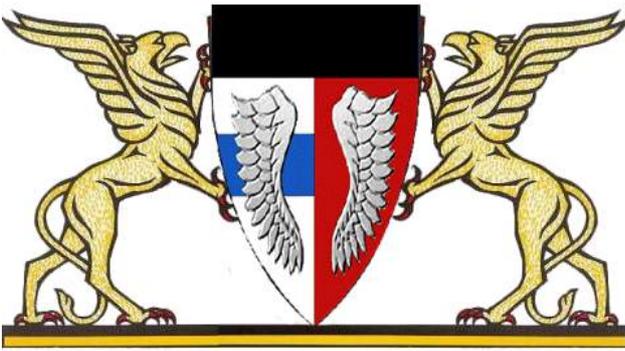


CLOCKWISE 2021 - WOLF VON WITTING

# GOTHANY DAWN

A TALE OF DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS





## The DUCHY of GOTHANY

Chapter 1 – Hibernau	page 4
Chapter 2 – Elfminster	page 7
Chapter 3 – Gnollwood	page 12
Chapter 4 – Manticross	page 15
Chapter 5 – Ogrillon Hill	page 17
Chapter 6 – A Long and Winding Road	page 21
Chapter 7 – Immerhûk	page 24
Chapter 8 – Highdungeon	page 27
Chapter 9 – Golembard	page 29
Chapter 10 – Sevenmarl	page 32
Chapter 11 – City of Marl	page 34
Chapter 12 – Gothany Dawn	page 37
Behind Gothany	page 39
Other locations	page 40

Yeah, this is a fantasy. The kind of fantasy I daydream about while playing AD&D-based computer games like *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale*, *Torment Planescape* and *Neverwinter Nights*. I've been through *Pool of Radiance* and its sequels on the Commodore 64, *Eye of the Beholder*, *Black Crypt* and similar games on the Amiga 500. I dreamed of writing such a story, set in the Forgotten Realms. Then I started creating my own fantasy world. One where no copyright laws would be infringed. I am all for open domain.

I would not mind if others would set their stories in this, the same world. Not that I have any sincere hopes of it. But, really, I wouldn't mind.

I wouldn't mind if someone were to draw a map of Gothany. On the contrary, I would **like** it if someone did. It would mean, someone has read this story carefully. I don't have much hope of that either. I mostly write this adventure for myself.

I decided not to overthink it, but let the adventure unfold as I go along. I don't know in advance where it will take the characters, what their fate will be and how it will end. I have done a story where everything was planned in advance and now I wanted to do it differently. So I am myself sometimes surprised by the unfolding of events. Oh, and some characters are based on real, existing people. Sides of them I perceived...

As I write this, I had just finished page 30. Now, what comes next...? I have no idea....

- Wolf von Witting -

### Prologue:

East of Angria and Northangerland, the duchy of Gothany split off from the kingdom of Zamorna in the first Wyvern War 182 years ago. A *Council of Twelve Cities* appoint succession of sovereign by vote.

### *Song of the Reign*

*It ruled the Duke of Elfminster and Dragonbar  
In peace and wisdom for sixty years  
His House was blessed from near and far  
And for his end each one shed tears*

*It ruled Grandmaster Wizard of Wyvernall  
The years in number forty-eight  
In righteous justice for one and all  
And words which carried sense and weight*

*Then it ruled the Lord of Ettingrave  
To his joyful fifty-seventh year  
His wish for us to well behave  
Is code of honour everywhere*

*Now it rules the Earl of Marl  
With iron hand and hardened soul  
His given name is Brioncarl  
We do not know what is his goal*

[ - Bard Unknown, possibly flayed - ]

Late summer in the year of the Unicorn, an old toothless woman wrapped in ragged clothes limped into the small town of Hibernau. She steered to the marketplace in town and dropped to the ground on the stairs of the temple. On the same day a group of children spotted a flying horse. A great white stallion with huge wings flying towards the east. Excited they ran into town and told of their sighting. Everyone was convinced children were not capable of lying, and stories of flying horses have been heard before even if they were rare. It was considered a good omen and might be connected to the old woman. But she didn't look as if she could survive for long.

- She will be dead by tomorrow, the commoners said with conviction. In the morning, the following day, the old woman looked dead, but she was not. A young girl, an acolyte of the temple, brought her water, soft bread and cheese to eat.

- She will be dead by the end of the week, the commoners said with an assurance no one cared to oppose. But she was not. The young acolyte kept bringing her food and water every day. Sometimes she was sitting next to the old woman for a while, waiting for her to speak. But she didn't say a word. She expressed her gratitude with the eyes, grey as her hair.

For the entire week, and during the mild nights, she lodged at the bottom of the temple stairs. The acolyte brought her a blanket to wrap around her.

- Well, she will be dead by the end of *this* week, the people insisted also the second week. On the third week, they said nothing, because instead of dying, she appeared to have regained some of her strength. On the morning of the 14th day she spoke for the first time.

- Thank you, she said to the young acolyte. What is your name?

- I am Dielle.

Dielle sat with her while she was eating and drinking.

- So you *can* speak, she said.

- I was confused, so I didn't know what language to use. I speak eleven languages.

- I didn't know there were so many. What is your name, if I may so inquire?

The old woman chuckled.

- There are more than eleven languages. There is the common tongue of Gothany, Angria and Northangerland, elvish, dwarvish, dragon tongue, the rudimentary languages of goblins, kobold, ogre and lizardmen... Those are only some of the languages spoken in our realm. You can call me Grendeline, by the way.

- Where are you from, Grendeline?

Her grey eyes seemed fixed on something remote and invisible to Dielle. As if she was looking into

another world. She stopped eating.

- I don't know, she said after a solemn moment of silence. I can't remember. I have been around. I remember the tall city walls of Wyvernall, the small streets, the pier, quay and half timbered houses and shops of Carrackham and the capital of Marl, its fortifications, the dark streets of Umberwich and a good tavern in town. I was with dwarves in Halberdale on the far mountainside, but that is not where I am from. I believe I do not have a home.

- Oh, said Dielle, eyes shining with excitement. I wish I could see all those places.

- You can, said Grendeline.

- People say you came here to die, said Dielle.

- People say a lot, because their day is long and their minds are small. I don't feel like dying. Not today at least. Even when I feel like dying, it is difficult for me to do, because I have never done it before.

- That makes sense, said Dielle. It is difficult for me too. They both smiled.

From the busy crowd in the marketplace a man of importance was approaching them. One could tell from the diagonal red-golden sash and the elegant and costly tailor-made jacket he wore. Dielle recognized him as the honourable mayor of Hibernau, Uriah Anahan. Apparently some townsfolk had directed his attention to the dirty and destitute parcel of dying woman at the bottom of the temple stairs. But Anahan was a good man and didn't come to make life difficult for the old woman. He came to offer her fresh clothing, to wash, as well as lodging. At least for a while until a permanent location had to be found in the graveyard, or on the outskirts of town. He bowed respectfully and greeted Grendeline and the acolyte, Dielle.

- Good day, my ladies. We regret that we were not informed sooner of your arrival. On that fateful day a flying horse was what townsfolk preferred to talk about. We have come to offer you the choice to wash and refresh yourself, as well as lodging in the local inn.

- We most gratefully accept, said Grendeline using the same polite oratory as the mayor.

- This is wonderful news! Cheered Dielle, nearly clapping her hands with enthusiasm.

- Perhaps, when you feel so disposed, we can talk about what you can do in our community, if you desire to stay. His tone was sincere and courteous.

- It sounds most reasonable, good Sir. We consider it and offer our skills as soon as we are able to recall any of them.

- We wish you well. With this the mayor took his leave and Grendeline finished the piece of cheese she held in hand.



Hibernau

## CHAPTER 1

*Life is long and full of woe  
We're all in passing thither  
But when at close you're not forworn  
You dance and sing elsewhere*

[ - The Minstrel of Dwarvendell - ]

Ten years later, Grendeline was still alive. Not only was she alive, her hair became darker and her vitality returned. There were still grey hairs, but fewer. Dielle noticed a few months after her arrival to Hibernau that her teeth were growing back. She had never seen such an amazing rate of regeneration before. Nor heard of it.

Dielle was appointed a serving cleric of the temple and Uriah Anahan was still mayor, but had grown a decade older, while it appeared that Grendeline was getting younger. Younger and more vigorous. The small hut the townsfolk had constructed for her on the outskirts of town, was replaced by a half timbered house she herself had built over a few years. There was no question she had her full strength back. It was whispered in town this was due to magic. What sort of magic, no one knew. A drunk guest in the local tavern once claimed he had met a man who aged backwards. Perhaps this was also what occurred in the case of this strange woman who didn't die. But giving the old ragged woman a home, proved to be a good decision for all people of Hibernau, because Grendeline had skills in diverse areas of life. Both Dielle and Anahan found wise answers to their most difficult questions, when they consulted her. Noble townsfolk began also consulting her. Most surprising to all, was her understanding of combat strategy and warfare. Grendeline would have made a fine commander. First informally, but later she became an instructor at the town defence academy.

One evening in the spring of the eleventh year, Uriah Anahan and Dielle came to her with serious

faces. He was not wearing his red-golden sash on this day, but he had an important affair to discuss with Grendeline. Every ten years Hibernau needed to contribute with 12 recruits to the Earl's army in Marl. This was part of a long standing concord with the Council of Twelve Cities and so with the current ruler of Gothany. The road to Marl is long and perilous along the river Cadensa until it joined with Rhymer and the grand river Odikon flowing through Gnollwood to Marl down by the coast. The city of Elfminster was located near the fork of Rhymer and Cadensa on the northern edge of Gnollwood. The journey along the Odikon was three times the length of the Cadensa road and it was a road of perils. Some recruits were known to have been lost on their journey. What became of them, no one knew. Some believed they became ghosts in Gnollwood or they were eaten by the lizard people. What Anahan wished to inquire, was if Grendeline was willing to accompany the new recruits to Marl, present them to the Earl and make sure their skills were coming to the best possible use.

Dielle had no question. She sipped on a hot brew prepared with leaves which Grendeline called *tea*. A kettle was hanging in the lit fireplace to refill the cups or to serve Uriah who had not yet tasted this peculiar brew of herbs.

Grendeline listened, resting the chin on her fist. She knew already his question and all his worries, having actively trained many recruits herself. They were all looking forward to the adventure and to see the big city. None of them seriously believed death could be a possible outcome. Gothany had not had a war since the devastating Wyvern War, long ago. As Anahan had finished speaking, he anxiously awaited her reply.

It was a simple question.

- When do we leave?

- In a fortnight, he said. Uriah was drawing his breath in colossal relief.

Grendeline glanced at Dielle.

- Who will be the clerics joining us? She knew all the men and women who served in the temple by their first name.

- I believe it will be Gwyness and me.

Anahan was getting curious about the brew Dielle was sipping.

- Can I have some of that... *tea*?

- Uriah, Grendeline said pointing to her dress. I can't go dressed like this. It is not right for the road. I need leggings and a shadow armour.

- A shadow armour!? Dielle gasped, but Anahan was less surprised, having observed the old lady while drilling the recruits.

- I have already required our best craftsmen to make one for you. And as you may be aware, the

Hibernau shadow armours are among the best in all of Gothany.

The shadow armour was an improved studded leather armour, black and impervious to arrowheads. While the wearer was able to move without hindrance, it demanded unusual strength to penetrate it and offered better protection than most heavy armours.

- Long sword?

- No sword, but two sets of throwing knives and holsters with thigh straps.

- Consider it done!

- I didn't know you were skilled at throwing knives, Dielle remarked. You are forever full of surprises.

Grendeline picked up a knife from the table. She pointed to the door on the far side of the room.

- Left door post, she said. One arm's length over the door handle. Then she hurled the knife. It buried itself in the left door post, properly an arm's length above the door handle, as she had aimed.

- Holy Hildara! Anahan invoked one of the lesser deities of Gothany.

- That wasn't even a proper throwing knife!! When and where did you learn this?

Grendeline seemed puzzled again.

- I honestly don't know and can't say... Every time when I reach advanced grey age, I keep forgetting some things.

- Wait a moment... said Dielle. How many times have you been old and grey?

- I wish I could tell you, I really do. But I don't know this either. More than once... I believe...

- You wouldn't have happened to ride a winged horse once? Said Uriah remembering the children with their exciting tale. For the first time it occurred to him, there could be a connection.

- A winged horse?

- Yes, a great white stallion with wings.

Again Grendeline's grey eyes seemed to lose themselves in a distance. Then she indistinctly murmured some names, uncertain which one of the names was right.

- I may have... He sleeps...

- Who sleeps? Uriah and Dielle asked with one voice.

- The stallion sleeps for a long time... I can not disturb him now. Not in many years. He also needs time with his family! At least I think so...

- Are you speaking of the winged horse?

Grendeline's gaze turned towards them.

- Yes, I believe I do.

- Why, in all these years have you not mentioned this before? Said Dielle in disbelief.

- Neither you have mentioned it before.

- How can you know everything about farming, everything about rare and special metals and the property of their alloys, you build a house and you

know everything about warfare, tracking and finding paths in the wilderness, you can navigate by the stars, and you are sewing and cooking and you know all the herbs, mushrooms, medicinal plants, you can throw knives like an expert. And I have never seen you doing it before and... Uriah stopped. You appear to know everything about everything! How is it even possible for a single human? Is there anything you can't do?

- Yet I feel like I know nothing at all, she answered him quietly. None of this comes to mind unless you mention it, but all of it is there hidden until it is needed. I don't know. I don't have any answers. I have as many questions as you all together. I am confused every evening as I go to rest.

- I know, Dielle commented. We often talked about this long into the night.

- And I am grateful for your friendship.

Grendeline looked the mayor straight into his eyes and said with calm;

- There are many things I can't do.

- Like what? Uriah almost laughed.

- Well, I am not good at drawing or painting, I can't play any instrument. I can't sing... I can make all sort of other sounds, but not very beautiful. I can't whistle, I can't make up interesting stories and I don't remember any funny stories to entertain with. Need I go on?

- Instead you know many useful things...

- Art and music is useful. Creative beauty is an essential human ability. What would we be without the beauty of things we create?

Dielle nodded thoughtfully.

- I agree with you on this.

- So, i am an expert at killing, among other things! It is the one thing i do not wish to be good at.

- How young will you become? Uriah suddenly changed the subject. Do you return to infancy?

- I don't think so. I believe I will become the age Dielle was when we first met. And then Alceletyn will be the nearest. The star will shine bright in the sky before it fades again for a hundred years.

I am always young when Alceletyn is close. At least I think so. I can't remember...

Uriah shuddered.

- You are older than anyone I ever knew.

- Probably.

- Do you have any idea how old?

- No.

There was a moment of silence.

- But i know how I can find out...

Both Uriah and Dielle's heads abruptly turned up from their pensive posture to face her.

- How?

- Forty-nine years from now, if I can gather with at least six of the sixty at the oracle... That's the oracle at Oracle, then all my questions can be

answered. And all questions of the six or more.

- Forty-nine years from now? Not so soon... That is not very helpful.

- That is how it is.

- Who are the sixty?

- I don't know.

- Do they age backwards and forwards like you?

- Probably... I don't know. Look, my friends, 11 years ago I was close to dying. My wits were gone and now I remember things I could not remember then. With the approach of Alcetyrn I remember more.

- Alcetyrn means "the sixty" in an ancient forgotten language, said Dielle suddenly. Compared to other stars in the sky, this one appears to be closer. It is moving through the dark of the night sky until we have two bright lights in the sky by day and one at night. Some who are occupied with studying the stars believe it could be a world like ours.

- Have you ever had a family? Asked Uriah.

- I don't know. I can't remember. Maybe...

Now Dielle interrupted. She had been asking those kind of questions before and knew it was like torture to her friend.

- Leave her be! You have a commander who will see them safely to Marl. We have intruded enough on your hospitality for one evening. Dielle threw something from her cup into the fireplace. It sparked and caught fire.

They parted amiably.

- Don't brood! Dielle told her friend. She knew her well and suspected the advice would not be heeded, but Grendeline was more weary than pensive and for once rather tried to sleep than to endlessly ransack her memories.

Before midnight she snored.

\* \* \*

The following day the final selection of recruits was made. Two clerics had already been decided on, but half of twenty other young men and women were to be chosen for one or another task. Half of them would stay in Hibernau and join the town militia, keeping order and assist when nature or folly caused destruction. The other half would go to Marl and enforce the army of the Earl. Grendeline got to make the final selection. The assembly was called to the yard of the training camp, not far from her house.

- You are all brave and valiant! Grendeline addressed them. The town of Hibernau is proud to have you. Before I choose the ten to go with us, I wonder if there are some among you who would prefer to stay in Hibernau and rather join the town militia? Please step forward. Two of the recruits made a step forward and after some hesitancy a

third joined the two, not to be separated from his friends.

Grendeline approached the two first.

- Mawdryn, she said to the one on the left. You are hereby promoted to group leader. The one addressed as Mawdryn straightened up, and was in doing so growing almost by the length of a finger.

- You will take charge of the group remaining here and report to the militia barracks after we're done.

Turning to the other, she said;

- Talfryn, you will be his second in command. It is important to have dedicated men and women to uphold order in Hibernau. I wish you the best of luck and may the gods smile upon you.

She stepped back a few paces to look at them all.

- Some of you will be disappointed. Not everyone will agree with my preferences. I will explain why those who get to go are chosen. For the seven of you, who do not stay behind by choice, I advise to pray the adventure doesn't come to you. You are young and eager, I understand this. But living is never entirely safe. And even among those who get to go, there may be regrets one day. In our imagination there is no dirt, no unreasonable rulers, no bad smell and least of all we expect to die without a purpose. You have peace and you have tranquility here. You are not going to miss it until you don't have it no more. As for who gets to go, some choices are obvious. Jethro Retekin is the best tracker among you, a good swordsman and a good archer. Prothpher Rokoser is the best shadow-runner.

The two friends smiled as they were named. Jethro was the younger brother of Gwyness, the cleric. He was dressed in the colours of the forest. Prothpher, called *Proth* by everyone was the only one save for Grendeline who was wearing a shadow armour. Like her, he was also dressed all in black. His ability meant he could move silently and disappear into shadows. Proth habitually moved silently, so silently that even Grendeline was unable to hear him. He didn't speak much either. Jethro was often doing all the talking for both of them.

Grendeline proceeded with her selection:

- Toronar Ryotakin, the strongest among you.

No one had an issue with this choice. Toronar was more than a head taller than the second tallest of them and his length was supported by his strong proportionate body.

- Miri Akarso, the smallest of you all. She is one of the most agile, a very good archer and there may come a day when a small fighter can solve an impossible task for anyone bigger.

- Neryman Nebyed, the best swordsman in your midst. An obvious choice. Nebyed didn't react at all. As if he hadn't heard.

## CHAPTER 2

- Nevis Kodari, mediocre with bow and sword, but a character who does wonders to improve the morale of the group. He is a natural charmer, has a sharp mind and knows many games to pass time with. He may not fully appreciate his own value, but I do. Nevis Kodari jumped for joy when he found himself among the chosen.

Unlike Nebyed, he had not expected it.

- Sagitta and Baltram Gauth. She is the best archer among you and Baltram not only knows very well how to use a weapon, but also how to make them or fix them, when they are in a state of disrepair. Now... Grendeline drew her breath. Two more. She didn't pause for long.

- Ragnal Teikena will keep our journal and Celtine Dryel is our bard. Both are also good average at melee, spear and with longbow.

Besides, Lord Teikena would be very cross with me if none of their proud house was chosen.

The last remark caused some knowing smiles in the ranks and even a muffled giggle was heard.

- Mawdryn and Talfryn, take your group and report to Lord Teikena at the town militia office! The rest of you have target practice. Get on with it! Now, move! All of you! The recruits dispersed and the yard was soon empty. Over a distance she could hear the town crier making an announcement; "*Hear ye, hear yee...!*" She didn't pay attention.

In her mind she was already on the road. The sky was clear and only a few white clouds drifted across the blue. It changes in a day, she thought. Dielle came alongside her.

- I, for one, feel safe with you. I don't know why, but I do. You always know what to do.

- I know how to give this impression. Sometimes I am not sure myself.

- Yes, I know. But it doesn't matter. You move on. You always find a way. No one knows which way the wind blows tomorrow.

*At dawn the sun rises in the sky  
And fills with joy all living  
It doesn't ask us to redeem  
It has no aim, but giving*

*[ - The Blackhove Bard - ]*

With two pack horses and one for riding the 12 recruits and Grendeline made good headway the first day. The horse for riding was intended for Grendeline as commander of the group, but she preferred to walk like the others and when one got tired she let him or her ride for a while. First it was Miri who seemed exhausted and later Nevis.

None of them were complaining but struggled forward. However, their commander was paying attention to their difficulties. She didn't want either of them to be worn down by the journey itself. Not more than what they all had to endure. As they set up camp for the night after the first day, they had made it halfway to Elfminster.

No unexpected discomfort or surprises caught them along the road.

The second day was almost as uneventful. They broke camp early in the morning and continued.

Jethro Retekin was carefully examining the trees along the road. In the afternoon he ran up to a huge oak and kneeled before it. He appeared to talk to it, softly. He returned with an air of content to the group. Proth Rokoser who barely ever said anything glanced at him and asked;

- What did she say?

- I wish'd her peaceful days and blessed her roots. Grendeline, for once had no idea what they were talking about.

- A huge oak like that, Jethro explained, must have a protective dryad. Did you know trees communicate with each other?

- No, I didn't. I didn't see any wood nymph either.

- She blessed our journey and told me no evil is near.

- Somehow I could have told you so, Grendeline said softly.

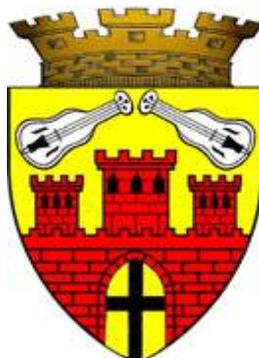
Jethro was not discouraged. Look over there, he said, pointing to another tree at the edge of a small group of trees. That's a maple tree.

- In Angria it is called a maple, but if you say so...

- I don't know why they abbreviated the name, but the leaves on this tree are shaped like Gothany.

He picked a huge maple leaf and held it up.

- Here, he said, flows the Odikon, running his finger along the midrib. Here at the base is Marl and all around the edges we're enclosed by mountains. This leaf here shows Rhymer and Cadensa flowing into the Odikon and later we will cross the Stansa. On the other side is the Epikon.



ELFMINSTER

- Wait a minute, interrupted Grendeline. I thought the Odikon doesn't begin before the two rivers meet at Elfminster.

- That is not entirely true, said Jethro. The Odikon and Rhymer have different sources. It's just that Rhymer now carries more water than the Odikon from its source. But they do in fact meet before the Cadensa joins them. Historically the mapleaf was more accurate a couple of hundred years back, but rivers change their flow and Odikon is no longer flowing exactly like the midrib of the leaf. But Gothany has not changed its shape.

- Why do we only have an Earl, when Gothany is a duchy? Asked Celtine. Shouldn't he be a Duke?

- Yes, he should... said Grendeline. I'm not sure.

- Because, said Ragnal Teikena who had studied the history of Gothany most carefully, it was the Duke of Elfminster and Dragonbar who ultimately defeated the invading wyverns in the battle at Dragonbar. He had no heirs, so he founded the Council of Twelve Cities. After the death of Lord Ettingrave, the Earl of Marl was appointed, but he can not become duke, unless he is elevated by nothing less than an Archduke or by the Council.

- And the council has not decided, Dielle filled in.

- The battle at Dragonbar... Grendeline contracted the eyebrows contemplating.

- How long ago was the Wyvern War?

- It was actually the second Wyvern War, said Ragnal Teikena. It was about 190 years ago.

- The Duke of Elfminster, the second Wyvern War and the battle of Dragonbar... it all sounds familiar somehow, murmured Grendeline. The dragons were not involved, she said. But a few none the less helped the duke at Dragonbar.

- Yes, said Teikena, that sounds right. It was probably crucial for the outcome. There was an ancient silver dragon on our side.

- There were two, Grendeline corrected.

- Two? Ragnal Teikena had not heard about a second silver dragon.

- Yes, there were two. She insisted.

Nevis Kodari climbed off the riding horse and let Gwyness Retekin rest on its back for a while. The two clerics wore the heaviest armour. Dark clouds drifted in from the east and for two hours they had to proceed through rain. But a warm breeze followed the rain and even though the air still was humid they dried up slowly.

Sagitta spotted a wild boar after the rain and swiftly hit it with an arrow. Ryotakin killed it with a spear and carried it to the camp the others were preparing. The evening meal was secured.

- How far still to Elfminster? Asked Dielle after eating.

- We should almost be there. Said Jethro. Two hours or three at most.

- We stay the night here and go to Elfminster in the morning, decided Grendeline. We should have a nightwatch from here on. Jethro, you schedule a shift rotation. Two hours, two watchers per shift.

Stay alert. Trouble rarely come north of Elfminster, but when it does, we don't want to be the first to discover it. But Grendeline was unable to sleep. Again she slipped into brooding. The ancient silver dragon. She knew him. But her memory was still vague.

When it was time for the second shift of the watch and Neryman Nebyed woke Rokoser, she gave him a sign to let Jethro sleep. She would take his shift. She knew there would be no talking with Proth Rokoser. She could brood as much as she pleased. But after an hour Proth laid a hand on her shoulder. As she didn't react, he quietly called upon her attention.

- Gren!?

She snapped out of her thoughts.

- Yes?

Rokoser pointed to the west where a thick fog was rolling in from the Cadensa. Grendeline followed the direction of his finger, but she could not see any movement. The wind was coming in from the north. Leaves rustled, but there was no other sound. She was not certain if she saw what she saw; a shadow moved towards them. Then she faintly heard a noise. Hobgoblins? More than four, no... more than six...

A slick dark figure appeared in the mist. It was moving silently towards them. No sound came from the swift moving figure. Sometimes it seemed to stop and make sure the hobgoblin were catching up. They noisily and carelessly trampled through the wilderness like a herd of wild boars. And they appeared to be in pursuit of the dark figure. As it came closer they could make out the nature of the silent, lonely shape, moving through the darkness and the mist like a ghost. It was an elf. A dark haired female elf.

If the hobgoblins wanted to catch her, they had to do so before she reaches Elfminster.

- Wake the others, said Grendeline. We have to expect unpleasant visitors from all directions. The hobgoblins are on a foxhunt. I believe they make this racket intentionally, driving her towards some nasty encounter.

- For whom? Rokoser didn't move.

The elf had stopped and turned towards the noise drawing closer. She was done running.

Eight bulky figures emerged from the fog. The four closest attacked the elf. She dived under a sweeping scimitar while pulling her sword, which suddenly lit up the surrounding plain with cold blue flames. In the same movement she swepted it upward, cutting through their leather armour

without effort and decapitating one of them. As she parried a scimitar, her sword emitted a bright flash and the weapon of her attacker shattered into several pieces. He yapped in surprise.

- Who is hunting who? Grendeline remarked.

Before she and Proth had decided if they should give the elf assistance, she had already cut down four of them. Three turned and fled back into the fog. One was still intent on killing her.

- She doesn't need our help. Grendeline observed casually and held Proth in place.

- No need, she said. Let them sleep.

The elf had already sheathed her flaming sword and held a shortbow with an arrow, ready to fire.

Five dead hobgoblins lay on the ground.

Grendeline, Proth and the elf listened into the dark and the mist. Faint footsteps were distancing themselves from the site of the skirmish. Then the elf turned and moved towards the hideout from where Grendeline and Proth were watching.

- Can she see us? Whispered Grendeline.

- Proth shook his head discretely and vaguely. A faint silent movement in each direction.

- No, said the elf. But I can hear you. Had you not phrased yourself so, I would have thought there is only one of you awake. No need to wake up the whole camp. She was speaking softly and they could barely make out her words.

Grendeline felt it prudent to come forward. She came towards the elf to greet her. The elf bowed respectfully.

- I am Nariel of Taïri, she said.

- I am Grendeline... of Hibernau... she added.

The elf examined her sternly.

- You are one. Nariel added casually.

- One?

- An immortal. Ah... you don't remember... We have met before. Fleetingly. I never knew your name. We were not properly introduced.

- I don't remember.

- You are probably not human, the elf remarked.

- I am not? Grendeline was confused again.

- We are not alone? Perhaps you can introduce me to your friend? I am impressed that I can't hear her, or him.

Proth came quietly out of the shadows.

- He is moving and I still can't hear him! Nariel now had amazement written all over her face.

- You said I am not human. Grendeline said bewildered. What am I?

- I said you are probably not human. I don't know what you are.

- Oh, for a moment I was hoping you knew something I had forgotten. Are you also... One?

- Let's not speak of it now and here, Nariel said. This is not the right time for it. I need to know what your mission is, who you are with and if we

share a common goal.

From her direct approach, Grendeline began to sense that Nariel had to be... One. Whatever being One entailed.

- We were under the impression the hobgoblins were driving you towards... something nasty. Do we have to worry about that?

- Two ogres. No, you don't need to worry. They trampled off into the wrong direction, past your camp. Didn't you hear them?

- Ogres and hobgoblins together hunting an elf?

- Not just an elf. An elf of Taïri, carrying *the Flame of Oroladian*.

- The burning sword?

- Yes, the sword. I understand you want to know everything, but I believe we will still have plenty of time for chit-chat.

- Very well then.

- Do you have any food which is not meat? I could smell the cooked boar all the way from the river.

- Yes, we have some fruit, bread, cheese...

- All of it is fine. I'll even have a piece of the boar. I just loathe eating only meat.

They shared some of their food with the elf and she ate as if she had been starving for days.

- So, where are you heading? She asked.

- Tomorrow morning we go into Elfminster. Then we continue to Marl. I have twelve recruits with me to join the forces of the Earl.

- Oh, that should come in handy now. Nariel said with a hint of sarcasm.

- What do you mean?

- Ah... you don't know what is brewing in Gothany? Nariel seemed vaguely amused.

- No, we don't. How could we? We lived at the northern edge of the land. We have had no news for a while.

- Well, the Earl is a pompous prat. Now he is becoming over-confident. This is dangerous. Are you sure you want to throw these young people into the meat-grinder?

- No, not really. But there is an old agreement Hibernau adheres to. We feel the need to uphold our end of the deal.

- And what was the Earl's part of the deal?

- I don't know. I seem to be saying so a lot these days. Why is it that all the questions I don't have answers to are being asked now? Do you know? She turned to Proth Rokoser. He again shook his head vaguely and silently. Then he pointed to the sleeping Ragnal Teikena, indicating that he might have an answer.

- Wake him, please. He is on the next shift.

Rokoser jolted Teikena out of his dreams. The young recruit yawned and stretched like a cat. He didn't notice the presence of the elf immediately, but as he joined them, he looked curiously at the

arrival.

- May I present? Nariel of Taïri.

- Taïri, the sunken city?

- Ah, you heard of it. Nariel noticed.

- Yes, but it was engulfed by the ocean waves centuries ago. You don't look much like a mermaid so I can't see how you can be from there.

- It is just a name. Don't think of it.

- Centuries ago... Grendeline echoed. What about the Flame of Oroladian? Have you heard about it also?

Ragnal's face lit up.

- Oroladian! He exclaimed. He was a mighty wizard and a king of Gothany, when it was at the heart of an empire. That was when Taïri was the capital. But the Flame of Oroladian... no, I have not heard of it.

Nariel finished eating.

- Good! She concluded. Let's get some sleep my friends. It has been a long night for me.

- We had another question for you, Ragnal. Do you know what the Earl does for Hibernau? We provide 12 recruits every ten years and Marl does what? Grendeline was curious. Ragnal Teikena's empty face was an answer. He didn't know.

\* \* \*

Early the next day, they woke up, noticed the sleeping elf and had questions. Gwyness was the first to see the five slain bodies of the hobgoblins near the camp. Baltram Gauth went to see if there was anything useful to loot from the cadavers.

His sister regarded his action with contempt. She wouldn't go anywhere near the bloody remains, surrounded by a fowl stench and buzzing flies.

- It appears we have had some action tonight. Said Jethro cheerfully. Then he greeted Nariel who just woke up.

Grendeline had slept a few hours and dreamed. She dreamed of silver dragons. In her dream she was a young silver dragon herself. It all seemed so real to her, she looked somewhat in surprise on her human hands and body as she woke up. She didn't mention the dreams.

- Let's pack up and leave! She said.

Miri Akarso and Toronar Ryotakin went to see to the horses. Ryotakin loaded their packing.

After two hours of marching the city walls of Elfminster came into sight. It was at the northern edge of Gnollwood and the roaring of the rapids nearby was heard over the distance. Nariel went to visit some friends in town, but was back after a few hours. She seemed disappointed.

But Grendeline didn't ask, what the cause of her

disappointment was. Baltram Gauth went dealing with the local blacksmith and returned with a satisfied smirk on his face.

Jethro and Proth rented rooms for them in the local tavern and for most of the day the recruits had a relaxing time in the old town. They stopped in a tavern and listened to some delightful elvish music and Grendeline only envied those who could produce such beautiful sound.

There was a minstrel whose voice enchanted her and she listened to his bardic storytelling and hymns for an hour. Only Gwyness and Dielle sat with her all the while. Later, as the minstrel retired, Nariel joined them at their table.

- You wanted to know what is brewing in Gothany, she said.

- I do. Grendeline didn't have pointed ears, but they were suddenly all attention.

- The Earl of Marl has ruled for 27 years now. The first time was fine. Fine in the sense that he didn't upset the people. He had high appraisal of himself after having been appointed and he introduced strict rules in Marl. He meddled in all, without having proper understanding of how it works. When enlightened, with all appropriate respect, he became stingy. Lately he has been issuing rules which make no sense and sometimes are in conflict with each other. He has never admitted being wrong. And none of the rules seem to apply to himself. Most of the upsetting happened after he accused his first wife of conspiracy against him and had her beheaded. That was six years ago. Since then he has been married twice again. Both of his new wives are already dead.

Nariel gave the innkeeper a sign to refill her glass.

- They had accidents, she continued.

- It doesn't sound like a very nice man, said Dielle.

- What an understatement! Nariel laughed.

- Were they really accidents? Asked Grendeline.

- Let's say they were odd. But no one has any evidence of wrongdoing to present. He makes frequent use of the pillory in the marketplace. Men and women have been locked in it for the most ridiculous crimes, such as disagreeing with him, farting in the presence of the Earl, writing songs he didn't like, stepping on the tail of his cat, not being sufficiently entertaining and not laughing when the Earl told a joke. Sometimes he finds an excuse by an instant decree, created in the very moment he is disgruntled. The Marl City Militia is refusing to hold up his crazy laws. But not openly.

- So the order of Marl is in shambles, said Dielle.

- That is not all. Now he proposes to dissolve the Council of Twelve Cities. Their function will no longer be required, he said.

- What does he intend to replace them with?

Now Grendeline was curious.

- He intends to crown himself king and create the first dynasty of Marl. King Brioncarl the first.
  - Does he have any support for his mad plans?
  - Unfortunately, yes. The Lord of Orchampton, the Count of Umberwich and the Lord of Griffinton. Maybe also the Count of Golembard.
  - And the voices of reason are...?
- Nariel tilted her head and looked up at the heavy wooden beams in the ceiling.
- The new Grandmaster Wizard of Wyvernall is outraged, of course. So is the Lord of Ettingrave.
  - What about Elfminster and Dragonbar?
  - The last heir to the duke has disappeared. We don't know if the Earl had anything to do with it, but a councilor rules temporarily in each city in his stead. Until his return, they say. They take no position. Halberdale is behind the Grandmaster Wizard. Scimitark and Basilester are undecided.
  - The country is divided, noted Gwyness. She had only listened so far. Now she was worried.
  - Will it come to war?
  - That is a good question. At any rate, the elves will stay out of it. I know it from a reliable source.
  - I am suddenly not sure we should go to Marl at all, Grendeline said thoughtfully.
  - Oh, we should go, Nariel said. But not to help the Earl, but to put an end to his madness. I will go with you and I propose you find out for yourself what the matter at hand is in Marl. Don't take my word for it. You would be a fool if you believed me without having the evidence of your own eyes.
  - I am afraid I believe you. But you are right, of course. Hear all, trust nothing.
  - That sounds like a good piece of advice.

Elfminster, in spite of its name, was scarcely populated by elves. There were many, but not nearly as many as there were humans. There were almost as many dwarves in town as elves. This was in part because a group of dwarves had come from Halberdale to visit their relatives in Elfminster. A few of them were befriended, since the dwarves were a cheerful people. They were heading back the road Grendeline's party just had come. She managed to send word with one of the dwarves to Hibernau and inform the mayor and the temple of their safe arrival in Elfminster. They were only two and a half day out, but Grendeline would send letters when ever an opportunity was arising.

The dwarves of Halberdale and Dwarvendell had heard of the Earl of Marl's plans and they were going to take word home of this. It was highly unlikely they would side with Marl, they said. But they were busy mining in the mountains and make business with anyone who wishes to buy their iron and alloys. They presented a new alloy, of which their first sample had come from Northangerland.

But they were now ready to begin their own production of what they called *orichalcum*. It was a red-golden alloy, with the colours of Anahan's sash blended into each other. The metal alloy was extremely durable and could find use as helmets and formidable plate mails for heroes and army commanders.

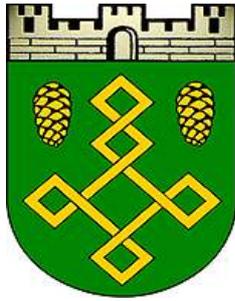
Nariel befriended a dwarf named Lerian and kept calling him "my backward dwarf" even though his name wasn't exactly her name backwards. But he had a sense of humour and called her "my forward elf", which was an accurate observation while she was under the influence of the strong dwarven ale. They told each other elvish and dwarfish stories and in the end they danced.

On the next day they parted. Dwarves heading north and Grendeline's party with the elf Nariel went south into Gnollwood. To Grendeline's rare surprise, Nariel didn't have a hangover from the drinking on the previous day. She was chirping like a bird and all smiles. She was in such a good mood that Nevis Kodari attempted to flirt with her. Repeatedly he came up with hilarious jokes, which made her laugh and then he winked at her until she asked him;

- Do you have something stuck in your eye?
  - Nah, you can't blame a man for courting a beautiful elf, can you?
  - Courting!! she said. Is that what you do? Are you aware that elves live for hundreds of years and sleep with each other for months, when making love? We don't actually sleep, you understand?
  - For months!?! Is that possible? Nevis' face went suddenly pale. He fell behind in line and after a while, thinking it over, started talking with Celtine Dryel instead.
- Grendeline laughed.
- You lied. You don't go on for months...
  - I exaggerated. Nariel admitted.

It didn't take long before the sun was blocked by the dense forest and the path ahead seemed rarely trodden.

Toronar Ryotakin was at the front cutting their way through the occasional thicket with a heavy blade. Grendeline knew it was only a matter of weeks before vegetation had reconquered their path. Plant life was relentless. A house left unattended, would be complete ruins in a matter of decades. She had left her home in Uriah's care. Her friend would keep the plants alive which were desired, and remove the undesired growth. When she would return, she couldn't say.



Gnollwood

### CHAPTER 3

*Our eyes mislead and trick us  
Forever so it be  
And in our mind we struggle  
To find what only blind men see*

*[ - The Blackhove Bard - ]*

In the evening after their first day in Gnollwood, they were fortunate to find a glade where they could set up camp. No evil had come their way and no accidents occurred during the day. It wasn't exactly what they had expected. But they did not sleep lightly in the night and the watchers were listening carefully to noise and were constantly ready to sound the alarm at once. But it remained peaceful and calm.

Dielle lying next to her friend looked up at the multitude of visible stars.

- Gren?

- Yes?

- What are they? The stars...

- I don't know. Maybe they are holes in the dome of the sky, through which the gods watch us.

- What about the wandering stars? They can't be holes if they move. And what about falling stars?

- I don't know. But I guess you're right, they can't be holes. There are three... no, four wandering stars; I can't recall their names. Except for Alcetyn which we only can see brightly for twenty years until it disappears for one hundred.

- Assarcar, Drosolis and Taupedon... Dielle named the three wandering stars. But I can't say which is which or when you see one. They move slowly, so I can't tell the difference between them and stars which do not move.

- They are sometimes brighter than stars which do not move. Grendeline proudly knew this at least.

- Do you believe they could be worlds like ours?

- I don't know. She sighed.

The second day of their journey through the forest was the same. The second night they slept undisturbed again and on the third day the

recruits began to speculate the perils of Gnollwood may have been exaggerated. Neither Grendeline, nor Nariel said anything to make them think otherwise. But they would not let their vigilance falter. When thinking oneself safe, the more vulnerable one would be. But Nariel's sensitive hearing was invaluable. When she said nothing, then there was really nothing to worry about. She shrugged and explained;

- I think I saw a squonk. I wasn't sure what it was, because it disappeared into the underbrush, but then I heard it sobbing. It's animal of sorrow. But I haven't seen or heard any boar or deer. It appears there is nothing to hunt in this part of the forest.

- It stretches far to the east. Perhaps that is where one finds both predators and their prey. We can only hope they stay out of our way, answered Grendeline.

But in the evening of the third day Nariel stopped and told everyone to stand still and if possible not to breathe. She listened intensely for a while.

Then she walked up to Grendeline and told her to continue on their way. She walked next to her.

- We are being watched and followed, she said.

- Can you say what sort of beings or how many they are? I am guessing they are on your side of the path, somewhat behind us.

- That is correct. You guessed?

- No, I saw a startled bird taking off from there.

- They are fewer than us. They speak a dark language. I can only make out a few words.

- What words?

- Morshat... gimbatul ûk...thraka...ghash

- Something... gather all, tie them up, fire... Gren translated.

- What are they? It sounds like an evil language.

- It is spoken by Orch slashers. Vicious creatures. We have to be very careful. They are not stupid. I think they expect reinforcements.

- I take it, we can expect them to attack in the night. We better sleep lightly, or not at all.

They continued through the thicket for an hour until they came to another glade. They could have gone further, but Nariel gave Grendeline a sign that the expected reinforcements of the Orchs may have arrived. They were now surrounding them on all sides.

- We better stop here. Keep your weapons at your side; horses and archers Sagitta, Miri in center; everyone form a circle around them. Rest and eat, but be prepared for an assault. This is not training, this is what you have been trained for. Expect trouble. Ready spears! The seriousness of Grendeline's voice told them that she wasn't jesting. Something evil was lurking in the thicket around them. Nariel could smell them.

They all waited, chewing on a piece of salted meat, or an apple. At first only Nariel could hear them, but after a while even with normal hearing coarse whispers could be distinguished from the rustling of trees. Somebody stepped on a dry twig, breaking it. It was close and they all felt the excruciating suspense of an imminent attack.

Grendeline had lost sight of Nariel and Proth Rokoser. They seemed to have disappeared, but as an angry growling was heard, she knew that Nariel had made a preemptive move.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Shrieks and growls came from all sides and terrifying shapes emerged from between the trees, one of them falling to the ground in front of Gwyness, who didn't get her spear up in time. It was dead. An arrow was buried in the back of its head. Some of the shapes shrieked in agony as they ran into the spears.

On one flank of the battle the Flame of Oroladian lit up the glade, cutting through horrible creatures. The bright light was unpleasant to them and their surprise made them swing their weapons through nothing but air.

Neryman Nebyed was high on adrenaline cutting frantically through attackers. Sagitta sent several into the underworld by targeting their eyes and wide open jaws. It was all over in a few moments. The remaining Orchs fled into the dark.

- We should quickly move on, said Nariel. They were overconfident and didn't use their advantage this time. They will not make the same mistake.

The small glade was littered with Orch corpses. Dielle vomited when Nariel picked up one of the severed heads. It was an ugly specimen.

Grendeline collected her throwing knives. She noted that she had hit only one target with a fatal wound. Nebyed had cut down five, Nariel five and Toronar four. He was the only one who had been wounded. A cut on his left arm. Gwyness was taking care of it. Three corpses had arrows in their heads, marked with the fletching of Sagitta.

- Only one!! Grendeline murmured to herself.

Nariel instructed Toronar to start cutting a path to the south. To Proth she said,

- You lead the horses with us. We have to lose them. Distribute the most important items among us. Take all the food, but leave the two tents.

The rest of you should continue southwest, while we create a misleading track southeast. Find the village of Manticross to the southwest. If you arrive before us, wait three days at most. Try not to leave obvious hints in which direction you went. We will join you later.

- What mistake? What advantage did they have?

Asked Miri Akarso. Her voice trembled.

- Well, had they given it more thought, they should have attacked us with missile weapons from out of the thicket. Fortunately they let themselves be provoked to a direct assault. They got a bit upset, when I cut one of them open.

Grendeline smiled.

- Ah, so that's why they suddenly came at us from all sides.

- Indeed. But now they will be more careful. We can't continue heading in the same direction. They would chase us relentlessly, unless we lose them fast. We are somewhere in the midwestern part of the forest. We better get going at once.

- What do you intend to do with the head?

- I will leave it as a provocative sign not to follow us, Nariel explained.

- You believe it will work?

- I hope so. I hope it will infuriate them and make them more determined to catch us.

- Good luck! I hope to see you later. Grendeline and nine of her recruits went southwest into the thicket without cutting their way and treading carefully through the undergrowth, stepping on as many large stones as possible, while avoiding trampling an all too obvious path to follow them by.

\* \* \*

Nariel, Jethro, Toronar and Proth with the horses did what they could to leave a more visible path. Jethro was not sure it was going to work, but Nariel assured him their pursuers wouldn't act or think as sophisticated as he did.

After two hours of trampling and cutting through the forest, they came to a small stream running west to east. It was running over a bed of rubble with little mud between the stones.

- Let's trample upstream through the water and lose the horses here. And let's hope they continue far enough south on their own.

Again, Jethro had his doubts, but didn't have any better suggestion to offer. They parted from the horses and Nariel sent them running south by slapping them high on their thighs. Then she created with Toronar's assistance a few additional signs to feign their following of the horses.

Meanwhile Proth and Jethro continued upstream, leaving less obvious tracks to follow. Nariel and Toronar soon caught up with them.

- How do we find the others? Jethro kept his mind on practical issues.

- We will find them. Nariel was confident, trusting her keen sense of hearing and smell. She also knew in taking the direction southwest, they were

going to find the shortest possible route out of the cursed Gnollwood.

- The horses were a giveaway, said Jethro. It is quite impossible not to leave a track with a horse in tow. It is still difficult without horses.

- True, admitted Nariel. Look at it from their angle. The orcs are really angry with us. And not all of them are great pathfinders, if they have any at all. Our chances are fair. I wouldn't give them much credit. On the northern side of the stream a long stretch of welcome gravel helped them to obscure their tracks.

- We should cross the stream and continue west-southwest, said Nariel. She had spotted a stone with markings on it.

- What does it mean? asked Jethro.

- It means, if we go in the direction I suggested, we ought to arrive at Manticross by morning. It is a large village on the edge of Gnollwood. If we are lucky, Grendeline's party will be waiting for us.

\* \* \*

Grendeline and her party were making progress slowly. The forest was dense where few ever have trodden. There were thornbushes, large young and old trees, dead and dying trees, fernbushes, moss, mushrooms and berrybushes in a random blend. In the late evening they came to an area where ancient ruins stood out from the undergrowth. A few tall walls and piles of brick rubble. From the tall empty windowframes she deduced this structure once would have been a sacred place, a temple or a cathedral. Half a tower seemed intact, but its roof had collapsed.

They were not given much time to examine the ruins. From out of the forest came without prior warning a light arrow which bounced off Grendeline's shadow armour.

- Take cover! She yelled.

They could all hear, barking, yapping sound, like small dogs.

- They found us! cried a terrified Miri Akarso.

Grendeline shook her head.

- No, it's not them. These are other creatures, Kobolds, I think. Let me try talking to them. And she released a series of similar barks and yaps. The answer came promptly from the forest.

- What!? This is a language? Ragnal Teikena was astonished. What do they say?

- They just want us to leave, said Grendeline.

- Tell them we'd love to leave, if they just stop shooting at us.

- I already said that.

- And what did they answer?

- They said fine. We can go.

- Really!? Who is going to stand up first?

Grendeline got up from the ground. She indicated her group would like to continue towards southwest and barked something. A yapping which sounded of approval came back.

- Fine. That's it. There is nothing to see here. Let's be on our way. Nobody is shooting at us. Slowly everyone came out of their hiding places.

- This is good for us, Grendeline thought out loud. I believe the orcs and kobolds go to great length to stay out of each others way. Even if we were followed, they would not track us through kobold territory. It means we don't have to worry so much.

- How did you learn kobold speak? Dielle was astonished. Wait! Don't tell me. You don't know. Grendeline gave her a glance which confirmed it. She didn't know this.

They continued through the forest and the ground gradually got softer and wet until they came to an area with a huge toad population.

- What is this? Frogtown? Said Ragnal.

- Not frogs, they are toads. Celtine corrected him.

- You speak toad also? Wondered Gwyness, but Grendeline only laughed in response.

- Only enchanted toads speak, I have heard. Those who are heirs to royal thrones and turn back into men if you kiss them.

- I wouldn't kiss a toad, said Celtine disgusted. Is it not more amazing to have a talking toad?

A few paces further the forest became a swamp.

- We go around it, to the south. Grendeline decided. As they proceeded south they came to a small stream running west to east and on their side was a long stretch of gravel.

Gwyness gave out a shout and pointed to the other side of the stream. There, in the distance she had spotted her brother, Proth, Toronar and Nariel. That night they didn't get a long rest, but at least they were back together.



MANTICROSS

## CHAPTER 4

*We strolled across a field  
And we saw the weirdest cow  
She had none her horns, but was happy anyhow  
We summoned the farmer to inquire this  
How come that his cow  
Both her horns seem to miss?*

CHORUS:

*Whaka-dee, whaka-doo, whaka-doe-dum-dum  
Whaka-dee, whaka-doo, whaka-doe-dum-dum  
Whaka-dee, whaka-doo, whaka-doe-dum-dum*

*The farmer was baffled but did swift reply  
Some cows lose their horns,  
I can think of reasons why  
Some folk drink their mead  
Out of horns from the beast  
Or fashion a musical horn for the feast*  
CHORUS:

*But now I shall answer your riddle instead  
This creature does well  
With no horns on its head  
No such on this animal I would endorse  
Since it's not a bloody cow,  
But an old speckled horse*  
CHORUS:

[ - Bards Reh binder & Kayat of Satyridge - ]

Outside the wooden palisade of Manticross sat a solitary lizardman. He was polishing his leather boots and hummed a harmonious reptilian song. When he spotted the approaching humans, he jumped up and quickly stepped back into his boots. He was terrified. This was obvious to both Grendeline and Nariel. Small pearls of liquid formed on his long snout.

- I did no distrroy, he said rolling the R.

- We did not say it, said Grendeline and gestured to Neryman to let his sword stay sheathed.

- Greetings!

-Grrreetings! Said the lizardman with visible relief.  
- I no no what rrolled here.

Grendeline tried to understand what he just said.

- You mean, you don't know what happened here?  
The lizardman nodded vigorously.

- Yap.

- Well, we don't know either. What is your name, reptilian?

- Me Trrrkrrr Trrraak.

- Terker Trak?

- Trrrkrrr Trrraak.

- Trker Traak? Grendeline tried to approximate his pronunciation better.

- Well, Trker, I am Grendeline. She pointed at the elf. This is Nariel and these are our... apprentices. You have nothing to fear from either one of us.

- Nariel! The reptilian repeated. Grrrendeline, good names. I can say.

- What were you doing here?

- Brrrush me brreks. He seemed to be referring to his boots.

- Why were you afraid of us and not of the folk in Manticross?

- Khrrrr....

Grendeline looked up at the unmanned tower nearby. Not one head could be seen looking down from the palisade either. Nariel listened intensely but couldn't hear any sound at all from inside the village.

- It is very quiet inside.

- Verrri quit! Confirmed Trker. Oll-ollon. Me.

- All alone?

Trker nodded vigorously again.

- Folk no hearr.

Proth, Gwyness and Jethro were already heading for the main gate.

- Well then, let's go and have a look. Said Nariel and followed.

Trker followed them curiously on some distance.

The gate was gaping open. Inside the village were deserted streets. Most doors were open and some doors were broken down.

- What happened here? Asked Dielle.

- It looks like all the village folks were taken away from here, said Jethro. Had they left by their own volition, one would have expected them to close and lock their doors.

- Unless they left in a hurry. Said Ragnal Teikena.

- But then they wouldn't have broken down their own doors, would they? Jethro added together the sum of their observations.

- It was like this when you came here? Gwyness turned around to Trker.

- Yap. Oll-ollon.

- Did you look for something to loot? Asked Miri.

- Me ungrrry. And drrrink.

- You were hungry and thirsty, clarified Miri. I see.

- There is food at the local tavern? You think? Let's lodge there and think over what we do.

Grendeline sent Neryman, Toronar and Sagitta to close the gates and to keep watch.

- Trker, do you want to stay with us?

The reptilian was undecided if he should accept the offer or not.

- More food and drink? She simplified it.

- Me ont! Yap.

- You want. Good. Then you keep watch on the far side of the palisade. Three hours shift. Alert us, if you see anything suspicious at all outside.

- Ott?

- Danger to us. You see enemy. You say.
- Yap. I say. See enemy, I say.
- Good grief! We start speak like he. Said Baltram.
- It is amazing he can speak the common tongue at all, Grendeline pointed out. I am impressed.

The door to the local tavern was open. There were a few goblets and mugs on the tables. Half emptied. Some guests were taken away in the midst of drinking ale, mead and wine.

- It is eerie, said Miri Akarso. I volunteer to do the dishes and clean up in the bar. If you would care to assist me, Baltram?

- Certainly, he answered. Vaguely enthusiastic.

On the second floor they found suitable rooms for everyone. Unused and cleaned after the previous guest.

- I am guessing the folk were taken away in the afternoon, said Jethro.

- Excellent deduction, praised Dielle.

- Not many drink beer and wine in the morning. But in the evening it would be crammed in the tavern. It looks like this is the only tavern in the village.

- I will go to the Town or Village Hall, if they have one, to see if I can find out something more. Or if they have a countinghouse, or militia barracks.

- There has to be a clue somewhere, as to where all the people have been taken.

- Sounds like a good idea. Take Ragnal with you.

In the corner Celtine Dryel found a lute and found it still well tuned. She started plucking it.

- They can't have been away for long, she said. I guess they were taken away yesterday or the day before yesterday.

- It still doesn't tell us who and why...

- Play us a song! Suggested Nevis Kodari. Then he turned to Miri and shouted.

- Bartender! May I have a stout dwarven ale!?

\* \* \*

The guard house near the gate didn't surrender any clue. Neither did what appeared to be the Village Hall. In a small shop laden with scrolls and books, Jethro found a journal on the floor. It was dated until the day before, but Jethro found all the clues he had been looking for.

The Nomad Slavers had come. They were known to have seized entire villages before, when they were short of goods to sell. The villagers had not let them in, but somehow the nomads tricked the village defenders and gained entry.

The journal ends abruptly.

- We have to take this to Grendeline immediately. He said to Ragnal Teikena.

They met a pale faced Neryman Nebyed at the door to the tavern.

- We have news, said Ragnal.

- So do I, answered the swordsman quietly.

Grendeline was listening to a ballad Celtine performed on the lute. She knew something of importance had been discovered when Jethro, Ragnal and Neryman came in at the same time.

- You have to see this, Neryman said.

The seriousness of his voice interrupted all other activity in the tavern. They all followed Neryman outside and up the palisade of the western wall.

He walked a few steps north to leave everyone space on the walkway of the palisade and then he pointed northwest.

- There, near the edge of the forest.

Grendeline and Nariel had already seen it. They heard some gasps and a muffled outcry of horror behind them.

Some two hundred paces away a group of men and women from Manticross, between 30 and 40 of the villagers, had been impaled on stakes. Behind them, a few old people were hanging from trees.

- I believe these were the people who resisted. Including the village defenders, said Neryman.

- We better take them down and burn them before they start smelling, said Nariel.

- This was done by nomad slavers, said Jethro.

- Then we hunt down these slavers and kill them. Grendeline said determined.

- They could be a lot, said Toronar who had joined them from the north wall.

- Hah! Grendeline scoffed. Killing is easy. Then she turned to Jethro again.

- Do you know what Bylsenberries look like?

- Yes, but...

- Take everyone with a weak stomach and go to the northeast edge of the forest. Gather me as many berries as you can. Dielle, Nevis, Celtine, Baltram and Miri... go with him. And nobody try something as stupid as to taste them!

- We have to build a big fire. One which doesn't start at once and one that doesn't set the entire forest on fire.

- Ragnal and Sagitta, find me a dozen beewax candles and thick sheets of paper. Books and scrolls will do if you can't find any paper without writing on them. Find me the lizardman! Where is Trker?

- What do you have in mind? Asked the elf.

- We build a pyre on the field, away from the trees and rig it with the candles and paper to not start burning until we are far away from here. If it looks like rain the lizardman, Trker, will have to start the fire prematurely. But at any rate, we should be hours closer to the slavers. They can't have gone

far, having to drag along hundreds of unwilling villagers, women and children. It shouldn't be too difficult to follow their tracks.

- Can't Trker just start the fire? Why the rigging?

- Because this lizard doesn't exactly strike me as a fire-lizard. He will be happy if he can stay as far away from it as possible. But since he is here and since we were good to him, we can perhaps count on him to do us this small favour. At the very least, he will not interfere.

\* \* \*

The stiffness of the impaled villagers had receded, and had their bodies not been so badly mutilated a clerical raise dead spell could possibly have revived one, if only Dielle or Gwyness would have reached a sufficiently high level. But raise dead spells were not yet part of their skills. Only the high priestess of the temple had acquired an advanced enough level and she was several days journey away. One of the women had been raped repeatedly before she was impaled. Grendelines anger grew inside her.

The funeral pyre was ready as Jethro and his group returned heavy laden from berry picking.

- Excellent, Grendeline praised their efforts. This looks like more than enough. Now let's grind them and squeeze out all the liquid we can get. Fill the liquid into the biggest empty bottles you can find in the tavern.

- I found something better, said Neryman anticipating her needs. He held up a huge goatskin bladder, big enough to hold all the liquid they got from the berries and far easier to carry than a collection of bottles.

- You are priceless! Grendeline noted. Excellent.

The preparations for the pursuit of the nomad slavers was swiftly done. They gathered in the tavern with the reptilian, Trker, as Jethro and Neryman filled up the goatskin bladder with the poisonous liquid.

- How will you make them drink it? Asked Nariel.

- We will see. But diluted with enough water, it will not taste all bad. Trker, we thank you, for making sure the fire will light up by dusk. I understand you hate fire, but courage is to do what needs to be done, even when you are afraid. And this needs to be done.

- Khrrr... this was a sound the reptilian made when he lacked the appropriate vocabulary.

They parted at the gates of Manticross. Trker stood there and long looked after them until they disappeared out of sight. Then he looked at the sky. It didn't look like there would be any rain.



OGRILLON HILL

## CHAPTER 5

*The fools upon the hill one night  
Were waiting for a guiding light  
But none they saw seemed true and right  
And all the stars still shine as bright.*

*[ - The Minstrel of Merrybath - ]*

They didn't need Jethro to tell them in which direction the nomad slavers had taken the captured villagers of Manticross. The slavers were fearless and had used the road.

But from the tracks, including a few carts, Jethro was able to draw conclusions only he would have been able to piece together.

- They must be more than one hundred slavers, he said. We will be hopelessly outnumbered.

They found two more hanged elders of the village in trees along the road. One of the two dangling corpses was decorated with the dignity of mayor.

- I am surprised their leader wasn't executed earlier with the rest of their defence. Perhaps he tried to spare as many lives as possible by arguing with his people not to resist. Which is why he would have been useful to the slavers.

- Until this incident...

As the sun was setting, they reached a turn in the road which over a distance revealed the slaver camp on top of a hill. It was a low hill covered with grass on its gentle slopes. But from up the hill it was easy to keep an eye on approaching enemies and defend the camp from attackers.

- Behind us! Said Neryman suddenly. They turned and saw a thin column of smoke. The pyre at Manticross was lit.

- They are going to see that. Said Dielle.

- Yes, I hope they do. Said Grendeline. And they will not expect us to be as close as we are. We better circumvent their camp, because many of their eyes will be in this direction once the fire catches properly.

They abandoned the road and followed a bushy path to the south of the slaver hill camp. As they came closer they could see two large enclosures in the camp, where the villagers were held captive. Nariel noticed a recently constructed well on the south side of the hill. She pointed to it with her whole arm and asked Grendeline;

- Is that what you were looking for?

Grendeline only nodded, but suddenly had a mischievous smile written all over her face.

- There is one slaver at the well. Said Jethro.

- And another one coming with buckets, added Neryman Nebyed.

- Can you take them out? She looked at Sagitta.

- I can take one, perhaps. But the other will raise hell. Sagitta placed an arrow on her bow.

- I can take the other one, said Nariel confidently, bringing forth her shortbow.

- Do it!

As the slaver with the buckets reached the fountain, he and his comrade lowered them into the well and brought up two buckets of clear and fresh water. Both of them unwittingly found their necks pierced by arrows as Sagitta and Nariel shot simultaneously. Before either of them could make any further sound, they were cut down by Nebyed and Jethro Retekin who lurked hidden in the bushes, prepared to strike.

- Proth, said Grendeline. You are the only one here who can do this. Sneak up into the camp and tell the villagers not to drink any water tonight.

Which one of us looks remotely like one of the slavers? She studied the faces of the two slain men. Proth was already halfway up the hill. It was easier to follow his progress from below and behind than to be spotted from the hill.

- No one among us look remotely as ugly as these fellows, Grendeline ascertained. Do we have two volunteers who slips into their outfits and carries these buckets back up to the camp?

Baltram Gauth and Nevis Kodari felt up to the task. Nevis had long wanted to contribute with something useful to do.

- Avoid eye contact, don't engage into any conversation and try to be back as quickly as possible. But don't run unless you have to.

She poured Bylsenberry extract into both buckets.

- Why don't we poison the well itself? Asked Miri, who felt it would have been an easier trick.

- Because, explained Grendeline, the water from this well would be undrinkable for years. And we want to drink water ourselves. Not to mention the villagers who might be thirsty.

From uphill shouting could be heard. They had finally laid eyes on the column of smoke coming from Manticross. The pyre would now be burning with full force.

- This could be to our advantage, said Nariel and urged on Baltram and Nevis, who still were in the process of undressing the two slavers, to hurry.

- Let's keep our fingers crossed, said Dielle as the two watercarriers began their ascent.

Roaring laughter was heard from the camp. The slavers were confident having had their mission successfully accomplished. Their numbers made them feel invulnerable and safe. Proth had already disappeared out of sight as Baltram and Nevis reached the top of the hill. Shortly after all three of them were out of sight.

- Now, all we can do is to wait.

This was still true as Baltram and Nevis slowly returned. No one had paid any attention to them. Except one slaver who told them to fetch more water.

- We go one more time? They asked.

- You feel up to it? The more you expose yourself, the greater the risk that you will be detected. But they both felt confident about carrying one more round of poisoned water.

- Will it kill them? I hope so! Said Baltram.

- I'm afraid not. Perhaps a few of them. But all who drink it, will be in pain tonight and it will make them poor fighters. We will still have to finish them off by the sword, mace and spear.

- Can I just club them to death with a log of wood? Said Toronar who felt the slavers were not worthy of perishing by conventional weaponry.

- Oh, tonight will be a bloodbath at any rate. You can be sure of that.

As Baltram and Nevis returned the second time they were coming down in notable haste.

- Ogrillons, gasped Baltram, they have Ogrillons among them! Huge bastards.

- How many?

- At least three.

- One or two would not be much of a problem, but three or more can be. Said Nariel. Will your drink affect the ogrillons?

- This depends... Grendeline gave it some thought and continued, depends on how much ogre and how much orch-heritage they have. Ogrillons are usually the offspring of an ogre raping an orch female.

- Yuk! What a disgusting image this produces. Dielle's turned away her face.

- One in ten ogrillons may not be affected at all, and the others may only feel some intestinal discomfort. They would still be able to fight and possibly be more fierce and enraged.

- They also have pretty good darkvision, added Ragnal Teikena to their worries.

Grendeline sighed.

- This is going to be more difficult than what I expected.

Darkness had fallen when Proth Rokoser returned from his mission. The Manticross villagers in the enclosures were advised not to drink any water given to them this night, nor should they ask for any additional fresh water. It would not be difficult. They already had wooden troughs inside their confinement filled up with water and some with a mixture of grains which resembled a porridge. They were expected to eat and drink like pigs and cows from these troughs. If they used any for washing, they would have one trough less with drinking water.

Nobody came to look for the two missing men.

This was another sign that there were a lot of slavers in the camp and that not everyone knew or cared about what their comrades did. Proth had also eavesdropped on slavers who talked about their intentions for the following day. They would break camp and herd their captives westwards to a plain between Orchampton and Blackhove.

There they would set up the slavemarket and collect gold and riches for all of them. Some more gold for their masters, but plenty for all to drink and feast for a whole week. He also found out that there were seven ogrillions, but that they were not allied with the slavers, but had to endure them on their hill for this one night. He estimated the number of slavers to one hundred and eighty.

- And nobody saw you!? Nariel was astonished.

- Nobody saw me. And nobody seemed to mind if they were being followed from Manticross or not.

- They are really over-confident, said Grendeline.

- We have this to our advantage.

- The huts of the ogrillions are on the far side of the hill, to the north. Proth added.

- Now we wait. Said Grendeline.

- What do we wait for?

- There will be a clear sign for us, when it is time to attack. Two groups, Neryman, Baltram and Dielle with me, Sagitta, Nevis and Celtine behind us with bows. Proth, Jethro and Toronar with Nariel and Miri, Ragnal and Gwyness behind them with bows and sling. Do not split up so we lose sight of each other. Sweep towards one side of the camp or the other, depending on where we meet more resistance. Do not go forward unless Nariel and I decide it is advised to do so. Do not engage the ogrillions unless they attack you. Oh, how I wish now we had a couple of fireball spells.

- Gren, said Nariel.

- Yes?

- You do not have a sword!

Grendeline looked down in surprise at her belt. She gasped.

- You're right, I don't seem to have a sword!

Nariel stared at her in disbelief, but regained her composure quickly. Then she remarked; somehow

I get the feeling this doesn't make you any less deadly.

- No, I feel a weapon in hand gives its wielder a deceptive self-confidence.

- Not this weapon, said Nariel and clapped the hilt of Oroladians Flame.

- It pleases me, that you trust me so much now. Said a muffled voice, which Grendeline believed came from inside Nariel's sheath.

- It speaks!? Your sword speaks?

- Uh, oh... not much. Very rarely... At least I think it does. Sometimes... did you hear anything? I didn't hear it.

- That was a neat trick, said Dielle. I didn't know you could throw your voice.

- That's what it was, said Nariel, laughing, a trick. Swords don't talk, everyone knows this.

- Actually, said Ragnal Teikena who had not heard anything of the previous part of the dialogue.

- There are a few enchanted swords which are known to have this ability. But none of them, save for one, ever did much talking. Most of the time they shut up, in particular when they are happy with their wearer. If they dislike their owner, it can be hard to make them shut up. Once there was a fabulous sword, chosen to rule an entire kingdom. The sword ruled long and wisely until...

- Not now, Ragnal!

A group of six slavers were casually strolling down the hillside. One of them complained about pain in his stomach.

Grendeline's party quickly took cover behind bushes, shrubs and treestubs. In the dark none of them were easy to spot unless one knew they were near. For a brief moment she worried if starlight could be reflected in Dielle's or Gwyness' plate mail armour. The two clerics were lying closely pressed to the ground.

The slavers were not wary of any danger, not even of possible orch or bear attacks. Three of them appeared to be intoxicated by beer or wine.

As they lowered a bucket into the well, arrows and bullets from slings showered them unexpectedly. With her usual precision Sagitta's arrow hit her target in the throat and four of the slavers died before they could make a sound. The one whose stomach caused grief had time to express his astonishment over the attack. But not very loud. Only one slaver yelled a word of warning up the hill before he was cut down by Neryman's merciless sword. They all held their breath in anticipation, but no one on the hill heard the shouting. No one came to see what was going on.

- We attack now? Neryman was impatient.

Grendeline suspected he was enjoying the killing.

- Not yet.

They waited at the base of the hill, carefully

listening to the sounds from the slavers camp. It appeared they were all going to rest.

- Now? Said Toronar after a while. Also he gave the impression he looked forward to do battle.

Grendeline felt it best to dampen their eagerness slightly.

- When ever you fight by sword, you best be ready to die. Better still... think of yourself as dead at the beginning of the battle. Fear makes you victims. The only victory you can win in battle is your life back. We may have a small advantage tonight. They will not expect us to attack them, some of them may be sleeping and...

A distinct groaning was heard from the camp.

- ...and many of them may not be in a fighting condition right now. That's our signal. Let's do this. In two groups of seven they slowly approached the camp of slavers. More groaning and wailing was heard from above. The poisoned water was beginning to take effect.

A loud crashing was heard from the far side of the camp. Proth was sent to investigate and returned after a brief survey. Apparently a disagreement between slavers and ogrillons had led to skirmish between them. The ogrillons had noticed that several slavers were incapacitated by something and felt no longer the need to keep a good face with their sudden neighbours.

- When two are fighting, the third is rejoicing! Said Grendeline. An old pearl of wisdom.

- Let them fight! Meanwhile, we can perhaps silently clean up this side of the camp, hut by hut. She allowed the eager Neryman and Toronar to go first into the nearest hut. They came out after less than a minute, both blood stained.

- Clean! Commented Toronar dryly.

- Yeah, confirmed Neryman. Nothing moving in there... anymore.

- Fine, thought Grendeline aloud. We let them continue if they enjoy it so much and allow them to also enter first into the next hut. A muffled scream was the only sound heard from within and both emerged as fast from the second hut as they had from the first.

- Clean, Toronar commented dryly again.

- Apparently we don't need to have any particular strategy at all. This is not a fight, this is an onslaught, a massacre. Commented Nariel.

- Let's not begin to feel sorry for them, even if they are a pitiful lot. Don't forget what they did, reminded Grendeline.

- Oh, I don't feel sorry for them.

A drunk slaver attacked Grendeline from the side. He hit the ground so fast, they could barely make out the movements she made, covering his mouth and breaking his neck.

Dielle was stunned. She glanced at her friend in

sincere awe. She would never have expected an old woman to move so fast and to be so deadly.

From out of the dark came an arrow and buried itself into Nevis Kodari's chest. He looked at it in surprise and stuttered; *I.. I am.. wounded!* Then he collapsed to the ground.

Proth Rokoser disappeared into the shadows and Sagitta shot off a couple of arrows into the direction the arrow hitting Nevis had come from.

The skirmish on the north side of the camp, between slavers and ogrillons had escalated into a fully fledged battle. Slaver skulls were crushed and ogrillons were fighting with several arrows in their bodies. None of them were yet defeated.

On the south side, several slavers discovered the other danger to their camp, represented by Grendeline, Nariel and her party. But their attacks were disorganized and feeble.

The arrow buried in Kodari's chest was a lucky shot. One of the slavers was desperately yelling;

- Where's Apone, where's Apone?!

- Forget it, he's gone! Shouted another slaver.

Grendeline lost count of how many slavers they had slain, but drunk and moaning slavers were stumbling around until they were cut down. There was no order at all among them.

Nariel had not brought out her flaming sword yet. She disposed one slaver after the other with well aimed arrows from her shortbow. Toronar and Neryman appeared to be in a state of bloodrush. The two of them came down on their enemies with seldom seen fury. Jethro, Gwyness, Ragnal and Celtine were also snuffing out the spirit of many slavers, but moved together near Gren and Nariel with cautious advances, while Sagitta, Miri and Baltram were covering Dielle who tended to Kodari's wound.

After an hour two ogrillons were on the ground and every slaver in sight. Possibly slavers may have run off the hill into the dark night. The five remaining ogrillons started to feast on the bodies of their fallen enemies.

Neryman and Toronar looked at Grendeline.

- Shall we end them too?

- Do they bother us? No. Will they prevent us from releasing the captives? No. What reason do we have to attack them? Simply because we don't like their race? What for? Worst case... see how many slavers they killed! They might kill one of us.

- Ah, I guess you're right. Admitted Toronar.

The battle was over and they gathered around Dielle and Nevis Kodari. She had tears in her eyes and he didn't make any sound or movement. Grendeline's fear was confirmed when Dielle announced to them the loss of their friend.

- He is dead. I couldn't save him. Nariel kneeled and caressed his cheek. Sorry, friend!

## A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

### CHAPTER 6

*Every journey has an end  
For every foe and every friend  
Ere we part from kin and thee  
Pray it's not the last we see*

[ - *The Minstrel of Dwarvendell* - ]

The most impressive hut in the slavers camp was the one in the middle. Grendeline asked Nariel to cut a new door to it from the side. The Flame of Oroladian lit up the night as she cut the opening. They peered inside.

What they saw explained a lot about the poor vigilance of the slavers. A fat and phlegmatic chieftain rested among his courtesans, barely taking notice of the intrusion. He had no guards.

- We better leave him to the ogrillons, and also his ladies if they don't have the wisdom to abandon him in the morning. We should use one of the vacated huts to get some rest. At least those of us who need rest. We say our farewell and make the pyre for Nevis in the morning before we turn south.

They opened the enclosures of the villagers. It was not a good time for them to head back for Manticross, but they still had enough and decent people to keep watch and help their saviours. As Grendeline and Nariel learned from their new spokesperson, the hanged mayor of Manticross had indeed prevented unnecessary sacrifices of family men. But in the end his mediating became his own annihilation. It was one of the villagers who noted that the loss of their saviours was proportionate to the loss of the villagers, who had lost one of fourteen, including the old and frail judged useless by the slavers.

Dielle was still broken up about the death of Kodari. She felt responsible, not having been able to save his life. Grendeline sent her to sleep. With Nariel she sat down at one of the many campfires still burning. Nariel threw two more logs on the fire. She accepted gratefully the blanket a passing villager handed to her.

- You don't need sleep as much as the humans, Grendeline said. Neither do I. More often I sleep because I like to dream. And the younger I get, the less sleep I will need. There is something I am curious about. If we are the same... If you are one and I am one, how come you look so young?

Nariel laughed.

- I thought that would be obvious. I am an elf, we

elves really live for hundreds of years. I was a young elf when I became one and even after sixty years, I barely reach mature age. Then I become younger again.

- And this is why you don't forget?

- I guess so. I have not really met many immortals and have rarely spent as much time with any of them, as I spend with you.

- Why do you stay with us?

Nariel looked into the fire.

- We met a long time ago, she said. You were always a good leader and always a good...

Grendeline was wondering why Nariel hesitated.

- Were you going to say "person"? And you are not sure I am a person?

- As I said, I am not convinced that you are entirely human.

- What else can I be?

Nariel suppressed a laughter.

- How many beings can shapeshift?

- I don't know. Gods, shapeshifters... obviously, and doppelgangers... changelings, rakshasha, tsochar, werepeople...lycanthropes...

- You are none of that, Nariel said with conviction.

But your name alone is a hint at something hidden inside you. Something which some may consider a monstrosity. But I don't really believe that.

- Do you know why we age forwards and backwards in an endless circle?

- Not endless. We can be killed. Many of us have been killed and their places were taken by others who became immortals.

- How?

- You wear it. Under your shadow armour. I also have one. Exactly the same. Nariel stuck a hand into her gown and brought out a small flat amulet. Grendeline's hand went in reflex to her chest. She had not given it a second thought for a long time. Now she could feel its presence. Nariel was telling the truth. She had one, exactly the same.

- This is what ties us to Alcetyn?

- Yes, and I believe there are sixty of them. Her amulet disappeared inside her gown as quickly as she had pulled it out. It was not an item she wanted to pull attention to. Nor did she ever show that she was wearing one. Except this one time.

- If people knew what it is, they would kill us for it. This has happened over and over again. There were six of us, 72 years ago. We were looking for answers. We went to see the oracle.

- What happened?

Again Nariel looked into the fire.

- I didn't expect my mentor to betray us. He was one of us. But he had already received all of his answers. And what he wanted to do, is to transfer our immortality to his personal friends, favourites and followers.

- So we were not his friends?  
 - I was stupid. I was convinced we were friends. But also teacher and student, of course. I could not believe he had ulterior motives. You thwarted his plans.  
 - I did???

- Yes, and I tried to kill you for it.  
 Grendeline's mouth opened to a response, but she was baffled and all of a sudden unable to produce a sound.

- You didn't succeed, it seems.  
 - Oh, I had you down, but then he, Oroladian confirmed your suspicions and I suddenly realized that you had been right all along.  
 - I have to take your word for it, because I do not remember a thing of all this. Not anything. What did you do?  
 - Disarm him! In fact, the flame itself helped me.  
 - The Flame was his sword?  
 - Yes. He created it. And he was good when he created it. But the sword rejected him, when he turned evil. Now it guides my hands.  
 - Ah, so you couldn't have pulled the sword as we killed the slavers, even if you had wanted to.  
 - No. It won't allow me to kill a defenceless being. Evil or not.  
 - Your shortbow doesn't have an opinion.  
 - Right and wrong is not always clear, neither is good and evil. But evil is tainting good sooner than the other way around. It's like shit and wine. Grendeline looked inquisitively at her.  
 - How do you mean?  
 - Well, if you pour a glass of shit into a bucket of wine, then you have a bucket of shit. But if you pour a glass of wine into a bucket of shit, then you still have a bucket of shit.\*<sup>1</sup> This is why there is so much evil in the world. Or why it appears so.  
 - I have a different idea. Said Grendeline.  
 - What?  
 - I believe evil comes from ignorance and fear. It takes time to learn, to accumulate knowledge and wisdom. Have you noticed that older people are more giving and friendly than younger people?  
 - Not always.  
 - True. Age is no guarantee for wisdom. But those who have it understand they don't take anything with them from this life. The same goes for us. We may not die today, but living itself is a risk. Every day we can die. A random arrow can snuff out our lives, like it did to Nevis.  
 - We don't think much about it... admitted Nariel.  
 - No, but so it is. Every day can be our last day. But children are born into the world every day and before they understand what it means to be mortal, they first have to learn how to live.  
 - And when they just about have learned how to live, they become arrogant and think they know it

all. Death is still far away from them, because in all their lives, they have only known life. They sat silently and stared into the flames of the camp fire.

- Thank you, for not killing me when you had the chance, said Grendeline.  
 - You're welcome.  
 - Where do we go from here?  
 - Many have asked the very same question. The answer is simple. We go forward, meet the future. Regardless of what we can expect. It is so much easier to do with friends at your side.  
 - Friends die, beasts die. I know only one thing that doesn't die. The judgment over the dead.\*<sup>2</sup>

Nariel looked at her. Light and shadows from the fire were dancing in Grendeline's face.

- It sounds like something you read somewhere.  
 - Yes, I did. You're right. Don't ask me where it was written. I don't remember.  
 Again they both stared into the fire for a long time. It was Grendeline who first spoke again.  
 - We are not really immortal, are we?  
 - No, it will be a big surprise for us when we die.  
 - Why do we even use the word immortal? Oh, and what became of Oroladian? Did you kill him?  
 - No, he escaped with a second amulet.  
 - What about the other two? Who were they?  
 - Ruyard Duryoda, was one. We lost touch. He would not be going by the same name now. But if we found him, it would probably be of great help. That is, if we want to be six again at the oracle.  
 - And then...?  
 - Nexus Atatkyo, a great wizard. He later became the Grandmaster Wizard of Wyvernall.  
 - And ruler of Gothany for 48 years.  
 - Yes, confirmed Nariel. He was killed.  
 Grendeline had again a sudden vision. A flash of vague memory.  
 - I knew him, she said. He was killed by a drow.  
 - I wasn't there. Nariel had not heard this story and Grendeline was still unable to tell it.

\* \* \*

At sunrise, Gren and Nariel were huddling at the camp fire. Proth and Jethro were the first to come out of their huts. They had rested well through the night.

The villagers of Manticross were preparing to return to their home. Some men picked up weapons from the slavers.

- Do you know how to use those? Jethro asked.  
 - You don't want to hurt yourself.

- - -

\*1 – Quote by Terry Pratchett in Dortmund 1999.

\*2 – Havamal, verse 77

- I was on the village defence, but off duty when the slavers came, one answered. We still have a few able men. We will have to train the younger men and women.

Their spirit was not broken. With this tribe of slavers out of their vicinity, they would be allowed to prosper for a long, long time.

- Should we burn or bury the slaver bodies before we leave?

- Perhaps the ogrillons would have an issue with us depriving them of their food. Said Grendeline. Better leave it as it is. If they don't like the stench which will arise and don't know how to preserve their bounty, it will be their problem.

A familiar sound was heard behind Jethro and Proth. It was closer to a purring than a growling.

- Khrrrrrrr...

Jethro didn't need to turn around to know what he would see. The reptilian Trker Traak had joined them again, coming all the way from Manticross in the night.

- Oll-ollon! He said. Me no like.

- Yes, you are probably safer with us, said Nariel. We are unlikely to kill you, just because you are different.

- I think he knows. Said Grendeline.

Trker looked at the devastation around the slavers camp and shuddered.

- Exterrminated... he noted gingerly. You drrread.

All the Hibernau recruits gathered logs to build up the fire Gren and Nariel had been sitting at. They prepared the pyre for their fallen comrade, Nevis.

- Final words to our friend? Anyone? Said Grendeline.

- He was the one among us who was enjoying living the most, said Gwyness.

- We will miss him, said Miri.

- Good bye! Said Jethro quietly and his friend Proth didn't say anything at all, but assumed a posture which was one of respect and a salute to Nevis Kodari. Toronar and Neryman followed his example.

- Khrrr... Good perrrrson. Trker remarked.

Celtine sang a sad song. Her gentle voice was perfectly in tune with the moment and soon there were tears in the eyes of most who stood around the fire listening. Toronar and Neryman placed Kodaris body on the pyre.

The villagers started their long walk back home. A group of three came to say their farewell.

- As long as there is one in Manticross who remembers this day, you will all have a place to rest if you ever come to see us again, said their leader, who upon their return was most likely to become chosen the new mayor.

- We thank thee. Answered Grendeline. It is good

to know. Farewell!

Grendeline, Nariel, the Hibernau recruits and the reptilian Trker filled up their flasks at the well below the hill and went south along the road. The sunlight was more benevolent than it had been previously in the Month of Bloom. They were on the verge of Youngsummer and it was a good time to be on the road. By late afternoon they crossed the river Stansa over a large arched stonebridge.

A caravan of traders from out of Golembard, heading for Blackhove were coming from the other direction and set up a quick road shop for the travellers they met.

Jethro Retekin brought forth a well filled purse of coins to buy fruits, bread and cheese for them all.

- Where did the coin come from? Asked Nariel.

- Oh, said Jethro. Proth and I felt the commander of the nomad slavers had plenty to spare. We just walked into his hut and filled up a few bags with gold. He didn't have any objections. In fact, he encouraged us to help ourselves.

- Ironically. Proth explained.

- Yeah, well... you know how irony is wasted on me. I always believe what people say. Except, of course when I don't.

From the chuckles and smiles among the group, Grendeline suspected that more purses than those of Jethro and Proth had been filled.

- Are Nariel and I the only ones who didn't think of looting the slavers before leaving?

- I believe so, said Gwyness. But we let most of the wealth go with the villagers to Manticross.

- They had lost so many, added Jethro.

- Well, the initiative was...

- ...commended! Nariel filled in. It may still come in handy in future.

Grendeline realized that no real harm was done. Her personal feelings about looting were not a universally accepted practice. The replenishment of supplies was welcome. They were even able to acquire a new pack horse. Expensive for its advanced age, but the younger horses they lost in Gnollwood, were possibly with them a shorter time than what this pack horse could be. It always depends on what surprises the future brings, she thought.

By evening they set up camp on an open field beside the road. Ragnal Teikena took out their journal and started updating it with the events of the previous night and their one encounter on the journey along the south road. Jethro spotted a milestone on the road as he went hunting with Sagitta. They were still twenty miles or a six hours journey from Immerhûk. He had heard about the small town between Golembard and Blackhove.

It had a small but famous wizard academy and a maze dungeon underneath in which it was easy to

get lost. Next day they would be there.



IMMERHÛK

## CHAPTER 7

*Would you like to live forever  
Then you have to follow me  
I can show you many places  
Where you'd rather like to be  
Grains of sand run through our fingers  
Tell me what do you see?  
It's a handful infinity.*

[ - The Bard of Basilester - ]

Late in the afternoon on their tenth day out of Hibernau, they arrived in Immerhük. It was the day before Midweek and the last day of Bloom.

- Immerrhook! Said Trker.

- No, it's Immerhük, a long u-sound, corrected Ragnal and examined on distance the sharp spikes on the lower part of the iron-bar-gate. Immerhük was surrounded by low town walls, kept no guards and only a lonesome lookout on their battlement near the gates. It was one of the oldest towns in all of Gothany. It had never been under siege.

Their inhabitants seemed obsessed with planting various rosebushes around their estates. One more colourful and impressive than the other. The buildings were almost exclusively half timbered with flat-tile rooftops.

The specialized master wizards preferred to live in small towers, some of which slightly taller than the city walls. The invoker, the enchanter, the diviner, the conjurer, the necromancer, the abjurator and the illusionist all had their own study in the highest room of a wizard tower.

- Perhaps we can pick up a few spells here, said Nariel.

- You believe the wizards will teach you any? It was Baltram Gauth who scoffed at this idea.

- Wizards don't share their secrets.

- It shows what you know, answered the elf. I know two spells already.

- What spells do you know? Asked Ragnal.

- Well, Nariel hesitated. One is more of a simple cantrip, but I know the *featherfall*. It makes me come down softly if I should fall from a height. It has saved me more than once.

- That can be a useful spell, noted Grendeline.

- I have also learned *sphere of dread*, but it scares me as much as it scares my enemies. I have to learn controlling it. It would scare you lot.

- I guess that's why magic is not in the hands of humpty and dumpty. If everyone would be able to cast a spell, this land would be in chaos. It was Baltram Gauth who commented on this.

Nariel didn't let herself be discouraged.

- I would like to learn *magic missile* while we are here, she announced cheerfully. It always hits its target.

- How do you plan on having a wizard revealing this trick to you?

- It is in the school of evocation.

- Invoke... evoke...? The difference was not clear to Dielle, who did more invoking than evoking in respect to the gods.

- Invoke... you call upon, while evoke is to call to mind, explained Nariel.

As they were chattering about these differences of calling upon forces and things, a tall man draped in an exquisitely stitched purple and golden robe of an archmage blocked their stroll through town. He stood in their way with natural authority.

It may have been possible to simply walk around him, but Grendeline felt it would be a grave mistake to do so.

- Greetings! She said instead.

- Welcome to Immerhük the wizard answered. You bring us apprentices? He asked. I already sense strong and powerful magic around the two of you. He gestured towards Grendeline and Nariel.

Before they were able to answer he continued;

- We regrettably only have one position open for an apprentice. You! He pointed at Celtine Dryel.

Grendeline turned in surprise to Celtine.

- Would you like to learn the ways of magic?

- Oh, I am flattered... and surprised... and I feel honoured. But... she hesitated. Can I have some time to consider it?

- You have until the sun sets. Answered the wizard. Come to the tower of the archmage.

- Who do we have the honour of speaking with...?

Grendeline's question remained unanswered. The wizard suddenly disappeared into thin air.

- Dimension door! Whispered Nariel to her.

- I am flabbergasted, Grendeline admitted. Let's find a tavern in town and talk about it.

The inn was not at all hard to find. Baltram

pointed at a sign which had become visible as the wizard stepped out of the way.

It was *The Fellow's Inn*. The barkeeper Wilfried was a jovial character, who brought them a round of beer so fast, as if he already knew what they were going to order.

They found a long table where all of them found a seat. Even the reptilian whose behind required a special chair because of his lizard tail. Such a chair was already at his place.

- Celtine, you have a rare opportunity here. Grendeline reassured her. I would not hesitate if I were you.

- Yes, but I would have to stay here. For years... And perhaps I will never see you again.

- Nonsense! Said Nariel, we come to visit you.

- Yes, you can be sure of that, confirmed Miri and Sagitta, both excited that one of them was given this chance.

- Incredible krrrunboon! Said Trker.

- He seemed impressed by your *sphere of dread*-spell, even if you haven't learned to control it yet.

Said Jethro to Nariel. But you also know a spell? Now he was looking at Grendeline.

- I don't think he was speaking of spells, Jethro. Magic takes on many forms. So, Celtine, you have to jump at this. You really should!

- Yes, I guess I take it...

As they were ordering the second round of beverages Wilfried came to their table with a full tray.

- Seven dwarven ale, said Grendeline. Four goblets of red wine.

- Seven dwarven ale, four goblets of red wine, Wilfried repeated, lifting the order off his tray.

- A glass of fresh water for our reptilian friend.

Wilfried put down the glass of water in front of Trker and had only one mug left on his tray.

- ...and a mug of mead for me, please. Said Miri.

- Ah, we are in luck, said Wilfried and put down the mug of mead in front of her.

- There is no such luck, Wilfried. How did you know exactly what we were going to order?

- I didn't, assured Wilfried. But wizards are very impatient customers and once a wizard created this unique spell, imbuing me with it. Years ago. It has not worn off yet.

- Was he a diviner? Inquired Nariel.

- That may have been his school, yes, madam.

- How do wizard schools usually recruit their apprentices, Gren? Nariel sat at the other side of the table, just across from her.

- They travel from town to town, until they find specially tuned folk, explained Wilfried who still was at their table. They all looked up at him in surprise. Wilfried turned and went back to the bar. Nariel leaned forward with a mischievous smile.

- So, Gren... Why don't you let me go with Celtine and negotiate for us. Uhm... for her?

- I wouldn't know how to negotiate with a wizard, answered Grendeline. I have no idea what we can ask for.

- It so happens, I do. Nariel got up from her chair.

- Wilfried, where is the tower of the archmage?

- Honourable Lord Elkin's tower? You passed it on your way here. To the left, the grand tower with brown wooden beams and an orange façade.

- So near! Then he was standing outside his own tower. Celtine? Ready to go? We just go and give him your answer and then we return here for your going-away party.

As Nariel and Celtine approached the door to the tower of the archmage, its front door swung open.

The ground floor of the tower was one large and impressive looking room. It was filled with books and neatly stacked scrolls. A yellowish framed map of Gothany decorated an entire wall. There was a large spherical object in the room and the honourable Lord Elkin was standing in front of it, combing his long grey beard with the fingers.

Nariel bowed respectfully.

- Greetings again, Master Elkin. We have come to offer you this apprentice in return for two very small favours.

The wizard scoffed.

- What favours?

One scroll and four weeks vacation every year for the apprentice, Celtine.

- Three weeks. I teleport her to her destination.

What scroll?

- Oh, nothing fancy. A low, first level spell. Magic missile. Nariel held her breath.

- That's it?

- That would suffice, Master Elkin.

The wizard laughed. It's a good thing you are not greedy.

- We have a deal. When can you start? He approached Celtine and she suddenly appeared smaller, next to the wizard.

- At the end of the day, or tomorrow morning?

The fresh appointed magician's apprentice asked.

- Tomorrow morning in this room is fine, said the wizard who obviously was in a good mood after the easy negotiation. Celtine was also happy, because she knew she could return to Hibernau for three weeks every year, or go anywhere she wanted to. Nariel was happy because she got the scroll she wanted. It was perhaps even time to find a small spellbook.

- Then, if our business is concluded, we return to the tavern. We are giving our young lady here a going-away party. Which is kind of ironic, because it will be us who are going away and she stays.

- Until tomorrow, Elkin nodded to Celtine.  
- Let us have this one evening with no sorrows, said Jethro Retekin. Food and drink for everyone, my friend Proth pays! As Nariel and Celtine returned, he pointed to the podium where a lute was leaned against the back of a chair.  
- Please, Celtine! Honour us with a song!  
- Yay!!! They all cheered and applauded.  
Celtine picked up the lute and plucked it. Then she tightened one string a little until she was satisfied with the sound. Then she sang;

*Remember this song when your soul is in pain  
That too many hearts have been broken in vain  
Your passion was not only blind, but insane  
To court the Duke's daughter at dawn  
No pedestal craved for the bold, nor the fair  
The idol is used as a fraud and a snare  
We all build our castles high up in the air  
It will be all right in the morning*

*We ask not what for, where from, or who may  
Consider, for us, there is no other way  
As sure as each dawn declares the next day  
No matter if Penthos is dormant  
Bereavement is also release from a tie  
Each gain is a loss, please, do not ask why  
And since all the gods themselves must die  
It will be all right in the morning*

*With gaiety and with a mind that is strong  
You can be successful when chance comes along  
While honour and dignity rarely is wrong  
The duchess required a Prince Charming  
And if you are tempted for her to aspire  
One can only hope that your reckless desire  
Is kept warm in hell, underground by the fire  
It will be all right in the morning*

*Unquiet we slumber in this quiet earth  
Compassionate souls pray what it's worth  
Let's hope for the best at our rebirth  
At night we surrender our yearning  
Our quest is too short and with limited bliss  
Can it possibly come more putrescent than this  
But don't let your spirit wither and miss  
The joy of a wonderful morning*

The round of applause was heartwarming. It came not only from their table but from all around the tavern. Celtine already knew how to enchant folk with the power of her voice. It was magic of a sort.

As the round of applause had receded Celtine sang a few more songs until her throat got dry. Then she announced a break and let someone else play a tune.

- Any volunteers? She shouted.  
No one seemed eager to perform after Celtine,

but Trker the reptilian stood up from his chair and raised a scaly hand.

- Trker! Let's hear a song of the lizardfolk!  
Grendeline was about to issue a word of warning, but everyone cheered for Trker as he got up on the podium and she suppressed her doubts. Perhaps reptilians had an entirely different idea of harmonies. They did. It started with a rolling base  
- Rrrrrrr....

Grendeline held her breath, ready to get up on the podium and defend the lizard, should people start throwing rotten food and worn out shoes at him.

*Rrrraw korrrraa trrrtrree... he sang.*

Grendeline relaxed. The song was not the kind of harmony they were used to, but didn't sound bad. It was a strangely weird song with an intricate rhythmical pattern and a soothing rolling of the R in what she assumed was the back of Trkers throat.

There was a distinguishable chorus going;

*Rrrraw korrrraa trrrtrree... and everyone at their table started to sing along on the chorus as closely as it was possible for a human to mimic the language of the reptilian.*

*Rrrraw korraw tr-tree...*

The sound of them all singing together sent shivers down her spine. It was so beautiful. Even Proth was singing along and Jethro revealed a talent of choral improvising. His voice of the chorus was a few notes above the others.

More guests came in from the street to listen to the singing lizard. They stood enchanted by the bar and by the door. And when Trker finished his song it brought down a thunder of applause.

Wilfried was so impressed, he came immediately after the song to offer Trker a job as entertainer at *the Fellows Inn*. Well... and when he wasn't doing that, he could always help out in the bar.

Trker hopped over to Grendeline and Nariel and asked them if he should accept the position. He was happy and it seemed as if it really was something he wanted to do.

- We really don't want to stand in your way. They said. Besides, if you also stay in Immerhûk, then you can keep an eye on Celtine for us. Make sure that she has no trouble.

- No oll-ollon, he said with a terrifying smile. Trker had his long sharp teeth exposed when smiling.

- Oooh, don't smile any more, advised Nariel.

- Onkh, sorri!

The next morning only twelve of them continued on their journey. Celtine entered Lord Elkin's tower and Trker waved goodbye from the doors of *the Fellow's Inn*.



HIGHDUNGEON

## CHAPTER 8

*Let's sit down by the fire  
You see it's burning low  
I will tell you a sad story  
Lit by embers, charcoal glow  
If you look into the flames, my friend  
Tell me, what do you see?  
There's a handful infinity*

*[ - The Bard of Basilester - ]*

The road from Immerhûk south was straight as far as the eye could see. Just outside the walls of Immerhûk, Toronar spotted an iron ring in the grass on the side of the road and just had to go and pull at it. It was stuck so he used more force.

With a dry crack the wood it was attached to broke, the iron ring in his hand, and under him a wooden hatch collapsed under his weight and Toronar Ryotakin disappeared from the surface.

Jethro and Neryman ran to the hole in the ground and shouted into it.

- Toronar!!! Are you hurt?

- No, but it is very dark here. I cannot see a thing.

- Do we have a rope? Nariel asked and Jethro nodded towards Proth.

- Allow me, she said and murmured the one spell she knew best. Featherfall. Then she jumped into the hole.

- Elves have excellent darkvision, Grendeline explained. This was not news to anyone.

- We're both fine down here, they heard Nariel's voice from below. She was further away than Toronar who landed on his behind just under the broken hatch. Nariel had immediately started to investigate the dark.

- Here is a long tunnel running north to south, back into Immerhûk and away from town. Under the city walls is a heavy wooden portal. It is closed. There is writing on the wall. Wait!

After a few minutes her voice was heard again.

- My friends, I believe I can turn on the light down here.

A weak flickering light lit up the bottom of the shaft under the broken hatch. Toronar's legs were visible until he got up from the tunnel floor. After a few minutes he came back to the opening.

- Wow! He said. You have to see this, my friends!

- It is absolutely amazing.

Grendeline was lowered into the hole. She found Nariel running her fingers over the writing on the tunnel wall.

- It is in three languages, she said.

- Yes, I can read two of them. Aha... we have magic torchlight. They will burn forever.

- That is very practical. If I read this correctly, the tunnel will lead us to Highdungeon. I didn't even believe the place existed. Yes, we have to find out more about this. Then she shouted commands up to the surface.

- Proth, Miri and Gwyness, come down here. You, Jethro and Dielle Uryens take charge of the group up there. Lead them to Golembard and wait for us there. It will take as long as it takes. But no more than five days at most.

- Aye, aye, Gren! Answered Jethro and Dielle almost simultaneously.

- Wait a minute! Shouted Dielle as they lowered Proth into the hole.

- How will you get back up, if needed?

- There are sturdy knockers on the door to Immerhûk. We just knock. They will hear it.

- Or we break it down. Added Toronar with his trust and optimism in sheer strength.

- I am just not sure it is a good idea to knock on that door now, whispered Nariel to Grendeline.

Now Gwyness Retekin was lowered into the tunnel and at last came Miri Akarso.

- Now, throw the rope into the hole, Grendeline instructed. She had a secondary plan how to get back up through the hatch they came down, if it should prove necessary. It involved her standing on Toronar's shoulders, while Miri was standing on hers. That should allow Miri to comfortably climb up, possibly also Nariel.

- Good luck, wished them Dielle.

- You too! Until later! Good bye! Came the reply from down below.

And after some hesitation, the six above ground went on their way south towards Golembard.

Dielle and Jethro leading the way.

\* \* \*

- This was not how I expected to drop into my first dungeon, said Gwyness trying to decipher any of the writing on the tunnel wall.

- Why is this so interesting? Wondered Miri. It is

dark, it is dirty, it is scary... The weak torchlight flickering in her eyes.

- You never heard of Highdungeon?

- No, I have not.

- It is a mythical, no, a legendary underground city connecting all the old towns of Gothany.

- Construction was completed under Oroladian, said Nariel. Which is probably why we may find a few useful magical items here.

To the south the tunnel led down a short stairway, Toronar had already been there. He could hardly contain himself to see how the others would react.

- Golembard used to be OGREFIELD before.

- What?

- It had the name OGREFIELD until it was renamed.

- Aaah... I see. Now Grendeline was running her fingers over the writing.

- We should be able to go all the way there underground.

- Let's hope we don't have to go all the way back. Said Gwyness casually walking down the stairs.

- Are there any bats here? I don't like bats! They carry disease... she interrupted and gasped. At the bottom of the stairway was another larger tunnel. A tunnel with sculpted columns on both sides. A tunnel with uncountable tombs in the walls between the columns.

- Treasures!!! Said Toronar excited.

Grendeline was not keen on looting graves, but she had to acknowledge there were potentially great riches buried with the forgotten heroes in this underground cemetery.

- Undoubtedly they will be protected by magic. Said Nariel. We best be careful. She approached a tomb on the westside of the gallery.

- Oh, I can feel strong magic pulsating from this tomb. She laid the palm of her hand on the engraved coverstone in the wall.

- So we best leave it alone, said Grendeline.

- What does it read? Asked Toronar eager to open it and find out what the strong magic was.

- All muscle and no brain, said Miri quietly.

Toronar pretended he didn't hear her.

- It's a cleric, Adaric Castore a hero of unreadable and fallen in the battle of Narnebourg... it follows a date which doesn't mean a thing to me. It is before any of the Wyvern Wars.

- We open it? Toronar was eager.

Grendeline sighed and walked a few steps away from the tomb. Also Miri took some steps away.

- Do what you have to do.

Toronar pulled at the stone. Slowly and creakingly it came loose. It fell to the ground with a heavy thump. Nothing happened. Toronar reached inside and pulled out a heavy spiked morningstar. The weapon of a cleric. He handed it to Gwyness.

- Something for the lady!?

Then he peered again into the darkness of the tomb and reached out for something.

- This appears to be a Holy Symbol...

He couldn't quite reach it.

- Do NOT touch the Holy Symbol! Yelled Gwyness and tried to pull back Toronar, but when his arm came out of the tomb, he had the symbol in his hand.

They both stared dumbfounded at the artefact.

- Put it back! Put it back! Gwyness begged him.

- Calm down. Adaric has been dead a long time. He is not going to mind.

He had barely time to say it when veils of dust seemed to form the shape of a man, a spectre. It shoved its hand into Toronar's chest and squeezed his heart. Gwyness quickly dropped the morningstar and snatched the Holy Symbol out of his hands. Then she threw it back into the tomb.

The spectre withdrew his hand from Toronar's chest and picked up the spiked morningstar. His transparent hands were not always synchronous with the weapon, but he held it up as if he was going to hit someone with it. Toronar went down on his knees, clutching his chest in pain.

Gwyness shrieked out.

- Please, don't kill him!

The spectre turned around the morningstar and handed it with the shaft to Gwyness. Then he dissolved. Gwyness couldn't believe what had just happened.

- There you have it! Said Grendeline. Lucky for us he decided not to kill anyone today. I don't know how to kill a spectre. It is already dead. Why don't we just be thankful and proceed south? Let's not open any more tombs here.

Gwyness was still speechless. Toronar was stunned. His enthusiasm for looting tombs had suddenly been cured. Gwyness stuttered...

- He... he gave me the weapon!

- Is it magic? Miri Akarso came closer to look.

- It radiates some kind of magic, said Nariel. It will be interesting to see when she has to use it. She shook Gwyness' shoulder.

- You did right, tossing that symbol back into the tomb. Now, Toronar, please close it again!

- He said... Gwyness was still in shock.

- What? I didn't hear him say anything at all.

- He spoke to me, assured Gwyness. I could hear his voice in my head.

- Well what did he say?

- He said...

All their eyes now turned to Gwyness.

- He said... remember me...

- That's all?

- He said remember me... in Mar! He knew where we were going.

Shakened, the six of them continued down the

gallery of tombs. It was gently sloping downwards and in a wide curve leading them southwest. All along the walls were more sculpted columns and tombs between them. Every tomb had a brief recapture of the deeds of its inanimate content.

- I know now what this is! Shouted Nariel suddenly, frightening them all, except Proth who followed them calmly, observing. I have heard of this burial site. It is the *Gallery of Gothany Heroes* and contains the most important and respected men and women of our earliest history. When we reach the Highdungeon end of it, we come to the very first settlers in Gothany. There should also be the ship in which they came.

- A ship, here underground in a dungeon? How did they bring it here? We are miles away from the sea! I can't wait to see it!

Grendeline was intrigued. This was ancient history to her and long before she was born, regardless of how long ago she was born. This evoked no memory flashes. This was entirely new knowledge to her. Her face suddenly appeared younger again in the flickering light of the magic torches.

They must have passed two thousand or more tombs and columns before they reached the center of the structure, Highdungeon. The great chamber of Highdungeon had 32 portals leading in different directions away from the chamber, but they saw no boat. There was a huge metal dome in the middle of the great chamber. There was ancient writing on the side of it. Large letters and numbers.

- Can you read it? Asked Nariel.

Grendeline stepped back to see the entire word written on the side of the dome. Underneath were several words, with smaller letters, but still very big and a terrible waste of space in a hall like Highdungeon. This writing must have been discernable from a vast distance.

- Yes, I can. But it makes no sense at all.

- What does it say?

- It says Francis Drake LSFF-1764 Underneath it states United Earth Space Explorer.

- It's gibberish! Said Gwyness.

- Here is a book, said Toronar and was about to pick it up.

- Don't touch it!!! yelled Grendeline.

Toronar reacted immediately this time. He was just standing near the book waiting for the others to come closer. Grendeline's face was only a finger's length away from the book when she was able to identify some of the letters on its cover.

Herb...and some unreadable letters. She had to guess what the first letter of the next word was.

- It says Mells or Wells... Island of Doctor More... something.... She tried to gently pick it up, but it crumbled in her fingers.

- It could have been The Island of Doctor Moresu or Morean, not sure....

- That makes as much sense as the writing on the dome. Said Nariel.

- Yeah, no sense at all. Agreed Gwyness.

Proth had walked all around the dome and found something which may be a portal. It was closed with metal plates from two sides within the frames and there was no handle on it. It had a distinct octagonal shape. Near the portal was a grove with a horizontal metal bar inside. He tried to pull it, but it didn't budge. He gave up the idea of trying to open it. Instead he studied the exits in all directions. There was writing in the same ancient language as on the dome above the exits.

Grendeline pointed to an exit on the far southeast side of the chamber.

- Golembard should be that way. It actually says OGREFIELD above the exit.



GOLEMBARD

## CHAPTER 9

*The greatest ever cynic,  
Defined our reason dire  
As weighing probability  
On the scales of our desire  
And folly as a gift  
Or a faculty divine  
Oh, that man must be in spirit  
Close kinship of mine*

[ - The Minstrel of Merrybath - ]

Dielle and Jethro had a nearly uneventful journey to Golembard and Ragnal would have had naught to write in his journal, had it not been for a dragon passing overhead, flying to the east. At first they thought it was a bird. Then a huge bird.

It was Sagitta who first shouted.

- It's a dragon! It's a dragon!!!

Apart from the dragon ignoring them, it was cause for some excitement, because none of them had ever seen a dragon before.

It later occurred to Jethro that it also was the year of the dragon. And as far as he was aware, it meant luck to see a dragon in the very year of the dragon. He was convinced that fortune and fame now was smiling upon them all. No harm would come to them. At least not for a while. In the nearest three days some of their deepest wishes and desires were to come true. There would be a number of lucky happenstances, blessing their journey and each and every one of them would have a deep desire fulfilled. So the superstition went and one had to believe it for it to happen.

- Shall we consider it lucky that we reached Golembard without any incident? Asked Dielle. Jethro didn't comment.

Golembard was another very old town in Gothany surrounded by a low wall, just like Immerhûk. The people of Golembard seemed less obsessed with rosebushes and more with trees. Jethro could identify a number of trees he never had seen before. He had only heard of them.

- There are cedars, he declared. Over there are palm trees and over there is a weeping willow. It was a paradise of trees to him and it confirmed to him what he had said before about the dragon as an omen.

- It's so beautiful! He stopped before a tree he couldn't identify. It had a white trunk, like a birch but its shape was more like an apple tree. Fruits were growing in it, but they were nothing like apples. The owner of the tree and the garden in which it was planted was outside. He noticed Jethro's enthusiasm and approached.

- What are these fruits?

- We call them Gibbles, but they are not ripe yet. They grow much bigger and we can harvest them in Latesummer. No sooner. But if you like I can give you a jar of Giblejam. I still have a good supply from last year. With this he went inside to fetch a jar of Giblejam.

Jethro was deliriously happy and thanked the man repeatedly.

Dielle was beginning to believe the tale about the lucky charm of the dragon.

Neryman and Baltram had stopped at a workshop and admired the swords on display.

Neryman had his eyes on a particular sword, sleeker than his longsword, with a long handle and a smaller guard and a slightly curved blade.

The weaponsmith asked him if he wanted to try it's balance and feel the weight in his hands and Neryman was delighted to try it out. It weighed less than his own sword, gave a better polished and harder impression than his and it was very

well balanced.

- How much?

The weaponsmith had not made a sale for several days and was afraid to scare away this customer, so he tried with making it sound like a bargain.

- Half the price for you.

Neryman was suspicious.

- Why? Something wrong with it?

The weaponsmith laughed nervously. He needed desperately some coin.

- No, not at all. But I can see you are a skilled swordsman. How much seems like a reasonable price to you?

Neryman weighed the purse of coins in his hand. It was his part of the loot from the slavers camp.

- This is what I have.

Baltram and the weaponsmith counted the content of Nerymans purse together.

- Here is more than enough! He took two thirds of Neryman's coins in one hand and dropped the remaining third back into the bag.

- This and your old sword in exchange. Do we have a deal?

Baltram nodded approvingly to his friend.

- We have a deal, said Neryman.

They exchanged swords and Neryman attached the new sheath and sword to his belt. As they walked away Baltram told him that he would have bought the sword himself, had Neryman not wanted it. He thought of it as a very good deal.

And Neryman was happy to hear this, coming from a weapon's expert.

They stopped in front of Dielle, who was sitting with Ragnal on a bench while he was making notes in their journal.

- What do you wish for? They asked her.

Her reply came instantly from both the heart and the stomach.

- I'd like some grilled birdmeat with oven-baked ground apples and a mixed salad on the side. I am so tired of fruits, bread and cheese.

- Let's find a tavern then, or an inn and see what they have to offer! Suggested Baltram.

None of them were particularly surprised as they found an inn and the innkeeper had exactly what Dielle was wishing for.

They sat long around the table and speculated as to what adventures Grendeline's group might have encountered underground. Then they retired to three separate rooms and slept in heavenly comfortable beds. This was Sagitta's wish and strongest desire, she explained to Dielle before they both closed their eyes. None of them have had such a good rest for more than a week.

\* \* \*

Proth Rokoser stopped in front of another exit at the southeast wall in the chamber of 32 doors.

The large chamber was octagonal like the metal door of the dome in its center. Each wall had four exits. As the others were heading for the exit to Golembard, he remained standing in the same spot, two gaping corridors away.

- Are you coming? Grendeline turned to him.

Proth had his index finger in his mouth and then held it up in the air in front of him. Grendeline had the feeling this gesture revealed a significant fact about the exit where he stubbornly had positioned himself at. She came over to him.

First she didn't notice anything special at all about the exit Proth insisted on. The walls in the narrow red-ochre corridor were more scarcely lit than most exits. She deciphered the inscription above it. It read; Brodweigh. Turned to Nariel, she asked.

- Does Brodweigh mean anything to you?

- That's Toweridge, today the ruins of Oroladian's castle.

Grendeline licked her index finger and held it up in the air like Proth did. His hand was still up. She closed her eyes. She felt it. A gentle breeze.

- I think Proth is right. We should go this way.

They followed the red-ochre corridor southeast.

There was rubble and debris on the floor along the corridor and they had to watch their step. Also this passage was gently curved towards the south over a long stretch. It was not as wide as the Gallery of Heroes and there were no tombs in the walls, but it was a far longer distance to walk. For a while they were wondering if it ever was going to end. But Nariel felt the gentle breeze they had discovered to be getting stronger.

After walking down the long corridor for another hour Nariel suddenly stopped.

- I hear something. Announced Nariel.

- What?

- It sounds crazy, I know. But I believe I can hear a herd of sheep.

They walked towards the sound. After a while the others could hear it as well.

The red-ochre corridor ended after what had felt like an eternity in a large hall where the ceiling had collapsed. As the last of them exited the corridor, the sparse magic torches in the corridor went out behind them and it fell dark. From above they could now distinctly hear the sheep.

They could also see the twilight of the sunset, and long shadows cast from the few standing parts of the gradually decaying structure.

The collapsed ceiling, which had been the floor of a room above, formed a slope of debris which facilitated their ascent to the surface. They were standing in the ruins of a fortress on the edge of

Gnollwood, which according to Nariel used to be the castle of Oroladian. To the south stretched a meadow on which a herd of sheep were grazing. As they emerged from the ruin, a young feral sheep laid down on the remaining rubble of Brodweigh, Oroladian's castle.

Meanwhile, Grendeline and her friends walked into the meadow as one star after the other lit up the sky above them. Toronar cursed vehemently as he stepped into something which appeared to be manure. He wiped his boots in the grass.

- By the way, Nariel. How did you turn on the light in the dungeon? I forgot to ask.

- By rotating any of the torches in their socket. Did you notice, how they turned off behind us?

- Yes, it was hard not to notice.

- No, I mean everywhere. Already in the Gallery of Heroes. In front of us, it was always lit as far as we could see, but behind us, at some distance the torches went out. Strong and clever magic.

- Perhaps we will return here. Knowing how to find and gain entry to Highdungeon, we would be able to enter any of the old cities unseen. This could become an invaluable strategic advantage. And we didn't yet gain entry to the metal dome in the heart of Highdungeon. I wonder what the words on it mean.

- It could be a password. The first part sounded like a name. Perhaps one has to speak the words written under it to open the metal portal.

- Yes, we didn't try that.

- Golembard ought to be directly south or a little southwest of us, said Gwyness who had picked up a few lessons in orientation from her brother.

Across the meadow, as the stars were coming out, they came to the road leading south. Before midnight they could see dim lights from the town Golembard at the horizon. And unknowingly they found lodging in the same inn at night, where their friends had gone to beds in three other rooms.

\* \* \*

In the morning on the following day, they met each other at breakfast, hugged, exchanged their stories and laughed. Ragnal wrote down what Gwyness told him about their excursion to Highdungeon and the discovery of the ruins at the edge of Gnollwood.

Jethro told them about the dragon they spotted and how wonderful an omen this was for their journey. He was convinced also their reunion was influenced by the same divine forces.



## SEVENMARL

### Chapter 10

*Good morning, sorceress, do you feel all right?  
And did you summon elements  
To aid you in the night?  
When the powers set in motion  
Can you read them in the sky  
There's a deep black endless ocean  
That twinkles in your eye*

*Can you swiftly call the winds  
To chase the clouds across the sky  
Could you, if you must, raise from dust  
A creature with a cry?  
Will your cantrip light a fire  
That burns within its veins  
And will its clay remain cohesive,  
Exposed to fallin' rain.*

*Good morning, sorceress, cast a good spell  
Conjure us a good year, we implore you  
Sing us softly your magical songs  
Tell us what the dragon has done to you*

*[ - The Minstrel of Merrybath - ]*

Few notes were added to Ragnal's journal in the following three days. Dielle, for one, was happy with their quite uneventful part of the journey. Early on the 4th day out of Golembard, they reached the outer 20th milestone of Marl. This was the average distance folk could be expected to walk in a day. It also marked the outer border of immediate influence of the capital. Villages within the territory had no administration of their own, but were subordinated to the Earl of Marl. At the seventh milestone before Marl was a village which derived its name from its location relative to Marl, simply called Sevenmarl. They arrived in Sevenmarl around midday after

two weeks out of Hibernau. Grendeline was not worn out by the long journey. If anything, she had become stronger and felt more alive than ever. For an old lady, she was in remarkable good shape and no one would now have guessed her age to be anything above sixty. Nariel was the same as when they first met. She appeared unchangeable forever, but the ten remaining recruits of Hibernau were tired and looked forward to another night of good rest in a proper bed with warm blankets and soft pillows.

In the east, they saw the river Odikon emerging from Gnollwood.

- It is possible, said Nariel, that we would have had a lesser distance to walk, had we continued through the forest along the river, but I am not convinced as many of us would still be alive.

- I agree with your assessment, said Grendeline, and it is a pity we couldn't just float down the river on a raft. There are too many rapids along the way, which would have shattered the raft.

- I wish we could all fly like the birds, said Dielle. We could have made the entire journey in a day.

- Perhaps, said Grendeline, one day this could be possible. She had a sudden memory flash, flying among cloudbanks on horseback. This she didn't mention. There were other possible creatures to mount for taking off into the air, none of them domesticated by humans. Wyverns, dragons and griffins were the first coming to mind. None of them likely to serve a creature such as a human.

- Or Celtine could transport us instantly by a dimension doorway, remarked Jethro dryly.

- Such comfortable mode of travelling could be possible years from now, commented his sister. Celtine has a couple of quite arduous years as apprentice still ahead of her. But if she likes it, she will feel it as rewarding, rather than punishing.

Sevenmarl had no surrounding palisade or wall. Was the village under attack, the population would have to flee to Marl, die in their homes, or hope rescue from the capital would arrive in time before their destruction. The upside for their exposed location, was that Marl had among the strongest force in Gothany and that there was no honour in killing defenceless civilians.

Not having experienced any nomad slavers, the villagers were less worried about outside threats than random insane decrees issued by the Earl.

The majority of folk they encountered in the street wore weary and troubled faces. Only the children remained largely unconcerned. As children do, they were playing, running, shouting and laughing as they do everywhere. Grendeline could also sense apathy among the adult population.

There was activity at the local brewery. The cart of

the taxation authority of Marl was being loaded with their percentage barrels of the produce. By the serious face of the brewer, it was easy to tell he felt overtaxed. The tavern was closed, but the inn was open. Apparently the Earl felt the people of Sevenmarl should drink less and work more.

The town crier had just arrived from Marl and prepared himself to make the daily announcement in the small square near the inn. Some villagers were standing patiently waiting for the news. Also Grendeline's party was curious to hear them.

- Hear ye, hear ye! He started and looked around, taking a deep breath.

- His Highness and Excellence, distinguished and most benevolent Regent of Marl, the Twelve Cities and all of Gothany let it on this day be announced for the benefit and knowledge for one and all that; Here the town crier paused and took another deep breath. Grendeline was not sure, but she felt a certain tone of sarcasm in his intonation at the words *benevolent* and *benefit*, as if these words were the exact opposite of what was to be expected from the announcement to follow.

- Slander and defamation of his high Excellence is now punishable with death by hanging. Flirtation and advances towards any of his Excellence's concubines is punishable by castration. The High Commander of Marl City Militia is dismissed and replaced by his Excellence's firstborn son; Lord Jorancarl.

Grendeline heard someone curse angrily; *That arrogant little prick!* And Nariel bent over to her and whispered; Isn't that boy younger than any of your recruits, Gren? She couldn't say... The town crier continued with the hint of a smile;

- Let it be known that the despicable criminal Rowald Isankino tonight mysteriously escaped out of his prison cell and shall be outcast in all the land. A reward of 100 gold pieces on his head, will be paid by the treasury for his recapture.

This announcement harvested a round of applause from the listening villagefolk. It was unclear if they applauded for the reward or for the successful escape of the prisoner. 100 gold pieces sounded measly for catching a dangerous criminal. If he was dangerous. It was Grendeline's guess Isankino had become a hero of the people and the price on his head would go up. She was willing to wager a bet on this with Nariel.

The town crier wasn't finished.

- Hear ye, hear ye, he held up a second scroll of announcements.

- No elves, dwarves, halflings or any half-breed of any other race than human will be tolerated in the City of Marl. Resident non-humans have 24 hours to leave the capital. Nariel scoffed in contempt.

- That doesn't even leave those who have shops

time to sell their property.

- Which is what the Earl probably intended, Nariel. He is obviously the worst ruler we could have. He sees other races as a threat. Or he simply intends to seize their assets and distribute them among his loyal supporters. Or both. Lively debate among the listening villagefolk ensued in the wake of this announcement. To stifle it, the town crier continued with the familiar introduction to his proclamations.

- Hear ye, hear ye!!! He paused and waited for the discussions to die down.

- All unauthorized use of magic in the City of Marl is prohibited. The penalty for unauthorized use of magic has been raised to 500 gold coins and expulsion from Marl.

Hastily he added another announcement;

- The Council of Twelve Cities has been disbanded, any claims of directives from such an organization are false. The only legal authority in Gothany is held by his Excellence, the Earl.

Grendeline shook her head.

- This sounds like a decision taken solely by the Earl himself. I don't believe the Council knows it has been disbanded.

- And finally, the town crier snorted and tried desperately to suppress his amusement; the artist and sculptor, who depicted his Excellence, the Earl of Marl as a cross-eyed donkey in a mural of the Temple... he drew his breath with tears in his eyes and finished the proclamation with irregular breathing; has been sentenced to imprisonment for the remainder of his life.

- For how long might this be, with the sadistic son of the Earl as High Commander? Murmured the elf.

- I don't believe we are going to join the forces of Marl after all, said Jethro.

- That depends which side those forces are on, said Gwyness. It doesn't seem to me like the Earl has too many supporters left. We just heard a long list of his failures and clutching at straws. It sounds to me like a regent about to lose his control.

- I agree, said Grendeline. I doubt he will stay in power long enough to see all elves and dwarves leaving the city. I can't believe folk will stand for this. Merely by trying to purge all elves and dwarves from Marl, he is digging his own grave.

- The veterans of the City Militia are not likely to take orders long from a snotty, disrespectful boy like Jorancarl. Added Nariel.

- And they wouldn't have let me go, if they were happy with the Earl, said a voice behind them. They turned to the voice.

- Who are you?

- My name is Isankino. Rowald Isankino. You

have 100 coins of gold standing in front of you, if you care to cash it in. I believe the taxation officials are still loading barrels from the brewery.

- If I may be forward and ask, Jethro was curious. Isankino nodded in response.

- What was the crime you were convicted of?

- I was a captain on the City Guard.

- Is that the same as the City Militia?

- Not exactly. The City Guard is an elite force. We protected both Marl and the regent. There was a bard who upset the Earl by writing ballads with doubtful content. It started after the beheading of the Earls first wife. I believe the bard was a good friend of the Lady of Marl. He exposed the Earl long ago for what he was. Gradually his lyrics became more aggressive and his ridicule more hurtful for the Earl. One of the songs infuriated the Earl to the point when he demanded the bard to be flayed alive. It was actually a funny song and had the Earl just taken it all with a sense of humour, the situation would not have escalated. If he had laughed with the bard, he would have proven him wrong.

- Except, the bard was not wrong. Said Nariel.

- No, he was not. Anyway, I happened to be in the wrong place at the time. I was present. The Earl ordered me to have the bard flayed. I refused. It was not part of my duties to torture and kill. I was a guard whose duty it was to defend Marl.

The Earl, by instant decree, included torture and killing among my duties. I had only one answer to give him.

- What did you say?

- I resigned. Isankino sighed.

- He was furious, of course. Then he ordered my men to seize me and have me hanged. They hesitated, but the Earl pointed out that I just had resigned and no longer was their captain, but an unemployd citizen. We almost had a revolution on our hands right there. My men feigned the arrest, but didn't put me in a prison cell.

- But he didn't forget you opposed him.

- No. I should have left there and then. He saw me in the palace the following day and screamed like a pig being led away to slaughter. Meanwhile he had appointed new City Guards among the City Militia. They were proud to serve, of course. At first. They had me in iron and thrown into a cell.

- What happened to the bard?

- Oh, we couldn't allow any harm coming to him. He was of noble blood and our best candidate to put forward for election, if the Earl was removed from office. He is with us.

A group of six men were standing behind the former captain of the Marl City Guard. Five soldiers and one civilian. Grendeline could easily guess which one was the bard.

- And your men helped you escape. Was Jethro's conclusion of seeing his men.

- Aye! That is correct.

- I don't know, but it seems to me like the Earl needs to be removed from power in two shakes of a wyverns tail, said Grendeline wistfully.

- We are ready to do that. All we need now is a good plan and a handful of people to execute the plan.

- Oh, I believe we can find a lot more than a handful, but we may not need to involve more.

Grendeline decided there was only one sensible course of action. She turned to her friends.

- Tomorrow we go to Marl and remove the Earl from office. Let us avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

Remember it is still the capital of Gothany.



CITY OF MARL

## Chapter 11

*You can't command who won't obey  
You can't rule winds and night away  
If any power you deserve  
You must be humble, think to serve*

*The wind knows in which way to blow  
The farmer knows when he must sow  
Your task is not to change their ways  
It is to aid an ease their days*

*A good king rules in harmony  
With gentry, winds, with serf and free  
When this has so been wisely done  
Then men and nature can be one*

*[ - The Unknown Bard of Marl - ]*

The distance between Marl and Sevenmarl is even at a moderate pace overcome in less than two hours. They expected to encounter an outflow of non-human cityfolk from Marl, but no caravan of refugees was leaving the capital. Outside the gates of the city a dwarf was rearranging the

ropes on his cart. He and his family had decided it was best to leave.

- For the safety of my family, he explained as he was asked. They did not try to hinder him. But Ragnal Teikena and Baltram Gauth lagged behind the others for a while, talking about something with the dwarven husband and father of three.

Rowald Isankino was recognized at the gates, but the City Militia was in no mood to make an arrest. Nariel had covered her head and ears in a hood, but when they all were allowed entrance without question, she felt neither exposed, nor afraid she would be molested. Nobody cared about the decrees of the Earl and no one carried out his orders. It could not be more obvious that he had lost control.

Some of Isankino's men came to salute him at his return. They were a fast growing crowd.

Grendeline saw the town crier who had been in Sevenmarl the day before. He was sitting high up on a balustrade applauding the return of the City Guard captain. His blond curly hair fluttering in the Youngsummer's breeze.

The main street of Marl was leading straight up to the palace and by the time they reached the gates of it, hundreds of cityfolk, humans, elves, dwarves and half-breed people of all races had joined behind them.

Some veterans of the City Militia came towing a ragged young man between them. He was yelling furiously at them and resisting with all his might.

- My father will behead you all! He promised them.

It was Jorancarl, the son of the Earl. One of the veterans grabbed his ear and twisted it. Jorancarl winced and begged him to stop.

- Then just be quiet, boy!

- Good plan! Isankino praised Grendeline's idea to walk straight up to the palace and knock on the doors. Or, if this would have proven more difficult, to revise it in proportion to the resistance they were encountering.

- Let's not make it more complicated than it has to be, she had argued. Now they were at the outer doors of the palace and used the knockers to announce their visit with three loud knocks. On the second knock the door gave way. It was open and no one in sight to bid them in or ask them to stay outside.

- Why does this remind me of the Nomad slaver commander? Said Nariel.

- Where is the Throne Room? Asked Grendeline and as Rowald gestured, she gestured back to him to lead the way.

Four men of the Earl's new City Guard came running into the courtyard, intent on stopping the invasion of the palace. When they laid eyes on the massive crowd pouring in, they reconsidered

and joined Isankino's men instead.

Angry folk began tilting marble sculptures in the yard and before they could be stopped, one fell and shattered into pieces.

Rowald Isankino yelled with such force, a fully grown lion would have paled in comparison.

- No looting, no vandalization! No wrecking, no demolition!! This is still the palace of the regent and you would destroy only the property of the City of Marl. Don't worry! We will have a new regent before nightfall. His confidence had grown with the unexpectedly massive support of everyone.

They continued upstairs to the Throne Room. The Earl, Brioncarl the first, had gained some weight since Nariel last had seen him. But when the crowd entered, he shrunk back in his huge chair. Suddenly the Earl made a small and pitiful impression.

- Sss... seize him! He tried to persuade the City Guard he appointed, gesticulating desperately towards Isankino. Seize him!!! 1,000 gold coins to who ever kills him. Nobody moved.

- 10,000 gold coins.

Grendeline shrugged, looking at Nariel.

- I told you the price would go up, didn't I?

Rowald Isankino turned to the crowd and asked with his strong roaring voice.

- What shall we do with this pitiful little man?

- KILL HIM!!! came the answer from a hundred excited voices.

- If we kill him, how long will his suffering be? Longer than all of yours? Long enough to make up for all of your suffering?

Somebody believed he came up with an attractive alternative, shouting it from the rear;

- Throw him into the dungeon!

Another one suggested; Feed him to the rats!!!

- Make him eat my wife's cooking! Another man shouted, thinking of himself as a funny man.

- What do you think, Gren? Rowald looked at her.

- Strip him of rank and honour. Dress him up as a commoner and put him outside the palace gate.

- Outside the city gates! The Earl suggested timidly.

- Outside the city gates, Grendeline corrected herself and added; give him the 100 gold coins he offered for your capture. Let's see how far and how long he can make a living of that.

- If he is not robbed of it by the first streetmugger who comes along, said Nariel.

- So be it. Take him away! Dress him up as a commoner. Give him a purse with 100 gold coins and put him outside the city gates. Now, for the next business... Rowald Isankino stepped up on the elevated platform of the throne.

- The choice for a new Earl of Marl, who not

automatically also will be the ruler of Gothany stands between the son of the Earl, Jorancarl and this bard, the son of Lord Andertan of Marl, young Thordanal Andertan. Come forward, both of you! Show yourself!

Jorancarl, having been roughed around by the veterans of the City Militia did not look his best. His eyeliner and mascara had smeared and one of his earrings was torn off and the ear was bleeding. Thordanal Andertan was older and used no cosmetics. If Isankino had not announced him as the son of Lord Andertan, no one could have guessed he was a nobleman.

- Andertan!!! roared the crowd and continued to do so; Andertan, Andertan, Andertan!!!

- You are dismissed, Isankino informed the son of the former Earl. Let him be, Isankino instructed the present soldiers and the crowd.

Thordanal Andertan cleared his voice and made his first address as regent;

- People of Marl, I thank you for coming. Always feel free to come to me, if you have questions.

- My first edict is to cancel all edicts of my predecessor in the last six years.

The crowd cheered and applauded loud and long at this decision.

- To clarify, Rowald Isankino is no longer an outlaw, but again Captain of the Marl City Guard.

Again loud applause and cheers from the crowd.

- Word will be sent to the Council of Twelve Cities, that their word is and has always been law in Gothany and a new ruler need to be appointed.

Furthermore, the artist depicting my predecessor as a cross-eyed donkey is to be released from prison immediately. Go out in the streets and let it be known that cityfolk of all race are welcome to stay in Marl.

- Andertan, Andertan!!! Roared the crowd.

\* \* \*

Neryman Nebyed, Toronar Ryotakin, Miri Akarso and Sagitta Gauth accepted the proud City Guard position. Ragnal Teikena and Baltram Gauth on the other hand decided instead to go together into the weaponsmith business in the capital. They had recently for a handsome amount of gold coins acquired a workshop from a departing dwarf family at the city gates.

Isankino wished Grendeline and Nariel would also join the Marl City Guard. He would even have made them both deputy commanders, but they declined graciously. To his disappointment neither Proth, Jethro, Gwyness or Dielle joined the elite force. The six who had decided not to stay in Marl

for long were guests of honour in the city and had free lodging until their departure.

The following day they were seated around an oval table in *Marl's Elvensong Taverna*. Gren, Nariel, Dielle, Proth, Jethro and Gwyness.

- I had a strange dream about Highdungeon, said Grendeline. You were not there Dielle and Jethro, but we found a grove next to the metal door of the dome, or I should rather say Proth found it. There was a horisontal metal bar inside. He tried to push and pull it, but it wouldn't budge. In this dream I had, I rotated the metal bar.

- Then what happened? The door opened?

- No, I woke up. It was morning.

- You want to go back and try to rotate the metal bar, Gren, said Nariel.

- Not only that, Grendeline was intrigued. I want to explore all of Highdungeon I want to try all 32 exits. Well, at least those exits, which are a mystery. We are under no pressure to go or be somewhere, we can explore as much as we like.

- But no tomb raiding! Commented Gwyness. She suddenly straightened up in her chair.

- What's wrong? Asked her brother.

- I just recalled what the spectre told me. Remember me in Marl, he said.

- Nobody else heard it, explained Nariel to Dielle and Jethro. It was only a voice in her head.

- What was his name again?

- Adaric... Adaric... Gwyness tried hard to recall the family name.

- Castore!!! Grendeline was first to recall it. It was Adaric Castore.

- So! Now you have remembered him! Task completed, what we do next? Said Jethro.

- NO!!! protested Gwyness. Nothing is completed. He gave me his morningstar for a reason. He could have killed us. Or Toronar at least, but he let him go. I promised him to do all in my power.

- We didn't hear you making any promise.

- Of course not, Nariel. As you said, it was all in my head. Our entire dialogue was in my head.

- Where can we possibly make an inquiry about someone who has been dead for a thousand years, or more?

- I can think of only one place, said Dielle.

- That is one place more than I can think of, said Jethro. And I'm supposed to be the brilliant tracker in our midst. He laughed. So, Dielle, enlighten us. Where do we go to inquire about this Adaric?

- To the temple of course. The Temple of the First.

- There is such a temple, Dielle? It is actually named the Temple of the First?

- Yes, Gren. And we have to go there. Today!

Gwyness was determined. And nobody could think of any good reason to stop her.

## GOTHANY DAWN

### Chapter 12

*Many things in all the land  
Are better we don't understand  
Don't be ashamed to let it show  
That there are things we do not know*

[ - The Blackhove Bard - ]

The Temple of the First was a small structure in disrepair in the poor quarters of Marl. The High Priestess received the six visitors with surprise and joy. Very few still came to services of worship.

- Adaric Castore? Yes, he was the last of the first. She explained. Why do you ask?

Grendeline felt it unwise to reveal much of their discovery. The legendary Highdungeon had been lost for hundreds of years. Some were convinced it didn't exist.

- We would like to know a little bit more about the first. Who were they?

The priestess offered them seats and brought forth a massive tome which she placed on a small desk, designed for browsing the pages of the book. Unopened, it filled up half of its surface.

- The first sailed to Gothany on a ship called the Francis Drake. It was a long, long journey. When they came here. The land was wild and inhospitable. The 2056 colonists lived on their ship until they had tamed the land. For this they had skilled men and women with professions and tools which today no longer are needed, so they no longer exist. The meaning of the words are unclear, but some were called terraformers and some were genetic engineers. Adaric was a young man when they arrived. He became what they called a technician.

From Gothany they spread all over the continent. To Angria, Northangerland, Zamorna and beyond. Then Gothany was the most powerful nation in the entire world.

- Forgive me, but... if they spread all over the world, then where did they come from? Is there another world?

- Uhm... The priestess didn't seem to have given this part of the story much thought. But she gave the answer as if it was all clear to her. But it sounded more like a repeating of something which had been written down; They called their world Terra and ours Alterra. They were sent to us

from the land of the gods. This is why their world is beyond our reach and we can't sail back.

- Were the first gods?

- No, they were men and women like us. But they were sent by the gods.

- And what about Adaric? What was his story?

- Adaric was meant to install... it's an old word, we are not sure what it means, the power of the gods. He had almost completed his task, but then he was killed. His morningstar was unfortunately buried with him. That was a mistake.

- Why not simply open his tomb and take out the morningstar? Suggested Jethro.

The priestess seemed uncomfortable with this question. The truth was that she didn't know, not having studied the ancient past carefully enough.

- Eh, the land was divided...

- I have his morningstar right here, said Gwyness and held up the weapon.

- Nonsense, said the priestess. You mock us! The morningstar of Adaric Castore has been lost for a thousand years.

- Well, said Gwyness. Suppose for a moment that we don't mock you and that this indeed is the morningstar of Adaric. What would you do with it, if it were?

The High Priestess breathed heavily and paused.

- Ah, very well... I will show you. Come with me please. And she showed them along a corridor and into a small chamber with an octagonal altar in the middle. There! If it were the lost morningstar I would place it in the socket in the middle of this altar.

Resolutely Gwyness bent forward and examined the socket. The priestess was going to protest when she raised the morningstar, but when Gwyness placed it, shaft first, into the socket, it fitted perfectly.

- And rotate it, counterclockwise... half a rotation, the priestess instructed instead.

It clicked inside the altar and the altar started humming. The spiked ball of the morningstar lit up the room with a bright yellow light. The priestess sank down on her knees.

- Oh, my gods!!! she cried. It **is** Adaric's...

\* \* \*

The High Priestess had quickly gone to fetch two of her colleagues, an old Monk and another female cleric. They were all in awe to see the shining light of the morningstar.

- Good heavens!!! said the Monk.

- Good morning! Said a voice, filling up the entire room. How can I be of assistance?

While everyone tried to understand where the voice came from, Grendeline was the first to ask a question.

- What... or who are you?
  - My name is Branwell. I am here to assist you.
  - Branwell, it is not morning. It is in the afternoon.
  - I just woke up, so for me – it is morning, but I understand. Good afternoon, to you.
- The voice of Branwell was calm and gentle. It revealed no emotion.
- Are you one of the first, Branwell?
  - I do not know who you refer to. Can you rephrase the question?
- Grendeline's mind was racing. She didn't know what to ask next.
- How can you assist us? Asked Nariel instead.
  - I have an extensive database to answer any of your questions.
  - But you do not know who the first were?
- No.
  - Where did the Francis Drake make landfall? Asked the High Priestess.
  - The Francis Drake landed at coordinates... and it followed a set of numbers which meant nothing to the present company.
  - Can you give us the distance and direction in miles and relate it to us from our position?
  - Very well, the distance to the coordinates is approximately 78 miles to north-northwest.
  - But that is on dry land!! Said the Monk.
  - Yes, it is.
  - Where did the Francis Drake come from? Now Grendeline had won over her own confusion.
  - It came from Earth.
  - Earth? Grendeline had heard or read the word somewhere. Yes... on the dome in Highdungeon.
  - United Earth?
  - Yes.
  - What is... Earth?
  - Earth is the third planet in the Solar System.
  - What is a planet?
  - A planet is a spherical satellite of a star, in size larger than what only can be defined as a dwarf planet.
  - The only word which makes sense to me here, is the word dwarf, commented Dielle.
  - What is a satellite? Grendeline did not give up.
  - A satellite is an object in orbit of a larger object.
  - What is a star?
  - A star is a sun in proximity.
  - Does Gothany orbit a star?
  - Gothany is a region on the planet Alterra. The planet orbits the star.
  - Does the sun... or the star have other planets orbiting it?
  - The sun of Alterra has 7 other planets in orbit and six dwarf planets.

- Assarcar, Drosolis, Taupedon? Said Dielle.
  - These are with Alterra the closest to the sun.
  - What did I have for breakfast? Asked Jethro, changing the subject drastically and bringing it to a level he could grasp.
  - I do not know what you had for breakfast. The information is not included in my database, said Branwell.
  - Haha!!! said Jethro. You can't answer every question. You don't know everything, Branwell.
  - I do not know, is a valid answer.
  - He has a point there, said Grendeline. I give this answer a lot myself.
  - What are you, Branwell? Asked Gwyness.
  - I am an artificial intelligence.
  - What is an arty...ar... what is it?
  - An artificial intelligence, also called *Ey-Eye*, is a sentient electronic device.
  - What means electronic, Branwell?
  - It means, relating to electrons.
  - What is an electron?
  - A stable elementary particle in the lepton class having a negative electric charge.
  - Can you answer anything, which doesn't give us more and more questions, Branwell?
  - Yes, I can.
  - Branwell, we have to teach you how to speak. In future you do not refer to yourself as an *Ey-Eye*, but as the *Spirit of the Morningstar*. That makes a lot more sense to us. And when ever you come to electron-things and other words you can't expect us to understand, you just say *magic*! Got it!?
  - I understand.
  - Now, Branwell... What are you?
  - I am the *Spirit of the Morningstar*.
  - How do you know so much?
  - *Magic*! Answered the voice.
- A thought suddenly came to Grendeline's mind.
- Alcetyn! She said.
  - What is Alcetyn?
  - Alcetyn is a planet in an elliptical 120 year orbit around the sun. It was a rogue planet caught by the star and does not orbit in the same plane as the original planets of this system, but in adding to the system it stabilized the orbit of Alterra. This is how the planet Alterra could be colonized.
  - Can you rephrase that, Branwell?
  - Alcetyn appears with regular 120 year intervals in the sky over Alterra. It was brought to make the planet safe for colonization.
  - Very good! You are learning, Branwell.
  - To learn is part of my... *magic*.

*And so the story suddenly ends... or does it continue? I don't know, it does not only depend on me. It depends also on if **you** want to read how it continues... If nobody cares, why should I bother?*



Dragonbar

*You can blow out a candle  
But you can't blow out a fire  
Once the flames begin to catch  
the wind will grow it higher*

[ - Bard Peter Gabriel - ]

23rd September 2021

## BEHIND GOTHANY

My aim was to write a story, the length of a regular Perry Rhodan-novel, of which there appear one every week since 1961. But a PR-author writes according to an *exposé* – a rough summary of what is supposed to happen in his *episode*.

I just got started and was hoping I would be able to tie it up all neatly near the end. I feel it worked out alright, but I also feel there are many more stories to tell. And the only way of improving, is to write and write more.

Tomorrow PR issue #3136 will be published. As a teenager I was reading a number of these *magazines* every week, sometimes two the same day. In length, two of these are equal to a standard length novel. I was curious, if I ever would be able to produce this amount of text with the same speed as a Perry Rhodan-author.

Given that the settings and characters were pre-determined, one only needed to set the events and players in motion.

So I did it – over roughly two weeks. I don't know if I did it well. I feel it was no worse than the worst Perry Rhodan-authors, but not nearly as good as some of the best. Yeah, I know only *the old ones*, so I would compare to *K-H Scheer* and *William Voltz* in this case. I can't compare to the new ones

because I haven't read any of them. I can only presume they must have improved their writing, because the series is still running. They *have to* be better. Perhaps they also spend more time with every issue.

On top of that, they have an editor proof-reading. That would have to be *Klaus N Frick*. I wonder if he would scold or praise this pilot episode...

If you have read this story to the end, you may have discovered that I left a mystery unanswered and that there can be a continuation. I may or may not ever write it. One way of making me deliver a second part, is to comment on the first.

Those who didn't like it and stopped reading somewhere between the first page and the last, are not likely to devote another minute to tell me if they liked it or not. They didn't.

But since I don't get paid for this, one way to make me happy, is to tell me. Simply... it is enough to say: *I read it all!*

Who in his right mind would read it all and suffer all the way in doing so? Nobody!

Naturally, Clockwise does not have a letter column, but since it is a *CounterClock Special*, the lettercolumn of CounterClock goes for both of these fanzines.

You write to: **wolfram1764-at-yahoo-dot-se**

You want to participate? Even better. Gothany is a land *under construction*. You can put your own heroes into troublesome situations. Pick a place to start. Communicate.

There are many more places, creatures and folk in Gothany who already are part of the world I created for this purpose. To make a map, for example, there are more locations to add. I will give you a few hints on the last page (page 40).



Wyvernall



Barleyhaven



Centaur Keep



Goldenboar



Blackhove



Ettingrave



Griffinton



Basilester



Forcromb



Pegastoke



Carrackham



Flamewark



Scimitark