loud popping sound followed by the wash of air gusting out of something. The Forest of Wayreth skidded to a halt. Wingerwin smiled and began walking towards the now-still forest, hoopak in hand.

The same window at the top of the tower opened again, and the same old mage stuck his head out and glanced down on the forest. 'What in the blazes!' he called out with wrath and then looked up, sighting the advancing Kender. 'You!' he accused. 'I should have known.' Ducking back inside the window, he disappeared into the tower.

Wingerwin strode angrily up to the edge of Wayreth Forest. There, he sighted the wizard coming towards him from within. Winger entered and met him halfway.

'What is the meaning of this!' shouted the wizard when he was still ten feet distant from Wingerwin. 'What do you mean by going and shooting out my tire like this? Do you know how long it'll take to change? Why, I ought to....' The wizard sputtered to a stop and turned pale as he got a good look at Wingerwin's deadly expression and the dangerous way the Kender was fingering his hoopak. A Paladin of Reorx in full wrath is not a figure to scorn.

'Now, just you listen a moment,' shouted Winger with ire. 'I've come too far and gone through too much to listen to any more of your stupid babbling. I'm tired of being snubbed. I'm tired of chasing the gods-be-cursed traveling Tower, and – Wow! This place is really neat!' Winger exclaimed as he got his first good look around.

The interior of Wayreth Forest was strange indeed. All around Winger trees stood suspended, their trunks attached to an intricate lattice of stout wooden beams. Their roots dangled inches off the ground. This wooden framework was connected in turn to a sturdy rectangular frame composed of enormous tree trunks. The frame was attached to both the Tower of High Sorcery and to two long axles. A wheel was affixed to both ends of each axle. The rear left wheel had a gaping hole in the tire, which was now deflated.

'What happened here?' asked Wingerwin, pointing at the flat tire.

'It's as I said,' explained the wizard more calmly. 'You shot my tire out, gave me a flat.'

'Tire? Flat?' questioned Winger.

'Ah, yes,' said the mage, 'I'd forgotten. The tire is a recent Gnomish invention. It all started when some poor Gnome tried lining his wagon wheels with pigs' intestines filled with air in an attempt to produce an amphibious wagon. Unfortunately, his attempt was less than successful. However, we felt his idea could be practical if used for other purposes. So, with a little magic we enlarged and enhanced the idea to what you see here. These tires produce better traction, a smoother ride, and greater gas mileage than your ordinary wagon wheel.'

'Gas what?'

'Never mind.'

'Gee, this is really neat, but--'

'Oh, yes,' the wizard interrupted, 'the flat. It seems you successfully exploited the one major weakness of these new tires: their susceptibility to puncture damage. The tire you see before you is ruined. We'll need to construct cranes and levers so that we can lift this end of the forest to remove the damaged tire and replace it with our spare tire – a process that should take many hours, if not days.'

'It doesn't need to take that long,' Winger offered. Without hesitation, he placed both hands under the frame and effortlessly lifted the entire left side of the forest off the ground.

'Gee, thanks!' exclaimed the wizard. He then quickly made to remove the flat tire and replace it with the spare. After about half-an-hour of struggling with two tires nearly a foot bigger in diameter than the wizard's own height, he finally managed to finish the job.

'Well, that wasn't too bad,' stated the wizard, 'not bad at all. It could have been worse. At least the engine didn't burst into flames.'

'Well, thank you very much, my great little friend for getting me on my way again.'

'No problem,' Winger replied, beginning to look dejected.

A concerned look came over the wizard as he saw Winger's expression sink. 'You know what,' he said, 'I see now that you are truly a great leader of a grand quest--'

'Winger!'

At that moment, Westhalas chose to interrupt and wander bleary-eyed into the forest.

'I heard all the noise, and I came to see what was the matter,' he mumbled as he stood there, bed-roll draped across his shoulders, clad in white pajamas.

'Don't worry, Westhalas,' Winger reassured him. 'Go back to sleep.'

'But--' Westhalas began.

'Westhalas.'

'Winger, I—'

'Listen, Westhalas,' Wingerwin said in cross tones, 'have you forgotten who's the leader here?'

'Oh, sorry, Winger,' Westhalas apologized and returned to camp.

'You were saying?' the Kender asked, turning back to the wizard.

'Yes, well, anyway,' finished the wizard, 'because of your great kindness, I will lend you this aid. I cannot delay my delivery; for that I am sorry. But, I will promise you this: four days hence, Wayreth Forest will appear in a small valley precisely twenty-five miles south of where you now lie. Be there and your quest is complete.'

'Now, I must go,' concluded the wizard.

Wingerwin and the old man shook hands firmly. Then the wizard returned to ascend the tower as Winger exited the forest. Again the forest began to rumble into motion. As it started forward, the old wizard opened a tower window and leaned his head out, proclaiming, 'May your god Reorx show you favor, Wingerwin Spiritmind.'

'He always does; I'm his favorite,' Winger called back.

Then, suddenly, they both heard it: 'Chirp, chirp.'

Winger's hand flew towards his hoopak, but the wizard was faster. A bolt of lightning lanced out from his finger and down among the treetops.

'Chirp, chirp. *SQUAWK!*' THUNK. Then silence.

The wizard smiled at Winger and winked once before the forest passed into the darkness. Winger was left alone in the clearing, among his slumbering friends. His solitary figure, bold in his armor that shone faintly under the stars, stared up, contemplating the heavens. Above, moving in slow, mysterious cycles were the stars: the white moon, Solinari; the red one, Lunitari; and that invisible, black orb, Nuitari, whose location and course were known only to those dark priests and mages who tracked its progress with foul astronomy.

'Hey, wait! I see it! Nunitari. I can see it! It's right there next to the second twinkling star on the right. Wow, I never thought I'd....'

Wingerwin awoke with a start to find himself seated, propped up against a tree, his hoopak resting against his shoulder. The sky was gray with the light of pre-dawn, and the campfire sent a thin wisp of smoke heavenward as it smoldered to an end. Across the fire, crouched against a tree, Westhalas sat with his cloak wrapped around his body and his hood pulled up around his face. As Winger stirred, Westhalas looked over at him and smiled slightly.

'You fell asleep on watch again, little one.'

*The Kender's Watch / Kevin Lannon & Matt Dusek*

For a moment Winger made no reply but stared about groggily, disoriented. Then he spoke. 'Westhalas.'

'Yes?'

'Westhalas, I....' he hesitated, his attention distant. Then Winger's eyes focused on Westhalas and his small hands clutched tightly at his hoopak. 'I know where to go. I know where to find Wayreth.'

*Since writing "The Kender's Watch" ages ago when there was still magic, the authors have sunk into the abyssal pit of the real world.*

*Kevin Lannon toils away in the obscurity of high energy physics. Matt Dusek writes by night to support his day job as an information technology consultant.*

*Between them, they hold degrees in physics, mathematics, literature, philosophy, and religion; the occasional opinion; and my margarita while I write this.*

*They are equally comfortable talking about themselves in the first and the third person. The second is tougher, but you do what you can.*

*Kevin knows the value of a dollar and loves his mother. Someday Matt could be President.*

*Kevin and Matt live, work, and write in Chicago. Matt dreams in San Francisco. Matt can be emailed at [matthew\\_dusek@hotmail.com](mailto:matthew_dusek@hotmail.com). Kevin shuns all social contact.*

# Arrows

by Dana Surrey

Cold almond-shaped eyes, steel blue, gazed at the fortress walls. The eyes narrowed slightly, and the elf's jaw clenched briefly; but this was the only sign of expression as he gazed at the Tower of Seven.

The magi's fortress rose out of the ground, hard black stone that gave nothing away to an enemy. Not even a kender could have climbed the sheer walls. Seven high towers stood above the others, each one surmounted with a flag, each flag different. Battlements, guardhouses, grim men pacing the walkways with spears in hand; the tower of the Seven Mages was a thing of iron and stone. It hulked impassively, a black silhouette against the darkening evening sky.

The elf was not intimidated. Any fear he might have felt – nay, even the capacity for fear – had been burned away with his home, with his wife and child. Only revenge remained.

Reaching back, his slender hand fingered the eight arrows in his quiver. Dried blood marred their feathers; Alanathara's blood, Alanathara who had been the starlight and the moon to him. His wife and the mother of their son. He had returned to their home to find it in ashes, his wife dead. Her graceful hands had lain outstretched, stilled, now and forever. He had sworn revenge on her blood.

Eight arrows. He left the fringe of forest and his view of the castle behind, turning back into the trees.

He climbed one of the giants oaks, with the skill only tree-born elves possess, silent enough that even the squirrels wouldn't have been disturbed. They left anyway; perhaps they smelled the death on him.

When he was high enough, he stopped and looked toward the towers. Directly opposite him was a barred window, a stone dragon carved and curled around it. The rope would span the fifty feet easily.

He found a suitable branch and snapped it off from the larger limb. Dead wood, but sturdy and strong enough for his purpose. His movements precise, the elf tied his rope to the branch and made a first cast.

The wood hit the window-grill and dropped to the ground. He pulled it back in and tried again.

On the eighth attempt, the branch went through the bars. He let out the breath he'd been holding and pulled the rope gently back until the branch caught and wedged in the grill.

Once this was accomplished, he pulled the slender

line taut and affixed his end to the tree's trunk. All was in readiness. He paused a moment, to see if any alarm had been raised, but the shadows of dusk had effectively hid his actions. Hand over hand, the elf crossed his rope.

He achieved the other side without incident, and was able to stand on the window ledge formed by the dragon's tail. He turned and gave the elvish rope a quick yank; it came free from the tree and he dropped it carelessly to the ground thirty feet below. There would be no going back. Through the grill, then; he was accounted slender even among elves, and whatever the bars had been made to keep out, it had been wider than he.

Inside, he dropped noiselessly to the stone floor, pulled the bow from his back, and began the hunt.

Long corridors of stone blurred past him as he made his way through the enemy's stronghold, racing along halls and up stairways, swift and silent. The guards inside were few, and human; avoided as easily as breathing.

A door sprang up before him, like a goblin in the mist. The mark of the mage Tanilen was set upon it. He entered.

Tanilen sat with his back to the door, his black robes voluminous about him. Some arcane tome lay before him on a table; the mage's fair head bent over it in study.

'Murderer.'

There was no time for battle. Tanilen had but started to turn, the beginning of surprise on his pale face, and the first arrow flew.

*Zwish.* Thunk.

Tanilen fell forward onto his desk, the elvish arrow through his throat. The elf turned and left the room.

A shadow among shadows, he lurked. His next target was around the corner. He did not know her name, a lady mage with long red hair, whose black robes rustled as she walked. She was making her way to some arcane chamber, perhaps a laboratory. She rounded the corner.

The green eyes widened, the lips parted in an 'Oh-'

*Zwish.* Thunk.

The red-headed wizardess stared down at her chest, raised one shapely hand to the arrow protruding from her heart, then fell soundlessly.

He nocked another arrow.

Two of them here, where the corridors met; a tall, thin, nervous-looking black robed mage arguing with a shorter red robe. 'Zailos, it was stupid to attack the elven cottage! What if the elf-girl and her brat had kin, to avenge them? Perhaps relatives with influence, who might rouse elven mages against us?' 'You are a fool, Mordecai! Our informant told us there was no one of importance to lament their deaths. Indeed, the lords of Silvanesti might thank us, for exterminating the witch and her child. Dark elves! You think anyone in Silvanesti gives a damn?'

'But what about the husband? Sothan told us there was—'

'Sothan – the fool... So eager to gain magic from us – as if we would teach him...' 'But the husband—'

'Dolt. So? One stray Kagonesti, no more than a wild dog. *He* would be the instrument of vengeance? Pah!

'Besides, it was worth it. The elf-woman had surprisingly powerful baubles in her possession... Perhaps, if you're so nervous, you had better give me the Ring of Azure Sea, your share of the spoils!'

'No, no... I'm just saying—'

The elf had heard more than enough. A small muscle clenching in his jaw, he fired.

*Zwish.* Thunk.

The arrow in the throat of the black robed wizard prevented him from finishing his sentence.

'By Lunitari! *Athl zag karokh nimar!*' gasped the startled red robe. Green lightning spat from his fingertips, a bolt of it striking the elf on his leg as he dove sideways, another arrow already nocked.

He hissed as the green fire burned into his thigh. Looking up, he saw the red robed Zailos running down the hall.

*NO.* A feral growl came from the wounded elf's throat as he raised the bow.

*Zwish.* THUNK.

Zailos fell forward with a grunt, a crimson stain spreading in the center of his back, red on red.

The elf stood still for moment, catching his breath and inspecting the burn. But soon he went on, in search of more prey.

Pausing outside a heavy oaken door, the Kagonesti listened intently for sounds within. The gurgle of water and a woman's laughter, low and musical, reached his ears. He slipped inside.

He was in a conservatory. A stone path lay in front of him, surrounded by green ferns and small trees. Hanging baskets of flowers were held up in the air without visible means of support. Overhead, the glass ceiling let in Solinari's soft beams. 'Now, my little Jahnr!

What have you been learning lately?' The woman's voice, soft and teasing.

'The letters, mother, and the cities of Ansalon.'

'Very good. Then do you know your alphabet, my bright boy?'

'Yes, mother. But when can I start learning magic, mother? I want to do spells like you!'

The woman's light laughter tinkled like bells. The elf crept nearer, through the foliage.

'All in time, child. Maybe your next birthday. You'll be seven then.' She was within sight now, a black robed sorceress seated on a stone bench. In front of her lay a pond full of goldfish, and a small boy with curly golden hair dangled his fingers in the water.

'But my birthday's a long way away, Mother. Not for a whole six months...'

'Come now, my precious. Don't whine. The time will go quickly.' She chuckled again, tossing her raven hair back.

The elf stared. His bow was raised, the arrow ready. Yet he could not fire. The child... so much like his own son. The curly hair, the wistful expression... Seithan... running through the forest behind his father, using the child's bow that had been his birthday gift, shooting his first rabbit and bursting into tears.

Seithan... still and dead. His body burned by mage-conjured fire. Never again to run, see starlight, sing, play, laugh...

The elf's eyes grew cold again. He raised his bow. *Zwish.* Thunk.

'It will still seem very long, mother... Mother? 'Mother?'

Another door. The Kagonesti reached out to the handle – and swore, yanking his hand away and sucking on the burnt fingers. Enchanted.

Very well. He could deal with that. Moving to the iron hinges, he carefully touched one, and when it became clear the magic did not extend to them, retrieved a small metal tool from his belt.

Working quickly and silently, he soon removed the door from its hinges and set it down as softly as he could. The room beyond was empty, but an open door led off to the east. The sound of a chanting voice emanated from there.

He entered the eastern hallway cautiously, making his way down to the end. Peering around the archway, he saw the sixth mage – Inius of Palanthas, sitting cross-legged on the marble floor. The black robed mage, in his sixtieth year at least, looked younger, his shaven head gleaming in the light of the candles set around him. He was in the midst of some spell, chanting rhythmically,

one hand upraised. In the hand he clutched a silver goblet set with shards of obsidian. It glowed softly.

The elf's upper lip raised in a silent snarl. The goblet had belonged to Alanathara, one of the things she had brought with her when she and her brother were exiled from Silvanesti for practicing magic. They had wandered, lost and despairing, until chance had brought them into his path, a traveller far from his Kagonesti home. Chance? No, the gods themselves, the elf had always believed. For his life to have been graced with such an angel as Alanathara, the dancer with black hair like stormclouds, eyes like distant stars, a voice as soft as the birds' calls...

He'd be consigned to the Abyss before he'd let this murderer touch anything his wife's hands had held. The bow came up.

*Zwish.* Thunk.

'Uunng...'

The goblet dropped from limp fingers to clang on the stones; the candles went out. Inius would never be returning to fair Palanthas.

The last wizard stood before him now, surrounded by four burly, armored guardsmen with swords. A slight, condescending smile played on the mage Zarubel's aged lips.

'So. Let me guess. You are the husband to the elven whore. Oh, I'm sorry. Did I say 'are'? I meant *were*, of course. Guards, take this mad dog out and get rid of him.'

'Yes, my lord,' they said, walking forward with confident sneers. One skinny, ragged elf. How hard could it be?

The elf pulled out his long hunting knife. He had two arrows left, and he was saving those.

The first guard made the mistake of trying to grab him. The elf moved, in his hand the flash of steel, and the human fell, a gurgling sound coming from his slit throat. But now the second was behind him, his arm around the elf's throat, choking him. In front, a guard pulled back his fist to punch.

The knife came up and into the arm of the punching guard. He screamed, and the elf used his remaining weapon – he bit deep into the forearm of the one holding him.

The guard let go, swearing. He sent a clumsy punch towards the elf's head, but it was easily dodged. Moving far faster than the bulky, weighted-down humans, the Kagonesti grabbed his knife from the guard's arm, bringing it up in one smooth motion to the throat.

Behind him again, the sound of steel being drawn. The elf ducked, and the sword meant for his neck passed over, throwing the attacker off balance. It was easy to

cut the human's legs out from beneath him. The guard he had bit swung at him again. Again he sidestepped, casually tripping his attacker. He brought the knife down into the unarmored back.

'Worthless fools!' spat the mage. 'One elf! How hard could it be? Ah well. As the saying goes: If you want something done...!' He raised his hand and muttered beneath his breath. Fire started to flicker around his hand.

The knife flew, sharp and glittering through the air. Clutching at his bloody hand, the mage swore, and looked up with hatred in his eyes.

The elf picked his bow up from the ground. The black-robed mage opened a pouch at his belt.

The elf pulled an arrow from the quiver. The mage drew out a handful of red sand. The elf nocked the arrow. The mage started to speak.

The elf fired.

*Zwish.* THUNK.

The old mage screamed, lifting a hand to his throat, where the deadly shaft protruded. He gurgled, rasped, and finally fell backwards, blood spreading over his throat.

The elf stood still, breathing heavily. Suddenly a voice came out of nowhere: 'The Tower of Seven was raised by the art of Seven Magi. They have Fallen. So now does this Tower.'

The stones started to shake.

He ran down a hallway, ignoring the panicked guards all around him. The bow was still held in one hand, the last precious arrow gripped in the other. All around him, portions of the roof fell, caving in. Men's screams were occasionally heard.

A piece of sharp stone painfully stung his cheek, followed by trickling warmth. He ignored it and kept running. A larger rock struck his shoulder; he winced and grunted, but ran on.

Finally the main gate was before him. With a last burst of speed, he made it out as the Tower collapsed utterly behind him.

The grass of the hill was soft, and he threw himself onto it with relief, exhausted. His chest heaving, he slowly became aware of his aching body: the pain in his thigh; the throbbing, burnt fingers; the innumerable sore places where falling stone had struck him on the way out. He closed his blue eyes, wanting nothing more than to rest...

'Brother! My brother...'

His eyes flew open.

Over the edge of the hill came an elf, ragged, once-fine clothing burnt and ripped. His dark eyes and hair proclaimed him Silvanesti.

'My brother... it gives my heart joy to see you alive. These wizards... they captured me. Several days ago. They have held me, treated me cruelly. I managed to escape when their evil tower started to fall. Imagine my joy to see you here, brother of my heart, husband of my sister! But what are you doing here, so many leagues away from Alanathara and Seithan?'

The Kagonesti stared at him coldly. 'They are dead, Sothan.'

The elf's eyes opened wide, shock and sorrow evident. 'Dead... No, by E'li, no! Say it is not so, brother!'

The Kagonesti was not fooled. He said nothing, watching his brother-in-law with steely eyes.

'Who-? The mages, yes? That must be why you are here, my brother.' He looked the other elf over, slight perplexion on his delicate features.

'You brought an extra arrow, I see. Were you worried you might miss?'

'No.' The Kagonesti nocked the bow.

'What-? My brother... what are you...no! No, wait, listen to-'

*Zwish. Thunk.* ☾

*Dana Surrey is a high-school student (with plans to become an artist) who lives in Fresno, California. She is 16 years old, which none of her Internet acquaintances ever believe, and her Raistlin fanfiction can be visited at [www.geocities.com/theshade00/rfic.html](http://www.geocities.com/theshade00/rfic.html). On the Web and in her writing she goes by the name Lady Dien. Her interests include comic books, most types of literature (especially fantasy/sci-fi), art, history, and the character of Giles on Buffy the Vampire Slayer. She would love to write something – anything – for Dragonlance.*

# *Blood Magic*

by Marc Dotson

Gray: the swirling gray mists of the gates of magic passed by as a forgotten wind, caressing his skin and coursing through his soul like a potent drug hammering within his veins. The magic swirled about Jenin and within him, drawing him ever nearer, ever closer; passing through infinity on the roads of the art, the roads of the dead.

And then it ended. It stopped as quickly as it had begun, but the strength unveiled was enough. The trip had been long and dangerous, one that others did not want him to take for fear of his powers, of his ambitions, his shadows. No, they would understand soon enough if they did not now. This was a battle to possess the power of a blessed land now destroyed. The power of that kingdom had been great, and its strength would shortly add to his own.

The journey had been long and hazardous, avoiding the auspices of greedy Knights of the Thorn and the constant searching gaze of the powerful Overlords. The Krynn that he had once known was mutated, but he reveled in the change. While others fumbled with the rediscovered magic of the world's beginning, Jenin thrived on it. He learned quickly, and spent months in research and contemplation before his powers erupted into the capability he now possessed. Any sorcerer who knew of his leaps forward was afraid, and he fed off of that fear. Let them be afraid of the future of the world, the man who would topple the Dragon Overlords and bring about the formation of a kingdom of wise men, a kingdom of sorcerers, a kingdom of new gods.

Istar, the bane of the past, was now the gateway to the future; or rather the secrets that Istar kept hidden in her ocean grave, now to be reborn in Sorcerer Creed.

It took him only a few moments to survey his surroundings and gather all relevant information. It was nearing dark, and the smell of the forests was overpowering.

For a few instants he thought the spell had been mistreated and that he had ended up on some other landmass far from the intended destination. As soon as the doubt arose, it subsided. No, this was the edge of Kernen, the capital of that rotten peninsula jutting out into the filthy richness of the Blood Sea. His destination. His destiny.

Turning, Jenin Creed disappeared into the forest, and with a thought the path was illuminated before him.

The reeking, dilapidated citadel of ogres and militants was eerily calm in the stoic moon's dead gaze. No brawls or hostility raged tonight. A peculiar tranquility had beset the entire brooding city, and many ogre shamans gathered in secret quarters to discuss the silence that beat like an angry war drum against their homeland.

Jenin entered the city, joining the absolute quiet as he stepped tentatively among the ruins of a lower portion of the once proud metropolis. Evading the eager, hungry gazes of many ogres before he came across their paths, feeling their life forces ebb and flow around him. Strange, this passiveness, he mused, among a thousand other thoughts and feelings. This is definitely amiss. A dozen possible reasons passed through his troubled mind, but as soon as they came he forced them away. This wasn't a natural occurrence, or the work of any man...it had to be a sign of something greater.

Of course he was right, he knew he was, and so he wasn't surprised as the huge visage of a great red wyrm swept over the capital, subduing the occupants even further. The dragonfear beat against his low form, and it took all his willpower to keep from cowering along with the other inhabitants of the ruined city. No, he would not fall victim to this being's awesome power, for he too was endowed with the strength of the ages. He was not yet strong enough to face the dragons in magical combat, but someday he would have amassed the powers to unmake these beasts from their very beginnings. He would one day be master and do with it as he pleased.

'Some day.' His words slipped away into the growing winds as the beast settled atop an ancient keep's parapet. Yes, these beings truly were forged of the power that he was only beginning to tap. He could feel that huge source of magical energy ebbing above the castle walls, and one day he would devour and feed off the energy of his enemies, the blood of dragons.

Pulling his will and forces about him like a cloak he shrank away, hidden from the view of that awesome creature. He let down his shield only after he was away from the city, from the view of that beautifully horrid monster.

Jenin sat beneath the gnarled limbs of a small oak tree, pulling his robes of red and black snugly around him to fight off the cold. It would be morning in a few hours, and he needed all the rest he could possibly get before the final leg of his journey to the Blood Sea itself.

'Only a matter of time,' he whispered as he was lulled into partial slumber by the cool breezes rustling through the thick surrounding forest.

The crimson horizon of the Blood Sea entranced the sorcerer. Beneath these waves lay a kingdom that

once proclaimed perfect righteousness, only to bring about the wrath of the gods. Yes, this surely had been a great place of marble-tipped towers and gem-encrusted temples. It had been great, but so too had the gods. And both were gone.

Mortals faced the terrible Dragon Overlords alone in this new age. But they were only just discovering the possibilities of greatness that existed within the world, the inherent magics left over from the gods' initial creation and the power of the spirit that existed in every living thing; the corporeal and incorporeal magics.

Someday soon they would come to see the powers that they truly possessed. But that was, of course, in the expected future. Divining when the past no longer existed was a thing of careful contemplation with an eye to the present.

Only time would tell.

The sorcerer looked away from the stream of clouds dotting the bloodied skies. He didn't travel this far to muse about what would inevitably come to pass, whether or not he understood it. No, he came for another reason entirely, and soon that confrontation would arise. He rarely relished this kind of work, but it must be done to preserve the integrity of the Age of Mortals.

The sorcerer pulled up his dark cowl once more and walked along the beach, the red-tongued tide licking at the hem of his robes, and again his steel-masked face was doubly covered in shadow.

Jenin marched along the beach, closer and closer to the bend from which he would see his destination. He was already able to locate the first artifact; the waves of power it gave off were even more than he could have hoped for. What could it be? The Kingpriest's scepter? A lost dragon orb? He nearly tripped over his attire as he moved along with the wind and twilight across the pinkish sands.

The bend passed quickly under his anxious feet, and just as suddenly he stopped.

A man – or thing – stood only a dozen feet away, somewhat hidden from the bend by a thick outcropping of rock. He was about to push past the dark robed figure, about to push on to find the artifact that he was searching for, when he made another startling discovery: this was that thing of power that he sensed. He immediately masked his true demeanor towards this being, whoever or whatever it was, too afraid to show the fear that he felt to someone this powerful, more powerful than himself even – something which he had to grudgingly admit in the immediate position.

'Are you Jenin Creed of Palanthis?' His voice was wispy, like the old magic tongue, as if his very words

dripped of the ancient or arcane.

'I am,' Jenin croaked, still attempting to size up whoever or whatever this thing was.

'The items that you seek belong to the Last Conclave, not to renegade fools such as yourself.'

The Last Conclave...the Shadow Sorcerer! Jenin nearly exclaimed his realization out loud, but contained himself as he began to prepare all the magic welling within and around him. What was the Shadow Sorcerer doing this far from the Desolation? Let the folly invite his demise. Perhaps he could use this man's existing strength for his own purposes.

'I would not attempt such things if I were you,' the Shadow Sorcerer hissed. 'You deal with a power far beyond your current understanding. I have simply come to stop you from taking the secrets of Istar, not to destroy. But, if I must...' His words fell on deaf ears. Jenin immediately unleashed huge waves of geomantic force and rock that rippled out to hit the Sorcerer full on; but the spell simply passed through him, or he passed through the spell, or...how was that possible?

'Creed...the new, ancient world of magic will mourn your passing in secret.'

As soon as the words were spoken Jenin felt his body solidifying from the core out. He knew that he was beaten by the Shadow Sorcerer's superior knowledge, but he wasn't about to give in to the wishes of the Last Conclave.

'Death won't stop-' his sentence was cut off as he was completely transformed into a solid, marble statue. The Shadow Sorcerer walked slowly towards the still form, laying a careful hand on the head of the once-powerful war magi from the free city of Palanthis. That boy had lived before the War, however, and soon the forces of Chaos had corrupted the promising young mage. A shame, really, but there was hardly anything you could do about renegade shadow daemons and evil sorcerers except dispose of them. 'Farewell, Sorcerer Creed.'

The red waters of the Blood Sea swirled around the falling statue, a statue made in perfect likeness of a screaming malevolent mage in flowing robes. That likeness came to settle among the ruins of an ancient fallen kingdom. Another power of Ansalon had met its doom beneath the waves, but just like the first he wouldn't be forgotten or left alone.

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# *Free in the Morning*

## *by Keith Drone*

Karthay has a saying, 'The sun sets slowly for those who live on the edge of night'. I have no idea what it means. I've never been to Karthay, nor would I want to. My cousin Curtis was killed there by a Minotaur last year, and I have no wish to follow him to the grave. Plus, I'm scared of the night. Okay, so I admit, I'm a coward. Long I have tried to be a hero, but every time I either screw up or chicken out. My family has had a long history of heroes, but to hear my father speak, the line died out with me. I guess that's why I'm here in this dungeon, locked away for trying to help. Since we're in the same cell, I guess I could tell you if you want to hear it. My story, I mean.

Really? Okay. It all started last week, I was in our home town of Camri, a tiny village east of Lemish. Well, I had just finished receiving another routine tongue-lashing from my father, who thinks I should go out and make something of myself – meaning he wants me to leave. I wasn't surprised; as a child I had to endure tales of our family's valor and heroism. But I for one have never seen any real proof of these so-called heroics. Father claimed his great-great-grandfather was a proud and famous Knight of Solamnia. Of course, no one has ever heard of him. Ever. I even asked a Knight who passed through and he told me, as politely as he could, that Father is a dingbat.

Anyway, it was getting late, and I was going to go visit my friend Cynthia over in Niceland, another tiny village that seems more like a group of huts than a real town. Very much like Camri. Well, as I left town, dusk began to play tricks with the shadows. Actually this happens often, but I seem to be the only person around who is bothered by it. At every sound, every movement, I jumped about three feet in the air. Your company is the only reason I haven't wet my pants with fear in this dark dungeon. Well, back to the story.

Like I said, I'm easily startled, so it didn't help matters when I stepped on a gully dwarf that had been sleeping on the path, causing it to scream and promptly cling to my leg in an iron grip. I jumped and screamed, desperately trying to get the little pest to let go of my leg. Unfortunately it only clung tighter, shrieked more, and clawed my trousers to shreds. Finally the little bugger dislodged, ran four feet, and collapsed. I poked it with a stick, fearing I had killed it.

'Go way. Me dead.'

I jumped again. Some hero I am, scared witless by

a dead gully dwarf.

Deciding not to tempt fate, I immediately left the area, continuing to my presumed destination, before realizing I had left the trail. I was lost. Lost in the woods, at night, frightened to death of dead gully dwarves. I hate my life.

I spent about an hour gathering wood for a fire, and trying to light it. My tinderbox was old and somewhat useless now in my time of need.

Handing me a tinderbox, a voice said, 'Here, you use this.' 'Thank you.' I said, lighting the fire with amazing ease. Then it hit me. I screamed again, turning around to find the gully dwarf I had stepped on earlier. It just sat and stared at me, doing nothing.

'I thought you were dead?' I asked. I know gully dwarves sometimes play dead, like other vermin, to avoid danger. I just didn't know they would come back to help you light fires.

'Me dead?' Its eyes grew wide, and it stared at me with a childish fear mixed with wonder. And promptly started crying.

Now, a gully dwarf crying is not the greatest thing to behold. Fortunately I was at the top of the pine tree next to me the moment the unholy shrieks left the Aghar's mouth. After about a minute in the tree, I remembered I was scared of heights, and scrambled down. 'Be quiet or you'll attract a bugbear or something!' I screamed. Luckily the thing shut up.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

'Where else would I be?' It asked in return. 'I Dirte!' it announced, and held out its hand.

'Yes, you are,' I muttered, wrinkling my nose at the filthy dwarf.

'How you know?' he asked suspiciously.

I finally figured out it was telling me its name. 'Uh, you just told me. I'm Stelen. From the village of Camri.'

'Oh!' Dirte exclaimed, 'They make good rat soup there at One-Eye's house.'

'Rat soup?' I laughed, 'The only thing ol' One-Eye serves at his inn is his secret mystery meat soup...'. I stopped there remembering what gully dwarves usually eat, and their uncanny ability to find it.

I passed out.

When I awoke, I was in some cave, and it was almost light out. Dirte was sitting next to me, drawing in the dirt. 'You not very heavy. Most humans heavy. You skinny, like little kender girl. You not very strong are you? You get beat up lots don't you?'

'Shut up.' I sat up, rubbing my eyes, trying to get the sleep out. 'Where are we? And how did we get here?'

'We 'bout one and two and two mile from where you fall over. I drag you.'

'Miles? How did you drag me this far!?' I asked, knowing that one and two and two could mean anything from one mile to one inch.

'I said. You skinny and small like little girl. You not weigh at all! You want rat to get bigger?'

'Uh, no thanks.'

'How 'bout deer?'

'Uh, no thanks... Did you say deer?'

'Yeah.' Somehow the little runt had scavenged up some venison. I didn't really care how, I was so hungry, and ate as much as I could. After about five minutes, the little guy (or girl – I wasn't entirely certain yet) asked me if I knew who General Burke was.

'Of course I do,' I answered. 'He's the Solamnian general in charge of keeping the peace in this area. If it weren't for him and his forces, the Knights of Takhisis would have moved in long ago.'

'Where he at?'

I told Dirte that the General's headquarters were located about a mile just west. Then, oddly enough, Dirte shook my hand (I wiped it off immediately), mumbled about a scroll and ran off directly east. Then he turned around complaining about bad directions, and went south.

Shaking my head at the inanity of gully dwarves, I continued my trip through the woods. Day was breaking, so I shouldn't have been surprised when I ran into the patrol. I started to wave a friendly hello when I realized it wasn't the Solamnics. Ducking into a bush, which unfortunately had thorns I didn't know about beforehand, I was barely able to escape their notice.

Lucky for me something else had grabbed their attention.

Dirte.

While I didn't like the idea of the evil knights killing the poor little creature just so I could hide, neither did I relish the idea of being caught myself. I listened the best I could from my hiding spot, and could hear Dirte asking about directions to a general. One knight backhanded the little fellow about 5 feet. They started talking about spies and how desperate the Solamnics must be. That's when they took Dirte, removed the scroll, stuffed him in a bag, and continued on their way.

I waited a good 50 counts before I emerged from

the thorn bush, debating which would have been better. Capture or thorns. I'm still debating that now.

The sun had risen a bit more by then, and that is when it happened. One of my father's lectures came back to me about being brave, and being a hero, and helping those in need. While I have never in my life seen any of my family help anyone but themselves, I was suddenly struck with an idea. Two ideas in fact. One was that if I rescued someone, even a gully dwarf, I could tell father and he just might stop shouting for a few days. The second was that if I had just slept in like usual and minded my own business I wouldn't be lost in the woods bleeding from thorns with evil knights lurking about.

Am I making any sense?

So in an uncharacteristic bout of bravery, I didn't faint. And I followed the knights. Though I'm particularly proud of not fainting.

As I started down the trail, it occurred to me I had no way of rescuing the little bugger. I was hoping maybe it would play dead again and they would leave it alone, but then there was the matter of the scroll. I didn't know at the time what the big huff was about it, but I would soon find out. I get ahead of myself.

You sure don't talk much, do you? The guards said you weren't much company, but they were wrong. You are the best listener I've met. You must have been here a while though, as pale as you are. When morning comes they'll let us out though, They promised.

Back to the story.

I was sneaking up to the knights, their trail not being hard to follow due to the bagged Aghar. Fairly rude of them I must say, dragging the poor fellow on the ground like that. They were cursing and complaining loudly about the weight of the dwarf. It took two of them switching turns to drag him along in that big bag. I was rehearsing what I would say to the knights in order to reason with them (I never said I was smart) when a voice asked 'Who you talk to?'

I turned to Dirte explaining 'I'm trying to free you, now be quiet!'

Once again I jumped about five feet into the air. I was worried the knights had heard me, but their own complaining and cursing must have masked it.

'What are you doing here? How did you get out of the bag? What are they dragging?'

The poor thing, it grasped its head in confusion from all the questions. I repeated them slowly once more, and then again even slower. Finally I asked individual questions.

'What are you doing here?'  
 'Waiting for bad men to leave.'  
 'How did you get out of the bag?'  
 'I climbed out.'

I couldn't argue with simplicity.

'What are they dragging then,' I asked next.  
 Dirte smiled real big and exclaimed: 'Rocks!'

'How did you... Never mind.' I couldn't keep from smirking. The Knights would be dragging that bag around for a long time before they realized there was no gully dwarf inside.

The scroll was sitting next to Dirte (he must have lifted it), so I grasped it and read.

*Dear General Burke*

*I regret to inform you that our spies have shown movement in the Takhisis Knights that indicates they may be planning to invade your area soon. I have entrusted this message with a gully dwarf not because I have gone mad, but because he has served me well in the past, and no one would suspect an Aghar to carry such a message.*

*Please prepare for a possible onslaught. Reinforcements will arrive in one week. I apologize for the delay, but we are running low on supplies and soldiers ourselves.*

*Sincerely, Golfman Grant*

I handed the scroll back to Dirte. That cleared it up. My home was going to be invaded! Even though we are a small village, some of the surrounding villages also under the Solamnics' protection are larger. I may have just saved all their lives, I thought.

I was feeling rather good about myself when I heard the Knights cursing again, but in my direction. That did not bode well. They ran my way, yelling. Suddenly it occurred to me that, if they caught Dirte, it could spell the end for my home town and many others. I turned around and yelled: 'Run Dirte, Run for you life!' Despite the corny cliché, it seemed pretty heroic and brave. Unfortunately I was too late. He was already gone. Little bugger runs fast. By that time the knights had caught up with me.

'Where is the dwarf, kid?'

I was shivering like a baby. I knew I couldn't tell them. If they caught him everyone I knew would be doomed. I did the only thing I could, fought back the only way I knew how. I screamed and kicked a lot.

It didn't work.

After they beat me soundly, and gave me a good laugh at, I was stuffed in the bag. The only things I

remember after that were the rocks and the horrible smell – after all, a gully dwarf had been in the bag for a while. They took me back to camp, questioned me, and sentenced me to a night in jail. They promised to let me out in the morning though. I'm sure they'll let you out too. They told me you've been in here numerous times, but that I'll end up like you eventually and be free. I suppose the knights of Takhisis aren't that bad. Wow, time sure did fly. The sun's coming up. I can almost see your face. Your face..... your skull. All the skeletons. I see.

I just wish father knew I was a hero finally. He'd be proud.

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# *Oath and Value*

## *by Stefan Schoberth*

The end of autumn was fast approaching. Even in the elven forests, my mother's homeland, the leaves had begun to fall. It was a good time for travelling. The warm and exhausting summer, with its unpredictable storms, had long gone, and winter's harsh cold remained some weeks away.

After ten years of studying magic among the forests of Qualinesti it was hard for me to depart, but I had learned all I could without taking the test. And the test was risky indeed. Many adepts left the Tower of High Sorcery physically or mentally disabled – if they left at all. Especially for a half elf like me, looking forward to a long life span, that was a step to be considered carefully.

I left behind more competitors than friends among the elves, who always felt uneasy around me. 'Aeren half-human,' they had called me; some in a jovial manner, but most meaning it to hurt. That was the way of the elves. They had much to teach me, and life in Qualinesti was almost perfect, save that I always felt inferior. And in spite of all that I had learned, and all the magic I had mastered, I did not feel confident enough to take the test.

I would take one or two years to think the whole thing through; a year was a short time for an elf and a short time for me too.

'Don't get infected with human haste, Aeren half-human, when you visit your father,' Sertianthelas called after me, when I waved my last good byes. He would be among the few I would miss.

With a grin I turned around and set off on the long walk to Haven. From there I would continue to Solace and to New Ports. The route along Qualinost would be shorter, but I wanted to return on the path that had taken me here ten years earlier. Walking among the beautiful trees gave me plenty of time to think, and to decide what to do with my life.

This journey would be easier than the arrival. My father, a famous Knight of Solamnia, had been very angry when I decided to study the arcane arts. There had been bitter words, and my mother – his beloved wife – had left with me, leaving him to the barren and hostile stone halls of his old Solamnic home. My mother had declined to return with me; ten years had not been enough to erase his bitter words from her elven memory.

The arguments had weighed heavily on my mind for the last decade. I held the hope that a confrontation with my father would ease that burden, and help me decide my future.

Solace still looked much the same as I remembered it. I wandered through town, delighted at the mighty vallenwood trees. Soon I climbed a twisty stairs to the upper, more lively level of the town, where most of the townspeople lived, in harmony with the huge trees.

Only an hour of daylight remained, so I went directly to the Inn of the Last Home, for a hot meal and a mug of good ale. Three elderly men sat at a table close to the entrance, playing cards. I seated myself in the back of the inn: close to the fire, so I could warm up, and half in the shadows, so I would not attract undue attention. There are those who do not look kindly upon elves or even half-elves. Travel-weary and busy with thoughts about my own future, I was not keen on starting a conversation, so the table suited me well.

I had finished my spiced potatoes, and my first mug of ale, when a large group of humans entered the inn. Judging from their clothing they were merchants, probably from Haven. It was a large company, and they occupied all the remaining empty tables. The bartender and the serving maid were very busy taking all the orders, and soon the smell of stew and strong ale filled the hall. I sat back and watched the humans.

The door of the inn opened again, admitting one more man. This one seemed to be travelling alone. He was very tall and had black hair with a streak of silver. His very presence commanded attention. He took off his dark cloak, revealing shining chain mail. With a practised move he folded the cloak, all the while scanning the inn. Then he spotted me and started in my direction.

Much to my chagrin, he came to my table and asked:

'Good evening, sir, do you mind if I join you?'

I desperately looked around, but the other tables were more crowded than my own, so I could hardly send him away. 'Of course not, please take a seat.'

He did so, then he looked at me appraisingly, his steel-blue eyes taking in every detail. A long moment of silence followed.

'Am I mistaken, if I take your almond eyes and slightly pointed ears as a sign that you are half-elven?' he inquired.

'No, you are not mistaken. Would you mind keeping your voice down?' I really did not care for the extra attention.

'Of course not. Ahh, I forgot: My name is Borocin Half-hand. I am a warrior, as you probably already guessed.' He indicated the scabbard at his side. 'With

whom do I have the pleasure of dining?' he asked.

'Aeren Uth Eisen,' I replied.

'Uth Eisen ... you are not, by chance, related to Argon Uth Eisen, the high judge of Vingaard Keep, hero of the Lance?'

His questions seemed to be without limit. No decent elf would have been this direct.

'By chance I am, Sir Borocin,' I said.

'Now that surely explains your muscular stature. I took you for a full human at first glance.' He scanned me with a calculating look, again. 'Surely you are training as a warrior, or even as a knight. But you carry no weapons that I can see, aside from that dagger. Why is that so?'

'You err – it so happens I do not train as a warrior. The War of the Lance was long ago. Highwaymen are scarce these days, therefore I do not carry heavy weapons with me. What I have is sufficient,' I explained.

'Oh, I understand.' He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'You study magic.' He looked around in the inn, 'You could have a much easier time if you trained as a knight, young man. You could even combine that with your other talents!'

He suddenly fell silent. I was puzzled, not understanding what he was hinting at. Then I realised that the door had opened again. A stocky individual entered the inn and banged the door shut behind him.

'Ah, Caramon, bring me some potatoes and ale, if you care.' The short, very brawny man looked around, setting his eyes on my table. I could not believe my misfortune this evening. 'Bring it to the table at the fire!'

When he approached it became apparent that he was a dwarf. No human could be that brawny at less than five feet in height. His face was hidden in the shadows of his hood, but strangely he did not sport a beard. A beardless dwarf was surely as rare as a mute kender.

'Hah, good evening, folks, you do not mind sharing your table with a weary dwarf?' Looking at us questioningly, he sat down. 'I did not think so,' he added. 'Perrin Longleaf is my name. Pleased to meet you.'

He waited until he had heard both our names. 'Uth Eisen. I sure know that name. You can only be the son of Argon Uth Eisen and his elven wife.'

I felt even more uncomfortable. Yes, my father had fought in the war, but I had never suspected him to be that famous. The second stranger I met knowing him made me nervous.

'Actually he already admitted the same,' Borocin said. 'A fine specimen for a half-elf, don't you think, sir Longleaf?'

'Of course, ' he grumbled into his non-existent beard. His face remained hidden in the shadows of his

hood. And what is your business here, mister half-hand?' he asked, with a pointed look at Borocin's left hand. Only now I noticed that he was missing the last finger. An ugly scar indicated the place where it had been lost.

'Me? I am a travelling warrior, on my way to Vingaard Keep. But I can not see why that is your business, sir dwarf,' Borocin said.

'I see. I also happen to be travelling there. This seems to be a fated meeting, huh?' He pulled back the hood, a broad smile on his lips.

I recoiled in terror: The lower half of his face was but an ugly scar, flaming red in the firelight. No single hair had survived the mangling. I had never seen a face that ugly; I could only suspect that he had been the victim of a vicious disease.

He put the hood back. 'Sorry, Sir Aeren, I did not mean to scare you. I once got into a fight with draconians, Kapaks to be precise, and kept this little souvenir.'

'So you are a fighter, sir dwarf. Longleaf is a rare name for a warrior,' Borocin observed.

'A fighter? No. I am but a humble smith, travelling with my wares. The road was not always as safe as it is now. For good measure I carry this little hammer of mine. Worked fine to discourage scoundrels and ...' Perrin took a strange look at Borocin, 'other folk, so far.'

Borocin looked from Perrin to me. 'Now, the evening is growing late. It has been a pleasure to meet you, Aeren, but I must now be on my way.' He gave me a final nod and turned away, leaving the inn.

'Jumpy fellow, huh?' Perrin asked.

'Well, that is not the way I would describe Borocin, sir dwarf,' I answered, realising only now that he had neither eaten nor drunk anything while in the inn.

'Still uncomfortable with my face, are you?' he suspected. 'I am not contagious. Anyway, I will leave you to your peace. Only a last bit of advice from a grumbling dwarf: Do not trust the likes of Borocin Half-hand. He is not quite what he appears to be. No good comes of dealing with his kind. Give my greetings to your father, Aeren Uth Eisen, and good evening.'

That evening it took me a long time to sleep, thinking of the two peculiar strangers.

In New Ports I quickly found a ship sailing for Caergoth and got on board. We had good weather all of the way, and the trip was a real pleasure. The sailors kept their distance, and I had time to enjoy the salty air and think.

In Caergoth I bought a horse, a fine brown mare by the name of Elis. She took me the rest of the way to Vingaard Keep. It was good going, and I enjoyed the

physical exercise of riding such a long way; such had been denied me during my studies in the Art. I arrived in Vingaard Keep before the winter truly started.

Vingaard Keep was much worse for wear. The streets were more filthy and the houses in worse disrepair than I remembered.

Taking a last regretful glance at the footprints I left behind in the shallow snow, I knocked at my father's house, once my home too. Maria opened the door. She looked old. She had always tended the household of my father, having been there for as long as I remember. But now, when I returned, after eleven short summers in Qualinesti, I found that she had aged drastically.

'Ah, so the message has reached you, young lord,' she greeted me, without much of an introduction. I was surprised that she would recognise me at once, but then remembered that, aside from the long hair, I would appear little changed from eleven years ago to a human. Moreover she had pretty much raised me; Maria probably knew me better than either of my parents.

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts, then I answered her question:

'No, Maria. No message has reached me in Qualinesti.'

'Oh, so you do not know?' she asked, her wrinkles deepening as she narrowed her eyes in concentration.

'Know what?' I returned the question.

She was silent for some moments, long moments, before continuing:

'Your father-' she hesitated- 'he is not well. We pray to our lord Paladine every day that his sickness may pass, but his condition does not improve. The clerics of Mishakal cannot help him. He is too old for their prayers to save him, they say. So we have sent for you and your mother. He should see you a final time before he dies.'

'Give him a chance to make his peace with you. And with his own heart.' She gave me a meaningful look.

I nodded hesitantly, my head swimming with the news.

'Come in now, quickly, he is awake,' she ordered abruptly. She ushered me in, more like her former self now.

I followed her along the long solemn corridors, with the echo of our steps reverberating from the walls all around. The heavy stone walls and ancient pillars were as cold and solid as I remembered from my childhood. My memory had them all cold and threatening; now they appeared steadfast and as solid as the Vingaard Mountains. The very mountains from

whose stone they were hewn. Apparently they were more solid than their ageing occupants, more lasting than a lone half-elf among elves.

Everything appeared unchanged, untempered by age, and yet seemed different. The precious oaken furniture, as well, was still the same, not much worse for wear. After years of absence, I discovered that I liked the style of the place and the feeling of security and permanence it gave me.

I would not have needed Maria's guidance to find my father's room, but I enjoyed the extra time her slow steps gave me. I looked around and rediscovered my home.

Finally we arrived at the heavy wooden door. Maria touched a finger to her lips, bidding me to keep silent. Then she carefully opened the massive door.

The room was dark, the windows obscured; feeble sunlight barred from touching the heavy carpets. A odour of sickness and age greeted me. I had not imagined how fast humans age.

'I have brought your son, master Argon. Do not exhaust yourself too much talking to him. You have the bell if you need me,' Maria said. Then she discreetly left the room.

It took me a long moment to recognise what remained of proud Argon Uth Eisen. He sat in the huge matrimonial bed in the centre of the room, his frail body nearly suffocated by cushions. The Knight of the Sword, member of the second highest ranking order of the Knights of Solamnia, formerly a proud warrior commanding attention, now looked lost in his own bed. The right side of the bed, clad in fresh linen, remained empty - waiting for the return of my mother.

I arrived at the bed without ever noticing that I had taken a step. His hand grasped mine and pressed it with astonishing strength.

'I thank you for coming, Aeren, my son. We were not always of the same mind and you left in anger, taking your mother with you, all these years ago,' he said gravely. The power of his voice was commanding, but diminished by age: like the shadow of its former self.

He waved away my forthcoming words. 'Now is not the time to argue. Little time remains to me. I can feel the sand running through the hourglass of my life.'

'You have grown up, become a man. Not much less powerfully built than I was at your age... Despite your magic, despite your heritage.' He proudly looked at my strong arms.

'I thank you for your kind words, sire -' I started again, but he waved my words away and continued:

'There are many matters we have to discuss. Foremost in my mind is one certain thing, and you have to hear me out on that.' He took a deep breath and

coughed violently. I started to assist him, and he soon recovered.

'I am a knight of Solamnia, trusting on my strong arm, clear intelligence and the wisdom of Vinas Solamnus. Est Sularus oth Mithas. Normally I do not care about feelings and dreams. But I have seen many things in my time. I participated in the War of the Lance. In all the years since, I never had this feeling of foreboding.

'A feeling, and the dreams. They are surely a warning from Paladine! Aeren, my son, a new war is approaching. Not next summer, not the one after that, perhaps not for a decade or later. But it will come, as surely as the tax after the harvest. In the heat of summer the enemy will approach. And I have seen you – clad in heavy armour, cloak wrapped around you, at the point of your own command of soldiers!

When the tide of evil once again washes over the land, I want you to join the knights – to follow the legacy of the Uth Eisens. I can see grave danger! You are my only heir and I know that you will hold your word, despite your unreliable elven blood.'

The insult stung, but I knew he meant no harm. It was true: the word of an Uth Eisen was worth more than blood or sweat. We never lied. The very thought of a Uth Eisen lying was absurd.

His hand gripped mine tighter now. This was very important to him; he had always been a stubborn man. But this was not a promise to give lightly, for it would have a grave impact on my future. I had come here to forge a decision. Now it looked as if I would have to decide earlier than I had planned. But decide I would – and why not now?

Though only a few moments had passed, it seemed like an eternity later when I decided to drastically change my way of life. To leave the elves and the magic behind me, the way I had left the footprints in the snow. To let them fade from memory.

I am not sure why I agreed to follow the way of the lance rather than the way of the spell. Perhaps it was the feeling of grave stability the house and my father impressed on me, so different from the way of the elves, the uncertain promises of magic and the very real dangers of the test. Perhaps it was the respect I read in Maria's eyes, the way she called me 'young lord.' Perhaps it was the love for my father, the love I harboured in spite of all the hard words between us.

Maybe I felt guilty for taking away my mother, the only person he had ever really loved, for whom he had even risked his title, land and career, for whom he had forsaken his chance to join the order of the Rose. The woman he would never again see before he died... Maybe I believed his grand words about armour, steel and

leadership, maybe I shared his vision. It does not matter now. I gave an oath fully knowing that I could not take it back without forsaking my own honour:

'When the tide of evil returns to Krynn, I swear to join the knighthood. I swear to bring law and order to the people of Krynn, as you did after the War of the Lance. And I promise to follow the Oath and the Measure, and to keep my word, as the Uth Eisens always have.'

'The word of an Uth Eisen was always as true and irrevocable as that of Huma himself,' my father agreed. A smile appeared on his thin lips before he exhaustedly sank back and let sleep overtake him.

My father arranged for Wilhelm Uth Greifen, an old friend of his, to sponsor my admission to the knighthood. While the formalities were under way, I lost no time and started to train with the sword and to read the Measure. The old text – written by Vinas Solamnus himself, the founder of the Knights of Solamnia – was still used as a guideline, governing every aspect of the life of a knight.

Most young men from old Solamnic families were admitted to the knighthood without much of a question nowadays, as ranks were dwindling. But if any knight from the council had doubts, weapons training and knowledge in the Measure would go a long way to convincing them. After a few years as a squire I would start my career as a Knight of the Crown.

Two short weeks after my return home, my father died. The day of his funeral was cold and windy, the snow on his face and armour giving him a peaceful appearance, while he was carried to our family crypt. I stood by his coffin for long hours, more than a full day, watching over his death.

I had never told him all the things I should have. Seemingly I was not as easy with words as could be expected from an elven mage. But it mattered not. My father had made his peace, with me and with himself. I did not regret my decision to take over his dream and follow in his footsteps. And it never occurred to me that I might take back my word, now that my father was dead. In that respect I was a true Uth Eisen.

Finally I stumbled up the stairs from the crypt, tired from grief as well as lack of sleep. Wilhelm waited at the exit, his white hair and long moustache flowing in the winter wind. His Solamnic armour, sporting the sword and kingfisher of the Knighthood, as well as the rose of his order, shone in the rays of the afternoon sun.

'Welcome back among the living, nephew, ' he greeted me. 'I have bad news for you, I fear.'

'Bad news?' I asked, my thoughts still with my dead father rather than his words.

'Indeed, Aeren. Siegfried Uth Hohenburg will be the head of the Knightly Council deciding on your admission.'

'Uncle Siegfried? Why is that bad news? Hasn't he always been a friend and comrade of my father, taking all his quests at the same time, the two of them ever being the best at their classes?' I questioned him, relying on what my mother had told me time and again.

'You are correct, Aeren. They were the best of friends – until they fell in love with the same woman, your mother. Siegfried never forgave your father for marrying the elven woman he himself loved but did not dare approach. You may know that elves are not best liked among the Solamnics. Siegfried is an example of this attitude. He does not see elves as persons. And he did not relax his position, even when he was sick with love.'

'Twenty five years ago we were five friends. But when Argon married Lathalithina, the friendship broke. Siegfried became bitter and did everything to stop Argon's career. I doubt that he will look favourably upon Argon's son.'

'So you must prepare to defend your honour, when he questions it. But you look tired. I will take you back to your manor now.'

The day approached faster than I had expected. There were three aspiring knights: Marion Uth Galehad, Jobor Uth Felsenfurth and me. I waited impatiently all through the lengthy introduction, and it was nearly noon when Helmut Uth Tiefenwald, the highest ranking Knight of the Crown, finally asked:

'The two men and the woman before us are from old Solamnic families, and there is an approved sponsor from our own ranks for each of them. If there is a question to the honour of Marion Uth Galehad, Jobor Uth Felsenfurth or Aeren Uth Eisen, now is the time. If there is no question, they will be accepted into the knighthood as squires.' Helmut waited for an adequate time. Just before he could continue, a second knight spoke:

'I, Siegfried Uth Hohenburg, highest ranking Knight of the Rose present, question the honour of Aeren Uth Eisen,' my Uncle Siegfried said matter of factly. 'I have used the weeks before the council to inquire about his past. Not only is he half-elven by birth, son of Argon Uth Eisen and the elven maid Lathalithina, but he was also trained as a mage for ten years in Qualinesti, the western forest of the elves. I can not prove why he was not allowed to take the Test, but I suspect he did not have the attitude for a white robe, rather tending to neutrality or even evil.'

'Only two weeks after Aeren arrived in Vingaard Keep, Argon Uth Eisen died, conveniently leaving the

family estate to his son.

'We do not commonly admit half-elves to our ranks. Though I would gladly have made an exception to that rule for the son of my old friend Argon Uth Eisen, considering the circumstances I must strongly advise caution.'

'I have no objections to the other two novices. We can proceed with the Oath to the honour of the Crown, and question Aeren privately afterwards.'

Not fully comprehending what had happened, I stood there staring into the void. I barely noticed the procedure necessary to accept Marion and Jobor into the knighthood.

Finally I was taken to a smaller, more private room.

'Do you admit to studying magic for a decade?' Siegfried asked me, the other knights only silently looking at me.

'Yes, but I ...'

'Do you admit that you did not take the test?' Siegfried continued, without hearing me out. I could feel that this was going the wrong way.

'Yes, if I ...'

'You have spend the last decade in the company of elves. Do you admit that you feel more elven than human?'

'That is a harsh way to phrase it,' I started to explain my position.

'Answer the question, Aeren,' he admonished me.

'Yes! I feel a little more elven, but only for the moment,' I angrily responded.

He continued, untouched by my emotions. 'Ten years ago you left your father, in anger?'

'Yes,' I replied, frustrated.

'Shortly after you returned, your father died from an illness he had lived with for more than a year. Is that correct?' His cold eyes bored through my forehead. I felt hot and cold at the same moment, cold sweat running down my back.

'Yes.'

He finally took his gaze away from me and addressed his fellow knights:

'You have heard the candidate's statement. Does any one of you challenge my decision to ban him from the knighthood?'

The knights lowered their eyes, looking neither at me, nor at Siegfried. I could see fear in the eyes of at least one, and the shaking hands of another. I knew that I had lost.

'Aeren Uth Eisen, you are forbidden to ever enter the ranks of the Solamnic Knights,' Siegfried intoned. 'You may now leave the presence of the Council, never to return.'

I was angered by the unfair procedure more than by the rejection itself. I had not even been given a chance to defend myself. I could see no way to adhere to my promise, my oath, and keep my honour.

Entering the knighthood, and bringing law and justice to the common folk, was now forbidden to me. Joining a Blood Sea pirate's crew or offering myself as a slave to minotaurs looked like viable options.

For hours I wandered the streets of the city; constantly moving, not wanting to stop, to think, to look anybody in the face. Searching for a way out.

'Oh, if that is not brave Aeren Uth Eisen,' a familiar voice said. I looked up and saw, half-concealed in the dying twilight, Borocin Half-hand. I wanted to turn around and walk away, but he took my arm and there was no way to escape his firm grip.

'Now, wait a moment, Aeren. I was at the town hall today, witnessing how that old devil Uth Hohenburg tricked you. He is a racist ass; he left you no chance. I am sorry,' he said.

I looked up in surprise, once again astonished at his knowledge. 'Have you been following me?' I asked.

'No, not at first. But I saw that coming. You are not the only one who was banned from the Solamn Knighthood! Twenty years ago I was also forbidden to enter their ranks, only because my bloodline was not true. My father was a knight of the Sword, but he never married my mother, so they would not take me in.' He laid an arm around me and steered me toward the closest inn.

'You know,' he continued, 'there is a way to become a knight yet, and prove a thing or two to that old bastard Uth Hohenburg! And you might even be able to perform magic without taking the risky test. Let me tell you about the Knights of Takhisis.'

By the morning I knew a lot about the honourable Knights of Takhisis. This hidden knighthood had the aim to rule over Krynn for their goddess Takhisis. While Takhisis was often described as 'evil', that old-fashioned label seemed irrelevant compared to the realities of the world. Her knights were honourable and would bring peace and order to the common folk – much more effectively than the decadent and ever less powerful Knights of Solamnia ever could.

And I learned about the Knights of the Thorn, who did not bow to any of the gods of magic, neither Nuitari, Lunitari nor Solinari. They were no renegades but performed magic nevertheless, drawing power from all three moons. Fascinated, I had listened to Borocin's every word. This was the way out I sought for. I would keep my word, as every Uth Eisen had before me – if not

exactly in spirit then at least in the letter. And my father's vision would be fulfilled:

I would lead knights into battle, I would wear shining plate armour, adorned with the death lily of her majesty, and finally, I would find the comradeship of other knights, who would not judge me by my almond-shaped eyes.

An hour after dawn I left Vingaard Keep at the side of Borocin Half-hand, making ready for my first ride on a dragon.

'Halt!' The shout from the bushes took me completely by surprise. Borocin had already dropped his cape, revealing a suit of jet black plate armour. An ornate sword was ready in his hand. Fumbling for my own sword I felt very clumsy.

'So you try to lead away yet another promising young man. Not this time, Half-hand! You outran me thrice, but this time I tracked you!' A very large dwarf sprang from the bushes. He was clad in full plate and long brown hair hung past his shoulders. A huge two-handed hammer was in his hands. Three human archers rose from the brambles behind him.

I looked at the dwarf dumb-founded, before recognition struck me: 'Perrin Longleaf, of all people!' I shouted in surprise.

'Aye, the same. Now come over to me, so that you don't get hurt. I have waited for this opportunity for a long time. Now I can finally save a soul from the clutches of evil. Perhaps you would even consider to join my little group of freedom fighters, by Reorx's beard!' Perrin offered.

Had he come a few hours earlier, I would honestly have considered his offer. I would not have kept my honour, but I would have done the right thing. Fighting for the poor and suppressed did not sound at all bad. Regretfully, he was too late. I already had made my decision to put my honour first. If I had to join 'evil' to keep my honour, so be it. Moreover I had already promised to join the Knights of Takhisis. I would not take back my word, no matter what the results might be. This was how Argon had raised me, and I did not want it any other way.

Sheathing my sword I slowly walked towards Perrin and started talking: 'You are too late. My decision is made; honour commands that I keep my word and join the dark knighthood. I do not wish you ill, Perrin Longleaf. If there is blood to be spilled today, it is mine. You must first kill me, before you may do battle with Sir Borocin.'

'But I hope that is not what you intend, and you will let us go.'

'Bravo, Aeren, you won us time to even the odds,' Borocin shouted, while I tried to remain standing in the

sudden wind. A deep fright crept into my stomach. The heaven went dark, and a massive body approached through the air.

The blue scales shimmered majestically while the huge dragon closed in. Crackling lightning hit the earth not ten paces from the place I stood. Perrin and the three archers went sprawling into different directions. My blood went cold.

The huge blue dragon slowly circled above the trees. I fought against the stunning fright; finally I partially succeeded, and was able to turn around. Borocin's face was split by a huge grin. There was a sadistic look to his steel-blue eyes.

'Stop it, Borocin, at once,' I shouted, surprised at my own audacity. 'Call back the dragon immediately, or I will reconsider my decision. If any of the blameless people is hurt you will leave here alone!'

He seemed to be no less surprised than I was myself. A single look showed him that I was serious. He ran towards the dwarf, wildly flailing his arms. The dragon sailed through the air and landed between us. I was flattened to the ground, not able to withstand the wind.

When I stood up, Borocin was already up in the saddle. He offered me a hand: 'I can fight this dwarf another time, no problem. Come on now, Aeren, mount up! You will love to see Krynn from dragon back. A bright future in the Knighthood awaits you!' ☾

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# Remember?

by Samuel Marshall

Tashen reined in his horse, scrambled out of the saddle, and breathed a thankful sigh. The long ride had taken its toll on his muscles; he felt stiff all over, and this break was blissful relief.

He led his mount - a grey, who by her nature was placid, and unused to such hurry - to the shallow stream, filled his own water bottle, and then left her to drink. Water trickled steadily over the pebbles with a soft reassuring noise, flowing along its course across the trail. It then fell in a small cascade down the rocky hillside, disappearing here and there into hollows or cracks.

Tashen followed the stream's trail with his eyes as far as he could, then turned his attention to the landscape as a whole. It was wild and beautiful, the hillside tumbling away beneath them in rocky splendour. Patches of tough grass or bracken dotted the slope, and here and there a twisted, wizened tree braved the elements and the poor soil. Further below, where the ground levelled out somewhat, the forest began again. It spread across the entire landscape, all the way to the valley floor and then over the hills on the other side. The green-and-brown autumnal carpet was broken only in places where, as here, the slope was too steep for roots to gain a purchase, and at the very tops of the hills opposite. These jutted out of the forest, rough granite-hewn protrusions scattered with patches of life. Late-afternoon sunlight lit them with a golden glow, like beacons amidst the sea of nature.

And beacons they were; Walter Crownguard, Tashen's companion and fellow knight, was comparing the landmarks against a map he had spread on the ground, held from the wind's hungry clutches by judiciously-placed stones.

'We're here,' Walter said with confidence, as Tashen knelt to join him. The brash young knight jabbed a finger at his map. 'Not far to go. If we ride hard, we should be there by nightfall.'

'Nightfall?' Tashen objected, dismayed. Only a few hours of daylight remained, and the distance indicated looked like half a day's ride to him, at normal pace. Of course, that wasn't what Walter had in mind.

'Indeed. We'll achieve our task, two days ahead of schedule.'

'Walter!' Tashen exclaimed in exasperation. 'There's no need to hurry. One day early would be fine. We're tired, the horses are tired; let's find a place to camp.'

'I prefer to set a good example.' Walter's wide mouth was set in a firm line, accented by his thin black moustache. 'We'll leave at once.'

'Walter!' Tashen lost his temper. 'We're carrying a message about the price of fish! This is not an emergency!'

It was true; the Knights of Solamnia, with the limited funding they could scrounge (or, depending on your perspective, extort) from the area's inhabitants these days, were attempting to save money by obtaining provisions from the cheapest source. Dried, salted fish such as they required was easily transportable, and so fish prices were indeed on the list they had compiled.

'When it is an emergency,' Walter said calmly, only the fixed gaze of his brown eyes hinting at his own anger, 'I intend our superiors to know who can be trusted with the mission. Now, get on your horse.'

Tashen stood mutinously still, glaring.

'Get! We may be of the same rank, but I was given command for this journey, and you'll follow orders!'

Reluctantly, Tashen did as he was told, trying as best he could to soothe the feelings of his grey, who was little more inclined to leave than her rider.

As they set off, he glanced up at a distant sound: where the track sloped down among the trees well ahead, a cloud of birds scattered suddenly into the air, disturbed by some predator. They were little more than dots at this distance, but he could faintly hear their angry squawking, wind-borne.

I know, he told them silently, I didn't want to move, either. And looked for silent sympathy from that quarter, because it surely wouldn't come from his human companion.

After descending into the forest, the path grew wider, so that it was safe to move quickly. Walter encouraged his horse to a canter and Tashen, bringing up the rear, had no choice but to follow suit. He was sore from the day's riding, and their speed meant he had to duck overhanging branches as they raced through the forest.

The trees were not densely packed in this area, and evening light shone through the frequent gaps, resulting in a beautiful but confusing patchwork of gold and brown and green and shadow. Tashen glanced briefly at the track before them, and suddenly caught sight of a patch that was none of those colours, but pale and white.

'Stop!' he shouted ahead, to Walter, who slowed to a halt and then turned back to glare.

'What might be the problem this time?'

Tashen caught up to him and gestured ahead, only

a few paces away now. The coloured patch resolved itself against others, becoming clear: a face, white and specked with mud. Somebody, pale-skinned and small, lay in a heap at the roadside. They were clothed in tunic and breeches, torn ragged and coloured a dull green. One hand was visible, long and delicate. Long blonde hair had fallen over the face, half-covering it. The merest point of an ear poked through.

'It would appear to be an elf,' Walter said with distaste. 'Dead, presumably.'

'We should check. I'll take a look...?'

Walter nodded grudgingly; knights were supposed to help those in need where possible. Tashen climbed off his horse, throwing the reins for Walter to hold. He approached the elf cautiously; while they were not technically a hostile race, neither were elves allies, of humans in general or knights in specific. Qualinesti was quite some distance away and Tashen himself had never even seen an elf – until now, he supposed. He felt a little nervous.

On reaching the body without event, he knelt by it, wincing as a jolt of pain shot through his cramped knees. The elf seemed to be male, though somewhat feminine in appearance – perhaps they were all like that.

Tashen reached for the outflung hand and touched it gingerly, fearing a reaction; there was none, and the flesh felt warm. Emboldened, he reached around the wrist to check for a pulse. One was present.

He turned his head to look up at Walter, a little way off and still in the saddle. 'He's alive.'

'Wounded, perchance?' Walter queried.

Tashen looked at the hand and the face, all the flesh that was visible.

'Not that I can see. A few scratches, that's all. There's no blood on his clothes.'

And yet the elf hadn't simply chosen this place to sleep. He had staggered out of the forest – a back-trail of broken vegetation was plainly visible – and collapsed sideways onto the track. There must be something wrong.

Walter had evidently come to the same conclusion. 'Drag him out of there and lay him down properly. An injury may be hidden by his position.'

Tashen looked doubtfully at the elf. What if, on being manhandled, he were to wake, and attack on reflex? Elves were rumoured to be fierce fighters – certainly this one would not be near as strong as Tashen himself, lacking the muscle, but if he were as quick and deadly as the tales had it...

But this one had no visible weapons. Tashen pushed aside his doubts and worked his arms under the elf, then lifted and dragged him. The elf was light enough, though his boots caught in the undergrowth so

that Tashen strained to pull him free. Finally, with a tearing of branches, something gave. Tashen staggered back and was forced to sit down hard on the path himself, the elf's head and back slumped across his knees.

Eyes – large, slanted – flickered open. Blue-green, Tashen noticed absently, then – 'Gods!' He recoiled in surprise and a sudden irrational fear, but there was no way to get away from the newly-awakened creature without dumping it on the ground.

'No threat!' he said quickly. 'Just wanted to see if you were okay.'

'Unnnh,' the elf groaned; then muttered what might have been a few words in another language, just as comprehensible.

'You do speak Common, don't you?' Tashen looked away a little, feeling deeply uncomfortable with an elf on his lap.

'I think so,' the elf murmured; accented and wavering, but easy enough to understand. He tried to sit up, but collapsed back onto Tashen, evidently still weak.

'Are you injured?'

'No...'

Maybe, then, it was just lack of food, Tashen thought. 'Hungry?'

The elf blinked. 'Yes.'

'Fine,' Walter broke in suddenly. He'd dismounted and was standing by, listening. 'We'll leave the elf food and water and get on our way. We've wasted enough time here.'

'We can't just leave him!' Tashen protested. Strange; he hadn't realised he was on the side of this frightening, weak creature, until Walter came out against it. 'Anything could happen with him in this state. The Measure says we should offer help—'

'It also says we should follow orders,' Walter interrupted curtly. 'But, I take your point. You may stay here. I shall continue with our assigned task.'

He moved over to Tashen's horse and loosed the straps holding a small saddlebag with supplies. Tossing it to the ground beside Tashen, he got up on his own horse again and, with a nudge, started along the path. Leading Tashen's grey beside him.

'My horse!' Tashen exclaimed.

'Might be required for other missions,' Walter called back frostily, 'Goodbye, Sir Tashen. I trust our commander will forgive your tardiness when I report it.'

'It's times like this make me wish I'd never joined the Knights!' Tashen shouted, then immediately regretted it. Walter would inevitably include his outburst in that report.

But his companion's reasoning was completely ridiculous: other missions? In these times, when knights

rarely left their strongholds for fear of commoners' antagonism? And when both Tashen and the horse he rode were not due back for two days in any case?

He sighed, releasing the anger; there was nothing he could do now. Winning an argument against Walter was never wise; he always made you pay. At least it wasn't too far to walk.

He looked back down at the elf, presumably much bemused by the dispute. 'Can you sit up now? It'll be easier to eat.'

With Tashen's help, the elf achieved a sitting position. He managed to eat some of their dry trail-bread, and drink some water. After that, he looked somewhat better, although still liable to fall over in a breath of wind. An air of gracefulness settled about him, even in his weak state; his small movements were controlled, delicate.

'I'm Tashen,' the knight ventured. 'Your name...?'

'Shöntharas.' Somehow the elf looked surprised even as he said it.

Tashen nodded, remembering at least enough of the name to use as an abbreviation. 'What happened to you?'

'I don't remember,' Shön answered slowly.

'Then where were you headed?'

'No...'

No? That wasn't an answer. Confused, Tashen looked at the elf.

The deep, blue-green eyes stared back at him, worry clear in their gaze. 'I don't remember anything at all before you woke me.'

Uncomfortably, Tashen looked aside. He didn't have any answer to that. Unless... 'We could retrace your steps, if you feel up to it; that might provide some clues.'

'Yes,' Shön nodded. He smiled, warmth of expression at least spreading across his pale face. A shaft of sunlight, dimmer now, glinted off a few strands of blonde hair. He looked almost like perfection, despite the dirt and the state of his clothing – like painted portraits Tashen had seen of knightly ladies, all smoothness and curves and perfect symmetry, without the remotest resemblance to the real woman.

He was clearly, obviously different from any human. Tashen felt a tinge of fear at the thought, but he didn't look away. 'Want to get up?'

Shön tried, but lacked strength; with Tashen's help, he made it on the second attempt, and stood wobbily on his own two feet. He was not, however, able to walk more than a few paces without support.

Feeling the strange, warm presence of an elf's arm linked around his, Tashen set forth into the deepening forest gloom.

The trail was easy to follow, a constant procession of trampled grass and plants. It wasn't what you'd expect from the stories of elves, all stealth and woods-knowledge; Tashen thought Shön seemed to be avoiding looking at it, embarrassed perhaps. The pair made slow progress through the leafy shadows and brighter clearings, Tashen often having to support the elf as he stumbled.

'Where do you come from?' Tashen asked. They had stopped for a brief rest and a drink of water, sitting against the thick, rough trunk of an old oak. In the lower branches of a tree opposite, a small bird had made her nest; she sat protective of the eggs within, occasionally peeking out at them to see if they were a threat.

'Lyrindal,' Shön said automatically, then looked surprised again. He paused. 'I think it's a village... only the name came into my mind.'

'Near Qualinost?' Tashen encouraged him.

The elf shrugged helplessly. 'Perhaps...'

'That's most likely,' Tashen considered. 'But it's a long way off, and elves don't often leave their homeland. I wonder why you're here?'

Shön could only shake his head. He looked forlorn, still worried about his state – as well he might be, since he seemed to remember only basic, practiced skills and much-used responses. Without a better knowledge of the area, its likely threats, and how to deal with them, he would be in trouble alone.

'Hey – don't worry,' Tashen said awkwardly. He touched the elf's shoulder lightly. 'I'll stay with you for a while at least, until you can manage. Okay?'

'Thank you.' Shön managed a faint smile. 'I do really appreciate it.'

Tashen nodded, embarrassed, looking away from the elf's grateful gaze. 'Ready?'

Shön seemed a little stronger this time, managing to get up without much assistance. He still needed support to walk, though; it wasn't that he lost his footing, he moved in a way that should have assured perfect balance, but sometimes his legs seemed too weak to hold him. Tashen was tired, too, and occasionally stumbled himself – trying not to rely on the support of Shön's arm linked into his, because then they might both come crashing down.

Wonderful, Tashen thought: the blind leading the blind. And, indeed, it was becoming darker too, the afternoon moving towards evening twilight. Shadows lengthened and the bright patches became duller, so that before long there would be little to distinguish shadow from light. The clear trail was still visible, though; they could continue for perhaps another half hour.

After only a few minutes, the forest seemed to open up ahead. They followed Shön's trail into a small clearing, and paused.

Central in the open space, a round pool shimmered, reflecting the half-moon and the few stars already visible. On one side, the water was bordered by a shallow rock ledge, barely a foot tall; a small spring issued from a crack in the stone, trickling a steady flow of water into the pool. Droplets in mid-air sparkled in the white moon's light. Opposite the spring, on the downhill side, a small stream left to take the overflow.

A flat area around the pool, where perhaps it flooded in winter, supported little more than grass. There wasn't much room, but enough to lay a blanket, Tashen thought. It looked like a good place to camp. And the spring's fresh water was inviting.

'Let's drink,' Tashen suggested.

Shön nodded, and they made their way to the rocky side of the pool. Tashen knelt down, the elf beside him, and cupped his hands under the trickle of water.

Suddenly – 'Wait,' Shön said, clutching at his arm so that he stopped, letting the water splash free.

'What is it?'

The elf paused. 'A feeling... there's something wrong about this place. Listen.'

Silent, he listened. Apart from the quiet, constant sound of the spring, there was little noise. A short way off, some creature scabbled through undergrowth. In the distance, an owl hooted mournfully.

'It's quiet,' he said eventually, 'but not silent. Doesn't seem strange to me.'

'Even so...' The elf released his arm, looked into his eyes, half-pleading. 'Don't drink from it. Please.'

He nodded, and the elf sighed in relief. Strange; by all he'd heard, elves cared little for those of other species, but this one seemed genuinely concerned. Maybe he'd forgotten he was supposed to dislike humans, along with everything else.

In any case, there was plenty of water left; not the fresh, cool water he'd been hoping for, but it would do. He moved away from the pool a little with the elf, and slung down the saddlebag from his shoulder. They sat with backs against a tree, close together for warmth since the evening was becoming cool. For a few minutes, Tashen watched the reflections, trying to pick out more stars among the slight ripples of the water's surface.

A small bird fluttered into the clearing, arriving from the same way they had earlier. It landed by the edge of the pool and hopped a little way into it, to drink. It might be the same one they'd seen before, Tashen thought; getting a last sip of water before returning to the nest to sleep.

Sated, the bird paused where it was for a moment,

then took off and flew – somewhat unsteadily, perhaps, but small birds were like that – in a different direction.

Shön shifted slightly beside him. 'Did you think she was the same bird we saw in the nest earlier? She had similar markings.'

'I didn't really see the markings,' Tashen admitted; evidently the elf's vision was sharper than his own, so in at least one aspect the tales had not lied. 'But I was wondering that.'

A pause. Then, 'Could we go and see?'

'The nest? Why?'

'It might be important.'

Tashen blinked, and started to dispute that – then stopped, thoughtfully. 'Okay.'

They got up, Tashen wincing at returned cramp. With the sky's dim glow and the half-moon's pale white light, it was still possible to see – just about. Shön seemed to have recovered more and barely needed support now, but they still walked with arms linked, this time for Tashen's benefit.

The elf picked their path, retracing the few minutes' walk to where they'd stopped before. Sure enough, the nest was there. Tashen, with his height, could just see into it. A few small eggs rested on the twigs and straw within, but there was no sign of any parents.

They waited for ten minutes, but no bird returned. Finally, giving up, they returned to the pool.

'You think it's the water, don't you?' Tashen said. 'Somehow it made you forget.'

'I didn't hit my head; how else do you lose memory, if not by some kind of magic? It seems likely that I drank here...'

The young knight nodded, staring at the trickling spring. He wondered if the light that sparked off the falling water was actually reflected from the moon as he'd assumed, or whether it was some sign of the strange curse that – maybe – affected it.

'I only have one blanket,' Tashen said at last, pulling the item from his saddlebag. 'You can have it, if you like.' There was a chill in the air; the night would not be a warm one, more akin to the winter approaching than the summer past. At least the cloudless sky did not threaten rain.

Responding, Shön shook his head. 'We can share. That would be warmer.'

Tashen glanced at the elf, feeling somehow as if he ought to reject the offer. But that would be foolish; both of them should be comfortably warm, together. They circled the pool, finding a suitable place to sleep. Eventually, they settled on one relatively clear piece of grass, and picked it free of stones and a few thistles.

This was as comfortable as they would get.

They lay on Tashen's blanket, and wrapped it around; it was large enough, just barely, because the elf was so slight. Close together, it was pleasantly warm.

'Tomorrow,' Tashen promised, 'we'll continue to trace where you came from.'

'Mm.' Shön sounded somewhat doubtful about the idea, but he didn't say anything further.

Tashen tried to sleep, but though he was exhausted, he found it difficult. The elf's warmth at his side comforted him, but also reminded him just how strange his situation was. Before today, he hadn't even seen an elf; now he seemed to be the companion of one. Perhaps there was even a friendship, between races that did not normally associate with one another.

Certainly there was more of a rapport than he had with Walter Crownguard. He really didn't like having to follow the orders of that one; and unfortunately, Walter was certain to progress quickly through the ranks, well above whatever status Tashen might reach. Walter was ambitious, and steadfast in his duty. Tashen was, frankly, neither.

He had joined the Knights in the first place partly because he had no particular interest in crafts or farming, and partly as a rebellious act, because most people – and his parents – viewed the knighthood with suspicion at best. He'd thought their cynicism unjustified, and mostly it was; the knights did act against bandits and were prepared to fight in a war, should one arise. But there was some justification for the common perception. Protection seemed to centre around areas which contributed to the coffers of the knighthood. Political infighting seemed to occupy most of the leaders' time. And, of course, the knights were poorly equipped: only the higher ranks, or those with independent means, had proper arms and armour.

When it came down to it, though, the problem for him personally was that he didn't like following orders. Oh, it was worse with idiots like Walter; but he didn't like it anyway. He really wasn't cut out to be a Knight. And yet, he'd made the vows... leaving the order would involve dishonour.

Something splashed in the pool, a lower tone than the constant soft trickle from the spring. Perhaps a fish, leaping above the water briefly.

A thought struck him, of the magic that – maybe – lay within those waters. 'If I were to forget those vows, then I could start over...', he murmured softly.

'Don't.' Shön spoke just as quietly, so that he wasn't as startled as he might have been; he'd thought the elf asleep. 'If you will break a promise, break it;

making yourself forget is no better.'

'Except,' he said, ashamed, 'that I wouldn't know I had broken it.' He felt strange, saying it; he certainly hadn't meant to admit this weakness to a stranger.

'I think you're stronger than I am,' Shön seemed to contradict his thoughts. 'You don't need to forget.'

Tashen stared at the stars above, doubting the elf's words. A hint of wind, much lighter than during the day, rustled the treetops. Suddenly, he realised what Shön had meant. 'You think you drank this water on purpose?'

'Why else would I be out here? I must have done something terrible, and... see? I am weak.'

'You don't want to know?' Tashen imagined himself in the situation; he'd be consumed with curiosity. Which, he suddenly realised, was why he really shouldn't take that option.

'I'll trust my earlier judgement on that,' Shön said; peacefully, but not without a touch of shame. 'But...'

There was a long pause. 'Yes?'

'I might be a murderer, or worse. Do you still want to help me?'

Tashen didn't hesitate, but reached for the elf's hand, clasped it in his own when he found it. 'Of course. Friends?'

'Friends,' Shön confirmed. Releasing Tashen's grasp, he sighed gratefully. 'Thank you...'

His breathing settled; this time, the elf really was asleep, Tashen judged. Tashen himself could not quite settle. For a little while he watched the stars, many and various now, some representing the gods who had abandoned the world in the Cataclysm. The moons were there too, red as well as white.

He turned his head to see, in their light, the pale and beautiful face of his companion. Unlined, it was the picture of tranquility. The strangeness of its shape: the slanted, larger eyes, the point of ears where hair had not fallen over them, subtle differences in the structure of bones; these frightened him no longer, but seemed almost normal, a good thing. He'd changed a lot within one day.

Snuggled in blankets with a warm, beautiful elf who was his friend; under the peace of the stars... He found himself wondering still if this wouldn't be a good place to begin life again.

Maybe – just maybe – he could do that without needing to forget.

*Samuel Marshall is a software and web developer working at the Open University in the UK. Many more of his stories (not all Dragonlance-related) are available on the Web at <http://www.leafdigital.com/fiction>.*

# The Box Game

by J.E. Watson

The black-robed mage didn't look up. In fact, he hadn't looked up from his dusty black spellbook for more than an hour. I had been perfectly content to entertain myself by studying my own white-bound book of spells, and it was while I was so absorbed that he suddenly spoke, cutting into the silence.

'There's someone at the door.'

I looked up with a start, my concentration broken. 'Mendyn, I wish you wouldn't do that. It's unnerving.'

Mendyn smiled wryly, not looking up, and continued reading.

I sighed, closing the book in my lap. I waited for a knock at the door, the footstep on the porch, or some other indication of a visitor. Nothing broke the silence, save for the crackle of the evening fire. I turned to my studious friend, my eyebrows raised critically. 'Your sixth sense must be failing you...' I trailed off.

At that moment, the late autumn air had blown open the door. True to Mendyn's word, there was indeed a visitor standing in the threshold. What surprised me, however, was not the actual appearance of a stranger. No, Mendyn and I had been friends since childhood, and even though I hadn't seen him in many long years – not since his banishment from Silvanesti – I still remembered his eerie intuitions. His uncanny ability to sense things before they happened had long ago ceased to amaze me. What left me open-mouthed in astonishment was the fact that our visitor was a kender.

The little fellow was holding one fist up in the air. He'd obviously been preparing to knock when the door blew in on its own. The crown of blue feathers in his hair fluttered in the breeze, and the contents of his pouches jingled as he slowly lowered his hand. Shrugging, he stepped inside and tripped over the step up from the porch into the house. He sprawled flat on the wooden floor, several feathers falling out of his hair on the way down.

After a week of staying at the home of my quiet and studious friend, the kender's fall seemed quite funny. Amused, I started to laugh.

Which, of course, was a bad idea.

'Well, I never, in all my years...' The kender, face reddening at an alarming rate, picked himself up off the floor. Eluding my attempts to grab him, he slipped past me into the house.

'I get out my great-uncle's picklocks, expecting a decent challenge after that long, boring trip here, and the door just *blows* open!' The kender plopped down – or rather jumped up – into the chair I'd been sitting in.

He crossed his arms and glared at me over the collar of his bright orange tunic. '*Blows* open, of all things! And then, as if that weren't enough, you go and laugh at me! And when I'm trying to do you a favor, too!'

Somewhat at a loss, I shut the door and looked to Mendyn. My friend was still perched on his stool at the table, bent over his book. I cautiously walked across the room and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Mendyn, there's a—'

'Very upset kender sitting in my parlor. Yes, I know.' He abruptly closed his book, setting it carefully aside. He stretched with an air of great unconcern and stood to glide, with his customary grace, across the room. With a smile that never got past his lips, he knelt in front of the kender's chair, putting himself eye-to-eye with the little fellow. 'May I help you?' he asked in a cold voice.

The kender looked up at him for a moment, still pouting. Taking in Mendyn's black robes and pointed ears, his eyes suddenly brightened. 'Hey, I'll bet you're that dark elf... Mendyn! Aren't you?' he asked, sitting up eagerly in the chair.

Mendyn nodded shortly, grimacing slightly at the title 'dark elf.'

'I'm supposed to give you this...' The kender started rummaging in an oversize pocket in his blue leggings. A frown enveloped his face. 'Now where is that thing...? I *know* I put it in here *somewhere*...'

Suddenly the kender straightened, something small clutched in his hands. 'Here it is!' He frowned again, looking puzzled. 'I don't know why that funny old wizard made such a fuss about it.' As he spoke, the kender tossed the object from one hand to the other and back again. 'I certainly couldn't get it to do anything interesting!'

Mendyn snatched the object out of the air. He immediately put it in a pocket and slid to his feet.

'Hey!' the kender protested, shaking his head, the blue feathers wagging. 'I wasn't—'

'Where did you get it, kender?' Mendyn asked quietly, staring down at our diminutive guest.

'It was given to me!' the kender announced immediately.

The black-robed mage arched an eyebrow. 'By who?' He casually placed a hand on the kender's shoulder.

The kender was staring at the pocket in Mendyn's robes into which the box had vanished. 'I'm supposed to give you the instructions first,' he said in a shrill, insistent voice. He wiggled slightly under the hand,

glancing up at Mendyn with a hurt expression on his face. ‘Say, would you mind moving that...?’

Mendyn silently tightened his grip. ‘Who?’ he repeated with another of his chilling smiles.

The kender gulped. In a smaller, not-so-shrill voice, he replied, ‘A wizard I met in Solace... I found his hat for him – a few times.’

Mendyn raised his eyebrows.

‘I really did!’ the kender exclaimed.

Mendyn’s eyes narrowed.

The kender went on hurriedly, ‘He, ah, gave me the box—’ He pointed to Mendyn’s pocket, ‘—and told me to give it to a Mendyn Darkcrest in Sanction, along with some instructions.’

‘What...instructions?’ Mendyn asked softly, releasing his grip on the kender’s shoulder. He turned, pacing across the room, his hands tucked behind his back. Stopping at the window, he gazed absently out into the chill autumn evening.

‘Well, he said...’ The kender paused and cleared his throat dramatically, the last of the pout gone from his eyes, replaced by a laugh and a sparkle. ‘...you know, the road’s been so long and dry, I think I’ve forgotten what he asked me to say. Isn’t that amazing?’

‘Astounding,’ Mendyn agreed softly, his back still towards us both. ‘Would you mind getting our guest something to drink?’ he asked. I got the feeling this wasn’t meant as a question. ‘To refresh his memory, of course.’

‘But, Mendyn—’ I began to object. Mendyn darted a glance at me from the corners of his gray eyes; I shut my mouth and complied. Muttering at the waste, I brought a glass of Mendyn’s best Silvanesti wine from the kitchen and handed it to the kender.

Smiling broadly after several noisy sips, the kender looked from his wine to Mendyn. ‘Very nice, and would you believe it, I think I remember now!’

‘Surprise, surprise,’ I mumbled, meriting myself another frozen look from my friend.

Leaning forward, dropping his voice to a whisper quiet enough to be heard by all of Sanction, the kender said, ‘Well, the funny old wizard told me, after I’d returned his hat for the third time... or was it the fourth? Anyway, he asked me if I wouldn’t mind running an errand for him. I was taught my manners as a little kender, so of course I agreed.’

The kender smiled proudly and took another drink of his wine before resuming. ‘He – the old wizard, that is – said he wanted me to give this to a Mendyn in Sanction. He told me to look for a house near the little park, one built sort of inside the trees... You know, that reminds me of the time—’

Mendyn turned back around to face us and, taking

a few steps nearer our uninvited guest, cleared his throat pointedly.

The kender sighed and went on. ‘Anyway, the wizard told me to give Mendyn – er, you – the box—’ the kender gestured to Mendyn’s pocket, ‘—and told me to tell you the rules.’

‘Rules?’ Mendyn asked. Though his voice remained as quiet and amused as his manner, I saw the spark in his cool eyes that showed his interest.

The kender nodded and, after rummaging through several pouches, produced a small, tattered piece of paper. Unfolding it carefully, he began to read:

‘Spells to learn, rewards to earn,  
the choice is yours to choose.  
If you are wise, you win the prize.  
but choose well or you lose.’

The game is quick, the box the trick.  
You are your own worst foe:  
If prize you take, the life you break  
of someone you don’t know.’

I frowned at Mendyn and shook my head a little as the kender tucked the paper into another pouch. ‘It’s ridiculous.’

‘It is not!’ The kender looked rather hurt. ‘Besides, you didn’t let me finish what the wizard said.’

Mendyn shook his head, replying to me and ignoring the kender. ‘I don’t know... I can’t tell whether this is some prank of the kender’s, or whether this is the work of some powerful wizard gone mad.’ He frowned for a moment, lost in thought.

As I was more than sure the kender had worn out his usefulness, I turned to usher him out. To my amazement, I discovered the little fellow slumped down in the chair, his eyes closed, snoring, the empty wine-glass held loosely in one hand. I looked at Mendyn in some alarm.

‘A sleeping potion in the wine, my friend,’ he said in smooth tones. Taking a step nearer me, his eyes flashing beneath the hood of his black robes, he said in a low voice, ‘Did you think I’d killed him?’ I choked and started to object, but he cut me off with a shrug and a wry smile. ‘Never mind. I thought I might have more questions for him later, but as I would much prefer to keep my belongings out of the kender’s pouches, I decided it best to let him sleep.’ He turned and retreated to his stool at the kitchen table. I followed him, seating myself in the stool across from his, staring at the object he held in his hand.

The kender had been right when he called it, simply enough, a box. It was small – the size of Mendyn’s

palm – and it looked to be made of wood. He turned it over slowly, examining every detail. Each side was identical...except for one. In one side of the cube there was a clearly imprinted red circle.

‘Why didn’t we notice that at first?’ I wondered aloud. ‘Perhaps it really is magical...’

Mendyn quirked an eyebrow at me, then looked back at the box. ‘What’s inside, though?’ he murmured to himself.

I stared at him blankly, uncomprehending.

He laughed silently. ‘My friend, it is, after all, a box. The poem states that there is a prize, so obviously it would follow that the prize is to be found *inside* the box.’ Setting the small cube on the table, he leaned back thoughtfully, his hands folded behind his head, murmuring the words to the kender’s poem under his breath.

I shrugged and, on impulse, tapped on the side with the circle. Nothing happened. I shrugged rather sheepishly and glanced up at Mendyn, then back down at the box... Which now sported a round red button where the circle was just a second ago.

‘Mendyn!’ I exclaimed.

He blinked open his eyes instantly and, taking in the change in the box in one quick glance, smiled at me. ‘Excellent!’

I looked at the box, frowning, and shook my head in wonder. ‘What now?’

‘Now, we make our decision.’ Mendyn stared intently at the box.

I stared intently at the mage. ‘Which is...?’

‘It’s simple,’ Mendyn said to himself. ‘Childishly simple.’ He snapped his gray eyes up to regard me, grinning, caught up in the game of the box. ‘The game is this: we push the button, we win the reward.’

I looked from Mendyn to the box and shook my head once, grinning. ‘Whoever made this puzzle really was strange! That was simple enough.’ I reached out to push the button.

Mendyn hurriedly grabbed my wrist. ‘Wait! The other part of the game: if we push the button, someone we don’t know will die.’ Mendyn nodded, more to himself than to me, and muttered, ‘“If prize you take, the life you break of someone you don’t know.” The poem clearly explains the consequences.’ He glanced up at me with a twitch of a smile. ‘Or weren’t you listening, my friend?’

I pulled my hand away and shook my head, ignoring his sarcasm. ‘So if we push the button, someone dies?’ I asked, horrified.

Mendyn nodded, sitting in silence. An eternity of thought seemed to pass, and finally my friend looked up at me slowly, eyes glinting dangerously. ‘Why should it matter to us? It’s someone we don’t know.’ He raised

an eyebrow, watching me carefully, crossing his arms in the sleeves of his black robes. ‘The prize – assuming the poem tells the truth – will almost certainly be worth it.’

I shook my head, staring at Mendyn, unable to speak. All I could see were his eyes, gleaming strangely from within the shadows of the black robes. *Black robes*, by the gods!

Mendyn kept his eyes locked on mine. He said, speaking slowly, as if to a child, ‘It’s an obvious choice. If we push the button, we win. If we don’t, if we let this chance escape us, we lose.’ He picked up the box, seemed to weigh it in his hand.

Eyes wide, I pulled my eyes from Mendyn – Mendyn, my *friend* I reminded myself, feeling slightly sick – to the box. For the first time, I realized why my childhood friend had taken the robes of evil, why he had been cast from Silvanesti in shame. A sour taste of bile rose in my throat and I choked. I suddenly felt an irresistible urge to run out of this house, out of the house of this mad dark-elf, and never look back. What had changed in him since I’d known him? How could he even *contemplate* doing such a thing?

Without really pausing to consider, I grabbed at the box. Mendyn calmly curled his fingers around the box and pulled his hand away.

‘Come now,’ he said in a voice barely more than a hiss, his eyes growing hard. ‘That’s not necessary. After all, the game is mine to play. It’s not your choice; it’s mine. I’ve made it.’

I stood up, slowly coming around the table to face Mendyn. ‘Please...’ I searched rapidly for words, ‘Mendyn, please... don’t do this. You’re killing someone! What could be worth that price?’ I reached for the box again.

A glint of steel from Mendyn’s hand flashed in the corner of my eye. He was on his feet in front of me, holding the dagger inches away from my face, the box clutched protectively in his free hand. I backed away several steps, out into the living room.

‘I regret, my friend, that you’ve made this foolish decision,’ he murmured. ‘I would have been glad to share my winnings with you, had you not tried to play the part of a hero.’ The corners of his mouth curled bitterly as Mendyn lowered the dagger slightly, taking a step forward, watching me carefully.

‘Please, my...’ my voice caught on the word ‘friend,’ ‘Please, Mendyn, don’t—’

He shook his head very slightly and interrupted, ‘No, enough wasting time. It’s someone *I don’t know*. Whether that person lives or dies is *not* my concern. This time...’ His voice lowered to a growl. ‘This time, I win.’

Mendyn lifted the box and, very slowly and

deliberately, pushed the red button.

The kender suddenly sat up in the chair, rubbing his eyes. 'My! That was a refreshing nap, though I don't remember ever really deciding to go to sleep...' He shrugged cheerfully, the blue feathers bobbing. He looked up at us, first at Mendyn, dagger drawn, then to me, face pale, eyes wide. He then looked at the box, buttonless now – back to a brown box with a circle on one side. 'Oh, drat!' the kender said, slipping out of the chair. 'You pushed it while I was asleep! I had wanted to—'

Mendyn covered the distance between himself and the kender in one stride. The dagger in his hand vanished, and smoothly, without blinking, he lifted the poor kender off the floor by the throat. 'Where... is... my... reward?' the mage grated, so softly I hardly heard. His thin fingers dug into the sides of the kender's neck.

The kender gurgled pitifully a few times, and Mendyn dropped him to the floor. 'Answer me!' the dark elf demanded.

The kender rubbed his throat and frowned up at him, amazingly composed and not in the least afraid. Replacing the blue feathers that his little trip through the air had removed, he said in a shrill, offended voice, 'Well! I certainly don't think you deserve these... In fact, if I hadn't been specifically instructed to do it – since you pushed the button and all – I don't think I would give them to you at all!' The kender huffily rummaged in his pockets for a moment, then handed Mendyn a small, tattered, spellbook bound in midnight blue.

Edging away from Mendyn and the spellbook – whose cold, magical aura I didn't like one bit – I helped the kender to his feet. Mendyn cradled the book in his arms, carrying it lovingly back to the table in the kitchen. I heard him laughing and muttering to himself exultantly; the only words I could pick out were 'lost since Cataclysm' and something that sounded like 'spellbook of Fistan...'

The kender brushed himself off and picked up the box from the floor, where it had been tossed carelessly by the elated wizard. Sighing, he shook his head. 'You'd think he'd be more careful with things that aren't his!' he muttered, tucking the box – along with Mendyn's wine glass – into one of his pouches. He then gave Mendyn – still huddled in the kitchen, fawning over his new book – one appraising glance and nodded to himself, satisfied.

'I guess I'll be off then,' he declared. Without another backward glance, the kender marched straight towards the door.

I, however, wasn't quite ready for his departure.

'Wait a minute!' Grabbing the kender by the collar of his bright green jacket, I pulled him back inside. 'Did someone really... die?' I asked, my voice cracking.

The kender regarded me gravely. 'Well, yes, I suppose so.' He paused thoughtfully, then added, 'Someone who Mendyn didn't know, of course.'

I swallowed and asked, rather meekly, 'Is that *all*?'

The kender shrugged. 'Let's see... I gave the box to Mendyn and said the poem... he pushed the button, I gave him his reward...' He ticked each item off on a finger and nodded in satisfaction. 'There's only one more thing the old man told me to do, as a matter of fact.'

Steeling myself, I inquired, quietly, 'What?'

The kender shrugged. 'Well, now I have to get rid of the box.'

I glanced once at Mendyn, still chortling and muttering to himself in the next room. A wave of pity, horror, and disgust washed over me. I realized that I couldn't stay in the house of this mad mage – once my friend – any longer. 'Would you mind if I traveled with you for a while? I don't really feel comfortable here, and it's a long way back to Silvanesti all alone...'

The kender looked up at me, his head cocked to one side. 'Sure! I'd be glad to have someone to walk with.' His eyes lit up and he broke into a delighted smile. 'As a matter of fact, I could tell you about the time—'

I grabbed my pack and cloak from the corner of the room, tucked my spellbook into the crook of my arm, and said, pretending not to notice I was cutting off the kender's story, 'Just out of curiosity, what exactly *are* you going to do with the box, anyway?'

The kender shrugged. 'I'm going to do what that old wizard told me to do.'

Cautiously, I asked, 'And that is...?'

The kender shrugged and stepped out into the cool evening air. I followed closing the door behind me. The little fellow grinned up at me and, as we started to walk down the road, replied,

'I'm going to give the box to someone Mendyn doesn't know.'

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