

*The Pilgrim's Trial  
and Faith  
(Part 4)*

*by Marc H. Wyman  
& Chris Boques*

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## *CHAPTER SIXTEEN*

Red's shouts were echoing through the corridors of the mansion, sounding over the clatter of our sets of armor as we ran after him – and Wharfrat. Where had the murderous bastard come from? He'd stabbed Carter, fled through the caverns well above us – and now he was here?!

I didn't waste too many thoughts about that. I was too much looking forward to getting a piece of him and slicing it off the stinking fishworm. He'd run away, and he was a bastard. Wharfrat!

Murderous piece of slime! He'd killed Carter, run away – depriving us of our leader and two swords! No Leaves and Wreaths for him, I would commend his soul to the abysses so the demons could play with him for a few millenia or so.

None of us were paying attention to the corridors we were running through, the doors that were slammed open before us – by Red, after Wharfrat threw them shut behind him. No time for the little man to block any doors, only time to run. The mansion was so large that we might have chased him for hours. Looking back it seems as if we did, taking corridors, running up stairs, running down some others, on a merry chase after Red and Wharfrat. Occasionally we would see Red, kicking open a door, slashing through cobwebs, then vanishing before us.

Then the shouts stopped, and we caught up with Red. In a hall that had once been a dining room, with mirrors all around the walls – several were cobwebbed, some broken, all had lost their sheen, but enough to create myriads of Reds and Wharfrats engaged in a deadly swordfight. Red was a powerful man, nowhere near Bluff's sheer strength, but he was a goodly head taller than Wharfrat. Moreover, he was empowered by his wrathful hate of the man who had murdered his brother. And let's not forget his Cayaborean training with blades. All that compiled made a man who should have

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slashed through Wharfrat's defense in a heartbeat or two, then skewered him on his blade – armor or no.

Instead Wharfrat blocked every move, parried them with a strength that none of us had witnessed in the little fish. Like an eel he danced away from any blow or swing that might pierce his defense, while his own sword nicked Red's vambrace, protecting his forearm. No damage there, but it served to enrage the taller man. Some hits got to the brassard on Red's upper arm – just beestings, yet Wharfrat shouldn't have been able to manage them in the first place.

Red howled in fury, swung with all his might. Wharfrat leapt backwards, on a chair, from there on the ancient oak table, with a tablecloth still in place, two chandeliers – the candles melted all the way, one kicked over – at each end, rusty goblets sprinkled over the table's length.

We burst into the room, confused for a moment by the mirrors. I was, anyway. Scraps wasn't. He dove forward, tackled the nearest table leg with the ailette on his right shoulder. The impact shivered through the table (while Scraps groaned in pain), the table – including Wharfrat – jerked backwards but was too massive to break.

Enough for Wharfrat to fall forward, flailing his arms. Red took advantage of that, jumped after him on the table, brought his sword up for a measured stroke at the nape of Wharfrat's neck.

The blade swung down – but then Wharfrat's right arm shot up, at an impossible angle, backwards, straight out. The shoulder ailette burst apart, as if it were brittle, rusty metal. I stared as the small man's naked hand grasped the blade, stopped it, held it steady. All while his head was still facing the tabletop.

Red pushed against Wharfrat's hand. To no avail. Wharfrat chuckled, then his hand tore the blade from Red, threw it away. "I am protected, you fools," the fishworm laughed. He wrenched his arm back, and now I could hear a cracking sound coming from his joints when the shoulder snapped back in. "Told you you'd die down here, didn't I? Idiots," he kept muttering while he slowly pushed himself up.

Red threw himself at the small man, but Wharfrat slammed him away with a jerk of his torso. Like a swatted fly Red flew off the table, into a chair that broke under his weight, slid towards a mirror on the wall. He raised his head, looked in confusion at Wharfrat.

He wasn't alone. We all stared in amazement and not a little bit of fright at the little man who now stood before us, glowering at us with a dark grin. "You should've listened to me, you really should've. Carter'd still be alive, the damn he-witch. Made us all go to our doom, and for what? What's it all worth when you're facing the gods, and you ain't got nothing to show for your lives?" He chuckled. No, that was more like the maddened cackle of an old man who'd seen his entire family burn to death. "You'll see, soon enough. The master will take care of you, and –" He smiled, cackled again. "He sure will take care of me. Hah! I'm stronger than I've ever been! I'm better! And I will be celebrated in the beyond! The Lord Conqueror will bid me sit at his table! Me! Orleond Darrys, at the Lord Conqueror's feast! You'll rue the day you called me a wharfrat, you bastards!"

He waved his hands. The door behind us slammed shut.

Magic? Wharfrat? The two were incompatible, weren't they?

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The proof was, as they say, irrefutable. Yet I could tell that it hadn't been Wharfrat who effected that spell, he was only the conduit for the magical power of somebody else. His master, whoever that – No, wait a minute. I *knew* who that master had to be. That “Lord Conqueror”, that must be Jengchan, the Tyrant, in the guise his followers preferred.

Bluff and Scraps rushed forward, to attack Wharfrat. They were quickly disposed of by easy strokes, their swords went flying, and they themselves followed. The berserker strength in Wharfrat was incredible. And so was what happened afterwards when Valanda had a clear shot at the small man. She fired two fireballs at him, the magical projectiles that could turn a man into a burning torch.

They smeared all over Wharfrat, burning for heartbeats before extinguished by an unseen force. Wharfrat laughed. “Magic? Yours isn't strong enough, wizardess. Not when the master is powered by the focus. I'll show you what real power –“

He suddenly stopped, crooked his head as if listening to a voice none of us could hear.

I wanted to hit the bastard, wanted to beat the malevolence out of him, the arrogance. But I couldn't – how much better would I fare, after the true fighters in our group had been bested? Me, a simple pilgrim, I – all right, I was a priest, of the chief god, I really had to get used to that, but what fighting prowess did that give me?

None, of course. Only a...

Memories of other priests rose in me. Memories of our neighbor back home, old Theriandas Cooperchild, ailing from a disease none could understand. The Decalleigh priest his family had called in – paid for by my father's money, lent to his old friend, Theriandas' son – had given up. He could do nothing against the disease that was taking Theriandas' life heartbeat by heartbeat, wasting him away slowly. Then Chorellas, the Decirius priest tending to our graveyard, came in, and he relieved Theriandas of his pain, invited the Messenger of Death to come and take his soul away.

Great Taker!

“No, you won't!” Valanda shouted, jerking me back to reality. There was Wharfrat, coming down from the table, heading intently for the wizardess, mumbling about his master's orders to bring her. And Valanda, she was powering fireball after fireball into the diminutive figure, to no avail.

I wasn't thinking, simply stepped forward inbetween her and Wharfrat. Valanda cursed, deflected her last fireball to shoot over my shoulder, singeing my hair.

Wharfrat looked at me with a grin. “What d'you want, pilgrim? Think you can do better than the fools? Step aside, and I won't squash you like a bug.”

How to call the Messenger of Death? Abyssal flames, I didn't want that creature anywhere near me, but – he'd been near me for so long I should be used to his presence. “Messenger of Death,” I said, filled my heart with longing for the bony, hooded being, “unseen, unfelt; by the people whose bowls are full; whose –“

I didn't get to finish the prayer, the broken rhymes I'd been hurriedly putting together. Wharfrat laughed, smashed his left fist towards me, and I braced instinctively for the impact that would crash through my breastplate, crumple my ribs and... Jitters?! He was still within the breastplate, and –

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Wharfrat's fist stopped in mid-thrust. The little man tore it back, tried again, but the fist stopped again, and he had to force it away. He jerked his sword up, swung it back for more force – only to have a twitch run through his arm, to his fingers that loosened on the hilt, let the blade clatter to the ground.

"What the abysses is this?!" he yelled. "Master! Help me!"

*He can't hit me*, I thought, emptily somehow. Just as I had been protected before, when every step of my friends had quaked the earth while I and Valanda had been able to walk over to the apple trees, pick apples. Something protected me. What, or who, was it? I didn't care.

Call the Messenger of Death? "No," I grinned, emotions slowly surging inside me, growing, growing in fury. "You little dungworm. You wharfrat."

Wharfrat's head spun around to face me, his eyes gleaming. Angrily he pointed his finger at me, admonishing, "My *name* is Orleond Darrys, pilgrim! Remember it, for I –"

My sword was in my hand. I swung the broadside against the stretched out arm. The split blade impacted, twisted Wharfrat's arm aside. "Your day of judgment has arrived, *Wharfrat*. I am not a pilgrim anymore, I am a servant of Decirius, and *my* name is Ahnfredas Bluekeg."

"Master!" was his response.

I swung my sword at him again, not as clumsy as I would have expected. Hunger filled me. Wrath. Fury. Emotions I had always held at bay, if I had ever experienced them. I am a mild person, really. Most of the time. At that point I was anything but mild, I was completely ensconced in a shell of anger that was eating away my mind, leaving nothing but the blade and a life to be taken.

My sword battered him back, against the table. Wharfrat yelped, bent sideways – his upper body twisting at an angle that should have torn his spine apart –, grasping for his blade. I kicked him back, planted my boot against his breastplate, then thrust the tip – or rather tips – of my Jengchan blade into the unprotected shoulder. Blood squirted up, Wharfrat yelled, tried to kick at me – but his legs were held immobile before they could ever reach me. Like the stone creatures, he wasn't allowed to hit me.

So *this* was justice. I was bringing balance to our lives, with a blade.

Inside my head something reminded me that it was a Jengchan sword. A weapon of the Tyrant. Or was that the Lord Conqueror?

"What?!" I shouted, stopping my blade before I could dive its tips into Wharfrat's face, kill the dungworm. When had I begun to think like this? When had violence become such a part of me? Before or after picking up that sword? Could it be that I was falling for a curse, falling into servitude to Jengchan rather than his father Decirius? Was this not judgment but...

"Kill him!" Red shouted, his voice husky, broken, but well audible. "Kill the scum!"

But could I use a Jengchan blade for that, could I –?

My thoughts were interrupted when the door behind us flew open – no, rather I should say it was blown from its hinges, the door crashing into the room. And into my back. I was hurled forward, over Wharfrat's body, heading straight for the edge of the table.

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It connected with my breastplate, an inch under my throat. Air expelled from my lungs, pain shooting sparkling stars into my mind. I rebounded from the table, dizzy, aching, wanted to get back to my feet. They didn't obey me. I fell to my back, my head lolling to one side so I could see Wharfrat dart to his feet, his torso still twisted unnaturally.

"Master, you've –"

"Be quiet," a new voice said. It would be fitting to say that it was a sonorous, deep and powerful voice, menace dripping from each word. Instead it was an ordinary voice, light and soft, sounding more like that of a merchant, the kind of man who might swindle you but not raise his hand. There was no danger in the voice, only in the words. My head felt very light, and for a moment the voice of Wharfrat's master made me want to laugh.

"Wizzardess, you will accompany me," the stranger said.

*Hah, she'll blow you to smithereens!* I thought. Valanda did mutter something to that effect, but her words were cut off, and after a moment Wharfrat appeared in my field of vision again, behind Valanda, her hands violently pushed behind her back. Wharfrat held her tightly, pushed her forward, towards his master.

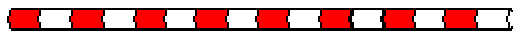
I couldn't turn my head easily, it took a lot of effort, and when I did, the master left me unimpressed. Oh, he was a Jengchan priest, in case you're still wondering, attired in the robes of his vile office, but he was a boyish-looking man who might have just reached thirty years of age, with flaxen hair, a patchy beard that gave him none of the authority he must have craved with it. His skin was pasty, as if it hadn't seen the sun in months. Not even his eyes were the menacing kind, although they weren't as innocent as the rest. Instead they were the kind that you just ignored.

"What do you want from me?!" Valanda yelled.

The master laughed. Now that was better and more dangerous, there was so little mirth in it. "Would you believe that I want your hand in marriage?"

She stared at him in disbelief. So did I, unable to do anymore. This was so – silly.

"Bring her," the master said, turned around and left the room, Wharfrat and a struggling Valanda in tow.



It hadn't taken all that long inbetween the blade of the door hitting me and the Jengchan priest leaving. Just long enough for me to start to get breath back into my lungs, to start feeling my fingers again. And the pain. A torrent of pain.

No, I couldn't feel any pain. I didn't *permit* myself that.

You know what's funny? That really worked. It isn't so much that I am a warrior born or anything of the sort. I'm not Hrolfwald's Clairbold, the Ambling Knight, who can't be stopped by a broken arm while a normal man would lie writhing in pain. But I *am* a priest of Decirius, and one who didn't quite know the blessings and curses available to him. Since I've found some ancient books in the mansion that have taught me more, amongst other things about a blessing that a judge uses to

purge himself of emotions. Whether the other priests know that there's a variety that deadens your nerves to pain, I have no idea.

It also had the unfortunate side effect that my fingers seemed to be wrapped in thick sheets of cotton; when I grasped my sword, I had to look down twice to believe that my fingers were firmly closed around the hilt. I lifted it, and nearly dropped it. My fingers were still nimble, that hadn't changed, but I barely sensed the wood on them. How was I supposed to fight this way? And, as I discovered when I stood up, walking might be a real problem, too. My feet and my legs felt as cotton-wrapped as my fingers, and I swayed heavily. The sword dropped from my hands, I fell forward, ramming my arms against the table to stay on my feet.

By that time my friends were coming back to. Scraps had been knocked unconscious, Bluff had been dazed, while Red... He was sitting up, of a sorts, massaging his right leg, while the other was angled just plain wrong under the first. Red looked up at me. For a heartbeat I thought I saw the despondent, apathetic man from before, then a fire lit behind his eyes. I shan't forget that sight. His leg was broken, he couldn't possibly move, but he wouldn't give up as he had done before.

"Get going!" he grunted at us. "Val's in trouble. I'll follow as soon as I can. Go!"

Scraps was shaking his head, chasing off the cobwebs of unconsciousness, dragging himself up. A questioning glance towards me, if I would remain behind. "Absolutely... not," I muttered. Feeling or no, I would go. Valanda needed me, needed us.

I knelt down, carefully looking about, took up my sword. When I straightened back up I concentrated hard on my motions. Just do everything as you've always done. It's supposed to work. Your muscles know what to do, even when you can't feel them do it.

"Will you move your sorry butts out of here?!" Red growled while straightening his left leg. A grimace of pain flooded his face, but he wouldn't stop.

Neither would we.



The dust was thick all over the house. A century's worth of it, and none of the recent occupants had bothered to brush it off. Footprints were everywhere, though, some themselves filled in by a thinner coat of dust. I couldn't make a wild guess which prints belonged to whom, which were the most recent, which were ancient.

Fortunately Scraps was a lot better. I've mentioned before that he was a good tracker, which he proved again in the mansion. He studied the tracks for a while, giving me the time to get better used to the numbness. If I didn't pay any attention to it, trusted my hands and feet to function as they always had, it seemed I could do so as well.

"Got it," Scraps announced, pointing to a section of ground disturbed by feet, and rather indistinguishable from any others. "They went that way, I can tell Valanda's shuffling her feet, pushed by that bastard son of a merwitch."

"Let's go," I growled, sounding harsh and determined. I was, but if I hadn't been so focused on moving, I probably wouldn't have achieved that tone of voice spurring my friends – and myself – on.

We walked forward, Scraps taking the lead, me in the middle, and Bluff behind – to watch our backs, and to catch me should I falter. (Which I did once or twice, when Bluff always steadied me before I could fall over.) After a few steps, the big man behind me asked how we could beat Wharfrat and the priest. I should note that he did not use those words, his were quite a bit more colorful and not quite fit to be repeated here.

An uncomfortably good question that was. It seemed I could fight Wharfrat, but he had to be powered by the cleric. Which made that man far more dangerous than he seemed. The Tyrant's servant...

Which reminded me of our blades – swords that had been in the Tyrant's service as well. Could it be that there was a connection, could it be that –

*You worry too much, Ahnfredas*, I told myself. Being a priest of Decirius gave me an added insight into people, perhaps into objects as well, and there didn't seem that much wrong with the swords. Nothing like the curse that I had been fearing.

Something was tugging at my mind, a nagging memory of something I had wanted to do before. What *was* it? I couldn't remember. It had been before fighting Wharfrat, hadn't it?

"They took that stairway," Scraps interrupted my thoughts.

He was peering down a narrow staircase, the beam from his breastplate cutting down, joining the flickering lights on torches mounted on the walls. There were no cobwebs, I noticed in an odd mood. The dust was as plentiful on the steps as it was anywhere else in the mansion, so it wasn't a case of frantic housekeeping that had removed the cobwebs. The spiders didn't go here.

Decirian insight? Or just a flash of good old human fright?

"Any idea where we are?" Bluff asked.

Scraps shrugged. So did I. There were no windows in the vicinity that we could check, and I hadn't thought of keeping track while giving chase to Red and Wharfrat. On the other hand... "I think we're in the basement area. I haven't seen any windows around here, only torch settings. You don't need them when there's always light outside."

"Uh-huh," Bluff grunted, weighted his blade in his hand. "Down we go, right?"

"Right."

Scraps went ahead of us again, I followed. I made a special effort to check the stairs beneath me, with the way my feet didn't feel right. My boots might have been sacks of flour, the way they seemed to me.

The stairway went down straight for some thirty steps, came to a landing, and from then on it spiraled down, reminding me strangely of the corkscrew tunnel in the caverns above. Some of the torches here were burning, not all by far. Their flickering light danced around us, slightly preferring the downward direction. A draft? I couldn't feel it. What I could feel was discomfort. This was...

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I couldn't put a word to it, except that it was a strange experience. As if the grinding rock noise of the dwarven bard should be beating now, so loud that our eardrums could split. As if we were coming close to the source.

The focus?

That's what Wharfrat had mentioned, wasn't it? The master's focus. Going by the speed at which my heart was beating, we were coming closer to it, but I had no idea what kind of a focus –

I suddenly stopped, breathed, "The battlelines!"

Bluff barely avoided running into me, Scraps paused four steps below me. Both scrutinized me closely, their faces a strange mixture of the straight beams of our breastplates and the waving, dancing light of the torches. There wasn't so much wonderment on their faces as grim determination.

"You know what I mean, don't you?" I muttered. "This is where the battlelines converge – both the ridges outside and the ditches we've seen down here. This is their focus."

Bluff shrugged. Scraps grunted, "I thought you'd figured it out. When you said we're in the basement, it's..." His voice trailed off, he shook his head, then made the unfamiliar warding sign over his breast again, joined this time by Bluff. Had I been able to copy the complicated gesture, I would have done so.

My head swayed, I steadied myself on the wall. Touching bare, roughly hewn stone. But the mansion had been perfectly built, of bricks, with plaster on top, as had been the stairwell we'd entered. This, though, wasn't. "The mansion was built on top of another building," I said. "Did you know that, too?"

"What?" Scraps' disconcerted answer as he directed his breastplate's beam first at the wall, then the steps under us was answer enough. All of them were clearly older than the mansion had been, rougher, dating back to a time when man hadn't had half as good an idea how to fit stone to stone. No bricks, but stones that had been quarried and chipped to fit the wall. Mortar held them together, as did the weight of the stones above.

The last time I'd seen a building like this had been an old temple – Brithur, I believe –, from the twenty-first century, about a millenium ago. One Darawk scholar I'd spoken to at length (not my choice, believe me) had mentioned architecture as a favorite pastime of his, and he'd mentioned that building styles had hardly varied in the time between the Elven Flood and about the twenty-third century. That is, according to the ruins surviving from those eras. Of course there had been aberrancies – some civilizations had used bricks long before they came to general use all across the continent, and there had always been different styles.

The details didn't concern me. This stairwell we were in might easily date back to the magepriests. "Abyssal flames," I whispered, barely audible to my own ears. The magepriests themselves might have taken these stairs. They might have walked down to whichever place we were heading to. The focus of the battlelines.

"Let's go on. Valanda is down there."

The others nodded. They didn't want to think too much about the implications, either.

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The stairwell stopped after one more revolution, ending before a heavy door of metal. Not iron, not steel. Something else, I could sense it, although it seemed to be ordinary steel. It wasn't. Steel doesn't have a smell of eons, and it doesn't set my senses aflame – no matter that they were otherwise dampened.

The door was open a crack. A subdued voice drifted towards us. The Jengchan priest, chanting something. I cast a quick glance to Scraps. He was tapping out a rhythm on his thigh, looked up, noticed me and nodded. "A Jengchan hymn," he whispered, leaning towards my head. "*The Hedge-Walker's Egg*, it's the same rhythm."

As noiselessly as I could I moved to the crack, peered through it into the room beyond. A circular hall, some fifteen yards across, its walls of the same rough stones as the stairwell, but with octagonal friezes at regular intervals. Grooves ran through the ground – just packed dirt, except for the grooves themselves – from the friezes, and I realized they had to be the continuation of the battlelines, converging at the very center of the room. Where Valanda was standing, Wharfrat still holding her. Underneath them was another octagonal frieze, planted on the ground. I couldn't make out any details what it depicted, the torchlight was too vague.

The priest – where was the priest? I couldn't see him, only hear him.

Valanda was looking at me. Why was she –

No, she was looking at the priest. And that meant he was almost where I was, just a little bit aside from my lookout behind the door. If I could somehow attract Valanda's attention... No, then Wharfrat would notice me, too. Or would he? He was so small behind Valanda, that maybe her back could block sight of a signal from me...

Wait a minute! The priest was standing *beside* the door? Could he be that stupid? Could it be that I only had to slam open the door and repay the favor he'd done me?

I exchanged quick glances with my friends. Both Bluff and Scraps had their swords at the ready – mine was hanging from my hand, but I still had a grip (I had to look down to make sure), and I could bring it up fast. We were as ready as we would ever be.

I took a deep breath, hoping it couldn't be heard over the priest's chanting, backed up one step.

Then I rushed forward, at the door, and swung it open with all the strength I had.

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## *CHAPTER SEVENTEEN*

I had guessed wrong. On two counts.

The first was that the Jengchan priest wasn't standing right beside the door. When I slammed my shoulder into it, the door swung open as fast, as furiously, as I had wanted. It crashed into the wall, the hinges were screaming in protest. But the Jengchan priest stood more than a foot away from the door, safe from it.

And the second count? I had forgotten how deadened my nerves were from my own blessing. I had no way of steadying myself, all I did was slide into the room, onto the dirt floor, a useless projectile that buried itself into the ground.

At least there was no pain. My breath was knocked from my lungs by the impact, I didn't waste time to catch it. I got my arms under me, pushed myself up – heard a woman scream my name. Valanda! *Give me just a little more time!* Up I went, too far, my arms were flailing again.

For once I was lucky, for my armored right arm smashed right into Wharfrat's face. The little twerp must have let go of Valanda, was running towards me, to attack me and protect his precious master. Whatever, my involuntary hit disabused him of that notion for a moment.

More shouts. Bluff and Scraps, coming into the room as well.

*Let them take care of the priest,* I thought. Wharfrat belonged to me! My sword arm went out, Wharfrat wanted to throw himself against it, careen me out of balance, but something stopped him, once more. I swung my arm back, to slice the blade deep into his neck and see those hateful eyes bulge out in shock.

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Except that there was no sword in my hand. I must have dropped it. And my fingers were a meaningless weapon now. Wharfrat dove under my swing, as surprised as I was that there was no blade. He punched up from his crouch, his fists deflected well before they could hit me.

"Duck, Ahnfredas!" a woman shouted. Shouted, not screamed.

I didn't have much of a choice here, since the various movements had brought me off balance already. And like a sack of flour – a familiar image, right? – I went down. The moment I hit the ground, I managed to roll over, my face up again. Just in time to see a ball of fire whisk past my head. I should have felt the heat, should have recoiled from it.

No sensation. Good. Now where was my sword?

Ah, there. Why was it flying through the air?

Because Bluff was throwing it towards me, I realized the same moment my hand went upward to snatch it from the air. A miracle occurred, and I got it. Wharfrat was yelling. My head snapped around, to see where he was. Like a wraith – twisted, torn – he rushed through the room, towards Bluff and Scraps, his arms spread wide. So fast, too fast it seemed for my friends to avoid him.

Scraps did leap sideways in time, but Bluff wasn't quick enough. Wharfrat caught his fingers, wrenched them back – Bluff roared in pain, was dragged backwards, along with his arm, towards Wharfrat. "I'll kill you!" the one-time sailor screamed in joy. Bluff slammed his free elbow back, the metal impacting Wharfrat's breastplate. The dungworm didn't notice, wrenched on Bluff's fingers with more force, in another direction. The arm jerked out of the socket, Bluff roared again, his eyes were bulging out. His arm wasn't torn apart, not yet, but Wharfrat was readying his muscles for another tug, one that would surely burst the armor, burst the flesh and the bones.

Scraps' sword interrupted him, flying at Wharfrat's unprotected neckline. The blade dug into the flesh, the spine broke with an audible *crack*, and Wharfrat let go of Bluff's arm. The tall man sunk to the ground, tears running from his eyes, twitching, trying to reach his arm, put it back into the shoulder – trying and failing.

But Wharfrat wasn't down yet. Scraps must have anticipated this, for he was done when the sailor – *sans* spine – smashed his arms around, crashed them into the wall right where Scraps had been moments before. A frieze sprayed apart under the fore of the fingers, chips flying in a cloud of dusty debris.

"No!" the Jengchan priest's voice bellowed. "Don't touch the panels!"

The priest! Where was he?!

Blue lightning, twisting, dancing, flashing, showed me the way. One end of the lightning were Valanda's hands, still standing on the central frieze, her eyes reflecting the blue-white light shooting from her, her face as grim as I'd ever seen it. And the other end of the lightning strokes was the priest, reeling under the stings of oh so many tiny points of blue light swirling over him, leaving black marks wherever they hit. The priest was caught in a thunderstorm, myriads of tiny lightnings scouring him. But he wasn't going down. His robe was starting to smolder, but not his flesh.

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I was distracted again. Scraps. Shouting something. I didn't understand it. Still, I saw him leap away from Wharfrat, the sailor rushing after him with outstretched arms, his head bent aside, no longer supported by his spine. But moving. Running close to me, after Scraps who flew past me.

"Bastard," I growled, fastened my grip on my sword – hoping that it was actually still within my fingers –, and swung it up with all my strength. Judgment Day was here. I was a priest of Decirius, I was the embodiment of the Messenger of Death. And Wharfrat was going to face the Final Courtroom.

The sword hit him right underneath the breastplate. We wore pieces of chainmail underneath – soft, supple material connecting with the leg armor. Chain rings went flying under the assault of my blade, Wharfrat folded over, legs and upper torso going forward, the middle stopped by my sword. I watched, amazed, as the blade kept going, eating through the chainmail. Further and further it dug in, splitting the mail, splitting the undershirt, and then reaching his flesh.

I shouldn't have been able to do that. Not as an ordinary man. But I was a priest of Decirius. Judgment was delivered.

An unnatural scream rose. It took me moments to realize it was coming from Wharfrat's mouth, and some moments longer to see that his torso was flung forward, separate from his legs that fell apart before me. The torso landed on the ground, face forward, the arms were moving, fingers crawling together, pushing Wharfrat up. "He *promised* me! He *promised*!" the voice from his mouth was yelling, but it wasn't Wharfrat's. This one was distorted, unnatural.

I didn't think. I just swung my sword back, at Wharfrat's neck. His head had rolled forward, well exposing the open area between helmet and backplate. As well as the bloody gorge that Scraps had dug into it. My sword finished the job. Wharfrat's head flew from his neck, and the unnatural voice kept spouting words, even when the head was rolling across the floor, without any blood spewing from either neck or base of head as it should have.

"He *promised*! After I came here, he promised that I'd be powerful, and that –"

A boot stopped him from talking forever. Scraps' boot, to be precise, smashing into Wharfrat's chin with all the force that his armored leg could give him. The kick unhinged the jaw, tore it aside, letting it clatter, allowing only more of the distorted screams to come forward.

My breath was coming hard. So was Scraps'. He was heaving dry, doubling over, holding onto his sword with sheer determination. Then he brought it forward, about to attack. Whom?

The priest. Scraps was swinging his sword at the lightning-clouded figure of the Jengchan cleric – but he never connected. The priest flicked his wrist, negligently, and a gust of wind hurled Scraps off his feet. He landed on his back, and he kept sliding, towards the wall.

It didn't stop him, he was scrambling back to his feet immediately – but he didn't attack again, instead glared at me. "Ahnfredas!" he shouted.

"Yes, I *know*!" I bellowed back. My turn. Again.

I forced myself to my knees, ready to stand up. Then I felt the glance of the Jengchan cleric upon me. I had to look up, meet his gaze, almost hidden behind the flare of Valanda's attack. It was hurting him, I could see that much. *Good*. But he was still holding up, and he was saying something. I didn't

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quite understand it. But I saw enough of his mien to see that he wasn't worried one bit. No matter that Valanda was hurting him, no matter that his servant had been cut into several parts, he was still sure of his victory.

Something was about to happen.

A moment later I knew what that something was.



Each of the friezes – even the one that Wharfrat had broken – started to glow. No, not really glow, as in brightness. It was a black light, if you can imagine that. As if there were flames licking out from the stone that sucked up all the light, that represented utter darkness. Darker than a moonless night. Darker than anything you can imagine.

The blackness descended from the friezes, like a fire's sparks first, then more like a thick liquid dropping globs down into the grooves. Mere heartbeats passed, I might as well have counted them on one hand, until there was a steady stream of black into the grooves, so much that the liquid light poured onward, rolling towards the central frieze.

When I would have run out of fingers to count my heartbeats, the light reached the central frieze, on which Valanda was still standing, pouring all her strength into the lightning storm. Until the light flowed up, into a column of blackness that shrouded her from my sight. Did she scream? I don't know. I never asked her what she felt at that moment, and I never will.

The priest cackled. The blue-white lightning ceased around him, revealing that his clothes were singed, smoke rising from them. His skin hadn't escaped the punishment, and there were signs of pain on his face, but he ignored them. "Now," he said to me, "I must think about how to deal with you. I was rather fond of my servant. Unlike the dwarf, he was a willing subject, you see, and I would have liked to keep him for a while longer."

He raised his arms, crooked his head in pondering.

I didn't care. I was judge, jury and executioner. And I was holding a sword in my hands.

From the edge of my eyes I saw Scraps fighting his way up to his feet, too, trembling hands fingering his sword, holding it tighter. I rose as well, breathing steadily. There was no pain. Fortunately. The sword that had cut through Wharfrat would do the same to the priest, and then Valanda would be free.

"Oh," the cleric said while Scraps and I stalked towards him, covering the few feet between us, readying our swords. He couldn't see Scraps, only me. Focus on me, you bloody Tyrant's servant. If you have any spells left, waste them on me, and then see what Scraps will do to you. "Is that my Lord Conqueror's blade?"

What? I didn't stop, just wondered about the statement. And it was a statement, not a question.

The priest laughed, mouthed something – and then my sword wrenched itself from my fingers, clattered to the ground. It refused to stay still, slid away, as far away from me as it could. To a place on the wall where it was joined by Scraps' sword as well.

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The cleric's head swiveled around, focused on Scraps – my friend standing there rather silly looking, with his arm raised to swing his blade, but no sword in his fingers. “A backstabber, are you?” the priest laughed.

“Duck, Scraps!” I shouted, and my friend proved once more that he was very adept at doing that.

A sliver of the black light liquid hopped up, darted up, elongated, grew into a spear – all in the matter of a heartbeat when a metal skewer had formed, then rushed through the air, lancing into the space where Scraps had been a moment earlier.

The spear dissolved into black light a heartbeat later, spraying out drops like a dog shaking itself. Some of those drops hit Scraps. He howled in sudden pain, rolled around on the floor, beat himself as if he were on fire. “You're not *that* fast,” the priest laughed.

Then yelped. A crossbow quarrel sprouted from his breast, at best an inch above his heart, blood flowing from the wound. His eyes traveled up, towards the entrance. Mine did, too, and at the same time as he did, I gasped.

Red was leaning against the door, one of the crossbows from the foyer in his hand, the free hand wriggling a second quarrel loose from his pocket, about to insert it. “Fast enough,” he muttered, while working the quarrel down.

The priest howled. He raised his arms.

Did he get to fire another blessing? Call up a windstorm, or have the black liquid form another projectile?

Ahh, you know he didn't. He had the problem of an armored Decirius priest slamming into his side, ramming him off his feet, and burying him under an awfully heavy suit of armor.

Me, I didn't feel anything. I wanted to slug him the next moment, the way that Bluff had handled the dwarven bard. Another slave of this priest's. Unfortunately, my body didn't keep up with my thoughts. I was slow to raise my arms, gave the cleric the pause to slam his arms up, into my sides.

Well, he was a bit foolish. My armor wasn't particularly troubled by naked fists.

So I was slow. So what? I still had the strength to plow my fists into his face, tell him what I thought of him, in the nice way of a very angry Decirius priest. Except that I saw his eyes. They weren't human. Not anymore. I had seen them before, a bit cold, but not filled to the rim with the black light spewing from the friezes.

Not a reflection. The light was in his eyes, filling them, shining from them.

But why was there fear in those eyes? They were blacker than the night, but when they locked with mine, utter despair flooded them. “No! Not *you*,” the priest whined, too little air in his lungs for a shout. “The power belongs to *me*, to *me!*”

His arms came back up, not to strike me as uselessly as before, but accompanied by a gust of wind like had happened before. “Get off me!” the priest yelled, and his wish was accomplished by the wind that ripped me off his chest, flung me backwards, flipped me upside down.

The circular room careened before my eyes. I saw Red tightening his crossbow for the second shot, so determined, ignoring the pain from his leg and the impromptu splint fashioned from a table leg and the ever useful strips of your own clothing. There was Bluff, sitting up now, trying to move

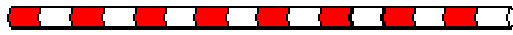
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forward – no, just to move, suppress the pain as well as Red did, but failing. And Scraps... Tearing Wharfrat's sword – not a Jengchan blade, but one of ours – from the scabbard around a severed leg.

Flashes. Images. Flooding me, until...

Until there was only the column of black light over the central frieze, behind which Valanda was hidden. I realized that I would join her now. For better or for worse, eh?

The magical wind hurled me into the column, and all I saw was black light.



Red saw me fly off the priest, his glance torn up by the sudden movement while he was working the quarrel back enough. Can I give you an idea of the pain he was in? Perhaps if I tell you that his eyes glaze over even now, such a long time later. Oh, not really so long, but it seems that way.

Yes, if you're wondering, Red survived this battle. Red's still around. One of the few, the proud.

He heard the *thwock* sound of the wrench hitting the end, the string wound as tightly back as it could. Instinctively he looked down, lost sight of the priest.

The Jengchan cleric stared after me, rolled himself around – at the same time when Red looked down. He breathed deeply, mumbled something towards the black light in the grooves. But it didn't respond, not as it had before.

The cleric shot to his feet, shouted at the black light, fully consumed with commanding it. Why wouldn't it follow his orders? Why wouldn't it form another spear, to skewer his enemies? The Lord Conqueror had ordained him, and he was destined for greatness.

Red saw him then, and he never noticed any of the malicious black light I had seen in the cleric's eyes. The eyes were normal – if frantic and desperate. "You will *obey* me!" the priest yelled.

Those were his last words.

A human body doesn't take kindly to a sword stabbing in his side, wielded by a maniacally grinning drummer boy named Scraps. Nor does it suffer a crossbow quarrel very well, not when said quarrel lodges itself in the throat. Blood spurted from the two openings in the priest's body. For a moment he stayed on his feet, held more by surprise than anything else.

Then he toppled over, falling right into one of the grooves of black light. The light squirted up, forming tendrils that eagerly lapped at the body, swept over him, in a heartbeat only – yet to Red and Scraps, it seemed to be a languid, ecstatic motion of the black flames as they surrounded the priest's body, caressed him.

And dragged him into the groove. Was there a scream? A final utterance from the cleric before the black light consumed him?

Neither of my friends paid much attention. They turned to the central frieze where Valanda and I had vanished. Bluff groaned, Scraps took a tentative step towards the black column. Red shouted my name.

I was otherwise occupied at the time.

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There's something else I should mention. Red never saw the black light in the Jengchan priest's eyes. But he saw it in somebody else's.

Mine.

When I was hurled off the priest, back into the column. Yes, my eyes were black. The malicious fluid in the grooves, from the battlelines was in me. And that was what the priest had seen when he screamed that the power belonged to him, not to me.

You know, it's all the dwarf's fault. All along, I mean. Ever since we stepped into this underground realm, and nothing seemed allowed to hurt me. Not the earthquakes, not the stone creatures, not Wharfrat. All because of a silly dwarven bard who couldn't tell one human priest from another. That Jengchan priest whose name I never found out, he had enslaved the bard in some fashion. Made him kill his own people, the wild dwarves we found in one cave above. Made him bring us down here, because he needed – and probably wanted – Valanda.

The latter... Well, I can't think badly of him because of that. I wanted her, too.

But I was talking about the dwarf. Enslaved as he was, he wasn't permitted to hurt the priest, and neither could any of his spells. Oh, yes, it was a part of his magic that twisted Wharfrat into the creature he'd become. The bard had no idea there was another human priest down here. Even if he had, I don't think he particularly cared either way.

He was mad. Driven mad by this circular room, this chamber we were in. The priest had forced him onto the frieze, driven the black light onto him with his chant, and made the bard join the battlelines. This place had never been designed for a dwarf, even one whose nature merged wizardly and clerical powers much as the magepriests had done.

Not that the priest cared. He only wanted to use the dwarf as a conduit, so he could Valanda and perform the ritual with her. Enslave her to him, make her his wizardly bride and conduit, so he could wield all the power of the battlelines.

So much power, so much strength. Enough to make you drunk on it, enough to make your head reel. Enough to rip the humanity from your mind and leave the savagery of the ancients behind.

Yes, it's all about power. The power of the magepriests. The ancient evil. Oh, it's certainly evil.

I should know. After all, I was thrown into it.

And I fell into it.

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## *CHAPTER EIGHTEEN*

The instant of black light before my eyes flashed by. The force of the wind conjured up by the Jengchan priest suddenly ceased, and I flopped down to the ground. Hard. Pain and impact combined to drive the air from my lungs once more, and I gasped for more, scrambled to get back up.

I had to get back at the priest, find my sword, if my numbed hands could –

Pain? I was in pain?! That wasn't possible, my blessing had –

My eyes opened and I saw that I wasn't in the round chamber anymore. Not exactly, anyway. The ground under me was covered by moss and a few blades of grass peaking up here and there, and the light flooding me from above was not the strange one of glowwater. It was the sun, high in a wonderfully blue sky with clouds.

How had I come here? Where had the chamber vanished to?

And why was the central frieze still here, looking a lot fresher and recent, as well as the grooves running towards it – now free of the black light? I had barely made it to my knees when I saw that there was a low, circular wall encompassing this place. The grooves ended in friezes much like the ones I had seen in the chamber below the mansion.

No, not much like them. Identical. And beyond them there were ridges of thrown up dirt, so fresh that no plants had yet taken root there. Battlelines, I realized, my mind as numb as my body had been moments earlier.

"Get away from me!" the broken voice of an old woman yelled.

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To my right. I turned my head, hands seeking for my sword. I must have dropped it, right? But there was something in my hands that felt comfortably like my old pilgrim's staff. A lot like it, but not exactly. Besides, my staff had broken across the head of an ardog half an eternity ago.

Then I forgot about that when I saw the old crone, bent over from age, standing on the other side of the frieze, staring at me with wild eyes, her hair – uncombed for a millenium, give or take a decade – white, messy. The crone wore a wizard's robe, black, billowing, but tightened down in the places that would have served a young woman very well. Habit of decades ago? I wondered absent-mindedly, while the major part of my mind tried to understand why she was so afraid of me.

Granted, an armored man doesn't commonly drop out of nowhere, but –

*Especially when he isn't wearing armor anymore.* I couldn't help it, I had to look down. I was wearing a robe now, of rough linen – not so rough that it was chafing, but I had grown used to the metal on my skin, after all. And my staff... Six feet long, of elfwood rather than the oak I had used. Elfwood! Yes, without a doubt it was that precious, rare wood. Once hardened, it is the toughest substance we know on our planet. And if you put an edge, a sharpened tip to the end of your staff, it makes for a formidable weapon that can cut through stone as if it were butter.

The crone made a noise that seemed like a sigh, but with an edge of determination. Fortunate for me, since I looked up just in time. She was making use of my ponderings to raise her arms – wrinkled, gnarled like an old tree –, and I knew right away she wanted to fire a magical spell towards me.

"Don't, please!" I yelled, raising my hands. "I mean you no harm, honest!"

The crone snarled, "That's what you would say! I haven't gone through all this blood and terror to be carried off by you!"

"I don't want to –" I started, then caught myself. That wasn't my voice at all – but it spoke from my mouth, that deep, dark bass, with a slight echo, sounding like a large, subterranean crypta. Like the place in the Divine Realm where the bowls of life were kept by Decirius, where each being's life water slowly dripped out of the bowl, until it was empty and the Messenger of Death would be sent out to fetch the soul towards the Final Courtroom.

"That isn't me!" I yelled, in fury and fright. Why did I sound like the Messenger of Death himself? How could that be? How could I hold the staff that the Messenger bore?! Yes, that was it, I had seen the picture so often before, it was a miracle I hadn't recognized it right away.

The crone hissed. She walked sideways, like a crab, always keeping her clawed hands pointed towards me. "What is this going to be? Archer Melt's book all over again? I like the classics, but this is silly." Her eyes were flashing angrily. She had the movements of a woman once used to utter grace, the kind who knew that each motion of her hip would make men swoon in dreams, leap to their feet and ask her for a dance. So strange that I had to think of that. This woman was ancient – a hundred years she certainly bore on her back, yet there was something in the lines of her face, a memory, a shade of beauty. Of kindness. Of laughter. Of...

"Valanda?!" I whispered.

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Just a whisper, but it stopped her dead in her tracks. For an instant the old hag studied me, trying to look into my hood, see the face hidden beneath. The hood! “Gods,” I growled, swept my hand up to push the hood back.

She mistook the meaning of my movement. Fireballs launched from her hands, so incredibly fast. I should have dropped back, avoided the balls, hoping I was fast enough. Instead my right hand jerked forward, the one holding the staff.

And the fireballs veered off their course to rush the elfwood, playing their fiery havoc on the dark wood, sending tendrils and sparks all over the six feet long staff, including my fingers – bare fingers, hurting like the abyssal flames. But it was over so fast, the elfwood soaked the flames in before I could do more than yelp. Too fast for me to drop the staff.

The crone coughed. “Should’ve known you couldn’t be hurt by magic,” she said, the fury slowly evaporating from her. She – could that really be Valanda? that ancient lady? – sank forward, her shoulders slumping, the light fading from her eyes. The eyes... Surrounded by wrinkles, deeply porous skin, spots over it. Yet the eyes I knew. “Go on,” she said in a low voice that I now recognized, despite the overtones of age and surrender, “take me. Finish it. I want to see where I wind up. I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me, are you? Leave it to your master to decide whether I was a good girl or a bad one.”

She wasn’t looking at me. Her hands were by her side, she was bent forward by the weight of more years than I could count. Or she could count, for that matter.

I got up, surprised by my own body. It wasn’t quite mine – not just that the skin was a pasty white, as if there should be maggots crawling around in my innards. No, I was taller than before. Slimmer. Now I’ve never been fat, but this was a body that hadn’t seen a meal in – well, probably never.

It didn’t matter. I saw Valanda, so old, so... hurting. Gods, she was still beautiful. I don’t understand how I could think that way. She was a crone, after all. A woman long past the final petals of beauty have wilted and fallen off. But she was Valanda. All the features of her face were still there, buried beneath wrinkles, beneath faded skin, but they were still there. I could see them. I didn’t even have to close my eyes, call up an image of memory. The latter would have been very easy – after all, not even an hour had passed since I had last seen her as she had been. Granted, there was still the glamor of youth on her, but...

I walked over to her, reached out my hand – the one without the staff, mind you – and gently touched her shoulder. “Valanda,” I said, doing my best to raise the tone of my voice, make it warm and less subterranean, “you are always a wonderful girl. Please, don’t –“

Before I could finish my pithy sentence, her elbow shot out, rammed my ribs with more strength than any old hag should have. Let me add that no self-respecting crone would have thought of slamming her forearm down right afterwards, burying her fist in my groin with enough force to make me wish for that nerve-numbing blessing to work. Provided that there would have been enough thought left in my head to come up with that idea, rather than gasp, double over and cry out huskily.

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Valanda didn't leave me any time to ponder on the fact that this was the third time that a woman had hit me there – let's not ponder the first two occasions, all right? I had been innocent, truly! No, her knee came up, meeting my head with a resounding crack. I spun backwards, to the ground, flattening a couple of swaths of grass, and then –

Then the hag was on top of me, kicking the staff from my fingers. I could barely see her, tears clouding my vision. She was grinning determinedly, shouting, "I won't be taken that easily!" Valanda pulled back her arm, for enough force to knock me unconscious. (It's a miracle I didn't pass out before, I ought to mention. That pain burning through me... Gods, throughout our descent I don't think I felt quite that much!)

She stopped when I started to laugh. Don't ask me how I managed. The laughter just came out, inbetween my gasps for air, despite my surely pain-distorted face, and everything. "Oh, Valanda!" I pressed out. Was my voice back to normal? Was it Ahnfredas Bluekeg's voice rather than that of the Messenger of Death?

I don't know. Something made her pull her punch. Yes, she did hit me. It wasn't all that bad, though. Perhaps because there was all that pain from her previous hits surging throughout me, but I didn't pass out. I kept on grinning and laughing. She hadn't surrendered. Face her with the Messenger of Death, and she kept on fighting. Foolish girl, she didn't know who she really was!

"I *know* myself," she snarled. Uhm, had I spoken the last thought aloud? Well, she stopped herself, frowned at me. "Ahnfredas?!"

"That's my name, don't waste it," I giggled, put my arms around her – finally! Gods, how I had longed for this moment! Yes, she was old, but – oh, abysses! – this was Valanda, and I loved her so much, so very much.

So much the realization made me pause in my laughter. I was in love with Valanda. All the way the bards (human ones, mind you) sing about, all that silly stuff about giving your heart and soul to one person. It had never seemed real – don't forget, there's all that real, day-to-day stuff that you have to deal with, not to mention the fact that a young man doesn't exactly worry much about love when there's a pretty girl around. Love, in the bardic sense, is the last thing on a young man's mind. Nonetheless, I suddenly understood that the bards weren't crooning about some dimwitted ideal, but something that existed. Something that transcends the bounds of the flesh. Don't ask me to explain it in any detail – it would only come out as flowery as a bard's song. And you, kind reader, do know how little impression that makes on the listener!

"You don't look like yourself," Valanda growled, stiff in my arms, still ready and willing to pound me to unconsciousness. She must have thought I was a rather mad Messenger of Death.

"Neither do you," I chuckled, "old hag."

"I am *not* old!" she cried, then paused herself. For the first time she noticed her hands, the gnarly old finger-like twigs. "I am..." she started, her voice breaking.

"Valanda," I said, grasping her head gently with both hands, "you're beautiful. I love you."

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“What?” she snarled. Such a harsh sound, not at all what the bards were singing about. She pushed up against my arms. I wasn’t holding her tight, she bounded up from me, with all the ease and strength of a young woman.

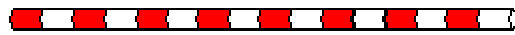
Which she was. I’m not sure when the change happened – somewhere between my words and her leaping up -, but now there was a woman of some twenty years of age standing above me, gazing at me with a mixture of fury and – well... – longing. “You’re... Ahnfredas?”

I carefully picked myself from the ground, rolled over onto an elbow. “Yes, that’s me.”

“You *love* me?” Her voice was breaking all over the place. Disbelief. Anger at somebody daring to express that to her, most of all me, and... “Me? You don’t *know* me,” she spat the words at me. “Ahnfredas, you’d better watch what you’re thinking, you –”

Tears welled up in her eyes, those pretty eyes that hadn’t changed one bit whether she was ancient, middle age, or young. “I want to, Ahnfredas, I want to love you, but I – I can’t, I can’t, I can’t...”

*“You will have the time to think about it.”*



The voice was unnatural, much like Wharfrat had sounded at the end. It was surrounding us, not coming from a single source. Not from any one mouth.

It jarred both of us out of the mood. (Not an uncommon experience *per se*, as far as I’m concerned, but the circumstances were quite unique.) I bounced up from the ground, my hand going automatically for the sword by my side. I had drawn the blade before I quite realized that I now had one by my side. And what a beauty it was. (Nothing to match Valanda’s.) Four feet of the best steel you can imagine, double-edged, the tip sharpened, the hilt made of ivory, with jewels inlaid. And while I was busy watching my sword, I noticed that my clothes had changed as well. I wore a shirt now, of white silk, with soft embroidery – no flowers, to be sure, but twisting, intricate insignia. There was a jacket over it, brown leather, supple to the movement, reinforced by chainmail inlaid between two sheets of leather. I knew that without having to test it. My breeches were knee-length, of the same brown leather. And my hair – it fell over my shoulders, and I just knew it was a perfect light brown, as perfect as my eyes had turned blue, in a face that one might have recognized as that of Ahnfredas Bluekeg. Should somebody have thought to use my likeness for the cover of one of Hrolfwald’s Clairbold tales.

I wasted little time on noticing these details. They were unimportant, now.

More important were the hooded beings standing before each of the friezes. Eleven, I thought without counting to make sure. They were of varying height, some a little over five feet, some ranging well above six feet. Each wore a black robe, with red signs on the chest, where the robe was closed with a blood-red sash. The signs – they were of both the wizardly and clerical kind, meshed in a painter’s fever dream. There was Darawk’s quill on one chest, merged with letters from the magical

language, and with something that reminded me of the balancing scales of Decirius. All in one intricate symbol.

None of the symbols were alike, merging various other symbols together in such a fashion that one might have lost himself in figuring out what was hidden behind the swirls of lines and curves.

*"They are not what we expected,"* the unearthly voice said.

*"They are here,"* the voice answered itself – as if another person had spoken, but it sounded exactly alike. *"The ritual has begun. They fit the requirements."*

*"Yes, but –"*

*"But nothing, brother!"* That was a third source of sound. *"A new cycle is started. These will be our successors. A proper priest, a proper mage."*

*"A wizard, actually,"* another source commented, suggesting a smile.

The third source made a growling sound. *"Whatever, they are ours now. They will continue our path. They will found the next generation of magepriests. After more than two thousand years, we will continue."*

*"Like the others?"* the first source said sourly.

I was reaching out my hand to Valanda in the meantime. She took it, her bosom heaving hard under the laces of her light pink blouse, her white skirt wafting in a breeze, exposing firm thighs. I felt my thews bulge, muscles all over my body, more than I had ever known in my life. Power was flowing through me – the sheer power of a strong body, not that of magic or anything of the sort. And Valanda, she was... No, not the same, but she was the very embodiment of femininity. With an edge. One made of steel, I hasten to add. Her blade was a shortsword, fitted to her perfectly, the hilt adorned with roses. Like roses, this weapon had quite a sting.

Oh, the sight of us would make a cover artist of the Clairbold-style romances faint, having found his heavenly model.

*"These two are more apt than the others."*

*"Just look at them. See how their minds shape them."*

*"Yes, dreams!"*

*"No, imbecile, that is the truth. Their selves know better than to fall for dreams. This is what they truly are."*

*"Yes. I second that. They are suitable."*

*"Quite suitable. How say you?"*

*"Acceptable."*

*"Dismiss this! Let us take them!"*

I shouted back at the cacophony of voices around us, "Forget that! We won't be taken by anybody!"

*"Interesting. Such resistance."*

*"A futile expense of energy."*

"Let's see about futility!" I shouted, squeezed Valanda's hand – and propelled myself forward, my wonderful sword slashing the air, making a hissing sound as it split the elemental air. I swung my

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blade at the nearest hooded figure, and the blade bit into the cloth, splitting it, going on into... Nothing?

The hooded figure disintegrated under my blow, its cloak and hood dissolving, revealing nothing underneath. Nothing but a patch of black light that churned, twisted, boiled – and screamed.

*“No, they are not permitted!”*

“Bloody abysses, we’re not!” That was Valanda shouting, running her own blade through another hooded figure. It blew apart a tad more spectacularly than mine had, I’ll admit.

*“Stop them, brothers and sisters!”*

The hooded figures moved away from their positions at the friezes, not walking, gliding along the grooves in the ground, much like the black light had flowed through them in the original chamber. Not leaving the grooves, right? I jumped back, amazed how much strength was in my body. One slash to the right, one to the left, and two more of the hooded figures fell.

So quick it was, so easy. The figures hadn’t expected us to fight. They hadn’t had any defenses in place, and before they quite realized what was happening, six of their number had dissolved, their screams boiling the air around us, darkening the sun. The black patches within the cloaks sparked up, formed a sort of dome above the circular place, for instances before fading away.

Then the hooded figures whisked by us, reached the central frieze. And changed. The cloaks and hoods fell away, but there was no simple black patch underneath. Creatures of nightmares turned around, clad in mottled brown scales, claws on all appendages, fanged snouts breathing small jets of flame, glowing red eyes. Not quite dragons, they were like a cross between dragons and human beings. A cross you wouldn’t want to see.

“Valanda!” I shouted. She was close to one of the dragon creatures, it slashed its arm out at her – lazily, negligently, but the claws were gleaming, rushing for her tender flesh. Valanda smacked her blade at the claws. The blade dented them, but the arm moved onwards, smashing into her side, flinging her across the room.

She didn’t cry, she kept hold of her sword, rolled neatly and came up on her feet.

I ran forward, fingers tight around my blade’s hilt, swung it at one creature. My blade cut in, splashed green blood, made the dragon creature howl – a sound from its snout, not the unearthly voice beyond -, but it still lashed out with his other hand. The claws bit into my stomach, tore my fine jacket and shirt apart, not to mention the skin underneath. Pain jabbed through me. No, I wouldn’t give in. My sword was moving away from the creature, on its outward swing. I brought it back in, spun it higher, towards the throat.

Yes! Scales went flying, blood followed, and the creature jerked back – forgetting to take another swipe at me.

Unfortunately neither of the two standing next to that one were as forgetful. They moved forward in unison, scaled and clawed arms flashing forward, about to sever my head from my neck. Valanda’s hand snatched me back, at the last second before the claws would have touched my throat. I flew back for an instant, managed to put my feet in the ground quickly enough to steady, scream an insult at the creatures and keep on swinging.

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So did Valanda. We weaved a web of glittering steel before us, so beautiful, so perfect. The dragon creatures nearest kept away, but not the others. Five were still there, three were held by the steely web, the other two stepped sideways, no longer bound by the grooves.

In moments more they would be upon us. Valanda and I tried to widen the web, cover the outer two as well – but it gave an opening to the creatures right before us. A powerful arm hit my sword hand, smacked it back – in Valanda's direction, the tip going straight for her. I had to drop to the ground, swipe my sword away.

A bigger opening for the creatures to attack us.

"Back!" I yelled, scrambling in that direction while I was shouting. Good Valanda, she was faster, doing her best to keep up the web with her single sword while I was pushing backwards on elbows, sidling to the left, towards one of the grooves. I knew my feet hit it when pain flooded me, as much as the damage Valanda had done. I ignored the pain, wedged my feet in, gave a thrust with my thighs, bounded up, my sword flying already.

No, I am not exaggerating. You probably think I'm drunk on some of the ambling knight romances I have read recently. You are right to think I have done so. Nonetheless, at that point my reflexes and abilities were those of a man who had trained fighting from childhood. Or, perhaps, even better than that. Had I been given the time to wonder about it, I would have died then and there, thrashed by the dragon creatures.

For nought, my newly found prowess was. Oh, yes, I kept the creatures at bay. For the moment. There were still too many, they were coming onto us. Valanda and I retreated, panting hard, swinging our swords. We scored on the creatures, sent more scales and blood drops flying. But the wounds healed almost instantly, and there was a howling of greedy hunger in the air. The unearthly voice, anticipating to take us.

There was only the low wall behind us. We could jump over it, run from these beasts, make it for some other place, try to –

For a tiny instant I forgot about one of the creatures, concentrated too much on the others. It was enough for that beast to leap forward, embed the claws on hands and feet into my chest, rending flesh from bones. That pain was – oh, I shouldn't say it was unbearable. I am running out of proper terms for that. Let me just continue in my tale, and you may imagine how I felt.

I wasn't alone in forgetfulness. So was the creature, ignoring my blade. That wonderful length of steel ran through it, splattering blood and gore wide – and the creature dissolved at that instant, turned to another patch of black light that sparked upwards. Lucky me, its claws vanished at the same time, or else I would have died then and there.

As it was I fell to the ground, blood spewing from my chest. And I remembered something. I was a priest of Decirius. Who could summon the Messenger of Death – the true one, not just its likeness.

That's what I'd been trying to remember earlier, when I had been about to enter the basement chamber in the mansion. The Messenger of Death. *And how are you going to speak a proper prayer, with your guts leaking like that?* I didn't care. I saw Valanda step across me, one leg to my right, the other to my left, and she was swinging her blade, hollering defiance. Defending me. Against all five of the

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dragon creatures. I needed the Messenger of Death, needed to send these beasts to the abysses where they belonged.

Magepriests! Demonic creatures! Wind up in the fiery blaze you deserve!

Valanda was knocked back by several of the arms connecting. One moment she was over me, her blade flashing, her voice shouting – then there were scaled arms, and red, precious blood splattered on my face, my lips. After that...



After that an elfwood staff flashed through my field of vision, cutting through the arms, transforming them into howling patches of black light. The elfwood kept swinging, a dark dome over me, so fast it blurred into a single sheet of brownish color.

The howls continued. The sheet of brown moved away from me, toward the central frieze.

I raised my head, wondering how I could still move with the wounds in my chest. Except that those were gone now, and I was free of pain. I sat up, and there was...

The Messenger of Death.

I couldn't possibly mistake the long-limbed, hooded creature – its cloak very different from those the magepriests had worn -, and that being was swinging an elfwood staff like the one I had held not so short ago. Whenever the elfwood touched a dragon creature, it bit deep, severed a limb, turned it into a patch of blackness. The creatures didn't dissolve altogether at the first touch, the Messenger needed a little more work to dispatch of them, moving with calm and a speed that was beyond a mortal human being.

I watched in amazement. So did Valanda. I knew where she was, felt the warmth of her body near to me, her legs – I was still sitting, but I shouldn't be, should I? *No, definitely not, Ahnfredas.* (Wait a minute, that wasn't my own thought. It's just now coming to me – foolish me, penning down these words, that it wasn't... But, really, whose thoughts could those be?) Anyway, I got to my feet, my fingers reaching out, touching Valanda's without either of us taking our eyes of the sight before us.

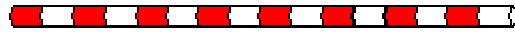
The Messenger of Death was dancing. It was a masterful dance, better than any I've ever seen. And I have seen Grenage clerics, priests and priestesses, at their most euphoric. Each thrust of his staff, still blurring quick, struck one of the dragon creatures, cut through scales, created one more patch of black to join the dance – a perfect counterpoint to the brown of his staff, the black of his robe, and the hood...

No, the hood had fallen from his head, onto his neck, exposing the pasty white skin of the head, the stringy patches of hair on the top, and the face... Grinning, enjoying, exulting in the process, yet it was familiar somehow.

Have you ever looked into a mirror? Or a reflecting pond, wondering at how familiar that face before you is? You don't regularly see it – perhaps when you shave, or on a similar occasion -, but you still have an idea what you look like.

The Messenger of Death wore my face. That of Ahnfredas Bluekeg.

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It was over quickly. The last piece of dragon was smashed, and the last patch of black light darted above us, formed the final dome of darkness, and after that...

There was the sun. There was the merry blue sky. The clouds, drifting about, having a good time. I noticed trees around us, big trees, growing towards the sky, blotting out the backdrop, but they were somehow happy trees.

The Messenger stood on the central frieze. He spun his staff around on his wrist, kept it moving for a whole minute, grinning and laughing, while he slowly turned around to face us.

Stupid me had to ask, "Are you the real –" At least I was fast enough to stop myself after those few words.

They were enough to make the Messenger chuckle. A friendly noise – strange, considering that he spoke in that cavernous voice that had frightened Valanda before. "Ahnfredas Bluekeg," he said, "you know who I am."

Valanda made a slight noise. "Ahnfredas, is that...?" Her voice trailed off, made me rather more aware of what the being before me had meant.

Oh, my. *He* wore my face. He looked as I had when I had appeared in this place.

I had thought He was only the Messenger of Death. Foolish, damn foolish me!

"My..." Voice breaking, I sank to my knees. Valanda did the same. We stared at the being with my face on the central frieze who now stilled his staff, planted it on the ground beside him, leaning on it with a smile on his face.

He Who Decides, the Eternal Judge smiled at the two of us. "You have done well, my children. Better, I must say, than I anticipated."

"My lord," I whispered, amazed at my audacity, "our friends... Torrindas, Carter, Cardsleeve, and... Are they...?"

The Taker nodded, his smile unabating. "Rest your worries, my children. They are at peace now. Ahnfredas, I have heard your plea, and I have judged them worthy." He winked. (Can you believe that? *He* winked at me.) "That includes Blasvendas Karrinal whom you knew as Longstick. As well as Rymondas and the one you knew as Slim Tim. They have proved themselves."

Then his smile wavered, and grimness replaced it. "But your road is not at its end, my children. That of your friends is. You... you have another task set for you."

"More? There is bloody, cursed more?!"

Don't ask me if that was really me shouting those words. I don't know. I'd rather think it was somebody else. Despite remembering.

But He smiled. That smile was back – an eery sight, his flesh receded anyway from the teeth, and smiling, showing those pearly whites, was little effort. His head seemed a mummified skull, and it still bore my face.

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"Yes, Ahnfredas. Valanda. There *is* more." He stepped aside, away from the central frieze. "The beings you just saw, they weren't the magepriests. They were but shades of the real thing, the real terror." He shook his head. "This was only one of the many sites of battle from those days. One headquarters, held for half a year before the magepriests moved to another site. Yet it is a focal point of their power, of their battlelines. It is a power that..." Another shake of his head. "No, my children, you need not know about that. Let us just say that this is an ancient power into which the magepriests tapped. They were more than servants, I will grant them that much, but they were not the single evil in there." He laughed. "Evil. What do you think that means?"

"No, don't answer. My children. Your view of evil is different from mine, as it should be. There once was a time when my own brethren thought I was evil. Good Darawk, lovely Alyssa, and Olmawi..." He Who Decides laughed at a private joke. I will wonder forever what he meant, and I will search the many books in the mansion for a clue or two. "This power here, it can be tapped. The way the magepriests have done. The way their shades had wanted you to do, wanted you to become their tools in propagating another set of magepriests on the world. I will not allow that. They can open the road for – the other evil."

The Taker walked towards us. We were on our knees still, and he bowed forward, laid his hands on our shoulders. "You fulfill the needs of the power, my children. I ask you to guard it for me. Keep it from those who would open the doorway. That is the task I set you. Take the power. Embrace it. Become one with it."

My mind recoiled from His words. How could he ask this of me? Of us?

Oh, very well, there was some ancient evil He didn't want loose in the world. But he meant for us – *us* – to connect with it, embrace it! Let it be *me* who does so, but not Valanda, not her, not this wonderful woman who –

"I understand, my children," the Eternal Judge said. "Both of you want to sacrifice yourself for the other."

*What?* The thought shot through my mind, taking its time to wind a couple of loops around my brain before telling me gently that Valanda had wanted to spare me, the same way I had wanted to do for her!

He sighed. "But the two of you are needed. Protect this power focus. Guard it. Become one with it, and keep it contained."

The touch faded from my shoulder, as it did from Valanda's. I frowned, looked up.

We were alone. The Eternal Judge, my lord, had gone.



Some time passed before we got to our feet. We wandered around, beyond the circular clearing, well away from it, into the land beyond. I must say that some of the features of land seemed familiar, like the subterranean landscape we had seen in the past day. Could this truly be the same place, now buried under tons of rock? At least a mile under the surface?

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And what did that say about where we were? Was this a real place, in the past? After the magepriests had been here? No, not quite. It took me a bit, perhaps a day. We slept outside, under the shade of elmtrees, by a pleasant creek gurgling its way through meadowy hills.

When I woke up, I was beginning to understand. We weren't in the real world. This place was askew from reality, as if a pocket had opened up between our mortal realm and that of divinity. It retained much of what had once been, in the time of the magepriests. Before their battle – just one of many – had caused a cataclysm, shoving this area beneath the ground, formed a cavernous ceiling. One that would be filled with glowwater dew, and the animals caught underneath were transformed, turned from ordinary surface beings into creatures quite different. Lizard-crossed beings, like the driger, or like my little Jitters. Innocent of themselves, but their origin...

That ancient evil was involved, but I wasn't given enough insight to understand. Perhaps I didn't care to know. Perhaps I don't want to know more at this time, either.

Valanda sat next to me, by that gurgling creek, flinging a stone into its waters. "All that time, my city has been above this focal point." She crooked her head, looking at the circles running out from where the stone had hit the water. It hadn't skipped, not like the one I had thrown moments earlier. "Guardpeak has become my home, you know, Ahnfredas? I don't..." She paused, then continued firmly, "This power might run free. Or somebody else can come down here, somebody like..."

Firmness of voice only went so far.

I didn't want to answer. I was far too satisfied sitting next to her, my arm around her, both of us naked, and... Ah, well, you can imagine the reason for our nudity. (Remove your thoughts from the ditch by the wayside.) "The wild dwarves. The Jengchan priest."

"Yes," she said slowly.

I squeezed her shoulder. She glanced at me. There was resolve in her eyes.

I closed mine. "You want to do this?"

"Ahnfredas," she said softly, her hand on my (still very well muscled) thigh, "I have to. It's... No, I don't want to sound selfish. It may be my best shot at doing something worthwhile, but that's not the point. Remember what Bluff said about protecting his wife and child? And Red, he's going to be a father. Carter sent Grapes back home. They all wanted to protect their loved ones. I –" She sighed. "I cannot do any less. No matter what that asks of me."

Resolve. Determination. All of that was in her voice.

She would embrace that darkness, the power of the battlelines, join them. Become one with them. A wizardess, without a priest by her side, would not fill all the requirements. Madness was the inevitable result.

Valanda, mad? This wonderful woman, this precious mind, lost?

I looked up at the sky, the morning sun just rising above the treeline. "You know that we will have to stay under ground?"

"Yes."

Such an easy word. Yes. Never to see the sun again. This would likely be the last time I got to see that yellow ball in the sky – and the last time I would see a blue sky, with clouds.

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“Yes.”

Now that last was me speaking. I am a priest of Decirius, of He Who Decides. This was my Final Courtroom, and I had leveled judgment on us.



We spent an hour or two more by that creek, finding a nice diversion that must have scandalized quite a few animals in the vicinity. Including perhaps an ancestor of Jitters, the lizard squirrel left in the real world.

Then we made our way back to the circular clearing, to the friezes. The focus of the battlelines.

We walked to the central frieze, stood on it, held each other's hands. I wanted to kiss her, but she shook her head. “Let us do this now,” she said.

We did. We invited the power. The friezes started to glow in that black light we had dreaded, and the grooves filled with it, like a dark liquid roiling towards us. The liquid reached the frieze, lapped up at our feet.

I held my breath, hoping that Valanda wouldn't notice my fear.

Then I saw that she was doing the same, and I grinned. I leaned forward, embraced her, pressed my lips on hers. If I didn't want to breathe, I might as well put my lips to good service, right?

That was the last moment of Ahnfredas Bluekeg, the pilgrim, the priest of Decirius, as he had once been. He died a good death, believe me.

Valanda? Oh, yes, she thinks it was a good death, too. She told me so a few minutes ago.

The black light rolled in and took us.

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## ***EPILOGUE***

The city of Guardpeak is like the chicken and the egg. Which one came first? The caverns below, or the city above?

That line I wrote at the very beginning of this tale. I really should give an answer. It's easy. Neither was first. The beginning was the focal point of the battlelines. The beginning were the magepriests, in the first millenium after the Elven Flood. Deersrun Hill is nothing but a sequence of oh so many settlements built on top of each other, until the first were forgotten.

This place was first.



There you have it. This is my tale. Does it have a happy ending?

Oh, kind reader, how I wish you could tell me. How I wish you could answer me in any way.

But I am sitting here, chewing on the end of my quill, dipping it now and again into the inkwell on that desk I have found on the second floor of the mansion – quite well maintained, surprisingly, it had been covered with a tarpaulin, and I managed to liquify the ink rather easily. Oh, yes, my sentence. I keep forgetting that, don't I? Forgive me, I may still be just a young man – mind you, no more than two months have passed by since the preceding tale. (Or has it been more? Not much more, at any rate. Perhaps even less, I can't tell.)

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No, I digress. I no longer have a definite trail to follow, no more memories to pick at. And my friends are getting restless, they're about to head back up for the surface, to their hometown of Guardpeak. It's taken them this long to recover from their injuries. Except for Scraps, he...

That good drummer. He's fashioned some makeshift drums for himself, from tree trunks and some burlap we've found in the mansion, as well as some bells and whistles. Scraps is really good with music. He's given us joy, and I'd have been the last person to believe that something as primitive as his set of instruments could have created enchanting music. Valanda and I danced to it, and then she pushed me aside with a laugh, inviting Red and then Bluff into her arms to dance. I sat next to Scraps, looking at him in the merry confusion a young lover has so often.

Young lover? Oh, you wonder about my looks, perhaps. I am still that over-muscled wanna-be hero from that skewered reality, *sans* my armor. Where did it disappear to? I don't know, except for the breastplate. It's right next to me, in this room on the second floor, and there is a certain lizard squirrel complaining regularly to me that I disturb his slumber, or that I snatch a nut from his lair for a snack. (Guilty, by the way.) The rest... I have no idea. The ways of the gods are not for us mortals to understand.

Valanda is young now. She has no need of the glamor anymore, and if I read Red's expression right, she's even more beautiful than she had been in her true youth.

But I was talking about Scraps. Oh, Scraps. His real name is Hallyondas Durvish. Not a bad name, that, but I suspect I'll always think about him as Scraps. He doesn't mind.

Scraps won't be going along with the others. He can't. Remember that the black light splattered over him, and that he was beating at the droplets as if they were flames? The black light got into him. It poisoned him.

Where Valanda and I are young – and I suspect our bodies will stay that way for quite some time to come – Scraps is aging. If you see him now, he might be a man on the verge of his sixtieth birthday. A week from now, he'll seem eighty. If he lives that long. It's taking him such an effort to beat his drums, play another merry song, lose himself in the music for a little time, before remembering the fate in store for him.

He doesn't know but I have dug a place for his bier. Where I will burn his body and speak the Leaves and Wreaths. It is a special place, up on the ledge surrounding the valley with the mansion inside. It is where Torrindas died. Two of my friends will be together, their ashes conjoined, while their souls will enjoy the world beyond and the warmth of the gods.

My friends. Can you imagine the import these words have to me? I haven't known any of these folks for a long time, yet they are a part of my life. As I have become a part of theirs. All of them. The ones who are still with me, and also the ones who have gone.

They are my friends. I don't want to see them go. Even though I know they will find their way back to the surface. Of course. They won't get lost in the caverns, the way Wharfrat had. I mentioned the labyrinth of caverns before, haven't I? Where you can think you're heading upwards, yet actually you're moving deeper and deeper. Yes, that's how Wharfrat wound up down here. He'd

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tried to get back up, and suddenly he was in this world, where he could be snatched by the Jengchan priest.

I know that's how it happened. Just a piece of information popped into my mind, and I have no idea where it's come from.

Ah, that doesn't matter. As I said, it won't happen to Red and Bluff. Valanda and I will forge passageways for them – easy passages, with steps, so they can quickly get back up to the levels that are used to store barrels of wine. Once they have taken those passages, we will destroy them. Quake them. Drop the ceilings down. Block any of the ways down here.

There are many more, by the way. This subterranean realm is incredibly big. I can feel it in my bones, and yet I can't quite grasp it. As a matter of fact, my knowledge of this place is fading at the edge. I *think* that I can feel the edge, but I'm not sure.

Anyway, Valanda and I are busy collapsing entrances everywhere. I don't think we're missing any. Maybe at the edge, maybe... Oh, I don't know. There'll be so much time to make sure, and my time is running out. Red is getting impatient, he wants to leave, and he's only waiting for me to finish these pages. Ah, Red, my friend, you can wait one hour longer, can't you? You have been walking about with that contained anger for two days already, not saying a word, but I can see in your face that you want to get back home. To see your child.

To see if Grapes, Weathervane and Theralas made it back safe. I told you that I cannot sense their lives anywhere within Deersrun Hill, but that doesn't make you feel better. I can understand. Should you read these pages, Red, I hope you find them safe and sound. Even Grapes. By now you know how I feel about him. He's your nephew, and you love him as an uncle should.

But, Red, I really hope that you and your child will take over the vinery. Maybe I'm betraying Carter's memory, but I honestly don't like Grapes.

Valanda is here. She scowls at me, reminds me that I have to finish. She is right, of course.

My lovely Valanda. In a few moments, when my quill has finished scratching across the paper, I will get up, fold her in my arms and kiss her.

In a few moments.

Kind reader, you are wondering why I am so sore. Is it that I will never see the sky again? That I will never leave this mansion, this focal point, for more than a few days, just walking through this realm below ground? After all, my body should be the envy of any male human; and I have Valanda here, my love. The woman whom I would love and caress no matter how destitute her body might become.

No, my friend out there, that is not the problem.

The problem is that ancient power. It is a part of me, a part of Valanda. We can wield it, together, after a fashion. But it is gnawing at us. Conjuring up dreams, telling us about opportunities to do more than just stick around here. A way to get back to the surface, to achieve glory, to... prove our might, our superiority.

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I *want* to do that. I want to go up there, fling away any opposing force, establish my own realm, and expand it onwards. That would be easy. Oh, yes, so very easy. Can you imagine how it would feel to have this power part of you? That temptation, fed by that very power?

Can you imagine me standing over your broken, charred body, laughing at your pain?

I fear that I can, and part of me would like that.

No, this is no threat. This is my own fear speaking. I don't want to do that. I want to rest in your memory as kind Ahnfredas Bluekeg, the son of Hernaldas the shoemaker. That is the memorial I want, not that of a conqueror who has surrendered his soul to darkness.

I will keep the faith in my lord, in the gods.

I will fight the darkness. So will Valanda.

Once my friends are gone, we will be alone. For decades, for centuries, perhaps. I have the feeling we might live for a long time yet.

For a long time, we will stand watch over the ancient power. And over ourselves.

Pray for us, kind friend, that we will be strong. Every little bit helps.

*Ahnfredas Bluekeg, priest of Decirius,  
Underneath Deersrun Hill, Shalak Province of the Topay Coalition,  
in the year 3101 after the Elven Flood*

T H E E N D

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